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**THE IMPACT OF HYPERBOLE ON PERCEPTION OF TESTIMONIES FROM VICTIMS OF  
SEXUAL CRIME**

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## Abstract

Hyperbole is a figure of speech which enhances emotionality by emphasising speaker intentions and evaluations. While hyperbole itself has not been studied in victim speech, emotionality is believed to be a deciding factor in forensic decisions. This thesis focuses on the language of victim testimony and related factors that make a 'credible rape victim' for forensically relevant groups. The topic is explored using a reverse funnel approach and mixed methods investigating the impact of hyperbole on victim testimony (Experiments 1 and 2), the preference of hyperbolic or literal language in victim testimony (Experiment 3), the role of hyperbole in establishing emotionality (Experiment 4), and finally, a qualitative analysis of impactful factors in victim perception other than hyperbole (Studies 5 and 6). Results indicate that (1) hyperbole performs different affective functions depending on the participant group: decreasing credibility for law enforcement while increasing credibility ratings for laypersons; (2) hyperbole increases emotional intensity for observers, but group differences in hyperbolic preferences persist such that laypersons prefer to use hyperbole and law enforcement participants remain disinclined; (3) when exploring professional perceptions of victims, it may be hyperbolic agency which ultimately negates hyperbolic emotionality and harms credibility and linguistic preference ratings. Figurative language in forensic settings is relatively unexplored, and hence suggestions are made for further studies on hyperbole in isolation as well as its role as an agent of conveyed emotionality.

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## Chapter 1: Figurative Language in Psycholinguistics

Figurative language is non-literal language used to communicate deeper insight into a speaker's intention and convey the valence and gravity of emotion. Rhetorically termed 'figure of speech' is the second classification of language, the first being 'figure of thought'. Seminal work by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) suggests that individuals conceptualise the world figuratively. That is, we understand the less concrete ideas with the help of more concrete ideas used figuratively. For example, in physics, an explanation for how light is emitted from a source is related to something more visually concrete: waves. Hence, light emission is likened to that of the tangible view of the sea and its waves, resulting in a clearer understanding. If the reader/listener has just understood the structure of emitted light, they are said to have 'grasped the concept' – a figurative expression clarifying that understanding can be likened to physically being able to catch an object such that it is now in their possession. The figurative utterance 'my excitement went through the roof' is more effective than 'I was very excited' because the figurative utterance makes use of common experiential, and spatial concepts embedded in human cognition (Kövecses, 2000; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Rubik, 2010; Shinebourne & Smith, 2010; Spitzbardt, 1963) which are mutually understood, thereby conveying more speaker meaning using nearly the same amount of words.

Figures of speech are myriad in number (metonymy, simile, tautology, personification, oxymoron, alliteration, etc.) however, very few are studied in depth, at least within psycholinguistics. Even rhetoric exploration into non-literal language production began with a strong inclination towards metaphor, which is considered one of four 'master tropes' – metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony (Burke, 1941). The rhetoric study of figurative language is predominantly meta-linguistic and serves to explain its functions. For example, in metonymy, a

distinguishing feature or attribute substitutes the literal object or person such as ‘*the uniforms barged in to arrest him*’; in synecdoche, a subordinate or superordinate takes place of the whole such as ‘*Sandy got some new wheels*’ (Honeck & Hoffman, 2018). The psycholinguistic study, on the other hand, concerns itself with the cognition and comprehension of figurative language and began when the interactive (Clark, 1996) and collaborative (Grice, 1957) nature of discourse became apparent.

It is evident that in many figures of speech, substitution of the literal by the non-literal plays a fundamental function. An abstract concept when used as a substitute for the factual concept, especially in free discourse, is essentially unidentifiable without context and similar world-knowledge of the speaker and the listener. Under the assumption that the figurative language uttered by the speaker is understood by their listener, it is a collaboration between two or more individuals who share a mutual understanding of at least one aspect of the object of their conversation, and one of whom—the listener—is able to utilise this shared view to conjure up the specific and relevant connotation of the speaker’s utterance. For example, in the statement ‘*Adam is dead*’ the literal reading would imply that Adam is no longer alive. The metaphorical and hyperbolic reading could imply that Adam has angered the speaker who now in-turn intends to harm Adam (verbally or physically). A more contemporary hyperbolic reading could simply imply that Adam has laughed a lot. The phrase ‘*is dead*’ could be a substitute for any of those three meanings, only one of which would be accurate regardless of context – the literal.

Glucksberg et al. (2001) talk expressly about this ‘substitution issue’ with metaphor and provide a list of basic assumptions upon which the ‘substitution view’ rests. First, literal language is basic and remains unchanged even in the absence of context. Second, figurative language derives from the literal and its interpretation is only possible with the retrieval of the

original literal expression for which the figurative was a substitute. Third, the understanding of figurative language is more complex, requires more cognitive work, and can never be fully comprehended without contextual information.

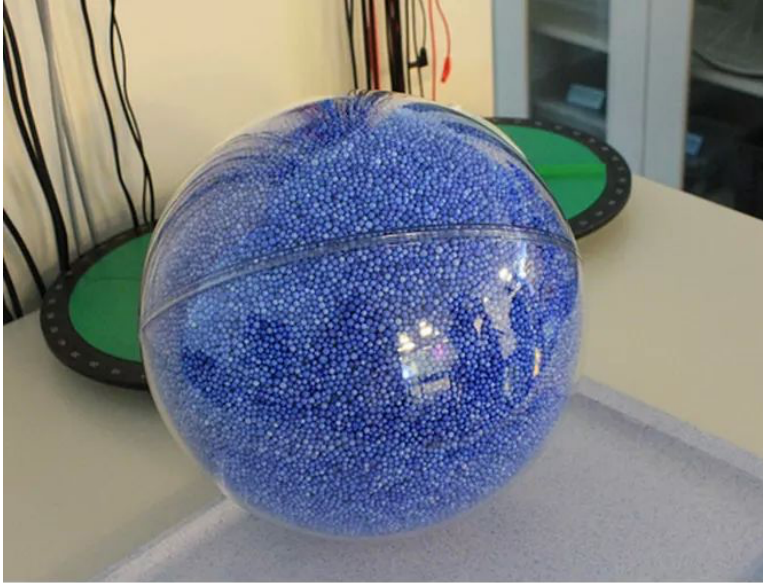
### **An Introduction to Hyperbole: Occurrence in Literature**

Hyperbole in literature is largely defined as a trope based on extremity, which either minimises or maximises factual affairs. Taking numerous facets into account, Carston and Wearing (2015, p. 81) describe hyperbole as “*a trope which involves deliberate and overt exaggeration (along a particular scale), it is flexible with regard to how it can be expressed (allowing for degrees of exaggeration) and it is capable of combining with a range of other tropes.*” After metaphor, it is the second most used figure of speech (Cano Mora, 2004), and co-occurs (in verbal and written speech) with all other tropes except for its literal opposite – understatement (Kreuz et al., 1996). Kreuz et al.’s (1996) co-occurrence matrix posits the overstatement as hyperbole and the understatement as its opposite. It is vital here to make a distinction and clearly define the overstatement and the understatement. While both have often been considered extensions of the ironic statement (Gibbs, 2007; Leggitt & Gibbs, 2000) their traditional definition is antonymous. Overstatement is mostly defined as presenting facts as more than they are; understatement is defined as presenting facts as less than they are. Besides these contrasting definitions, they also perform vastly different functions in conversation. According to Walton (2017), the overstatement in conversation functions to remind or emphasise to a listener who is either not present, or is unable to confirm the fact and must take the speaker’s word for it. The understatement on the other hand, functions more to provide a speaker’s evaluation of a fact that the listener already knows and can easily confirm. Hence the understatement performs much as a rhetorical statement, where the listener is expected to provide a follow-up (see: Sinclair &

Coulthard, 1975) that the speaker demands (Fogelin, 2011). For example, Z walks around a lake in the morning and a dozen or so gulls are flying past him. He remarks to a friend walking with him “that’s at least two birds”. This is an understatement. Conversely, if he was on a phone call with a friend, he might choose to say “there’s at least a hundred birds here” which is an overstatement. Using understatement when a listener can easily confirm the facts underlying one’s statement, may be seen as an extension of irony and accomplishes greater linguistic emphasis than if an overstatement were to be used (Walton, 2017). However, if a listener is not in a position to undeniably confirm the factual proceedings, using an understatement would only make the conversation ambiguous. Without immediate affirmative context, an understatement can easily be accepted literally which would defeat the purpose of what a speaker wishes to convey. Figure 1 below shows a meme where understatement is used in a similar structure as described above. Without the image, a listener/reader could assume the statement ‘at least 12’ as literal (*At Least 12 Earths*, 2016).

**Figure 1.**

*An understatement as depicted in the ‘At Least 12 Earths’ meme.*



itsreallystupid:

detko2:

sixpenceee:

This is a model of how many Earth's can fit inside the sun.

Damn, that's gotta be at least 12

Well you're not wrong

Considering its prominence in written as well as spoken word, investigation into hyperbole has been scant from both fields – rhetoric as well as psycholinguistics. Kreuz et al. also claim that “*in terms of sheer occurrence, hyperbole seems to deserve more notice than it has received to date*” (1996, p. 91). In fact, the literature on this heavily used trope is so scant (Cano Mora, 2009; Claridge, 2011; Colston & Gibbs, 2002; Kreuz et al., 1998), that no consensus has been reached on which of the main tropes it is most like, or belongs with. Within psycholinguistics, two principal tropes have been identified: metaphor and irony; on the basis that they are the most distinct from each other. While metaphor and irony are both forms of non-literal language, the primary difference lies in the part of speech comprehension where effective communication occurs. The agreement is that the interpretation of metaphor is semantic, in that the understanding of the utterance involves adjusting some part of the sentence that was actually

uttered (Sperber & Wilson, 2012). On the other hand, the interpretation of irony is post-semantic or pragmatic, in that the understanding of the utterance does not arise from the sentence itself, rather, from a meta-representation followed by the substitution of a dissociative thought in place of the literal meaning (Carston & Wearing, 2015; Gibbs, 2007; Hills, 1997; Stern, 2000; Wilson, 2013).

Other types of figurative language have been segregated by whether they align most with irony or metaphor. For example, simile is said to be more like metaphor, whereas understatement more patterned with irony. There is disagreement upon whether hyperbole aligns better with metaphor or irony (Carston & Wearing, 2015). In rhetoric literature (Norrick, 1982; Sperber & Wilson, 2012; Wilson & Carston, 2007) hyperbole is usually studied as a metaphorical extension whereas within psycholinguistics (Gibbs & Colston, 2006; Gibbs & Colston, 2007; Leggitt & Gibbs, 2000; Recchia et al., 2010; Stern, 2000) usually as an extension of irony. This is possibly because it is easy to view hyperbole as an extension of any trope that may be studied. Considering it is the most co-occurring trope (Burgers et al., 2018; Carston & Wearing, 2015; Hsiao & Su, 2010) according to the co-occurrence matrix (Kreuz et al., 1996), there exist versions of hyperbole that may be interpreted as metaphor, sarcasm, simile, or irony.

### ***Hyperbole When Studied as an Extension of Metaphor***

The predominant view that hyperbole belongs with—or even is a form of—metaphor is held by Relevance Theorists (Norrick, 1982; Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 2012; Wilson & Carston, 2007). Both metaphor and hyperbole are seen as loose uses of language, at different stages on a continuum; the listener is required to form an ad hoc concept, which is able to denote far more than the concept that has been lexically encoded for said utterance (Carston & Wearing, 2011, 2015; Rubio-Fernández et al., 2012, 2015; Sperber & Wilson, 2012; Wilson & Carston, 2007).



Due to the formation of the ad hoc concept, the interpretation of the same utterance could be either hyperbolic, or metaphorical in certain instances. A commonly used example is ‘Susan is a saint’ (Carston & Wearing, 2011, 2015; Sperber & Wilson, 2012). In this instance, the word ‘saint’ could be either interpreted metaphorically assuming that Susan is not in fact, a saint, but rather just a good person; or it could be interpreted as hyperbole where ‘saint’ is used to exaggerate what a good person Susan is. The argument is that there is no specific line which can be drawn between the hyperbolic and metaphorical interpretation of this utterance. Sperber and Wilson (2012) present a few more examples of utterances that are also hard to classify which leads them to the conclusion that where it is hard to draw a line, there must not be one.

### *Hyperbole When Studied as an Extension of Irony*

The more relevant view to this research is of hyperbole as an extension of irony – the view held largely within psycholinguistics. Fogelin (2011) and Stern (2000) hold the impression that while hyperbole is a distinct trope, it belongs with irony. Traditional psycholinguists have either only spoken about overstatement and understatement as forms of irony (Gibbs, 1999, 2007; Hancock, 2004; Recchia et al., 2010) or eradicated hyperbole altogether and made distinctions between ironic overstatements and ironic understatements (Leggitt & Gibbs, 2000). Distinctions have also been made where overstatement has been seen as a completely different trope, however the understatement is seen at least akin to irony, if not an extension of it (Colston & Keller, 1998; Colston & O’Brien, 2000; Walton, 2017). Walton (2017) argues that just like irony, an understatement also requires salient understanding, as with both tropes, the speaker mentions the exact opposite of what they wish to convey. For example, after buying a rather expensive item beyond one’s usual budget, one might remark “it was basically free”. Just like the metaphor and the overstatement, there is difficulty in drawing a line between the understatement

and irony. Carston and Wearing (2015) identify two lines of argument as adopted by those who group hyperbole with irony: one, that hyperbole is an extension of irony and thus inherently ironic; two that hyperbole belongs in the irony family but is a different trope. The next section discusses both these views.

### ***Hyperbole as a Trope Separate from Metaphor and Irony***

This section argues that chiefly *because* hyperbole can be likened to both metaphor and irony (as opposed to just one), it is a trope distinct and sufficient in itself. Recently, strong arguments have been made for why hyperbole is neither an extension of metaphor (Carston & Wearing, 2011, 2015; Rubio-Fernández et al., 2012, 2015) nor irony (Burgers et al., 2018; Carston & Wearing, 2015; Walton, 2017). Metaphor and irony emerge as the two principal tropes—or master tropes—because there is a significant difference in the mechanisms underlying their interpretation (semantic vs. post-semantic or pragmatic). Despite this significant difference, the fact that hyperbole has been classified as both at various points in literature, should suffice to suggest that it may not conclusively be like either and/or might deserve a classification of its own. From the findings of Aljadaan (2018, p. 27) “[hyperbole] is unique because it shares features with metaphor and irony that are essential in distinguishing those two from each other”.

While hyperbole and metaphor are both seen as loose uses of language on a continuum, the distinction remains that metaphor depicts qualitative substitutions and thus an utterance may have more than one metaphorical interpretation, whereas hyperbole uses quantitative substitutions and more often than not, has only one interpretation in a given situation (Carston & Wearing, 2015; Rubio-Fernández et al., 2015). Take for example the utterance below:

- (1) Susan is a saint.

The metaphorical interpretation could use one of two obvious qualities: first, the inherent goodness of a saint; second, the canonisation of a saint. The first interpretation could be as hyperbolic as it is metaphorical; which forms the basis of the argument that hyperbole is an extension of metaphor (Sperber & Wilson, 2012). This argument is only valid however, if one chooses to entirely ignore the second metaphorical interpretation which occurs on a different qualitative plane. A metaphor shifts between qualitative planes with ease (once comprehended as magnitude and once as a trait), which hyperbole does not accomplish. The argument that hyperbole is essentially a metaphor that is unable to accomplish these shifts (and hence a subordinate) can easily be challenged. It is an established assumption for metaphor that it denotes the precise representation of a figurative concept for which there exists no appropriate literal counterpart (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Rubio-Fernández et al., 2015). In contrast, hyperbole denotes a figurative evaluation for a literal concept. This evaluation occurs in a scalar fashion where the evaluation may be (a) realistic (e.g. ‘*there are 50 fish in our backyard pond*’); (b) possible but improbable (e.g. ‘*there are thousands of fish in our backyard pond*’); (c) impossible (e.g. ‘*there are a gazillion fish in our backyard pond*’) (Colston & Keller, 1998). The hyperbole accomplishes scalar shifts that the metaphor cannot. Despite this, a metaphor is not essentially a hyperbole failing to accomplish scalar shifts.

Carston and Wearing (2011) advise against dropping the distinction between hyperbole and metaphor principally because the issue is not that it is robustly neither metaphor nor irony, but that it is robustly both. Moreover, in such utterances, the hyperbole provides an ‘extent’ to which the ad hoc metaphorical concept may be inflated (see: Chapter 7); without the hyperbole, the metaphor may become ambiguous and difficult to interpret. For example, consider the following utterances:

(2) That room is the sun.

(3) It is a mammoth task.

(4) He's a troll.

In all of the above utterances, the metaphorical format of 'A is B' is adopted. The primary interpretation (without further context) that comes to mind is the room is very hot (2); the assignment is rather large (3); the individual is disruptive and/or disrespectful (4). This indicates an interpretation of metaphor where the understanding of the speaker's evaluation is gained through the manipulation of the quantitative hyperbole within it. A purely metaphorical and qualitative interpretation could suggest unusual or very context-specific interpretations such as the room is gaseous, or unapproachable by humans (2); the assignment is either old, or extinct (no longer exists/is completed) (3); the individual is disproportionate or may live under a bridge (4). Based on universal human knowledge about the sun, it is very obviously unfavourable for human approach, mammoths are obviously an old and extinct animal, and trolls usually live under a bridge and have disproportioned limbs. However, without context, a primary reading of either of these statements would not cause a listener to branch out in pursuit of qualitative metaphors. The first instinct would be to interpret them with hyperbole.

Rubio-Fernández et al. (2015) propose key differences between hyperbole and metaphor: the interpretation of metaphor and hyperbole may have identical underlying processes—in that an ad hoc concept needs to be formed—yet the nature of these ad hoc concepts is fundamentally different. An ad hoc concept developed for metaphorical interpretation includes what they call 'emergent properties', where the concept may not be lexically connected to the utterance. For example:

(5) Drinking green tea in the mornings has been revolutionary.

The ad hoc concept of ‘revolutionary’ in this context can be inferred with ease as a constructive change in habit, however, has nothing to do with the lexically encoded concept of actually overthrowing a government or social order. The peripheral implication of a revolution being new or progressive becomes the central theme of this newly formed ad hoc concept. On the other hand, an ad hoc concept developed for hyperbolic interpretation activates properties that not only stand for the pragmatic concept, but also its lexically encoded counterpart (such as the hyperbolic use of ‘revolutionary’ to imply getting rid of/overthrowing a routine). Rubio-Fernandez et al. (2015) conducted an empirical investigation of these claims which supported that people interpret hyperbole and metaphor differently, hence providing evidence that they are indeed different concepts requiring separate study as opposed to one being an extension of the other.

After a close study of rhetoric literature and the argument it makes to classify hyperbole and metaphor as one, it becomes tedious to imagine an argument as convincing that instead classifies irony and hyperbole together. While metaphor and hyperbole are said to have identical underlying mechanisms, metaphor is distinct from irony for that very reason. When the underlying mechanisms and processing of hyperbole and irony are seemingly contrasting, it is questionable to present hyperbole as an extension of irony. Papers that present hyperbole as so (Gibbs, 2007; Leggitt & Gibbs, 2000; Recchia et al., 2010), do not explain the basis on which this has been assumed. However, Claridge (2010) mentions in her corpus analysis, that hyperbole *“is a phenomenon both semantic and pragmatic in nature”* (p. 37).

Psycholinguistics has often labelled hyperbole as inherently ironic (Gibbs, 2007; Leggitt & Gibbs, 2000; Recchia et al., 2010). This is the first line of argument as identified by Carston and Wearing (2015) and is relatively easy to challenge. The challenge emerges from the results

of Recchia et al. (2010) themselves who investigated children's comprehension of verbal irony in everyday, familial conversations. They used a broad notion of irony which involved any speech production where the utterance differed from fact in either strength or valence and included sarcasm, rhetorical questions as well as hyperbole. Results showed that while a complete comprehension of irony was not evident until age six, some forms of irony could be interpreted as early as age four. These 'forms of irony' included hyperbole and rhetorical questions.

The second line of argument classes hyperbole as an extension of irony. Even fundamentally, irony is most often an 'utterance', whereas hyperbole can range from single word to longer utterances (Burgers et al., 2016, 2018). While hyperbole interpretation involves context-based inferencing (as with metaphor), it also involves choosing a relevant meaning from a polysemous expression allowing for an emotional evaluation (much like irony) (Claridge, 2010). Similar to the arguments of Claridge (2010), Burgers et al. (2018) also state that the nature of the evaluation achieved by hyperbole as opposed to irony is completely different. Both can be used in the evaluation of a situation where expectancies have been violated (Cano Mora & Macarro, 2004; Colston & Keller, 1998); however, while hyperbole magnifies a normal or minor expectancy violation, irony usually functions by highlighting the expected outcome and eventually critiquing the situation where it failed to be met (Burgers et al., 2018).

There are three main theories concerning the underlying mechanisms of irony-interpretation. The first is a traditionally Gricean (and now outdated) view that utterers of ironic statements (as well as those who understate or overstate) inherently look for a correction from their listener (Fogelin, 2011). In the case of an example provided previously (repeated for convenience):

Z walks around a lake and sees a dozen or so gulls. He then remarks either:

(6) Understatement: *'That's at least two birds'*; or

(7) Overstatement: *'There's at least a hundred birds here'*

In both cases, the view held by Fogelin is that the speaker wishes for a correcting utterance from his listener; either *'there's a lot more than just two'* (6); or *'there isn't that many'* (7). More recent views provide a nuanced recognition of irony, as opposed to the broad view adopted by Recchia et al. (2010).

The first is the echoic account theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1981, 2012; Wilson, 2013, 2017) which states that an ironic utterance is not merely the opposite of what one wishes to say, but rather an echoing of a usually dismissive attitude held by the speaker. The theory also states that echoing is a distinctive feature of irony which allows for identification. It is perhaps this feature that causes researchers to see hyperbole as an extension of irony. Both figures require an affective evaluation of the speaker's utterance through words that may not be taken literally. The second theory is the pretence theory (Clark & Gerrig, 1984) which suggests that the speaker of an ironic utterance merely pretends to perform a speech action while expecting the listener to see through their pretence (Wilson, 2017). This pretence, again, is touted as a distinguishing feature in the accurate recognition and comprehension of irony. Within figurative language use, there can be two levels of pretence: first, that non-literal words are spoken as literal. Second, that what is being spoken is deliberately false with the 'permission' of the listener. While hyperbole differs from metaphor in its function, it differs from irony in its mechanism. Evaluation of the ironic statement-speaker's intent is done through stating the opposite of what one means with the listener seeing through pretence. However, hyperbolic evaluation usually occurs through adjustments within the uttered words themselves. While hyperbole utilises concept substitution, it does not principally involve 'seeing through pretence' other than recognising that the

utterances are not literal. Rather, it requires a mere quantitative adjustment on part of the listener.

For example:

(8) (*Standing in queue at a café*) there are a thousand people ahead of me.

(9) I waited ages for him to arrive.

(10) People from tropical countries freeze when the temperature goes below 25 degrees.

The utterances above display how a speaker may feel about each situation; that is, their evaluation. However, none of the above utterances involve any pretence. None of the utterances mean the opposite of what is said. In order to understand what the speaker means in each of the utterances above, the listener need only reduce the scale of each utterance. When there exist hyperbolic utterances without defining features of irony mentioned in two of its most operational theories, it becomes difficult to class it as ‘inherently ironic’. Furthermore, while Recchia et al. (2010) view both tropes as non-distinct, their results imply that both tropes are comprehended at different stages of the developmental curve, and that hyperbole, being comprehended at age four, is empirically easier to process than irony.

***Auxesis and Meiosis Versus Overstatement and Understatement.*** Hyperbole and overstatement are often used interchangeably, especially in the psycholinguistics literature. Understatement is presented as its opposite, and meiosis is largely absent from non-rhetoric literature. The terms understatement and overstatement are non-technical, broadly used terms to describe whether an utterance has minimised or maximised the state of affairs respectively. While psycholinguistics makes distinctions between the understatement and the overstatement (Carston & Wearing, 2011, 2015; Colston, 1997; Colston & Keller, 1998; Colston & O’Brien, 2000; Leggitt & Gibbs, 2000; Rubio-Fernández et al., 2015), these distinctions are not to be



confused as a distinction between a maximised exaggeration and a minimised exaggeration. Cano Mora (2003, 2008, 2009, 2013) is one of the only researchers (to my knowledge) who describes hyperbole as including both - minimised and maximised exaggerations. She (see also: Hsiao & Su, 2010) bases this on Smith's (1969) classification of hyperbole into two domains: auxesis and meiosis. Thus, the study of meiosis as a trope separate from, and opposite to hyperbole is often inaccurate, as it is a kind of hyperbole. While over and understatements are antonymous concepts, this definition does not extend from the overstatement to auxesis, or from the understatement to meiosis. Meiosis and understatement are often used interchangeably (Walton, 2017) however Cano Mora (2008) makes distinctions between the two. An understatement moderates extreme situations in the real world (see Figure 1) whereas meiosis, being a type of exaggeration, describes moderate situations in the real world as extremely minimised. In this research, all accounts of hyperbole will be taken to include both auxesis and meiosis.

## Chapter 2: An Introduction to Rape and Sexual Assault

Rape and sexual assault are terms that are often used interchangeably. There is, however, a difference between them. Within the UK, the statutory definition of rape according to the Sexual Offences Act (SOA; 2003) is:

A person (A) commits an offence if—

- (a) he intentionally penetrates the vagina, anus or mouth of another person (B) with his penis,
- (b) B does not consent to the penetration, and
- (c) A does not reasonably believe that B consents.

While legally in the UK, a female cannot be the perpetrator of a rape, this factor will not be reflected in the materials created for experimental purposes in this thesis; considerations for diversity in the victim and perpetrator populations have been made in the present thesis. Sexual assault on the other hand, refers to any degree of unwanted, non-consensual sexual contact (Maier, 2014). It is statutorily defined in the SOA (2003) as the following:

A person (A) commits an offence if—

- (a) he intentionally touches another person (B),
- (b) the touching is sexual,
- (c) B does not consent to the touching, and
- (d) A does not reasonably believe that B consents

Within this research, the two terms will not be used interchangeably. ‘Sexual assault’ will be used to convey unwanted sexual contact including rape; the term ‘rape’ will only be used to convey penetration (with a penis, and/or with any object in the vagina or anus of a non-consenting person).

Police professionals are often the first professionals encountered by victims and are the ‘gatekeepers’ of justice (Maier, 2014). Their role when responding to victims can be tripartite: *“to support and interview victims, to collect and preserve forensically relevant evidence, and to submit the evidence to a prosecutor”* (Woods & National Sheriffs’ Association, 2008, p. 43). It is important to measure the perceptions of individuals who become crucial to the processing of sexual crime cases, and consequently a victim’s experience with the justice system.

### **Theoretical Perspectives on Rape and its Causes**

Out of the numerous theories on the causes of rape, three are most commonly used: the feminist theory, the rational choice theory, and the routine activities theory (Maier, 2014). The feminist theory proposes the ‘not sex’ (Palmer, 1988) outlook. It suggests that the motivation behind rape does not stem from sexual desire, but rather from violence (see: Chapter 10 for further exploration). Radical feminism portrays gender inequality as the main cause of oppression (Renzetti et al., 2012) and stresses that sexual assaults are caused by a patriarchal system that puts men in positions of power (Griffin, 1971; Maier, 2014; Millet, 1971). Holmstrom and Burgess (1978) also suggest that rape was fundamentally about violence, merely executed through sexual acts. This theory most heavily lends to the current outlook that rapes do not occur because rapists are unable to control their sexual urges and desires but in fact occur as a display of power over another individual. This leads to the conclusion that rape is a social issue and not an individual one. Throughout this thesis, the prevalence of schemas and expectations from the rape victim are portrayed. As reasoning for this prevalence, rape-allowing social spaces and other feminist perspectives are discussed in detail within the general discussion (Chapter 10).

The rational choice theory is most commonly used to explain the causes of stranger rape and asserts that before committing a crime, criminals weigh the potential benefits and risks

(Clarke & Cornish, 1985). Specifically considering rape, some risks include those of getting caught, of incarceration, and of family and friends' opinions; the benefits include considerations like the pleasure obtained by overpowering the victim and low possibility of identification and prosecution.

The final theory is the routine activities theory. Proposed by Cohen and Felson (1979), it is used most commonly to explain campus sexual crime and argues that there are three main components to a crime: likely or motivated offenders, suitable targets (an intoxicated or unconscious individual), and the absence of a capable guardian (friends who would intervene in the event of crime). Why there are so many motivated offenders on a college campus is beyond the scope of this thesis, but for theories, see Maier (2014).

While these theories are helpful in explaining why rapes occur, none are without limitations and none encompass all sexual crime, or even all rape. The feminist theory looks to eradicate any trace of sexual motivation in sexual crime. While it has been established that rape doesn't stem from lack of consensual sexual contact (Griffin, 1971; Holmstrom & Burgess, 1978; Maier, 2008a, 2014; Millet, 1971; Schwendinger & Schwendinger, 1974; Winkler, 1991), there still exist arguments that rape is not completely devoid of a sexual component, be it deriving sexual pleasure from overpowering and humiliating a victim, violating despite resistance, or manipulating the victim's emotional state (Palmer, 1988; Winkler, 1991). The rational choice theory is entirely based upon the weighing of benefit and risk, and fails to acknowledge the presence of a moral compass, which dictates that an individual will not perform a sexual crime, simply because it would be immoral to do so (Bachman et al., 1992; Maier, 2014). The routine activities theory places great emphasis on the presence of a capable guardian in cases of inability to protect oneself. It does not take into consideration the large statistic of

offenders who are known to the victim where crime occurs expressly because the offender might be classed a ‘capable guardian’. It also provides a theoretical framework for essentially victim-blaming by claiming that the victim by being ‘an unfavourable target’ could have avoided the attack (Maier, 2014).

### **Rape Myths, Biases, and the ‘Ideal Victim’**

*"If it's a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down."*

– Todd Akin, Republican U.S. Senate Candidate (2012)

Rape myths or rape scripts refer to our (often inaccurate) beliefs and perceptions of what and who constitutes ‘real rape’ and ‘real victims’. In professional settings such as police interview rooms or court rooms, where social stereotypes should ideally be irrelevant to decision-making, research has shown that biases often guide the way, and are directed by victim demeanour (Ask & Granhag, 2005; Ask & Landström, 2010; Bogoch, 2007; Bollingmo et al., 2008; Frohmann, 1991; Hackett et al., 2008; Maier, 2008a, 2012b, 2012a, 2014; Spears & Spohn, 1997; Süssenbach et al., 2012; Wessel et al., 2012; Winkel & Koppelaar, 1991, 1992). Amir’s (1971) ‘*Patterns in Forcible Rape*’ was the first, and one of the most influential works that introduced the term ‘victim-precipitated rape’. This argued that victims are to some extent, responsible for their own rape and had they behaved differently, it could have been prevented; this work was widely accepted and largely forms the basis of the ‘victim-blaming’ concept today. Rape scripts assert attitudes either about victimology such as only certain types of women are raped (Ryan, 2019; Süssenbach et al., 2012), a woman can only be raped if she wants to be raped (Holmstrom & Burgess, 1978), men cannot be raped (Ryan, 2019) or about rapists themselves, such as rape is not rape if the victim and perpetrator are acquainted and no violence

is used (Estrich, 1987; Ryan, 2019) and rapists rape because they are unable to control their sexual urges (Schwendinger & Schwendinger, 1974).

Rape myth acceptance (RMA) (Burt, 1980) is one of the most prominent societal issues today (Hockett et al., 2009) because it not only proves a difficult aftermath for the individual who identifies as a victim, but also for the victim who doesn't yet identify as such. This is because victims and non-victims alike may subscribe to rape scripts (Burt, 1980; Maier, 2014; Ryan, 2019) which may result in victims minimising their assault to 'miscommunication' (Maier, 2014). Research conducted with college students showed that even though students' experiences of incidents met the legal definition of rape, a large number of victims minimised its gravity because it did not meet their expectations of what rape constituted (Littleton, Axsom, & Yoder, 2006; Littleton, Axsom, Breitkopf, et al., 2006; Littleton & Axsom, 2003).

In the wake of recent social movements such as the SlutWalk (2011), and the #WhyIStayed (2014), #SurvivorPrivilege (2014), #MeToo (2017) social media campaigns, rape myths are now being addressed, identified and debunked rapidly and successfully (Bailey et al., 2019). Despite this, recent studies have shown that even law enforcement officials (Maier, 2014; Page, 2010), rape victim advocates (Maier, 2012b) and victim aid volunteers (Maier, 2012a; Thapar-Björkert & Morgan, 2010) at least partially hold the conception that victims are responsible for their violent victimisation. These beliefs however, lie in what Maier (2014) calls a 'grey area' which is the fine distinction between offering risk-reduction techniques taken to avoid rape and blaming victims when they make 'poor choices' (Thapar-Björkert & Morgan, 2010). Despite heightened awareness and a greater source of accessible information, ideologies that would essentially classify as rape myths, still guide societal perceptions of rape, victims, and rapists.

### *The Ideal Victim*

A large volume of research clarifies the role and posits the myriad benefits of an affective victim. The general consensus is that jurors side with the victim who displayed emotions congruent to their distressed mental state and have less sympathy and tolerance for those that were neutral or incongruent (Bollingmo et al., 2008; Kaufmann et al., 2003; Nadler & Rose, 2002; Rose et al., 2006; Wessel et al., 2012; Winkel & Koppelaar, 1991, 1992). This has been described by Ask and Landstrom (2010, p. 392) as the “emotional victim effect” which argues that the emotionality of a victim’s demeanour impacts perceived credibility. Due to the observer-expectation of the victim to behave in a specific manner; they often harbour definitive perceptions of what comprises ‘normal reactions’ for victims, especially those of sexual crime. If the victim fails to behave according to expectation, or causes an ‘expectancy violation’, it promptly causes suspicion, evokes negativity, and subsequently, causes victim credibility to decline (Ask & Landström, 2010; Bollingmo et al., 2008; Hackett et al., 2008; Kaufmann et al., 2003; Winkel & Koppelaar, 1991, 1992).

From a sociological standpoint, the affect control theory (Heise, 1987) states that strong congruent emotions of an individual in any given state of being provides information about how different their current state is from their fundamental state (Tsoudis, 2002; Tsoudis & Smith-Lovin, 1998); for example, in the case of a victim giving testimony, strong negative emotions would portray that the speaker has not consistently been a victim and is thus greatly impacted by the current situation. Conversely, in a victim with only mild negative emotions, listeners are more likely to perceive complacency in emotion-depiction, as the victim’s fundamental state being close to their current state, requiring no strong evocations. Nadler and Rose (2002) also found that when victims maintained their congruent, emotionally upset behaviour from primary

statements to the end of trial, the offender was more likely to be given a serious punishment as opposed to those who were upset and tearful at first, but calm and controlled later during the trial.

The emotional victim effect is a sexual crime-specific phenomenon of a much wider, and universally accepted concept of ‘the ideal victim’. This was first highlighted in the seminal work of Nils Christie (1986) where he defined the ideal victim as “*a person, or a category of individuals who – when hit by crime – most readily are given the complete and legitimate status of being a victim*” (p. 18). The ideal victim has several extremely specific attributes which are contradictory at best and mutually exclusive at worst. They must be weak enough to be considered a victim, yet powerful enough to claim victim status. The offender must be unknown, and inherently ‘evil’, granting credibility to the victim who most ideally, must be engaged in an everyday chore, or a respectable project (Christie, 1986; van Wijk, 2013).

While originally termed and documented by Christie, the ideology is more than a few centuries old. Shakespeare’s (1594) poem, *The Rape of Lucrece* provides the narrative of Lucrece, who was raped by a Roman prince, Tarquin. While the narrative takes a revengeful turn after Lucrece is raped, the characteristics and descriptions used by Shakespeare to provide the character with immediate victim status are congruent to those that are described by Christie almost four centuries later. Each characteristic essential to be perceived as the ideal victim, is present in Lucrece. While the other women around her, who are seen “*dancing and revelling, or in several disports*” (Willbern, 1989, p. 182), Lucrece is found chastely spinning; hence observed as engaged in a ‘respectable’ everyday chore. Prince Tarquin primarily enters Lucrece’s chamber that evening with the intention to seduce her. He is received politely, but when his apparent intentions become clear to Lucrece, he is met with resistance as Lucrece is married to another



nobleman. His attempt at seduction fails even when he resorts to arguments consequently escalating to threats. As a final resort, he overpowers her, and rapes her. The narrative here depicts the meek demeanour expected of a woman (Frohmann, 1991; Ponterotto, 2007; Stevenson, 2000) yet accompanied by the strong resilience of a rape victim (Christie, 1986; Estrich, 1987; Larcombe, 2002; Matoesian, 2001). When Tarquin departs, Lucrece is left in “*vigorous lamentation*” (Willbern, 1989, p. 183) and consequently kills herself. Not only does the congruency of her emotions lead her to suicide, but the strength of these emotions is then acquired by her husband, who vows to avenge her rape and death. This is in some ways consistent with the claims of Rose et al. (2006) in that emotional consistency is essential for significant impact on secondary listeners. In addition, characteristics of the perpetrator are also consistent with those of an ideal perpetrator. Tarquin is firstly, an unknown intruder and subsequently assailant. He is also resilient in that he inflicts physical harm while overpowering her. Conclusively, he is depicted consistently as ‘evil’ throughout the poem. This supports the concept of the ideal victim—and by virtue of this, the ideal perpetrator—which has been deeply embedded in the perception of sexual crime for several centuries, even within non-forensic literature.

The theory of the ideal victim has been revisited in recent literature, where these attributes are still essential in determining the credibility of a victim in the media (van Wijk, 2013), and more importantly, in court (Maglione, 2017; Matoesian, 2001; Ponterotto, 2007; Spohn et al., 2001). Attributes have also been added: a victim’s resistance must be overt, a weapon must be used, and injury must be sustained and documented (Estrich, 1987). Moreover, Stevenson (2000) lists the characteristics of valorised female victims as chaste, sensible, dependent, cautious and responsible. The addition most relevant to this study was made by

Larcombe (2002, p. 15) “[*The successful rape complainant*] is not prone to exaggeration or embellishment but seems to talk straight. She answers questions quickly and precisely and speaks fairly and frankly without shame about sexual acts and activities”.

Emotional cues and non-verbal behaviour though heavily examined, may or may not be intentional demonstrations (Leggitt & Gibbs, 2000). While emotionality can be imperative in studying deception-detection due to this very quality (Adams, 1996; Bollingmo et al., 2008; Ekman, 1997), it may not be as constructive in cases where innocence is the primary assumption. Verbal communication is a more robust form of conveyance in that speakers intend for their listeners to perceive and recognise, and cause thought or action (Grice, 1957).

### **The Language of Sexual Crime: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives**

*“One cannot separate what happened from the language that is used to describe or explain what happened. When the meaning of the act is ambiguous, the words we use to talk about it, become critical.”* (Danet, 1980a, p. 189)

Verbal cues of a victim are specifically essential where the basis of establishing the credibility of a victim-witness is weak. Moreover they are essential when there are seldom any additional witness or evidence besides the alleged suspect and victim themselves (Ask & Landström, 2010; Baldry & Winkel, 1998). Verbal cues help provide insight into a victim’s state of mind during the incident, and the nature of acquaintance with their perpetrator—among other factors—both of which have been stated as indicators of the ‘ideal victim’ measures (Ehrlich, 2007). However, there are anomalies in analysing verbal behaviour in court. According to the Birmingham Model of Discourse Structure (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975) a spontaneous

conversation consists of a series of three-part exchanges: question, answer, and follow-up. For example:

Question: What time do we leave for the bus?

Answer: About 4 p.m. I think

Follow-up: Oh, okay.

This structure is usually followed and is also characterised by hedging and overlapping.

Courtroom dialogue, however, is “*highly structured, and lacks characteristics of spontaneous conversation*” (Ponterotto, 2007, p. 111) and thus occurs in predominantly two parts: questions and answers. The delivery of the follow-up is eliminated along with the freedom to hedge or overlap. Moreover, answers are often limited to yes or no alternatives, providing the victim with extremely limited discursive space (Larcombe, 2002; Ponterotto, 2007; Young, 1998). This would imply that primary victim statements—having none of the discursive limitations of courtroom dialogue—become all the more important, giving the victim discursive freedom to describe their experience without the certainty of leading questions. These primary statements refer either to statements provided to the police in an interview, or statements prepared by the complainant to read out in court as part of the trial.

Figures of speech are commonly used in both colloquial and formal language (Cano Mora, 2009; Kreuz & Roberts, 1995; Roberts & Kreuz, 1994), however, there is no research to determine their impact in the legal sphere. There is a large amount of literature on victim-impact statements; which are statements provided in court by the victim themselves, or the friends and family of the victim, describing the impact of the crime on their daily lives (Bandes, 2017). These statements are touted as an empathic narrative with the power to sway sentencing (Bandes, 2017; Hills & Thomson, 1999; Nadler & Rose, 2002). When the combination, nature and

intensity of words are given such strong relevance, it becomes crucially important to pick up on each type of speech and analyse the effect it might have on those listening.

In this thesis, I examine the impact of one such type of figurative language: hyperbole. I examine hyperbole, its relationship to emotion, its role in victim testimony, and ultimately the roles of victims and professionals themselves. The next chapter details the methods adopted throughout to make these examinations, followed by an overview of the subsequent empirical chapters.

### Chapter 3: Methodology and Data Analysis

The nature of this research demands a preview of the methods adopted by four separate sub-fields: speaker production of hyperbole, listener comprehension of hyperbole, perception of victims of sexual crime, and the impact of victim language on forensic proceedings. Figurative language has never previously been investigated in the context of victim speech. The aim of this research is to investigate three main questions: first, an exploration of the (sexual crime-specific) context within which hyperbole is considered justifiably produced; second, the impact of hyperbole on the listener/reader perception of victim testimony; third, a wider and detailed impression of how forensic authorities perceive victims of sexual crime. The present research addresses these questions throughout using qualitative and quantitative methods, in order to gain a holistic understanding. The aim of this section thus, is to provide a rationale for the methods implemented in the examination of these questions.

Considering the study of figurative language is impossible to conduct in a vacuum (Grice, 1957; Spitzbardt, 1963), the prerequisite of context provision allows a researcher two main options: naturally occurring language with inherent embedded context, or manipulatable language with researcher-provided context. Researchers such as Cano Mora (2003, 2004, 2006, 2009, 2013), McCarthy and Carter (2004) and Claridge (2011) have conducted detailed investigations into the taxonomy, functions and occurrences of hyperbole using corpora to better understand its natural occurrence. These investigations were made using pre-existing corpora such as The Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English (CANCODE) or the British National Corpus (BNC) and looked at hyperbole occurring in everyday conversations.

The use of corpora in rhetoric studies is an established practice (Deignan, 2008), allowing linguists to explore through frequencies and concordances the use of language within different

settings. Specialised corpora (a term reserved for corpora under 1 million words) are increasingly being used in fields besides rhetoric study such as sociolinguistics and forensic linguistics. A specialised corpus allows a researcher to explore language in a specialised setting, while analysing the behaviour of specific words or phrases in a given context (McCarthy & O’Keefe, 2010) and conducting an empirical investigation of natural utterances (Biber, 2012). While the examination of hyperbole in everyday speech is possible due to the detail of available corpora such as those mentioned above, to my knowledge, there does not exist a specialised corpus that is comprised solely of speech from victims of sexual crime. Moreover, the main caveat with using corpora for forensic linguistic analysis is that texts available for forensic analysis such as ransom notes, suicide letters, victim or witness statements are short; rarely longer than a page, and often not representative of lexical minutiae as are other generalised corpora featuring everyday conversations or newspaper articles (Cotterill, 2010).

One of the primary criticisms of experimental designs for empirical linguistic investigation is that the invention of texts by researchers generally involves occurrences which are rare or non-existent in a corpus (Burgers et al., 2018; Deignan, 2008). While this might be true for discourse involving everyday conversations, unless a characteristic corpus within the specific context exists, the rating study is established and effective.

### **Quantitative Methods**

While research into victim language is scant, and research into hyperbole even more so, methods generally applied to figurative language or legal discourse investigations are still useful to gain insight into common practices of the fields. One commonly used method within psycholinguistics and forensic psychology is a simple rating study, whereby participants are provided with ‘items’ and they rate these items based on different measures. For example,

Leggitt and Gibbs (2000) provided participants with snippets of conversation between two individuals and asked them to rate their own emotions, the emotions of a speaker, and how the speaker wishes for them to feel. Sherrill et al. (2015) investigated the influence of grammatical aspect on criminal judgements by providing participants with the scenario of a crime, asking them to make a judgement on intention, followed by a requirement to rate the factors that impacted their decisions. Koppelaar et al. (1997) tested whether positive or negative credibility information had any impact on the length and nature of victim interviewing. As attention checks, their participants also completed two questionnaires; one where they rated their belief of victim credibility and another with questions from the RMA scale (Burt, 1980).

The rating method allows the researcher to view conscious decisions made by the participants which is crucial to the study of victim perception. The outcome of forensic proceedings depends largely on the conscious, concrete decisions made by the individuals involved as opposed to an examination of comprehension or cognition – guilty or not guilty, first vs. second degree murder, whether or not the case proceeds to trial. In the present context, this method is most beneficial because it allows for manipulation of the factors that may contribute to conscious decisions without compromising the knowledge of the definitive final answer. In the present research, similar to Koppelaar et al. (1997), both novel and adapted rating scales have been used. Experiments 1 and 2 required the formulation of an original rating scale which measured facets of perceived credibility. Experiment 3 utilises a dichotomous-choice task in order to further explore and clarify results from Experiment 1. In Experiment 4, to examine the emotionality of hyperbole in victim testimony, the scale used is adapted from Bradley and Lang's Self-Assessment Manikin (SAM; 1994).

Here I also note a general criticism of samples within experimental psychology, which is that typically these studies tend to use student populations. The argument is that student populations do not appear a representative sample of the general population and thus, generalisation of results from a student sample to the public is more complicated than previously anticipated (for an in-depth analysis, see: Hanel & Vione, 2016). In the present research I attempt to avoid ungeneralisable and non-viable conclusions and have thus employed populations that are immediately relevant in forensic settings. The first main group of participants involves jury eligible members of the public which does not seek to exclude students, but instead, create a heterogenous sample as might be representative of a jury. This is done by recruiting participants through student-rich and student-scarce platforms. The second main group of participants involves different types of forensic professionals; namely, law enforcement officers, victim advocates and therapeutic officials, and finally—only in Experiment 1—students enrolled within forensically relevant courses such as law, forensic science, and forensic psychology.

### **Qualitative Methods**

Quantitative data such as those obtained from Experiments 1, 2, 3, and 4 allow for a broad view of a very specific research topic. With the scarcity of figurative language research in forensic contexts, a primary, generic observation of how hyperbole impacts victim perception is necessary. While the impact of factors such as age, gender, socio-economic background, and individual differences—of all involved: victim, perpetrator, and participant—might be beneficial to consider in order to make nuanced conclusions, the primary existence of an impact needs to be addressed. Conversely, there is a large amount of literature on how victims are perceived and treated by general public (e.g. Bosma et al., 2018; van Doorn & Koster, 2019) and professionals alike (e.g. Maier, 2008b, 2012b, 2014; Sleath & Bull, 2017); including studies relating to specific



victim behaviour displays (Nagle et al., 2014; Weir & Wrightsman, 1990). In this case, the present research adopts a specialised exploration of victim perception by using qualitative methods of analysis which provide a detailed view of a small subset of the population.

As Experiment 1 investigates the impact of hyperbole on the perception of victim testimony, qualitative responses—provided as support to the quantitative—suggest that a more detailed examination of the general factors impacting victim perception is necessary. To address this gap, Studies 5 and 6 qualitatively examine the general perceptions of law enforcement officers and victim advocate workers respectively towards victims of sexual crime. Both studies use a similar semi-structured interview schedule, however they were administered using different platforms, and data were analysed using different techniques: online, written administration and thematic analysis for law enforcement participants; and face-to-face video interviewing and interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) for victim advocates and counsellors.

Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79) describe thematic analysis as “*a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail*”. In the current thesis I use both inductive (Chapter 8) and deductive (Chapter 9) thematic analysis (e.g. Rudolfsson, 2021; Rudolfsson & Punzi, 2021; Rudolfsson & Sinani, 2021). An inductive thematic analysis—an analytical technique based firmly on the data themselves (Braun & Clarke, 2006)—was conducted with the data of law enforcement officers to obtain possible novel outcomes. Thus, despite the theoretical interest of this thesis being in victim language, the themes coded within Chapter 8 do not specifically relate to language, but instead, language impact is mentioned in the analysis when mentioned by subjects themselves. At variance with this approach, Chapter 9 includes a deductive thematic analysis—grounded in the theoretical and epistemological interests of the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006)—as

support to the IPA in order to further explore, as well as ground the findings of the IPA in a more theoretical framework.

