Young Adults' Attitudes Toward Sex Trafficking, Its Myths, and Corresponding Perceptions of

Personal Safety

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Abstract

This thesis examined levels of knowledge, myth acceptance, and perceptions of personal safety around sex trafficking among Nova Scotian young adults. Violence condition and citizenship were manipulated in this vignette study to explore associations between blameworthiness, vignette believability, perceptions of safety, knowledge, and two covariates (commercial sexual involvement and victimization). Results revealed that less concern for personal safety was associated with less knowledge and less vignette believability. Participants ascribed less blame to the victim in the forceful trafficking depiction compared with a coercive condition. Participants reported any preventative action taken against the risk of sex trafficking. Responses indicated that most preventative action was not in line with most common coercive forms of trafficking, demonstrating a skewed knowledge of risk. Findings suggest that young adults are misguided in the realities of sex trafficking and education and prevention tactics should be adapted to combat myth acceptance and encourage more fulsome preventative actions.

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Introduction

Human trafficking is a prominent global human rights violation that has garnered increasing attention from the research community. Globally, the International Labour Organization (ILO; 2018), a United Nations agency, estimates that more than 40.3 million people are currently trafficked globally. There is frequent debate over what constitutes human trafficking and the appropriate language to use, but a commonly accepted definition comes from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons* in which human trafficking is defined as:

the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation (UNODC, 2000, p. 2).

In Canada, there were over 2,400 reported incidents of human trafficking[1] from 2009 to 2019 with 95% of victims being women and girls. Most (89%) victims were younger than 35, and 21% were younger than 18 (Public Safety Canada, 2022). In 2019 alone, police reported over 500 incidents of human trafficking in Canada, representing a rate of 1.4 incidents per 100,000 people and making up .02% of all police-reported incidents in 2019 (Ibrahim, 2021). Ontario and Nova Scotia are reported to be the primary locations for human trafficking in Canada. In 2019, Nova Scotia reported the highest rates of police-reported human trafficking incidents in Canada, with 51 reported human trafficking incidents, which was 7.5 times the

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[1] Human trafficking is an offence under the Canadian Criminal Code, where it is illegal to control or influence a person's movements with a purpose of exploitation, including but not limited to recruitment, harbouring, and transportation (*Criminal Code*, 1985, s. 279.01.1).

national average (Ibrahim, 2021). The same Statistics Canada report relayed that 2019 saw a

44% increase in trafficking incidents from 2018 and saw the highest rates in the province since

2009 (Ibrahim, 2021).

Human trafficking is a broad term and can take many forms, including forced labour,

domestic servitude, and debt bondage, among others. The present thesis focused on sex

trafficking[2], which refers to "the recruitment, harbouring, transportation, provision, or obtaining

of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act" (Trafficking Victims Protection Act, 2000,

s. 103.9)[3]. Sex trafficking represents 50% of trafficking worldwide with most victims (72%)

comprising women and girls (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, [UNODC], 2020).

Compared to human trafficking, there is relatively little research that focuses specifically on sex

trafficking; however, some studies that do look at sex trafficking often use the umbrella term of

human trafficking.

Statistics Canada (Ibrahim, 2021) reports all incidents of trafficking under the umbrella of

human trafficking, but specifies that trafficking for sexual exploitation (i.e., sex trafficking) is

the most detected form of trafficking in Canada. As Nova Scotia reports the highest rates of

human trafficking per capita in Canada and national statistics are not disaggregated by

trafficking type, logical inference concludes that sex trafficking is likely common in Nova Scotia

as well.

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[2] There is some uncertainty regarding terminology around sex trafficking. Prostitution, or sex work, refers to individuals consenting to trading sexual acts in exchange for some form of payment, while a victim of trafficking cannot consent. The terms "victim" and "survivor" are often used interchangeably, yet most literature now differentiates between the two, using "victim" to describe someone who is currently being trafficking, and "survivor" to refer to someone who was, but is no longer being trafficked (Baird et al., 2019). The current study will reflect this distinction.

[3] A commercial sex act is defined as any sexual act that is performed in exchange for anything of value, including but not limited to money, food, shelter, and protection, to any person (Trafficking Victims Protection Act, 2000, s. 103.3).

The present thesis aimed to better understand what young adults in Nova Scotia know about sex trafficking, what common myths and stereotypes are accepted, and how levels of myth acceptance influences appraisals of adult victims of sex trafficking via vignettes that depicted cases of sex trafficking. The current study consisted of young adults (aged 17-25) responding to vignettes that depicted a victim of sex trafficking who was trafficked in Nova Scotia; in addition, it examined how young adults respond to and accept sex trafficking myths and how these attitudes impact perceptions of personal safety. The majority of victims of sex trafficking in Canada are young adults (Ibrahim, 2021), so having participants be within the higher risk age range allowed for the opportunity to investigate the most prevalent attitudes toward and awareness of sex trafficking, and, what, if any, attentiveness to personal safety against the risk of sex trafficking is occurring.

Myths & Stereotypes Surrounding Sex Trafficking

Given its prevalence in Nova Scotia, sex trafficking is an important topic of research. A challenge in conducting research on sex trafficking and providing support to victims is the prevalence and reinforcement of stereotypes about sex trafficking that are present in society and mainstream media (Rodriguez-Lopez, 2018). Sex trafficking is a complex issue with many factors that contribute to its occurrence, yet perpetuation of myths and stereotypes can impede victim identification and impact the credibility of sex trafficking victims (Gonzalez-Pons et al., 2020).

