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Unpacking Victim Blaming: Theoretical Limits in Understanding Male Sexual Minority Victims of Sexual Violence

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ABSTRACT *This narrative literature review investigates the mechanisms underlying victim blaming of male sexual minority victims of sexual violence, focusing on three dominant theoretical frameworks: the Defensive Attribution Hypothesis (DAH), the Just-World Hypothesis (JWH), and the Sexual Attraction Hypothesis (SAH). The review synthesises findings from 39 studies, revealing that while each framework offers partially explanatory value, their applicability to male sexual minorities is limited. DAH's reliance on perceived similarity is complicated by gender norms and homophobia. JWH's ideological robustness lacks empirical support in intersectional contexts. SAH's focus on sexual attraction is challenged by ambiguities around consent and asymmetrical application. The review highlights the need for an integrated, intersectional approach, as no single framework fully accounts for the complex, context-dependent nature of victim blaming in this population. Recommendations include expanding empirical research and developing integrated frameworks that address the interplay of gender, sexuality, and cultural norms.*

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1 INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence is a pervasive issue worldwide. In the United States, one in six women (17.6%) report experiencing rape or attempted rape during their lifetime (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Belgian data indicate a similar prevalence, yet official police statistics—4,792 rapes reported in 2024, equivalent to an average of approximately 13 registered rapes per day (Federale Politie-DGR/DRI/BIPOL, 2024)—mask substantial underreporting. Estimates suggest that the actual incidence may exceed 100 rapes per day, with fewer than one in five cases reaching law enforcement (Amnesty International, n.d.; Federal Public Service Interior, Federal Police, 2021).

A major reason for underreporting is victim blaming, which involves the tendency to assign partial or full responsibility for an offence to the victim (Witte & Flenchsenhar, 2024). Victim blaming constitutes a form of secondary victimisation, reinforcing the notion that victims are responsible for their own suffering and could have prevented or even provoked the offence. Sexual offences are particularly susceptible to victim blaming, partly due to unclear consent boundaries and the influence of societal prejudices on assessments of victim credibility (Bieneck & Krahé, 2011). Victim blaming reflects a complex interplay of widely held societal beliefs, cognitive biases, and sociopsychological mechanisms (Witte & Flechsenhar, 2024).

Although victim blaming has been widely investigated in the context of female victims (see, *inter alia*, Suarez & Gadalla, 2010; Grubb & Turner, 2012; Van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014), there remains a striking scarcity of empirical research addressing male victims, and particularly those who identify as sexual minorities (Thomas & Kopel, 2023). The common association of men with perpetration, along with gender norms that portray men as strong, autonomous, and sexually assertive, can influence the recognition of male sexual victims (Davies & Rogers, 2006; Struckman-Johnson, 1988). When male victims also identify as members of sexual minorities, such as gay or bisexual men, the intersection of gender and sexuality leads to different forms of stigmatisation. Homophobic stereotypes, misconceptions about sexual behaviour, and cultural prejudices play a role in the interpretation and recognition of victimhood (Levi et al., 2024). Additionally, gender stereotyping also constrains perceptions of perpetration: femininity norms that cast women as nurturing and non-violent can render female-perpetrated sexual violence less visible, with transgressive acts reframed as “caring” or benign. This stereotype contributes to disbelief when men report sexual victimisation by women and interacts with rape myths to minimize perceived harm (Smith et al., 1988; Grubb & Turner, 2012; Reitz-Krueger et al., 2017).

Taken together, these intersecting social perceptions highlight the need to assess whether existing explanatory models of victim blaming adequately account for such experiences. Consequently, the applicability of established theoretical frameworks—the Defensive Attribution Hypothesis (DAH), the Just-World Hypothesis (JWH), and the Sexual Attraction Hypothesis (SAH)—to this population has yet to be systematically examined (Davies & Rogers, 2006; Negreiros & Pereira, 2025; Pinciotti & Orcutt, 2019). Given the paucity of direct empirical evidence, this inquiry draws on broader literature on victim blaming to assess whether these models can provide explanatory value, and to identify where supporting or contradictory evidence may arise. By synthesising insights from research on other populations and contexts, this review aims to delineate the potential explanatory scope of each framework when applied to an understudied population.

The DAH posits that observers assign responsibility based on perceived similarity or identification with the victim (Shaver, 1970; Walster, 1966). The effect of such identification is twofold, reflecting the dual role of perceived similarity. Initially, the DAH suggests that similarity (e.g., in appearance) between observer and victim, coupled with a perceived vulnerability to a comparable misfortune, reduces attributions of blame. This is explained as a form of psychological self-protection: by exonerating the victim, the observer mitigates their own sense of vulnerability (Burger, 1981). Recent research, however, indicates that similarity can also be experienced as threatening, prompting observers to deny personal resemblance and increase the victim's blame (Grubb & Harrower, 2008). In this case, the cognitive strategy shifts from empathy to defence: blame is assigned not due to lack of identification, but because excessive identification triggers threat avoidance (Grubb & Harrower, 2008). Thus, the DAH is not a straightforward concept; similarity can either connect or repel, depending on its interpretation within a broader psychological context (Grubb & Harrower, 2008).