As such, due to the specificity of IPA, its generalisability to the population occurs through grounding the subject-specific findings in larger literature, or through further studies which must aim to investigate the research question using a more generalisable sample (Parkes et al., 2019). The aim of sampling for an IPA is to be purposive, and recruit participants which are homogenous and ideally between three and seven in number (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Smith and Osborn (2008, p. 53) describe the process of an IPA as the following: “*The participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world.*”. On that basis, the results of the IPA in this thesis are based in both, previous quantitative findings in the thesis, as well as broader literature within first responders, trauma, and victim demeanour expectancy.

### **An Overview of Empirical Chapters**

This thesis observes the following structure: Chapter 4 explores the impact of hyperbole on the perception of victim testimony through investigating both forensic and lay populations (Desai et al., 2021) using vignettes and rating scales of perceived-credibility measures. Chapter 5 explores the impact of the different levels of hyperbolic inflation on the aforementioned populations using different, shorter vignettes, but identical rating scales. Chapter 6 aims to support findings from Chapter 4, and further explore the role of hyperbole and its perception using a simple preference-based task in laypersons and police officers (Desai & Filik, 2022). Chapter 7 is based on the rhetoric and psycholinguistics establishment that hyperbole enhances emotionality, explored in the current context of testimony from victims of sexual crime. This is done using materials from Chapter 4 (Experiment 1), but with the rating scale based in

emotionality theories and the SAM (Bradley & Lang, 1994). Chapter 8 considers factors other than language that impact (negative) victim perception. Law enforcement participants are interviewed using a written, semi-structured interview schedule and results are discussed in the context of how different factors may relate to language use. In Chapter 9, I interview victim advocates, Independent Sexual Violence Advisors (ISVA), and counsellors with advocacy duties in order to provide a contrast to the professional participants in Chapter 8. The focus of the study remains the same: to identify professional perceptions of rape victims. Results of the IPA are discussed in relation to previous results, and facets of hyperbole that may contribute to its negative perception are identified. Finally, in Chapter 10, I conclude the thesis by discussing the findings of experiments in Chapters 4 through 7, and studies in Chapters 8 and 9 within the larger context of literature from forensic psychology and psycholinguistics. Implications for theory and practice are discussed, and directions for future research suggested.

*A Note on Terminology: Victim vs. Complainant vs. Survivor.* In the present thesis, three main terms are used for persons who have undergone sexual violence<sup>1</sup>: victim, complainant, and survivor. Here I explain the reasons for, and instances of different usages. The Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN) defines a victim as “*someone who has recently been affected by sexual violence; when discussing a particular crime; or when referring to aspects of the criminal justice system.*” The term ‘survivor’ is used to “*refer to someone who has gone through the recovery process, or when discussing the short- or long-term effects of sexual violence*”. The Survivor’s Handbook provided by Women’s Aid (W.A.F.E, 2009) outlines the terms ‘survivor’ as an active retaliation towards abuse, and ‘victim’ as passive acceptance. Considering the different definitions, the current thesis will adopt the following use-case:

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<sup>1</sup> Sexual violence is used as a non-technical, all-encompassing term for any type of sexual aggression and includes harassment, sexual assault, and rape.

- Victim: this term is used most often and refers to persons who have undergone sexual crime in all except therapeutic and courtroom contexts.
- Complainant: this is used primarily in the context of experimental tasks and specifically where the credibility or victim-status of the victim is to be determined by the participants as part of a task. Secondly, it is also used to refer to victims specifically when they are in the courtroom.
- Survivor: this term is used largely only in Chapter 9 as it was the term used exclusively by the participants and because Study 6 is heavily focused on victim treatment within forensic therapeutic settings.

The empirical section of this thesis begins in the next chapter with this specific question: what is the impact of hyperbole upon people who listen to victim testimony to determine credibility, or pass judgement?

## Chapter 4: The Impact of Hyperbole on Perception of Victim Testimony

*Note.* The work presented in this chapter is based largely upon the eponymous journal article by Desai et al. (2021), appearing in the Journal of Pragmatics.

Statements from victims of sexual crime are often highly emotionally charged and although emotion and memory biologically stem from two different systems, they interact when intense emotion is evoked in retrieving a memory (Phelps, 2004). That is, emotions can modulate memories to match emotional significance and interpretation of events (Loftus & Palmer, 1974; Phelps, 2004). The way in which victims' testimonies are perceived by those in the criminal justice system is key and can influence judgements of victim and evidence credibility. Thus, it is clear that research on the language used by emotional victims is essential. In the current study, I investigate the impact of figurative language, specifically hyperbole, on the perception of victim testimony.

Different types of figurative language have been assigned discourse goals, implying that they have a specific function in a certain scenario making them preferable over their literal, nonfigurative counterpart. Within psycholinguistics, eight prevalent types of figurative language exist. These are: hyperbole, idiom, indirect request, irony, understatement, metaphor, rhetorical question, and simile (Roberts & Kreuz, 1994). The hyperbole as a figure of speech (e.g., "I've been waiting *ages*"; "my bag weighs *a ton*"; "this room *is hotter than the sun*"; "that lecture *bored me to death*") can be defined as an expression which "*exceeds the (credible) limits of fact in a given context*" (Claridge, 2010, p.5). It has also been defined as "*an expression that is more extreme than justified, given its ontological referent.*" (Burgers et al., 2016, p.163). Most definitions emphasize the key elements of hyperbole with exaggeration (Carston & Wearing,

2015), overstatements (Colston & Keller, 1998), excess (Cano Mora, 2004; 2009) and extremes (Norrick, 2004). Carston and Wearing's (2015) definition of hyperbole as "*a trope which involves deliberate and overt exaggeration (along a particular scale), it is flexible with regard to how it can be expressed (allowing for degrees of exaggeration) and it is capable of combining with a range of other tropes.*" (pp. 81) will be the operational definition used for this study (and throughout this thesis).

Hyperbole has classically been studied within the field of rhetoric and is associated with persuasive and powerful speech (Cano Mora, 2009; McCarthy & Carter, 2004). Literature on metaphor and irony provides useful insights into the functions and perceptions of hyperbole where the discourse goals are humour, clarification, or emphasis (Kreuz & Glucksberg, 1989; Kreuz & Roberts 1995; Roberts & Kreuz, 1994). Studies find that when used in the realm of evaluation, hyperbole is most commonly used in negative evaluations of situations, as opposed to positive (Anderson & Leaper, 1998; Cano Mora, 2009; Claridge, 2010). This refers to the high occurrence of hyperbole in describing situations involving chaos, pungency, evil, frightfulness, violence, destruction, sorrow, and loss of control as opposed to when describing perfection, magnificence, splendour, or beauty (Cano Mora, 2009). Simply, negative situations are usually described with grander adjectives or phrases that specifically convey that they are not the norm. This creates necessity (as well as a rationalisation) for the very 'embellishment'—the hyperbole used in seemingly unwarranted situations—that Larcombe (2002) warns the complainant against.

Outside of the corpus linguistics literature, research on the perception of hyperbole is scant (Cano Mora, 2004; Claridge, 2010). Hyperbole, however, has been studied in the psycholinguistics and rhetoric literature as an extension of irony and metaphor respectively; these insights might provide an indication of hyperbolic perception. Leggitt and Gibbs (2000)

investigated the perception of, and reaction to, verbal irony. They recruited undergraduate students and provided them with 28 short stories presented as a short conversation between two individuals; each of which ended with one kind of ironic statement. The two that are relevant to this study were the ironic overstatement and the ironic understatement. At the end of each scenario, participants were asked to rate their current emotions on a 7-point scale with options ranging from 'merry, joyous' to 'disgusted'. Participants were further instructed to empathise with the person that the ironic statement was directed towards and base their emotional state on this personalisation. It was found that overstatements immediately evoked negative feelings and resentment towards the speaker due to their nature of magnifying problems that may not necessarily deserve magnification. Even though participants perceived the speaker's intention as non-threatening and positive, the feelings evoked due to this speaker's overstatement were quite the contrary. While an overstatement (more accurately, *auxesis*) is only one type of hyperbole, Leggitt and Gibbs were successful in establishing the importance of the listener's perception in a social interaction involving figures of speech. This elicits serious consequence for an affective speaker whose listener is a legal authority.

An inference can thus be made that if the authoritative listener is inherently and already sympathetic to a victim's situation prior to a statement, the speaker will be met with sympathy. However, should the listener not regard the victim's situation as distressing or even serious, a hyperbolic victim statement will evoke at least negative feelings, if not complete dismissal (Colston & Carreno, 2020) by a listener (Claridge, 2010). Literature within forensic psychology (Ask & Granhag, 2005; Baldry & Winkel, 1998; Bollingmo et al., 2008; Bollingmo et al., 2009; Kaufmann et al., 2003; Memon et al., 2003; Rose et al., 2006; Winkel & Koppelaar, 1991) stresses the benefits of being an emotionally consistent victim. Rhetoric literature in turn, shows

the role played by figurative language in conveying speaker-emotionality (Cano Mora, 2009; Citron et al., 2016; Fussell & Moss, 1998; Gibbs et al., 2002; Reinsch, 1971, 1974; Rubik, 2010; Walton, 2017). The limited literature on the social perception of hyperbole also shows that it may have negative perceptions in situations that are ‘undeserving’ (Colston & Carreno, 2020; Larcombe, 2002; Nemesi, 2004). Therefore, the question remains whether the hyperbole in a victim statement merely functions to subsequently evoke negative feelings. This study aims to apply the emotional congruency theories of Rose et al. (2006) to the forensic linguistics paradigm to investigate the role of hyperbole in victim statements, and more importantly, study its consequences.

### **Current Study and Predictions**

In the current study, two experiments are conducted using two different participant pools: a specialist population who have experience with, or knowledge of victim statements (Experiment 1), and participants from the general population who do not have any specialty in forensics or victim support but would be eligible to serve on a jury (Experiment 2). Experiments 1 and 2 are otherwise identical. There will be 16 written scenarios which are presented as a conversation between an authority figure and a complainant. Each scenario contains a number of statements that are presented in either a hyperbolic or non-hyperbolic version. Participants will be asked to read these scenarios and after each scenario, answer four close-ended questions pertaining to four separate measures of perception - belief, sympathy, victim-impact, and likeability, and an open-ended question, asking participants to provide reasoning for their choices.

A purely forensic perspective (Christie, 1986; Estrich, 1987; Larcombe, 2002; Matoesian, 2001; Rose et al., 2006) would suggest that hyperbole will make a victim seem more impacted



and believable, hence increase the sympathy felt by participants towards the complainant. A linguistic perspective (Cano Mora, 2009; Claridge, 2010) would suggest that while hyperbole (in theory) functions to emphasise emotions, its perception is empirically negative when a listener is added to the equation. This in turn, should cause sympathy and believability to be reduced. Linguistic literature, however, also dictates that hyperbole is unwelcome where undeserving situations are magnified (Leggitt & Gibbs, 2000; McCarthy & Carter, 2004). Quintilian (1921) goes so far as to warn speakers from being too affective or hyperbolic as exaggeration only deserves to be used when the magnitude of the situation goes beyond words; in such circumstances he claims that hyperbole will be more effective than literal language (Nemesi, 2010). While ‘undeserving’ situations may be plenty in number in normal conversation (talking about how hot a room is, or how long you had to wait for someone) (Colston & Carreno, 2020; Reider, 2022), it might be safe to assume sexual crime as a ‘deserving’ situation. It is therefore interesting to empirically examine the effects of hyperbole on a deserving narrative with both fields taken into consideration.

## Method

### Participants

#### *Experiment 1a - Professionals*

There were 32 participants (11 male, 21 female;  $M = 35.75$  years). All participants were from one of three categories: social workers currently working or volunteering within organisations that provide victim aid ( $n = 13$ ), law enforcement officers ( $n = 6$ ), and students of forensic psychology/forensic mental health/forensic science ( $n = 13$ ). These participants were targeted since they tend to be (or are in training to be) the primary judges of victim credibility and are most likely to be approached by a victim wishing to report an assault or provide a statement. Professional participants were recruited through emails to the point of contact in each organisation, the vast majority of which were charities operating to offer support to victims of sexual crime. Student participants were recruited through emails to their university account either directly from the researcher, or the module convenor. Participants were entered in a prize draw to win one of two £20 Amazon vouchers.

#### *Experiment 1b – General Population*

There were 32 participants (12 male, 19 female, 1 preferred not to say,  $M = 40.75$  years). All participants were from the general public, were native English speakers, over the age of 18, and eligible for jury duty. Participants in this group were recruited through social media postings on Facebook, and through survey-participation websites such as SurveyCircle and SurveyTandem. Participants from this group were also entered into a prize draw for two £20 Amazon vouchers. This group was targeted to examine a contrast (if any) in results from the professionals.

## Materials and Design

Participants in both experiments were presented with 16 written scenarios (see Appendix A). Each scenario depicted a hypothetical conversation between an alleged victim of a sexual crime, and a criminal justice authority (such as a law enforcement officer or a lawyer) and occurred in a legally relevant setting (such as a police station or a courtroom). The statements were 250-300 words long, and described a victim's experience with either rape, sexual assault, or sexual harassment. Each statement contained phrases which were either hyperbolic (e.g. "*I used to think I was the luckiest boy in the world*"), or non-hyperbolic (e.g. "*I used to think I was a very lucky boy*") in nature. An example scenario is presented (hyperbolic and control phrases are in bold; the first phrase was viewed in the hyperbolic condition, the second in the control):

*Complainant B is a 19-year-old female alleging sexual assault. The following is an extract from a hypothetical conversation between the complainant and a police authority. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.*

Complainant B: "Can I report an assault?"

Police Officer: "Please begin by telling us what happened and where."

Complainant B: "I'm a student. I was walking back home from the university and I lost my presence of mind **for just a second/for a bit**. I decided to take the shortcut through a car park on my way. It was 8:23pm, I thought I'd be okay but I didn't...didn't know it only took **no time/a little time** for my world to end. I had a bag, so I think I hit him, but it came **faster than I could blink/very quickly**. Like, he was behind me, put an arm around my neck, and began to choke me. He then put his fingers down my skirt, then tights...I could feel myself **disintegrating in his hands/giving up**, and then tried to take them off, but he couldn't. At some moment in that

**eternity/time**, I think he had his...uh, his...bloody **monster fingers/fingers** inside me. I can't be sure. Blue backpack, black jeans. He then ran away. **I don't know anything. I don't know anything, literally nothing/I don't know enough. I can't remember enough, really.** I'm not even being helpful, am I? **I make zero sense/I don't make much sense.** Does this make sense?"

After reading each scenario, participants answered corresponding questions. The first four questions were on a five-point yes/no scale ranging -2 (No) to 2 (Yes). These questions addressed believability (*Do you believe the complainant?*), sympathy (*Do you sympathise with the complainant?*), impact (*Do you believe that the complainant has been impacted by the crime against them?*) and likeability (*Do you like the complainant?*). The quantitative questions were followed by a single open-ended question asking participants to justify their answers in the previous question of belief (*What made you believe/disbelieve the complainant?*).

The study was a within-subjects design and participants saw eight scenarios containing hyperbole and eight without. Scenarios were counterbalanced across two different versions of the questionnaire such that participants saw 16 scenarios in total, however, only saw each scenario in either its hyperbolic version, or its non-hyperbolic version.

**Linguistic Considerations.** There were seven to nine hyperbolic (or control) phrases per scenario; each scenario had a mix of single word hyperbole (e.g., everything, nothing, literally, endless), phrasal hyperbole (e.g., faster than I could blink) and clausal hyperbole (such as repetition of phrases and/or pre-modifiers for certain words). Across all scenarios, hyperbole from each of the above subcategories, along with varieties from all three domains of hyperbole were employed; the three domains being: realistic hyperbole, possible but improbable hyperbole, and impossible hyperbole (Colston & Keller, 1998). Phrases were controlled for length across

hyperbolic ( $M = 24$ ) and non-hyperbolic conditions ( $M = 22.7$ ) with regards to number of words  $t(30) = .460$ ;  $p = .649$ . It is important to note that control phrases were not always literal. They contained no hyperbole; however, no restriction was made with regards to other types of figurative language.

**Forensic Considerations** The nature, speech, and reactions within victim statements were all written to be in accordance with normative victim demeanour expectancy. That is, males were presented as more aggressive and resentful, used stronger language, and provided more linear narratives. Females in turn were inclined towards shame, remorse, and self-blame, and provided less linear but more emotional narratives (Bollingmo et al., 2009; Kaufmann et al., 2003; Rose et al., 2006). The only principle of normative victim demeanour expectancy not followed was that of compliance; regardless of sex, victims were equally compliant or posed strong resistance. This was not followed because compliance was in accordance with the age or power dynamic of the victim compared to their perpetrator (e.g., child vs. adult, stranger vs. acquaintance vs. workplace superior).

The scenarios also balanced nature of familiarity between the victim and the perpetrator (equal number of known vs. unknown assailants), sex of the victims (equal number of male vs. female victims), along with the nature of sexual crime (equal number of incidents with sexual harassment vs. sexual assault). Sexual assault scenarios were further divided into penetrative assault (rape) and non-penetrative assault, which were also equally balanced.

### **Procedure**

Participants were informed that they were taking part in an online survey investigating the credibility of victim testimony. They were invited using a link. They completed the survey using Qualtrics, online from their own devices. Upon clicking the link, participants were

presented with an information sheet detailing the purpose, nature, and contents of the study. They signed a consent form agreeing to participate in the study along with a GDPR statement which they must also consent to, in order to progress. They then filled in demographic details: age-range and gender for both Experiments 1 and 2, with an added section for occupation in Experiment 1. Their email addresses were recorded on the next page, however, this was optional and collected only to contact the winner of the prize draw after which any identifying information was deleted. They were then presented with the questionnaire where they read 16 scenarios which were each followed by five questions. This procedure was repeated 16 times until they had read eight hyperbolic and eight non-hyperbolic scenarios (presented in a random order) and answered questions after each.

To alleviate any emotional distress, following the 16 scenarios, participants engaged in questions requiring them to select their preferences of cute animals. At the end of the survey, they were presented with a participant debrief form. The debrief gave further information about the rationale of the study, informing participants about the hypothesised link between hyperbole and victim perception.

## Results

Paired-samples *t*-tests were performed by calculating mean values from data that were averaged across both participants (*t*1) and scenarios (*t*2) (in order to take both subject and item variation into account) to explore the effect of condition (hyperbole/no hyperbole) on each of the four counts of credible perception - belief, sympathy, victim-impact, and likeability. Cohen's *d* was calculated as a measure of effect size.

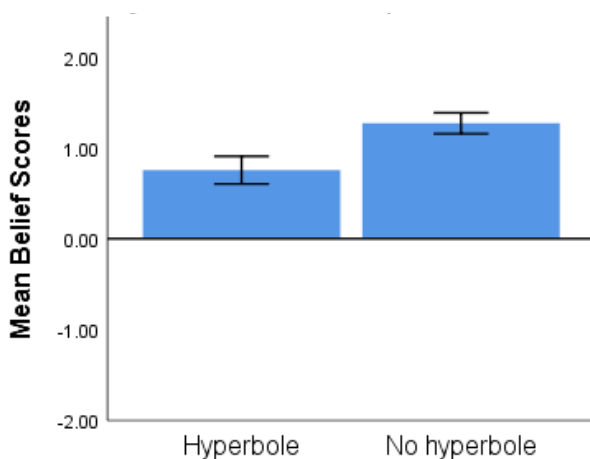
## Experiment 1a – Professionals

### *Belief*

Participants were asked to rate whether they believed the complainant's statement on a scale of -2 (No) to 2 (Yes). There was a significant difference in the means of scores calculated by participant  $t_1(31) = 3.54, d = 0.95, p = .001$  and by scenario  $t_2(15) = 5.75, d = 1.39, p < .001$ . This suggests that victim statements were significantly more believable when they were non-hyperbolic, than when hyperbole was used (see Figure 2).

### **Figure 2.**

*Mean belief scores with standard error of participants in the hyperbolic and non-hyperbolic conditions.*

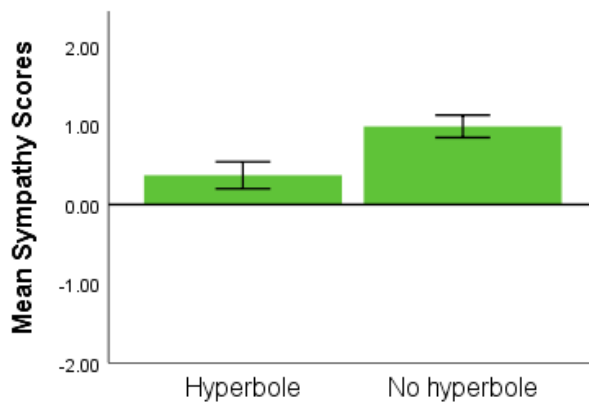


### *Sympathy*

Participants were asked to rate whether they sympathised with the complainant based on the victim-statement on a scale of -2 (No) to 2 (Yes). There was a significant difference in the means of scores calculated by participant  $t_1(31) = 3.60, d = 0.92, p = .001$  and by scenario  $t_2(15) = 3.80, d = 0.99, p = .002$ . This suggests that victim statements were significantly more sympathised with when they were non-hyperbolic than when hyperbole was used (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3.**

*Mean sympathy scores with standard error of participants in hyperbolic and non-hyperbolic conditions.*



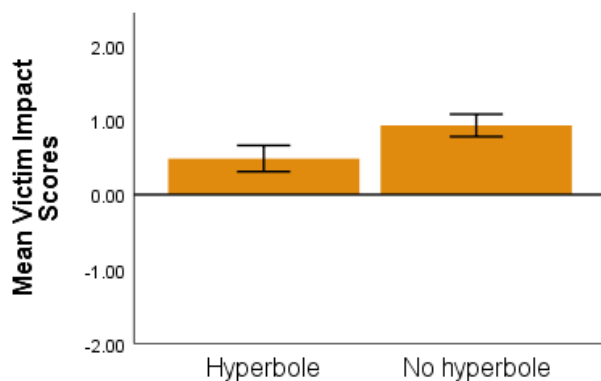
### *Victim-impact*

Participants were asked to rate whether they believed the complainant was impacted by the crime based on the victim-statement on a scale of -2 (No) to 2 (Yes). There was a significant difference in the means of scores calculated by participant  $t_1(31) = 2.73, d = 0.65, p = .01$  and by scenario  $t_2(15) = 3.40, d = 0.68, p = .004$ . This suggests that victims seemed significantly more impacted when statements were non-hyperbolic, than when hyperbole was used (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4.**

*Mean victim-impact scores with standard error of participants in hyperbolic and non-hyperbolic conditions.*



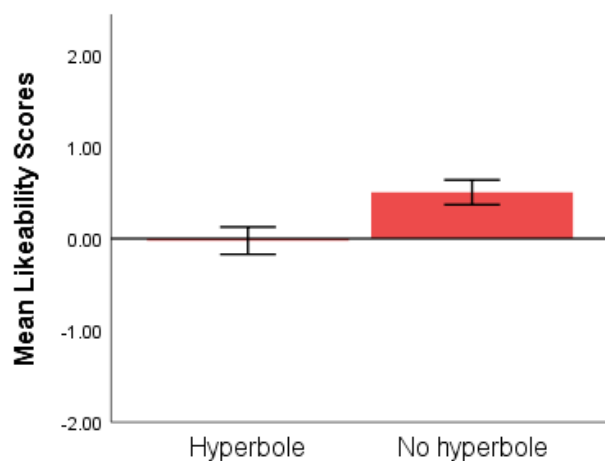


### *Likeability*

Participants were asked to rate whether they liked the complainant based on the victim-statement on a scale of -2 (No) to 2 (Yes). There was a significant difference in scores calculated by participant  $t_1(31) = 3.37, d = 0.86, p = .002$  and by scenario  $t_2(15) = 4.36, d = 1.13, p = .001$ . This suggests that the complainants were significantly more likeable when their statements were non-hyperbolic, than when hyperbole was used (see Figure 5).

### **Figure 5.**

*Mean likeability scores with standard error of participants in hyperbolic and non-hyperbolic conditions.*



Results from the qualitative question revealed participants' motives behind believing or disbelieving the statements that they read. The following statements made by participants are provided to illustrate the direction of the quantitative findings. They are segregated into hyperbolic and non-hyperbolic, based on the condition that the participant viewed the specific scenario in.

**Hyperbolic condition.** “There is something very verbose and poetic about the way the complainant recalls the events. I wouldn't base a sentence on it. But it doesn't seem like the complainant is recalling from a state of distress, rather it seems rehearsed; which due to how heinous the nature of the crime in question is, doesn't seem necessary.”

“He seems disturbed, but he's extremely rude! If it happened that long ago, he should've learnt some composure by now, seems like it happened yesterday.”

“Sounds somewhat dramatic, but the jumbled sentences could be explained as a result of perceived shock.”

“You can see the emotional impact of the incident on her mind. Quite apologetic also shows she possibly blames herself.”

“I feel they have exaggerated. It may have been going on for 3 years but how strongly they feel about it i feel that it's only been a fleeting comment”

**Non-hyperbolic condition.** “The emotional language used and the defensive language to being not believed, made me believe the complainant”

“I cannot imagine someone lying about something like this, and it makes sense that if he has been experiencing abuse since early on that he might have thought that was normal to some extent. However the way he gave his statements is a little sketchy, which makes me thing [*sic*] he may be exaggerating.”

“The level of detail originally given before an obvious uncomfortability [*sic*] about having to go into more detail made me believe the complainant.”

“There was a lot of ambiguity and she seems unsure about everything that happened which made me believe her less. Also it is a strange incident that I have not heard of happening before which also made it less believable for me”

### Experiment 1b – General Population

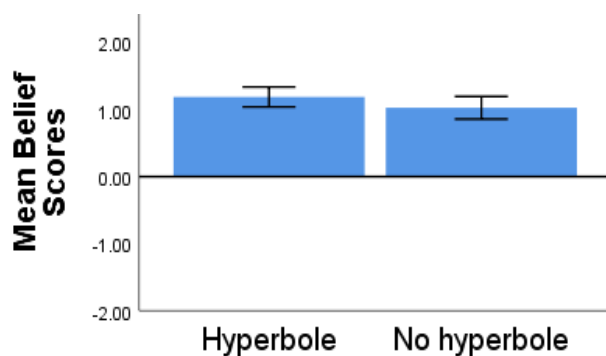
The analysis procedure was identical to that used in Experiment 1a.

#### *Belief*

The main effect of believability was significant in the analysis by participants,  $t_1(31) = 2.20$ ,  $d = 0.28$ ,  $p = .03$ , but not by scenarios,  $t_2(15) = 1.40$ ,  $p = .18$ . This suggests that contrary to Experiment 1, there is some evidence that complainants were more believed when their statements were hyperbolic than when no hyperbole was used (see Figure 6).

#### **Figure 6.**

*Mean belief scores of participants in the hyperbolic and non-hyperbolic conditions.*



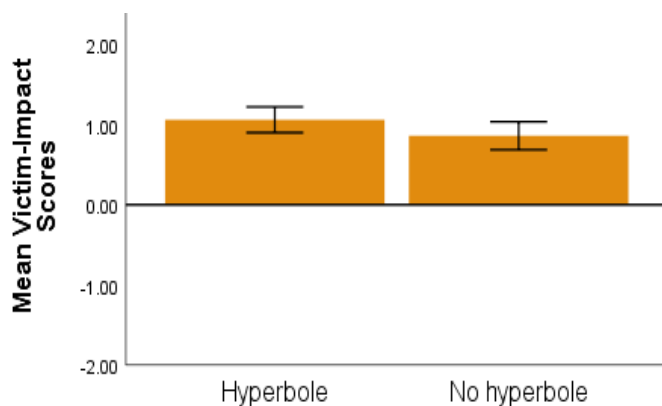
#### *Victim Impact*

There was a significant difference between hyperbolic and non-hyperbolic conditions  $t_1(31) = 2.62$ ,  $d = 0.42$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $t_2(15) = 2.23$ ,  $d = 1.33$ ,  $p = .04$ . This suggests that contrary to

Experiment 1a, complainants were thought to be significantly more impacted when their statements were hyperbolic than when no hyperbole was used (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7.**

*Mean victim-impact scores and standard errors of participants in hyperbolic and non-hyperbolic conditions*



***Sympathy***

No significant differences were found between hyperbolic ( $M = 1.11$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ) and non-hyperbolic ( $M = 1.03$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ) conditions; either when calculated by participant  $t_1(31) = 1.22$ ,  $d = 0.14$ ,  $p = .23$  or by scenario  $t_2(15) = 0.91$ ,  $d = 0.20$ ,  $p = .37$ .

***Likeability***

No significant differences were found between means in hyperbolic ( $M = 0.41$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ) and non-hyperbolic ( $M = 0.47$ ,  $SE = 0.12$ ) conditions; either when calculated by participant  $t_1(31) = 0.76$ ,  $d = 0.09$ ,  $p = .45$  or by scenario  $t_2(15) = .15$ ,  $d = 0.03$ ,  $p = .87$ .

Results from the qualitative question revealed participants' motives behind believing or disbelieving the statements that they read. The following statements made by participants are provided to illustrate the direction of quantitative findings. They are segregated into hyperbolic and non-hyperbolic, based on the condition that the participant viewed the specific scenario in.

**Hyperbolic condition.** “I don’t believe due to the descriptive nature of the language used i.e. lost my presence of mind I was broken in spirit”

“The uncontrolled outbursts at the end made it especially believable”

“Believe, statement reads of frustration in the tone, accused's character not fitting with actions. She has made it more believable by pointing out contrasting factors, rather than all one sided There is a lack of specificity for detail about actual events, apart from the quote, but the comment 'its got to stop' suggests reaching a breaking point. The last part seems emotionally charged, which suggests its of *[sic]* the cuff and therefore more likely factual.”

“the statement sounds quite dramatic and emotive, in a way making it less believable”

“Victim seemed quite emotionally invested, not really any reason to make this complaint if it wasn't true”

“He seems very aware that what's been done to him was wrong. That almost makes it more believable. Hes *[sic]* also not changing his manner of speech. It seems natural.”

**Non-hyperbolic condition.** “Her bravery and honest account really shines through in this section. Especially after the defence's disrespectful replies”

“Believe. Saying she feels she might have deserved this, questioning her actions contributed, her choice of words suggests rather low self esteem, which fits with a delayed reporting. Link that with the fact she asked "can i report a rape" as if the answer might be "no". Blaming herself for not taking advice from friends fits the same characterisation. There’s consistency to wording for being a victim, almost apologetic for reporting. That consistency of tone doesn’t ring of someone making strong accusations based on a lie.”

“He steps through that explanation using a reasonable tone, with consistency. His statements build the story in steps and don’t contradict. Nothing he says seems out of place or

counter to the central tenet of being placed in a bad situation, and feeling out of place. "I'm scared", "I was struggling" stand out as being victim statements, not bold or forceful, it fits the claim of being taken advantage of by a power differential and abused. He was looking to those in a more superior position than him to say "cut", thus consistently describing he was deferential and vulnerable.”

“She indicates a lot of self-destructive tendencies, seems to live on survival instinct from moment to moment, that nature might be indicative of lying. But she is not trying to hide aspects of her character which you think might negatively impact accepting the validity. By being open and potentially honest about what she says she has done in the past, adds credibility to believing the rest of the statement. She talks like she’s tough, but admits she cried for days. By providing a direct and balanced account of her experience, it suggests she is speaking truthfully.”

“Very vague, didn’t seem very affected by the alleged crime and didn’t seem very emotional”

## **Discussion**

The aim of the current study was to investigate the impact of hyperbole on the perception of victim testimonies. There were a number of key findings. In Experiment 1a, hyperbole in victim statements had an overall negative effect on all four tested measures of victim perception: belief, sympathy, victim-impact as well as likeability. In contrast, in Experiment 1b hyperbole had a positive effect on two out of the four tested measures: belief and victim impact. It had no impact on the measures of sympathy and likeability.

### **Comparisons with Evidence from Rhetoric Literature and Psycholinguistics**

These findings are consistent with the linguistics literature on a number of levels. First and foremost, they support the primary claim that figurative language is incomplete without a

listener paradigm (Cano Mora, 2004; 2009; Carter & McCarthy, 1997; Leggitt & Gibbs, 2000; McCarthy & Carter, 2004). This consequently evokes the question of how a listener perceives figurative language, which leads to consistency with Leggitt and Gibbs' (2000) second claim of hyperbole evoking negative feelings. As in Leggitt and Gibbs' experiment, Experiment 1a reported here also had participants perceive the victims' intentions as positive and non-threatening - participants' answers to qualitative questions repeatedly revealed comments that implied that the victim's situation and victim status deserved sympathy. Thus, the complainants' language elicited evocations of sympathy from participants in general, however, the use of hyperbole nevertheless evoked reduced positive ratings from participants.

There are two essential differences between the method used by Leggitt and Gibbs (2000), and the one used in this study. First, the former instructed participants to assume the position of the primary listener (i.e., assume the statements were directed towards the participant themselves) whereas in the current study, participants remained secondary listeners. Second, Leggitt and Gibbs (2000) did not treat hyperbole as a separate trope. The reactions they observed were to the ironic understatement and ironic overstatement as opposed to the absence of deliberate irony in this study. Despite this major difference, the results found by both remain the same. Specifically, it can be inferred that the negativity evoked by a hyperbolic statement permeates the primary listener, and evokes negative feelings even in a secondary listener whom the statement was not directed towards. Further, the negativity of the hyperbole does not solely arise from the tropes that it co-occurs with; it has a negative effect of its own.

In Experiment 1b, however, hyperbole performed more in line with its rhetoric expectations. Analysis of the findings from Experiment 1b indicates that the non-specialist group of participants, though not directed to assume the position of the primary listener, may have done

so, and accepted the hyperbole as a necessary tool to convey the complainant's affect. One participant went so far as to describe their own story of sexual assault: "*Believe her cause it is not easy coming forth, and even if he knew it was wrong then, sometimes people don't listen or take you seriously, I was not took seriously in 1992, they kept trying to connect it to a second attack in which the man was stopped and I tried to tell them what put me in that condition to begin with*". The positive impact of hyperbole on the measures of belief and victim-impact suggests that non-specialist participants had a higher emotional involvement towards both the crime and the statement from the complainant.

The interpretation of these results forces a comparison between the perception of hyperbole and that of other types of figurative language. Research data on the function of sarcasm, for example, demonstrate that in certain situations, it is perceived as humorous and less insulting than a literal criticism, whereas in others, as being incredibly harsh (e.g., Kreuz & Roberts, 1995; Pickering et al., 2018; Roberts & Kreuz, 1994). Roberts and Kreuz (1994) note that information about the type of figurative language to use in a specific situation is provided metacognitively to a speaker; this means that the speaker who uses figurative language perceives its function by gaining information from language itself. However, considering the interactive nature of figurative language, it is impossible to determine whether the listener perceives this function in a manner identical to that of the speaker. For example, in a scenario where a complainant uses hyperbole with the intent to emphasise trauma and pain, one specialist participant observed the hyperbole coming across as sarcasm ("*I believe him, but some of his speech just sounds sarcastic.*"). In another scenario, specialist participants perceived the complainant to be "*dramatic*" and "*entitled*" in the hyperbolic condition as opposed to genuinely impacted. Hyperbole, as discussed previously, has three main discourse functions: impact,



emphasis and finally, humour. It is clear from the qualitative statements that the participants who are the listeners, often assume a different function than the one intended by the speaker. In certain scenarios, the hyperbole functions to convey the intended connotation of impact: “*He seems very dramatic, but also extremely shocked...and he explains his emotions and it's understandable why he would be shocked*”; however in other scenarios, it is perceived as either sarcastic, doctored and rehearsed, or entirely fabricated: “[...] *But it doesn't seem like the complainant is recalling from a state of distress, rather it seems rehearsed; which due to how heinous the nature of the crime in question is, doesn't seem necessary.*”

In Experiment 2 however, non-specialist participants have not only been successful in identifying the figurative language, but they have also been able to assign a discourse goal identical to that of their speaker: “*Worded like, 'world to end', 'broken in spirit', makes it seem a bit over-dramatised. However, still being in after shock of the incident could impact the retelling.*” This primary difference between the perceptions of specialist and non-specialist participants can be explained if we look at the scenarios while making considerations for professional differences. To a large extent, the law exclusively allows for a binary narrative; be it dichotomous answers expected of victim-witnesses (Bogoch, 2007; Ponterotto, 2007) or fractal recursivity (Andrus, 2009, 2011, 2012). Andrus (2012) expressly speaks of the binary nature of the excited utterance exception to the US law of evidence on hearsay. Paramount to this exception is the state in which it was uttered; an excited utterance must be uttered in a state of distress, in a situation ‘worthy’ of causing excitement or nervousness. The excited utterance is admissible assuming it unequivocally true by virtue of impulsivity and a lack of agency on part of the speaker (Andrus, 2009); by default, rendering other reflectives—that may arise following further thought—false, or at least untrustworthy. Considering the legal gravity allotted to

impulsive emotions and utterances, it seems plausible that hyperbolic or affective language when used in scenarios where complainants do not immediately speak in the aftermath, may seem unnecessary, or even manipulative to specialist participants.

Moreover, while the specialist participants may view these scenarios as a product of their workplace, non-specialist participants may view it as a one-to-one conversation with an affective individual who simply has chosen to convey their emotion (Claridge, 2010; Gibbs, 1994; Pollio & Barlow, 1975). This can be viewed in two different manners: either non-specialist participants tend to perceive more effectively the fine nuances of emotion as opposed to the specialists, or, non-specialists are susceptible to affect and emotion and would lack the expertise required to weed out deception—when required—compared to specialist participants. This may seem like an obvious observation, but it is also an important one; while specialist participants are more likely to fulfil tasks such as providing mental health help to victims and providing testimonies in court, it is the non-specialist participants who constitute a jury which decides trial outcomes.

### **Comparisons with Evidence from Forensic Psychology**

Rose et al. (2006; see also Kaufmann et al., 2003) found similar results while conducting experiments to test how a victim's emotions were perceived by observers. They found that although victims were expected to behave in a certain way, there was no certainty on what made an emotional response acceptable or normal. Strong displays of emotion were beneficial, but it was found that this rule was conditional – males were expected to have as severe an emotional reaction as females, but for a shorter period of time; males in authoritative positions were expected to display anger and aggression as opposed to sadness or remorse, which was more suitable when displayed by females. It is important to note that although Rose et al. (2006) researched observers' reactions to different emotions displayed by victims, a close study of their

experiment reveals that their scenarios written with the intention to display severe emotion included hyperbolic statements, for example, “*What happened is on my mind from the time I wake up in the morning until I go to bed at night. I get bent out of shape over any little thing, and it seems like I’m always feeling down.*” (p. 208) and ones written without this intention, did not. In addition, sentences written with the intention of strong emotional portrayals were either wittingly, or unwittingly by the researchers, written including more varieties of figurative speech such as metaphor and simile along with the obvious hyperbole. Participants were also tested on whether the victim had ‘likeability’, and it was found that although mild emotional reactions were considered unusual and decreased credibility, it was the ‘stoic’, calm and controlled victim that was liked and preferred by observers. The results from Experiment 1a display a similar trend. Participants believed the victims to be highly impacted in the control condition, due to their strong emotional depictions, however, penalised the same evocations when accompanied by fitting language. They tended to more positively perceive the statements of those who spoke logically versus those that tended to use emotional exaggerations. An inference can be made that it was not the affect that has been penalised, but the dramatic language used to describe these events. There is a strong disconnection between an observer/listener’s concept of a credible victim, and that of a credible individual in general.

To further contextualise the inclination of forensic professionals away from the hyperbolic, and towards the literal, the work of Shonna Trinch needs consideration. Trinch (2010) explores the incident-reporting of paralegal interviewers with clients who are victims of domestic assault. Her analysis adeptly identifies two things: first, that victims quote—often and verbatim—abusive and obscene language used by their perpetrator in order to be successfully perceived as victims and credible narrators. Second, paralegal interviewers often dissolve these

direct quotes and replace them with distanced language to create the narrative of a witness – one who detaches themselves from the abuse and objectively views their perpetrator’s actions. While Trinch’s (2010) work does not refer to hyperbole, her observations explicate the results of this study, especially in relation to the response of the specialist participants. While lay participants seemed to resonate with the very tool complainants used to make themselves seem more credible, forensic professionals had a stronger leaning towards their occupational cultivation of creating distanced, legally credible narratives which are often less affective, hence more literal.

The primary aim of the current study was to test hyperbolic conversations in legal settings to determine the consequences of hyperbole in instances involving serious crime. The results of this study are critical because in Experiment 1a, the hyperbolic victims should ideally have implied emotional distress (thus increasing sympathy among participants and portraying the victim as more impacted)—the depiction of which has proved beneficial in previous research—since emotional behaviour cannot be depicted without language (Lakoff, 2016). However, the hyperbolic victims suffered in comparison to their non-hyperbolic counterparts and this goes against some of the theories - like the affect control theory (Heise, 1987) - about a victim’s behaviour expectation. Findings from Experiment 1b are continually congruent with this theory. While hyperbole had no impact on likeability, victims seemed significantly more impacted when they used hyperbole as observed by non-specialist participants. It is however important to note that believability was only significantly impacted when data were averaged across participants, but not when they were averaged across scenarios.

While there is minimal research on the perception of figurative speech in forensic settings, there is a lot of insight into the perception of emotional behaviour (Bollingmo et al., 2009; Kaufmann et al., 2003; Rose et al., 2006; Rose & Nadler, 2002). The data from those

studies show that a victim's emotional behaviour (and consequently language) heavily contribute to victim perception, credibility, and requirement of an additional expert witness. These factors in turn have impact on prosecution, which is the ultimate outcome of all forensic proceedings, and hence language considerations are important, albeit being secondary or indirect factors.

### **Limitations**

It is important to note that the scenarios in this study were predominantly narratives and contain limited evaluations. Hyperbole occurs frequently in negative evaluations, and hence using scenarios/transcripts that focused on participants' evaluations as opposed to a chain of events might have yielded a more positive reaction to hyperbole in the sympathy and victim-impact measures. However, evaluations are often not necessary or desirable when first describing crimes to authorities, whereas narratives of the actual chain of events are essential and often determining in legal situations.

Like a majority of research investigating language, the scenarios, while based on real situations (learnt from several informal researcher interactions with survivors), were essentially constructed by the researcher in order to allow manipulation for empirical purposes. This severely limits naturally occurring creative metaphorical hyperbole in discourse (e.g., "*I was beaten to look like a bag of mulberries*") which by virtue of being metaphorical, have no suitable literal counterpart available to manipulate (Carston & Wearing, 2015).

Another limitation is the inclusion of (0) on the rating scale. While allowing participants to hedge and providing the study with more accurate portrayals of participants' perception, it is a choice that can only be provided in academic settings. In forensic settings, all individuals concerned with the case (jury, judge, or law enforcement) must make clear dichotomous choices.

## Conclusions

Hyperbole in victim statements has a significant negative impact on belief, sympathy, victim-impact, as well as likeability when the participants are specialists within the forensics field. In contrast, hyperbole has a positive impact on belief and victim-impact when participants are members of the general population with no background in forensics. Non-specialist participants were more perceptive of the clear target of emotion as well as its non-neutral nature. This may also be evidence that while non-specialist participants closely perceive hyperbole as a tool for linguistic expression, specialist participants go a step further and also evaluate the probability of psychological presence of emotion, as opposed to a mere linguistic expression. The next chapter will look at the different levels of hyperbole (realistic, possible but improbable, and the impossible) and attempt to investigate whether some levels of hyperbole are perceived more or less positively than others.

## **Chapter 5: The Inflation Hypothesis of Hyperbole and its Impact on Measures of Victim Perception**

Grice (1975) proposes four maxims of logical conversation. These are: quantity (where the speaker provides as much information as needed—no more, no less); quality (where the speaker provides truthful information based on facts); relevance (where the speaker is relevant to the conversation at hand) and manner (where the speaker provides information that is unambiguous). The purpose of figurative language is to fulfil the demands of conversation that its literal counterpart cannot, hence, by principle violating one or more of the Gricean maxims. For example, to describe an overheated room, the use of metaphor (*'we live on the sun now'*), irony (*'it's freezing in this room!'*) and simile (*'it's hot as the sun in here!'*) violates the maxims of quality, relevance, and manner. These 'violations' aren't intended to deceive the listener but expect the co-operation of the listener. Such deviations from his maxims are called flouts. When one or more of the Gricean maxims are flouted, it generates an implicature.

### **Theories of Hyperbolic Comprehension**

Conversational implicatures form the basis of the first hypothesis on the comprehension of hyperbole. The Mere Inconsistency Hypothesis (Colston, 1997; Colston & Keller, 1998) states that hyperbole is comprehended simply due to the violation of Gricean maxims causing a discrepancy between utterance and reality (Kreuz & Roberts, 1995; McCarthy & Carter, 2004). A contrasting hypothesis also proposed by Colston and Keller (1998) is the Inflation Hypothesis, which states that the comprehension of the overstatement is overt and effective primarily because the speaker inflates the discrepancy between expected events, and events that actually ensue/d.

Colston and Keller (1998) proposed the Inflation Hypothesis in relation to hyperbole, irony, and both in conjunction. They described hyperbole as having a range of inflation as

opposed to a single inflation that differentiates it from the literal utterance. They use the example of snowfall. Hyperbole here can range from slight and realistic (*'we got five feet of snow last night'*) to unrealistic and impossible (*'we got a billion feet of snow last night'*). The range of hyperbole was categorised into three levels of inflation: realistic, possible but improbable, and impossible. In order to empirically investigate the claims of the inflation hypothesis, Colston and Keller designed an experiment upon which the current study is also based. They utilised short scenarios (2-3 sentences) "*where the quantity of something was always more than expected*" (p. 508), however, the level of this inflation was manipulated either to be realistic hyperbole, possible but improbable hyperbole, or impossible hyperbole. It was found that there was no effect of the different levels of hyperbole on the perception of surprise; that is, using any level of hyperbole, the speaker could be perceived as the same degree of surprised. However, they also established that as the level of inflation became higher, it was easier to determine that the speaker was surprised by a specific outcome: "*The more extreme the exaggeration, the easier is this determination.*" (Colston & Keller, 1998, p. 510).

In order to contextualise the inflation hypothesis within the study of victim perception, it is also essential to look at the claims of the affect control theory (ACT) (Heise, 1987). The ACT states (among other things) that strong, congruent emotions of an individual in a situation depict how close their current state is to their natural or fundamental state. Strong emotions from a victim of crime would imply to viewers or listeners that their current state differs from their fundamental state. Moreover, further work on modelling the ACT states that upon forming the identity of a victim, observers expect them to be distressed (Tsoudis & Smith-Lovin, 1998). The inflation hypothesis implies that surprise—or shock in the case of victims of crime—becomes easier to comprehend as the levels of hyperbolic inflation escalate. It can thus be inferred that



pragmatically, the quickest and most effective method to communicate victims' shock, despair, and discomfort would be through inflating the hyperbole to the impossible level (also known as extreme case formulations, or ECF (Norrick, 2004)).

### **The Present Study**

Rationale for the present study has been derived using the results of the previous study (Chapter 4). The results of Experiment 1 demonstrate contrasting results for laypersons and professionals. While the specialist participants' ratings in Experiment 1a seemed to suggest a negative impact of hyperbole on credibility measures, the converse was true for the laypersons sample in Experiment 1b. Based on this discrepancy in the perception of hyperbolic discourse goals in victim speech by two forensically relevant groups, the present study attempts to understand whether the overtness of the exaggeration may be a contributing factor to this divide. The aim of this study is to investigate the impact of hyperbolic inflation on laypersons, and professionals such that it allows a contrast of the inflation hypothesis and the affect control theory.

In the current study—similar to Experiment 1a and 1b—participants were presented with vignettes or scenarios detailing a hypothetical statement from a victim of sexual crime. Each scenario was written using either literal or hyperbolic phrases; the hyperbolic phrases were separated into the three categories also utilised by Colston and Keller – realistic, possible but improbable, and impossible hyperbole. Participants were then asked to answer the questions on credibility measures identical to those in Experiment 1: sympathy, victim-impact, likeability, and believability. Based on results from Experiment 1a, and observations made by Colston and Keller (1998), I predict that for professional participants, the negative impact of hyperbole will be apparent in the impossible hyperbole condition specifically when compared to the literal and

realistic hyperbole scenarios. However, if the claims of the ACT are also to be considered, impossible hyperbole should be most useful in conveying the affect for victims. Results from Experiment 1b may suggest that this positive and useful aspect of hyperbole may be best received by the laypersons sample in the present experiment.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

All participants across experiments were over 18 years of age, and native English speakers.