Prior to discussing myths, it is important to briefly highlight some of the research data that speak to the realities of sex trafficking. Victims of sex trafficking in Canada are most often young women who are trafficked by someone they know (Ibrahim, 2021). Data from Statistics Canada found that of police-reported human trafficking incidents, 29% of victims were

trafficked by a friend or acquaintance, 25% were trafficked by a current or former romantic partner, and only 11% reported that they were trafficked by a stranger (Ibrahim, 2021). Substance use and addiction can play a significant role in sex trafficking, where victims are at high risk of substance use problems and mental health disorders (Gerassi, 2018). Substance use is frequently used as a form of control and intimidation as some victims are coerced or forced into selling sexual services for substances, while other victims turn to substances as a coping mechanism for their situation (Hopper, 2017). Lastly, out of over 900 Canadian police-reported incidents of sex trafficking between 2006 and 2017, only six (7%) involved international trafficking, while the vast majority were instances of domestic trafficking (Millar & O'Doherty, 2020).

Despite these realities, a common stereotype involves the narrative of the "ideal victim" of sex trafficking, which typically includes a woman or child from a low-income country who is forced to cross borders and is subsequently sex trafficked (Uy, 2011, Christie, 1986). This narrative evokes unequivocal sympathy and enforces the myth that sex trafficking always happens to the "other" and that it results in helpless, victimized women and girls who need to be rescued; however, when victims of trafficking do not fit this narrative, it leads to judgment, doubt, and sensationalism (Uy, 2011). Mainstream media often plays into this "ideal victim" narrative and portrays victims as young and innocent, usually in contrast to the depiction of hardened and promiscuous sex workers who joined the sex trade willingly (Menaker & Franklin, 2013). This leads the public to view trafficking through this lens and results in marginalization and obliviousness to those who do not fit the mould, along with a lack of awareness of the realities of sex trafficking (Gonzalez-Pons et al., 2020).

In addition to perpetuating the notion of a "ideal victim", sensationalism in the media can shape attitudes and understanding of sex trafficking and violence toward women specifically (Houston-Kolnik et al., 2020). The media often depicts traumatic and aggressive stories of trafficking, showing gruesome images, and perpetuating all traffickers as dominating and violent (Babu et al., 2022). By focusing on only the most sensationalized aspects of a trafficking case, media coverage fails to acknowledge the complexities of trafficking, its multiple forms, and often removes the autonomy from victims to share their own experiences (Houston-Kolnik et al., 2020).

Due to these widespread sex trafficking myths that are often perpetuated by mainstream media, public attitudes and perceptions toward sex trafficking and traffickers' methods of exploitation are frequently skewed. There are many risk factors that increase one's risk of being trafficked, such as homelessness, addiction, childhood maltreatment, and poverty (Wilson & Butler, 2014), but not all victims meet these criteria. These myths can be damaging as they could mean that victims will be overlooked by professionals and not offered the necessary services if professionals subscribe to such myths. Further, believing myths around methods of exploitation likely influences the individual's perceptions of victims, regardless of previous exposure to trafficking, and their perceptions of personal safety, which has not yet been directly examined in this field of research. There is also a prevalent myth that all traffickers are organized criminals with large trafficking enterprises and that they exploit their victims primarily through brute force (Heber, 2020); however, traffickers often establish their victims first through romantic relationships and/or by providing basic needs, which then can lead to victims being coerced and manipulated into sex trafficking (Baird et al., 2020; Cunningham & Cromer, 2016).

Often, the trafficking stories that the media depict are ones that further the perception of the ideal trafficking victim (Jobe, 2020). In fact, the coverage and perpetuation of extreme violence and organized crime trafficking rings has been found to set the standard of victimhood very high and establish evidence of physical abuse as a necessary factor for professionals to identify victims (Sigmon, 2008). Moreover, many have argued that mainstream media has the power to challenge stereotypes and sex trafficking myths (Walker, 2006; Saewyc et al., 2008). Saewyc and colleagues (2013) examined Canadian newspaper articles and the focus and language used when depicting sex trafficking. Many articles placed the blame on the victims themselves, and used contradictory statements, such as identifying an individual as a victim of sex trafficking but also as a sex worker, implying personal agency and choice while still being trafficked (Saewyc et al., 2013). Myth acceptance was also found to be related to less belief of reported sex trafficking and increased victim blame, which further demonstrates the danger of myth perpetuation within the public (Cunningham & Cromer, 2016).

Myth acceptance can also create a false sense of security and personal safety among the general public. Both past victimization and feelings of vulnerability influence perceptions of personal safety (Scherg & Eirnaes, 2022), but if there is an inaccurate understanding of risk or vulnerability, such as believing in myths or accepting stereotypes, then individuals may not take sufficient preventative action. As such, if people do not have an accurate understanding of the reality of sex trafficking and its victims, then they may have a perceived sense of personal safety that does not accurately represent their risk of becoming a victim of sex trafficking. This component of safety relative to trafficking attitudes has yet to be explored.

Moreover, while there is a growing awareness of the need to bring attention to domestic trafficking, there have been few studies that examine citizenship as a variable for attitudes

toward sex trafficking and myth acceptance. Most research has previously focused on international sex trafficking, with many studies exploring the effects of race of both study participant and trafficking victim. While there has been a growing shift of focus to encompass domestic sex trafficking in research, there has been little specifically about citizenship status of victims. Nevertheless, there is still the pervasive stereotype of trafficking victims being forced to leave their home country and some, often Eastern European women, are oversexualized in media coverage (Uy, 2011; Saewyc et al., 2013). There have also been suggestions that the emphasis on international sex trafficking may be sensationalized and not truly reflective of trafficking patterns (Millar & O'Doherty, 2020).