The JWH arises from the desire to believe that the world is fundamentally just and that everyone receives what they deserve (Lerner, 1980; Lerner & Matthews, 1967). Justice is equated with merit: one gets what one earns, and earns what one gets. The JWH rests on the notion that belief in a just world mitigates confrontation with existential uncertainties. JWH functions as a psychological mechanism that enables individuals to cope with the complexity and unpredictability of life, since acknowledging otherwise implies vulnerability to injustice (Hammond et al., 2011). Assigning blame to the victim, therefore, serves as a strategy to reduce cognitive dissonance: holding the victim responsible symbolically restores the balance between cause and consequence (Wu et al., 2011).

The SAH proposes that observers' attributions of blame are influenced by perceived sexual attraction (McCaul et al., 1990; Grubb & Turner, 2012). Conceptualisations in the literature are diverse. From the participant's perspective, blame may increase if the observer themselves experiences sexual attraction

toward the victim. From the perpetrator–victim perspective, blame can be based on perceived sexual attraction between the two, which is conceptualised in two ways. In some studies, attraction is seen as mutual, with blame rising when it is assumed to be reciprocal (Levi et al., 2024). In others, it is unidirectional, in which only the perpetrator is perceived as sexually attracted to the victim, or the victim is believed to have derived sexual gratification from the incident—for example, when a male victim has an erection (Ford et al., 1998; McCaul et al., 1990). Despite these differences, the central tenet of the SAH is consistent: sexual attraction systematically influences observers’ attributions of blame; often amplifying blame directed at the victim while diminishing responsibility attributed to the perpetrator. In this literature review, no distinction is made between these different operationalisations, and studies employing any of these perspectives are included.

These three frameworks were selected because they represent the most widely recognized explanations for victim blaming in sexual violence (van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). They provide a comprehensive perspective by integrating individual cognitive processes with societal beliefs. Their conceptual clarity and clear relevance for sexual violence in general makes these models more effective than broader or less theoretically grounded approaches. Building on these frameworks, the central research question guiding this review is: What are the roles of the DAH, the JWH, and the SAH in explaining third-party victim blaming of male sexual minority victims of sexual violence?

Although this study references a broad range of scholarly literature, it deliberately refrains from conducting a methodological comparison of the selected sources. Instead, it focuses on capturing the complex nature of the phenomenon and the theoretical nuances essential for a comprehensive understanding of victim blaming within this context. Employing a purely methodological approach could risk reducing these models to formal structures, potentially overlooking substantive insights. Moreover, such an approach could compromise both the conceptual depth and thematic relevance that this study aims to preserve. Consequently, the focus lies on the substantive contributions of the three theoretical models rather than on a technical assessment of the underlying literature.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. First, the applied methodology and search strategy are outlined. This is followed by a presentation of the main findings from the literature review, forming the empirical foundation for discussion. The discussion then addresses the central research question, considers the study’s limitations, and concludes with recommendations for future research.

2 METHODOLOGY

This study is a narrative literature review. We selected a narrative approach because the phenomenon of victim-blaming of male sexual minority victims

requires analytical depth and interpretive flexibility, rather than the exhaustive enumeration and protocol-driven procedures that are characteristic of systematic reviews or systematic–narrative hybrids. Consistent with guidelines for narrative syntheses, we prioritize transparent reasoning, conceptual integration across heterogeneous designs, and conceptual saturation rather than exhaustive retrieval, thereby acknowledging that our review does not encompass all existing literature (Grant & Booth, 2009; Greenhalgh et al., 2018; Green et al., 2006; Sukhera, 2022). To avoid any ambiguity, we do not present this work as a systematic review or as a systematic–narrative hybrid (Turnbull et al., 2023), and we therefore do not follow systematic-review protocols.

Before commencing the review, the scope and key concepts were clearly defined to ensure conceptual consistency. The review focuses on academic studies addressing the attribution of blame toward male victims of sexual violence, with particular attention to those identifying as sexual minorities. Three core theoretical frameworks—the DAH, JWH, and SAH—served as anchors for the analysis. In line with the flexible nature of narrative inquiry, the initial scope evolved iteratively as familiarity with the literature deepened and new conceptual linkages emerged.

Literature searches were conducted in April 2025 using PubMed, Scopus (Elsevier), Web of Science and Google Scholar. These databases were selected for their coverage of psychology, criminology, sociology, victimology and related fields. Following an initial exploratory phase, a set of specific conceptually driven search terms was developed, and applied both individually and in combination using Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) to locate relevant academic sources. Search terms were organised into four clusters:

1. Victim blaming: *victim blaming, blame attribution.*
2. Offence-related: *rape, sexual assault, sexual violence.*
3. Victim profile: *male victim, male rape victim, sexual minorities, homosexual, gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer, men.*
4. Theoretical constructs: *defensive attribution (hypothesis), attribution theory, sexual attraction (hypothesis/appeal), perceived attractiveness, just world (hypothesis/theory), belief in a just world.*

Search queries consistently combined one term from each of the four clusters. An example combination is: (victim blaming OR blame attribution) AND (rape OR sexual assault OR sexual violence) AND (male victim OR male rape victim OR sexual minorities OR gay OR homosexual OR bisexual OR pansexual OR queer OR men) AND (just world hypothesis OR just world theory OR belief in a just world).