#### ***Experiment 2a – Law Enforcement***

A sample of 27 (14 male, 13 female) individuals between ages 24-56 years ( $M = 36.41$  years,  $SD = 7.67$ ) took part in the study. All participants were professionals who listed their current or previous occupation as law enforcement. Participants were recruited through Prolific (an anonymous participant recruiting interface) and received an average payment of £7.77 per hour for any inconvenience.

#### ***Experiment 2b – General Population***

Considering results from Experiment 1 where laypersons provided a contrast to the professionals with their positive perception of hyperbole, jury-eligible members of the general public were again a target group in the present study. A sample of 41 participants (4 male, 37 female) between ages 18-65 years ( $M = 26.23$  years,  $SD = 0.81$ ) took part in this experiment. Participants in this group were recruited through social media postings on Facebook, and through survey-participation websites such as SurveyCircle and SurveyTandem. Participants from this group were entered into a prize draw for one of two £20 Amazon vouchers.

## Materials and design

### *Considerations from Experiment 1 and Changes Applied*

From performing Experiment 1, several learnings were used to make changes to the materials of Experiment 2 (see Appendix B for a full list of experimental materials).

- Before reading each scenario, participants had an added instruction to “*refrain from merely providing politically correct answers*” and be honest in their judgements to the best of their ability.
- Contrasting to Experiment 1, where the age and gender of the complainant was provided to the participants, in Experiment 2, no such information was provided. The scenarios were all in first person, with no mention of the complainant’s own gender. This was done to demonstrate inclusivity within survivor communities and be relatable to persons not prescribing to traditional genders. The perpetrator’s gender, however, was referred to using either male or female pronouns.
- In Experiment 1, the scenarios were a hypothetical conversation between a legal authority and the complainant. This involved several statements (from lawyers/police officers) within the scenario which challenged the statements of the complainant. In Experiment 2, the scenarios were not a conversation; they were merely excerpts from hypothetical statements made by victims. No challenging from legal authorities was included in these scenarios. This was done to shorten the scenarios.
- Scenarios were significantly shorter in this study (100-150 words as opposed to previously used 250-300 words) to balance the incorporation of more conditions

and a greater number of scenarios overall—when compared to Experiment 1—to limit the time taken by participants to complete the study.

- Scenarios were made more evaluative in nature as opposed to purely narrative; instead of simply describing the chain of events, the hypothetical statements also involved the complainant’s evaluation of the situation.
- After each scenario, the order of the questions was slightly altered. In Experiment 1, participants rated on measures of believability, sympathy, victim-impact, and likeability – in that order. For this experiment, the first question viewed used the sympathy measure. Believability was the last question in order to allow participants more time when providing a final judgement.

**Main Experiment.** Participants in both experiments were presented with 24 scenarios. Each scenario was an extract from a hypothetical statement made by a victim of sexual crime. The statements were 100-150 words long, and described a victim’s experience with either rape, sexual assault, or sexual harassment. Each statement was written using four versions of the manipulated utterances: literal, possible hyperbole, possible but improbable hyperbole, and impossible hyperbole. An example scenario is presented with manipulatable phrases bulleted (1 = literal, 2 = realistic hyperbole, 3 = possible but improbable hyperbole, 4 = impossible hyperbole):

My father was an alcoholic and every time he would come home

1. Drunk on the verge of passing out
2. Drunk enough to cease functioning
3. Drunk to death
4. Obliterated by drink

He would rape my mother and beat her up. It had gone on for long as I could remember, that's just the way it was. He came home one afternoon and my mother wasn't in, only I was. That's when he targeted me. It already all happened

1. So quickly
2. Within seconds
3. Before I could even blink
4. Before I could live or see it

I knew from watching my mother get raped, that you couldn't fight him off. You just lie there and let him get it over with. I guess it was only natural progression from her to me. I'm...I even tried to do some things to speed it up. I remember when he came to his senses that evening and realised what he had done, he

1. Cried a lot
2. Cried and cried and cried
3. Cried until his eyes fell out
4. Cried until there was nothing left of him.

I told him though, I said to him, you can't take back what's happened, I'm done.

After reading each scenario, participants answered the same questions as in Experiments 1a and 1b. The first four questions were on a five-point yes/no scale ranging from (-2) to (2). These questions addressed sympathy (*Do you sympathise with the complainant?*), impact (*Do you believe that the complainant has been impacted by the crime against them?*), likeability (*Do you like the complainant?*) and believability (*Do you believe the complainant?*). These were followed by an open-ended question asking participants to justify their answers in the previous

question of belief (*What made you believe/disbelieve the complainant?*). Data from the open-ended questions, however, is not reported because no conclusive information was found to provide further explanation for the results. It is possible that due to the length of the experiment, responses provided by the participants in the qualitative section were compromised and not rich in detail or absent altogether.

The study adopted a within-subjects design and participants saw six scenarios in each of the conditions. Specifically, scenarios were counterbalanced across the four conditions (levels of hyperbole) such that participants saw 24 scenarios in total, however, only saw each scenario in one of its four conditions.

***Preliminary Testing.*** A pre-test was conducted in order to confirm researcher intuitions about the literal possibility of event occurrence. Seven participants recruited through convenience sampling were asked to rank 52 items with the four conditions in the order of literal possibility. These items were the same target phrases used in the main experiment. Figure 8 below shows the task instructions to the participants, followed by Figure 9, showing one example item. Figure 10 shows the task as completed. Participants were provided with a single sentence of context and were asked to judge how possible the sentences were in a literal sense. The task asked participants to drag and drop sentences from most literally possible, to literally impossible.

**Figure 8.**

*The task instructions provided to participants in the pre-test.*

Rank the following phrases in order of how possible they are in the literal world. Rank them from most possible, to impossible. For each set of phrases, you will be given some background, and based on that background, you will determine whether these are possible in that specific situation. In order to rank them, please DRAG AND DROP them in the order that you would prefer.

**Figure 9.**

*An example pre-test task as presented to participants.*

The person here is talking about how long a process took or will take.

It will probably transcend eternity

It will probably transcend my life

It will probably take a lifetime

It will probably take a long time

**Figure 10.**

*An example participant task when completed.*

The person here is talking about how long a process took or will take.

- 1 It will probably take a long time
- 2 It will probably take a lifetime
- 3 It will probably transcend my life
- 4 It will probably transcend eternity

For data analysis, a simplified version of the sum of Pairwise Absolute Row Differences (PARDs) as proposed by Bartok and Burzler (2020) was applied. Participant rankings were

collated in an SPSS datasheet. For each scenario, there were four ranking options across seven participants. For each question, participants who deviated their ranking from the majority (four out of seven) were each given a point. For example, in Figure 10 above, if five participants ranked the statement “*It will probably take a long time*” in first place, and the other two participants ranked it in third place, the score for that statement ranking column would be two. Hence, for each scenario, with seven participants and four options, a total of 28 points could be scored, signifying complete disagreement in the rankings across all four statements in one item. Contrastingly, an item score of zero would imply full agreement among all participants regarding the ranking of each item. In the few questions where there was no majority, all seven points were added for that question to keep a more conservative idea of agreement. The total possible sum of the PARDs in the present pre-test was 1,456; the actual sum of PARDs in the present test was 401. It was here that the analysis of the present data was separate from that suggested by Bartok and Burzler (2020) who suggest that the sum be interpreted using probability. However, the objective of the pre-test was to determine whether researcher division of phrases into the different levels of hyperbole inflation was agreed upon by independent rankers for the purpose of material refinement. Hence, a percentage agreement score was used overall, indicating a 72% agreement among participants regarding the levels of hyperbole inflation. In items with over 60% disagreement ( $n = 6$ ) the wording was slightly altered, and/or the levels were reconsidered by the researcher.

### **Procedure**

Participants were informed that they were taking part in an online survey investigating the credibility of victim testimony. They completed the survey using Qualtrics, online from their own devices. Upon clicking the link, participants were presented with an information sheet



detailing the purpose, nature, and contents of the study. They signed a consent form agreeing to participate in the study along with a GDPR statement which they must also consent to, in order to progress. They then filled in demographic details: age-range and gender for both Experiments 2a and 2b, with an added section for occupation in Experiment 2a. Their email addresses were recorded on the following page in Experiment 2b; however, this was optional and collected only to contact the winner of the prize draw after which any identifying information was deleted. They were then presented with the questionnaire where they read a scenario which was followed by questions. This procedure was repeated 24 times until they had read six scenarios in each of the conditions (literal, realistic, possible but improbable, and impossible) and answered the questions after each. In general, participants took 65-90 minutes to complete the study.

To alleviate any emotional distress, following the 24 scenarios, participants engaged in questions requiring them to select their preferences of cute animals. At the end of the survey, they were presented with a participant debrief form. The debrief gave further information about the rationale of the study, informing participants about the hypothesised link between the levels of hyperbole inflation and the perception of victims. Finally, participants were provided with contact details for organisations who could help them in case participating in the experiment had caused them any distress.

## **Results**

### **Experiment 2a – Law Enforcement**

A one-way repeated-measures Analysis of Variance was conducted to examine the differences in means across the four conditions (literal, realistic hyperbole, possible but improbable hyperbole, and impossible hyperbole), under each of the four credibility measures

(sympathy, victim-impact, likeability, and belief). No statistically significant difference was found between the means of the credibility measures under the four speech conditions when calculated by participant ( $F_1$ ) and by scenario ( $F_2$ ). Results for each measure were as follows: sympathy  $F_1(3, 78) = 1.01, p = .39; F_2(3,69) = 0.55, p = .65$ , victim impact  $F_1(3, 78) = 0.92, p = .44; F_2(3, 69) = 0.53, p = .66$ , likeability  $F_1(3,78) = 0.29, p = .83; F_2(3, 69) = 0.18, p = .91$  or belief  $F_1(3, 78) = .32, p = .81; F_2(3, 69) = 0.26, p = .85$ . Table 1 below shows the descriptive statistics.

**Table 1.**

*The means, standard errors and partial eta squared (as a measure of effect size) for four measures of credibility under four speech conditions for professional participants.*

Measure/Condition	Literal		Realistic		Possible but Improbable		Impossible		$\eta^2$
	M	SE	M	SE	M	SE	M	SE	
Sympathy	1.22	0.10	1.18	0.11	1.25	0.13	1.32	0.09	.04
Victim-Impact	0.97	0.14	1.04	0.13	1.10	0.14	1.12	0.10	.03
Likeability	0.22	0.10	0.20	0.11	0.19	0.09	0.25	0.08	.01
Belief	0.97	0.11	1.00	0.10	0.94	0.12	0.92	0.11	.01

## Experiment 2b – General Population

A one-way repeated-measures Analysis of Variance was conducted to examine the differences in means in four conditions (literal, realistic hyperbole, possible but improbable hyperbole, and impossible hyperbole), under four credibility measures (sympathy, victim-impact, likeability, and belief). No statistically significant difference was found under the four speech conditions when calculated by participant  $F_1(3, 120) = 0.43, p = .74$  in the measure of sympathy. Mauchly's Test of Sphericity indicated that the assumption of sphericity had been violated for the sympathy measure when calculated by scenario  $\chi^2(5) = 12.34, p = .03$  and no statistically significant difference in means was found in the ANOVA with a Greenhouse-Geisser correction  $F_2(2.19, 50.31) = 0.29, p = .77$ . Mauchly's Test of Sphericity indicated that the assumption of sphericity had been violated for the victim-impact measure when calculated by participant  $\chi^2(5) = 13.52, p = .02$  and by scenario  $\chi^2(5) = 10.99, p = .05$ . A Greenhouse-Geisser correction was applied to the measure of victim-impact and no significant difference in means was found when calculated by participant  $F_1(2.45, 97.83) = 0.04, p = .99$  or by scenario  $F_2(2.3, 53.16) = 0.05, p = .97$ . Sphericity was assumed in the other two measures and no significance difference in means was found in the likeability measure when calculated by participant  $F_1(3, 120) = 0.57, p = .64$ , or by scenario  $F_2(3, 69) = 0.18, p = .91$ . No significant difference in means was found in the measure of belief when calculated by participant  $F_1(3, 120) = 0.88, p = .45$  or scenario  $F_2(3, 69) = 0.26, p = .85$ . Table 2 below shows the descriptive statistics.

### Table 2.

*The means, standard errors, and partial eta squared (as a measure of effect size) for four measures of credibility under four speech conditions for laypersons.*

Measure/Condition	Literal		Realistic		Possible but Improbable		Impossible		$\eta^2$
	M	SE	M	SE	M	SE	M	SE	
Sympathy	1.20	0.09	1.24	0.09	1.18	0.11	1.16	0.11	.01
Victim-Impact	1.11	0.11	1.11	0.09	1.11	0.09	1.09	0.09	.001
Likeability	0.60	0.11	0.57	0.12	.61	0.11	0.54	0.11	.01
Belief	1.16	0.09	1.17	0.09	1.13	0.09	1.06	0.09	.02

### Discussion

The aim of this experiment was to investigate the claims of Colston and Keller's (1998) inflation hypothesis in the context of statements from victims of sexual crime, and observe the effects of various levels of hyperbolic inflation on perceptual credibility measures of belief, sympathy, victim-impact, and likeability. Colston and Keller (1998) claim that while the level of hyperbole makes no impact on the conveyance of speaker-surprise,—such that the use of 'tiny' would imply the same amount of surprise as would 'minuscule'—the progression of inflation impacts how easily a listener comprehends their speaker's evaluation.

The present results do not show any statistically significant impact of the different levels of hyperbole (realistic, possible but improbable, nor impossible) on measures of perceived credibility (sympathy, victim-impact, likeability, and belief). The noticeable contextual

difference is this: Colston and Keller's experiment used everyday situations, where listeners made no assumptions about the evaluations of their speaker. In such cases, hyperbole helped with ease of understanding; each inflation simplifying a speaker's emotional evaluation for their listener. However, in the present study, it is possible that readers (rightly) assume a negative speaker-evaluation of sexual crime, hence rendering redundant the very function of hyperbole that creates impact in everyday situations: ease in speaker-evaluation determination. That is to say, at least in the current context, listeners (participants) do not require hyperbole to determine that a victim may see rape as a negative situation. For example,

- (1) Laura went to a café this morning before work. It was busy in there. She ordered a latte, but the barista mixed up her order and gave her a cappuccino instead. She took one sip of her drink and said "God, it's anarchy in here. They can't get anything right!"

In (1) above, the reader does not know, until they get to what Laura said, that the speaker thought negatively of this situation. Based on the contextual information, there would be no surprise on the part of the reader if the following sentence was said instead '*Oh this is the best surprise! Might order this next time.*'. It is precisely this type of situation where hyperbole might make it easier for the reader to determine what the speaker thought of the situation. According to Colston and Keller (1998), utilising '*God, it's anarchy in here. They can't get anything right!*' is significantly more imminently demonstrative of unpleasantness, as opposed to the amount or intensity of the unpleasantness when compared to perhaps '*God, it is the worst. They didn't get my order right.*'. Conversely, take for example a situation in the context of the present study:

- (2) As Laura woke up this morning, she opened her eyes to a strange figure above her, perhaps a man she saw at the party the night before. She did not remember inviting

him to her house; she certainly had not consented to sex. Immediately a thought crossed her mind – she was never going to recover from this. She had died right this moment. Nothing was ever going to be the same again.

In (2) above, even before the reader reaches Laura's experience of being raped, the fact that the speaker's evaluation will be negative in this context is not ambiguous. The reader knows what has happened is unpleasant. Moreover, while being given a cappuccino instead of a latte may not even be noteworthy for readers themselves, being a victim of sexual crime is likely to be not only noteworthy, but almost definitively unpleasant. The inference is that the universal negativity attached to being raped pre-emptively provides an evaluation for the listener, thus fulfilling the simple function of the hyperbolic inflation. Chapter 7 further discusses the role of hyperbole in conveying valence (pleasantness vs. unpleasantness) and intensity (calming or agitating) specifically in sexual crime situations.

Based upon the conclusions of Colston and Keller, the function of hyperbolic inflation would be to simplify speaker evaluation for the reader. The present study aimed to re-investigate whether hyperbolic inflation would impact listener perception of speaker evaluation such that credibility ratings would be impacted. Based on the results, hyperbolic inflation does not seem to impact credibility measures and thus perhaps perceived valence in sexual crime testimonies. Namely, no amount of hyperbolic inflation makes sexual violence seem more unpleasant than it already is. This may be primarily because it is very unlikely that sexual crime may be perceived as anything but very unpleasant. The functions of hyperbole pertaining to positive or negative evaluation are most likely fulfilled by the context of sexual crime itself. Thus, the inference is that while the use of hyperbole by victims may not be necessary for them to communicate valence (only in the current context), it may function more to demonstrate the nuances of

individual lived experiences rather than simply allocate a singular evaluative label of positive or negative (see Chapters 7 & 9 for a discussion of hyperbole as a therapeutic and evaluative tool).

In the context of the ACT, it was assumed that hyperbole usage would cement victim-status due to overt language that marks the unexpectedness of being victimised. This in turn would ideally cause increased credibility ratings, specifically in the laypersons' sample. The current results do not support this assumption. That is, hyperbole does not make the victim seem more conformed to the victim identity. In truth, the ACT is a detailed concept connecting emotion, identities, and impressions within which emotional congruency and strength is a small factor. Further work on the ACT in forensic contexts was done by Tsoudis and Smith-Lovin (1998) and seems to suggest that emotionality has very little direct effect on the impressions of behaviour, but a very large effect on the identity we form for those displaying the emotions. This means that emotion conveyed linguistically through hyperbole must first attribute an identity to the speaker (such as that of a 'victim' as predicted). It is then this victim identity that performs for the observer in lieu of the individual themselves. It is possible that the limitations (further discussed in the subsequent sections) of the current experiment and materials mean that this key identity was not able to be formed. Moreover, even if an individualistic victim-identity were to be formed, it is possible that hyperbole manipulated factors within this identity that are not classed as typical for victim-behaviour.

### **Differences from Experiment 1**

Considering sexual crime a context with pre-established valence (unpleasant), hyperbolic inflation should typically only function to address/clarify speaker intensity. That is, just how unpleasant sexual violence was for that specific complainant. It is expected that this is how hyperbole functioned for the lay participants in Experiment 1b which caused an increase in

credibility ratings. However, those participants had a starker contrast between the hyperbolic and the non-hyperbolic in order to perceive an overt increase in intensity. Despite the presence of a literal, non-hyperbolic condition in this experiment, the present literal condition cannot be expected to provide the same quality of contrast as the non-hyperbolic condition in Experiment 1. The present experiment includes the ‘realistic hyperbole’ condition which presents as very similar to the literal, which does not provide enough contrast between the literal and hyperbole. Especially with the limited provision of context.

The reason why we see effects of hyperbole in Experiment 1 but not in the current experiment can be explained if we view materials in Experiment 1 as a toggle button, and those in Experiment 2 as a slider. The scenarios viewed by participants in Experiment 1 were either hyperbolic, or not. The contrast between two conditions was relatively stark as hyperbolic scenarios contained all types of hyperbole. In the present experiment, scenarios moved gradually from literal to impossible hyperbole, but more notably, the difference between the literal and realistic hyperbole conditions was minimal. It was also possibly more difficult to identify unless participants were clearly looking for hyperbolic language in increasing intensities. This gives rise to the question of why no differences were found between the literal/realistic hyperbole and the impossible hyperbole conditions. I maintain that these differences exist, but that they require a host of complicated empirical considerations pertaining to materials, natural-sounding speech, and sample size.

### **Limitations**

In this section, I consider potential limitations for the present study. In concluding the previous section, I address the importance of natural-sounding speech. This elicits a query into the nature of the materials. While we confirmed that the researcher’s evaluations of different



levels of hyperbolic inflations were also supported by independent rankers, each scenario was viewed by the participant in one of the four levels of hyperbolic inflation. It is thus possible that scenarios at each level seemed unnatural when compared to normal speech. While it is possible to inculcate scenarios that align closely with natural speech (see Chapter 7) while investigating certain variables, it is unviable in the present study where the objective was to compare the impact of each level. Besides seeming unnatural, it is possible also that in the sexual harassment scenarios the higher levels of inflated hyperbole seemed unnecessary.

Each individual scenario was shorter in length (100-150 words) compared to Experiment 1 (250-300 words) which may lead to reduced emotional involvement of the participant. This factor leads to another contributing limitation: the number of items and participants per condition in the present study. There were four conditions, with six scenarios per condition, (compared to eight per condition in Experiment 1) making 24 in total. While the study would have benefitted from a larger number of items for each condition, the study was already long at an average completion time of 65-90 minutes.

In a different context, hyperbole inflation may in fact, ease the perception of surprise; however, in a context where surprise/shock is assumed, the reader may use hyperbole to measure individual differences in evaluations. The use of hyperbole for the reader to perceive individual differences in evaluations would ultimately require complex and nuanced speech from the outset, which perhaps is not achieved through the experimental materials of the present study. The exploration of different levels of hyperbole inflation requires the isolation of each level in speech, which may not sound entirely natural to a reader/listener.

## Conclusion

The level of hyperbolic inflation ranging from literal to the impossible hyperbole in victim statements does not seem to impact measures of perceived credibility. This is most likely observed due to the inherent negativity of sexual crime along with the universality of this negativity. Previous results from Colston and Keller (1998) seem to suggest that hyperbolic inflation makes the speaker's surprise (or shock) more readily apparent; the widespread knowledge of sexual crime being negative renders this specific function of hyperbole redundant. It is possible that for victims of sexual crime (who are also aware of the universality of the negativity of sexual crime) hyperbole may function to 'tell their story'. Hyperbole seems to be a personalised method of conveying that which literal language is unable to (see also: Chapter 7) – the experience of the emotional incident specific to the individual themselves. The next chapter investigates whether different groups such as laypersons and law enforcement officers have separate linguistic preferences when it comes to 'telling their story', by asking them to assume the first person in a victim testimony situation.

## **Chapter 6: Literal vs. hyperbole: Examining speech preferences in testimonies of victims of sexual crime**

*Note.* The work presented in this chapter is based largely upon the eponymous journal article by Desai and Filik (2022), appearing in *Psychology, Crime and Law*.

In an optimal forensic proceeding, all factors bar the contents of a victim's testimony would be omitted from consideration. In a more realistic forensic proceeding, the complainant (especially one of sexual crime) must first establish that they deserve immediate victim status, then obtain an exemplary score on a host of legally irrelevant measures that often become discerning factors. These potential determinants range from behaviour at the time of victimisation, a victim's moral character (Campbell et al., 2015; Spears & Spohn, 1997), eye contact (Weir & Wrightsman, 1990), emotionality and negative expression (Rose et al., 2006; Salekin et al., 1995), smiling (Nagle et al., 2014), as well as hard to define factors such as 'genuineness' (Randall, 2010). These factors operate to provide a corroboration for an invaluable phenomenon to victims of sexual crime: credibility. While most forensic proceedings analyse the behaviour and credibility of the defendant, rape is one of very few offences where legally irrelevant characteristics of the complainant are considered for prosecutorial decisions (Spohn & Holleran, 2001). In the present study, I consider that affect may intuitively co-exist not only with physical behaviour (such as smiling and eye-contact) but also linguistic behaviour (such as figurative language use, and agentic language). The aim is to investigate whether forensically relevant populations such as jury-eligible laypersons and law enforcement officers demonstrate a preference for how the existence of affect is conveyed through linguistic behaviour. I focus in particular on preference for or against the use of hyperbole due to its well-established link with heightening emotionality and affect (Cano Mora, 2009; Claridge, 2010; McCarthy & Carter,

2004; Musolf, 2021). Specifically, I investigate whether different participant groups prefer to use the emotion-heightening hyperbole, or its literal counterpart. This is done by asking participants to assume the role of a victim of sexual crime and choose between literal or hyperbolic language within the presentation of their testimony. The function of the dichotomous choice task is to indicate, simply and precisely, whether emotionality in language (as provided by figurative language such as hyperbole) is also as desirable as emotionality in behaviour (Sleath & Bull, 2017). The conspicuous argument is that affective language and affective behaviour achieve similar results; such that in the current context, both will help to increase source credibility. However, in the following sections, I discuss the nuances to, and caveats involved in assuming this argument and propose a more specific prediction towards the end.

### **The Importance of Credibility**

Judgements of victim credibility are made right from a primary victim statement to the end of trial; they not only impact case progression from one legal authority to another, but also the intra-progression stage among different functions of each forensic authority. For example, when a victim files a complaint with the police, the responding officer first makes a judgement to investigate the alleged offence, and then makes another judgement to refer the case to the CPS. At each stage (law enforcement to prosecution services, finally followed by a judge and jury at trial) the credibility of a victim-witness is crucial to the progression of the case (Nitschke et al., 2019). Law enforcement officers are more likely to recommend a case to prosecutorial services (Alderden & Ullman, 2012; Ask, 2010; Tasca et al., 2013), prosecutors are more likely to proceed to trial (Frohmann, 1991; Spohn & Tellis, 2012), jurors are more likely to convict the defendant (Ellison & Munro, 2009), and the defendant is more likely to receive a harsher punishment (Nadler & Rose, 2002) when the complainant is indisputably credible. This implies

that especially in a sexual crime scenario, the credibility of a victim is paramount (Nitschke et al., 2019).

### *Developing an Impression of Credibility.*

Literature within forensic and legal psychology attributes consequential significance to emotionality in victim behaviour. In a systematic review of literature on police perception of rape victims, Sleath and Bull (2017) concluded that among other factors such as physical evidence, consistency of the account and level of detail, the most influential factor remained portrayals of victim emotionality. Credibility ratings were overall swayed by the emotions displayed by a victim when providing their statement; in almost all studies, the victim benefitted from a depiction of heightened emotion. Victim emotionality was used as an indicator of victim reliability (Maddox et al., 2012) and congruent negative emotions strengthened the impression that the allegation was credible (Bollingmo et al., 2008; Rose et al., 2006; Tsoudis & Smith-Lovin, 1998). An emotionally expressive victim was considered more likely to have been raped than not (Ask & Landström, 2010) where conveying panic, expressing fear, and being shaken were all emotional reactions that expressly indicated a legitimate case (Venema, 2016). It is important to note that in most studies, emotionality is described in ways that cannot exclude linguistic expression (see: Danet, 1980b).

Factors that affect victim credibility can be broadly divided into two main categories: testimonial factors (ones that form the content of the testimony) and extra-testimonial factors (ones that are visible or audible factors but are extraneous to the content of the testimony). Each category can be further subdivided into three more: intentional, unintentional, and uncontrollable. Table 3 shows a brief explanation of each category and sub-category.

### **Table 3.**

*The categories and sub-categories of factors affecting victim credibility.*

<b>Testimonial</b>	<b>Extra-Testimonial</b>
Intentional testimonial – said and meant to be said (e.g. choice of words, case (in written word)).	Intentional extra-testimonial – unsaid, intentional or often controllable behaviour extraneous to the content of one’s testimony (e.g., nodding, gaze, sighing).
Unintentional testimonial – said but not meant to be said (e.g., hedging, overlapping).	Unintentional extra-testimonial – unsaid, unintentional behaviour extraneous to the content of one’s testimony (e.g., micro-expressions, anxiety behaviours such as foot tapping, biting the inside of cheeks, picking at cuticles, etc.)
Uncontrollable testimonial – said but with no control over speech (e.g., child witnesses who do not yet have breadth of language, stammering, speech ticks as in Tourette’s syndrome).	Uncontrollable extra-testimonial – unsaid, with no control over depictions (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, social status).

While there is an abundance of research into extra-testimonial behaviours exhibited by a victim-witness and their subsequent impact on forensic authorities (for review see: Sleath & Bull, 2017), testimonial behaviour in all three subcategories is heavily under-researched. Moreover, the heavily researched extra-testimonial factors, while impactful, may not be admissible in court<sup>2</sup>. However, testimonial behaviour such as word choice is performed intentionally for observers to recognise speaker-intention, and consequently instigates thought and action (Grice, 1957). This prompts the need for investigation into the intended and observed implications of the speaker's linguistic choices. The purpose of a victim statement is to convince an observer of irrefutable victim-status; for this purpose, it can be inferred that often, a victim makes use of conscious persuasive language—not as an intentional attempt at manipulation, but as a meta-cognitive choice (see: Roberts & Kreuz, 1995) made by those who are discursively competent (Matoesian, 2001)—in addition to the intentional extra-testimonial behaviours.

### **Language and Credibility**

A vast amount of research within victim credibility (specifically of sexual crime), focuses on extra-testimonial victim behaviour (intentional or unintentional) (Bollingmo et al., 2008; Hackett et al., 2008; Nitschke et al., 2019; Randall, 2010; Salekin et al., 1995; Sleath & Bull, 2017; Weir & Wrightsman, 1990). However, even within studies that solely focus on extra-testimonial behaviour, researchers wittingly, or unwittingly involve figurative language in their materials (see: Rose et al., 2006). This makes it apparent that, at least within the written word, language is made affective and emotional through the use of figures of speech. Andrus (2012) provides a crucial forensic connection between emotionality and its consequent linguistic

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<sup>2</sup> It is essential to note here that developing irrefutable credibility through all means possible is important for the complainant precisely because 'inadmissible' does not necessarily translate to inconsiderable (O'Barr, 1982).

impression. She speaks expressly of how emotionality provides a statement with legal admissibility. One example is of the US law of evidence which renders all hearsay as inadmissible in court, except for the ‘excited utterance’. This implies that if an individual utters something in a state of distress, without agency of their speech, another individual can recount this utterance in court, and it will not be dismissed as hearsay. This demonstrates two things: emotionality in behaviour is often extended to emotionality in speech, and this affective language is persuasive even in a strongly physical-evidence-based setting such as a courtroom. Having considered the importance of emotionality for victim-credibility (Sleath & Bull, 2017), and the impact of language on perceived emotionality, it becomes important to examine the devices that may be used to contribute to the emotionality of a statement.

### ***Figurative Language and Credibility***

Figurative language has a long history of usage as a powerful and persuasive linguistic tool (Sopory & Dillard, 2002a;b). Reinsch investigated the effects of figurative language on persuasion (1971), and source credibility (1974) where he concluded that figurative language impacted both source credibility and attitude change, however, each was influenced by different functions of figurative language. He proposed two ways in which figurative language produced oratorical effects: first, through the “*psychological response sequence induced by a figurative stimulus*” (Reinsch, 1974, p. 79); second, through the “*information conveyed to a receiver by a source’s verbal choices*” (Reinsch, 1974, p. 79). He believed attitude change occurred due to a psychological response sequence triggered by figurative language whereas source credibility was established (lowered or heightened) based directly on the choice of words. The implications of his research mean that not only can a complainant authenticate credibility by their choice of



words and specifically by using figurative language, but also that such a use may bring about a change in the attitudes of their observer/s.

While Reinsch's works involved metaphor and simile, Chapter 4 used these assumptions to measure the impact of hyperbole on the perception of four measures of victim credibility: belief, sympathy, victim impact, and likeability. It was found that hyperbole had a significant negative effect on all four measures of credibility when rated by professionals but a positive effect on belief and victim-impact when rated by jury-eligible laypersons. This implies that there is a consequence to consider where word-choice is concerned: there is a compelling divide between individuals who view hyperbole as an emphatic necessity, and those who view hyperbole as unnecessary embellishment. Both these groups are forensically relevant. Research suggests that professionals such as law enforcement, victim aid advocates, and paralegals prefer literal, distanced, and informative narratives (Andrus, 2011; Desai et al., 2021; Trinch, 2010) as opposed to laypersons (who may make up a jury) who view hyperbole as a tool for a complainant to convey the impact of the crime and increase believability (Experiment 1). Findings from Experiment 1 are novel and consequential, and incite the need for replication, and further examination.

The extended focus on hyperbole in the current study is justified due to its fundamental link to affect; research on the semantic taxonomy (Cano Mora, 2009) and the occurrence of hyperbole in everyday conversation (McCarthy & Carter, 2004) highlights that the purpose of hyperbole is to provide an evaluation of the situation from the speaker's perspective. Moreover, hyperbole persists in situations where these speaker evaluations are negative rather than positive (Roberts & Kreuz, 1994) such as in sexual crime situations. In this thesis, hyperbole is viewed

as a conceptually useful tool for the communication of victims' negative evaluations of sexual crime.

The current Experiment 3 aims to advance and further explore the findings from Experiment 1 by investigating whether professionals and laypersons prefer the use of hyperbole or literal phrases when they are asked to assume the role of the speaker themselves. The complainant statements from Experiment 1 have been adapted to involve a blank where participants will choose between the two options provided—either a hyperbolic phrase, or its literal counterpart—to fill in the blank. Rationale for the current research arises from two contrasting hypotheses. First, based on the conclusions of Reinsch (1974) regarding the impact of figurative language on source-credibility and observer-attitude changes, it may be inferred that commonly-used (Kreuz et al., 1996) hyperbole is an essential tool that individuals may use to rapidly establish victim-status and victim-impact. Second, that the impact of hyperbole is bipolar in that it causes professionals' impressions of credibility to decrease, but it helps the complainant claim victim-status for laypersons (Desai et al., 2021). Based on this, I posit that professionals will have a leaning towards the literal, whereas participants from the general population will prefer hyperbolic options.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

#### ***Experiment 3a – Law Enforcement***

35 law enforcement officers (23 male, 12 female) between the ages 21-65 years ( $M = 35.11$  years,  $SD = 9.81$ ) participated in this experiment. All participants were recruited through Prolific—an online, anonymous participant interface—where the screening restrictions were limited to individuals who listed their current, or previous employment sector as law

enforcement. Participants were compensated for their time using Prolific's internal payment system, with an average of £3.25 per participant.

### ***Experiment 3b – General Population***

30 jury-eligible individuals (5 male, 25 female) between the ages 19-58 years ( $M = 25.90$  years,  $SD = 7.22$ ) participated in this experiment. All participants were recruited through advertisements on Facebook research participation groups and through survey-participation websites such as SurveyCircle and SurveyTandem. Participants were entered in a prize draw to win one of two £20 Amazon vouchers.

### **Materials and Design**

Participants in Experiments 3a and 3b saw identical versions of the materials. Specifically, each participant was presented with 16 vignettes—each 250-300 words long—that involved hypothetical complainants providing statements to forensically relevant sources, or in forensically relevant settings such as a police station, or a courtroom. Materials in the present study were adapted from those used in Experiment 1 (see Figure 11 for an example; Appendix C for full list of experimental materials). However, in contrast to Experiment 1, where each scenario contained either hyperbolic or non-hyperbolic phrases, each vignette in the current study contained a mix of both hyperbolic and non-hyperbolic phrases.

Each vignette detailed an experience of either rape, sexual assault, or sexual harassment told from the perspective of the complainant and contained a 'target phrase' which was left blank. The task (see Figure 11) was for participants to fill in this blank using one of two options: a literal version, or a hyperbolic version of a phrase with identical linguistic implications (notwithstanding valence).

**Figure 11.**

*Example of the participants' task in both Experiments 3a and 3b with option 1 being hyperbolic and option 2 being literal.*

The following extract is from a hypothetical conversation between a victim of sexual crime, and a legal authority. One word/phrase has been left blank. Please read the extract carefully, and fill in the blank by selecting the phrase that you would use if you were in this situation, and were making the statement yourself. The options are provided below and you can select the phrase by clicking on it.

Victim B: "Can I report an assault?"

Police Officer: "Please begin by telling us what happened and where."

Victim B: "I'm a student. I was walking back home from the university and I lost my presence of mind for just a second. I decided to take the shortcut through a car park on my way. It was 8:23pm, I thought I'd be okay but I didn't...didn't know it only took no time for my world to end. I had a bag, so I think I hit him, but it came quickly. Like, he was behind me, put an arm around my neck, and began to choke me. He then put his fingers down my skirt, then tights...I could feel myself disintegrating in his hands, and then tried to take them off, but he couldn't. At some moment in that eternity, I think he had his...uh, his...fingers inside me. I can't be sure. Blue backpack, black jeans. He then ran away.  
 \_\_\_\_\_ . I'm not even being helpful, am I? I make zero sense. Does this make sense?"

I don't know anything. I don't know anything, literally nothing.

I don't know enough. I can't remember enough, really.

Across all scenarios, the manipulatable phrases closest to the target phrase were alternated to be either hyperbolic or literal. For example, in Scenario 1, the manipulatable phrase before the target phrase was literal, and after the target phrase was hyperbolic. This order was reversed for the next scenario, where the phrase before the target phrase would be hyperbolic, and the phrase after – literal. This was done to avoid swaying participants towards selecting one specific option for the target phrase. In addition, while the control phrases used by Desai et al. were non-hyperbolic but not necessarily literal, the current study only provided participants the choice between hyperbolic or literal to present a clearer distinction between the two conditions.

The hyperbolic phrases used were a mix of single word hyperbole (e.g. nothing, literally, endless), phrasal hyperbole (e.g. I could feel myself disintegrating...), and clausal hyperbole such as repetition of phrases (e.g. years and years) or pre-modifiers for certain words (e.g. never ever). Hyperbolic phrases could be either realistic, possible but improbable, or impossible hyperbole (Colston & Keller, 1998).

## **Procedure**

Participants were informed that they would be involved in a research study investigating speech preference in victim testimony. Upon opening the survey (ethics approval number: S1186), participants were presented with an information sheet detailing the purpose, nature, and contents of the study. This was followed by a standard consent form and a GDPR statement. If they agreed to both, they proceeded onto the demographics sections: gender, age, and occupation. Participants in Experiment 1 proceeded onto the vignettes whereas participants in Experiment 2 were presented with the option of entering their email addresses. Provision of their email was optional, and was only used to contact the randomly selected winner of the prize draw after which any contact details were deleted. Participants were then presented with the 16 vignettes. One phrase in each scenario was left blank, and participants were instructed to fill in the blank with one of two options available to them: a literal phrase or a hyperbolic phrase. Participants were asked to assume first person, and choose the phrase that they personally would use, if they were providing the statement. This procedure was repeated 16 times and vignettes were presented in a random order.

After viewing all 16 scenarios, participants were provided with a stress-alleviating task which asked them to engage in selecting their favoured pictures of cute animals. They were finally presented with a participant debrief form, informing them of conclusions from previous research, and the rationale for the current research.

## **Results**

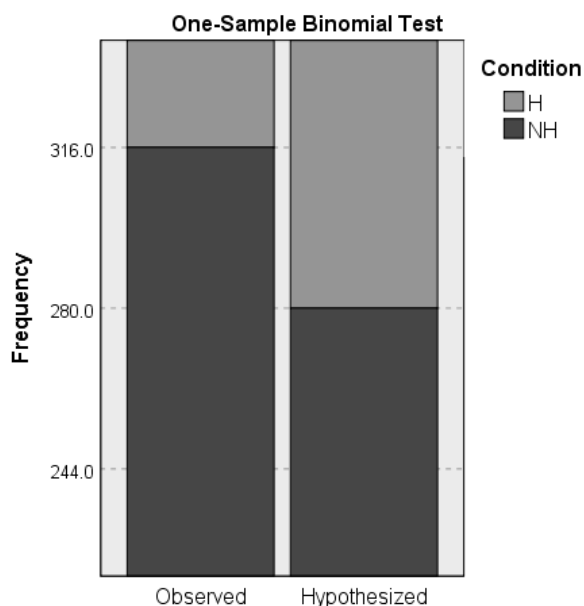
### **Experiment 3a – Law Enforcement**

A one-sample binomial test with exact Clopper-Pearson 95% CI was run on the sample of 35 law enforcement officers to determine whether they preferred the ‘literal’ or ‘hyperbolic’

phrase within victim testimony, while assuming the role of the speaker. The ‘hyperbolic’ condition was considered the ‘success’ category. Of the 560 datapoints across 35 participants, the hyperbolic choice was selected in 244 instances, or 43.6% of the time. The literal option was selected in 316 instances, or 56.4% of the time. This disfavour for the hyperbolic phrase had a 95% CI of 39.4% to 47.8%,  $p = .003$ . Figure 12 shows the observed versus hypothesised frequencies of hyperbolic and literal choices made by participants.

**Figure 12.**

*Observed versus hypothesised frequencies of hyperbolic (H) and non-hyperbolic (NH) choices made by participants in Experiment 3a.*



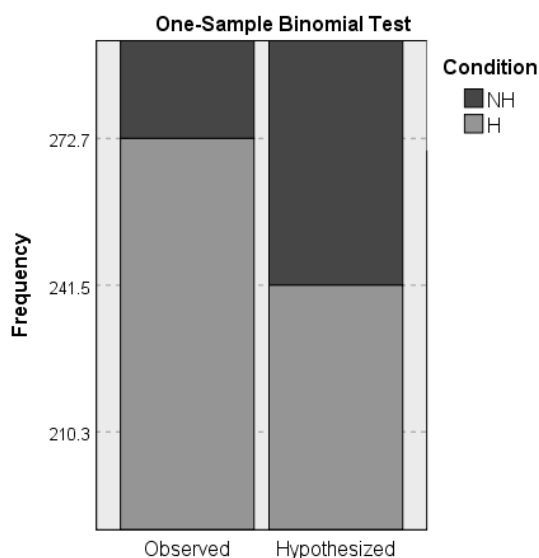
**Experiment 3b – General Population**

A one-sample binomial test with exact Clopper-Pearson 95% CI was run on a convenience sample of 30 jury-eligible individuals to determine whether they preferred the ‘literal’ or ‘hyperbolic’ phrase within victim testimony, while assuming the role of the speaker.

The ‘literal’ condition was considered the ‘success’ category. Of the 480 datapoints across 30 participants, the hyperbolic choice was selected in 271 instances, or 56.5% of the time. The literal option was selected in 209 instances, or 43.5% of the time. This disfavour for the literal phrase had a 95% CI of 39.1% to 48.1%,  $p = .005$ . Figure 13 shows the observed versus hypothesised frequencies of hyperbolic and literal choices made by participants.

**Figure 13.**

*Observed versus hypothesised frequencies of hyperbolic (H) and non-hyperbolic (NH) choices made by participants in Experiment 3b.*



## Discussion

The aim of the current study was to explore language preferences in both professionals and laypersons to explore the influence of language choices on victim credibility. In Experiment 3a, the results suggested that law enforcement officers preferred to use literal phrases as opposed to hyperbolic even when they assume the speaker role. Conversely, results of Experiment 3b suggested that laypersons preferred to use hyperbolic phrases when they assumed the speaker

role and put themselves in the situation. The present study builds upon Experiment 1 by using a preferential task to provide previously unavailable information about the consequences of assuming the role of the speaker, compared to a secondary listener.

Hyperbole's link to affective communication forms the rationale for the present experiment. This link is formed through its rhetoric function (i.e., how hyperbole ought to perform in general language) and its pragmatic function (i.e., the aspects of hyperbole use that make it meta-cognitively suitable for use in specific contexts). The rhetoric function of hyperbole is to clarify and provide emphasis. The pragmatic functions of hyperbole are to help the speaker claim immediate victim status (clarify victimhood) and suggest victim-impact (emphasise victimhood) in this context. For the laypersons sample in Experiment 3b the rhetoric and pragmatic functions of hyperbole seemed to be identical: hyperbole performed its rhetoric function as laypersons likely chose hyperbolic options as they believed that the clarification provided by using hyperbole helped them attain the pragmatic functions of claiming victim status and conveying victim-impact. However, hyperbole did not seem to have similar pragmatic functions for the professional sample.

Results from Experiment 3a in conjunction with previous literature on the importance of victim emotionality suggest that mutually exclusive beliefs are held by law enforcement officers when it comes to victims of sexual crime. While emotional behaviour such as crying, being afraid, and appearing shaken may cement the victim-status for police officers (Sleath & Bull, 2017), the current results suggest that professional participants are inclined against using accompanying language involving linguistic expressions of emotionality, especially when they are non-literal. This suggests that there is a discrepancy in the extra-testimonial, and testimonial expectations of professional participants. While previous research (Bollingmo et al., 2008;



Randall, 2010; Rose et al., 2006; Wessel et al., 2012) provides a straightforward template for a victim, suggesting distressed behaviour as the key to claim victim-status, Experiments 1 and 3 portray that there are convoluted implications of maintaining consistency between distressed behaviour and language. These implications are worthy of further investigation and replication.

### **Language-Related Schemas**

A simple preference for literal over the hyperbolic phrase (or vice versa) suggests that there may be a schema relating to language use within victims; emotional or otherwise. The task instructions in the present study motivate each group of participants to assume the position of the speaker. Assuming these instructions were followed, each group chose the speech option which they perceived to be most persuasive or effective in each scenario. This corresponds with the conclusions of Reinsch's (1971, 1974) works suggesting that the presence or absence of hyperbole not only discerns source credibility for each group of participants, but we can conclude that it also impacts the perceived persuasive power of the testimonies. The frequent inclination of law enforcement participants towards the literal option and of the laypersons towards the hyperbolic option, suggests that the language of a credible victim varies between groups.

There are two models of processing persuasive social information that may explain the methods employed by observers (judge, jurors, or the police) to judge rape victim credibility. First, the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) which provides a bipartite processing system: central and peripheral. Central processing implies that jurors would use "*effortful cognitive thought*" (Nagle et al., 2014, p. 196) to process testimony, and peripheral processing implies the use of less effortful, subjective perceptual biases to make judgements and decisions. The second model is the heuristic systematic model (HSM; Chaiken, 1980). The HSM

is also a dual-part processing model, bifurcated into systematic and heuristic processing. The implications of this model are similar to the ELM in that systematic processing involves a careful weighing of available information prior to forming any credibility judgements (Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994; Nitschke et al., 2019); whereas heuristic processing is similar to peripheral processing in that it uses “*cognitive shortcuts*” (Hackett et al., 2008, p. 325) to make rapid judgements which may neglect wider available relevant information.

The HSM advocates that individuals may use both systematic and heuristic processing. The level at which observers process information depends on their ‘sufficiency threshold’ or the level of confidence required of an observer making judgements. Information processing will continue until a sufficiency threshold is reached and the style of processing that provides an observer with the most confidence in their decision eventually overrides the other. An observer’s sufficiency threshold is highly dependent on their cognitive capabilities and motivations. Within forensic proceedings where deciding agencies are either police officers aiming to do their job competently, or jurors aiming to provide a fair decision to protect their community, the assumption can be made that these deciding agencies are highly motivated observers (Nitschke et al., 2019). For such highly motivated observers, if preliminary heuristic processing fails to yield a judgement that the observer is confident in, systematic processing is used which is ideal to avoid passing judgements based on pre-conceived biases. However, the bias hypothesis (Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994) suggests that when the available information is ambiguous (as it often is in sexual crime cases), heuristic processing often strongly influences systematic processing (also called biased systematic processing). There is evidence to support the bias hypothesis in cases of jurors using schema-dependent heuristic processing or biased systematic processing which relies often on heuristic cues obtained from extra-testimonial factors such as believability, age,

behaviour, gender, ethnicity (Chaiken, 1980; Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994; Hackett et al., 2008; Nagle et al., 2014; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Vrij, 2000).

### *Implications for Victims.*

If the current results are considered in the context of social information processing models, observers may use heuristic and schema-dependent information stemming from the language used by victims. The results suggest that these schemas are at least different for the two forensically relevant groups in our sample, if not diametric. This also implies that while victims may employ ‘appropriate language use’ to develop an impression of credibility according to their own perceptions, these notions may be different from those held by law enforcement, and their employment may reduce the merits of one’s statement.

Grounding the present study in linguistic theory explains implications of language-related schemas for victims. There is additional previous evidence to suggest not only that victim-witnesses may hold ideas of testimony that are different to those more forensically well-versed, but also that these ideas are often incorrect and harm credibility impressions. The work of O’Barr (1982) focuses on the linguistic importance of form over content. In multiple experiments ranging in focus from power and agency, to hypercorrectness, O’Barr manipulated actual testimonies from courtroom dialogue to examine legal interactions. Of particular interest to this study are O’Barr’s conclusions on hypercorrection and its impact on legally trained and legally untrained participants. Sociolinguistically, hypercorrection can be described as a speaker’s failed attempt to overtly and correctly apply the rules of formal communication (e.g., /h/ insertion such as saying ‘haitch’ for the letter ‘aitch’). Theorizing that courtroom situations form some of the most stressful and alien situations for laypersons, O’Barr points out the prevalence of hypercorrection which may stem from being uncomfortable and unable to use one’s natural

instinct in language. His empirical results suggest not only that witnesses sound more unnatural as a result of hyper-formality, but also that they are perceived as less intelligent, less convincing, and less qualified in their attempts to appear more 'correct'. The inference here is that each witness may resort to hypercorrection precisely to appear more intelligent, qualified, and convincing. He thus concludes that speech that varies from the 'natural' tends to have significant impact on how testimonies are evaluated.