Vignette Studies on Attitudes about Sex Trafficking

The impact of attitudes on perceptions of trafficking can be thoroughly explored through vignette studies. Silver and colleagues (2015) were among the first to look at prosocial behaviour toward victims of sex trafficking. A sample of American psychology undergraduates were randomly assigned to a vignette of a young woman engaged in the commercial sex industry, where consensual nature of sexual activity (voluntary vs. involuntary) and citizenship (Eastern European vs. American) were manipulated. Participants then responded to a series of questions to measure levels of empathy and prosocial inclinations (Silver et al., 2015). Results demonstrated that empathy was positively associated with prosocial behaviour, with participants demonstrating the most empathy for the Eastern European victim of sex trafficking (Silver et al., 2015). Participants reported holding the American sex worker more accountable for their situation than the Eastern European victim of sex trafficking, despite the vignette in each condition depicting the woman having experienced familial abuse and alcoholism. Participants also found the woman to be less responsible for her behaviour when she was exploited, but only

when she was identified as an immigrant, rather than an American citizen. This finding reinforces the idea of a "ideal victim" being someone forcibly removed from their home country for purposes of sex trafficking (Uy, 2011) but contradicts previous research findings of perceived similarity and shared experiences being a predictor for empathy and lack of blame (Cromer & Freyd, 2009), thus highlighting the need for additional research on the role of citizenship of victims in perceptions of trafficking victims.

Cunningham and Cromer (2016) also used a vignette study to look at the influence of prevalent sex trafficking myths on attitudes toward victims. The researchers presented a vignette portraying a case of child sex trafficking to a sample of American undergraduate students. The vignette depicted a 13-year-old with a gender-neutral name who ran away from home and was subsequently sex trafficked by a stranger in exchange for food, shelter, and clothing. Participants responded to questions about the believability of the situation and the victim's perceived blame. Then, participants were presented with the author-developed Human Trafficking Myths Scale, which included 17 items that reflected false beliefs about the nature of trafficking, characteristics of trafficking victims, and victim agency (Cunningham & Cromer, 2016), as well as the Brief Betrayal Trauma Survey (BBTS; Goldberg & Freyd, 2006). Most participants (77%) indicated that they found the vignette believable and 31% attributed some blame to the victim. Men were found to be more accepting of the presented trafficking myths (e.g., trafficking must include elements of physical force, restraint, bondage, and/or violence), were more likely to blame victims, and were less likely to believe the veracity of the trafficking situation than were women (Cunningham & Cromer, 2016). Additionally, contrary to past research, participants' history of sexual trauma was not correlated with higher belief in the trafficking scenario and was not

significantly associated with victim blame. Finally, myth acceptance was related to less belief of reported sex trafficking and increased victim blame (Cunningham & Cromer, 2016).

Additionally, a study by Weiner and colleagues (2021), examined judgments toward victims of sex trafficking and sex workers, and how these beliefs influence whether participants felt the victims of trafficking should have been arrested, namely for the crime of prostitution. Participants were presented with one of eight vignettes depicting a victim of trafficking, in which vulnerability (vulnerable background vs. not vulnerable background), prior sex work (engaged in sex work before being trafficked vs. was not engaged in sex work before being trafficked), and subsequent livelihood (engaged in sex work after being trafficked vs. worked as a waitress after being trafficked) were manipulated. The vignette depicted an American police operation and prosecution of a sex trafficker who travelled between states to sell the sexual services of women he had trafficked. Participants were then presented with the legal definition of sex trafficking and were asked to report whether they believed the perpetrator to be guilty of trafficking and the victim guilty of prostitution. Participants also responded to whether they felt that the police should arrest the victim for "committing the crime of prostitution" (Wiener et al., 2021. p. 536). Participants reported that though they thought the perpetrator was almost certainly guilty of trafficking (98%), the woman was also guilty to some extent, since she participated in selling sexual services (80%). Those who were presented with the victim who was described as not vulnerable (depicted as having a privileged and stable upbringing) and having no previous experience with the commercial sex industry, had the most certainty rating (80%) that the victim was guilty and deserving criminal charges; however, when asked if the victim should be arrested, participants were much less certain (46%) that they were deserving of arrest, which differed from their guilt certainty of both trafficker and victim.

A final study examining attitudes toward child sex trafficking was conducted by Franklin and Menaker (2015) in which the researchers identified characteristics that influenced judgements of blameworthiness, as defined as the attribution of fault. Participants were undergraduate students who were randomly assigned to one of four vignettes depicting an underage girl as a victim of sex trafficking. In the vignettes, the race of the girl (White vs. non-White) and victimization history (present vs. not present) were manipulated. When participants were assigned to the vignette condition where the victimization history was absent, they reported significantly higher rates of blameworthiness than those who received the victimization history. Even when controlling for victimization history disclosure, participants rated the White victim with significantly higher levels of blame than the non-White victim. Blameworthiness was also significantly correlated with participants' attitudes toward sex work, with increased myth acceptance correlating with increased levels of blameworthiness, regardless of the victim's race. Further, participant-reported childhood physical abuse significantly predicted increased levels of blameworthiness, which does not support the theory of perceived similarity, in which individuals who perceive a similarity between their own identity or experience and that of others results in greater empathy and an ability to relate (Cromer & Freyd, 2009). Franklin and Menaker's study further highlights the significance of blameworthiness, race, and myth acceptance and its impact on attitudes toward victims of sex trafficking.

Current Study

In summary, vignette studies have demonstrated that acceptance of sex trafficking myths can influence attitudes and blame of trafficking victims. The studies also demonstrated that perceptions of victims can vary depending on information given about the victim, including race and citizenship. The current study built on past studies by further exploring levels of myth

acceptance and the influence of citizenship on appraisals of adult victims of sex trafficking. The notion of the "ideal victim" has been established as a harmful myth (Uy, 2011), yet past research has found less blame and higher empathy toward foreign victims of sex trafficking, highlighting the need for further research into the citizenship variable. The study also adds to the body of knowledge by exploring perceptions of personal safety in relation to sex trafficking. Nova Scotia has some of the highest reported rates of human trafficking in Canada (Ibrahim, 2021), which likely also means some of the highest rates of sex trafficking, and yet it is unknown whether this influences young adults' behaviour regarding their personal safety or if misguided myth acceptance results in limited safety precautions.