Articles retrieved through database searches were screened in two stages. In the first stage, titles and abstracts were assessed for relevance to victim blaming in the context of sexual violence against male victims, with particular attention to studies focusing on sexual minority men. In the second stage, full texts were reviewed to determine conceptual alignment. Studies were excluded if they did not meaningfully engage with victim blaming or responsibility attribution, were

not published in peer-reviewed academic journals, were limited to conference abstracts, or consisted of non-academic sources (e.g., opinion pieces or reports lacking empirical or theoretical grounding). Research focusing exclusively on victim coping, trauma outcomes, recovery processes, or perpetrator characteristics was excluded unless these topics were explicitly linked to observers' or societal blame attributions toward victims. While studies that directly examined bystander, observer, or societal perspectives on blame attribution were prioritised, this criterion was applied flexibly. Accordingly, studies in which victim blaming was examined implicitly within broader attitudinal, normative, or evaluative frameworks were also considered eligible when relevant. This flexibility reflects the narrative nature of the review, in which predefined search parameters were applied interpretatively to maximise conceptual coverage rather than exhaustiveness.

Both English- and Dutch-language publications were considered. However, as no relevant Dutch-language sources were identified, the final corpus consists exclusively of English-language literature. Initially, the temporal scope was restricted to publications from 2015 to 2025, reflecting the marked increase in scholarly attention to sexual violence and victim blaming in recent decades (Cuenca-Piqueras et al., 2023). However, further analysis revealed that, despite the substantial body of research on victim blaming, relatively few studies have specifically examined this phenomenon with respect to male sexual minority victims of sexual violence, and mechanisms underlying such attributions. To avoid conceptual impoverishment, relevant publications predating 2015 were therefore included when they offered essential theoretical, conceptual or empirical contributions. The final corpus reflects a deliberate emphasis on recent scholarship, with approximately half of the included studies (18 of 39) published after 2010. Earlier works, particularly seminal studies from the late 1960s to 1980s (Walster, 1966; Lerner & Matthews, 1967; Shaver, 1970; Lerner, 1980), were selectively retained as theoretical anchor points underpinning the three hypotheses. These foundational studies inform, rather than dominate, the analysis, which remains primarily oriented toward contemporary empirical research.

The included studies predominantly originate from psychology, criminology, victimology and gender studies. Methodologically, the corpus encompasses qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method research, as well as meta-analyses and narrative reviews. No a priori exclusions were imposed based on study design. Empirical studies most frequently employed vignette-based experimental designs, reflecting the dominance of observer-based approaches within the victim-blaming literature.

Although the review centres on male sexual minority victims, no exclusion criteria were imposed regarding the gender of the perpetrator. This allowed for the inclusion of studies examining male sexual minority victims assaulted by female perpetrators, as well as same-sex or LGBTQ+ scenarios (e.g., Burt & DeMello, 2002; Diamond-Welch et al., 2018). These variations were included solely to ensure adequate coverage of victim-blaming processes relevant to male sexual

minority victims, given the limited availability of studies directly addressing this population. Importantly, the review does not seek to compare victim-blaming processes across victim or perpetrator groups, but rather to synthesise evidence on attributional mechanisms as they pertain to male sexual minority victims, even where this required drawing on partially overlapping empirical contexts. This approach was necessary due to the absence of studies explicitly examining male sexual minority victims within one of the three theoretical frameworks. Consequently, the review integrates literature addressing relevant components of these hypotheses to enable theory-driven synthesis within a clearly delimited substantive focus. After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, a total of 39 studies were retained for analysis (see Table 1 in Appendix).

To synthesise the selected literature, the Narrative Synthesis Framework developed by Popay et al. (2006) was applied. This framework supports the qualitative integration of heterogeneous studies, the identification of thematic and conceptual patterns, and the combination of qualitative and quantitative findings. The literature was organised according to the four search clusters, enabling a clear thematic structure. Subsequently, similarities and differences between studies were analysed, with particular attention to the influence of victim gender and sexual orientation on victim blaming, the theoretical hypotheses employed, and the identification of gaps, overlaps, and discrepancies within the literature. Finally, conceptual linkages and potential explanatory mechanisms for victim blaming of male sexual minorities were formulated, resulting in an integrated understanding of the phenomenon.

In addition, the SPIDER (Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, Research type) model was used to support the narrative synthesis by providing a clear descriptive structure for the search strategy and selection criteria (Cooke et al., 2012). The target population (Sample) was defined as male sexual minority victims of sexual violence. The central phenomenon (Phenomenon of Interest) was victim blaming and related perceptions of guilt and responsibility. Although no prior selection was made based on study design (Design), the final selection revealed that most included studies employed vignette-based methodologies. The outcome measure (Evaluation) concerned the degree and nature of victim blaming, including theoretical explanations. Finally, the research type (Research Type) encompassed qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method studies, provided they offered sufficient insight into the phenomenon under investigation (Cooke et al., 2012).

3 RESULTS

3.1 General overview of included studies

This literature review encompasses a total of 39 peer-reviewed publications, published between 1966 and 2024, including three studies that contributed to the results of two separate hypotheses. The studies originate from eight countries, with a clear predominance of research conducted in the United States ($n = 24$) and the

United Kingdom ($n = 9$). Additional contributions stem from Germany ($n = 1$), Sweden ($n = 1$), Canada ($n = 1$), Italy ($n = 1$), Australia ($n = 1$) and China ($n = 1$). The geographical distribution is relatively narrow, with a predominant concentration in Western contexts, which raises considerations regarding the generalisability of the findings across culturally diverse settings.