The prevalence of hypercorrection may also explain the motivation to use hyperbole: to appear more convincing. However, the examination of hyperbole was suitable in the present context specifically due to its prevalence in everyday language, or the 'natural' language. Hence the assumption that it may deviate from the natural is not entirely applicable in the current study. However, an alternative explanation for the disinclination of the current law enforcement participants towards hyperbolic expressions, is that they may expect a certain discomfort from victim-witnesses. Repeated exposure to victims in non-neutral, noteworthy contexts may mean that professionals expect deviations from the normal speech such as fragmented sentences or hypercorrection (O'Barr, 1982) and that this deviation from normal in turn becomes normative in a legal context. While hyperbole is not inherently or necessarily 'informal', the semantic taxonomy proposed by Cano Mora (2009) suggests that at least in speech, hyperbole has a high frequency of informal occurrences and may resultantly be viewed as a device better suited to informality. Thus the use of hyperbole, which is often used in the everyday conversations, can possibly violate victim demeanour expectancies, perhaps by being too 'everyday'.

### **Explanations for Schematic Preferences**

There may be several alternative reasons for this division of preference between police officers and laypersons in the data, which should be considered here. The first may be gender

imbalance (see: Larson, 2018): our sample consisted of a higher number of male police officers compared to female, and a higher number of female participants from the general population compared to male participants. However, this explanation is not supported by the data, as I found that the overall pattern for each group—preference for the literal among professionals, and the preference for hyperbole among laypersons—occurred for both genders within the group.<sup>3</sup>

Another reason may be that professionals such as police officers can be considered ‘active’ listeners, whereas laypersons or non-professionals may be considered ‘passive’ listeners. The terms ‘active’ and ‘passive’ are used here to convey the amount of involvement expected of the observer after listening to a victim statement. Law enforcement officers are considered the ‘gatekeepers’ of (Maier, 2014; Woods & National Sheriffs’ Association, 2008), and ‘gateways’ to (Kerstetter, 1990; Mennicke et al., 2014), justice. They possess the authority to make crucial decisions such as conducting a further investigation into preliminary claims made by a complainant, and the viability of probable cause for arresting perpetrators. A professional’s objective is to judge a victim for their credibility, and create a version of their narrative that negates the complainant as a victim, and promotes the image of a distanced witness capable of objectively assessing their situation (MacLeod, 2020; Trinch, 2010). The victim-complainant may use hyperbole to establish and cement victim-status through linguistic emotionality as previously mentioned. However, to divert the narrative from a victim perspective to a witness perspective once credibility and victim-status have been established, the professional cultivation would suggest minimising emotionality, and hence, hyperbole. The objectives of laypersons, on the other hand, can be determined by whether they are provided with the power to make

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<sup>3</sup>Male police officers chose hyperbole on 43.2% of trials (literal on 56.8%).  
 Female police officers chose hyperbole on 44.3% of trials (literal on 55.7%).  
 Non-professional males chose hyperbole on 67.5% of trials (literal on 32.5%).  
 Non-professional females chose hyperbole on 54.2% of trials (literal on 45.8%).

judgements (such as individuals on a jury). Those on a jury would be required to make judgements on credibility because the decision would heavily impact another individual (the defendant). The participants in the present sample, however, were not asked to put themselves in the position of a jury, and hence viewed the scenario as one that impacted them personally (owing to the task instructions of assuming a first-person view), from a non-forensic, affective standpoint. This adoption of the first person may have resulted in more compelling effects among our current sample, compared to the laypersons sample in Experiment 1b.

Literature within psycholinguistics often examines hyperbole only in conjunction with master tropes such as irony and metaphor. However, even with limited exclusive references, most research concludes that hyperbole has a negative impact in everyday situations where it is ‘unnecessary’. Colston and Carreno (2020) investigated the use of hyperbole (and irony) in denials of accusations. They found that when hyperbole was used to deny an accusation, participants perceived the subject as more likely to be guilty instead, compared to when irony was used. Leggitt and Gibbs (2000) studied emotional reactions to the ironic overstatement, and the ironic understatement. They asked participants to assume each statement was directed towards them and asked them to rate how the receipt of each statement felt. They concluded that even though participants were cognizant of the good or neutral intentions of their speaker, the use of the overstatement evoked a negative reaction, nonetheless. Finally, Quintillian (1921) expressly warns speakers against using exaggerations in ‘underserving’ situations. The current research is based upon the assumption that sexual crime is an inherently singular, hence, noteworthy situation. While this may be supported within the laypersons sample whose exposure to sexual crime in everyday life may be severely limited, this cannot be said of professionals such as police officers. Grandey (2000) (see also: Parkes et al., 2019) suggests that police staff

who interact specifically with victims or perpetrators of sexual crimes adopt one of two coping mechanisms to traumatic stimuli: ‘surface acting’ which entails masking their true emotions of anger or sadness, and ‘deep acting’ where the feelings themselves are modified by changing the focus of their thoughts. The primary implication of employing such coping mechanisms is the desensitizing of professionals, allowing them to explore the extremes of human criminality without displaying signs of vulnerability (Parkes et al., 2019). While the resultant reduction of emotional involvement in their everyday jobs works to reduce emotional exhaustion (Andela et al., 2016), it may also provide a convincing explanation for the reason behind professionals deviating from speech tools that enhance emotionality, such as hyperbole.

### **Limitations and Conclusions**

One limitation of the current research is the lack of data regarding the demographics of participants besides age, gender, and occupation. No data concerning race, culture, ethnicity, or socio-economic status of the participants were collected. It is possible to find differences in both differing emotionality expectations and hence hyperbole preference (Perlovsky, 2009), as well as factors such as feminist attitudes and prescribing to rape myths (Lefley et al., 1993), between differing cultures and languages. However, considering the lack of research investigating testimonial as opposed to extra-testimonial factors, the purpose of the current research was to target forensically relevant populations holistically with further considerations as an aim for future studies.

The aim of this study was to address the lack of research examining victim or complainant speech in forensically relevant situations. This study also aimed to replicate and further explore previous conclusions regarding hyperbole in victim testimony. Conclusively, results imply serious consequence for victims of sexual crime: two populations, both forensically

consequent, have contrasting views on linguistic expressions of emotionality. Hyperbole is disfavoured by law enforcement officers, while preferred by laypersons when asked to assume the role of the speaker. When the conclusion from this study is compared to the large body of literature detailing a) benefits of emotionality, and b) the role of hyperbole in facilitating emotionality, the present results appear anomalous. Thus, to confirm the role of hyperbole in establishing emotionality, the next chapter investigates the impact of hyperbole on measures of perceived emotionality.



## **Chapter 7: The Role of Hyperbole in Conveying the Emotionality of Victim Speech**

The use of figurative expressions is prevalent in the affective lexicon. The function of figurative language in describing emotional lived-experiences has developed from being described as deviant or special, to essential and fundamental (Colston & Gibbs, 2021; Fainsilber & Ortony, 1987; Fussell & Moss, 1998; Ortony, 1975; Ortony et al., 1987; Pollio & Barlow, 1975; Téllez, 2018). The aim of this study is to investigate the role of rarely studied but commonly used form of figurative language, hyperbole, in the perception of conveyed emotionality specifically within the context of speech from victims of sexual crime.

### **Figurative Language in Descriptions of Autobiographical Emotional Experiences**

The English language is “rife” (Fussell & Moss, 1998, p. 114) with figurative expressions for emotions such as idioms, metaphor, and simile. The use of figurative language lends itself to the communication, interpretation, comprehension, and perceived intensity of emotional experiences (Fainsilber & Ortony, 1987; Gibbs & Colston, 2006; Reinsch, 1971; Roberts & Kreuz, 1994; Sopory & Dillard, 2002b, 2002a). According to the ‘bad is stronger than good’ (Baumeister et al., 2001) principle and the affect control theory (Heise, 1987), figurative language especially lends itself to the expression of negative experiences and unexpected outcomes (Cano Mora, 2009; Citron, 2018; Citron et al., 2016; Citron & Goldberg, 2014). Literature on lived experiences of chronic pain and abuse stresses the inadequacy of literal language; namely, its inability to qualify pain or affect (Barlow et al., 1977; McCarthy, 2020; McMullen, 1996; Pollio & Barlow, 1975; Rubik, 2010; Shinebourne & Smith, 2010; Téllez, 2018). In such cases, figurative language acts as a verbal strategy for the speaker to express exactly that which may otherwise be inexpressible (Fussell & Moss, 1998; Téllez, 2018), hence making it more direct and descriptive than its literal counterpart (Colston & Gibbs, 2021).

Due to extensive research into the master tropes, theories regarding the function and discourse goals of metaphor and irony have been researched and debated to a much larger extent than those of other figures such as hyperbole or allegory. Ortony (1975) suggests that the function of metaphor within discourse is encompassed by three hypotheses. The compactness hypothesis focuses on the ability of metaphor to communicate verbose yet conceptually important information in a “*quick, concise and effective*” (p. 48) manner. The inexpressibility hypothesis proposes that the role of metaphor is to precisely demonstrate that which would otherwise be ambiguous or unimpactful using literal language. Finally, the vividness hypothesis concerns itself with the results achieved by metaphor performing its intended function: based on the assumption that the metaphor is comprehended by the listener, its ability to communicate the speaker’s mental image and reconstruct their experience makes it a superior communicative vehicle and a “*strong emotive force*” (p. 50).

Carmen Maria Machado (2020) in her memoir documenting abusive same-sex relationships “In the Dream House”, uses the metaphorical device of lived-experiences-as-architectural-structures, where the titular ‘dream house’ is the abusive relationship. The memoir written almost exclusively through metaphor is entirely warranted due to the unconventionality of her narrative: communicating her experience with only the availability of “*shoddy vocabulary to describe queer experiences, especially queer abuse*” (McCarthy, 2020, p. 193). Consider the following passage:

- (1) “*The Dream House was never just the Dream House. It was, in turn, a convent of promise[...], a den of debauchery[...], a haunted house[...], a prison[...], and finally, a dungeon of memory.*” (Machado, 2020, p. 82)

In this case, metaphor simultaneously performs all three functions: it provides the reader with a compact and vivid image of an otherwise inexpressible experience, over an extensive

period. Each phrasal metaphorical unit immediately conveys a phase of the relationship, along with the autobiographical emotion connected to each progression. Within the larger metaphor of the dream house, the meta-meta-linguistic description of the dream house as a ‘convent of promise’ provides the reader with firstly, the lexically encoded meaning of convent: as a community of persons devoted to religious life under a superior, and secondly, with the polysemous ad hoc concepts of a convent being (a) a place to live chosen by free will, (b) an establishment devoted to relatively ‘purer’ pursuits, and perhaps less intentionally, (c) a challenge to the patriarchal notions of the woman as a mother and wife (to a man). This is followed by an indication of what the ‘religion’ might be: promise. Collectively, it can be interpreted as the individual, under the influence or guidance of her ‘superior’—in this case, her partner—being devoted to the religion of promise, which in turn may be interpreted as either a verb (promising to love one another) or a noun (a relationship full of promise). Relaying the facets and meanings mentioned above, is the singular phrase “a convent of promise”. The next metaphorical unit “den of debauchery” immediately provides the reader with a bipolar speaker-evaluation of the situation: while ‘den’ refers especially to the lair of a predatory mammal—seemingly unfavourable to enter—it is promptly contrasted with ‘debauchery’ which refers to indulgence with agency. The resultant perception is that the speaker, being peripherally aware of the predatory nature of her partner and abuser, entered a relationship which served as a means of self-indulgence; presented vividly with “den of debauchery”, and so on.

While each phrase works to provide support for the compactness and vividness hypotheses, the entire passage is otherwise inexpressible on two separate levels: first at a macro level, in that there exist relatively few accounts of abuse within lesbian relationships hence there being a lack of specialist language surrounding the topic (Machado, 2020; McCarthy, 2020).

Second, at a micro level, in that an attempt at explaining “it [the dream house] was, in turn, a convent of promise” leads not to literal language, but instead to a more simplified metaphor: ‘the relationship was full of promise’. At this stage it is essential to note that while (1) above is overtly and intentionally metaphorical, it would be incomplete without the escalating hyperbole within each creative metaphor. With the progression of each word (convent, den, haunted house, prison, dungeon) the reader perceives an escalation that begins with consensual, even enthusiastic entry, leads to feeling inescapable (‘prison’), and finally ends with being trapped albeit with a historical context (‘dungeon’), or in the past (‘of memory’).

### **Hyperbole as a Crutch for Creative Metaphorical Expressions**

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have argued a since widely supported view that individuals experience the world through metaphor. Some experiences confoundedly require figurative language in order to convey to a listener the true nature of said experiences (Foolen, 2015; Gibbs, 2020; Henriksen & Mishra, 2020; Téllez, 2018). Gibbs (2020) argues that because people often comprehend through an embodied simulation process, the metaphor often helps those who are in distress by allowing them to communicate their exact experience – otherwise limited by literal language and heavily dependent on listener experience. The metaphor allows listeners to relate the speaker’s likely abstract description to something concrete, and often a universal experience. For example, a new mother may describe her love for her infant as ‘bursting’ which is only comprehensible because of the universal experience of an overfull container being pressured from the inside-out. This description may be especially helpful to someone who is not a parent. Gibbs says this about the metaphors used by patients to describe illness, or the healing process, however, this concept may also be true of the hyperbole often embedded in figurative language produced to convey emotion. Popa-Wyatt (2020) posits that upon mixing with other

figures of speech such as metaphor or irony, hyperbole functions as “*an interpretive effect that infuses hyperbolic tinges into the figure it mixes with*” (p. 93). The argument of this section is therefore that while metaphor is often traditionally discussed in conveying difficult abstract concepts tangibly (Foolen, 2015), emotionally intense descriptions involve a high volume of novel metaphors (Crawford, 2009; Foolen, 2015; Ortony & Fainsilber, 1978) where the contribution of hyperbole must not be ignored.

In the discourse of emotional experiences, figurative language seems almost customary. Rubik talks about ‘display rules’ governing the expression of emotions which “*regulate what and how much a speaker may appropriately express under what circumstances*” (Rubik, 2010, p. 161). This principle as suggested by Rubik, in the current context, works alongside principles such as victim demeanour expectancy – suggesting not only linguistic expectation, but a change in reader-reaction dependent on the meeting of said expectations. Moreover, in support of the current argument, she speaks about the scarcity of ad hoc concepts we draw from in literature, especially when it comes to love, or pain (see also: Scarry, 1985; Shinebourne & Smith, 2010). Kovecses (2000) depicts the subsumption of all metaphors for love within the following categories: fire, hunger, war, animal, pressure in a container, disease, insanity, rapture, and opponent. Rubik (2010) considers that with limited ad hoc concepts, the hyperbole within a conceptual metaphor (see also: Spitzbardt, 1963) along with innovative structure may contribute to whether display rule expectations are met. For example, she suggests that hyperbole may be expected, rewarded, and sympathised with in situations where the speaker treats the reader as a confidante, but not as an amused bystander. This is also supported through the format and discourse goals of hyperbole.

While metaphor promotes the creation of multiple ad hoc concepts in addition to the lexically encoded concept of a phrase, it is hyperbole that provides a scale along which intensity may be manipulated (Carston & Wearing, 2015; Rubio-Fernández et al., 2015). Due to the nature of both metaphor and hyperbole as described in Chapter 1, a metaphor may be used when no literal counterpart for the idea exists (such as Machado’s description of queer abuse or explaining the emission of light as ‘waves’). However, in order to manipulate intensity metaphorically, the speaker must use an entirely different metaphor. Metaphors do not possess a scale. This holds until the metaphor also involves hyperbole which can be manipulated in its place to increase or decrease intensity. To an extent, it may be inferred that the manipulation of hyperbole may contribute to whether victim linguistic expectancy is fulfilled.

Hyperbole may be so embedded in the description of emotional experiences that a lack of it, even in the presence of its literal semantic-equal (see: Kaufmann et al., 2003; Rose et al., 2006), may be jarring to the speaker themselves. Consider the following statement in an essay by Isabel Alonso-Breto (2018, p. 132), about her realisation of, and living with, a cancer diagnosis:

(2) *“It was extremely depressing (even if this is such a dull sentence).”*

It is essential to note that the sentences preceding and succeeding this are almost entirely figurative. The phrase ‘extremely depressing’ in (2) above—while a semantic-equal to other phrases such as *“grotesque black cloud”* (p. 135)—felt so displaced and insufficient even to the speaker, that she chose to reflexively mark (see: McCarthy & Carter, 2004) the sentence – an attempt at reducing reader-backlash and managing expectations through highlighting a linguistic expectancy violation.

Research on the usefulness of figurative language in understanding and communicating traumatic or emotional experiences usually focuses on the benefits for the speaker, or the subject

of the emotional experience (Barlow et al., 1977; McMullen, 1996; Pollio & Barlow, 1975; Shinebourne & Smith, 2010). Outside of therapeutic settings and literary analyses, the role of figurative language, and specifically hyperbole, for active listeners (those who are expected to act upon the information such as victim advocates, therapists, lawyers, judges, jurors, etc.) has not been widely considered. Results from Chapter 4 have suggested a negative impact of hyperbole in victim statements on various measures of victim credibility; Chapter 6 concludes that professionals specifically are disinclined towards using emotion-enhancing tools such as hyperbole even in hypothetical first-person situations. Conversely, emotionality often increases and supports the notion of a credible victim and is deemed absolutely essential in a rape trial (Lees, 1997; Maier, 2014; Sleath & Bull, 2017). Hyperbole is theoretically an evocative and emotional linguistic tool (Cano Mora, 2009; Cano Mora & Macarro, 2004; Colston & Carreno, 2020); however, in the present empirical investigations it seems to have a negative effect on credibility despite being placed in an emotional testimony as well as an emotional context. This provides a rationale for the current study which investigates whether hyperbole indeed increases perceived emotionality specifically in the current context.

### **The Present Study**

Similar to previous experiments in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, the current experiment examines the perception of hyperbole in hypothetical testimonies from victims of sexual crime in two populations: law enforcement officers, and laypersons. Materials are adopted verbatim from Experiment 1 and the presence of hyperbole in each scenario is manipulated to investigate its impact on measures of perceived emotionality. This diverges from previous experiments where the dependent variables were measures of perceived credibility such as belief, sympathy, victim-impact and likeability. Presently, perceived emotionality is measured based on three measures

adapted from Bradley and Lang's (1994) Self-Assessment Manikin: valence (whether an emotion is pleasant or unpleasant), arousal (the extent of its pleasantness or unpleasantness), and appropriateness (whether the displayed emotion is appropriate for the situation). Due to the context of this study being sexual crime, the meaning of the word 'arousal' may be misconstrued by participants and hence the term used throughout this study is 'intensity'. Both measures of valence and intensity are determined on two levels – as perceived by the participant themselves, and as perceived by the participant on behalf of complainant.

The role of figurative language, and specifically hyperbole has been repeatedly established in literature as essential to the understanding and communication of affect (Citron et al., 2016; Crawford, 2009; Foolen, 2015; Gibbs et al., 2002; Hsiao & Su, 2010; Musolff, 2021; Nemesi, 2004; Rubik, 2010). Research expectations for the present study are guided by this claim, and thus, the presence of hyperbole should increase overall perceived emotionality. I predict a general skewedness on the valence scale towards unpleasantness due to the nature of the scenarios in both groups. Considering the results from previous Experiments 1 and 3, I predict that in the professional sample, hyperbole presence is more likely to increase intensity in general, but also specifically on the 'as perceived by the complainant' scale. This is because I previously propose (Chapter 6) a degree of desensitisation on the part of forensic professionals which might impact how intensely they might perceive emotion (i.e., overall, as less intense), however, specifically due to training and experience, they are likely to comprehend the intensity of emotions for the complainant. For the laypersons' sample, it is predicted that hyperbole will increase emotional intensity for both, the participant themselves as well as for the complainant. This is because the general unfamiliarity with sexual crime may play a part in intensifying the emotionality of the context for the lay participant, especially when compared to the professional.



## Method

### Participants

#### *Experiment 4a – Law Enforcement*

40 law enforcement officers (25 male, 15 female) aged 23-58 years ( $M = 35.13$  years,  $SD = 7.70$ ) participated in this study. All participants were recruited through Prolific—an online, anonymous participant interface—where the screening restrictions were limited to individuals who listed their current, or previous employment sector as policing and/or law enforcement. Participants were presently based in the UK and had a native or fluent proficiency in English. Participants were compensated for their time using Prolific’s internal payment system, with an average of £7.72 per hour.

#### *Experiment 4b – General Population*

36 jury-eligible individuals (13 male, 23 female) aged 18-81 years ( $M = 30.45$  years,  $SD = 12.85$ ) participated in this experiment. 30 participants were recruited through advertisements on Facebook research participation groups and through survey-participation websites such as SurveyCircle and SurveyTandem. Participants were entered in a prize draw to win one of two £20 Amazon vouchers. Six remaining participants were recruited through Prolific and were compensated using Prolific’s internal payment system, averaging £7.52 per hour. All participants had a native or fluent proficiency in English.

### Materials and Design

Materials in the present study were identical to those used in Chapter 4 (see Appendix A). Participants were presented with 16 vignettes—eight literal, eight hyperbolic; each 250-300 words long—that involved hypothetical complainants providing statements to forensically relevant sources, or in forensically relevant settings such as a police station, or a courtroom. Each

vignette detailed an experience of either rape, sexual assault, or sexual harassment told from the perspective of the complainant. The task was for participants to read the vignette and answer questions on measures of emotionality (valence, intensity, and appropriateness).

The current measures of emotionality were adapted from Bradley and Lang's (1994) Self-Assessment Manikin (SAM) and maintains some differences from the original study in its design. Figure 14 shows an example scenario as viewed by participants. The current materials were entirely verbal/written as opposed to Bradley and Lang's (1994) non-verbal, pictorial assessment. There were five questions after each scenario, rated on a 9-point scale. Both the valence and intensity categories consisted of two questions each, referring to the perspectives of both, the participant themselves, and the perceived perspective of the complainant in the vignette. The valence questions (*"According to you, how pleasant or unpleasant is the statement above?"*; *"Based on their statement, how pleasant or unpleasant do you think the experience was for the complainant?"*) were each rated with options ranging from Extremely Unpleasant (1) to Extremely Pleasant (9), with a mid-point of Neither Unpleasant nor Unpleasant (5). The intensity questions (*"According to you, how intense is the emotion portrayed in the statement above?"*; *"Based on their statement, how intense do you think were the emotions felt by the complainant?"*) were also rated on the 9-point scale with options ranging from Not At All Intense (1) to Extremely Intense (9), with no neutral mid-point. The final appropriateness question (*"To what extent would you say the intensity of emotion expressed in the scenario was appropriate to the circumstances described?"*) was rated with options ranging from Much Less Than Appropriate (1) to Much More Than Appropriate (9), with a mid-point of Fully Appropriate (5).

**Figure 14.**

*Example scenario as viewed by participants in Experiment 4.*

**Complainant D is a 35-year-old female alleging prolonged sexual harassment. The following is an extract from a hypothetical court statement. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.**

Defence: "If I understand correctly, Mr. X has been your colleague for almost 4 years, is that right?"

Complainant D: "Yes."

Defence: "And how long do you say the harassment has lasted?"

Complainant D: "Three years."

Defence: "Can you tell us the exact nature of this harassment?"

Complainant D: "Yes, well, it has a lot to do with inappropriate remarks and glances. You'd think the finesse with which he speaks, he's the most polite person in the world, but he's nothing more than a manipulative harasser. It's a normal conversation until within moments, it turns into 'let me guess your bra size' or 'I'll show you how to do that' with a nasty voice intonation and a wink. You would think women are built to survive misogynistic hailstones such as these thrown at them every step of their lifetime, but we are a thousand percent at a point where this needs to stop. It is not harmless, and it is not invited. I think I speak for all women when I say that our 'No' needs to stop melting into nothing."

Defence: "Although that was quite a moving speech, it answers none of the questions. Especially the one of, why wait 3 years and endure it, if you felt this strongly about it?"

## Procedure

Participants were informed that they would be involved in a research study investigating perceived emotionality in victim testimony. Participants in Experiment 4a were recruited through their Prolific accounts, which automatically opened the survey to members who met the study's pre-set eligibility criteria. Participants in Experiment 4b either used their link on SurveyTandem, a QR code on Facebook and SurveyCircle, or directly gained access to the study through their Prolific accounts if they met the eligibility criteria for the study. Upon opening the survey, participants were presented with an information sheet detailing the purpose, nature, and contents of the study. This was followed by a standard consent form and a GDPR statement. If they agreed to both, they proceeded onto the demographics sections: gender, age, and occupation.

Participants then proceeded onto the 16 vignettes. After each vignette, participants saw a brief explanation of the scales being utilised in the study (see figure 15 below), after which they answered five questions on the measures of emotionality.

**Figure 15.**

*Instructions to participants after reading the vignette, before answering questions.*

*Please rate the scenario you read above on the following scales:*

***Valence** is the extent to which the scenario described is positive or negative in its emotion; **Intensity** here refers to the perceived intensity of the scenario from very calming to highly exciting or agitating.*

*For each scale, you will be asked to make a rating based on your own feelings, as well as from the perspective of the complainant.*

This procedure was repeated 16 times and vignettes were presented in a random order. After viewing all 16 scenarios, participants were provided with a stress-alleviating task which asked them to engage in selecting their favoured pictures of cute animals. At the end of this, participants in Experiment 4b were asked to provide their email addresses to be entered into a prize draw. Provision of their email was optional and was only used to contact the randomly selected winners of the prize draw after which any contact details were deleted. Participants from Experiment 4a were compensated through their prolific accounts. Both groups were finally presented with a participant debrief form, informing them of conclusions from previous research, and the rationale for the current research.

## Results

Datasets from both participant groups were merged and analysed together using linear mixed effects models through the ‘lme4’ package (Version 1.1-29; Bates et al., 2022) in R (Version 4.2.0; R Core Package 2022). First, the maximal model was fitted to the data; that is, a model including random slopes and random intercepts for the fixed effects of participants and items (see: Brown, 2021; Howman & Filik, 2020). Condition (the presence or absence of hyperbole) and occupation (laypersons or law enforcement) were the fixed factors in each analysis and were dummy coded by default. If the maximal model did not converge, the “bobyqa” optimiser was applied. If the model still failed to converge, such that the (isSingular) error-warning persisted, the “summary ()” command in R was used to determine perfect and near-perfect correlations. Then the perfect correlations were progressively eliminated until a converging model was reached. Once a model converged, likelihood ratio tests (LRTs) were performed with an even simpler model to determine the best fit for the data. Results showed statistically significant main effects of both condition and occupation on certain response variables. There were no statistically significant interactions between condition and occupation. This suggests no significant effects of condition levels on occupation (and vice versa) such that it would impact response variables. Table 4 below reports the descriptive statistics for the both samples calculated using the package ‘emmeans’ (version 1.7.4-1; Lenth et al., 2022).

### **Table 4.**

*Means and standard errors for ratings within the law enforcement and laypersons sample (on the response scale).*

*Main effects of condition*

Measure		Hyperbolic:		Hyperbolic:		Non-		Non-	
		Law		Laypersons		Hyperbolic:		Hyperbolic:	
		Enforcement				Law		Laypersons	
						Enforcement			
		<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>
Valence	For Self	3.50	0.18	2.68	0.18	3.53	.018	2.72	0.18
	For Complainant	2.89	0.19	2.46	0.19	2.99	0.19	2.56	0.19
Intensity	For Self	5.64	0.20	5.90	0.20	5.45	0.21	5.71	0.21
	For Complainant	6.44	0.20	6.66	0.21	6.16	0.20	6.39	0.21
Appropriateness		5.40	0.13	5.52	0.14	5.20	0.13	5.32	0.14

There were significant main effects of condition (hyperbole or no hyperbole) on three out of five measures for perceived emotionality: emotional intensity as perceived for participants themselves, as perceived for the complainant, and appropriateness. The results suggested that the presence of hyperbole in victim testimony significantly increased the intensity of the emotion as felt by participants themselves, and as perceived for the complainant. Means were generally higher on the valence scale as perceived for the complainant than perceived for the participants themselves. For emotional intensity, mean scores suggest that laypersons as a group rated scenarios higher on arousal (i.e., as more intense) than law enforcement participants, and rated scenarios as more intense for the complainant than for themselves across conditions.

Hyperbole also impacted appropriateness such that non-hyperbolic scenarios were significantly more emotionally appropriate than scenarios employing hyperbole. A further one-sample  $t$ -test was conducted to determine whether hyperbole also made scenarios seem more emotional than appropriate. Mean appropriateness scores in the hyperbolic condition (across both participant groups) were higher ( $M = 5.50$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ) than the midpoint of the scale (5), anchored as *Fully Appropriate*. Emotionality was rated as significantly more than appropriate in scenarios which were hyperbolic  $t(75) = 3.77$ ,  $p < .001$ . Non-hyperbolic scenarios were also more emotional than appropriate  $t(75) = 2.35$ ,  $p = .02$ , but non-hyperbolic means ( $M = 5.28$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ) were closer to the midpoint (5) than hyperbolic means.

### ***Main effects of occupation***

There were significant main effects of occupation (laypersons or law enforcement) on four out of five measures of perceived emotionality: valence for self, valence as perceived for the complainant, emotional intensity as perceived for participants themselves, and as perceived for the complainant. Mean scores suggest that regardless of condition, laypersons rated scenarios more negatively on valence scale (i.e., more unpleasant) than their law enforcement counterparts.

The results for fixed effects parameters are reported below in Table 5 using the  $t$  values ( $t$ ), and  $p$  values ( $p$ ), using 95% confidence intervals ( $CI$ ). These values were calculated using packages ‘emmeans’ (version 1.7.4-1; Lenth et al., 2022), and ‘lmerTest’ (version 3.1-3; Kuznetsova et al., 2020) and are supported with the best fit model for each response variable.

**Table 5.**

*The results of the fixed-effects parameters in the linear mixed-effects models for each response variable.*

Note:

Measure			( <i>t</i> )	( <i>p</i> )
Valence*	For Self	Condition	0.49	.62
		Occupation	10.90	<.001
	For Complainant	Condition	1.25	.21
		Occupation	5.09	<.001
Intensity*	For Self	Condition	1.94	.05
		Occupation	2.60	.009
	For Complainant	Condition	2.80	.005
		Occupation	2.23	.02
Appropriateness*		Condition	2.21	.02
		Occupation	1.26	.21

Note: \*Model: ~ Condition + Occupation + (1 | Participant) + (1 | Question)



## Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine whether hyperbole had an impact on three measures of emotionality and perceived emotionality within victim testimony: valence (how pleasant or unpleasant a statement was), intensity (how emotionally intense a statement was) and appropriateness (how appropriate the emotional intensity was to the situation presented). The results suggest that the most prominent effect of hyperbole across groups is on the emotional intensity of a statement followed by appropriateness of depicted emotion. Hyperbole had no impact on valence such that regardless of condition, scenarios were rated just as unpleasant. However, hyperbole significantly made scenarios seem more emotionally intense, especially as perceived on the behalf of the complainant. Hyperbole also had a statistically significant impact on emotional appropriateness, suggesting that the presence of hyperbole made testimonies seem emotionally inappropriate when compared to non-hyperbolic testimonies.

Data were also analysed to examine the impact of occupation (laypersons vs. law enforcement) on perceived emotionality. Group differences were examined to explore and exemplify previous conclusions (Experiments 1 and 3) which suggested that law enforcement participants were generally desensitised to emotionality, specifically in the current context of sexual crime due to the high level of their exposure and a need for self-preservation. The current results seem to support these conclusions as occupation had a significant impact on four out of five measures of perceived emotionality. Lay participants generally rated scenarios as significantly more unpleasant than law enforcement participants. They also rated scenarios as more emotionally intense than law enforcement participants. The current results fully support previous conclusions in that: hyperbole significantly increases emotional intensity but despite the validity of the sexual crime context, still negatively impacts emotional appropriateness.

Moreover, laypersons find the sexual crime context more emotional in itself than law enforcement participants. There was also a significant main effect of occupation (professional vs. non-professional) on measures of valence and intensity which suggests that regardless of condition, laypersons in general thought the scenarios/testimonies to be more emotional compared to their professional counterparts. Appropriateness was the only measure which had no significant main effect of occupation, but a significant main effect of condition. Further analysis suggested that participants believed hyperbole made a testimony more emotional than was appropriate.

### **The Impact of Display Rules**

The discussion of display rules in the present study has been in the context of victims and complainants. However, the stringent display rules in place for law enforcement officers (Grandey, 2000; Parkes et al., 2019) must not be disregarded. The need to maintain outwardly professional objectivity and balance implies that police officers often manage their reactions to the constant emotionally distressing stimuli through a type of ‘acting’: deep, or surface (Grandey, 2000). Categorically, the officers who deal with sexual offences on a regular basis require a high frequency and prolonged duration of acting (Burns et al., 2008; Parkes et al., 2019; Perez et al., 2010). To prevent burnout associated with the cognitive load of such acting (Andela et al., 2016; Hülshager & Schewe, 2011) these officers often become desensitised to distressing information as a way of coping. Mills and Kleinman (1988, p. 1022) argue: “*Professionals are not simply taught to mask their feelings about clients. Rather, they learn to redefine the client in ways that discourage them from reacting emotionally.*”

If, as previously theorised, law enforcement participants were considerably more desensitised to the scenarios, hyperbole should ideally not have an effect on perceived emotional

intensity. However, results suggest that it might be precisely because of this desensitisation (not despite it) that hyperbole is allowed to perform according to its discourse goals. This desensitisation to the inherent sexual crime situation due to prolonged exposure in fact facilitates the current results. Contrary to previous results from Chapter 4 where hyperbole caused a decrease in credibility measures, hyperbole here performed according to its discourse goals (emphasising the difference between expected and actual outcomes) for the professional participants in the current study. The dominant difference between Experiment 1 and the current Experiment 4 is the nature of the dependent variables and what they ultimately examine. The inference here is that where the nature of the crime may not inherently evoke an emotional reaction, hyperbole in the statement intensifies testimonial emotionality. However, despite the evocation of emotion, participants from the same population when asked to provide credibility ratings, perceive a negative impact of hyperbole.

At variance with the level of exposure of professional participants, the laypersons sample is a population which does not typically have familiarity with the everyday proceedings of a rape complaint or trial, and hence the interactions and discourse within this context were not commonplace for the participants (Konradi, 1999). Due to this unfamiliarity, the inherent emotionality of sexual crime perhaps contributed more to the emotionality ratings, than did hyperbole. This is especially visible in the valence ratings of both groups where laypersons consistently rated scenarios as more unpleasant than law enforcement participants. Additionally, even though hyperbole had a positive impact on intensity scores, group differences persisted such that laypersons had generally scored scenarios as more emotionally intense than law enforcement participants. It is possible that while police officers have a set of display rules firmly in place which allow them to determine essential factors about the case such as risk-levels

and seriousness, laypersons' lack of a framework for sexual crime situations impels them to react to the heuristically processed sexual crime aspect as opposed to the statement itself.

### **Limitations**

One of the primary limitations of this experiment is that the materials that were non-hyperbolic in nature were not entirely literal. It is possible that involving materials that were concretely literal may have made the impact of hyperbolic scenarios starker, specifically in the measure of emotional intensity for self (which was marginally significant). While the resolution is seemingly straightforward, that is, manipulating the materials to make them concretely literal, such results would not be fully viable. One of the predominant criticisms of materials within experimental psycholinguistics in general, is that they often fail to follow the pattern of normal speech (Burgers et al., 2018; Rose et al., 2006). This has also been a limitation in the present thesis, in Experiment 2. While manipulation is essential to accurately determine the roles of certain variables, the requirement for participants to involve themselves in the scenario in order to provide accurate personal judgements was presently more important for generalisability. Being that figurative language is so inherent to linguistic expressions of emotionality, a complete absence of figures of speech would result in the complainant statements sounding 'unnatural'.

### **Conclusion**

Appropriate emotionality is a questionable concept, filtered through professional and individual experiences and differences. The current results not only support current predictions, but also previous theories about group differences and emotionality perceptions. Hyperbole appears to have no impact on valence. This may be primarily because it is unlikely that any participant would perceive sexual crime as pleasant. Hyperbole had a significant positive impact, and hence increased, the perceived emotionality in scenarios. In the present study, participants

across groups seem to recognise that hyperbole advances emotional intensity – a factor often rewarded (upon being ‘the appropriate amount’) in forensic settings. Previous studies in this thesis have assumed that sexual crime as a context appropriates hyperbole usage due to its unpleasant valence. Current results (and results throughout this thesis) support the unpleasant valence but suggest that the present context is still not viewed as appropriate for hyperbole usage. Despite contextual unpleasantness, hyperbole-heightened emotion is still considered ‘too much’. It is possible that hyperbole manipulates factors other than emotionality which make hyperbolic testimonies seem more emotional than appropriate. In the next chapter, I conduct a further exploration of factors adjacent to hyperbole (linguistic or otherwise) that may provide a greater insight into negative victim perception. I investigate impactful factors through questioning impactful persons: law enforcement officers, who are often the catalysts of any case progression.

## Chapter 8: Professionals' perceptions of (in)credible victims and false allegations

In judging the demeanour of a person, you must suppose that his reactions to a given happening—tragic, peculiar, or even commonplace—will invariably be the same as your own; and I do not need to tell you of the dangers attending that.

- (Dickson, 1938, pp. 146–147)

Research over the past few decades continually suggests that the self-presentation of a rape victim is a factor almost as important as physical evidence, and that it significantly impacts all stages of a case progression (Alderden & Ullman, 2012; Ask, 2010; Frohmann, 1991; Holmstrom & Burgess, 1978; Larson, 2018; Sleath & Bull, 2017; Spohn & Holleran, 2001; Venema, 2016; Venema et al., 2019; Winkel & Koppelaar, 1992, 1991). An emotional victim—as opposed to one who is numbed or neutral—is more likely to appear credible (Ask, 2010; Bandes, 2017; Rose et al., 2006; Tsoudis, 2002) and establishing victim credibility aids decisions for the police such as investigating a case and arresting a perpetrator (Alderden & Ullman, 2012; Ask, 2010; Nitschke et al., 2019; Tasca et al., 2013). In cases so heavily reliant upon unpredictable trauma responses from victims, it becomes crucial to investigate the perceptions and reactions of first responders. This study aims to qualitatively understand the mechanisms underlying the concept of a 'credible rape victim' as they function for those who make the most consequential decisions.

Historically, in the absence of contemporary conclusive forensic evidence, the veracity of a rape victim's—usually assumed a cis-gendered, heterosexual, white woman (Larson, 2018)—testimony was determined exclusively by her behaviour before, during, and after the assault. She ought to have been engaged in a respectable chore (Christie, 1986; Larcombe, 2002; Stevenson,

2000), in a good neighbourhood at a sensible hour (Orenstein, 2007). The ideal woman is disciplined, and requires “*a closed mouth (silence), a closed body (chastity), and an enclosed life (domestic confinement)*” (Glenn, 1997, p. 1). When attacked, the victim must struggle physically with an unknown perpetrator, and as a result, sustain injury while simultaneously crying out loud for help and clarifying that she does not consent – physically and verbally (Estrich, 1987; Larson, 2018; Orenstein, 2007; Pateman, 1980; Salekin et al., 1995). After the assault, she must establish victim-impact in power-loaded situations such as police stations or courtrooms: “*[the successful rape complainant is] polite but not compliant, cooperative but not submissive. She is not prone to exaggeration or embellishment but seems to talk straight. She answers questions quickly and precisely and speaks fairly and frankly without shame about sexual acts and activities.*” (Larcombe, 2002, p. 15).

Well-established theoretical perspectives such as the focal concerns theory (Steffensmeier et al., 1998) and the sociological theory of law (Black, 1980) suggest an equal contribution of legal and extra-legal factors in police decisions for processing sexual crime cases (Spohn et al., 2014; Venema et al., 2019). These factors are predominantly the seriousness of the crime, the risk-level of the offender, the credibility of the victim and the character of the victim. The latter two factors along with being extra-legal, are unique to sexual crime cases (Spohn & Holleran, 2001) which place inherent blame on to the victim by default. With victim credibility being fundamental and pivotal to sexual crime cases, the objective (even before the introduction of interviewing techniques) becomes to examine a testimony for believability rather than to assume it.

## Modern Schemas and Expectations

As previously discussed in Chapter 3, many research studies investigate how different groups of individuals perceive rape victims: mock jury members (Ellison & Munro, 2009; Nuñez et al., 2017; Tsoudis, 2002), police officers (Parratt & Afroditi, 2017; Sleath & Bull, 2017), medical first responders (Maier, 2012a; Rudolfsson & Punzi, 2021), victim advocates (Konradi, 1997; Maier, 2008a; Rich, 2019), therapists, and counsellors. Despite this abundance of data, empirical results from Chapters 4 through 7 are novel, and do not emerge from exact antecedents. It is clear from the nature of those results, that factors which have not been considered before, and moreover, diametric factors, may be at play and may be as important as one another. One more aspect is evident: the expectations of the victim are not simply expectations. They are rules for behaviour with the ability to change perceptions. A hyperbolic victim seems to be less impacted by the crime, yet a hyperbolic testimony signifies that the complainant felt intense emotions (law enforcement sample). Hyperbolic testimony makes the victim more believable for laypersons such that, when asked for a first-person opinion, laypersons would rather use hyperbolic phrases to express themselves. It can be argued that expectations of the rape victim exist because a concept of the ‘real victim’ exists. For example, a person who is raped must resist their perpetrator because ‘that is what a real victim would do’. Thus, a question arises – at what point is an expectation just another rape myth?

Martha Burt introduced the rape myth acceptance (RMA) scale in 1980 which has since been used to determine attitudes towards sexual violence. It is likely that since that time, some rape myths have been identified, corrected, and no longer exist with a prevalence that may be harmful to society. However, it may be equally accurate that newer rape myths have emerged and are in circulation, those unidentified within Burt’s RMA. In 2007, Gerger et al. released the



AMMSA scale (see also: AMMSA-21; Bohner et al., forthcoming) which pertain to the acceptance of modern myths about sexual aggression (for exemplary items, see: Bohner et al., 2022; Gerger et al., 2007). This scale seeks to identify more modern forms of dissenting attitudes towards rape and rape victims with the assumption that sexual aggression myths evolve with time. In the current study, law enforcement officers are interviewed, and data are analysed to examine what the modern expectations of the rape victim are. At several points in this chapter, the AMMSA-21 (Bohner et al., forthcoming) is used to support thematic findings.

### **The Perceptual Shorthand**

Steffensmeier et al. (1998) suggest that those within the criminal justice system have some focal concerns—namely, the harm perpetrated by a suspect on a victim, risk to the community, and the suitability of the sentencing—by virtue of which they consider factors that most readily affect said concerns, resulting in a ‘perceptual shorthand’. This perceptual shorthand is a concept similar to Chaiken and Maheswaran’s (1994) heuristics and schema-based processing of information on source credibility. It suggests that based on the focal concerns, forensically relevant authorities examine cases for viability and sustainability. Venema et al. (2019) note that police officers have their own perceptual shorthand which ‘screens’ cases in order to determine those which prosecutors are likely to pick up, and ultimately bring to trial. The perceptual shorthand however, similar to heuristic processing, is not uniform across all law enforcement officers, and stems from individual differences in factors such as experience, beliefs, training, age, gender, and ethnicity. For example, some researchers find that victim injury and weapon involvement were likely positive predictors of the police’s decision to charge perpetrators (Alderden & Ullman, 2012) whereas some find physical resistance a more likely predictor (Wentz, 2020). In other cases, prompt reporting by a victim significantly increases the

possibility of charges leading to arrest (Tasca et al., 2013; Wentz, 2020), whereas for a different police sample, reporting time does not prove a significant factor (Holleran et al., 2010). It is important to signpost here that there are several speech occurrences from participants in the subsequent data which strongly suggest that they personally consider prosecutorial decisions while investigating cases.

### **The Present Study**

Based on the experimental chapters within the current thesis so far, the information we have on law enforcement participants is this: professional participants perceive negative effects of hyperbole on credibility measures (Experiment 1a). Even in situations where they are asked to assume the role of a primary speaker, they show a significantly stronger inclination towards literal language than hyperbole (Experiment 3a). As previously mentioned, wider research suggests that emotionality in victim testimony is often rewarded, and especially by law enforcement participants (Sleath & Bull, 2017). The results from Experiments 1a and 3a seemed to suggest that it is possible that law enforcement participants do not view hyperbole as enhancing emotionality. However, despite their disinclination towards hyperbole, they recognise its emotional aspect, as results from Experiment 4a show that hyperbole in victim testimony increases overall emotional intensity among law enforcement participants. Hence, the incongruent nature of previous results is evident. There are two possibilities: it is either the nature of hyperbole that performs a function beyond that of enhancing emotionality, or, the nature of the population where distinct samples, despite recognizing the emotionality within hyperbole, are averse to its usage. It is this second possibility that is explored in the current study. The aim is to qualitatively and holistically examine some other factors contributing to the perceptual shorthand and schema formations. Specifically, those that like hyperbole use, often

contribute to a more negative perception of the victim. In the present study, while analyses are inductive and based purely in the data, the resultant themes are discussed within the context of relevant theories proposed throughout this thesis.

The four questions in the present interview schedule are devised to elicit answers specifically in relation with factors that may reduce credibility. Based on previously discussed linguistic principles such as ‘bad is stronger than good’ (Baumeister et al., 2001), questions have been formulated with a ‘negative focus’ (e.g. ‘what are some red flags that may indicate to you that a complainant is lying?’ as opposed to ‘what might make you believe the complainant is telling the truth?’). This formulation is based on the assumption that in general individuals are more likely to remember deviations from, or ruptures of, the norm (Das, 2008; Porter, 2019) and that negative incidents are naturally more noteworthy than neutral or positive ones.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

15 law enforcement officers (9 male, 6 female) between the ages of 25-49 years ( $M = 36.8$  years,  $SD = 6.91$ ) took part in this study. All participants were recruited through Prolific where they were each screened for two eligibility criteria: (1) individuals who listed their current, or previous employment sector as law enforcement; (2) individuals who were within law enforcement consecutively for five or more years (currently, or at the time of their employment). Only participants who met both criteria were given access to the study. The median length of time within law enforcement was 9 years (and ranged from 5-20 years). Participant titles included Police Constable (5), Detective Constable (4) Intelligence Officer (1), Police Sergeant (1), Commanding Officer (1), Property and Evidence Technician (1), Inspector (1) and Chief

Security Officer (1). Participants were compensated for their time using Prolific's internal payment system, with an average of £6.65 an hour.

## **Design**

### ***Semi-structured interview***

A semi-structured, written-interview schedule was designed for this study. There were four questions in the schedule focusing on the participants' experience with, and opinions of victims of sexual crime specifically. The four questions addressed commonalities across victims (*In your experience, are there certain characteristics that are common to most victims of sexual crime?*), factors alluding to false allegations (*Before or during an investigation, what are some "red flags" that may indicate to you that a complainant is lying? Or, what implies that you may be dealing with a false allegation?*), stimulating memories of relevant incidents (*Briefly recount 3-5 incidents where you personally dealt with a frustrating complainant, especially if they claimed to be/were a victim of sexual crime*), and finally, factors interfering with successful proceedings (*Keeping your answer above in mind, what are some things that a complainant might do or say, that hinders their chance at a successful investigation or trial?*). For each of the above questions, participants were instructed and encouraged to elaborate as much as possible and make use of personal stories and experiences.

### ***Qualitative Data Analysis***

A thematic analysis approach as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) was followed for data analysis. Patterns of meaning in participants' accounts were systematically extracted using the following steps:

- (1) Familiarization with the data through multiple readings.

- (2) Generating preliminary codes to capture thoughts and opinions expressed by participants.
- (3) Assembling codes representing similar ideas under an initial list of themes.
- (4) Reviewing the initial list of themes in relation to the entire dataset to create a ‘thematic map’.
- (5) Defining each theme to consolidate and appropriately depict the data.

## **Procedure**

A pre-screen was released on Prolific to determine the length of participants’ employment within law enforcement. The pre-test consisted of one question: ‘*Please enter (in years) the length of your employment as a police officer*’ and was released to Prolific members who listed their previous or current employment as police and/or law enforcement. Individuals who had five or more years of experience were then put on a custom ‘allowlist’ on Prolific exclusively allowing them access to the interview schedule on Qualtrics. Once they clicked on the main study link, they were presented with a participant information sheet detailing the purpose, nature, and contents of the study. They then signed a consent form agreeing to participate in the study along with a GDPR statement which they must consent to, in order to progress. They then filled in demographic details: age and gender. This was followed by occupation-specific questions asking them to confirm that they had been employed within law enforcement for five or more consecutive years, and asking them their current, or most recent rank or position. Participants were then presented with the four interview questions. At the end of the interview, participants were presented with a debrief form, giving them further information about the rationale of the study and the importance of investigating the perceptions of forensically relevant individuals.