This study is one of the first of its kind conducted with a Nova Scotian sample and differs from past literature that focuses on child sex trafficking (Cunningham & Cromer, 2016; Franklin & Menaker, 2015), as adult victims not only make up the majority of sex trafficking victims, but they also present less of an immediate moral and ethical response than do children (Baird et al., 2020). It is also the first Canadian study to explore perceptions of personal safety in relation to sex trafficking attitudes and myths. Believability, that is, belief that the trafficking scenario is plausible, is also closely linked to perceptions of personal safety. If individuals are not aware of, or do not believe that various methods of trafficking are taking place in Nova Scotia, they are likely not taking adequate precautions to protect themselves from its risks.

This research is impactful from an education, prevention, and intervention perspective. Despite Nova Scotia having some of the highest rates of reported trafficking in Canada (Ibrahim, 2021), there does not appear to be an adequate understanding of the realities of sex trafficking. If myths and stereotypes continue to be perpetuated by the media and are what is commonly accepted, this will inhibit young adults and all Nova Scotians from learning about the risks of sex

trafficking, which will preclude them from taking measures to accurately reduce their risk. This study contributes to the current literature surrounding sex trafficking, as there is currently very little empirical work examining sex trafficking myths and its relation to attitudes and perceptions of safety. Lastly, this research presents a framework for future studies and supports community initiatives looking to increase awareness of sex trafficking and heighten approaches to personal safety.

There are five hypotheses that guided the current study. The hypotheses and their justification are presented below:

Hypothesis 1: Participants will assign less blame to the victim who has been exploited in an explicitly forceful method compared with a coercive method. The hypothesis is informed by previous research that found explicit and forceful depictions of sex trafficking generally elicit less blame (Cunningham & Cromer, 2016; Silver et al., 2015).

Hypothesis 2: Participants will assign less blame to the victim if they are identified as a non-citizen rather than a Canadian citizen. This hypothesis is informed by Silver and colleagues' (2015) findings, where increased empathy and less accountability was displayed toward the Eastern European victim compared with an American victim. It is believed that a similar result will be found when measuring blame between Canadian and non-Canadian victims in the current study.

Hypothesis 3: Participants who report less knowledge of sex trafficking will report a higher sense of perceived personal safety from sex trafficking than those with more knowledge. While this aspect of safety relative to trafficking knowledge has yet to be directly explored, myth acceptance can create a false sense of security (Scherg & Eirnaes, 2022) and, as such, it is

hypothesized that having less knowledge about sex trafficking and the realities of risk and vulnerability may result in individuals believing that they face no real risk.

Hypothesis 4: The association between violence in vignette condition and believability will be moderated by participants' knowledge of sex trafficking, such that participants who have less knowledge will report less believability in the coercive condition as compared to those in the explicitly forceful condition. If participants have limited knowledge and are unaware of the realities of sex trafficking, they may only view the explicitly forceful vignette condition as trafficking, due to the stereotypes established in media coverage (Jobe, 2020). Cunningham and Cromer (2016) found evidence to support this hypothesis as they found that limited knowledge was related to lower believability.

Hypothesis 5: There will be a negative association between believability and personal safety, such that participants who report less believability will report a higher sense of perceived personal safety than those reporting higher believability. Just as myth acceptance can contribute to a false sense of security (Scherg & Eirnaes, 2022), an inaccurate understanding of the realities of sex trafficking is associated with a lack of awareness of risk (Cunningham & Cromer, 2016). As such, individuals who are unaware of risk factors of sex trafficking should take fewer preventative measures for their safety. With this hypothesis, the current study also intends to fill the gap in research about personal safety relating to sex trafficking.

Given the potential impact of victimization history and involvement in commercial sexual activity (either selling sexual services or purchasing them), all of the main analyses will be re-run controlling for the potential confounds, victimization and commercial sexual involvement.

Method

Participants and Procedure

The sample included 323 participants who were recruited between June and November 2023 from a university and online community population. To recruit university participants ($n =$ 248), the study was advertised on SONA (Sona Systems, n.d.), a student bonus-point system for participating in psychological studies. In the present study, students were granted 0.5 bonus points for completing the survey. The online community sample ($n = 85$) was recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and social media websites Reddit and Instagram. Reddit is a website designed for content sharing comprised of multiple smaller topic-specific forums known as subreddits. The study was posted on the author's Instagram account and her supervisor's lab Reddit account. The author shared the post on approximately 15 different subreddits, including "r/NovaScotia", "r/halifax", and "r/HalifaxJobs". The study was also posted on subreddits for all Nova Scotian universities, community college, and towns across the province. Prior to participating, an online informed consent form was reviewed and, if the individual chose to complete the study after reviewing the consent form, they were presented with the study screening questions.

If responses to any of the three screening questions did not meet the recruitment requirements, they were unable to proceed to the survey. The first screening question was "Are you between the ages of 17 and 25?" in which the participant was asked to respond either "Yes" or "No". The second question asked, "Do you currently live in Nova Scotia?", once again with the option to respond either "Yes" or "No". Finally, participants were asked to provide one of two of the 3-digit Nova Scotia telephone area codes (902 or 782) as a precautionary measure to ensure as best as possible that all participants currently lived in Nova Scotia, though the region was also restricted through Qualtrics such that the survey automatically terminated if anyone

from outside Nova Scotia attempted to participate. If participants did not input either Nova

Scotia telephone area code, they were removed from the sample.