Methodologically, the majority of studies adopt an experimental design ($n = 29$), most commonly employing vignette-based approaches in which participants are presented with hypothetical scenarios of sexual violence. Supplementary approaches include meta-analyses ($n = 2$) and literature reviews ($n = 5$). One study uses qualitative methods ($n = 1$), namely discourse analysis, while others are theoretical works ($n = 2$) that elaborate conceptual frameworks. Sample populations are predominantly composed of university students ($n = 22$), typically drawn from psychology or social science programmes. A smaller number of studies engage general adult populations ($n = 9$), or focus on specific subgroups such as transgender individuals, LGBTQ+ respondents, or male victims ($n = 5$). For several studies (e.g., theoretical works or those with unspecified demographics), participant information was not reported or not applicable.

3.2 Defensive Attribution Hypothesis ($n = 17$)

The DAH offers a pertinent explanatory framework for third-party victim blaming, positing that the attribution of blame is partly contingent upon the perceived similarity between the victim and the evaluating observer (Shaver, 1970; Walster, 1966). According to Shaver (1970) and the blame avoidance model, observers are less inclined to blame victims with whom they identify, driven by a desire to avoid the distressing realisation that they themselves could become victimised (Burger, 1981; Witte & Flechsenhar, 2024). However, recent empirical evidence has shed new light on this hypothesis with the harm avoidance model: when the perceived similarity is experienced as too threatening, observers may actively deny this identification, and the associated vulnerability, through victim blaming (Grubb & Harrower, 2008).

While empirical evidence supports mechanisms consistent with both models, the blame avoidance model remains the more consistently observed predictor in experimental studies of victim blaming. For instance, Witte and Flechsenhar (2024) reported a moderate negative correlation between perceived similarity and victim blaming, whereas Suarez and Gadalla (2010) found that women are generally less likely to blame female victims, reflecting shared vulnerability (Calhoun et al., 1976; Fulero & DeLara, 1976). Conversely, Muller et al. (1994) showed that, in some cases, identification with the victim can increase blame, as observers seek to mitigate the threat of recognising their own potential victimisation.

Although research specifically addressing male sexual minority victims of sexual violence remains scarce, the extant literature predominantly operationalises perceived similarity in terms of gender; a dimension particularly relevant for

examining responses to this population. Observers typically assign less blame to victims of the same gender, providing a seemingly straightforward metric for studying similarity. Yet, this metric proves less clear-cut when considering male sexual minority victims. A robust and consistent pattern across the literature indicates that male observers are systematically more inclined to blame victims, regardless of gender, than female observers (Calhoun et al., 1976; Wakelin & Long, 2003). This pattern can be understood through two explanatory processes.

This discrepancy may point to two phenomena: the harm avoidance model or a lack of identification. From a defensive attribution perspective, the phenomenon can be situated within the harm avoidance model: male observers attempt to minimise cognitive dissonance resulting from threatening similarity by assigning blame to the victim (Muller et al., 1994). Male victimhood is frequently perceived as a violation of dominant masculinity scripts, which prioritise physical strength, assertiveness, and sexual dominance (Lee et al., 2024). Identification with a male victim may therefore be experienced as threatening, as it implies susceptibility to such crimes; a realisation that contradicts prevailing notions of male invulnerability. Burt and DeMello (2002) further highlight homophobia as a potential defensive mechanism. Their findings demonstrate that homophobic attitudes are significantly associated with increased blame attribution towards homosexual male victims, regardless of the observer's gender. Homophobia thus offers an alternative route to defensive attribution, driven by discomfort with the victim's sexual orientation (Burt & DeMello, 2002). These findings suggest that the hypothesis is confirmed through the active rejection of similarity via victim blaming, thereby avoiding both the possibility of personal victimisation and a challenge to one's gender identity.

An alternative interpretation is also plausible: no identification occurs because the victim is perceived as non-conforming to dominant masculinity norms (Parker et al., 2022). This tendency is reinforced by rape myths and traditional gender role beliefs, which, as demonstrated by Parker et al. (2022), correlate with increased blame attribution towards male victims, particularly when the perpetrator is female. Pinciotti and Orcutt (2019) similarly argue that men are less likely to engage in defensive attributions, as victimhood is less familiar and less socially accepted for them. This supports the notion that a lack of perceived similarity increases the likelihood of blaming male victims (Diamond-Welch et al., 2018). From this, it may be understood that gender can act as both a bridge and a barrier to identification, but tends not to reliably indicate perceived similarity for male sexual minority victims of sexual violence.

Historically (Thornton, 1984) and in recent research (Diamond-Welch et al., 2018; Gerber et al., 2004), scholars have cautioned against relying solely on gender as an indicator of similarity. Alternative components (such as shared risk of victimisation, personal attitudes, and socio-cultural context) appear to more accurately predict observer identification and victim blaming. For example, Diamond-Welch et al. (2018) found that trans and cisgender women assigned less blame due to perceived vulnerability, whereas heterosexual cisgender men,

perceiving less shared risk, were more likely to blame male sexual minority victims of sexual violence. These findings suggest that the dominant operationalisation of similarity via gender may be insufficient for understanding victim blaming in male sexual minority populations. This highlights the need to examine whether the mechanisms of the DAH extend to this group.