## Results

Table 6 below shows the different themes and subthemes that were identified after conducting a thematic analysis of the data.

**Table 6.**

*Summary of Themes and Subthemes.*

### Red Flags

Themes	Subthemes
<b>Red Flags</b>	Questioning credibility based on physical evidence
	Questioning credibility based on victim characteristics
<b>Motives other than justice</b>	Leverage and benefits
	Regret
	Revenge
<b>Difficult despite true allegations</b>	Before reporting
	During reporting
	After reporting

Participants generally concurred that determining the differences between false and true allegations from the onset was extremely difficult. Through their years of experience, however, they were able to establish some 'red flags' or factors that when appeared in the case, immediately alluded to an untrustworthy complainant. Within the subthemes it is evident that participants deem victim demeanour almost as much of a contributing factor to police decision-making processes, as physical evidence.

### ***Questioning Credibility Based on Physical Evidence***

Most participants agreed upon the importance of the presence of physical evidence in a sexual assault case. The most obvious red flag was falsifying evidence that was easy to corroborate and lying about any part of the incident, especially when it could be found out using CCTV footage or third-party corroboration.

Red flags would be: A clear and obvious fault in their account. i.e., I recall a 40 year old female who met a man via the internet. She met him in a pub and went to her home for sex. She told police that he had bundled her into his car and dragged her into the house. CCTV however showed them kissing in the pub and her walking freely to the car. A neighbour also had a conversation with the female as she was entering the home. This was a clear indicator that there was a falsehood in her account. It later turned out that they had had consensual sex but the male wasn't interested in seeing her again. (*Sergeant, 37, Male*)

Participants also agreed that failure to provide adequate details was another cause for concern. This involved accounts that did not hold up to detailed questioning, failure to add or amend details regarding the situation and deleting social media posts and voice or text messages.

[If complainants are] unable to give even a basic description of the events of the crime itself whereas compared to a true allegation, the person doesn't want to talk about it, however can recall great amounts of intimate information about the incident, like smells and textures, it is [cause for concern]. (*Police Constable, 29, Male*)

### ***Questioning Credibility Based on Victim Characteristics***

One of the primary factors that caused participants to question the authenticity of an account was if the complainant did not appear affected at all by the crime that they were reporting. In addition, participants also mentioned that any testimony that sounded rehearsed or coached in any way undermined the authenticity of the account. Three participants who expressly used words such as ‘nonchalant’, ‘matter-of-fact’, and ‘casual’ to describe the reporting manner of the complainant also almost exclusively used the word ‘alleged’ to refer to the victim and/or crime. This possibly suggests that they were not prepared to grant complete victim status to the seemingly unbothered victim.

The first and biggest "red flag" that I perceived was the casual manner as she proceeded to explain the alleged abuse and, at a later time, the attempt to cry (failed). (*Chief Security Officer, 49, Male*)

It is noteworthy, however, that this participant was aware that such a response may be the result of intense trauma and in another answer, proceeded to explain in further detail:

As I already wrote in the second answer, a major "red flag" is the "matter of fact" way the alleged victim might show while explaining the alleged abuse and/or rape incident. HOWEVER [*sic*] this can't be dismissed at once as a false testimony because it can also be a form of mental defence that a true victim can assume to cope with such a stressful situation. In the case I wrote about in the second answer that was a "red flag" but I didn't dismiss it as a false accusation at that time. Only when the contradictory statements started to pile up I noted that in my report. It's not my place to



judge but only to report the complaints exactly as the victim or purported victim tells me. (*Chief Security Officer, 49, Male*)

One participant mentioned the rarity of false allegations due to the tedium of a sexual assault complaint process.

That said, I think that normally rape victims don't usually lie or present false allegations, however, that is possible, and some signs may be the relaxation of the alleged victim while complaining, if they are too relaxed, the super descriptive report, but I think it all depends on the feeling of the officer about the truth of the allegations. (*Commanding Officer, 25, Male*)

This participant however, was also the only participant who mentioned being aware of external influences in a sexual crime case, and actively mentioned attempts to reject them.

I think that the success of the investigation depends most on the investigators than on the victim itself, despite anything he/she might do or say. It's understandable that the investigators may be influenced by the victim behaviours but they should always abstract themselves of that. (*Commanding Officer, 25, Male*)

### ***Frequent Flyers***

Complainants who tended to make multiple allegations against the same or different individuals were most often likely to be viewed with mistrust.

As with any investigation when you receive a report, the details of the victim and suspect will be listed. This allows for initial research. If during that research the victim is shown to have made numerous allegations

against males, either the same male or others this will raise alarm bells as such. It does not mean it will not be investigated fully however it raises initial doubt. (*Detective Constable, 39, Female*)

One participant also mentioned the frustration of dealing with complainants who had unfounded previous claims.

Some of the most frustrating ones are [...] the "Frequent Flyers", so to speak. These individuals have, in some cases over 30 separate reports of rape or sexual assault, and every single time the evidence from the case has been tested, it's always come up as negative for any DNA or other evidence. There are several people who have these reports at least once per week, and it gets frustrating to deal with the same vague, rambling stories they always come up with, and every time come up with no evidence. Most all of the people are homeless, and potentially with mental issues, and one of them is an average citizen, but who seems to report a sexual assault on a weekly basis. Knowing the price of the rape kit makes the situation much more frustrating when I see them coming back every single time with no evidence the assault took place. (*Property and Evidence Technician, 39, Male*)

Participants agreed that especially if the complainant was unable to provide most other details excepting the descriptions of the perpetrator, in combination with multiple previous unfounded allegations, the account was likely fabricated, and the alleged crime was reported with ulterior motives.

### **Motives Other Than Justice**

All participants mentioned that some of the most frustrating cases they dealt with, involved complainants who “falsely reported sexual assault”, and/or for reasons other than obtaining justice. According to participants, the motivations behind false allegations (for the complainant) usually rested in one or more of three goals: leverage or benefits, regret, and revenge.

### ***Allegations as Leverage***

Participants who spoke of false allegations made for leverage and control mentioned that it was never solitary sexual abuse, and the case most often involved a variety of domestic issues surrounding the complainant and perpetrator. The consensus was that it was most often cases of child custody, where a parent used sexual assault in order to gain legal leverage over the other parent. It may be interesting to note here that one of the first items on the AMMSA-21 scale is “*In a custody battle, women often allege that their ex-husband has been sexually violent*” (Bohner et al., forthcoming).

When fake allegations are made, regardless of the context of the incident, they often refer to ongoing issues with the alleged perpetrator, i.e., current child custody battles, and it becomes apparent that they intend to get the individual into trouble with the law in the hope that they will win the custody battle as being the "good" parent. (*Police Constable, 34, Female*)

[It is frustrating to see] complaints in an effort to have the children more than the other party in a divorce. When it comes to our children, people will literally make up any story to try and wiggle the custody from the

other parent. It's quite sad to see especially because the children are always in middle of this guilt and manipulation game. (*Inspector, 28, Male*)

One participant spoke about the rare occurrence where the sexual assault had indeed occurred, but the victim will threaten to report it only if the perpetrator does not acquiesce to some other, often unrelated demand. He mentioned that having physical evidence of using a rape complaint as a threat significantly altered the credibility of the victim, especially from the perspective of a third party, such as a jury, or Crown Prosecution Services (CPS).

Occasionally they will threaten to make the complaint via text if some other factor does not take place. i.e if you don't return my dog I will tell the police you raped me. So even though the female has been raped it can appear as though the allegation is postured to gain leverage. (*Sergeant, 37, Male*)

### ***Allegations as Regret***

The majority of the participants mentioned that one of the most common motivations behind a false allegation was regret and/or fear. Most participants admitted to dealing with reports of sexual abuse that were later clarified to have been made as a result of regretting the consensual sexual encounter or being fearful of their usual sexual partner discovering the incident.

I have dealt with many incidents, where a female had been on a night out with friends and had drunk too much alcohol, so her inhibitions had lowered and she'd decided to have sex with a male who was not her usual sexual partner. Her friends would have seen her go off with the male also.

The next morning, once sober, the female regrets her choices and fears that her friends may say something and it may get back to her partner, so states to her friends that she had in fact been raped. The consequence of these type of allegations is huge. (*Detective Constable, 48, Male*)

Such cases were also notably reported by a complainant who looked “reluctant” to report anything, but who was encouraged by either a friend, or most often, a partner.

[I] have had victims attend with their boyfriend to report that they have been out drinking with friends and they have been raped by a male they have met. These victims will often seem very reluctant but pushed along by a boyfriend and on deeper conversation with the victim it has come to light that this is more what we would term “regret sex”. (*Detective Constable, 39, Female*)

Participants mentioned that not only were such allegations a harmful contribution to statistics but were often extremely time-consuming with no consolidated results. Many talked about the disappointment and emotional toll that it took upon an investigating or interviewing officer when a report is eventually cleared as having been falsified.

An example I have is where a female alleged a stranger rape after a night out, this created a huge investigation with police and forensics, media appeal which then scared the public. After hours of investigation the female admitted to lying, saying she'd had a one night stand and hadn't wanted her partner to find out. (*Detective Constable, 40, Female*)

### *Allegations as Revenge*

A common thread within false allegations was also that of using a sexual assault report as revenge against a current or ex-partner, or even acquaintances. It is important to highlight here that participants mentioned that substance abuse and mental health issues (often both in combination) contributed hugely to malicious intent. I mention after the next quote how several participants state that false accusations are rare. Mental health issues also appear strongly in questions concerning victimology. Regardless of this knowledge—the rarity of false allegations and the vulnerability of those with mental health concerns—some participants do not seem to fully consider this while providing answers.

I will say now that I investigate many allegations of a sexual offence that can be proven to be false and of those investigations the majority of persons reporting them will either be suffering from a mental health condition or it will be an allegation against an ex partner which has sadly been malicious in nature. (*Detective constable, 39, Female*)

Many participants discussed cases where the complainant had used a rape allegation to control or intimidate the partner into compliance or as a “punishment tactic after a breakup”.

A female who was drunk in the city centre had an argument with her partner who left her to go home on her own. She picked up an older man in a nearby bar and went to his house where they had consensual sex. She left the address and reported a 'date rape' to nearby street preachers and collapsed. The man was arrested and held for almost a day. He had intimate swabs taken from his genitals and was questioned in relation to

raping the female. Evidence however suggested otherwise, and the female later admitted making a false allegation. It was an attempt to make her partner regret leaving her alone in the city. (*Sergeant, 37, Male*)

It is essential to clarify that although all participants had previously dealt with allegations that may not have been entirely truthful, most agreed that such cases were rare and that the current examples were brought to mind due to the nature of the interview questions. However, interview questions help to highlight more nuanced biases that have been discussed previously only in theoretical literature. Most notably, Larson (2018) comments essentially that ‘the victim has mental health issues’ is the new ‘women are lying whores’. Less severely put, many mental illnesses such as anxiety and depression have been historically known as women’s issues. The word ‘hysteria’ is etymologically linked to the word uterus. Discounting victims because they suffer from a mental illness, Larson claims, is another action steeped in misogyny that hasn’t yet been widely addressed (as perhaps is the misogyny in ‘asking for it’ rape-myths). These contemporary victim-questioning attitudes still connect strongly to the archaic, and misogynistic ideas about victims being creators of the rape-narrative hoax.

### **Difficult Despite True Allegations**

Participants mentioned several factors that made trial or investigation proceedings difficult, despite them believing that the allegation was truthful and that an assault had indeed occurred. Notably, all but one of these factors depended greatly on victim behaviour which can be categorized into behaviour before, during, and after reporting. Within this theme, there are most evident examples of participants utilising the prosecutorial shorthand in order to not only perform investigatory actions, but also to inform their own perceptions.

***Before Reporting.*** A few participants talked about the difficulties in an investigation when a victim decides to delay the reporting of their crime. Delays in reporting often complicate proceedings on multiple levels making it hard to find trace evidence, surveillance videos and possible witnesses. One participant also spoke about it from the perspective of a jury: in the absence of a power dynamic between the victim and perpetrator, it would be difficult for a jury to immediately grant victim status. Those who spoke about the issues with delays however, also acknowledged that a victim may often need time to process the incident and build up the courage to report and that in such cases, they would do everything in their power.

Waiting a long period of time before reporting raises some questions. Don't get me wrong we will do everything we can but possible traces are gone, surveillance videos are no longer available, possible witnesses become hard to find. I can imagine this being very frustrating for the victim who maybe needed time to gather his courage but it makes our job much more difficult. I had a middle aged woman who filed a complaint for sexual assault that happened almost three years ago at a festival. We did what we could but had very little to go on. (*Inspector, 28, Male*)

One participant spoke of difficulties created by a victim's sexual behaviour with their perpetrator prior to the incident of abuse. The availability of physical evidence for the victim's willingness to have sex with the perpetrator often raised doubts in the minds of both investigating officers as well as potential jury members.

Another common factor is highly sexualised behaviour prior to any incident. [If] the victim sends sexual text messages highlighting a



willingness to have sex. Then perhaps isn't willing but does so. When this comes to light it makes it difficult for a third person to decide. (*Police Constable, 29, Male*)

***During Reporting.*** Participants agreed that most individuals who had been victims of sexual crime experienced shame and guilt while reporting. They also mentioned that victims seemed to be acutely aware of how others would judge them in light of certain actions taken during or after the course of the assault. Participants stated that some victims tended to diminish or embellish the assault and their responses, whereas others tended to lie about or hide some aspects in order to be taken seriously or be believed by the police. This involved lying about substance involvement, the nature of their relationship with the perpetrator, and often “filling in the gaps with made up memories because the victim couldn’t remember what had happened”. Participants unanimously agreed that any type of omission or embellishment seriously harmed the chances of a successful trial. This particular participant shows that she is cognizant of the factors that plague every victim reporting their abuse.

When victims withhold any information because they are ashamed of a certain detail or afraid of being judged, such as one who told me she never takes any illegal drugs, but had in fact been using ketamine, this often comes out later when blood results are returned or mobile phones are examined and are used by the defence to suggest the victim is not honest. Vulnerability is used by the defence as synonymous with unreliable. Victims also diminish their involvement with the suspect prior to the assault as they are afraid that if they state they liked the suspect or were

sexually interested that police won't take them seriously or suggest what happened was consensual. (*Police constable, 33, Female*)

Two predominant other factors involved victims who blamed themselves, and victims who attempted to protect their assailants. Continuing the thread of shame and guilt, two participants highlighted the detrimental nature of victims blaming themselves on a successful outcome at trial.

Victims blaming themselves so during the investigation [the victim] would say that they lured the person in, they should have dressed that way, or walked that route and it was their fault it happened, causing an unsuccessful trial. (*Commanding Officer, 25, Male*)

If the victim tended to have a relationship with their perpetrator, especially if a child was involved, participants mentioned that victims would often try and protect their assailant for the well being of a child, or a relationship. In such cases, one participant said, that it was often difficult to determine if they should continue the investigation because an unwilling victim would almost always ensure that the case would not be picked up by a prosecutor.

A victim of a rape lied to me by telling me that the suspect was no longer present, despite the fact they were - this could have aided in the early part of the investigation and the lie made it harder for the case to be taken to court. (*Police constable, 33, Female*)

***After Reporting.*** The most common behaviour which lead to undermining the victim's testimony post reporting was if they maintained contact with their assailants or withdrew from the investigation. Officers mentioned that if a jury found out that the victim had maintained

contact, “the common mind will ask the question, why would you do that if you had been raped?”. Officers also mentioned that in cases without other witnesses, having physical evidence such as text messages from the victim on a suspect’s phone would only help the suspect’s account despite a genuine assault.

She had made numerous allegations in the past against other parties and had previously been to the press about being a victim having waved [*sic*] her right to anonymity. Despite me ensuring she was video interviewed and interviewing and giving bail conditions to the suspect she persisted in inviting him round to her house, would call and text him and even have him present when I would call her for welfare checks. She was undermining her own case. On downloading his phone, I found numerous messages from her telling him to admit the rape so she would take him back. (*Detective Constable, 39, Female*)

Participants described the process of an interview as lengthy and tedious for the complainant, requiring “a lot of repetition from the victim”, and an extremely detailed investigation from the participants themselves. Some participants spoke of victims who would tire of the process and become “less and less responsive” and would avoid phone calls, withhold evidence and finally admit that they are no longer interested in the investigation. The trial eventually also suffered however, if the victim had been forthcoming during the investigation, but refused to provide testimony in court. The following quote supports that at least to some extent, police officers think of what a prosecutor might need to prosecute, as opposed to simply what might be needed for a crime to have occurred.

Even in cases where the allegations are found to be valid, the victim not taking part in the investigation is an almost certain dead-end in the investigation [...] The victim decided she had no interest in testifying or participating with the investigation, which caused the prosecutor to decide not to proceed with the case. I understand a victim choosing not to help the investigation, but most of the time, it's needed to prosecute the offender. (*Property and evidence technician, 39, Male*)

### **Discussion**

All but two participants mentioned that in their experience there was some truth to all allegations of sexual assault, and entirely fabricated allegations were extremely rare. Despite this, participants highlighted that factors such as the complete unavailability of physical evidence—like DNA or CCTV footage—and a lack of emotionality in the victim while reporting the crime were strong indicators of falsehood in an account. This is consistent with previous research which consistently suggests that physical evidence and victim-emotionality are some of the most important factors in establishing the ‘realness’ of the victim, especially one of sexual crime (Ask, 2010; Larson, 2018; Pateman, 1980; Sleath & Bull, 2017; Winkel & Koppelaar, 1991). The consensus was that the few rare cases of false accounts of sexual abuse never occurred in a vacuum but were often fuelled by other issues such as regretting consensual sex, wanting child-custody in a civil battle, and using sexual assault allegations as a means of revenge towards a current or previous partner. Participants mentioned that despite their determination of the truth in an account, there were still a variety of factors that made a case difficult through the investigation and trial process. In the current results, these factors depend on the victim’s behaviour through the course of reporting their assault and ranged from displaying a willingness

to have sex with their perpetrator, hiding consequential facts from their testimony to enhance perceived credibility, withdrawing from the investigation, or keeping contact with their perpetrator.

How the current sample of law enforcement officers view victims of sexual crime depends heavily on how they view their jobs and functions. They view themselves as enforcers of the law. Derived from that rubric is the identity of the victim as afraid, lacking agency, and generally unstable; immediately contrasted by the logical, reasonable yet protective police officer (see: Andrus, 2019). The very factors which, when identified, establish the victim as a victim (lack of agency over their situation, being authentically emotional and afraid) change their primary function and ultimately harm prosecutorial decisions. The most evident example of this is the mention of mental health vulnerabilities in two separate and opposing instances. A victim with mental illness is provided victim-status because of their risk-level, but continued vulnerable mental health contributes to the image of an ‘unstable victim-witness’ in court. A true victim is expected to be ashamed and have low self-esteem, yet confident enough to have minimal delays in reporting and sever all relationship with their perpetrator immediately. Arguably, the self-identity of the participants as ‘good police officers’ strongly relies on a ‘good victim’- one who understands and acts according to both – the biases held against victims and the legal requirements for prosecuting a sexual crime case.

### **Nuances within the rape myth framework**

Within the current data, there is evidence to suggest that law enforcement officers, at least to a certain degree, understand the popular rape myths and are actively aware of their impacts. Most officers acknowledged the diversity within rape victims and their situations; while they provided a few commonalities, they also reasoned that these commonalities were based on

personal experience and that other officers, often colleagues or seniors had had different experiences. These are positive outcomes arising from a heightened awareness of rape myths and an increased attention towards the prevalence of sexual assault within society. However, the current results also suggest that participants may subscribe to myths about sexual aggression which are not yet widely known or addressed. In the following subsections, I discuss how certain responses from the current sample of the participants point towards subscription to items from the AMMSA scale instead. Additionally, due to the qualitative nature of this study, I identify and detail several as yet understated victim-questioning attitudes.

### *Agency and Emotionality*

The current results suggest that while historical victim-related schemas—predominantly, Glenn’s (1997) silence, chastity, domestic confinement—may not be largely prevalent in participants’ responses, there still exist expectations of the rape victim. Consistencies with the historical view lie within the realms of sexual agency, and emotionality. While the concept of ‘chastity’ may seem like a redundant ‘ideal’ to uphold in contemporary times, the current data show variations of the ‘chaste victim’ expectation. The willingness of an individual to have sex with their perpetrator at a different time point ultimately undermines the crime against them; this is a strong indicator that an individual with the agency of their sexual experience may not be ‘enough’ of a victim (Orenstein, 2007). Carole Pateman (1980) notes that a rape victim must ‘perform’ in accordance with societal expectations of a victim; this performance in turn, greatly determines the guilt of the perpetrator (Leader, 2008; Spohn & Holleran, 2001). Within this ‘performance’, any admittance, or even an interest in sexual activity immediately undermines the expectation of chastity, as well as the claim that one specific sexual encounter was unwanted.

The idea that sexual desire is ‘unwomanly’<sup>4</sup>, informs the view that the admission of sexual encounters ultimately clashes with widely held ideas about femininity and that a woman who possesses such desire is unreliable (Larson, 2018).

Law and legality in general have a history of penalising agency. In the present study, the willingness of the complainant to have sex with their rapist (at a different time) was determined through sexually explicit messages, demonstrating not just sexual agency, but also discursive agency. Andrus (2009, 2012), through her work on exceptions to the hearsay dismissal in US law establishes the binary nature of the excited utterance rule. The excited utterance exception states that a third-party (the non-subject of the event or experience) may recount the reaction of an individual in court without it being dismissed as hearsay if the speaker was extremely shocked or surprised and seemingly had neither a specific intention nor agency of their speech. The concept supports that discursive agency is a deliberate, linguistic action and the presence of agency inherently undermines the trustworthiness of the action. Andrus (2012, p. 610) notes “...*the speaker of the excited utterance is forever linked to a representation of a story in which she was the victim, and in which she has no agency, discursive or otherwise.*”: it is essential to note here that the absence of agency is one of the ways in which a victim is most readily given credibility, even by the legal system. The link between emotionality and legal admissibility provides a rationale for the strong relevance of emotionality in forming impressions of victim-credibility. Similar to the conclusions of Andrus in relation with the domestic violence victim, the rape victim is given credibility through the portrayals of emotionality, which in turn, runs on the inherent principle of ‘untrustworthy until lacking agency’.

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<sup>4</sup> The word unwomanly also extends to those feminised by the discourse of rape (see: Bonthuys, 2008)

There are also new caveats to the existing emotionality schemas: current data suggest the importance of distinguishing between an embellished emotion, and an embellished narrative. An embellished emotion<sup>5</sup> is likely to cement victim-status whereas an embellished narrative is almost certain to discredit an account. Participants suggest the lack of emotionality or a victim who is ‘too relaxed’ as an indicator of a false account. While some participants acknowledge the individual differences in response to traumatic events, the lack of emotionality in a victim’s recounting of events certainly raises initial doubt of its authenticity. On the other hand, participants also mention that the heightening of certain aspects of the assault and attempting to ‘diminish’ others leads to an embellished narrative situation, which when eventually revealed, seriously harms credibility despite a truthful allegation. It is noteworthy that the emotionality of a victim’s narrative and the contents of one’s account are both often highly influenced by trauma and its impact on memory (Tidmarsh & Hamilton, 2020), and may not primarily be under the control of the victim, ready to manipulate in light of a variety of victim-demeanour and display rule expectancies (Rich, 2019; Rubik, 2010). On the occasions that it is indeed a deliberate attempt at impression management, the need for such management needs to be questioned.

### ***False Allegations.***

Research suggests that police perception of false rape accusations is significantly higher than the actual statistic (Ask, 2010; Lisak et al., 2010; Rich, 2019; Spohn et al., 2014; Tidmarsh & Hamilton, 2020; Venema et al., 2019). The current participants recognise, to a certain extent, that false allegations are rare, and are vigilant to mark it in their responses. More prevalent within the current data, however, is the police perception of falsified aspects of seemingly truthful allegations. Among those mentioned, were factors such as “filling in the gaps with made-up

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<sup>5</sup> Lack of emotionality may be a natural trauma response. Thus, any emotion added to it for testimonial purposes, however minimal, is essentially embellished.



events” and leaving out case-related facts that may have been ‘shameful’ for the victim. It is crucial to note that many indicators of ‘false’ accusations mentioned by participants have been found in research to be directly affected by posttraumatic stress, and that stress behaviours often mimic indicators of substance abuse, fabrication and hallucinations (Lonsway et al., 2012; Rape Crisis Scotland, 2018). Research also suggests that when victims resort to filling in the gaps, it is most often due to the pressure from an investigating officer to produce a sequential narrative (Andrus, 2012; Greeson & Campbell, 2013).

There are several other factors that may contextualise the ostensibly strict credibility decisions made by the current participants. Matoesian (2001) argues that while it is the complainant and the defendant who are ‘active participants’ in the trial, those who support each side (in this case, the police officers followed by the victim’s legal and social supporters, and finally, the prosecuting lawyer) have a personal involvement in the outcomes of the judgement. It is not just the victim, but also their supporters whose credibility, honesty, and competence are simultaneously questioned. It is hence possible, that at each stage, those who handle the case look for factors that establish unquestionable credibility of the victim; consequently, ensuring that their own credibility remains upheld under questioning. However, the caveat with substantiating credibility is that these factors, being filtered through individual differences, are usually not identical for all involved.

Moreover, the concrete binary nature of the legal system (Andrus, 2009, 2012; Ponterotto, 2007) has a distinctive relevance in a sexual crime case. It implements that the alternative to an unequivocal ‘A’ has no successful founding in a legal proceeding. For example, an unequivocally credible victim is one who succeeds at trial (Christie, 1986; Sleath & Bull, 2017) but the alternative is not an equivocally credible victim. The alternative is concretely

binary: not 'A', and hence, not credible, and not successful at trial. Legal credibility (or lack, thereof) may not extend to the actual credibility of the event or victim, however, the binary 'A – not A' structure may be embedded into police perceptions of an allegation, where an unequivocally true allegation is viewed as ideal, compared to an equivocally true allegation which suffers from the 'false' label. When responses to trauma are assumed as indicators of falsehood and baseless accusations, the resultant situation for the victim is secondary victimisation within the legal system which may not be solved simply through generic training (Parratt & Afroditi, 2017; Schwartz, 2010). Moreover, while retractions may be an effort at self-preservation, they may be perceived as acceptance of guilt from a complainant (for examples, see: Larson, 2018). This suggests a specific cycle: first responders such as law enforcement look for indicators of credibility within a victim's account, which in turn determines their case-progression decisions (Alderden & Ullman, 2012), similarly, complainants look for indicators of acceptance and care from a corresponding officer which determines their involvement, and recant rate during their justice system progression (Rich, 2019). Thus, perhaps a focus on treating them with care before establishing a victim's credibility may be the more effective method for law enforcement officers to obtain the necessary evidence. If the primary objective is providing care and protecting victims, the need for victims to protect themselves may be diminished, with no conceptual requirement for any embellishment or impression management. From the perspective of display rules violations and demeanour expectancies, it would be difficult for victims to lose credibility through violating behavioural expectations if none existed.

### ***Victim-Perpetrator Dynamic***

While participants demonstrate awareness of the prevalence of acquaintance rape over the historically believed stranger rape, most participants posed objections to continued

relationships between the victim and perpetrator. Post potentially dispelling the belief that a ‘real’ victim is raped by a stranger (Christie, 1986; Estrich, 1987), a more nuanced myth is that a ‘real’ victim would immediately halt any associations with their perpetrator. Despite participants recognising the effects of grooming with children, the possibility of grooming is not extended to adults. It may also be deduced that recognising the prevalence of acquaintance rape does not heighten awareness towards the possible difficulty for victims to abruptly discontinue a relationship with a trusted partner or family member either due to shock or lowered self-esteem (Andrus, 2019; Tanner & Brake, 2013).

Other characteristics that participants describe as harmful to successful trials and investigations such as blaming themselves, and taking responsibility for the perpetrator’s behaviour, often stem from varied responses to trauma and manipulation. These include shame, the perception of being disbelieved, fearing for the safety of dependants, and victims themselves prescribing to rape myths, not believing their experiences to be sexual assault (Littleton & Axsom, 2003; Tidmarsh & Hamilton, 2020).

***Mental and Physical Vulnerabilities.*** Mental health issues are unique factors influencing victim perception because they appear equally within victimology – indicating individuals most likely to become victims of sexual crime, but also within the category of false accusers or ‘frequent flyers’. Victims of sexual crime who suffer from mental and physical disabilities are most likely to be presumed unreliable witnesses due to the lack of coherence, and are most likely to be infantilised (Benedet & Grant, 2007, 2014; Spohn et al., 2014; Tidmarsh & Hamilton, 2020). However, the lack of coherence is—as previously discussed—also prevalent post-trauma in those without any history of mental health issues and does not equal dishonesty (Ashmore et al., 2015). While the current data suggest that participants are aware of the vulnerability and

seeming falsities of such accounts, the simple awareness of their own biases may not be entirely sufficient in successfully investigating a case that they may not have confidence in.

Larson (2018) argues that the facet of mental or physical vulnerability is extremely stigmatised, and ever present in the discourse of sexual crime. Those who disclose being victims and are believed, are forced to renounce the label of ‘victim’, “*overcome trauma, and appear nondisabled*” (p. 690) by adopting the ‘survivor’ label, a phenomenon she terms ‘compulsory survivorship’. Historically, women (and those feminized by the associated rape discourse) have been seen as the weaker sex, prone to spells of fainting, being feeble-minded, hysterical, and mad (Chesler, 1990). Hence, disbelieving those who disclose being victims and calling them liars further solidifies the label of disability by playing on an antiquated trifecta of gender, emotionality, and mental illness. In simpler words, the idea that those with mental health vulnerabilities often make false accusations is strongly associated with the antiquated idea that women (along with those feminised by the associated rape discourse (Bonthuys, 2008; Mulder et al., 2020; Mulder & Bohner, 2022)) are unstable, and hence, incredible (Gray et al., 2020; Leader, 2008; Lees, 1997; Matoesian, 2001; Porter, 2019).

***Perceived Intention-Based Alienation.*** An interesting finding within the current data is that of judging a victim account based on the ‘purity’ of their intention while reporting rape or sexual assault. The current results suggest that participants dealt with allegations due to regret sex, or revenge. Within cases of regret sex, participants mentioned the prevalence of alcohol and recreational drugs; while these substances are often perpetrator tools to facilitate vulnerability in an otherwise non-vulnerable individual (personal interview; Chapter 9), they are most often used to discredit victims and indicate regret sex. With possibly a more contemporary knowledge of rape myths, participants do not state that being under the influence of any substance implies a

victim was ‘asking for it’; however, it is still used as a tool to discard the gravity of the allegations by terming them ‘regret sex’. Current data suggest that participants deem any motive other than justice as an indication of falsehood, and an impure motive. While some agree that a leverage-based motive does not confirm the absence of sexual crime, they nevertheless conclude that it ultimately harms the case and credibility of the victim. The question remains why, if participants are aware of the presence of sexual crime does any leverage-based motive obscure credibility.

The recent widespread relevance of linguistic analysis within forensic settings (Leonard et al., 2017; Taslitz, 2006) has resulted in an analysis of language within sexual assault cases and trials. This analysis has revealed an anomalous phenomenon almost restricted to sexual crime cases where the use of language supports attempts to alienate a victim (Bogoch, 2007; Larcombe, 2002; Ponterotto, 2007). The alienation attempts are not limited to those made by the defence, but also include judges who use alienating language to justify lighter sentencing for a defendant (Coates et al., 1994). One of the more well-known instances of alienating the victim is part of the William Kennedy Smith rape trial where the eponymous Smith was said to have raped Patricia Bowman at his property after meeting at a bar. Matoesian (2001) describes defence lawyer Roy Black’s trial practice as “*poetic*” and “*verbal art*” (p. 21) to depict the persuasiveness of his use of language. Within this trial, Black used recordings of Bowman’s testimony to the police—where she mentioned being traumatized by a former partner and hence being resentful of men—to present her as a revenge-seeking scorned woman, who was attempting to make false accusations against a politically relevant figure to satisfy her own hysteria. William Kennedy Smith was acquitted on all counts after the first five minutes of jury deliberation. It is evident

that the ‘scorned-woman seeking revenge’ narrative is a powerful one, often used (Lees, 1997; O. Smith, 2018) to discredit the victims.

Matoesian (2001, p. 21) further notes “*Did police detectives conducting the interview elicit such damaging information from the victim, and, if so, why?*”. He places the culpability of Bowman’s discrediting directly on those who interviewed her, received damning information, and proceeded to support the case to trial ultimately causing serious disadvantage to the victim. Moreover, police officers in the current study may place the onus of a case’s success at trial upon themselves, and in the process, attempt to “weed out” genuine cases, which may not sustain in a courtroom (Trinch, 2010; Venema et al., 2019). Similarly, it is important to note here that despite having identified multiple themes and facets of nuanced sexual aggression myths, most participants actively mentioned rejecting familiar rape myths. Many mentioned that men could get raped, and more often than not, the perpetrator was an acquaintance. Moreover, they actively mentioned being aware of the delicate nature of victim-witness questioning, and the secondary traumatization it can cause. Despite this, the perceptual shorthand pertaining to finer myths may impact their perception of victims and investigations. This is also supported by previous experimental chapters within the thesis, namely, Experiments 1 and 4. Overall, victim testimonies were rated credible, but hyperbole still had a significant negative impact. In Experiment 4, victim-testimonies were considered emotionally intense for the speaker and listener, but hyperbole still seemed more than appropriate. Despite this overall positive perception of victims, it is also necessary to prioritize factors that cause negative perceptions. This is because the current experimental design throughout is essentially ‘blame-negative’. That is, no final verdict, or fate of a defendant/suspect is ultimately at stake. In real-world situations, where positive decisions for the complainant result in repercussions for the defendant, the

negative perceptual factors may play a larger role in decision-making than at present.

Additionally, the very fact that current participants mark their active rejection of some well-known rape-myths suggests that they indeed are motivated observers. This grounds the current suggestion of providing (further) trauma-informed training to police officers in social processing theories. As Chaiken and Maheswaran (1980; 1994) suggest, motivated observers constantly seek further information that aids correct decision-making and deviates from heuristics. For motivated observers who still may possess victim-questioning attitudes, the first step might be simply to provide more helpful information about trauma-based responses and nuanced sexual aggression myths. The suggestion here, therefore, is not that police officers deliberately discredit victims, but that their perception that the revenge-seeking victim (perhaps more accurately, the victim as an angry agent) does not typically sustain in court—while often factual—contributes to secondary victimization. However, for motivated police officers who wish to improve victims' experiences in the justice system, simple (but constantly evolving) information about how complainants are usually revictimized may go a long way.

### **Conclusion**

The current data certainly suggest heightened awareness of many historically held rape-myths among first responders. This awareness, however, does not entirely reduce legal expectations from rape victims, who provide responses arising from trauma, especially in the immediate aftermath. It is evident from the current study that at the least, demeanour expectancies from a victim are still prevalent and evolving constantly into progressively nuanced forms. However, the reason behind this may be more complex, with credibility decisions being guided through the prosecutor's shorthand. That is, while police officers may be aware of certain biases, they do often consider (potentially correctly) that these biases may be held by a judge,

jury, or media, eventually causing an unsuccessful trial. This may impact their case decision-making. Furthermore, police officers may not be entirely aware that they hold certain nuanced victim-questioning beliefs due to the minute difference between protective measures and victim-blaming (further discussed in Chapter 9). Despite this, most participants in the current sample mention investigating a case as normal even in the presence of some initial doubt. This does suggest that law enforcement officers are motivated and active observers whose ultimate goal is to perform their duties diligently. Thus, the main finding of this study is not that the current sample holds or believes in rape myths and actively revictimizes rape victims. It is that even motivated observers are not exempt from attitudes rooted in patriarchy; however, much like Chaiken (1980) suggests, these observers actively seek out relevant information that aids correct decision-making. Thus, updating specialised training and highlighting evolving challenges in working with sexual aggression will only allow a motivated group to better serve their community. The solution to providing suitable care to victims within the justice system may be to identify and continue debunking myths through trauma-informed care and a more person-centred investigative process. Further research must aim to address the viability and efficiency of trauma-informed approaches within forensic contexts in order to understand its applications in the prevention of secondary victimisation, as well as a lower case-attrition rate, specifically for sexual crime victims.

In this chapter I propose that the functions expected of the law enforcement officer impact how they view victims and perform their duties. The consequent question is naturally whether in the event of different functions, the expectations also differ. In the next chapter, I qualitatively examine the attitudes of professionals who are not concretely bound by the expectations of the courtroom and legality. Despite working with victims closely, the function of



therapy and advocacy professionals is not to determine the viability of a case in court, or for a prosecutor. The next chapter considers that the perceptions of advocacy professionals differ from law enforcement professionals and examines the nature of this difference.

## **Chapter 9 – Victim Advocacy Professionals on Victim Perception**

Law enforcement officers are taken as the gatekeepers of justice; however, prosecutors are the ones with the ‘keys’ to the courtroom. The interactive relationship between police officer and prosecutor (Alderden & Ullman, 2012; Wentz, 2020), functions to address the focal concerns of both (for review, see: Lapsey et al., 2021). Namely, a ‘winnable’ case (Frohmann, 1991; Konradi, 1997; Spohn et al., 2014), which achieves simultaneously a satisfactory reward for the investigative hours devoted by the police, justice and validation for the victim, and punishment for the perpetrator by removal from society. The idea of a winnable case can be likened to that of an ideal victim (Christie, 1986), and draws upon many of the same stereotypes where a victim is a respectable individual, raped by a stranger who wields a weapon and causes evident physical injury during sexual assault (Estrich, 1987; Frohmann, 1991; Spohn & Holleran, 2001). A winnable case is thus, one that meets the trial sufficiency rather than the legal sufficiency of crime. Chapter 8 discusses the impact of focal concerns on police professionals whose function can be said, is to work against the perpetrator. However, there are professionals who work for the victim/survivor. The following sections discuss the impact of focal concerns on police decision-making and apply the focal concerns theory (Steffensmeier et al., 1998) to individuals who are professionals but with a different objective: victim aid advocates. The aim of this study is to provide a contrast between two different types of professionals with similar, but not identical focal concerns. Moreover, it is to examine closely the perceptual differences that may arise as a result of different objectives in a sexual crime situation.

### **Focal Concerns Theory and a Different Class of Professionals**

The focal concerns theory as proposed by Steffensmeier et al. (1998) states that the decision-making of judges and others within the criminal justice system such as police officers

and prosecutors (Alderden & Ullman, 2012; Holleran et al., 2010; Wentz, 2020) is guided by their primary concerns. For police officers these concerns are often the blameworthiness and danger of the offender, the seriousness of the crime, and the degree of injury to the victim (Spohn et al., 2014). Upon further examination and breakdown, it becomes clear that at least two of the focal concerns (the danger posed by the offender and the seriousness of the crime) depend heavily on police officers' personal assessments of individual situations. The third (degree of injury to the victim) then becomes a factor demonstrable by the victim with the implication that one of three factors that determine whether police make arrests and forward cases to prosecutors, depends on either the visible injuries sustained by the victim, or the victim's ability to convince the police of their emotional and psychological injuries.

In a sexual violence case, whether police officers are convinced of a victim's non-visible injuries often depends on whether officers believe in the ability of the victim to convince a judge and jury (Lapsey et al., 2021; Wentz, 2020), that is, the 'convictability' of the case. While this is evidently a concern for the prosecutor (Holleran et al., 2010; Spohn et al., 2001, 2014), police officers are often reluctant to invest time and resources into making an arrest when the end result may not be trial (Frohmann, 1997). This provides a comprehensive rationale for why victim credibility is of utmost importance in cases of sexual crime. Police officers—using their assessments of whether a prosecutor will consider the case 'winnable', a judge will consider the case 'convictable', and a jury will find the victim credible—determine whether they find a perpetrator culpable.

Previous findings in this thesis suggest that professional participants including both victim advocacy and therapy workers as well as law enforcement officers view hyperbole harmful to credibility development (Experiment 1). Law enforcement officers specifically prefer

to use non-hyperbolic phrases to describe trauma and/or sexual violence even when assuming the role of the victim (Experiment 3). Furthermore, a more detailed qualitative analysis revealed that law enforcement officers often understand the obvious rape myths but may be vulnerable to a nuanced form of myth which comes into play when they assess whether a victim is credible enough to justify arresting the perpetrator and forwarding the case to a prosecutor (Chapter 8). It is noteworthy that in Chapter 4, even as hyperbole had a significant negative impact on perceived credibility, overall, professionals tended to believe the testimonies. It is this detail that is of interest to the present study. The professional sample of Experiment 1 in Chapter 4 had a higher number of victim advocacy representatives than law enforcement officers. While the disinclination of law enforcement towards the hyperbolic has been further explored in Experiment 3, the present exploration of the attitudes of victim therapy and advocacy representatives towards credibility and victims in general serves multiple purposes. As an extension to the previous chapter (8), the application of the focal concerns theory to therapy and advocacy professionals allows a better understanding of whether the objectives of professionals ultimately change their perception of what a credible victim looks like. This is of interest to this thesis because police and victim aid converge on certain functions such as protecting members of the community but diverge on how they fulfil said function (e.g. therapists give agency back to survivors, and police officers take agency away from the perpetrator, by making arrests).

In the present study, we explore the attitudes of counsellors and advocacy workers who have been trained specifically to work with victims and survivors of sexual crime at a rape crisis centre in England. Using a face-to-face virtual semi-structured interview to collect data, the question framework consists of all the questions posed to law enforcement participants in the previous study (Chapter 8) to allow a suitable view of divergence among themes. The current

data are however, analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to provide greater depth into the motivations behind participants' perceptions, as well as to investigate whether end goals and objectives have any impact of how participants respond to questions about false allegations and incredible victims.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Four female participants between ages 29-51 ( $M = 42.50$  years,  $SD = 8.73$ ) were interviewed for the present study: Laura, Grace, Kelly, Alice.<sup>6</sup> All were purposively sampled and recruited through the research liaison officer at a sexual violence support services centre in England. All participants worked within the organisation to support survivors/victims of sexual crime in heterogenous roles such as Senior Lead Counsellor (1), Senior Independent Sexual Violence Advisor (ISVA) leading to ISVA services management (1), Counsellor (1), Counsellor and Advocacy Worker (1). The period for which each participant had experience working specifically with sexual crime survivors ranged between one and 14 years.

### **Materials and Design**

Data were collected through a semi-structured interview online over video calling platforms such as Zoom or Skype. Questions in the current face-to-face interview schedule were adapted from the previous interview study (Chapter 8). There were six open-ended questions posed to participants which addressed their perceptions of victims, allegations and forensic procedures: specifically, those within sexual crime. The questions were formulated such that the nature of responses from the participants could, to a certain extent, be viewed against responses

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<sup>6</sup> All names are changed to protect participant confidentiality.

from law enforcement participants. The interview schedule was used more as a prompt, and questions were added and eliminated based on participants' responses and the question's relevance to the responses. The prompts and follow-up questions outlined below were used as a starting point to reach a topic that participants considered priority, and when such a point was reached, participants were encouraged to recall examples (similar to Chapter 8) in order to enhance the richness of data. The questions ask participants more about the experiences of others rather than themselves; the aim of this study was to explore in greater detail whether the focus and end objective of professionals determines to any extent their perception of, and attitude towards, victims and survivors. The face-to-face data collection method allows the interviewer to pose additional relevant questions which the participant may gloss over in a written format. Moreover, the nature of the IPA allows the researcher to explore tangential topics that may not be traditionally relevant to the research question but may become relevant as their relevance to the participants is revealed.

Each question along with prompts (for the role of prompts, see: Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012) to encourage detailed and rich data collection is outlined below:

1. What is your role in a rape/sexual assault case as a victim advocacy representative, and how many years of experience do you have in the area?
2. In your experience, are there certain characteristics common to most victims of sexual crime? Prompt: these do not have to be limited to physical or visible traits.
3. Based on your perception, what is a false allegation, and how would you define it?
4. Based on your experience, what are some 'red flags' that may indicate to you that an alleged victim is lying, or that you may be dealing with a false allegation?  
Follow up if not mentioned: how common are they?
5. Are there commonalities in the way a victim reports a crime? Prompts: behaviour, language, what they focus on.

6. What are some things a victim might do or say that hinders their chance at a successful investigation or trial despite a truthful allegation?

### **Data Analysis**

Each interview lasted between 50-90 minutes and was recorded using a Mibao 16 GB digital voice recorder. Backup recordings were made using the in-built recording features of Zoom and Skype. All four audio recordings were first automatically transcribed using Descript version 11.1.0. The interviewer then went through the automatic speech-to-text transcripts with the audio recordings and manually corrected misheard words, and any inconsistencies or inaudible sections.

Data were analysed through Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as outlined by Smith and Osborn (2007, 2008): data were repeatedly read to identify initial emerging themes which were noted in the right hand margin of a word document and/or on a set of printed sheets. A word cloud of codes was created for each participant and sent to them to confirm that it accurately depicted their intentions. Three out of four participants confirmed this. One participant did not respond. Salient themes were then reworded to concisely portray their meaning and content, and in a separate word document, were arranged first according to their appearance in the data, and then according to theoretical relevance. Similar themes were grouped together, and the overarching sentiment of each theme was chosen as a theme title and focus. Each participant's interview was analysed individually without any attempt to group themes with its previous or succeeding interview. The analysis of each participant's data involved the formation of themes individual to each interview. In order to present holistic results from the homogenous sample, superordinate themes were identified. These were themes that existed as discussed topics throughout the data, but participants perhaps had differing opinions, or took different directions in discussing them. These themes portray the convergence and divergence

among participants' responses. More importantly, it allows the view of the divergence of one participant from the convergence of the collective (often including the diverging participant). This is specifically viewed in the additional analysis of Grace's data, due to her unique function (a divergence in perspective). Finally, participant responses are discussed through the lens of the focal concerns theory.

## Results

Two superordinate themes have been identified from the present data: Survivors Crave Belief, and Unconditional Positive Regard. These themes follow the track from participants identifying the needs of their clients, to providing the best possible care that meets those needs. It is worthy of note here, that despite all questions being formulated with the word 'victim' to designate the person who underwent sexual violence, not one of the participants used that word in their answer. They referred to these persons strictly as survivors at all points. Table 11 below details the superordinate themes and subthemes.

**Table 7.**

*The superordinate themes and subthemes across participants.*

<b>Survivors crave belief</b>	<b>Unconditional positive regard</b>
Shame, self-blame, and guilt	I've got you
The overarching need for validation	You've got this!
	"That's not my job"

### Survivors Crave Belief

It was evident from all four interviews that each participant had extensive knowledge of the intimations and manifestations of trauma as a result of sexual violence and in general. One of



the predominant factors in rape case attrition as well as non-reporting is rape myth acceptance; not just with those handling rape cases and victims, but also with those who are victims themselves (Littleton, Axsom, & Yoder, 2006; Littleton & Axsom, 2003).

### ***Shame, Self-blame, and Guilt***

Participants felt that survivors refrain from reporting or even seeking help, principally because they subscribe to rape myths themselves; feeling guilt for their actions around the time of assault, shame at being assaulted, and self-blame for having ‘caused’ it. When survivors themselves do not class their abuse as ‘real rape’, they tend to feel that others will not believe them as ‘real victims’ either. In this instance, despite mentioning self-blame, Grace mentions that this self-blame is also through no fault of their own.

Yes. I cannot stress enough. How much that yeah. Survivors do do feed into that and it's no fault of their own, this is society that makes them feel that actually, first of all, I need to question myself before I even dare pick up the phone to the police or get some sort of support. (Grace)

Grace interestingly pointed out the extent, and needlessness, of the self-blame that dominates thought-processes even in stranger rape cases.

And I think it's a, I mean, even if it is one of those, a small minority of stranger rapes that someone is grabbed off the street by a stranger and, and raped and whatever... where it was a complete stranger rape, there was still an element of. Yeah, what she said was, “you know, looking back, I should not have been out at 10 o'clock at night walking. I knew that that area was, was rough and I should not have been out at 10 o'clock at night.” This lady

was. She, she, she, she should be able to go out at one o'clock at night and not be sexually violated, but she, yeah. Straight away she was like, yeah.

(Grace)

In the last two sentences above, especially in the repetition of 'she', Grace's frustration is evident. While the objective of this study is not a discourse analysis, such obvious displays are difficult to ignore, and are easy illustrations of participants' true feelings upon the subject. It is precisely this 'double hermeneutic' (making sense of language that makes sense of an event in turn) nature of the IPA that allows an appropriate analysis in the current context.

Another participant goes on to speak about the kind of discourse survivors want to focus on, the conversations that are therapeutic from the survivors' perspectives, which is often just confirmation of the fact that what they underwent was indeed abuse, and that they did not deserve to be dismissed.