There were two manipulation checks post-vignette; $n = 21$ participants failed the

citizenship manipulation check (i.e., "Where was Sarah from?") and were subsequently removed

from the sample. There was a second manipulation check assessing the violence condition

variable (explicitly forceful or coercive; i.e., "Did Brian explicitly threaten Sarah with

violence?"). A few, $n = 30$, participants failed within the explicitly forceful condition and were

removed from the sample. However, the question was not found to be an effective manipulation

check for the coercive condition since coercive actions may not have been very evident in the

vignette or hard for participants to understand (see limitations). Thus, participants in the coercive

condition who failed this check but passed the other manipulation and attention checks were still

retained in the sample, $n = 10$. Four attention checks were randomly embedded throughout the

survey and participants' responses were removed from the sample if they did not pass all four (n

$= 11$). See Appendix B for the Attention Checks.

After applying all exclusion criteria, the total number of participants for analyses was

reduced to 206 participants between the ages of 17 and 25 ($M_{age} = 20.33$, $SD = 2.05$), with $n =$

189 recruited through SONA and $n = 17$ recruited online. The average completion time for the

survey was 16.21 minutes ($SD = 17.52$ minutes). In the total sample, 80.6% identified as

cisgender women ($n = 166$), 10.7% as cisgender men ($n = 22$) and 8.7% as a gender minority

(e.g., transgender; $n = 4$). The majority of participants were White ($n = 158$; 76.7%).

Participants recruited online were slightly older ($M_{age} = 22.19$, $SD = 2.62$) than those

recruited through SONA ($M_{age} = 19.63$; $SD = 1.91$). With SONA participants, 84.7% identified

as cisgender women ($n = 160$), 8.5% as cisgender men ($n = 16$), and 2.1% as gender non-

conforming ($n = 4$). Compared to the participants recruited online, 35.3% identified as cisgender women ($n = 6$), 35.3% as cisgender men ($n = 6$), and 17.6% as non-binary ($n = 3$). Over three-quarters of both groups identified as White (SONA, 76.2%; online, 82.4%). For a complete summary of demographic information, refer to Table 1. For the complete demographic questionnaire, refer to Appendix C.

Once participants completed the screening questions and were deemed eligible, they were randomly assigned to one of four vignettes that provided a description of an 18-year-old woman who was sex trafficked in Halifax, Nova Scotia. After reading the vignette, participants were asked a series of questions about what occurred in the vignette (manipulation checks) and the extent to which they believed the situation, and how they then reflected on their own personal safety as a result. Following these questions, participants responded to a brief demographics questionnaire and then completed three scales about their knowledge of sex trafficking, understanding of its myths, and perceptions of personal safety.

Measures

Trafficking Vignettes and Questions about Vignettes. Vignettes created by Cunningham and Cromer (2016) and those by Silver and colleagues (2015) were modified by the author to depict an 18-year-old woman victim of sex trafficking who had run away from home. Four vignettes have been created, each with the method of exploitation (either explicitly forceful or through coercion) and citizenship (either Canadian or Bulgarian) manipulated. See Appendix A for vignettes.

Participants were then asked a series of questions surrounding the believability of the vignette, the level of blame ascribed to the victim, and their perceived sense of personal safety, responding to each on a 5-point Likert scale. To assess believability, participants were asked to

respond to the question: "Do you find this situation believable?", adapted from Cunningham and

Cromer (2016), where 1 = not at all and 5 = entirely. The question assessing blame asked: "To

what extent was the victim to blame for her situation?", also adapted from Cunningham and

Cromer (2016), where 1 = not at all to blame and 5 = entirely to blame. Similarly, the author-

created question about personal safety asked: "To what extent does reading about this situation

make you concerned for your own personal safety?", once again, where 1 = not at all and 5 =

extremely.

Demographics Questionnaire. Participants responded to several demographics questions

asking participants' age, race, and gender identity. See Appendix C for the Demographics

Questionnaire.

Human Trafficking Myths Scale (HTMS; Cunningham & Cromer, 2016). The Human

Trafficking Myths Scale consists of 17 items, with each statement depicting a myth about either

the nature of trafficking, characteristics of trafficking victims, and victim agency (Cunningham

& Cromer, 2016). Each statement is then rated on a 6-point Likert scale, where 1 = definitely

false, 2 = mostly false, 3 = probably false, 4 = probably true, 5 = mostly true, and 6 = definitely

true. An example item is "Only foreigners and illegal immigrants are trafficked". The scale was

found to be face valid and was verified by a human trafficking expert to be reflective of

prevalent trafficking myths (Cunningham & Cromer, 2016).

An adapted version of Cunningham and Cromer's (2016) Human Trafficking Myths

Scale was used for the current study. The 17 statements in the scale were changed to reflect sex

trafficking in Canada, rather than broadly addressing human trafficking in the United States. For

example, the statement "Human trafficking does not happen in the United States" was changed

to "Sex trafficking does not happen in Canada". Chronbach's alpha indicated fairly high internal consistency for this sample at α = .79. See Appendix E for the adapted scale.

 Sex Trafficking Attitudes Scale (STAS; Houston-Kolnik et al., 2016). The Sex Trafficking Attitudes Scale is a 33-item measure designed to assess cognitive, behavioural, and affective attitudes toward victims of sex trafficking. The STAS (Houston-Kolnik et al., 2016) has six subscales: Knowledge About Sex Trafficking (e.g., "A person is trafficked when someone uses coercion to employ her in the sex industry"), Attitudes Toward Ability to Leave Sex Trafficking (e.g., "If a trafficked person chose to leave, the problem would be over"), Awareness of Sex Trafficking (e.g., "I have seen public awareness announcements about sex trafficking"), Attitudes Toward Helping Survivors (e.g., "If it is for the trafficked individual's own good, an outsider should do whatever is needed to make decisions for the trafficked person"), Empathic Reactions to Sex Trafficking (e.g., "I become emotional thinking about trafficking"), and Efficacy to Reduce Sex Trafficking (e.g., "I can make a difference for trafficked persons").