3.3 Just-World Hypothesis ($n = 11$)

Decades of research into the JWH have demonstrated a strong association between belief in a just world and the attribution of blame to victims of sexual violence (Furnham, 2003; Hammond et al., 2011). The underlying mechanism of third-party victim blaming is rooted in the psychological need to preserve one's belief in a just world: a world in which individuals receive what they deserve (Lerner, 1980; Lerner & Matthews, 1967; Wu et al., 2011). However, this relationship is sometimes ambiguous. Despite substantial empirical support, findings remain mixed: while some studies report that higher belief in a just world scores predict greater victim blaming (e.g., Strömwall et al., 2013b; Pinciotti & Orcutt, 2017; Witte & Flechsenhar, 2024), others find weak, inconsistent, or even reversed effects (Hammond et al., 2011; Kleinke & Meyer, 1990; Sleath & Bull, 2010). These inconsistencies suggest that belief in a just world operates under specific gendered and cultural conditions rather than as a universal explanatory mechanism.

When considering male sexual minority victims of sexual violence, the literature is notably scarce and only indirect evidence exists. For example, Strömwall et al. (2013b) found that young male sexual victims were blamed most strongly by male observers high in just-world beliefs. This suggests that gendered and sexualised expectations may activate just-world reasoning. Yet the victim's sexual orientation was not assessed, leaving the role of homophobia or sexual minority status unexplored.

This lack of direct evidence indicates that it remains unclear how belief in a just world operates in perceptions of this group. Nevertheless, theoretical links can be drawn. Central to the JWH is the notion of deservingness: individuals are motivated to perceive outcomes, whether positive or negative, as deserved, to maintain a sense of order and fairness in the world (Lerner, 1980). This sense of deservingness underlies victim-blaming judgments. Observers may perceive certain victims as less deserving of sympathy, protection, or justice when they deviate from dominant social or sexual norms (Lerner, 1980). For male sexual minority victims of sexual violence, this process may intersect with normative and moralised assumptions about masculinity and sexuality. As Davies and Rogers (2006) argue, dominant gender norms suggest that "real men" cannot be raped. When combined with homophobic attitudes, the sexual victimisation of male sexual minorities may thus be framed as a deserved consequence of deviant or non-normative behaviour. In this way, just-world reasoning does not only

rationalise victimisation but actively sustains heteronormative hierarchies of worth and deservingness.

3.4 Sexual Attraction Hypothesis ($n = 14$)

Throughout the research history of victim blaming, various variables have been manipulated to uncover the underlying mechanisms of the phenomenon, including sexual attraction (McCaul et al., 1990; Grubb & Turner, 2012). The SAH posits that victims who are perceived as sexually attractive or approachable, whether physically or behaviourally, are more likely to be held responsible for the offence (Caricati et al., 2023). In line with this hypothesis, Strömwall et al. (2013b) concluded that victims of sexual crimes who behave in a seductive or flirtatious manner are more frequently targeted by victim blaming.

Ford et al. (1998), in a vignette study involving a known male perpetrator, found that homosexual male victims and heterosexual female victims were significantly more likely to be unjustly blamed for their sexual victimisation than heterosexual male and lesbian victims. They attributed this to the SAH, noting that participants predominantly blamed victims who were perceived by the perpetrator as sexual objects. However, the study employed a vignette in which both parties were acquainted, aware of each other's sexual orientation, and the victim had agreed to accompany the perpetrator to his apartment. It could be argued that this voluntary act was erroneously interpreted as sexual consent. Consequently, it remains unclear whether victim blaming in this study stemmed from perceived sexual attraction or was influenced by other factors, such as the nature of the relationship. This alternative explanation may be plausible, given that victims of acquaintance rape are more frequently subjected to victim blaming than victims of stranger rape (Gravelin et al., 2019). To address these interpretive ambiguities, Wakelin and Long (2003) examined whether the findings held in cases of stranger rape. By removing potentially confounding scenario elements, they were able to isolate gender and sexual orientation as independent variables. Their results confirmed that, regardless of context, victims perceived as sexually attractive were more likely to be blamed. In accordance with the SAH, homosexual male victims and heterosexual female victims were assigned greater blame due to perceived sexual attraction, when the perpetrator is male, thereby supporting the findings of Ford et al. (1998).

In attempts to justify the offence, the purportedly ambiguous boundary between rape and consensual sexual interaction is frequently invoked. This ambiguity facilitates a reinterpretation of the rape, whereby the violent nature of the act is denied and reframed as a mutual sexual encounter (Doherty & Anderson, 2004). In the context of male sexual minority victims of sexual violence, this reinterpretation is readily reinforced through stereotypes. The SAH is often linked to cultural scripts surrounding sexual availability and consent, which are rooted in heteronormative assumptions (Rodgers et al., 2023). Extensive research into the stereotyping of male sexual minorities reveals that this group is systematically

portrayed as hypersexual (Anderson, 2024). There exists a general assumption that men are perpetually interested in sex and act as initiators of sexual contact (Rodgers et al., 2023). Homosexual men, in particular, are frequently depicted as sexually excessive, promiscuous, and uninhibited (Levitt & Klassen, 1974). Levi et al. (2024) demonstrated that when respondents perceived a male sexual victim as homosexual, they interpreted this as a sign of sexual availability. This perception was associated with reduced credibility of the victimisation and increased levels of victim blaming. The cultural discourse that consistently presents male sexual minorities as sexually approachable reinforces the interpretation of sexual attraction, and contributes to the undermining of their credibility and the prevalence of victim blaming.