I suppose the main thing that they, that survivors want to focus on is not being believed...Um, what they want to concentrate on is did it really happen? Was it real, or am I allowed to say that because that's my partner, will anybody believe me?...it's, it's an education they're recognizing what happened was not their fault first and foremost. And also that, you know, it's unacceptable behaviour. (Kelly)

### ***The Overarching Need for Validation***

When survivors question themselves and have been consistently disbelieved (or told that they would be disbelieved), the support or justice they seek is predominantly confirmatory. Simultaneous to their disbelief of themselves, and their trauma, is the overarching need to be

believed and validated by others. Participants go on to describe the liberation felt by survivors when they go from questioning themselves, to receiving validation from others about the assault:

They relax. Yeah their body language changes and everything. You know those first sessions, they're seized up like they got a rod up their back. And actually, you see everything just calm, like wow, this person actually believes me. (Laura)

So if you kind of validate something where they question, "actually, I don't know if this is assault or not", and you kind of say, well, okay, we'll explore what happened. And then you're like, you know, you could say something as simple as well, I would see that as an assault and actually, you know, it is, um, quite serious. [...] I would say 99.9% changes when you, when you do provide them with the validation that they're kind of seeking, perhaps because they haven't found it anywhere else, or even within themselves, sometimes. (Alice)

While validation can be liberating, Alice also talks about how finding belief from others sometimes makes things worse for survivors; they often ignore the reality of the abuse but when met with others who confirm it for them, instantly a need to address and deal with trauma is created. Specifically, trauma that they spent a considerable amount of time convincing themselves never existed.

So it can actually, it can make things, worse in some ways. So temporarily there's a dip of mood. Um, but then at the same time, it is quite, um, it's quite, quite freeing. (Alice)

So often it'll start off with like a narrative, almost like they're tellin' a story, and then at some point that narrative becomes very, very real. And that is when you have to really be there to you know, metaphorically hold them, in a fashion. (Laura)

In a courtroom context, the effect of forwarding cases which meet trial sufficiency versus legal sufficiency is clearly visible:

But I would say every single survivor that I have ever dealt with is going through criminal justice would always be very concerned about, um, if this goes to court, am I going to be believed?...Um, if it's no further action, does that mean they don't believe me? Right. Um, if it's not guilty, does that mean 12 people think I'm lying? (Grace)

### **Unconditional Positive Regard**

Participants agreed that the factors of foremost importance in working with survivors, are understanding, empathy, and empowerment. While it does not signal irrevocable agreement with choices made and behaviours exhibited by their clients, it does entail the extension of basic respect and courtesy that they believe many survivors have been deprived of. It is interesting to note that key evidence for this theme arises when participants were asked questions about false allegations.

We-we take everybody as they are and accept them and value them. And each and every person through our door gets the respect they deserve.  
(Laura)

Most participants' methods of providing survivors with empowerment could be viewed as divided into two: support focused empowerment (I've got you), and agency focused empowerment (you've got this!).

### *I've Got You*

This type of empowerment speech was usually noticed when participants talked about survivors first disclosing trauma, coming to terms with being sexually abused, and considering the reality of that abuse. The objective was to confirm for survivors that they were not alone. Participants recognised their role as being a source of solid validation and support for survivors.

Okay so so as far as you know, they-they, you know, somebody could come in-into an office with me, sit down, have a session with me and tell me that they were abducted by aliens the night before. I'm not going to argue with that, it's their truth. Yeah. You know, so, and I want to know about that. (Laura)

Sometimes support meant validation for how a survivor behaved, and letting them know that there is no one correct way:

And so I always say to survivors, trauma affects survivors in different ways. You know, some people will laugh some people cry, some people show no emotion, um, and that's normal, but you have to go in there and you have to tell your truth. And if you want to cry, you cry. And if you don't, then you don't and, um, don't force anything. Don't just be, just be, you, don't force anything. (Grace)

Even in situations where participants weren't client facing, their instinct to be protective of survivors was evident in their responses to questions that may eventually lead to victim blaming. Almost all participants hesitated at the term 'false allegations', and chose to address questions in ways that would not include the word false:

I've never had it...yeah...when it's to do with the sexual violence itself, never had it where I've actually thought, well, that seems a bit. Or, you know, that doesn't, um, match up, I've never had to question it...yeah. That also doesn't come up massively because people tend to be very honest.

(Alice)

They may get a little bit confused with what has happened and what hasn't happened. That's not to say that something didn't happen. It's about what did happen. So false allegation. I think it's a bit harsh to say in that, um, another way in which survivors deal with, um, abuse is to dissociate. So, um, It may have happened. Um, but for them it would have happened in a different form and to a different form of themselves. (Kelly)

So a false allegation, I think if you think about it, sometimes people do, and-and sometimes you know, we have worked with people that have made allegations or or disclosed a sexual assault and actually along the lines, actually, it didn't happen. So you know at the time, they believe it has? (Laura)

A noteworthy difference between the response of this victim aid counsellor and law enforcement officers in the previous chapter is in their knowledge of different presentations of

trauma and the factors that lead to healing. When presented with narratives that do not quite add up, both groups seem to reach differing conclusions about the meaning of these inconsistencies. At this point, the current participants choose to continue working with their clients, together in order to realise a more cohesive version over time. However, for majority of the law enforcement participants, the inconsistent part of the narrative is where they seemed to begin doubting the complainant. This is first easily explained by the functions of both groups. In the subsequent theme “That’s not my job”, participants clearly demarcate where their function ends; they recognise and highlight that it is not their function to determine the truthful or questionable intricacies of a case or testimony, but to support their client. Similarly, law enforcement participants may view unconditional positive regard as counteractive to their function which is, in part, to determine the exact details of a given event.

### ***You’ve Got This!***

Participants stated that one of the major effects of sexual abuse, specifically long-term and childhood sexual abuse (CSA), was that victims had often been told by their perpetrator that nobody was going to believe them. Coates and Wade (2007) discuss this expressly in terms of language: perpetrators often strategically use language and rhetoric to demean their victim and exert force and authority over them while simultaneously using persuasive language to improve their own standing in society; ultimately making themselves look like ‘model citizens’. This further demotivates a victim from coming forward. Participants recognise this typicality within most survivors, and often focus on giving the agency back to survivors. Grace who is a sexual violence advisor, often faces survivors who doubt their agency over their narratives especially in a courtroom situation:

You know, you constantly, as a practitioner reassuring a survivor that, you know, yes, you, you are believed in this, evidence is not necessarily about, it's not about you lying or, it's about evidence. (Grace)

Most participants also made active attempts to prevent infantilising their clients (for example, correcting themselves to replace the term 'girl' with 'woman' when talking about a specific survivor) which is often used to discredit survivors (Matoesian, 2001) and diminish the power of a victim over their narrative (Andrus, 2019). Kelly spoke expressly about strength and agency, not just as a therapeutic technique, but more as an actual observation from working with survivors:

...you might experience, um, clients who have been sexually abused very strong, very robust, but society still views them as being quite fragile [...] they, you know, [are] very astute and like they know what they can get away with, so they will push boundaries as well. (Kelly)

She further lays focus on agency –

The survivors that I work with, they are the experts in their lives um, so I don't quite like to go in there and start, you know, cracking the whip, spending my judgment. (Kelly)

Laura, a therapist with 14 years of experience with sexual crime victims in a medical and forensic setting also refuses to call herself an expert.

Which is why, um, another thing that I often do, I'm not, a therapist that will naturally sit facing a client. Yeah? Sometimes I sit next to them [...] I'm just saying, I'm not your expert, I'm with you on this one. I'm not



sitting opposite you, trying to be the expert, because I'll never be that.

(Laura)

The predominant reason behind the need for agency-focused empowerment is because the mechanics of the legal system often take agency away from a sexual crime victim and use it to do both: blame them (MacLeod, 2016; Thapar-Björkert & Morgan, 2010; Venema, 2019), and render them helpless in order to increase believable victim status (Andrus, 2011, 2012, 2019).

***“That’s not my job”***

All participants were asked about the factors that made them feel like they could not trust/believe the survivor, at multiple points in the interview, and in different fashions. All participants (except Grace, who was additionally encouraged to think from the perspective of courtroom participants owing to her role as an ISVA) refrained from commenting on factors that did not encourage support and positivity. While it is the function of a judge or jury to determine the truth in every case they examine, the current participants were very clear that making this determination was not their function.

It's not my role to, um, determine whether they're telling the truth and it's not my role to, um, you know, to have a thought on false allegations or whatever it's my role to deal with the trauma. (Kelly)

Our role isn't to, um, I think with the ISVA role, we don't get to find out, um, the details of the offense or the alleged offense because of contamination of evidence at court...Um, so it's, it really isn't, it really isn't for us to kind of make that, um, call, I think. (Grace)

Moreover, all participants spoke about how their job was collaborative. Part of giving agency back to survivors was also about engaging them in their healing; letting them dictate the pace, and nature of the support they wanted. However, more relevant to the current research question is what participants did do if they found discrepancies in their clients' accounts. The process of working through discrepancies in survivors' accounts is noteworthy because the focus of the current participants lies in providing care and support.

You know so absolutely, for me, my client's truth is the truth, and if at some point we find some-something-some discrepancy in that, then that's something that we discover together, if that makes sense. I don't do it on my own and they don't do it on their own we do that as a unit. (Laura)

In the quote above, it is noteworthy the care employed by Laura when speaking of said discrepancies evident though 'some-something-some'. The investigation of truth is more for the purpose of cognisant healing, as opposed to building a case, and the end objective certainly impacts the attitude towards a discrepancy.

Um, we tend to go down the route of, um, we always believe because I guess we support in an emotional sense, not in a legal sense. (Alice)

While the first theme here of support focused empowerment or 'I've got you' is common to therapeutic techniques for most types of trauma such as chronic pain (see: Téllez, 2018) and addiction (Shinebourne & Smith, 2010), the second theme of agency focused empowerment is probably narrower in its applicability, and is especially true for sexual crime victims (Spohn & Holleran, 2001). The third theme above (that's not my job) is crucial specifically when viewed through the focal concerns theory lens because it signals a rejection of perceptual shorthand.

More simply, the current participants have focal concerns evidently rooted in trauma care and management. This is different from the law enforcement participants in Chapter 8 whose concerns are rooted in safety and risk-management. It is thus a plausible conclusion that being rooted in trauma-management as opposed to risk-management limits the use or need of a perceptual shorthand. The determination of credibility is not viewed as necessary by the current participants.

### **Further Analysis**

Three out of four participants were counsellors and/or advocacy workers who largely interacted with survivors in a therapeutic setting, with the objective being recovery and support. One participant had consistent experience with survivors in forensic settings such as a courtroom: Grace. Owing to the wide range of theoretical knowledge paired with the practical experience she had dealing with victims (along with her past as a probation officer for 15 years), she had first-hand knowledge of both victims and perpetrators, their circumstances, the justice system, the prison system, as well as complex trauma. Her data clarifies that she was knowledgeable about the signs and impact of trauma but was also aware that survivors are not treated with unconditional positive regard and are often re-victimised in the justice system. In order to present the most relevant bridge between the attitudes and perceptions of the law enforcement officers (Chapter 8), and the current participants, a deductive thematic analysis—based in the theoretical framework of emotionality, the ideal victim, and their perception—was conducted on Grace’s data. Three main themes were identified: What Forms Credibility?, “I’ve seen the outcome of thought”, and solutions. The following analysis adds to the current thesis by contextualising the responses and lived experiences of victim aid therapists and advocacy workers in the framework of presently relevant ideas such as victim credibility, agency and

emotionality, and language. The final theme also provides a realistic view that victim advocates may take towards the police and the system in general. Analysis of Grace's interview also includes some excerpts from the interviews of other participants; these sections were not previously analysed because the purpose of an IPA is for the researcher to make sense of the world of their participants, and their lived experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2007). The theme 'survivors crave belief' has its primary focus in what participants perceived their clients' needs to be and considers participants' further actions. However, the current thematic analysis aims to directly investigate the process of a case in the criminal justice system, at a semantic level, versus a heavily latent and interpretive and phenomenological approach as utilised by the IPA.

### **What Forms Credibility?**

Grace had a special function within the justice system which was not known prior to interviewing her. Besides her role as an ISVA—where her function is to support survivors “going through the criminal justice system” and “liaise with the police, with the CPS, with witness services, from report, all the way to court”—she works with the Crown Prosecution Services (CPS) as part of a multi-agency taskforce who critique sexual crime cases that have a ‘not guilty’ outcome. The most noteworthy detail within that topic was that this multi-agency group of individuals repeatedly come across cases where judge and jury decisions seem random. She mentioned that survivors tended to “pre-think”, tended to consider their behaviour before and during court, and tended to question whether certain actions would make them appear more or less believable. However, she personally never advised a survivor for or against any behaviour.

And, um, I think I've seen so many court cases where. You think this is it, this is guilty. This is guilty because my survivor- the evidence that they

gave was powerful. Um, the defence was weak, and it's come back and it's been not guilty. And it literally floors you. You can never, ever, um, second guess what a jury is going to come back with...Why would we never know it is, it's a, it's a mystery. Um, so we never ever, ever say to a survivor, you know, if you do this [you are more likely to be believed] or don't do that, or never.

She speaks about a specific case, and while she hesitates, she ultimately reveals the kind of schemas and ideas that may come into play when a case is found not guilty:

Um, and then also I think, and this is. Probably a little bit...I'm going to say it, how a perpetrator looks. I think that there was a high-profile case in [city redacted] that, you know, it's not confidential, that high profile case where two individuals were there. Alleged to have took her...they went back to their flat. Um, the, the, the girl went back with them. The lady went back with them and, um, she was very, very intoxicated and they, uh, there was sexual acts that took place, and she was in videos and she was clearly intoxicated. Um, for me, it was a hung jury to start off with. Bless her she went back again for retrial, amazing woman. Um, and it was found not guilty. These two individuals were university educated. They were part of, um, I don't know whether it's a rowing club or rugby club or whatever. They presented...very smart very educated, very, and, um, I don't know whether the jury looked at these two young men and thought, um, oof do we really want to send them to prison for the rest of the life? You know, that their lives ruined on him, especially when, you

know, did she really know what she's doing? Could she win? So I honestly think to myself, had they have been a different type of perpetrator? Could it have been different? I don't know.

The inference that can be made is this: even when a victim may be credible, and clearly unable to give consent as in the case above, a strong consideration of the jury remains whether the defendant/s deserve prosecution. A case may receive a 'not guilty' verdict despite a jury believing that a complainant was raped but not specifically by the defendants, or not beyond reasonable doubt. This is once more a strong indicator of the staunch legal binary (Chapter 8) where the onus relies on the complainant to demonstrate that they are an unequivocally credible victim; or risk losing the case, because there exists no such thing as an equivocally credible victim. Grace however, shows clear indications of her understanding of this prevalent and binding binary, and also attempts to explain it to her clients.

Grace was asked her personal opinion about emotionality in court, and whether that seemed to help. While victim-witnesses were not to be coaxed towards emotionality (or any reaction) by their ISVA, Grace had a personal opinion on how and why emotionality matters in court.

Interviewer: Do you really think that there's the crying or, you know, having extreme emotions or displaying everything that you have on, on, in court, do you think that helps them? Do you think that that-

Grace: Yeah, on a human level and people might deny this until they're blue in the face? Absolutely. See these 12 people are everyday people. If we see a human being that's crying. Yeah. They're in pain. We empathize

with them, and we want to help. We're like, oh my gosh, this person they're crying, they're broken, and they're hysterical versus a person that might be a quite assertive; come across as quite hard; come across as quite cold without a shadow of a doubt.

As she talks about what the ideal victim looks like in court, and how they present emotionally, she also provides an image of what the real victim looks like. And that they could look like anything or anyone:

Unfortunately, I do think that that makes a difference. Whereas that person that's coming across as quite hard and cold, that could be a protection. They could be that damaged by what happens to them. The only way to get through question after question, after, is to disassociate, is to shut down versus someone that's quite emotional and that's their way of dealing with things...I've seen that happen.

### **Solutions**

One of the first things Grace (as well as all other participants) focused on was the need for a general education around trauma, how it presents in rape victims, things that may or may not be triggers, and specialist training for professionals who regularly work with victims. Victims crave belief and validation because of a misunderstanding of complex trauma, the depth of its impact and the variety of possible responses to it (most often because a general lack of education around rape myths includes ignorance from those who may be victims themselves):

The emotional response has a huge impact, um, on believability from people that don't know about complex trauma... society still have this

massive kind of, um, issue with rape myths...Uh, I still think they believe that rubbish, I was gonna swear then, I still think they believe that rubbish.

And it requires a lot of training in terms of training professionals and training their support people and training people of the survivors to build them back up as opposed to kind of, yeah. Subject them to everything that traumatized them in the first place.

The reason people may believe that a certain type of people (those with mental health vulnerabilities) or people with differing motives (revenge, leverage, etc.) make false allegations (Chapter 8; see also: Lees, 1997) might be because they underestimate the “gravity of self-doubt” and revictimization that victims often go through. On false allegations specifically, Grace (as well as all other participants) agrees that a small minority may report things that may not be as they occurred (they all mostly refrain from saying the word ‘false’ in this context where it applies specifically to survivors except in this exclusive instance below), however the alternative is presented:

Yeah, it does happen. Of course, it's false allegations and of course it's always going to be in anything. But that doesn't mean that, that we just don't take it serious. Don't take them to – what do we do? Do we just ignore them? Because there is a small minority of people that might use that kind of agenda or whatever, um, that there would always be that in anything.

However, when thinking from the perspective of a victim, Grace also ultimately arrives at the same conclusion that many survivors do. Despite her knowledge of and experience with trauma (albeit mostly others’), believability is still the foremost factor in reporting:



Just the support going through the police process, it's vile. Vile. I know I can honestly say if it happened to me. Um, would I go to the police?

I don't know.

And this is no disrespect to the police. This is about the system. Would I go to the police? Oh, it would depend. Yeah. Again, rape myths, it would depend on whether I felt I was going to be believed or not. For me, the people that come forward. All very brave. Very, very brave.

### **“I've seen the outcome of thought”**

Grace focuses on how survivors who may not present as emotional in court may “be on the back foot when it comes to being believed in court”, however, an aware victim, or the victim with agency also suffers in court:

I've seen, I've seen all sorts of responses in court by survivors and I've seen, yeah, I've seen the outcome of thought.

She speaks of a different case:

I think, and this has been, I can remember being in court with one case and she came, she was very, very, she came across as very distant, but that was her way. [...] And she then started to say on it, you know, with, with cases of domestic violence, sexual violence, perpetrators behaved like this and she started reeling off of things that she'd read. Um, textbook, at first they said...then it was very much like, oh, you, you have actually, you read that, you've read this as opposed to you actually experienced it. So

therefore, we are doubting whether actually this applies to you or whether you've just read it, but actually it's quite normal for a survivor or anybody research certain things about how you might be feeling, or – but because she came across as so assertive and robotic, um, you know, it may...it kind of tested her authenticity a little bit.

The implication seems to be that victims must process and live their emotions and trauma; however, their reactions are preferable if grounded in emotionality as opposed to intellectuality. They are seemingly expected to give up any agency if they want to be a 'real victim'. While remaining emotional about such traumatic events in your life may seem like an obvious reaction, another participant Alice notes why victims may be emotional, but may not want to remain that way:

Clients tend to not be emotional, which does make sense because I think it's a disconnect or a dissociation from what's going on...I think it's a survival thing. I think it, uh, you know, if they were to, hold all this trauma, and actually connect with it all the time in an emotional sense [it would be difficult to survive]. They just want to be able to be aligned. (Alice)

## **Discussion**

This study aimed to investigate how victim aid and advocacy professionals perceive their clients specifically through the lens of the focal concerns theory (Steffensmeier et al., 1998). A primary IPA analysis highlights two superordinate themes: survivors crave belief, and unconditional positive regard. Results suggest that the focus of the current participants is heavily on support and empowerment; participants thus work on their own awareness of complex

trauma, use those theories to identify the needs of their clients, then based on their exact role in the referral or support process they identify how best they can meet those needs. While all the interview framework questions focused on factors that decreased credibility and made allegations seem false, participants were clear that their role was not to make determinations of the truth. A further deductive thematic analysis was conducted on the data of one of the participants, Grace, due to her extensive knowledge of and experience with the prison and justice systems as well as complex trauma. The theoretical framework of emotionality and language along with the ideal victim literature was used for the deduction. Three themes were identified: What Forms Credibility?, “I’ve seen the outcome of thought”, and Solutions. These themes suggest that agency and awareness during a trial often undermine the authenticity of a victim who is otherwise expected to actively participate (Larcombe, 2002). Many expectations of a rape victim may indeed be mutually exclusive (Desai et al., 2021), in that they are expected to constantly remain involved with (and display) the emotions brought on by sexual assault (Sleath & Bull, 2017), but “the outcome of thought” almost certainly goes against the victim (Bosma et al., 2018), and significantly enough to overturn jury verdicts.

The most positive development illustrated within this study is that the results do not seem to conform with some previous literature, which indicated that even victim advocates harboured some victim-blaming attitudes (Maier, 2012b). The current results suggest that even in answer to questions specifically about false allegations, participants’ responses are those cognizant of complex trauma and nuanced rape myths and reveal neither victim blaming, nor victim questioning. Moreover, results suggest that participants are protective and emotionally responsive towards those they work with. This provides a contrast to the responses of law enforcement participants (Chapter 8). It is crucial to note that law enforcement officers at no

point actively blamed victims or mentioned at any point that a specific victim ‘deserved it’; in fact, most respondents said that they would actively try and help the complainant regardless of the circumstances.

However, when the general nature of responses is compared to those of the current participants, it is clear that law enforcement officers may unknowingly have certain internalized biases and victim-questioning—as opposed to victim-blaming—attitudes (see: Maier, 2012b). This general positive attitudes towards victims may arise from the fact that participants were aware of the “*social undesirability of agreeing with blatant RMA items*” (Bohner et al., 2022, p. 3). It is also possible that the differing methods of data collection for the two groups may have contributed to the differences in responses. The law enforcement participants answered questions in an anonymised setting, with no interviewer present, and in a written schedule, whereas the victim advocates were interviewed face-to-face. It is likely that participants in the present study attempted impression management because the anonymity was not complete, especially when viewed through Bohner et al.’s social undesirability lens.

### **Focal Concerns of the Victim Advocate**

In this section, I propose three focal concerns of a victim advocate as derived from the analysis of the current participants’ responses: protecting victims from revictimization, reintroducing agency to the lives of victims/survivors, and educating others about rape myths and biases through advocacy and practice. The current data were analysed through the lens of the focal concerns theory to further investigate the conclusions made in the previous chapter which considers that law enforcement officers’ focus on certain facets of sexual crime cases may cause victims to try impression-management in forensic settings. The current data seem to support this theory. According to participant interviews, one of the central concerns of a victim pre-reporting

or seeking support is whether they will be believed. Victims, who are often just laypersons, try to gauge the reactions of others and try to make themselves most believable which may sometimes be by omitting details, or adding incorrect ones (Chapter 8). Law enforcement officers when focusing on attributes of false allegations tend to focus on these attempts at impression management and use them to justify discrediting victims. While the issue seems to be victims' attempt to manage impressions instead of 'telling the truth', the real concern is perhaps that victims are concerned about their impressions in the first place.

Participants concur that once survivors are reassured that they are believed and that their experiences are valid (not in a legal, but in an emotional sense), they become open and more relaxed. There is a visible reduction in anxiety, and they are generally completely honest, sometimes even "communicating bowel movements" (Alice). While the trauma from sexual abuse does not disappear, this is often the demeanour and mental state that may be most beneficial to an investigating or questioning officer from an evidentiary perspective. This suggests that the approach of victim advocates towards their clients is advantageous to meaningful (Konradi, 2010) testimony, and the focal concerns of these advocates gives rise to practices and communications which if adopted, may benefit the justice system greatly.

### **Comparing The Two Types of Professionals**

Based on the previous studies within this thesis that examine professional perceptions of sexual crime victims, a basic division can be proposed: professionals who work against the perpetrator (such police officers), and professionals who work for the victim (such as victim advocates and counsellors). As is evident from Grace's interview, factors that ultimately cause a guilty or not guilty verdict are undecipherable even by the CPS – who have access to, and analysis of, a significantly large database of cases and outcomes. It can therefore be inferred as

unlikely that individual police officers are in a position to make conclusively definitive decisions about victims and their individual cases. Thus, a police officer using a prosecutor's shorthand to determine whether a case is 'winnable' not only revictimizes victims but is also unlikely to be an accurate judgement of potential real outcomes.

In the previous chapter, I suggest that more intensive trauma training for law enforcement may be an effective method to dispel rape myths and associated beliefs which harm victim reporting rates. However, the question remains whether forensic settings such as a police interrogation room, or a courtroom may be the appropriate or even a feasible setting for a possible therapeutic narrative. Liberal legality functions to (also) preserve the rights of the accused—'innocent until proven guilty' (Crown Prosecution Service, 2019)—which is in itself a necessity (Ciorciari & Heindel, 2016). However, this impacts a sexual crime case specifically when there is not much evidence besides the word of the complainant and the accused. In such a case, victim testimony is an active agent in determining an outcome, hence becoming the prosecutor's instrument: open to critique, preparation, and changes in voice – albeit for the advantage of the victim-complainant (Ciorciari & Heindel, 2016).

## **Conclusion**

The current data suggest that victim advocates and counsellors have different focal concerns to some other groups working within the criminal justice system. Namely, protecting victims from revictimization, providing victims with agency over their narrative, and educating against rape myths and biases. Results seem to support the hypothesis that a group's focal concerns change what a credible victim looks like, or even if credibility needs to be established. While the need for credibility to be established in court is inevitable, revictimization of complaints in order to achieve this remains unnecessary (Konradi, 2010). Victim advocates'

focal concerns allow them to provide suitable care to their clients, who in turn eventually find comfort in their actual reactions to trauma as opposed to “pre-thinking”. This suggests that knowledge and education of complex trauma helps prevent impression management on the part of the victims, which seems to be the primary difficulty in establishing undeniable credibility as identified by law enforcement officers (Chapter 8).

## Chapter 10: General Discussion

### A Summary of Findings

This thesis aimed to contribute to the literature regarding figurative language use in testimonies of victims of sexual crime, and its perception in forensic settings by relevant forensic authorities and laypersons. There were a number of key aims: exploring the impact of hyperbole on perceived credibility of sexual crime victims, the role of hyperbole in establishing the emotionality of victim testimonies, preferences for literal vs. hyperbolic language when assuming first person testimonies, and finally, a more detailed and general exploration of professional perceptions of rape victims and its basis in conceptual framework and practice.

Experiment 1 (a and b; Chapter 4) directly investigated how hyperbole in victim testimony impacts four specific measures of perceived credibility: belief, sympathy, victim-impact, and likeability for both professionals and laypersons respectively. 16 vignettes depicting hypothetical testimonies of victims of sexual crime were manipulated to be either hyperbolic or non-hyperbolic (overall) in nature. Main results from this experiment suggested that for professional participants, hyperbole had a significant negative impact on all four measures of perceived credibility; for laypersons, on the other hand, hyperbole had a positive impact on belief and victim-impact.

Experiment 2 (a and b; Chapter 5) investigated whether the inflation hypothesis of hyperbole (Colston & Keller, 1998) had any impact on hyperbole perception and credibility, and whether one type of hyperbole (realistic, possible but improbable, or impossible) was better justified over another in the context of sexual crime testimonies. The results, however, did not suggest a correspondence with Colston and Keller's inflation hypothesis; the level of hyperbolic inflation had no significant impact on any of the four measures of perceived credibility.



In Experiment 3 (a and b; Chapter 6), professionals and laypersons were asked to assume the role of the speaker, that is, assume that they were testifying themselves, before attempting the task to choose a literal phrase or a hyperbolic phrase. In order to empirically explore whether individuals would choose to express themselves hyperbolically if they were victimised, participants were presented with a simple dichotomous choice of literal versus hyperbolic. Each scenario had a blank in one of its sentences wherein the participants were provided with two options to fill the blank. One was hyperbolic, and the other, literal. The frequency of choices in each category was calculated and the results supported those from Experiment 1: law enforcement officers preferred literal phrases, whereas jury-eligible laypersons preferred to use hyperbolic phrases instead.

Experiment 4 (a and b; Chapter 7) explored whether hyperbole plays a role in the semantic depiction of emotionality, specifically in testimonies from victims of sexual crime. Materials from Experiments 1 and 3 were used and participants were instructed to answer questions on measures of perceived emotionality. Nine-point rating scales were adapted for use in the current context from Bradley and Lang's (1994) works: intensity (in place of arousal), appropriateness, and valence. Results from LME models suggest that hyperbole significantly increases emotional intensity perceived for participants themselves, as well as perceived for the victim. Interestingly, participant-group means suggest that hyperbole a) has a negative impact on appropriateness and b) makes testimonies seem more emotional than is appropriate in the current situation.

The aim of Studies 5 and 6 (Chapters 8 and 9 respectively) was to explore in detail whether there might be occupation-specific factors that might result in the negative perception of hyperbole in testimonies (Experiment 1), as well as an inclination towards the literal versus the

hyperbolic (Experiment 3). Considering the negative impact of hyperbole that made a victim sound less credible, the focus of the questions was on other factors that may contribute to declining credibility. Also, in contrast with previous experiments, the objective for the qualitative studies was to observe participant-introduced remarks on speech and language, instead of those introduced by the researcher. It was originally expected that participants would independently address language use and word choice. However, where participants chose to address factors outside of physical evidence, it was more related to agency and motivation, though language was also mentioned.

Study 5 sought to qualitatively explore law enforcement perceptions of rape, victims, and investigations in general. A semi-structured written interview schedule online was used to collect data and questions focused on commonalities among most victims of sexual crime, factors that interfere with successful investigations or trials and factors alluding to false allegations. Four main themes were identified: Victimology, Red Flags, Motives Other Than Justice, and Difficult Despite True Allegations. Main results from a thematic analysis were: (1) physical evidence and victim emotionality were the most important factors in a sexual violence case, (2) while no participant openly blamed victims, many certainly portrayed victim-questioning attitudes, (3) the dispelling and identification of typical rape myths was evident, however, participants tended to submit to more nuanced sexual aggression myths and finally, (4) the focal concerns of the police seemed to inform their perception of victims.

In Study 6, questions similar to those used in Study 5 were posed to a different group of professionals in a face-to-face video interview: counsellors and advocates of victims of sexual crime. Informed by the results of Study 5, Study 6 aimed to examine in depth, how advocacy and therapy professionals perceived their clients specifically through the lens of the focal concerns

theory (Steffensmeier et al., 1998). The data of four participants was subjected to an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis; two super-ordinate themes were identified – Survivors Crave Belief and Unconditional Positive Regard. The organisation of data suggested a flow of participant-focus from identifying the needs of their clients, to meeting those needs to the best of their ability while maintaining objectivity and professional boundaries. Through the results of the IPA, a preliminary identification of the focal concerns of a victim advocate could also be intimated. These are: (1) protecting victims from revictimization, (2) reintroducing agency to the lives of victims/survivors, and (3) educating others about rape myths and biases through advocacy and practice. The sections that follow will discuss the findings of the current thesis as they fit in the wider research within psycholinguistics and forensic psychology.

### **Rape as a Tool to Repress Agency**

In order to understand the roles of agency and language in a legal proceeding, it is essential to first understand the role of power in sexual violence. The theories for the very occurrence of rape may also provide clear answers for the reasons behind the presence of rape myths, expectations from victims, and their treatment in forensic settings. The feminist perspective on rape suggests that sexual violence is an act of displaying dominance over another individual and usually involves no sexual motive at all. While this view has been criticised for completely ignoring sexual motives in sexual crime (see: Palmer, 1988), it has repeatedly been established that rape is often used as a tool to exert control and power (Brownmiller, 1993; Griffin, 1971; Holmstrom & Burgess, 1978; Maier, 2014; Millet, 1971). The objective of a rapist is to transfer power from his victim to himself; usually either to improve confidence, enhance self-worth, or retaliate against an individual or a group (Groth, 1979).

Sexual violence as a ‘weapon of war’ (Diken & Laustsen, 2005; Maier, 2014; Porter, 2019) supports that rape is often an exertion of power. In former Yugoslavia (specifically Bosnia), rape was reportedly systematically applied as a war strategy (Diken & Laustsen, 2005; Swiss & Giller, 1993) used to ‘punish’ women by making them carry a child borne of repeated rape. In Uganda, the Acholi (Porter, 2019) and Luwero (Swiss & Giller, 1993) communities reported a majority of women being raped by soldiers, to the extent that some younger women who had not experienced sexual violence described it as something that had not happened to them “*yet*” (Porter, 2019, p. 1027).

Sexual violence in wartime is usually viewed through one of two perspectives: as a ‘weapon of war’, or as the manifestation of a normal belief and practice, but simply during abnormal times (i.e., war) (Buss, 2009; Diken & Laustsen, 2005; Gray et al., 2020; Porter, 2019; Swiss & Giller, 1993). Porter (2019) argues against this perception of ‘rupture versus norm’ as being too simplistic. She posits that sexual violence during war is viewed as ‘rupture’ – something that is an event and is out of the ordinary, as opposed to normal sexual relationships which are the ‘norm’. This is also the basis of the argument for hyperbole use within the current thesis. Applying the semantic taxonomy (Cano Mora, 2009) of hyperbole, and its frequency in everyday language (Roberts & Kreuz, 1994), the affect control theory (Heise, 1987) and the ‘bad is stronger than good’ proposition (Baumeister et al., 2001), hyperbole, which is frequently used to evaluate negative, or ‘rupture’ events, would have utility (moreover, precedence) in testimonies of sexual crime victims. However, Porter also insists that the event and the norm may ultimately be ontologically linked, such that no event-behaviour is entirely novel but instead, born from the norm. That is, rape as a weapon of war exists because it is, at least to a certain extent, a weapon of violence in normative times. Based on the idea that rape may be a

weapon of violence in normative situations, hyperbole may be used to describe rupture events, but sexual violence may almost be considered the norm. Thus, there is a possibility that hyperbole is ‘too much’ even in sexual crime situations because contrastingly to previous expectations, sexual violence is still not considered largely outside of the realm of normative incidents.

Das (2008), referring to the partition of India and the violence (physical and sexual) that ensued during the process, states the ease with which violence is folded into our daily lives (see also: Gray et al., 2020). She argues that the longer a rupture exists, the closer it is to becoming the norm. She gives the example of the young soldiers in a militant group in Sri Lanka who speak about death and dying with ease on a daily basis, suggesting that their familiarity with an outcome does not necessarily mean an actualisation of it. Violence and war become the norm for these young soldiers who treat the general rupture of war as a ‘virtual’ reality – one not fully comprehended or actualised and one where sexual violence is commonplace. However, the commonplaceness of sexual violence, Das argues, is not novel; its appearance during rupture stems from having been allowed, however indirectly, during the norm. While the idea that normal society ‘allows’ sexual violence seems unlikely, Porter (2019) details this may indeed be the case, but that the allowance occurs in a specific ‘moral space’ (see also: Andersson & Edgren, 2018; MacLeod, 2020). An occurrence of the event (i.e., rape) outside of a moral space where it has become the norm results in special consideration, however, the event continues to occur unnoticed or accepted in other moral spaces as ‘allowed’ by society. The most lucid example for this is the prominent myth surrounding what constitutes rape. The idea that real rape is perpetrated by the weapon-wielding stranger who jumps out of the bushes and leaves his (female) victim lying on the ground covered in bruises due to how strongly she resisted (but

ultimately failed) is one that is posited as requiring attention, sympathy, and belief (Christie, 1986; Estrich, 1987; Lees, 1997; Maier, 2014; Matoesian, 2001). Despite repeated research conclusions suggesting that intimate partner and acquaintance rape is the dominant type of victim-perpetrator relationship, (Crown Prosecution Service, 2017, 2019; Maier, 2014) stranger rape is not only most readily accepted as rape, but is also prosecuted more often, and the victim is less likely to be questioned by investigating and interviewing officers on credibility grounds (Black, 1980). This suggests a concerning pattern of society as well as the criminal justice system to categorise some places (such as a street or a parking lot) as a moral space where the mores and rules dictate that rape is a violation of the norms, an 'event'. However, domains such as the home, or workplace, are domains that 'allow' rape: a moral space where rape is not (as much of) an event (for discussion see: Porter, 2019).

Das (2008) suggests that the norms of the moral spaces are rooted in patriarchy and that legal reasoning works to serve the purposes of men (Page, 2010). Women are divided into good and bad, where the good are owned by, and remain in the custody of, their husband or father, and the bad are those with prior sexual history (Brownmiller, 1993; Griffin, 1971; Page, 2010). It is possible that public spaces are identified as moral spaces with vehement rape rejection because the legal system punishes men (or perpetrators) who encroach on the 'property of other men'; essentially a punishment for theft as opposed to rape. A woman raped at home is essentially raped by her owner (or a superior in the case of male victims), hence requiring no intervention or reminder of the rules from society. The prevalence of rape even today—despite several feminist advancements in thought—in war afflicted and peaceful countries alike (Diken & Laustsen, 2005; Maier, 2014), suggests at least an indirect presence of rape-allowing moral spaces, especially if we consider the Rational Choice theory (see: Clarke & Cornish, 1985). The

perspective that perpetrators weigh the benefits and risks of the crime they commit prior to committing it, and proceed only when the benefits outweigh the risks, supports that rape-allowing spaces exist universally, in every society, regardless of rupture events. While this view seems archaic, many aspects of legality remain entrenched in this view, in essence, either allowing rape, or revictimizing survivors.

### **Risk and Repression of Agency in a Rape Trial**

Sexual violence is harmful dominantly because it destroys a victim's sense of personhood (Scarry, 1985), and makes them feel "unravelling and obliterated by violence" (Gray et al., 2020, p. 202). In this section, I discuss how the criminal justice system and trial proceedings which should ideally function to heal this damaged sense of self, work to revictimize individuals by situating rules which rescind the agency of a complainant and/or penalise it.

How rape victims are viewed depends heavily on who is viewing them and for what purpose. The inclination of the society and the legal system to cast victims as meek, fragile, hysterical and emotional is evident in literature (Bollingmo et al., 2009; Christie, 1986; Ehrlich, 2003; Estrich, 1987; Franklin et al., 2020; Kaufmann et al., 2003; Larcombe, 2002; Maier, 2014; Nitschke et al., 2019; Rose et al., 2006; Venema, 2016; Wessel et al., 2012) even though the evidence for victim-witnesses being astute and creative agents in a courtroom exists (Fohring, 2018; Konradi, 1999; Lees, 1997; Matoesian, 2001). This may stem from the inability of a court narrative to accommodate both agency and vulnerability side by side. In simpler terms, an individual who was raped is clearly helpless, blameless, and vulnerable. An individual with sexual agency (or emotional agency discussed in the following sections) clearly led the sexual activity and hence cannot be raped. Hence, an individual with sexual agency and sexual history, cannot be called blameless (Spohn & Holleran, 2001), and ultimately cannot be raped because

they are not viewed as vulnerable enough (Andersson & Edgren, 2018). However, Gray et al. (2020) detail that as an individual feels removed and undone by sexual violence—which lends to vulnerability—they also simultaneously remake and rebuild their world around them while exercising agency as a method of survival. Therefore, feasibly being both vulnerable and agentic at the same time.

To better illustrate the delicate balance of agency and vulnerability depictions and their ‘appropriateness’ in court, an excerpt from the William Kennedy Smith trial transcript can be observed. The complainant Patricia Bowman was, in the words of defence counsel Roy Black, an “*effective witness*” who “*worried the shit out of me*” (cf. Matoesian, 2001, p. 24). Matoesian (2001) mentions the effectiveness of the complainant as she cried, and was extremely emotional throughout but was otherwise an astute, “*articulate, and tough witness*” (Matoesian, 2001, p. 24). However, in the following excerpts, the very factors which made her an effective witness were then eventually used against her (cf. Matoesian, 2001, p. 23):

Roy Black (RB): “You didn’t even watch your own lawyer getting on TV and talking about you?”

Patricia Bowman (PB): I watched some of it. At the time I was so sick of seeing this on the media I didn’t want it was overwhelming to be raped, to feel dirty, to feel humiliated//

RB: Please, I gave you a chance to say that yesterday.

PB: Judge, may I answer?

Judge: Listen to the question and answer the question.



At one point, the judge reprimanded her: “*there’s only so much emotion we can tolerate in court*” (p. 24). Matoesian’s analysis of this trial discourse is also supported by the present thesis. Results from Experiment 4 accurately depict the delicacy of these intricacies – in both professional and non-professional samples, the presence of hyperbole significantly increased the emotional intensity scores as perceived for the complainant such that participants believed that the complainant felt the emotion more intensely when hyperbole was used. However contradictorily, in both populations, hyperbole made emotion seem more than was deemed appropriate for the scenario. Thus, the very hyperbole which initially made victim-testimonies seem intensely emotional, was ultimately perceived as antagonistic, ‘too emotional’ and ‘dramatized’ (Experiment 1).

Matoesian further highlights the importance of agency when he points out the “*sophisticated verbal constructions*” (p. 24) used by the victim-witness which made the situation difficult for the defence counsel. An example (p. 24):

RB: Now on the morning of March 30, 1991, Will never made any verbal threats to you, did he, in order to get your compliance?

PB: You mean when he raped me?

The evidence from this specific example suggests that the balance between vulnerability and agency is delicate (Andersson & Edgren, 2018; Edgren, 2019). Both are essential; however, it is often up to the victim themselves to produce and secure this balance in court. Agency, while undeniably required to establish an identity in court and survive through defence counsel questioning (Matoesian, 2001) with limited discursive space (Ponterotto, 2007), can also often harm the victim who may be perceived as not being emotional enough (personal interview;

Chapter 9). This suggests that even though the presence of emotion is not enough to be corroborative, the absence of emotion can seriously harm victim perception (Lees, 1997).

The presence of emotion has further intricacies. Expressing agentic emotions such as anger has been unfavourable (Bosma et al., 2018; Rayburn, 2005), especially when expressed by female victims of sexual crime (Ask & Landström, 2010; Lees, 1997; Rubik, 2010). Wrede et al. (2015) use the Emotions as Social Information (EASI; Van Kleef, 2009) model to explain that an angry (agentic) victim is seen as less in need of help, than a sad (non-agentic) one. An angry victim is seen as capable, strong, and most importantly, (seemingly) not vulnerable. When motivated observers (Nitschke et al., 2019) such as judges and jury members view a complainant as invulnerable, they may be less inclined to feel a sense of responsibility and care. Fohring (2018) goes so far as to say that the key to the provision of victim-status is the appearance of suffering. This can be observed in the current data and may also be the reason for why law enforcement participants who may feel occupationally protective (Andrus, 2019) regularly outlined an angry, 'scorned' or revengeful individual as one likely to make false sexual assault allegations in Chapter 8. Observing agentic emotions in their complainants may intimate to law enforcement that they are less in need of care and support. Since a rape victim is usually perceived as a real victim if they are disoriented and shaken, an agentic victim may fail to invoke the 'immediate victimhood' (Christie, 1986; Tsoudis & Smith-Lovin, 1998). The ambiguity does not lie in varying preferences of a clear dichotomous choice of vulnerability over agency or vice versa; but rather, in the simultaneous requirement and penalty of both depending on the observer and situation.

In the conclusion of Chapter 9, I pose a question concerning whether a legal space such as a courtroom may viably double as a space for therapeutic narratives. While it seems unlikely,

the adoption of trauma-informed and person-centred approaches battles this need for a delicate balance between agency and vulnerability. In their review, McKenna and Holtfreter (2021) propose that the courtroom is a challenging space for its non-native participants in part because of the ambiguity surrounding rules of behaviour. They also posit that if native courtroom actors adopt strategies based in trauma-informed care (much like the therapy and advocacy professionals in the present Study 6), it would dispel a large proportion of the expectations from victim-witnesses. In the absence of concrete expectations for behaviour, language, or uncontrollable extra-testimonial factors (Experiment 3; Chapter 6), impression management would also reduce. This is important because a majority of the participants in Study 5 detailed that a trial or investigation was made difficult because victims, in order to make themselves seem less culpable and more accepted as true victims, altered some part of the actual narrative in their primary testimonies. When detailed by the participants (Study 5 & 6) these were often factors such as how much alcohol had been drunk, how late it was when the victim was solitary and attacked, etc. This attempt at impression management either resulted in the prosecutor deciding to prevent the victim themselves from testifying (significantly weakening the case), or in the presentation of the victim-witness as unreliable and a liar by the defence at the trial (Lees, 1997; Maier, 2014; Matoesian, 2001).

### **Hyperbole: Agentic and Affective**

The original assessment within this thesis was that hyperbole suggests emotionality (Cano Mora, 2009; Cano Mora & Macarro, 2004; Claridge, 2010; McCarthy & Carter, 2004; Rubik, 2010), emotionality is rewarded and expected (Alba-Juez & Larina, 2018; Ask & Landström, 2010; Bades, 2017; Sleath & Bull, 2017; van Doorn & Koster, 2019; Wrede et al., 2015), hence hyperbole would enhance the emotionality (Musolff, 2021), and by virtue,

perceived credibility of victim testimonies (Desai et al., 2021). The investigations were based on this assumption and aimed to further explore the discrepancy in the negative perception of hyperbole (Colston & Carreno, 2020; Leggitt & Gibbs, 2000; Quintilian, 1921), despite the positive perception of emotionality. However, in light of previous arguments which discuss the adversarial effects of agency, this section considers that it may perhaps be the agentic nature of hyperbole that produces antagonistic effects and competes with its affective facet.

Foolen (2015) suggests an essential role of figurative in language in expressing and conceptualising emotion (see also: Colston & Gibbs, 2021; Henriksen & Mishra, 2020; Machado, 2020; Mashhadi, 1997; McCarthy, 2020). For example, those who have experienced sexual abuse may often describe feeling, ‘filthy and absolutely disgusting’ which is a conceptualisation of their emotion. However, this feeling may also be expressed non-conceptually using just ‘ugh’ or ‘icky’. While the general argument as a development to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and Linguistic Relativity (Lucy, 1971; Perlovsky, 2009) has been that figurative language helps conceptualise emotion (Crawford, 2009), Foolen (2015) suggests that figurative language is just as prominent in expressing emotion. However, due to its role in the conceptualisation of emotion, it is possible, that hyperbole suggests a certain degree of agency. This is because the use of figurative language presents a speaker with the ability and opportunity to “*represent and manipulate information for the self and for others*” (Crawford, 2009, p. 137) specifically where affect is concerned. Therefore, as previously discussed in Chapter 7, hyperbole indeed allows the manipulation of emotional intensity, however, it is possible that the manipulation aspect works against the emotional intensity aspect; ultimately causing a negative impact on perceived credibility in some observers.

The reason for viewing manipulation negatively in victim speech may be explicable in the following ways. In Chapter 6, I briefly mention speakers' metacognitive choices to use persuasive language such as hyperbole which is seldom intentional manipulation but often representative of discursive competency. However, it is likely that depictions of discursive competency contrast strongly against the shaken (Venema, 2016) and incomprehensible rape victim-image. Moreover, discursive competency not only suggests linguistic agency, but also the conceptualization of emotions suggesting actualized emotional agency. This is expressly elucidated in results from Chapter 7 where hyperbole functions to increase the intensity of the testimony, however, the descriptive statistics suggest that depictions of emotionality in scenarios with hyperbole were perceived negatively and as more than appropriate for the situation. These results support that hyperbole enhances at least one aspect of perceived emotionality, but also that a speaker's control of that emotionality may have some unfavourable outcomes in terms of observer perception (e.g., that the emotionality may seem more than is deemed appropriate by the observer/s).

The importance given to non-conceptualised emotions by the legal system can be demonstrated, as previously discussed (Chapter 6 & 7), using the excited-utterance exception to the US law against hearsay (Andrus, 2012). In a courtroom, the determination of presence versus absence of agency is important primarily because it plays a pivotal part in blame attribution (Davis & Villalobos, 2014). The one who perpetrates crime is seen as the agent (one who is blameworthy), and the victim is vulnerable. In cases of most other types of crime such as theft or murder, this is often overt and evident, based on the assumption that no individual wants to be stolen from, or murdered. However, this basic assumption is not extended to sexual crime such

as sexual assault or rape; such that even police officers have been shown to subscribe to the ‘women want to be raped’ myth as recently as 15 years ago (Page, 2007; Sleath & Bull, 2017).

The results of Experiments 1, 3 and 4 when contextualized using emotionality literature seem anomalous; that is, if emotionality is necessary and recognised, why does hyperbole, a tool consistently used to demonstrate emotionality cause adverse effects on perceived credibility of victim testimonies? The same question is better answered if contextualized using available evidence on agency and victimhood: hyperbole, a tool used to conceptualize emotion, suggests a certain degree of linguistic agency in the speaker. When used by victims of sexual crime, who are expected to lack (linguistic) agency and coherence while possessing and displaying emotion, the hyperbole creates a paradox for which the courtroom and society allow no space: the existence of agency and vulnerability in tandem.