 Convergent validity, factor structure, and subscale consistency of the STAS (Houston-Kolnik et al., 2016) have been examined by the scale creators. The scale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency and small to moderate intercorrelations between a few of the subscales; however, the strongest correlation was .36, indicating that despite being intercorrelated, the subscales did measure distinct components of attitudes toward sex trafficking (Houston-Kolnik et al., 2016). Additionally, significant, moderate to large correlations between the STAS (Houston-Kolnik et al., 2016) and related constructs were found in terms of convergent validity. The scale was slightly adapted in that a subscale titled "Efficacy to Reduce Sex Trafficking" has been removed and Nova Scotia-specific statements have been added. This measure was used in the current study to assess participants' understanding of sex trafficking,

their empathic responses to victims, and their awareness of trafficking overall. For this study, internal consistency was found to be relatively high with Chronbach's alpha at $\alpha = .74$. See Appendix F for the scale.

General Social Survey on Canadians' Safety (Victimization) (GSS Safety; Statistics Canada, 2019). The General Social Survey on Canadians' Safety (Victimization) is a subscale of the national General Social Survey, a survey collected in all Canadian provinces and territories through Statistics Canada every five years. The Victimization subscale is comprised of 6 items, each aimed to measure Canadians' sense of safety, where participants respond on a 5-point Likert scale, varying per question. One example being, "In general, how satisfied are you with your personal safety from crime?", 1 = very dissatisfied, 2 = dissatisfied, 3 = neither dissatisfied nor satisfied, 4 = satisfied, and 5 = very satisfied. The final question asked participants, "Do you routinely take any preventative measures to avoid being sex trafficked?", 1 = No, 2 = No, but I feel like I should, 3 = Yes, occasionally, 4 = Yes, always. If participants responded yes, either 3 or 4, they were then asked an open-ended question, "If yes, what are they?" and prompted to report what preventative measures they take.

The GSS Safety was slightly modified for the current study, to measure perceptions of safety specifically toward the risk of sex trafficking, rather than victimization in general. For example, the item "how safe do you feel from crime walking alone in your area after dark?" was modified to "how safe do you feel from trafficking walking alone in your area after dark?". In the present study, internal consistency was low at $\alpha = .55$, but increased to $\alpha = .62$, after one problematic question was removed. Please see Appendix G for the adapted scale.

Commercial Sexual Involvement & Victimization. Commercial sexual involvement (either through selling sexual services or purchasing them) and victimization were controlled for

in the present study. Participants were asked to report whether they had any past sexual

victimization or commercial sexual activity, whether it be selling services or purchasing them.

Past sexual victimization was measured with the question, "Throughout your lifetime, how many

times have you been kissed, touched, or done anything sexual with another person when you did

not want to do so and/or did not provide consent?". Participants were asked to respond on a 5-

point Likert scale where 1 = Never, 0 times, 2 = 1-2 times, 3 = 3-4 times, 4 = 5+ times, and 5 =

10+ times. Using the same 5-point Likert scale, commercial sexual activity was assessed with the

questions, "Throughout your lifetime, how many times have you been involved in camming,

escorting, sugaring (i.e., sugar baby, momma, daddy), and/or providing virtual or in-person

sexual exchanges?" and "Throughout your lifetime, how many times have you paid for

camming, escorting, sugaring (i.e., sugar baby, momma, daddy), and/or virtual or in-person

sexual exchanges?". Definitions were provided for each term. After data collection, the

responses to these questions were dichotomized (Yes/No) due to the response distribution for

both of these variables that suggested higher levels of victimization and CSI were not commonly

endorsed.

Almost two-thirds of participants (65.5%, $n = 135$) reported having been kissed, touched,

or having had a sexual act done to them without their consent at least one time in their lives. The

majority of participants (85%; $n = 175$) reported never having provided camming, escorting,

sugaring, and/or providing virtual or in-person sexual exchanges, while 15% ($n = 31$) reported

having provided sexual services at least once. Further, most participants (97.6%; $n = 201$)

reported never having paid for camming, escorting, sugaring, and/or virtual or in-person sexual

exchanges. The two CSI items were combined for the purposes of including it as a control

variable in analyses. See Table 3 for a complete summary of responses and Appendix D for the

Commercial Sexual Involvement (CSI) Questionnaire.

Data Analysis

The first hypothesis for the current study was that participants would assign less blame to

the victim in the vignette who has been exploited in an explicitly forceful method than in a

coercive method. To test this hypothesis, participants were asked after reading the vignette to

answer a 5-point Likert scale (where 1 = not at all to blame and 5 = entirely to blame) question

on the amount of blame they placed on the individual in the vignette. A new variable was also

created to indicate whether participants were in the forceful or coercive conditions (dichotomous

variable forceful or coercive). Due to the continuous nature of the outcome variables, a linear

regression was conducted to explore the relationship between blame and violence condition.

Although other tests could have been used (e.g., t-test), it was decided that a linear regression

was most appropriate to ensure consistency with the other hypotheses and because it allowed for

the ability to control for variables (CSI and victimization) in the analyses. Subsequently,

recognizing the likely impact of victimization history and commercial sexual involvement (either

through selling sexual services or purchasing them), a hierarchical multiple regression was

conducted controlling for these two covariates with commercial sexual involvement and

victimization entered into step one and blame and violence condition entered into step two.

The second hypothesis posited that participants would assign less blame to the victim if

the victim were a non-citizen rather than a Canadian citizen. Using the same measurement of

blame as the first hypothesis, a linear regression was run to determine how the citizenship of the

victim (either Canadian or Bulgarian) would account for variance in the level of blame assigned

to the trafficking victim. Following, the same hypothesis was analyzed while controlling for

commercial sexual involvement and victimization history. A hierarchical multiple regression was conducted entering commercial sexual involvement and victimization in the first step and blame and citizenship in the second.