Despite the empirical support for the SAH, it is not without limitations. A key contradiction lies in the differing levels of victim blaming experienced by homosexual men and heterosexual women. The SAH suggests that sexual victims who are raped in accordance with their sexual orientation, and where sexual attraction between perpetrator and victim is perceived, are more likely to be blamed. Accordingly, heterosexual female victims and homosexual male victims of rape by a male perpetrator should, in theory, experience comparable levels of victim blaming, as both are perceived as sexually approachable. However, research has shown that judgements of heterosexual women are similar but less extreme than those of homosexual men, and do not significantly differ from other victim categories (e.g., heterosexual men) (Wakelin & Long, 2003).

Further insight into this discrepancy is offered by recent research published by Levi et al. (2024), which demonstrates that the impact of perceived sexual attraction is strongly dependent on the gender and sexual orientation of the sexual victim. Their findings reveal an asymmetrical application of sexual attraction as a basis for victim blaming: heterosexual women are not associated with active sexual intent in their model, unlike homosexual men. A heterosexual female sexual victim who feels attracted to the perpetrator does not lead to the assumption that she desires sex, whereas this assumption is made in the case of a male sexual victim (Levi et al., 2024). The absence of a linear relationship between attraction and blame attribution, given that it appears to apply only to homosexual male sexual victims, supports the finding that this group faces disproportionately high levels of victim blaming.

The SAH is further challenged by findings concerning male sexual victims of female perpetrators, which are difficult to reconcile within the framework. Smith et al. (1988) concluded that a heterosexual man raped by a woman receives less victim blame than when raped by a man. According to the hypothesis, mutual attraction should increase the likelihood of blame attribution. The fact that this does not occur suggests that other factors outweigh the rational application of the SAH. Participants likely interpreted the offence in (hetero)sexualised terms, thereby diminishing its status as a violent incident. Reitz-Krueger et al. (2017) similarly point out that the widespread belief that men cannot be raped by women may explain the lower levels of blame attribution.

4 DISCUSSION

The findings of this narrative literature review offer insights into the mechanisms underlying victim blaming, with particular attention to male sexual minority victims of sexual violence. However, the reviewed literature reveals that the application of the three theoretical frameworks to this specific population remains limited, resulting in fragmented knowledge that is often only indirectly applicable. At the same time, the hypotheses differ markedly in their conceptualisation of victim blaming, complicating the interpretation and comparison of empirical findings and underscoring the need for an integrated approach.

The Defensive Attribution Hypothesis provides a useful framework for understanding third-party victim blaming, but its explanatory power depends in part on how perceived similarity is operationalised. Historically, similarity has been measured primarily through gender, with the assumption that observers identify more with same-gender victims and therefore assign less blame. While this metric often predicts reduced blame, it may be less applicable to male sexual minority victims of sexual violence, as male observers frequently assign higher blame despite shared gender. This may be partly because male victimhood possibly conflicts with dominant masculinity norms emphasizing assertiveness and invulnerability.

For this group, gender-based operationalisations of similarity may therefore be limited in capturing the processes underlying victim blaming. For example, homophobic attitudes may amplify blame, allowing observers to distance themselves from perceived threats to their own masculine identity. Similarly, identification may be avoided because the victim is perceived as violating masculinity norms, rather than because of a lack of gender similarity *per se*. These findings suggest that, for male sexual minority victims of sexual violence, the DAH may operate in part through active avoidance of identification with the victim, rather than through identification itself. While gender-based operationalisations of similarity still provide useful insight, they may not fully capture the subtle processes underlying victim blaming in this population.

In contrast, the Just-World Hypothesis offers a more fundamental yet abstract explanation. This belief functions as a general worldview in which individuals assume that the world is inherently fair and that everyone receives what they deserve. According to this hypothesis, victim blaming serves as a means of reducing cognitive dissonance when injustice is perceived. This defensive reaction parallels DAH in that both frameworks operate as psychologically self-protective mechanisms. However, JWH is not contingent upon the situational interpretation of the offence, as is the case with DAH and SAH, but instead functions at the level of ideological conviction.

The JWH receives partial support in explaining third-party victim blaming, but its application to male sexual minority victims of sexual violence remains largely speculative due to the limited amount of direct research. The core mechanism, maintaining a belief in a just world by attributing blame to victims, is

consistent with observed patterns in gendered contexts, particularly when victims deviate from normative masculinity scripts. For male sexual minority victims, just-world reasoning may intersect with heteronormative and moralised assumptions, framing their victimisation as a deserved consequence of non-conformity to social and sexual norms.

At the same time, findings in the broader literature are inconsistent, cautioning against overgeneralisation. Some studies report weak or even reversed associations between belief in a just world and victim blaming, indicating that JWH may operate under specific conditions, potentially moderated by observer gender, cultural norms, and perceived adherence to social expectations. In the context of male sexual minority victims of sexual violence, this suggests that just-world reasoning may be activated selectively, reinforcing stereotypes and social hierarchies, rather than providing a universal explanation for blame attributions.

Unlike these psychologically motivated hypotheses, the Sexual Attraction Hypothesis (SAH) offers a more culturally oriented framework, positing that sexual attraction increases the risk of victim blaming, without necessarily stemming from intrinsic beliefs or motives (Levi et al., 2024). The SAH also contributes explanatory value, particularly in understanding the disproportionate victim blaming faced by male sexual minority victims of sexual violence. Empirical evidence demonstrates that perceptions of sexual availability, combined with cultural stereotypes of hypersexuality, amplify blame towards male sexual minority victims. The interaction between perceived sexual intent and normative expectations about male and homosexual sexuality creates a context in which victim credibility is undermined.