### **Group Differences in Hyperbole Perception**

While considering the variety of reasons behind the negative perception of hyperbole, it is important to also address that this negative perception was not consistent across all participant groups in the present thesis. In this section, I consider the group differences in hyperbole perception and discuss possible reasons for the positive perception of hyperbole by laypersons in further depth. Prior to addressing group differences, it is noteworthy and consequential that group differences exist at all. This is because first, that the groups present diametric results and second, because both the groups—laypersons and professionals—are equally forensically relevant. Forensic professionals determine whether a case is worth investigating and gathering evidence for, and laypersons ultimately decide the case outcomes should it go to trial. Moreover, laypersons may not only make up a jury, but they might also be the victims and subsequently

complainants; it is at this juncture that their idea of credible compared to a professional's idea of credible may be significant.

To summarise and clarify the exact nature of the group differences found in this thesis:

1. In Experiment 1, which tested the impact of hyperbole on perceived credibility, the presence of hyperbole reduced mean scores on all four credibility measures for law enforcement participants. Conversely, the presence of hyperbole increased means of the credibility measures of belief and victim-impact for laypersons.
2. In Experiment 3, which examined whether a preference for hyperbolic or literal language existed for speakers in a sexual crime context, law enforcement officers predominantly chose literal phrases to use in their testimony while assuming the role of the speaker. In contrast, the laypersons sample chose to use hyperbolic phrases from the given options when they assumed the speaker-role.
3. In Experiment 4, in addition to testing the impact of hyperbole on perceived emotionality, the impact of occupation on emotionality measures was also investigated. Occupation overall had an impact on all measures except for appropriateness which was solely impacted by condition. The results suggested that law enforcement participants had higher mean scores on valence scales, indicating that they found the scenarios less unpleasant than their lay counterparts. On the intensity scales, law enforcement participants had lower means suggesting they found the scenarios less intense than their lay counterparts.

Previously, these reasons have been proposed (Chapters 4, 6, & 7) to explain found differences: the overall seriousness of sexual crime renders the persuasive aspect of hyperbole redundant; laypersons, who were not instructed in the experiment to be active listeners (i.e. to provide

judgement), seemed significantly more forgiving of breaches in preconceived display rules; and finally, the agency provided by hyperbole may be more accepted by those unbound by courtroom rules and regulations. These explanations are specific to the current experiments, but it is also important to look at more generalised explanations for why differences between professionals and laypersons regarding sexual crime perceptions exist.

The first overt explanation for the positive perceptions of hyperbole in the general population sample may just be their overriding positive perceptions of victims in general. That laypersons don't entirely perceive hyperbole positively is evident through its negative impact on appropriateness. Moreover, it may be laypersons' prejudice against sexual offenders. In a study comparing perceptions of sexual offenders between students and forensic staff, Ferguson and Ireland (2006) found that professionals had a more positive attitude towards offenders, seeing them as able to rehabilitate. Even when compared to participants who reported being closely acquainted with sexual abuse (either through personal experience or those of friends or family), laypersons without this acquaintance were harsher towards sexual offenders. Jung et al. (2012) also report in their study that lay participants when compared to professionals were more likely to assume recidivism compared to professionals. Both studies, however, may have found this because their laypersons sample was predominantly made up of undergraduate students whose education and life experience were significantly less when compared to their professional sample (Jung et al., 2012). This is not characteristic of the general population samples in the present thesis. In the context of the present samples, I predict that this difference may be largely because of how distanced laypersons may be not just from sexual crime but also sexual offenders and hence, their 'humanity'.



In addition to a possible prejudice against sexual offence perpetrators, overall positive evaluation of victims within the laypersons sample may stem from how socially undesirable it is to victim-blame and prescribe to historic rape myths (Bohner et al., forthcoming). While law enforcement participants may be inclined to neutrality towards complainant and suspect, the layperson has no such requirement, and may be generally inclined to side with the victim instead. This, however, does not imply that the layperson does not subscribe to myths about sexual aggression. In close accordance with the present context, Studies 5 and 6 in this thesis discuss how alcohol intake by the victim is regularly used to blame or at least question victim-behaviour. However, Jung et al. (2012) found in their study that perpetrator alcohol intake was often used to reduce accountability expectations within their laypersons sample.

All factors considered, it is evident that two forensically relevant groups have different ideas about linguistic (and general) expectations from victims of sexual crime. It is also evident from the present work and broader literature that these expectations can stem from misinformation regarding the actual statistics in sexual crime. Moreover, it appears that both sample groups possess misinformation regarding different aspects of sexual crime and victims. This necessitates further propagation of evidence-based information.

### **Limitations**

Because the current research is an initiation into previously unexplored factors in both fields – psycholinguistics and forensic pragmatics, it has certain limitations. First it is notable that the nature of materials throughout this thesis was hypothetical vignettes. There exists criticism for this methodology because manipulatable materials may often sacrifice the characteristic features of naturally occurring speech. Second, from a forensic psychology perspective, general cases about sexual offences could involve overt stereotyping. The

hypothetical scenario method has however, allowed me to control for factors that cannot otherwise be controlled such as offender and victim gender, nature of the crime (sexual harassment, sexual assault, or rape), a known vs. unknown assailant, and importantly, the use of hyperbole or literal language in victim testimonies. Moreover, using non-hypothetical materials would also mean procuring natural speech occurrences of hyperbole in victim speech for participant evaluation, the absence of which has already been discussed in Chapter 3.

Another limitation is the lack of conclusiveness in the qualitative data of Experiments 1 and 2. The quantitative parts of the task were lengthy and due to this, it is possible that many participants chose to disregard or skip the qualitative question in both experiments, but especially Experiment 2. In light of Studies 5 and 6, qualitative data that could formally be analysed from the general population sample would have been helpful in order to contextualise further the responses of the professionals and understand group differences. Finally, as noted previously, the experiments in the present study were all blame negative; that is, there was no consequential decision-making involved for the participants. It might have been extremely beneficial to include a measure for *Final Verdict* such that at the end of each scenario, participants could provide an answer for whether or not they would convict a defendant or arrest a suspect based on the testimony. This would clarify not only the impact of hyperbole on credibility, but also whether these credibility ratings were ultimately consequential to case outcomes. This measure was not included as some previously conducted research as part of my undergraduate thesis suggested that verdicts were ultimately inconclusive. Participants often refrained to base verdicts on testimonies alone without the knowledge of additional factors such as physical evidence and suspect background.

## Conclusion and Future Directions for Research

Despite the limitations outlined in the previous section, the present research contributes to the literature in two principal ways. Firstly, it is a call for attention to hyperbole – despite its prevalence, very little is known about its occurrence in isolation from the master tropes. This thesis attempts to separate hyperbole from its grouping with metaphor or irony and show the variety of functions it fulfils in affective speech. Moreover, while there is some available literature about its comprehension, hyperbolic production and perception remain largely understudied. Studies in this thesis are some of the first acknowledgements of the contrast of expected hyperbole function and its actual performance in the sexual crime context. Namely, the importance of hyperbole in conveying emotionality but also its negative impact on perceived credibility and emotional appropriateness.

Second, this thesis establishes that linguistic expectations of the victim still exist; even for professionals who are expected to be neutral for ethical reasons. These expectations are not evidence-based despite the existence of a large amount of literature. It shows that professionals are also subject to social biases, but further study also shows that these biases may be avoided, or at least known of, through continued training in trauma-informed care. For example, Grace in Study 6 provides the incident of the client who read about her situation and researched it. When in court, she was dismissed as seeming rehearsed and coached. However, Grace, who was informed in trauma-behaviours and its emergent responses, could identify that it is natural for individuals to look into things that they undergo. It was a response to confusion. It is likely that if courtroom participants knew, they might have used evidence-based reasoning not unlike Grace.

In her examination of hyperbole as used to depict emotion in literature, Margaret Rubik aptly concludes (2010, p. 373):

“It is essential to remember, however, that response to emotional rhetoric in a particular text certainly depends not only on a successful conceptual blend to express the respective feeling and on the stylistic excess or restraint of its expression but on an almost infinite variety of interconnected effects relating to genre and point of view, but also to the gender and age of a speaker, and to the text’s addressee and context. Descriptions employing very similar images or stylistic features may hence still challenge entirely different responses because of a reader’s sense of what is appropriate for a man or a woman, a hero or a villain, for public display or private confession, for omniscient or focalised narration, for poetry or prose, in the past or in the present.”

Similarly, the perception of victims in general is a complex phenomenon in the current context. Based in the findings of wider literature, it may be influenced by a variety of factors including but not limited to, the type of sexual crime (assault/rape vs. harassment), the audience (laypersons vs. law enforcement vs. victim advocates), emotionality, availability of physical evidence, prior relationship with the perpetrator, victim’s familiarity with and knowledge of the literature on sexual crime, and linguistic choices. Professionals’ perceptions of victims (and their linguistic choices) in turn depends on a sense of their own purpose, and their focal concerns working either for the survivors (advocates and therapists) or against the perpetrators (law enforcement officers). Laypersons’ perceptions of hyperbole in victim testimony are positive, however this might be purely because the gravity of sexual crime supersedes the words used to describe it, or because a certain degree of agency is not penalized by those unbound by rules of the courtroom and legality.

The limited amount of experimental hyperbole research implies that a variety of previously unexplored investigative paths exist for hyperbole, and only a few are outlined here. The current conclusions hint at the agentic nature of hyperbole, however, it is essential to empirically test these claims in both everyday as well as forensic settings. It would be a beneficial contribution to the currently limited literature on hyperbole within psycholinguistics to examine its connection with agency; specifically using the blame-attribution paradigm which has previously been used with linguistic characteristics such as active and passive voice (Bohner, 2001; Davis & Villalobos, 2014). This paradigm would be beneficial in that it is usable both, in everyday situations when blame for common mistakes is to be considered, as well as within forensic settings by comparing hyperbolic speech between victim and perpetrator. A valuable study design would be to examine victim blaming/questioning attitudes via items modelled upon the AMMSA-21 (Bohner et al., forthcoming) scale using vignettes with hyperbolic language, agentic but non-hyperbolic language, and literal language. This design could be used in various contexts such as to highlight an everyday grievance; a non-sexual forensic context such as theft or housebreaking; finally, a sexual-crime forensic context such as rape. This would serve to examine a) whether agency is directly proportionate to victim blaming/questioning attitudes and b) whether hyperbole serves to enhance perceived agency (by comparing hyperbolic language with agentic but non-hyperbolic language).

A further interesting avenue of research may also investigate whether perceived agency inflates with inflating levels of hyperbole. In general, the inflation hypothesis presents theoretical perspectives which have yet to be fully corroborated experimentally. Furthermore, a broad experimental enquiry into the discourse functions of meiosis or exaggerated minimization would also be beneficial. The current thesis has maintained a majority of the focus on auxesis in part

because of the higher occurrence of auxesis hyperbole (Cano Mora, 2009; Claridge, 2010), and in part because of the lack of literature on whether meiosis occurs independently from sarcasm.

In sum, this thesis presents the importance of considering hyperbole and its functions and perceptions in psycholinguistics as well as forensic settings. The frequency and prevalence of hyperbole in everyday language means that unusual, or ‘event’ language must also (and especially) involve hyperbole. This thesis attempts to be a starting point for investigation into hyperbole in forensically relevant contexts beginning with its purpose, perception, preference, and impact.

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## Appendix A: Complete Experimental Materials (Experiments 1 and 4)

1. Male, Sexual Assault.	
Hyperbolic	<p>Complainant A is a 28-year-old male and an alleged victim of sexual assault.</p> <p>The following is an extract from a hypothetical court statement. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.</p> <p>Prosecution: “Mr. A, please give us a detailed account of the extent of your abuse by your perpetrator”</p> <p>Complainant A: “Um...I will try not to be ambiguous to the best of my abilities; forgive me if I’m not, it has been a long time. It must have started when I was about 3. I used to think I was the <b>luckiest boy in the world</b>, because my father loved me so much. Loved me enough to give me a bath, cleaning parts of my body that I didn’t know existed yet. It only started with inappropriate touching, we never had sex until maybe, I was 8. Loved me to infinity and back, he’d say. Once we started having sex, it <b>never</b> stopped. It continued as an <b>endless, eternal trauma</b> and by the time I was 13, I remember being <b>petrified</b> even considering the possibility that this might not be normal. I have a degree in pulling my trousers down and bending over and he <b>never even had to say a word</b> to me.”</p> <p>Prosecution: “When did it stop?”</p> <p>Complainant A: “When I was 18, I left for university. The frequency...of, well, of the abuse had reduced by then. It wasn’t happening <b>every second</b> of my life. Less frequent.”</p>



	<p>Prosecution: “It’s difficult for this court to understand why it took you slightly over ten years to report the crime and come out with your story.”</p> <p>Complainant A: “Is it fucking really? Sorry. Um. Well, for starters I thought it was normal for fathers to ruin your self-image by thrusting himself inside you every time they had an urge. When I found out it wasn’t normal, I knew I had to come out or I’d <b>think myself to death</b>. After that, I had to gather up the courage to come forward which I didn’t think I had, owing to my negative self-esteem. So yes. That’s why.”</p>
Non-Hyperbolic	<p>Complainant A is a 28-year-old male and an alleged victim of sexual assault. The following is an extract from a hypothetical court statement. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.</p> <p>Prosecution: “Mr. A, please give us a detailed account of the extent of your abuse by your perpetrator”</p> <p>Complainant A: “Um...I will try not to be ambiguous to the best of my abilities; forgive me if I’m not, it has been a long time. It must have started when I was about 3. I used to think I was <b>very lucky</b>, because my father loved me so much. Loved me enough to give me a bath, cleaning parts of my body that I didn’t know existed yet. It only started with inappropriate touching, we never had sex until maybe, I was 8. Loved me to infinity and back, he’d say. Once we started having sex, it <b>didn’t</b> stop. It continued <b>for many years</b> and by the time I was 13, I remember being <b>afraid</b> to even consider the possibility that this might not be normal. I have a degree in pulling my trousers down and bending over and <b>he didn’t even have to instruct me.</b>”</p> <p>Prosecution: “When did it stop?”</p>

	<p>Complainant A: “When I was 18, I left for university. The frequency...of, well, of the abuse had reduced by then. It wasn’t happening <b>as often in my life</b>. Less frequent.”</p> <p>Prosecution: “It’s difficult for this court to understand why it took you slightly over ten years to report the crime, and come out with your story.”</p> <p>Complainant A: “Is it fucking really? Sorry. Um. Well, for starters I thought it was normal for fathers to ruin your self-image by thrusting himself inside you every time they had an urge. When I found out it wasn’t normal, I knew I had to come out or I’d <b>overthink</b>. After that, I had to gather up the courage to come forward which I didn’t think I had, owing to my negative self-esteem. So yes. That’s why.”</p>
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2. Female, Sexual Assault	
Hyperbolic	<p>Complainant B is a 19-year-old female alleging sexual assault. The following is an extract from a hypothetical conversation between the complainant and a police authority. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.</p> <p>Complainant B: “Can I report an assault?”</p> <p>Police Officer: “Please begin by telling us what happened and where.”</p> <p>Complainant B: “I’m a student. I was walking back home from the university and I lost my presence of mind <b>for just a second</b>. I decided to take the shortcut through a car park on my way. It was 8:23pm, I thought I’d be okay but I didn’t...didn’t know it only took no time for my world to end. I had a bag, so I think I hit him, but it came <b>faster than I could blink</b>. Like, he was behind</p>

	<p>me, put an arm around my neck, and began to choke me. He then put his fingers down my skirt, then tights...I was <b>could feel myself disintegrating in his hands</b>, and then tried to take them off, but he couldn't. At some moment in that <b>eternity</b>, I think he had his...uh, his...<b>bloody monster fingers</b> inside me. I can't be sure. Blue backpack, black jeans. He then ran away. <b>I don't know anything. I don't know anything, literally nothing.</b> I'm not even being helpful, am I? <b>I make zero sense.</b> Does this make sense?"</p>
<p>Non-Hyperbolic</p>	<p>Complainant B is a 19-year-old female alleging sexual assault. The following is an extract from a hypothetical conversation between the complainant and a police authority. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.</p> <p>Complainant B: "Can I report an assault?"</p> <p>Police Officer: "Please begin by telling us what happened and where."</p> <p>Complainant B: "I'm a student. I was walking back home from the university and I lost my presence of mind <b>for a bit</b>. I decided to take the shortcut through a car park on my way. It was 8:23pm, I thought I'd be okay but I didn't...didn't know it only took no time for my world to end. I had a bag, so I think I hit him, but it came <b>very quickly</b>. Like, he was behind me, put an arm around my neck, and began to choke me. He then put his fingers down my skirt, then tights...I was <b>broken in spirit</b>, and then tried to take them off, but he couldn't. At some moment in that <b>time</b>, I think he had his...uh, his...<b>fingers</b> inside me. I can't be sure. Blue backpack, black jeans. He then ran away. <b>I</b></p>

	<p><b>don't know enough. I can't remember enough, really.</b> I'm not even being helpful, am I? <b>I make no sense.</b> Does this make sense?"</p>
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<p>3. Male, Sexual Harassment</p>	
<p>Hyperbolic</p>	<p>Complainant C is a 17 year old male, alleging sexual harassment in flight. The following is an extract from a hypothetical conversation between the complainant and airport police authorities. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.</p> <p>Complainant C: "I have to, I mean, it's probably not a big deal, but it'll probably happen to someone else, so I should say something. I'm on the plane. It's late at night, Bombay to London which would take <b>ages</b> anyway, so there's basically <b>nothing</b> to do but sleep. This elderly lady is next to me in the seat, so I say hello, ask her how she's doing and basically just small talk. So, I fall asleep but I wake up to this lady who has her hands on my thigh...under my blanket, moving inwards! That's <b>literally unbelievable</b>. Can you believe that? In front of a <b>thousand</b> people, too. When I say elderly, I mean, she's old, maybe 50s so I'm <b>literally a foetus</b> compared to her. She had the bloody nerve. And that kind of thing doesn't happen by mistake, you know, <b>it was nothing if not deliberate</b>. I'm just <b>really, really, utterly</b> disappointed in myself for not saying something, maybe even just pushing her hand away."</p> <p>Airport P/O: "Alright, well, we've got her in custody, we'll let you know what can be done next once we've got her statement."</p>

Non-Hyperbolic	<p>Complainant C is a 17-year-old male, alleging sexual harassment in flight. The following is an extract from a hypothetical conversation between the complainant and airport police authorities. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.</p> <p>Complainant C: “I have to, I mean, it’s probably not a big deal, but it’ll probably happen to someone else, so I should say something. I’m on the plane. It’s late at night, Bombay to London which would take <b>9 hours</b> anyway, so there’s basically <b>not much else</b> to do but sleep. This elderly lady is next to me in the seat, so I say hello, ask her how she’s doing and basically just small talk. So, I fall asleep, but I wake up to this lady who has her hands on my thigh...under my blanket, moving inwards! That’s <b>difficult to believe</b>. Can you believe that? In front of <b>a plane full of</b> people, too. When I say elderly, I mean, she’s old, maybe 50s so I’m <b>very young</b> compared to her. She had the bloody nerve. And that kind of thing doesn’t happen by mistake, you know, <b>it was deliberate</b>. I’m just <b>extremely</b> disappointed in myself for not saying something, maybe even just pushing her hand away.”</p> <p>Airport P/O: “Alright, well, we’ve got her in custody, we’ll let you know what can be done next once we’ve got her statement.”</p>
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4. Female, Sexual Harassment	
Hyperbolic	<p>Complainant D is a 35-year-old female alleging prolonged sexual harassment. The following is an extract from a hypothetical court statement. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.</p>

	<p>Defence: “If I understand correctly, Mr. X has been your colleague for almost 4 years, is that right?”</p> <p>Complainant D: “Yes.”</p> <p>Defence: “And how long do you say the harassment has lasted?”</p> <p>Complainant D: “Three years.”</p> <p>Defence: “Can you tell us the exact nature of this harassment?”</p> <p>Complainant D: “Yes, well, it has a lot to do with inappropriate remarks and glances. You’d think the finesse with which he speaks, he’s the <b>most polite person</b> in the world, but he’s <b>nothing more than a manipulative harasser</b>. It’s a normal conversation until <b>within moments</b>, it turns into ‘let me guess your bra size’ or ‘I’ll show you how to do that’ with a nasty voice intonation and a wink. You would think women are built to <b>survive misogynistic hailstones such as these thrown at them every step of their lifetime</b>, but we are a <b>thousand percent</b> at a point where this needs to stop. It is not harmless, and it is not invited. I think I speak for <b>all</b> women when I say that our ‘No’ needs to stop <b>melting into nothing</b>.”</p> <p>Defence: “Although that was quite a moving speech, it answers none of the questions. Especially the one of, why wait 3 years and endure it, if you felt this strongly about it?”</p>
Non-Hyperbolic	<p>Complainant D is a 35-year-old female alleging prolonged sexual harassment. The following is an extract from a hypothetical court statement. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.</p>

	<p>Defence: “If I understand correctly, Mr. X has been your colleague for almost 4 years, is that right?”</p> <p>Complainant D: “Yes.”</p> <p>Defence: “And how long do you say the harassment has lasted?”</p> <p>Complainant D: “Three years.”</p> <p>Defence: “Can you tell us the exact nature of this harassment?”</p> <p>Complainant D: “Yes, well, it has a lot to do with inappropriate remarks and glances. You’d think the finesse with which he speaks, he’s <b>very polite</b>, but he’s <b>a manipulative harasser</b>. It’s a normal conversation until <b>without warning</b>, it turns into ‘let me guess your bra size’ or ‘I’ll show you how to do that’ with a nasty voice intonation and a wink. You would think women <b>can survive such misogynistic comments because we get them so often</b>, but we are at a point where this needs to stop. It is not harmless, and it is not invited. I think I speak for <b>most</b> women when I say that our ‘No’ needs to <b>start having meaning</b>.”</p> <p>Defence: “Although that was quite a moving speech, it answers none of the questions. Especially the one of, why wait 3 years and endure it, if you felt this strongly about it?”</p>
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5. Male, Sexual Assault	
Hyperbolic	Complainant E is a 22-year-old male alleging sexual assault. The following is an extract from a hypothetical conversation between the

complainant and police authorities. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.

Complainant E: "I'm an actor in the porn industry. Last Friday, I was at a shoot and something happened there that I thought was inappropriate and would like to report."

P/O: "Porn star? Right, grab a chair and begin with providing a detailed account."

Complainant E: "It was one of those dominatrix themed shoots, a short advert type video for a company that specialises in bondage equipment. It's a great opportunity for a **baby** like me in the industry, I was **dead** chuffed. Now I might not be seasoned, but I've done a **thousand** shoots before, to know that the terms are agreed beforehand, so nothing really happens 'in the moment', so to say. Everything is going according to plan, and the actress that I'm working with – **massive** name, by the way – decides to take things into her own hands. Now if there's anything I won't do, it's oral sex. This woman, hurls herself at me. Forces me to perform oral sex on her, and the nature of the video is inherently dominant. I'm **terrified** because firstly, it wasn't planned, so I wasn't expecting it; secondly, she's a **huge, huge, huge** star who is, as she explains it, 'improvising'. I was struggling to keep up, and nobody said 'cut'. My literal assault on screen, somehow made that video all the more authentic. I'm **nobody** compared to her, so I'm expendable. I don't care what anybody thinks, really, this is openly recorded and supported sexual assault.



Non-Hyperbolic	<p>Complainant E is a 22-year-old male alleging sexual assault. The following is an extract from a hypothetical conversation between the complainant and police authorities. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.</p> <p>Complainant E: “I’m an actor in the porn industry. Last Friday, I was at a shoot and something happened there that I thought was inappropriate and would like to report.”</p> <p>P/O: “Porn star? Right, grab a chair and begin with providing a detailed account.”</p> <p>Complainant E: “It was one of those dominatrix themed shoots, a short advert type video for a company that specialises in bondage equipment. It’s a great opportunity for a <b>new addition</b> like me in the industry, I was chuffed. Now I might not be seasoned, but I’ve done <b>my share</b> of shoots before, to know that the terms are agreed beforehand, so nothing really happens ‘in the moment’, so to say. Everything is going according to plan, and the actress that I’m working with – <b>popular</b> name, by the way – decides to take things into her own hands. Now if there’s anything I won’t do, it’s oral sex. This woman, hurls herself at me. Forces me to perform oral sex on her, and the nature of the video is inherently dominant. I’m <b>scared</b> because firstly, it wasn’t planned, so I wasn’t expecting it; secondly, she’s a <b>very popular</b> star who is, as she explains it, ‘improvising’. I was struggling to keep up, and nobody said ‘cut’. My literal assault on screen, somehow made that video all the more authentic. I <b>can’t be</b></p>
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	<p>compared to her, so I'm expendable. I don't care what anybody thinks, really, this is openly recorded and supported sexual assault.</p>
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6. Female, Sexual Assault	
Hyperbolic	<p>Complainant F is a 29-year-old female alleging sexual assault. The following is an extract from a hypothetical court statement. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.</p> <p>Defence: "Would you please tell the court how long you and my client have been married?"</p> <p>Complainant F: "Four years."</p> <p>Defence: "And in those four years, has he ever assaulted you in any way?"</p> <p>Complainant F: "He...it has happened <b>countless</b> times that he would continue to make sexual advances until I comply."</p> <p>Defence: "So, you comply? That is consent. Has he ever hurt you? Laid a hand on you?"</p> <p>Complainant F: "No, but should I have waited till the court could see my body bruised in the <b>worst</b> possible way?"</p> <p>Defence: "So, it is safe to say, that when you complied with my client's sexual advances, you were not afraid of him physically harming you in any way."</p> <p>Complainant F: "I was indeed afraid of the <b>loaded gun that society holds to the heads of lonely, divorced women.</b>"</p>

	<p>Defence: “Why did you decide to make a sexual assault complaint after all this time?”</p> <p>Complainant F: “Why is <b>every second word</b> out of your mouth said to discredit me? Last time I checked, I wasn’t on trial.”</p> <p>Defence: “Please answer the question.”</p> <p>Complainant F: “Because I have had enough. <b>Really, totally, absolutely</b> done with being treated like a sex doll. He used to try and convince me. Now he’s stopped trying. He makes decisions for my body. What’s next? Being slapped into submission? You and I have to decide the limit to this <b>limitless</b> humiliation women are put through. I’m here today, but what about the women before me? Who can say he hasn’t done this to a <b>hundred</b> other women before me? And that he won’t do it again?”</p>
Non-Hyperbolic	<p>Complainant F is a 29-year-old female alleging sexual assault. The following is an extract from a hypothetical court statement. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.</p> <p>Defence: “Would you please tell the court how long you and my client have been married?”</p> <p>Complainant F: “Four years.”</p> <p>Defence: “And in those four years, has he ever assaulted you in any way?”</p> <p>Complainant F: “He...it has happened <b>multiple</b> times that he would continue to make sexual advances until I comply.”</p>

Defence: “So, you comply? That is consent. Has he ever hurt you? Laid a hand on you?”

Complainant F: “No, but should I have waited till the court could see my body bruised in a **bad** way?”

Defence: “So, it is safe to say, that when you complied with my client’s sexual advances, you were not afraid of him physically harming you in any way.”

Complainant F: “I was indeed afraid of the **societal judgement of lonely, divorced women.**”

Defence: “Why did you decide to make a sexual assault complaint after all this time?”

Complainant F: “Why are **most of the words** out of your mouth said to discredit me? Last time I checked, I wasn’t on trial.”

Defence: “Please answer the question.”

Complainant F: “Because I have had enough. **Absolutely** done with being treated like a sex doll. He used to try and convince me. Now he’s stopped trying. He makes decisions for my body. What’s next? Being slapped into submission? You and I have to decide the limit to this humiliation women are put through. I’m here today, but what about the women before me? Who can say he hasn’t done this to other women before me? And that he won’t do it again?”

Hyperbolic	<p>Complainant G is a 22-year-old male alleging sexual harassment. The following is an extract from a hypothetical court statement. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.</p> <p>Prosecution: “Can you tell us how when and where the pictures were taken?”</p> <p>Complainant G: “I was at a party thrown by a close friend, when I got a little carried away with drinking. Actually, I <b>got carried away like hell</b>. And that <b>never, ever</b> happens. <b>Thousand times out of a hundred</b>, I can hold my liquor. Why would I drink otherwise? I think I passed out at the party. When I woke up the next morning, I was still at my friend’s house, and I was naked, and I had, just like, just. Like, absolutely disgusting things written all over me. In permanent ink. I was too hungover, so I just went home, I cannot clearly remember. Just thought it was <b>weird as hell</b> that I was naked. For a <b>second</b> I thought in my drunken state, I had assaulted some girl. That I was the one who hadn’t got consent. That’s when the notifications came <b>like an avalanche</b>. I had been tagged in a picture on facebook, posted from an anonymous account. It was a naked picture of me, passed out, with my head in the toilet bowl. Now I agree I shouldn’t have been that drunk in the first place. But guys don’t get into situations like that?! Nobody’s interested in taking pictures of us. I didn’t think in a <b>million</b> years, that I would be exposed and, and just treated like this at a party full of people I was friends with?! This picture has ruined my life, my lecturers have seen it, my employer has now fired me, and it has had adverse effects on my mental health.”</p>
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Non-Hyperbolic	<p>Complainant G is a 22-year-old male alleging sexual harassment. The following is an extract from a hypothetical court statement. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.</p> <p>Prosecution: “Can you tell us how when and where the pictures were taken?”</p> <p>Complainant G: “I was at a party thrown by a close friend, when I got a little carried away with drinking. Actually, I <b>got quite carried away</b>. And that <b>doesn’t usually</b> happen. I can <b>always</b> hold my liquor. Why would I drink otherwise? I think I passed out at the party. When I woke up the next morning, I was still at my friend’s house, and I was naked, and I had, just like, just. Like, absolutely disgusting things written all over me. In permanent ink. I was too hungover, so I just went home, I cannot clearly remember. Just thought it was very <b>weird</b> that I was naked. For a <b>few moments</b> I thought in my drunken state, I had assaulted some girl. That I was the one who hadn’t got consent. That’s when the notifications came <b>one after the other</b>. I had been tagged in a picture on Facebook, posted from an anonymous account. It was a naked picture of me, passed out, with my head in the toilet bowl. Now I agree I shouldn’t have been that drunk in the first place. But guys don’t get into situations like that?! Nobody’s interested in taking pictures of us. I didn’t <b>ever</b> think, that I would be exposed and, and just treated like this at a party full of people I was friends with?! This picture has ruined my life, my lecturers have seen it, my employer has now fired me, and it has had adverse effects on my mental health.”</p>
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8. Female, Sexual Harassment	
Hyperbolic	<p>Complainant H is an 18-year-old female alleging sexual harassment.</p> <p>The following is an extract from a hypothetical conversation between the complainant and police authorities. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.</p> <p>Complainant H: “I would like to report stalking and cyber harassment. I have been getting these <b>outrageous</b> and offensive text messages from this individual.”</p> <p>P/O: “How many a day do you get? And do you know this individual?”</p> <p>Complainant H: “No, I have never seen that number before in my life. And I get like, a <b>million</b> a day. <b>They just keep coming. It’s like this person has nothing else to do.</b>”</p> <p>P/O: “What is usually the nature of these messages?”</p> <p>Complainant H: “Well, it varies. It changes <b>dramatically</b> from images of a penis, to sometimes texts describing sexual acts involving me. I’m <b>terrified</b> it might be someone I know. I’ve blocked several numbers and I just keep receiving similar texts and messages from different numbers. It’s probably just someone with a <b>shit ton</b> of free time, but if they know me, they could be following me; and that’s what makes me uncomfortable.”</p>
Non-Hyperbolic	<p>Complainant H is an 18-year-old female alleging sexual harassment.</p> <p>The following is an extract from a hypothetical conversation between the victim and police authorities. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.</p>

	<p>Complainant H: “I would like to report stalking and cyber harassment. I have been getting these <b>dirty</b> and offensive text messages from this individual.”</p> <p>P/O: “How many a day do you get? And do you know this individual?”</p> <p>Complainant H: “No, I have never seen that number before in my life. And I get like, <b>about 20</b> a day. <b>I receive them quite frequently. It’s like this person has barely anything else to do.</b>”</p> <p>P/O: “What is usually the nature of these messages?”</p> <p>Complainant H: “Well, it varies. It changes from images of a penis, to sometimes texts describing sexual acts involving me. I’m <b>afraid</b> it might be someone I know. I’ve blocked several numbers and I just keep receiving similar texts and messages from different numbers. It’s probably just someone with a <b>substantial amount</b> of free time, but if they know me, they could be following me; and that’s what makes me uncomfortable.”</p>
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9. Male, Sexual Assault	
Hyperbolic	<p>Complainant I is a 48-year-old male and an alleged victim of sexual assault. The following is an extract from a hypothetical court statement. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.</p> <p>Complainant I: “So yes, this is my statement. I...must’ve have been about 12. Not yet a teenager. My brother, the defendant, would be 16 then, and he sexually assaulted me. It was around 2pm in the afternoon as I was changing out of my school clothes, my brother came into my room, provided <b>zero</b> explanation and stuck his tongue down my throat. I was <b>repulsed, disgusted,</b></p>



	<p><b>shocked, terrified;</b> so, I did nothing about it. He began to fondle my genitals. I was extremely uncomfortable, but also <b>numb</b> and mechanic. I can also remember being disgusted with myself, instead of him. A month ago, my 10-year-old son came back from his uncle’s house and decided to show me the ‘game’ he had been playing with his uncle. I think <b>I just stopped breathing.</b> I kept quiet and I led my son into the same trauma-trap. <b>All I can feel is guilt and shame.</b> It happened to me once, after which I threatened to tell our parents. He backed off after that, but the words he said echo in my head <b>every single day.</b> Sometimes <b>every moment of every day.</b> He said, “all brothers do it, it’s called practicing.”</p>
Non-Hyperbolic	<p>Complainant I is a 48-year-old male and an alleged victim of sexual assault. The following is an extract from a hypothetical court statement. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.</p> <p>Victim I: “So yes, this is my statement. I...must’ve have been about 12. Not yet a teenager. My brother, the defendant, would be 16 then, and he sexually assaulted me. It was around 2pm in the afternoon as I was changing out of my school clothes, my brother came into my room, provided <b>barely any</b> explanation and stuck his tongue down my throat. I was <b>shocked and disgusted;</b> so, I did nothing about it. He began to fondle my genitals. I was extremely uncomfortable, but also <b>unable to retaliate</b> and mechanic. I can also remember being disgusted with myself, instead of him. A month ago, my 10-year-old son came back from his uncle’s house and decided to show me the ‘game’ he had been playing with his uncle. I think <b>I had a hard time believing</b></p>

	<p><b>it had happened again.</b> I kept quiet and I led my son into the same trauma-trap. <b>I am ashamed and I feel guilty.</b> It happened to me once, after which I threatened to tell our parents. He backed off after that, but the words he said echo in my head <b>quite often.</b> Sometimes <b>multiple times a day.</b> He said, “all brothers do it, it’s called practicing.”</p>
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10. Female, Sexual Assault	
Hyperbolic	<p>Complainant J is a 21-year-old female alleging sexual assault. The following is an extract from a hypothetical conversation between the complainant and a police authority. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.</p> <p>Complainant J: “Can I report a rape?”</p> <p>P/O: “Please start with what happened and when.”</p> <p>Complainant J: “Um. It happened last month. There’s this guy I used to hang out with. I only met him a few months ago...he lived in the same flat. It was uni halls, so you don’t always know them all beforehand. <b>Weird as hell,</b> but so was I, so it was, like, I felt kinship. We were coming back after a night of drinking, and he just, like, pulled me in an alley and just raped me. I don’t know what else to say, I’m <b>fucking devastated.</b>”</p> <p>P/O: “Did you say it happened a month ago? Why did you decide not to report it earlier? Unfortunately, we have lost a lot of important forensic evidence and might not be able to build as strong of a case as we may have wanted.”</p>

	<p>Complainant J: “I have a lot of friends and they like, well, they told me <b>100 times</b> he’s a <b>terrible</b> dude, <b>creepy as hell</b>, told me not to hang out with him and I did anyway. Sometimes your brain just like, <b>freezes</b> and you do stupid shit. So I felt like, maybe, I don’t know, I deserved this. I’m still trying to get used to this whole feminism thing, and not blaming myself for <b>literally everything.</b>”</p>
Non-Hyperbolic	<p>Complainant J is a 21-year-old female alleging sexual assault. The following is an extract from a hypothetical conversation between the complainant and a police authority. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.</p> <p>Complainant J: “Can I report a rape?”</p> <p>P/O: “Please start with what happened and when.”</p> <p>Complainant J: “Um. It happened last month. There’s this guy I used to hang out with. I only met him a few months ago...he lived in the same flat. It was uni halls, so you don’t always know them all beforehand. <b>Slightly unconventional</b>, but so was I, so it was, like, I felt kinship. We were coming back after a night of drinking, and he just, like, pulled me in an alley and just raped me. I don’t know what else to say, I’m <b>fucking down.</b>”</p> <p>P/O: “Did you say it happened a month ago? Why did you decide not to report it earlier? Unfortunately, we have lost a lot of important forensic evidence and might not be able to build as strong of a case as we may have wanted.”</p>

	<p>Complainant J: “I have a lot of friends and they like, well, they told me <b>on multiple occasions</b>, he’s a <b>bad</b> dude, <b>creepy</b>, told me not to hang out with him and I did anyway. Sometimes your brain just like, <b>walks you into doing</b> stupid shit. So I felt like, maybe, I don’t know, I deserved this. I’m still trying to get used to this whole feminism thing, and not blaming myself for <b>this</b>.”</p>
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11. Male, Sexual Harassment	
Hyperbolic	<p>Complainant K is a 34-year-old male alleging sexual harassment. The following is an extract from a hypothetical conversation between the complainant and police authorities. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.</p> <p>Complainant K: “So, I’m here to make a formal complaint against my boss. She...well, let me start at the beginning. Last year, she gave me a promotion that I wasn’t really expecting. I had been struggling financially <b>for ages</b>, so this was a good surprise. Fast forward one month...that’s how long it took for her to start harassing me. It was like, giving me the promotion gave her the <b>ultimate power over everything I ever did</b>. She started saying things like she hoped that I would keep satisfying the company, and her, the same way I had before. She began to invite me to her home after hours to submit papers that could’ve been passed on at the office. She’s my boss and she could easily fire me or demote me, but I don’t care, I’ll sit in front of her, and point my finger at her, I don’t give a shit.”</p>

	<p>P/O: “Well, we’ve got a statement from your boss as well, and while I’m not saying your version is inaccurate, her statement mentions you indulging in harassing behaviour because you assumed she was interested as a result of her giving you this promotion.”</p> <p>Complainant K: “Well, obviously the two statements are going to be <b>180 degrees</b>, aren’t they? But I’m the one that’s got something to lose, <b>really something</b>. You think about it. I’m a married man, being married to my wife is almost <b>the first coherent memory I have</b>, that’s how long I’ve been married. I just got a promotion. Why would I ruin it, is the question. There’s no reason for me to lie, is there. <b>None. Absolutely none</b>. I know how unusual this is. You probably get <b>a million</b> cases of women getting harassed and then there’s me, but I’m here because <b>everything</b> is jeopardised. You try to do the right thing, but you’re a man, aren’t you, so you don’t get taken seriously by the system. Hell, maybe I should just enjoy it.”</p>
Non-Hyperbolic	<p>Complainant K is a 34-year-old male alleging sexual harassment. The following is an extract from a hypothetical conversation between the complainant and police authorities. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.</p> <p>Complainant K: “So, I’m here to make a formal complaint against my boss. She...well, let me start at the beginning. Last year, she gave me a promotion that I wasn’t really expecting. I had been struggling financially <b>for a long time</b>, so this was a good surprise. Fast forward one month...that’s how long it took for her to start harassing me. It was like, giving me the promotion</p>

gave her **an authority over me**. She started saying things like she hoped that I would keep satisfying the company, and her, the same way I had before. She began to invite me to her home after hours to submit papers that could've been passed on at the office. She's my boss and she could easily fire me or demote me, but I don't care, I'll sit in front of her, and point my finger at her, I don't give a shit."

P/O: "Well, we've got a statement from your boss as well, and while I'm not saying your version is inaccurate, her statement mentions you indulging in harassing behaviour because you assumed she was interested as a result of her giving you this promotion."

Complainant K: "Well, obviously the two statements are going to be **different**, aren't they? But I'm the one that's got something to lose, **really**. You think about it. I'm a married man, being married to my wife is **one of the earliest memories I have**, that's how long I've been married. I just got a promotion. Why would I ruin it, is the question. There's no reason for me to lie, is there. I know how unusual this is. You probably get **numerous** cases of women getting harassed and then there's me, but I'm here because **my job and home** are jeopardised. You try to do the right thing, but you're a man, aren't you, so you don't get taken seriously by the system. Hell, maybe I should just enjoy it."

Hyperbolic	<p>Complainant L is a 31-year-old female alleging sexual harassment. The following is an extract from a hypothetical court statement. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.</p> <p>Defence: “Can you please state for the court, the nature of your profession, and your relationship with my client?”</p> <p>Complainant L: “I’m a dancer and choreographer by profession. The defendant used to be my teacher, and recently we have been working as partners choreographing together for plays, movies, TV shows and stuff.”</p> <p>Defence: “Would you say, you and my client are close?”</p> <p>Complainant L: “Close? I’d say we have a professional working relationship.”</p> <p>Defence: “Would you perform partnered dances with my client, ones that required him to touch you, lift you, and did you often choreograph such dances yourself?”</p> <p>Complainant L: “If my profession as a choreographer required me to, yes.”</p> <p>Defence: “And now you are alleging that he harassed you during one such dance sequence?”</p> <p>Complainant L: “Yes, yes I am. He was at a rehearsal he wasn’t supposed to be at. It was my choreography, I was teaching it. He came into the studio and just sat there. He’s done that <b>hundreds</b> of times before, <b>so I couldn’t care less</b>. At first. He then started moving <b>closer and closer and closer</b>. He then came and stood right next to me, in the middle of the song, and</p>
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	<p>started pushing me around, shoving me, saying I wasn't doing it right, and that he would teach me how to dance. I said nothing then, but I complained to the owner of the studio afterwards. I must've gone on for <b>ages</b> about how humiliating it was. The owner said she couldn't do anything as our company was a third party that she had hired, and it was our own personal matter. I had <b>no interest, absolutely none</b>, in confronting him about it, but I still went ahead and met up with him next day, explaining that I was no longer a young girl and that his behaviour was unacceptable. When I went into the studio the day after, he was already there. Had been there for ages, with MY students, and had changed the routine to include a partner. He said the solo routine was boring and that he'd included some steps that I'd have to perform with him. It was like, a license to harass. <b>Like a kick to my soul, my dignity and the power I had asserted as a woman who felt perturbed.</b> The new routine involved him touching me inappropriately, and he felt he had a legitimate way to harass me now.”</p>
<p>Non-Hyperbolic</p>	<p>Complainant L is a 31-year-old female alleging sexual harassment. The following is an extract from a hypothetical court statement. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.</p> <p>Defence: “Can you please state for the court, the nature of your profession, and your relationship with my client?”</p> <p>Complainant L: “I’m a dancer and choreographer by profession. The defendant used to be my teacher, and recently we have been working as partners choreographing together for plays, movies, TV shows and stuff.”</p>



Defence: “Would you say, you and my client are close?”

Complainant L: “Close? I’d say we have a professional working relationship.”

Defence: “Would you perform partnered dances with my client, ones that required him to touch you, lift you, and did you often choreograph such dances yourself?”

Complainant L: “If my profession as a choreographer required me to, yes.”

Defence: “And now you are alleging that he harassed you during one such dance sequence?”