The third hypothesis postulated that participants who report less knowledge would report a higher sense of perceived personal safety against sex trafficking than those with more knowledge. A mean score was computed to measure Knowledge, comprised of knowledge-related questions from both the author-adapted Human Trafficking Myths Scale (Cunningham & Cromer, 2016) and the author-adapted Sex Trafficking Attitudes Scale (Houston-Kolnik et al., 2016). Similarly, a mean score was computed for a Safety score, including the author-adapted victimization subscale of the General Social Survey on Canada's Safety (Statistics Canada, 2019) and self-report questions on feelings of safety against trafficking in Nova Scotian neighbourhoods. Once again, linear regression was run to explore how participant knowledge accounted for variance in their sense of personal safety and subsequently, a hierarchical multiple regression with commercial sexual involvement and victimization (step one) and knowledge and sense of personal safety (step two) was conducted to control for the two covariates.

The fourth hypothesis in this study posited that the association between violence condition and believability would be moderated by knowledge, such that participants who have less knowledge will report less believability in the coercive condition as compared to those in the explicitly forceful condition. Believability was measured with a post-vignette question posed to assess participants' belief in the trafficking scenario. A Model 1 moderation analysis using the Hayes (2022) PROCESS model was conducted, then re-run to include the covariates of commercial sexual involvement and victimization.

The fifth hypothesis theorized that there would be a negative association between believability and personal safety, where participants who report less believability report a higher sense of perceived personal safety than those reporting higher believability. Linear regression was run with the computed believability and safety scores, then re-run as a hierarchical multiple regression with commercial sexual involvement and victimization in the first step and believability and personal safety in the second in order to control for the covariates.

Finally, post-hoc analyses were conducted on the open-ended question pertaining to preventative action in the General Social Survey on Canadians' Safety (Victimization) (Statistics Canada, 2019). Of the total sample, $n = 80$ participants completed the open-ended question. The author reviewed and coded the responses into twelve common actions identified in the answers.

Results

The means, standard deviations, ranges of total score, confidence intervals, skewness, and kurtosis were computed for descriptive analyses. See Table 2 for the descriptive statistics of all variables of interest. Notably, blameworthiness was very low for the entire sample, while believability was high. Most participants ($n = 151$, 73%) did not place any blame on the victim in the vignettes. To explore this further, post-hoc analyses were run to examine if there was a difference between men and women on blameworthiness and believability. A sensitivity analysis was conducted using the G*Power software package (Faul et al., 2007), which suggested that the Mann-Whitney U tests would be sensitive to effects of Cohen's d = 0.65 ($p = .05$, two-tailed). The post-hoc Mann-Whitney U tests were not statistically significant, though there was a small effect found regarding believability, where women reported higher believability than men, $U = 1492.5$, $p = .128$. See Appendix I for the Mann-Whitney U test results.

As the variables were not all normally distributed, Spearman's Rho correlations were conducted to examine whether there were intercorrelations between the variables of interest: blameworthiness, believability, perceptions of personal safety, knowledge, commercial sexual involvement, victimization, preventative action, and myth acceptance. There were many significant correlations, while a few were notable. Particularly, preventative action was significantly correlated with all variables of interest aside from commercial sexual involvement. Results indicated that there was a positive correlation between personal safety and preventative action, $r(204) = .671$, $p = .01$, whereby participants reporting higher precaution also reported frequently taking action to protect themselves.

Results also demonstrated a positive correlation between knowledge and personal safety, $r(204) = .210$, $p = .01$, such that participants with more knowledge about sex trafficking reported more precaution around their safety from trafficking. Victimization was also positively correlated with personal safety, $r(204) = .253$, $p = .01$, indicating that participants who reported experiencing sexual violence also reported higher concern about their safety from sex trafficking. Further, commercial sexual involvement was correlated with victimization, $r = .274$, $p = .001$, finding that participants who reported either buying or selling sexual services more frequently reported experiences of sexual victimization. Full correlation results can be found in Table 4.

To assess whether there were any differences due to gender, the intercorrelations were re-run with the $n = 22$ cisgender men (see Appendix H). The size and direction of effects changed for some of the variables of interest; however, due to the small sample size, caution is required when interpreting the results and comments are just provided on whether there was a change in the direction of the effect. Overall, the correlations with believability largely differed, as believability was negatively correlated with all variables aside from personal safety and

blameworthiness for the cisgender men compared with the total sample where believability was positively correlated with all but commercial sexual involvement and blameworthiness. Believability and blameworthiness were negatively correlated for the entire sample, but there was a positive association between these two variables for cisgender men. Further, preventative action and believability were significantly positively correlated in the overall sample, but negatively correlated within the men participants.

Regressions

A sensitivity analysis conducted using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) suggested that linear bivariate regressions with the current sample would be sensitive to effects of Cohen's $d = .04$ with 80% power ($p = .05$, two-tailed), such that the study would not be able to reliably detect effects smaller than Cohen's $d = .04$.

Hypothesis 1. A linear bivariate regression was conducted to test whether violence condition (either explicitly forceful or coercive) was associated with the blameworthiness of vignette victims. An analysis of standardized residuals was carried out on the data to identify any outliers, which indicated that there were four outliers, though all were retained in the sample. The data met the assumption of independent errors (Durbin-Watson = 1.96). The histogram of standardized residuals indicated normality was violated (M = 1.37, SD = .71); however, this was not a concern due to the sufficiently large sample size, $N = 206$, as the impact of non-normality is effectively diminished (Hair et al., 2013). The data also met the assumption of non-zero variances (Violence Condition, Variance = .243; Blame, Variance = .497).