However, the SAH also encounters significant limitations in practice, as it does not hold universally across different victim groups and contexts. Discrepancies between homosexual male and heterosexual female victims of sexual violence suggest that the role of sexual attraction is asymmetrical and mediated by gendered sexual norms (Wakelin & Long, 2003). Furthermore, cases involving male victims of female perpetrated sexual violence challenge the explanatory scope of the SAH, as these sexual victims often receive lower blame despite the potential for perceived sexual attraction (Reitz-Krueger et al., 2017; Smith et al., 1988). This suggests that SAH only offers explanatory value when embedded within a broader socio-cultural framework, and that gender norms and cultural assumptions often outweigh perceived attractiveness itself.

Taken together, the findings suggest the need for a more synthesised explanatory framework that moves beyond treating the three hypotheses as discrete or competing explanations. Rather than operating as isolated mechanisms, these three hypotheses appear to converge in shaping victim-blaming judgments toward male sexual minority victims. Victim blaming in this context is likely to emerge from the interaction of three interrelated levels: (1) individual-level defensive motivations, such as vulnerability avoidance as described by the DAH; (2) ideological worldviews concerning justice and deservingness, central to the JWH; and (3) socio-cultural sexual scripts regulating perceptions of consent,

attraction and sexual availability, as captured by the SAH. These levels mutually reinforce one another within a heteronormative and gendered cultural context.

In this context, it is important to consider intersectionality, which refers to examining how co-occurring social positions (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, age, migration status, socioeconomic position) and structural conditions (e.g., stigma climates, policy and legal frameworks) jointly shape perceptions of victimhood and blame. Rather than treating identities as separate, additive factors, intersectionality assesses their interacting effects and how these are embedded in cultural and institutional contexts (Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 1991; Bowleg, 2012; Cole, 2009). Applied to our synthesis, this means that the operation of DAH, JWH, and SAH is likely conditional on specific identity configurations and contexts. For example, the way these frameworks function can change depending on whether a male victim is perceived as gay or bisexual, whether he is racialized or not, and whether he is situated within a legal environment that criminalizes or protects sexual minorities, or within a social context that imposes strongly gendered norms, with ensuing stigma on victims who deviate from these norms. Each of these factors can influence how observers identify with the victim (DAH), how they judge his deservingness (JWH), and how they interpret sexual scripts and attraction (SAH).

Theoretically, an intersectional lens suggests that defensive identification (DAH) may differ across identity constellations (e.g., heterosexual vs. gay men; racialized vs. non-racialized) and contexts (e.g., homophobic vs. protective environments). Similarly, just-world reasoning (JWH) may be activated selectively where heterosexist or racist norms render some victims “less deserving”. In practice, such differences in victim stigma between different intersectional groups create unequal barriers for reporting, help-seeking, and legal action (Buckley, et al., 2025). Sexual-attraction judgments (SAH) may also be mediated by gendered and sexualized stereotypes that vary across cultures. Practically, studies could sample beyond the typical Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) populations and English-only sources to capture greater diversity. Researchers are encouraged to design studies that manipulate intersecting variables in factorial/vignette designs (e.g., victim sexual orientation × race/ethnicity × perpetrator gender × legal context cues). Moreover, analyses could be structured to test for interaction effects between these intersecting identities, rather than simply treating each identity as an independent, additive factor.

Although rape myths are not the primary focus of this review, its relevance becomes unavoidable when victim blaming is examined across gendered and heteronormative contexts. Rape myths, defined as prejudicial, stereotypical, and false beliefs about rape, victims, and perpetrators (Burt, 1980), are closely linked to victim blaming processes. Research on rape myths concerning male victims remains limited. However, existing evidence suggests that rape myths targeting both male and female victims are rooted in patriarchal cultural structures characterised by sexism and heterosexism (Walfield, 2021). In the case of male

victims, such myths often reflect gendered and heteronormative assumptions, including beliefs that men cannot be raped, that only gay men are raped, or that gay and bisexual men deserve blame because they are perceived as sexually deviant or immoral (Depraetere et al., 2020; Turchik & Edwards, 2012).

With the proposed synthesis, rape myths function as a cross-cutting cognitive schema that interacts with all three theoretical mechanisms. For male sexual minority victims, perceived sexual attraction may activate rape myths, which facilitates just-world rationalisations and defensive distancing from the victim. Sexual attraction can serve as a retrospective justification of presumed consent, enabling observers to restore a sense of moral order while avoiding identification with the victim.

This literature review, while offering valuable insights, is subject to several limitations that must be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the limited number of studies explicitly focusing on male sexual minority victims of sexual violence results in fragmented knowledge. This scarcity restricts the depth and generalisability of the conclusions, as interpretations often rely on extrapolation from heterogeneous or indirectly related findings. At the same time, this is also a substantial finding demonstrating a gap in our current knowledge that future research could address. Second, the included studies are overwhelmingly Western, and the review is narrative (not systematic). Accordingly, global generalisability cannot be assumed. Our conclusions should be read as indicative trends about mechanisms that may vary across cultural contexts, particularly with respect to masculinity norms, stigma towards sexual minorities, and legal/reporting environments (Moreau et al., 2021). Future research could directly test these mechanisms across non-Western and multilingual settings to evaluate how culture scripts and legal frameworks shape victim-blaming dynamics. Finally, as this study follows a narrative review design rather than a systematic one, the synthesis is inherently interpretative and may reflect the authors' analytical emphasis.