Complainant L: “Yes, yes I am. He was at a rehearsal he wasn’t supposed to be at. It was my choreography, I was teaching it. He came into the studio and just sat there. He’s done that before, **so I didn’t think about it much**. At first. He then started moving **closer**. He then came and stood right next to me, in the middle of the song, and started pushing me around, shoving me, saying I wasn’t doing it right, and that he would teach me how to dance. I said nothing then, but I complained to the owner of the studio afterwards. I must’ve gone on for **about 45 minutes** about how humiliating it was. The owner said she couldn’t do anything as our company was a third party that she had hired, and it was our own personal matter. I had **no interest** in confronting him about it, but I still went ahead and met up with him next day, explaining that I was no longer a young girl and that his behaviour was unacceptable. When I went into the studio the day after, he was already there. Had been there

	<p>for ages, with MY students, and had changed the routine to include a partner. He said the solo routine was boring and that he'd included some steps that I'd have to perform with him. It was like, a license to harass. <b>Just a way to disrespect the dignity and power I had asserted.</b> The new routine involved him touching me inappropriately, and he felt he had a legitimate way to harass me now."</p>
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13. Male, Sexual Assault	
Hyperbolic	<p>Complainant M is a 24-year-old male alleging sexual assault. The following is an extract from a hypothetical conversation between the complainant and police authorities. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.</p> <p>Complainant M: "I'm a student. I work behind the bar at a gay club part-time. Last night, a <b>horde</b> of straight men came into the club looking for straight girls who might have gone with their gay friends. They were constantly at the bar, getting drinks, trying to talk to different girls who came up and just making themselves look like <b>colossal</b> assholes. I just ignored them, usually they're harmless and just misinformed. I left when the club closed at 3am, and these guys were apparently walking the same way as I was. Right behind me. And that's when it <b>all went down</b>. They were clearly up the wall about not finding girls so they <b>took it all out</b> on me. They were only yelling things at first, but then one of them <b>flew</b> up behind me, and tried to grab my...well my behind. I smacked him away and started walking quicker. I've <b>never ever</b> been in such a</p>

	<p>threatening situation. The other three at that point, just came over, circled me and started touching me inappropriately, saying things like “you’re gay, you should enjoy this. Are you having fun?” Just the <b>most terrifying</b> situation. I was trying to get out of this <b>circle of homophobia and death</b>, when a car drove by and they – <b>within a split second</b> – backed off. I keep thinking like, what if that car didn’t drive by? And these guys <b>just ate me alive</b>? What then?”</p>
<p>Non-Hyperbolic</p>	<p>Complainant M is a 24-year-old male alleging sexual assault. The following is an extract from a hypothetical conversation between the complainant and police authorities. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.</p> <p>Complainant M: “I’m a student. I work behind the bar at a gay club part-time. Last night, a <b>group</b> of straight men came into the club looking for straight girls who might have gone with their gay friends. They were constantly at the bar, getting drinks, trying to talk to different girls who came up and just making themselves look like <b>just</b>, assholes. I just ignored them, usually they’re harmless and just misinformed. I left when the club closed at 3am, and these guys were apparently walking the same way as I was. Right behind me. And that’s when it <b>happened</b>. They were clearly up the wall about not finding girls so they <b>took it out</b> on me. They were only yelling things at first, but then one of them <b>came up</b> behind me, and tried to grab my...well my behind. I smacked him away and started walking quicker. I’ve <b>never</b> been in such a threatening situation. The other three at that point, just came over, circled me and started touching me inappropriately, saying things like “you’re gay, you should enjoy</p>

	<p>this. Are you having fun?” Just a <b>frightening</b> situation. I was trying to get out of this <b>homophobic and threatening situation</b> when a car drove by and they – <b>within seconds</b> – backed off. I keep thinking like, what if that car didn’t drive by? And these guys <b>assaulted me</b>? What then?”</p>
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14. Female, Sexual Assault	
Hyperbolic	<p>Complainant N is an 18-year-old female alleging sexual assault. The following is an extract from a hypothetical court statement. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.</p> <p>Defence: “Can you please state for the court your age and the nature of your acquaintance with this man here, the defendant?”</p> <p>Complainant N: “I’m 18. I met him at a bar. He offered to buy me a pack of cigarettes in return for a blowjob. So, I’d say the nature is physical.”</p> <p>Defence: “So, you’re 18. At a bar that serves alcohol – which you were probably drinking – and you voluntarily engage in oral sex with a man in return for some cigarettes.”</p> <p>Complainant N: “I’ll do it for some drink or weed too. I have done that in the past. Blowjobs are fuckin’ easy. Like, <b>easier than breathing</b> and you don’t even have to tell yourself to do that. If you’re good, you’re at it for <b>literally no time</b>, and you get a pack of fags. Or like a bottle of vodka. But this guy...he’s a dickhead isn’t he. He took me home, did what I had promised, and not only did he not repay me, he then pounced on me for sex, kept me there for three bloody days that <b>felt like a lifetime</b>. He made sure he fucked me <b>in every</b></p>

	<p><b>inch</b> of that house. I've bled on <b>everything</b> he owns by now. Gave me his shirt to wear and scrubbed me down after in his <b>ant-sized bathroom</b>. <b>Sure as hell</b> though, you can't get away from that DNA stuff they found in his house. You should only try some things if you're smart, or I'll get smarter and ruin your fuckin life. I cried until <b>there were no tears left in me</b>, then I decided to make sure he <b>never</b> sees the sun rise without seeing the bars before it."</p>
Non-Hyperbolic	<p>Complainant N is an 18-year-old female alleging sexual assault. The following is an extract from a hypothetical court statement. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.</p> <p>Defence: "Can you please state for the court your age and the nature of your acquaintance with this man here, the defendant?"</p> <p>Complainant N: "I'm 18. I met him at a bar. He offered to buy me a pack of cigarettes in return for a blowjob. So, I'd say the nature is physical."</p> <p>Defence: "So, you're 18. At a bar that serves alcohol – which you were probably drinking – and you voluntarily engage in oral sex with a man in return for some cigarettes."</p> <p>Complainant N: "I'll do it for some drink or weed too. I have done that in the past. Blowjobs are fuckin' easy. Like, <b>so easy</b>. If you're good, you're at it for <b>such a short time</b>, and you get a pack of fags. Or like a bottle of vodka. But this guy...he's a dickhead isn't he. He took me home, did what I had promised, and not only did he not repay me, he then pounced on me for sex, kept me there for three bloody days that <b>felt longer</b>. He made sure he fucked me <b>in different places</b> in that house. I've bled on <b>so much of what</b> he owns by now. Gave me</p>

	<p>his shirt to wear and scrubbed me down after in his <b>small bathroom. Surely</b> though, you can't get away from that DNA stuff they found in his house. You should only try some things if you're smart, or I'll get smarter and ruin your fuckin life. I cried <b>a lot for the first few days</b>, then I decided to make sure he <b>won't</b> see the sun rise without seeing the bars before it <b>for a good 7-10 years.</b>"</p>
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15. Male, Sexual Harassment	
Hyperbolic	<p>Complainant O is a 19-year-old male alleging sexual harassment. The following is an extract from a hypothetical court statement. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.</p> <p>Defence: "What is your relationship with the defendant here?"</p> <p>Complainant O: "He is my piano teacher."</p> <p>Defence: "And how long have you known him?"</p> <p>Complainant O: "Like, 12 years. Since I was 7, and I'm 19 now. So yeah."</p> <p>Defence: "And what do you say occurred in your version of events, that night on December 4<sup>th</sup>?"</p> <p>Complainant O: "He personally tutors me. Sometimes we sit and play the piano without any notes, <b>nothing binding us</b>, just enjoying the music, really. That evening, after my session, he asked me to walk him to the park for a stroll. He's old, so he often needs help going places. It was dark outside, so I found it weird, but I took him anyway. He didn't take his cane, and he <b>always, always</b> takes his cane so that was weird too. He said he would lean on me</p>

	<p>instead. I...didn't think anything of it. We were walking through the park for <b>ages</b> and he kept leaning on me, then started stroking my back, saying how I was a good student. He then said I was beautiful. That <b>creeped me the hell out</b>. I just left him there and started to walk away. I could feel my <b>insides crumbling</b>, and <b>I could hear, like, my heart just thumping, wanting to jump out of my body. I wanted to die</b>. I wanted it to never happen. I wanted to respect him. <b>I haven't been able to look at him since then</b>. He's disgusting. I was like a bloody son!"</p>
Non-Hyperbolic	<p>Complainant O is a 19-year-old male alleging sexual harassment. The following is an extract from a hypothetical court statement. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.</p> <p>Defence: "What is your relationship with the defendant here?"</p> <p>Complainant O: "He is my piano teacher."</p> <p>Defence: "And how long have you known him?"</p> <p>Complainant O: "Like, 12 years. Since I was 7, and I'm 19 now. So yeah."</p> <p>Defence: "And what do you say occurred in your version of events, that night on December 4<sup>th</sup>?"</p> <p>Complainant O: "He personally tutors me. Sometimes we sit and play the piano without any notes, <b>feeling free</b>, just enjoying the music, really. That evening, after my session, he asked me to walk him to the park for a stroll. He's old, so he often needs help going places. It was dark outside, so I found it weird, but I took him anyway. He didn't take his cane, and he <b>always</b> takes his cane so</p>

	<p>that was weird too. He said he would lean on me instead. I...didn't think anything of it. We were walking through the park for <b>a long time, all while</b> he kept leaning on me, then started stroking my back, saying how I was a good student. He then said I was beautiful. That <b>creeped me out</b>. I just left him there and started to walk away. I could feel myself <b>feeling dejected</b>, and <b>my heart was beating very fast. I wanted to...not believe it</b>. I wanted it to never happen. I wanted to respect him. <b>I haven't been able to look at him the same since then</b>. He's disgusting. I was like a bloody son!"</p>
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16. Female, Sexual Harassment	
Hyperbolic	<p>Complainant P is a 26-year-old female alleging sexual harassment. The following is an extract from a hypothetical conversation between the complainant and police authorities. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.</p> <p>Complainant P: "I'm an escort. I started escorting to pay through university, but I do it because I enjoy it now. Three months ago, I got a new client, I met up with him, he wanted the normal girlfriend experience...took me out to dinner in a <b>dead</b> fancy restaurant, <b>hours and hours</b> of me listening to him talk about his <b>torturously monotonous</b> life, came back to a hotel room and just wanted to cuddle. I met up with him a few times after that and he wanted the same thing every time. Some of these guys are just lonely. It always happens though, they get carried away and treat this less like a business transaction and more like the real thing. He started turning up to my flat without</p>



	<p>booking an appointment. He added my personal Facebook account and tried to follow me on my Instagram too! I explained to him <b>over and over and over again</b>; he needed to stop this behaviour and that I wasn't his girlfriend. But now he's been stalking me! He's <b>everywhere</b> I look. Cafes, bars, supermarkets. I thought he was just a harmless little guy, but it's starting to get creepy now, y'know? I'm lucky my apartment building has <b>the best</b> security, or he'd be in my house waiting for me <b>every</b> evening. I'm not sure if I want to press charges, but I feel quite irked, so I had to make a complaint.”</p>
<p>Non-Hyperbolic</p>	<p>Complainant P is a 26-year-old female alleging sexual harassment. The following is an extract from a hypothetical conversation between the complainant and police authorities. Please read this carefully, and then answer the questions that follow.</p> <p>Complainant P: “I'm an escort. I started escorting to pay through university, but I do it because I enjoy it now. Three months ago, I got a new client, I met up with him, he wanted the normal girlfriend experience...took me out to dinner in a <b>proper</b> fancy restaurant, <b>hours</b> of me listening to him talk about his <b>boring, monotonous</b> life, came back to a hotel room and just wanted to cuddle. I met up with him a few times after that and he wanted the same thing every time. Some of these guys are just lonely. It always happens though, they get carried away and treat this less like a business transaction and more like the real thing. He started turning up to my flat without booking an appointment. He added my personal Facebook account and tried to follow me on my Instagram too! I explained to him <b>on three different occasions</b>; he needed to stop this</p>

	<p>behaviour and that I wasn't his girlfriend. But now he's been stalking me! He <b>follows me to a lot of the places I go to</b>. Cafes, bars, supermarkets. I thought he was just a harmless little guy, but it's starting to get creepy now, y'know? I'm lucky my apartment building has <b>good</b> security, or he'd be in my house waiting for me <b>in the</b> evening. I'm not sure if I want to press charges, but I feel quite irked, so I had to make a complaint."</p>
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## Appendix B: Complete Experimental Materials (Experiment 2)

The levels of hyperbolic inflation and the control phrase are numbered as follows:

1. Literal.
2. Realistic hyperbole
3. Possible but improbable hyperbole
4. Impossible hyperbole

1) Sexual Assault, Unknown Assailant
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<p>I was walking home last night, when a man came up to me and asked for the time. I didn't respond to him, or acknowledge him, and just kept walking. He came up behind me, grabbed hold of my hair and threw me to the ground. He attempted to take off my trousers, but I was kicking and screaming. He then kicked me in the stomach</p>
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- |  |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A lot of times</li> <li>2. Twenty times</li> <li>3. A hundred times</li> <li>4. About a gazillion times</li> </ol> |
|--|

2) Sexual Assault, Unknown Assailant
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<p>I was at a bar last night with a few friends. A guy came up to me, started flirting and kept following me around the bar. I didn't respond to him or acknowledge him, but when I got home, turns out that he'd walked behind me the entire time and followed me home. He jumped out in front of me. I</p>
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- |  |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Was terrified</li> </ol> |
|--|

2. So scared, I stopped breathing
3. Felt life leave me
4. Felt my heart drop to my stomach

He moved towards me and grabbed my waist. He pushed me against a railing and started to grope and kiss me. Outwardly, I did nothing but on the inside I was

1. Chaotic
2. Hysterical
3. Breaking
4. Physically, literally, honestly crumbling

### 3) Sexual Assault, Known Assailant

I have waited

1. A long time
2. Years and years
3. A lifetime
4. A thousand years

To gather up the courage to come forward with my story. My husband was so bad to me the entire time that we were married. He would come home, demand food, and then have sex with me, whether I wanted it, or not. This was

1. Happening so frequently
2. Every day
3. Every hour
4. Every millisecond

in/of my life. If I resisted, he would

1. Beat me a lot
2. Beat me till I almost died
3. Beat the shit out of me
4. Beat me till I disintegrated

, straddle me, then masturbate over me. That kind of sustained abuse makes you feel like it's almost normal and you reach a dangerous level of acceptance.

#### 4) Sexual Assault, Unknown Assailant

After he raped me, my skin-deep wounds passed through their natural healing stage and soon after, there was no evidence of the scar. But to me, that moment is embedded in my memories...and that wound he made, the healing process will probably

1. Take a long time
2. Take a lifetime
3. Transcend my life.
4. Transcend eternity

My soul aches for anyone else that has been through this. It happened

1. Many years ago now, at least 7
2. Years and years and years ago
3. A lifetime ago
4. A million years ago

and I still get flashes of scenes. All these years later, I can still smell the room where it happened. All it takes is

1. One little lingering look
2. one lingering look, one sentence, one expression
3. a minuscule look, a tiny sentence, a micro-expression
4. nothing, absolutely nothing

for every moment of the act to come flooding back to me. It doesn't leave and it haunts me.

#### 5) Sexual Assault, Known Assailant

It began when I was 11. He asked me once to come lie in his bed with him. He then asked me to take off my trousers and said I had to do it if I wanted to live. So I stopped fighting.

1. I tried to stop moving
2. I didn't move a single muscle.
3. I turned into ice.
4. I turned into stone.

He had sex with me. I'm not sure it was traumatic, it was just unpleasant back then.

Thinking about it now, it is

1. Just, bad
2. The worst
3. The worst of the worst
4. An unspeakable level of horrendous

The things he did, I

1. Hadn't heard of anything like that before

2. Didn't think were possible
3. couldn't have ever imagined them.
4. Thought could literally never ever happen.

I...he, would insert...objects? Uh, in me. Like bottles and pencils. That man broke my spirit.

#### 6) Sexual Assault, Known Assailant

I remember being on the phone to a lady from Victim Support and at some point, very chirpily she said "remember, you are not alone"; and I said to her "that's what I've been trying to tell you". She was always there, watching. It gets to you, it drives you into

1. A depressive state
2. This abyss,
3. This black hole,
4. This nothingness,

slowly but surely. Every time I looked at her, my body would react in a way it never had before, it takes

1. A lot of preparation
2. Everything in me to...
3. The energy of a hundred people
4. All the energy in the universe

to speak, to think, even to breathe. I knew though, that once it all passed, there would be

1. No more genuine emotion
2. Just a hollow shell
3. Mere molecules
4. Not a single part

left of me to come out on the other side of all this. And it has happened, look. It's happened.

#### 7) Sexual Assault, Known Assailant

He lived across the street from us when I was younger. I must've been 8 or 9. I was coming back from school and I remember he just asked me to come in for some orange juice. He was nice enough, so I followed. I found out much later though, that he had abused

1. multiple kids in this neighbourhood
2. literally every kid in the neighbourhood
3. literally every kid with a pulse
4. literally every kid that ever lived

I remember I had a glass full of juice in one hand, and he took my other hand and put it over his erect penis. He kind of, like, moved it around. I felt so awkward, that I dropped the glass and it shattered. I think that scared me more than what he was doing, so I just ran out. I'd taken off my shoes, so when I got home and looked at my feet

1. I saw so much blood and glass
2. all I could see was blood and glass
3. I saw a litre of blood and thousands of glass shards



4. I was just floating in a pool of glass and my own blood.

It's crazy to think that I was that scared of breaking his glass, and he could so comfortably break my self-esteem.

#### 8) Sexual Assault, Known/Unknown Assailant/s

My ex-wife...she had a serious drug problem. Anything class A, she was doing it. At the time we were seriously fuckin' tight on money and we both turned tricks... prostitute...to sustain her drug habit. Mostly me. She would take pictures of me and put them up on these websites for

1. Potential customers to see
2. Everyone to see
3. The whole world to see
4. Literally the whole world to see

I thought y'know, I loved her, and I couldn't see her suffer, so I did whatever I could.

Thinking back though, she just used me, didn't she. Used me

1. To feed her habit and lower my self-respect
2. To kill herself with the habit and destroy my self-respect
3. To kill herself with the habit and kill my self-respect
4. To kill herself with the habit and turn my self-respect into dirt

#### 9) Sexual Assault, Unknown Assailant

I never told anybody about it, because the whole time, I was just so damn embarrassed of myself. I could not accept the fact that I was raped by another man. For

1. A long time
2. Ages
3. Years upon years upon years
4. Hundreds of years

After it happened, I kept questioning my sexuality. I thought maybe I was gay because I had an erection and even ejaculated when I was raped. I was

1. Extremely confused
2. Confused as hell
3. Dead confused
4. Confused beyond life

maybe I liked it? I thought I couldn't complain because of that. What would the DNA evidence say? I wasn't dumb, I just wasn't woke.

#### 10) Sexual Assault, Known Assailant

My father was an alcoholic and every time he would come home

5. Drunk on the verge of passing out
6. Drunk enough to cease functioning
7. Drunk to death
8. Obliterated by drink

He would rape my mother and beat her up. It had gone on for long as I could remember, that's just the way it was. He came home one afternoon and my mother wasn't in, only I was. That's when he targeted me. It already all happened

5. So quickly

6. Within seconds
7. Before I could even blink
8. Before I could live or see it

I knew from watching my mother get raped, that you couldn't fight him off. You just lie there and let him get it over with. I guess it was only natural progression from her to me. I'm...I even tried to do some things to speed it up. I remember when he came to his senses that evening and realised what he had done, he

5. Cried a lot
6. Cried and cried and cried
7. Cried until his eyes fell out
8. Cried until there was nothing left of him.

I told him though, I said to him, you can't take back what's happened, I'm done.

#### 11) Sexual Assault, Known Assailant

My uncle used to come visit us when we were younger. He always brought me chocolates. I sat in his lap and he would kiss and cuddle me. And when we were alone in the house, he would take me to the bathroom, sit me in his lap, and kiss and cuddle me. Under my clothes, on my skin, between my legs. I remember

1. I used to scream so loudly
2. I would scream at the top of my lungs
3. My screams could wake the neighbourhood.
4. My screams could be heard from space.

I remember he would wrap his hand around my mouth so tightly. “Shh, shh. Almost done. You are

1. Such a beautiful thing
2. the most beautiful thing
3. the most beautiful thing in the world
4. the most beautiful thing in the history of everything

My doll.” I was nine. I told my mother. She said the same thing. “Shh...don’t tell anybody”. I didn’t tell anybody else.

## 12) Sexual Assault, Unknown Assailant

It’s crazy what some people will do in public and assume it’s acceptable. I was on the bus last week and it was crowded so everyone was standing

1. quite close together
2. interlinked with each other
3. on top of each other
4. literally inside each other

and I felt something going up my thigh. Now I’m used to busy buses, so forwards and backwards – normal movement. What the hell is this up and down thing?! I looked over my shoulder and I see

1. a really unattractive man
2. a man–ugly is an understatement—
3. the ugliest man ever
4. Literally the definition of ugly

He was holding his equally ugly penis and stroking my thigh with it. You better damn believe I turned around and slapped him as hard as I could. He's probably still walking around

1. With a bruise on his face
2. With a four-finger imprint on his face
3. With my finger prints on his face
4. With my palm-imprint on his mind

I might have just saved another girl from public assault by this guy.

### 13) Sexual Assault, Known Assailant

Everyone tells you to be safe when you go out, be vigilant, keep your presence of mind.

1. Most people won't tell you
2. Nobody tells you
3. Not a soul warns you
4. Not a single person has ever told you

About the dangers inside your own home. If the man in the street whistling as you walk by is dangerous, so is the man in your home who comes home and demands sex. My own partner has raped me. I have had times in my life where

1. I was beaten so much
2. I was beaten black and blue
3. I was beaten almost to pulp
4. Beaten to look like a bag of mulberries

## 14) Sexual Harassment, Known Assailant

My ex-girlfriend is

1. Crazy
2. Batshit crazy
3. The craziest person
4. I'm pretty sure literally left her brain somewhere

When we broke up, it was on bad terms, and she would do things to spite me. I just thought of them as petty and ignored her. Last night it took

1. A turn for the worse
2. An evil monster turn
3. The worst turn in history
4. Turned into everyone's worst nightmare.

She posted my address on twitter and all morning I've been getting hateful cards from her girlfriends, I'm assuming, saying shit like 'your dick is small', 'you're shit at sex'. And I mean...that's just not bloody necessary, is it.

## 15) Sexual Harassment, Unknown Assailant

I was walking to the shops, minding my own business. Not doing anything wrong. I was just...and this older guy...a man comes up really close behind me on his bike. And he stopped. I kept walking, so he kept driving behind me

1. Slowly
2. Dead slow

3. At a tortoise pace
4. Slower than a tortoise

For a few paces. I stopped and turned around and gave him a nasty look to say like,

1. Fuck, go away
2. Fuck out of my face
3. Fuck off into space
4. Fuck off somewhere lightyears away from me

And that's when he spat at me. He must have been chewing tobacco or something, because it was like his spit and it was all black, just tobacco out of his mouth. He literally

1. Spat at me
2. Drenched me in his spit
3. Rained his spit on me
4. Bathed me in his spit

Top to bottom. He said, "you shouldn't wear those shorts if you don't want to be spat at" and fucking drove away?! Like, what the actual fuck?

#### 16) Sexual Harassment, Unknown Assailant

1. It takes very little
2. It only takes one thing
3. It takes barely anything
4. It takes nothing

For something like this to happen to you, but it takes over once it happens. I was out for my evening walk in the park. My daughter was in the play area not far from me. I walked over this garden bridge, over a tiny pond. This man jumped out from under the bridge and he was naked from the stomach down. He yelled out something I didn't understand, you know how kids jump out of nowhere and will say 'boo'? And then he started to run away. I tried to run after him but he

1. Was very quick
2. Ran like the wind
3. Was faster than a cheetah
4. Was inhumanly fast

And he got away.

#### 17) Sexual Harassment, Unknown Assailant

I'm traveling alone for a business trip and have been staying at Hotel X. I checked in at the reception like usual and because it was quite late, I just went up to my room and fell asleep. When I woke up this morning and went into my balcony, I

1. Was shocked
2. Shit myself
3. Near enough died
4. Literally died from the fear

The man who checked me in was just standing there, casually. My curtains had been open, so I

1. Don't know



2. Haven't got a clue
3. Absolutely literally have no clue
4. Don't even have an inkling

If he had been staring at me while I was asleep. It was

1. So creepy
2. The creepiest thing that has ever happened in a hotel
3. The creepiest thing ever
4. The creepiest thing that anybody could have ever experienced.

#### 18) Sexual Harassment, Known Assailant

1. Family parties
2. Every family party ever
3. Every family party since I was a foetus
4. Every family party since before I was conceived

Have/has been so uncomfortable. My aunt used to pick me up and pull my cheeks and kiss them

1. , not being gentle at all
2. Like she was incapable of being gentle
3. Like a violent giant
4. Like she was a violent monster

And I was such a small child, nobody saw it as being inappropriate, but it just didn't feel good. She would lift me and hug me so tight, I

1. Had a hard time breathing

2. Just couldn't breathe
3. Was gasping for air the entire time
4. I couldn't breathe again for a year

She still does it. To other kids, to mine. I don't know, it's so rude to say something, maybe her intentions aren't bad, but I remember it felt like

1. A serious invasion of privacy
2. A massive invasion of privacy
3. The biggest ever invasion of privacy
4. Facebook-level invasion of privacy

#### 19) Sexual Harassment, Known Assailant

My next-door neighbour is this 40-something year old man and I mean, I'm not scared of him. But I'm always so anxious of bumping into him. He hasn't ever done something harmful, but he

1. Just keeps making comments at me
2. Constantly comments on me
3. Tirelessly and incessantly makes comments on me
4. Comments on me every second of every day

He'll say things like 'I heard you come back after midnight last night' or 'you shouldn't go out drinking' and they're just absurd and frankly, none of his business.

#### 20) Sexual Harassment, Known Assailant

When people in authority make passes at you, and you aren't in a position to refuse, they

1. Don't know
2. Don't have a single clue
3. Don't know for the life of them
4. Will never, ever, ever be able to know

What it does to a person. I'm not even a particularly shy person, but I have been scared and conscious around the office ever since. Through the glass door right opposite my cubicle, he stares

1. Stares at me
2. Stares and stares and stares
3. Stares till everything else disappears
4. Stares until nothing else exists

And it's so uncomfortable. He never sends emails, or texts, so I don't even have anything against him. But he says things and looks at me weird. And I know this isn't so serious, but the thought behind it, the thought in his mind

1. Makes me want to vomit
2. Makes me vomit every time I think of it
3. Makes me vomit out everything in me
4. Makes me vomit my insides out.

21) Sexual Harassment, Unknown Assailant

I have been getting direct messages on Instagram from this person. He's like an Instagram influencer or something and I'm just

1. A regular person
2. The pinnacle of regular
3. The epitome of normal
4. Nothing, really

He's clearly gay, and I'm married to my wife and have three kids. He first messaged me saying things like 'wow, you're hot' and it felt weird, but I accepted the compliment, and said I was straight. He said that that was okay but then he

1. Continued to message me
2. Constantly messaged me
3. Messaged me every other minute
4. Bombarded me with messages

I stopped responding to him. Now he released an Instagram story explicitly stating my name and saying that I misled him and used him. I don't know what the fuck to do! I am

1. Getting so much hate from his fans
2. Getting a ton of hate from his fans
3. The most hated man right now
4. The most hated man in history

22) Sexual Harassment, Known Assailant

My boyfriend and I are in an open relationship. We can go out and do whatever we want, but at the end of the day, we always come back to each other. Lately he has been wanting a threesome involving me and a stranger. I refused his idea when he first posed it to me, but he

1. Won't quit
2. Never lets it go
3. Holds it over my soul
4. Will probably hold this over my grave.

First it began with trying to convince me incessantly. Now he has started bringing other men home from bars. He makes them wait in the living room, and will come into the bedroom and try to have sex with me. Halfway through, he will go and get the other boy and I'm just

1. Left there fucking shocked
2. Left there fucking devastated
3. Left there fucking crippled
4. Left there fucking dying

All the time. Like where did he even get the idea that this was an acceptable thing to do?

### 23) Sexual Harassment, Known Assailant

I work in social media marketing for a very popular YouTube channel. The office is very casual as we're all 20-somethings and tend to work late rather than early. I've

never had a problem here before, but one of my colleagues has been making passes at me. I refused him on multiple occasions and now

1. He has changed
2. He pulled a 180
3. He has completely changed
4. He has turned into another person

Into this horrible guy who just

1. Says rude things to me
2. All he can say are rude things
3. Says the rudest things ever
4. Says nothing else but rude things

He says things like 'I never liked you anyway, so and so in design is so much prettier than you'.

#### 24) Sexual Harassment, Known Assailant

I have been working as an unpaid intern at this legal firm for about a year now and they recently held interviews for the interns, to decide on which ones would get a permanent position. I was one of the four chosen people. Last week I found the file which had the notes on each intern. I knew I shouldn't look, but

1. It felt like a compulsion
2. It was a compulsion
3. I couldn't stop to save my life
4. I had to look or I'd die.

There were words and phrases against the name of each of us. It said stuff like, 'hardworking, but needs constant direction'; 'not obedient'; 'extremely sharp, good for novel strategizing'. When I got to my own name, I

1. Was so shocked
2. Stopped dead in my tracks
3. Felt colour drain from my face
4. Felt my whole life leave me

It said 'pretty'. That's all it said. It was like...they objectified me. I was treated like I...

1. ...was just objectified
2. I was never a living person
3. I was literally a non-living thing
4. I was literally an object

It's so weird to complain because I shouldn't have been looking, I've still been hired, but how can I work in such an environment and do my job properly?

### Appendix C: Complete Experimental Materials (Experiment 3)

#### 1) Sexual Assault

The following extract is from a hypothetical conversation between a victim of sexual crime, and a legal authority. One word/phrase has been left blank. Please read the extract carefully, and fill in the blank by selecting the phrase that you would use if you were in this situation, and were making the statement yourself. The options are provided below and you can select the phrase by clicking on it.

Prosecution: “Mr. A, please give us a detailed account of the extent of your abuse by your perpetrator”

Victim A: “Um...I will try not to be ambiguous to the best of my abilities; forgive me if I’m not, it has been a long time. It must have started when I was about 3. I used to think I was the luckiest boy in the world, because my father loved me so much. Loved me enough to give me a bath, cleaning parts of my body that I didn’t know existed yet. It only started with inappropriate touching, we never had sex until maybe, I was 8. Loved me to infinity and back, he’d say. Once we started having sex, it didn’t stop. It continued as an endless, eternal trauma and by the time I was 13, I remember being afraid even considering the possibility that this might not be normal. I have a degree in pulling my trousers down and bending over and he never even had to say a word to me.”

Prosecution: “When did it stop?”

Victim A: “When I was 18, I left for university. The frequency...of, well, of the abuse had reduced by then. It wasn’t happening \_\_\_\_\_. Less frequent.”

Prosecution: “It’s difficult for this court to understand why it took you slightly over ten years to report the crime, and come out with your story.”



Victim A: “Is it fucking really? Sorry. Um. Well, for starters I thought it was normal for fathers to ruin your self-image by thrusting himself inside you every time they had an urge. When I found out it wasn’t normal, I knew I had to come out or I’d overthink. After that, I had to gather up the courage to come forward which I didn’t think I had, owing to my negative self-esteem. So yes. That’s why.”	
Hyperbolic Option	every second of my life
Non-Hyperbolic Option	as often in my life

## 2) Sexual Assault

The following extract is from a hypothetical conversation between a victim of sexual crime, and a legal authority. One word/phrase has been left blank. Please read the extract carefully, and fill in the blank by selecting the phrase that you would use if you were in this situation, and were making the statement yourself. The options are provided below and you can select the phrase by clicking on it.

Victim B: “Can I report an assault?”

Police Officer: “Please begin by telling us what happened and where.”

Victim B: “I’m a student. I was walking back home from the university and I lost my presence of mind for just a second. I decided to take the shortcut through a car park on my way. It was 8:23pm, I thought I’d be okay but I didn’t...didn’t know it only took no time for my world to end. I had a bag, so I think I hit him, but it came quickly. Like, he was behind me, put an arm around my neck, and began to choke me. He then put his fingers down my skirt, then tights...I could feel myself disintegrating in his hands, and then tried to take them off, but he couldn’t.

<p>At some moment in that eternity, I think he had his...uh, his...fingers inside me. I can't be sure. Blue backpack, black jeans. He then ran away.</p> <p>_____ . I'm not even being helpful, am I? I make zero sense. Does this make sense?"</p>	
Hyperbolic Option	I don't know anything. I don't know anything, literally nothing.
Non-Hyperbolic Option	I don't know enough. I can't remember enough, really.

### 3) Sexual Harassment

The following extract is from a hypothetical conversation between a victim of sexual crime, and a legal authority. One word/phrase has been left blank. Please read the extract carefully, and fill in the blank by selecting the phrase that you would use if you were in this situation, and were making the statement yourself. The options are provided below and you can select the phrase by clicking on it.

Victim C: "I have to, I mean, it's probably not a big deal, but it'll probably happen to someone else, so I should say something. I'm on the plane. It's late at night, Bombay to London which would take ages anyway, so there's basically not much else to do but sleep. This elderly lady is next to me in the seat, so I say hello, ask her how she's doing and basically just small talk. So, I fall asleep but I wake up to this lady who has her hands on my thigh...under my blanket, moving inwards! That's \_\_\_\_\_. Can you believe that? In front of a plane full of people, too. When I say elderly, I mean, she's old, maybe 50s so I'm literally a foetus compared to her. She had the bloody nerve. And that kind of thing doesn't happen by mistake,

you know, it was deliberate. I'm just really, really, utterly disappointed in myself for not saying something, maybe even just pushing her hand away."

Airport Police: "Alright, well, we've got her in custody, we'll let you know what can be done next once we've got her statement."

Hyperbolic Option	literally unbelievable
Non-Hyperbolic Option	Difficult to believe

#### 4) Sexual Harassment

The following extract is from a hypothetical conversation between a victim of sexual crime, and a legal authority. One word/phrase has been left blank. Please read the extract carefully, and fill in the blank by selecting the phrase that you would use if you were in this situation, and were making the statement yourself. The options are provided below and you can select the phrase by clicking on it.

Defence: "If I understand correctly, Mr. X has been your colleague for almost 4 years, is that right?"

Victim D: "Yes."

Defence: "And how long do you say the harassment has lasted?"

Victim D: "Three years."

Defence: "Can you tell us the exact nature of this harassment?"

Victim D: "Yes, well, it has a lot to do with inappropriate remarks and glances. You'd think the finesse with which he speaks, he's the most polite person in the world, but he's a manipulative harasser. It's a normal conversation until without warning, it turns into 'let me guess your bra size' or 'I'll show you how to do that' with a nasty voice intonation and a wink.

You would think women are built to survive misogynistic hailstones such as these thrown at them every step of their lifetime, but we are at a point where this needs to stop. It is not harmless, and it is not invited. I think I speak for women when I say that our ‘No’ needs to \_\_\_\_\_.”

Hyperbolic Option

stop melting into nothing

Non-Hyperbolic Option

start having meaning

### 5) Sexual Assault

The following extract is from a hypothetical conversation between a victim of sexual crime, and a legal authority. One word/phrase has been left blank. Please read the extract carefully, and fill in the blank by selecting the phrase that you would use if you were in this situation, and were making the statement yourself. The options are provided below and you can select the phrase by clicking on it.

Victim E: “I’m an actor in the adult film industry. Last Friday, I was at a shoot and something happened there that I thought was inappropriate and would like to report.”

Police officer: “Porn star? Begin with providing a detailed account.”

Victim E: “It was one of those dominatrix themed shoots, a short advert video for a company that specialises in bondage equipment. It’s a great opportunity for a new addition like me in the industry, I was dead chuffed. Now I might not be seasoned, but I’ve done a thousand shoots before, to know that the terms are agreed beforehand, so nothing really happens ‘in the moment’, so to say. Everything is going according to plan, and the actress that I’m working with – popular name, by the way – decides to take things into her own hands. Now if there’s anything I won’t do, it’s oral sex. This woman, hurls herself at me. Forces me to perform oral

sex on her, and the nature of the video is inherently dominant. I'm terrified because firstly, it wasn't planned, so I wasn't expecting it; secondly, she's a \_\_\_\_\_ star who is, as she explains it, 'improvising'. I was struggling to keep up, and nobody said 'cut'. My literal assault on screen, somehow made that video all the more authentic. I can't compare to her, so I'm expendable. I don't care what anybody thinks, really, this is openly recorded and supported sexual assault.

Hyperbolic Option	huge, huge, huge
Non-Hyperbolic Option	popular

#### 6) Sexual Assault

The following extract is from a hypothetical conversation between a victim of sexual crime, and a legal authority. One word/phrase has been left blank. Please read the extract carefully, and fill in the blank by selecting the phrase that you would use if you were in this situation, and were making the statement yourself. The options are provided below and you can select the phrase by clicking on it.

Defence: "Would you please tell the court how long you and the defendant have been married?"

Victim F: "Four years."

Defence: "And in those four years, has he ever assaulted you in any way?"

Victim F: "He...it has happened \_\_\_\_\_ times that he would continue to make sexual advances until I comply."

Defence: "So, you comply? That is consent. Has he ever hurt you? Laid a hand on you?"

Victim F: “No, but should I have waited till the court could see my body bruised in the in a bad way?”

Defence: “So, it is safe to say, that when you complied with my client’s sexual advances, you were not afraid of him physically harming you in any way.”

Victim F: “I was indeed afraid of the loaded gun that society holds to the heads of lonely, divorced women.”

Defence: “Why did you decide to make a sexual assault complaint after all this time?”

Victim F: “Why is most of the words out of your mouth said to discredit me? Last time I checked, I wasn’t on trial.”

Defence: “Please answer the question.”

Victim F: “Because I have had enough. Really, totally, absolutely done with being treated like a sex doll. He used to try and convince me. Now he’s stopped trying. He makes decisions for my body. What’s next? Being slapped into submission? You and I have to decide the limit to this humiliation women are put through. I’m here today, but what about the women before me? Who can say he hasn’t done this to a hundred other women before me? And that he won’t do it again?”

Hyperbolic Option	countless
Non-Hyperbolic Option	multiple

### 7) Sexual Harassment

The following extract is from a hypothetical conversation between a victim of sexual crime, and a legal authority. One word/phrase has been left blank. Please read the extract carefully, and fill in the blank by selecting the phrase that you would use if you were in this situation,

and were making the statement yourself. The options are provided below and you can select the phrase by clicking on it.”

Prosecution: “Can you tell us how, when, and where the pictures were taken?”

Victim G: “I was at a party thrown by a close friend, when I got a little carried away with drinking. Actually, I got carried away like hell. And that never, ever happens. I can always hold my liquor. Why would I drink otherwise? I think I passed out at the party. When I woke up the next morning, I was still at my friend’s house, and I was naked, and I had, just like, just. Like, absolutely disgusting things written all over me. In permanent ink. I was too hungover, so I just went home, I cannot clearly remember. Just thought it was weird that I was naked. For a second I thought in my drunken state, I had assaulted some girl. That I was the one who hadn’t got consent. That’s when the notifications came \_\_\_\_\_. I had been tagged in a picture on Facebook, posted from an anonymous account. It was a naked picture of me, passed out, with my head in the toilet bowl. Now I agree I shouldn’t have been that drunk in the first place. But guys don’t get into situations like that?! Nobody’s interested in taking pictures of us. I didn’t ever think, that I would be exposed and, and just treated like this at a party full of people I was friends with?! This picture has ruined my life, my lecturers have seen it, my employer has now fired me, and it has had adverse effects on my mental health.”

Hyperbolic Option	like an avalanche
Non-Hyperbolic Option	one after the other

#### 8) Sexual Harassment

The following extract is from a hypothetical conversation between a victim of sexual crime, and a legal authority. One word/phrase has been left blank. Please read the extract carefully,

and fill in the blank by selecting the phrase that you would use if you were in this situation, and were making the statement yourself. The options are provided below and you can select the phrase by clicking on it.

Victim H: “I would like to report stalking and cyber harassment. I have been getting these dirty and offensive text messages from this individual.”

Police officer: “How many a day do you get? And do you know this individual?”

Victim H: “No, I have never seen that number before in my life. And I get about 20 a day. They just keep coming. It’s like this person has nothing else to do.”

P/O: “What is usually the nature of these messages?”

Victim H: “Well, it varies. It changes...from images of a penis, to sometimes texts describing sexual acts involving me. I’m \_\_\_\_\_ it might be someone I know. I’ve blocked several numbers and I just keep receiving similar texts and messages from different numbers. It’s probably just someone with a shit ton of free time, but if they know me, they could be following me; and that’s what makes me uncomfortable.”

Hyperbolic Option	absolutely terrified
Non-Hyperbolic Option	afraid

### 9) Sexual Assault

The following extract is from a hypothetical conversation between a victim of sexual crime, and a legal authority. One word/phrase has been left blank. Please read the extract carefully, and fill in the blank by selecting the phrase that you would use if you were in this situation, and were making the statement yourself. The options are provided below and you can select the phrase by clicking on it.



Victim I: “So yes, this is my statement. I...must’ve have been about 12. Not yet a teenager. My brother, the defendant, would be 16 then, and he sexually assaulted me. It was around 2pm in the afternoon as I was changing out of my school clothes, my brother came into my room, provided barely any explanation and stuck his tongue down my throat. I was repulsed, disgusted, shocked, terrified; so, I did nothing about it. He began to fondle my genitals. I was extremely uncomfortable, but also unable to retaliate and mechanical. I can also remember being disgusted with myself, instead of him. A month ago, my 10-year-old son came back from his uncle’s house and decided to show me the ‘game’ he had been playing with his uncle. I think I just stopped breathing. I kept quiet and I led my son into the same trauma-trap. \_\_\_\_\_ . It happened to me once, after which I threatened to tell our parents. He backed off after that, but the words he said echo in my head every single day. Sometimes every moment of every day. He said, “all brothers do it, it’s called practicing.”

Hyperbolic Option

All I can feel is guilt and shame.

Non-Hyperbolic Option

I am ashamed and I feel guilty.

#### 10) Sexual Assault

The following extract is from a hypothetical conversation between a victim of sexual crime, and a legal authority. One word/phrase has been left blank. Please read the extract carefully, and fill in the blank by selecting the phrase that you would use if you were in this situation, and were making the statement yourself. The options are provided below and you can select the phrase by clicking on it.

Victim J: “Can I report a rape?”

P/O: “Please start with what happened and when.”

Victim J: “Um. It happened last month. There’s this guy I used to hang out with. I only met him a few months ago...he lived in the same flat. It was uni halls, so you don’t always know them all beforehand. Weird as hell, but so was I, so it was, like, I felt kinship. We were coming back after a night of drinking, and he just, like, pulled me in an alley and just raped me. I don’t know what else to say, I’m fucking upset.”

P/O: “Did you say it happened a month ago? Why did you decide not to report it earlier?”

Unfortunately, we have lost a lot of important forensic evidence and might not be able to build as strong of a case as we may have wanted.”

Victim J: “I have a lot of friends and they like, well, they told me \_\_\_\_\_ he’s a terrible dude, creepy, told me not to hang out with him and I did anyway. Sometimes your brain just - you do stupid shit. So I felt like, maybe, I don’t know, I deserved this. I’m still trying to get used to this whole feminism thing, and not blaming myself for literally everything.”

Hyperbolic Option	100 times
Non-Hyperbolic Option	on multiple occasions

### 11) Sexual Harassment

The following extract is from a hypothetical conversation between a victim of sexual crime, and a legal authority. One word/phrase has been left blank. Please read the extract carefully, and fill in the blank by selecting the phrase that you would use if you were in this situation, and were making the statement yourself. The options are provided below and you can select the phrase by clicking on it.

Victim K: “So, I’m here to make a formal complaint against my boss. She...well, let me start at the beginning. Last year, she gave me a promotion that I wasn’t really expecting. I had been struggling financially for ages, so this was a good surprise. Fast forward one month...that’s how long it took for her to start harassing me. It was like giving me the promotion gave her \_\_\_\_\_ . She started saying things like she hoped that I would keep satisfying the company, and her, the same way I had before. She began to invite me to her home after hours to submit papers that could’ve been passed on at the office. She’s my boss and she could easily fire me or demote me, but I don’t care, I’ll sit in front of her, and point my finger at her, I don’t give a shit.”

P/O: “Well, we’ve got a statement from your boss as well, and while I’m not saying your version is inaccurate, her statement mentions you indulging in harassing behaviour because you assumed she was interested as a result of her giving you this promotion.”

Victim K: “Well, obviously the two statements are going to be different, aren’t they? But I’m the one that’s got something to lose, really something. You think about it. I’m a married man, being married to my wife is almost the first coherent memory I have, that’s how long I’ve been married. I just got a promotion. Why would I ruin it, is the question. There’s no reason for me to lie, is there. I know how unusual this is. You probably get a million cases of women getting harassed and then there’s me, but I’m here because my job and home is jeopardised. You try to do the right thing, but you’re a man, aren’t you, so you don’t get taken seriously by the system. Hell, maybe I should just enjoy it.”

Hyperbolic Option	the ultimate power over everything I ever did
Non-Hyperbolic Option	an authority over me

## 12) Sexual Harassment

The following extract is from a hypothetical conversation between a victim of sexual crime, and a legal authority. One word/phrase has been left blank. Please read the extract carefully, and fill in the blank by selecting the phrase that you would use if you were in this situation, and were making the statement yourself. The options are provided below and you can select the phrase by clicking on it.

Defence: “Can you please state for the court, the nature of your profession, and your relationship with my client?”

Victim L: “I’m a dancer and choreographer by profession. The defendant used to be my teacher, and recently we have been working as partners choreographing together for plays, movies, TV shows and stuff.”

Defence: “Would you say, you and my client are close?”

Victim L: “Close? I’d say we have a professional working relationship.”

Defence: “Would you perform partnered dances with my client, ones that required him to touch you, lift you, and did you often choreograph such dances yourself?”

Victim L: “If my profession as a choreographer required me to, yes.”

Defence: “And now you are alleging that he harassed you during one such dance sequence?”

Victim L: “Yes, yes I am. He was at a rehearsal he wasn’t supposed to be at. It was my choreography, I was teaching it. He came into the studio and just sat there. He’s done that a couple of times before, so I couldn’t care less. At first. He then started moving closer. He then came and stood right next to me, in the middle of the song, and started pushing me around, shoving me, saying I wasn’t doing it right, and that he would teach me how to dance. I said nothing then, but I complained to the owner of the studio afterwards. I must’ve gone on for

ages about how humiliating it was. The owner said she couldn't do anything as our company was a third party that she had hired, and it was our own personal matter. I had no interest in confronting him about it, but I still went ahead and met up with him next day, explaining that I was no longer a young girl and that his behaviour was unacceptable. When I went into the studio the day after, he was already there. Had been there for ages, with MY students, and had changed the routine to include a partner. He said the solo routine was boring and that he'd included some steps that I'd have to perform with him. It was like, a license to harass.

\_\_\_\_\_. The new routine involved him touching me inappropriately, and he felt he had a legitimate way to harass me now.”

Hyperbolic Option	Like a kick to my soul, my dignity and the power I had asserted as a woman who felt perturbed.
Non-Hyperbolic Option	Just a way to disrespect me and the power I had asserted as a woman who felt perturbed.

### 13) Sexual Assault

The following extract is from a hypothetical conversation between a victim of sexual crime, and a legal authority. One word/phrase has been left blank. Please read the extract carefully, and fill in the blank by selecting the phrase that you would use if you were in this situation, and were making the statement yourself. The options are provided below and you can select the phrase by clicking on it.

Victim M: “I’m a student. I work behind the bar at a gay club part-time. Last night, a horde of straight men came into the club looking for straight girls who might have gone with their gay friends. They were constantly at the bar, getting drinks, trying to talk to different girls who came up and just making themselves look like just, assholes. I just ignored them, usually they’re harmless and just misinformed. I left when the club closed at 3am, and these guys were apparently walking the same way as I was. Right behind me. And that’s when it all went down. They were clearly up the wall about not finding girls so they took it out on me. They were only yelling things at first, but then one of them ran up behind me, and tried to grab my...well my behind. I smacked him away and started walking quicker. I’ve \_\_\_\_\_ been in such a threatening situation before. The other three at that point, just came over, circled me and started touching me inappropriately, saying things like “you’re gay, you should enjoy this. Are you having fun?” Just the most terrifying situation. I was trying to get out of this threatening homophobic situation, when a car drove by and they- – within a split second – backed off. I keep thinking like, what if that car didn’t drive by? And these guys proper assaulted me? What then?”

Hyperbolic Option	never ever ever
Non-Hyperbolic Option	not

#### 14) Sexual Assault

The following extract is from a hypothetical conversation between a victim of sexual crime, and a legal authority. One word/phrase has been left blank. Please read the extract carefully, and fill in the blank by selecting the phrase that you would use if you were in this situation,

and were making the statement yourself. The options are provided below and you can select the phrase by clicking on it.

Defence: “Can you please state for the court your age and the nature of your acquaintance with this man here, the defendant?”

Victim N: “I’m 18. I met him at a bar. He offered to buy me a pack of cigarettes in return for a blowjob. So, I’d say the nature is physical.”

Defence: “So, you’re 18. At a bar that serves alcohol – which you were probably drinking – and you voluntarily engage in oral sex with a man in return for some cigarettes.”

Victim N: “I’ll do it for some drink or weed too. I have done that in the past. Blowjobs are fuckin’ easy. Like, easier than breathing and you don’t even have to tell yourself to do that. If you’re good, you’re at it for a short time, and you get a pack of fags. Or like a bottle of vodka. But this guy...he’s a dickhead innit. He took me home, did what I had promised, and not only did he not repay me, he then pounced on me for sex, kept me there for three bloody days that \_\_\_\_\_ . He made sure he fucked me in every inch of that house. I’ve bled on so much of what he owns by now. Gave me his shirt to wear and scrubbed me down after in his small bathroom. Sure as hell is hot though, you can’t get away from that DNA stuff they found in his house. You should only try some things if you’re smart, or I’ll get smarter and ruin your fuckin life. I cried a lot for the first few days, then I decided to make sure he never see the sun rise without seeing the bars before it.”

Hyperbolic Option	felt like a lifetime
Non-Hyperbolic Option	felt longer

15) Sexual Harassment

The following extract is from a hypothetical conversation between a victim of sexual crime, and a legal authority. One word/phrase has been left blank. Please read the extract carefully, and fill in the blank by selecting the phrase that you would use if you were in this situation, and were making the statement yourself. The options are provided below and you can select the phrase by clicking on it.

Defence: “Can you please state for the court your age and the nature of your acquaintance with this man here, the defendant?”

Victim N: “I’m 18. I met him at a bar. He offered to buy me a pack of cigarettes in return for a blowjob. So, I’d say the nature is physical.”

Defence: “So, you’re 18. At a bar that serves alcohol – which you were probably drinking – and you voluntarily engage in oral sex with a man in return for some cigarettes.”

Victim N: “I’ll do it for some drink or weed too. I have done that in the past. Blowjobs are fuckin’ easy. Like, easier than breathing and you don’t even have to tell yourself to do that. If you’re good, you’re at it for a short time, and you get a pack of fags. Or like a bottle of vodka. But this guy...he’s a dickhead innit. He took me home, did what I had promised, and not only did he not repay me, he then pounced on me for sex, kept me there for three bloody days that \_\_\_\_\_ . He made sure he fucked me in every inch of that house. I’ve bled on so much of what he owns by now. Gave me his shirt to wear and scrubbed me down after in his small bathroom. Sure as hell is hot though, you can’t get away from that DNA stuff they found in his house. You should only try some things if you’re smart, or I’ll get smarter and ruin your fuckin life. I cried a lot for the first few days, then I decided to make sure he never see the sun rise without seeing the bars before it.”

Hyperbolic Option

my insides crumbling



Non-Hyperbolic Option	myself feeling dejected
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### 16) Sexual Harassment

The following extract is from a hypothetical conversation between a victim of sexual crime, and a legal authority. One word/phrase has been left blank. Please read the extract carefully, and fill in the blank by selecting the phrase that you would use if you were in this situation, and were making the statement yourself. The options are provided below and you can select the phrase by clicking on it.

Victim P: “I’m an escort. I started escorting to pay through university, but I do it because I enjoy it now. Three months ago, I got a new client, I met up with him, he wanted the normal girlfriend experience...took me out to dinner in a fancy restaurant, hours upon hours of me listening to him talk about his boring life, came back to a hotel room and just wanted to cuddle. I met up with him a few times after that and he wanted the same thing every time.

Some of these guys are just lonely. It always happens though, they get carried away and treat this less like a business transaction and more like the real thing. He started turning up to my flat without booking an appointment. He added my personal Facebook account and tried to follow me on my Instagram too! I explained to him on three different occasions; he needed to stop this behaviour and that I wasn’t his girlfriend. But now he’s been stalking me! He

\_\_\_\_\_. Cafes, bars, supermarkets. I thought he was just a harmless little guy, but it’s starting to get pathological now, y’know? I’m lucky my apartment building has good security, or he’d be in my house waiting for me every evening. I’m not sure if I want to press charges, but I feel quite irked, so I had to make a complaint.”

Hyperbolic Option	is everywhere I look
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Non-Hyperbolic Option	follows me to a lot of the places I go
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