To address the gap in studies explicitly centred on male sexual minority victims of sexual violence, there is a need for larger-scale and more diverse empirical research in which this group is foregrounded. Experimental studies that manipulate both the victim's and the observer's sexual orientation could yield valuable insights into the complexity of identification processes. Additionally, the gender of the perpetrator remains underexplored, particularly in cases involving female perpetrators who may be judged differently than male perpetrators. To move beyond indicative trends, comparative designs that manipulate both victim and observer characteristics across diverse cultural contexts, and that incorporate legal-policy environments, are needed. This would allow rigorous tests of whether DAH, JWH, and SAH operate similarly (or diverge) in settings with different masculinity scripts, stigma climates, and institutional frameworks. Finally, the development of an integrated framework and an intersectional approach is imperative, as is further analysis of the interplay between social identities such as gender and sexual orientation in shaping perceptions of victimhood.

5 CONCLUSION

This literature review demonstrates that the mechanisms underlying victim blaming are complex and multidimensional, and that existing theoretical frameworks—the Defensive Attribution Hypothesis (DAH), the Just-World Hypothesis (JWH), and the Sexual Attraction Hypothesis (SAH)—provide partial insights but exhibit limitations when applied to male sexual minority victims of sexual violence.

The DAH highlights the psychologically self-protective function of victim blaming. However, its traditional operationalisation of similarity (typically based on gender) proves insufficient when applied to male sexual minority victims. The concept of similarity is multidimensional and context-dependent, and observers may experience social and psychological distance from this group, complicating identification. Expanding the notion of similarity beyond objective markers could enhance the explanatory relevance of this hypothesis for this target group.

The JWH offers an ideologically grounded, cognitive framework to understand why observers attribute blame to victims in order to preserve a sense of justice. Empirical findings relevant to the JWH are scarce but theoretical considerations suggest that belief in a just world may interact with heteronormative and moralised assumptions. This includes framing victimisation as deserved, particularly when victims deviate from dominant masculinity scripts, but direct evidence remains limited.

The SAH foregrounds the role of socio-cultural factors in shaping perceptions of victimhood. However, its validity as a standalone mechanism is questionable, as its operation appears closely intertwined with broader normative structures. It is therefore plausible that sexual attractiveness does not function as a primary explanatory factor in victim blaming of male sexual minorities, but rather as an expression of deeper cultural assumptions and normative frameworks.

Overall, the reviewed literature suggests that no single theoretical framework is likely to fully account for the mechanisms underlying victim blaming of male sexual minority victims. Each theory provides valuable but partial insights into a phenomenon that is inherently complex and context-dependent. Understanding this form of victim blaming therefore requires an integrative and critically analytical approach, one that acknowledges the interplay between cognitive, social, and cultural processes and the layered nature of blame attribution. Such a perspective can foster a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how gender norms, sexual orientation, and moral beliefs intersect in shaping observers' responses to male sexual minority victims of sexual violence.

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APPENDIX

Table 1*Overview of Included Studies (n = 39) and Reason for Inclusion*

| Reference | DAH | JWH | SAH |
|---|-----|-----|-----|
| Anderson, K. J. (2024). <i>Benign Bigotry</i> (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009244053 | | | x |
| Burger, J. M. (1981). Motivational biases in the attribution of responsibility for an accident: A meta-analysis of the defensive-attribution hypothesis. <i>Psychological Bulletin</i> , 90(3), 496-512. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.90.3.496 | x | | |
| Burt, D. L., & DeMello, L. R. (2002). Attribution of rape blame as a function of victim gender and sexuality, and perceived similarity to the victim. <i>Journal of Homosexuality</i> , 43(2), 39-57. https://doi.org/10.1300/J082V43N02_03 | | x | |
| Calhoun, , L. G., Selby, J. W., & Warring, L. J. (1976). Social Perception of the Victim's Causal Role in Rape: An Exploratory Examination of Four Factors. <i>Human Relations</i> , 29(6), 517-526. https://doi.org/10.1177/001872677602900602 | x | | |
| Caricati, L., Baldini, S., & Bonetti, C. (2023). Female-to-Male Sexual Assault: The Role of the Perpetrator's Attractiveness and Attributed Emotional States on Victim Blame. <i>Violence and Victims</i> , 38(3), 396-413. https://doi.org/10.1891/VV-2021-0172 | | | x |
| Davies, M., & Rogers, P. (2006). Perceptions of male victims in depicted sexual assaults: A review of the literature. <i>Aggression and Violent Behavior</i> , 11(4), 367-377. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.AVB.2006.01.002 | | x | |
| Diamond-Welch, B., Marin Hellwege, J., & Mann, O. (2018). Blame Avoidance and Transgender Individuals' Attributions About Rape: Unpacking Gendered Assumptions in Defensive Attribution Research. <i>Journal of Interpersonal Violence</i> , 36(9-10), 4690-4716. https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260518792241 | x | | |
| Doherty, K., & Anderson, I. (2004). Making sense of male rape: constructions of gender, sexuality and experience of rape victims. <i>Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology</i> , 14(2), 85-103. https://doi.org/10.1002/CASP.765 | | | x |

| Reference | DAH | JWH | SAH |
|--|-----|-----|-----|
| Ford, T. M., Liwag-McLamb, M. G., & Foley, L. A. (1998). Perceptions of rape based on sex and sexual orientation of victim. <i>Journal of Social Behavior & Personality</i> , 13(2), 253-262. | | | x |
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