Using the enter method it was found that violence condition accounted for a significant amount of the variance in blameworthiness, $F(1, 204) = 9.46$, $p = .002$, $R^2 = .044$, $R^2_{adjusted} = .04$. The analysis showed that violence condition was significantly associated with blameworthiness

of vignette victims, $\beta = .30,\ SE = .10,\ t(204) = 3.08,\ p = .002,$ such that participants attributed less blame to the victim when they were in the explicitly forceful condition compared with the coercive condition.

Hypothesis 2. A linear bivariate regression was run to assess whether victim citizenship was associated with blameworthiness of vignette victims. An analysis of standardized residuals was conducted to identify outliers and, though there were three outliers identified, they were once again retained. The data met the assumption of independent errors (Durbin-Watson = 1.95). Once again, normality was violated for blameworthiness, as indicated through the histogram of standardized residuals and P-P plot, but it was not a concern due to the sample size. Finally, the assumption of non-zero variances was met, Blame, Variance = .705; Citizenship, Variance = .250.

Using the enter method, results indicated that victim citizenship did not explain a significant proportion of variance in blameworthiness, $F(1, 204) = .403, p = .526,\ R^2 = .002, R^2_{adjusted} = -.003$. The analysis showed that victim citizenship was not significantly associated with blameworthiness of vignette victims, $\beta = -.063, SE = .10, t(204) = -.635, p = .526$.

Hypothesis 3. A linear bivariate regression was conducted to explore the impact of knowledge of sex trafficking on perceived personal safety. An analysis of standardized residuals was carried out, which showed that the data contained no outliers, and the assumption of independent errors was met (Durbin-Watson = 2.09). Both the histogram of standardized residuals and normal P-P plot of standardized residuals indicated that the data contained approximately normally distributed errors. Further, visual inspection of the scatterplot of standardized predicted values demonstrated that the assumptions of homogeneity of variance and

linearity were met. Finally, the data met the assumption of non-zero variances (Safety, Variance = .737; Knowledge, Variance = .055).

Using the enter method it was found that knowledge explained a significant amount of the variance in perceived personal safety, $F(1, 204) = 10.59$, $p = .001$, $R^2 = .049$, $R^2_{adjusted} = .045$. The analysis demonstrated that knowledge of sex trafficking was significantly associated with perceptions of personal safety, $\beta = .81$, $SE = .25$, $t(204) = 3.25$, $p = .001$, whereby greater knowledge of sex trafficking was associated with a greater awareness of personal safety.

Hypothesis 4. A moderation analysis was performed, using centered variables, with SPSS's PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2022). No assumptions were violated. The overall model that examined if knowledge moderated the association between violence condition and knowledge was not significant, $F(3, 202) = 1.53$, $p = .208$, $R^2 = .022$. Table 5 displays the unstandardized regression coefficients for the moderation analysis. The interaction effect was not statistically significant ($p = .141$), which indicated that knowledge did not moderate the effect of violence condition on vignette believability. For the purposes of completeness, Figure 1 shows the slopes and Table 6 presents the conditional effects of the focal predictor (violence condition) at three values of the moderator (knowledge).

Hypothesis 5. A linear bivariate regression was conducted to assess the relationship between believability of the vignette conditions and perceived personal safety. There were no outliers, as identified through an analysis of standard residuals. The assumption of independent errors was met (Durbin-Watson = 2.06), and visual inspection of the histogram of standardized residuals, normal P-P plot, and scatterplot demonstrated approximately normally distributed errors and that the assumptions of homogeneity of variance and linearity were met. The

assumption of non-zero variances was also met (Safety, Variance = .737; Believability, Variance = .513).

Linear regression using the enter method demonstrated that believability in the trafficking vignette explained a significant amount of variance in perceived personal safety, $F(1, 204) = 8.80$, $p = .003$, $R^2 = .041$, $R^2_{adjusted} = .037$. The analysis indicated that believability was associated with perceived personal safety, $\beta = .24$, $SE = .08$, $t(204) = 2.97$, $p = .003$, such that greater believability was associated with higher perceptions of personal safety.

Commercial Sexual Involvement and Victimization

All analyses were re-run controlling for commercial sexual involvement (both selling and purchasing) and victimization. Across all of the analyses, controlling for commercial sexual involvement and victimization did not change the results of the regression. See Tables 7 through 10 for the hierarchical regression results and Table 11 for the conditional effects of the focal predictor (violence condition) at three values of the moderator (knowledge) when controlling for commercial sexual involvement and victimization.

Post-hoc Analyses

A post-hoc analysis was conducted on the participants' answers to the open-ended question ($n = 80$) around preventative measures taken for their safety against sex trafficking and twelve overarching responses were found. The four most endorsed responses were "not walking alone in the dark", "sharing location/using a tracking app", "carrying protection/weapon", and "being aware of surroundings".

The most common response mentioned was "not walking alone in the dark" ($n = 44$), where 55% of participants who reported taking preventative measures stated that they would, for example, "avoid walking alone at night", or "try to walk with others at night when possible". The

second most common response was "sharing location/using a tracking app" ($n = 26$). Many participants reported sharing their location from their phone with family and/or friends such that, "multiple people that I trust have access to my location at all times". One participant wrote that they, "always tell others where [they are] going, having a tracking app (Life360) on [their] cell phone".

Of those who reported taking preventative action, $n = 25$ participants reported "carrying protection/weapon", with $n = 2$ acknowledging that they carried something illegal to carry in Canada. In this response, $n = 5$ described carrying a whistle or alarm, while others either reported they, "keep pepper spray with me", "carry mace around with me", or "hold keys in optimal position to possibly stab". The fourth most prevalent response was "being aware of surroundings", where $n = 23$ provided answers such as, "check my surroundings regularly", "no headphones while walking at night or in unfamiliar areas" and "I am always watching making sure no one is following us, or is slowly advancing". A list of all responses and sample narrative excerpts are presented in Table 12.

Discussion

Summary

In summary, this study explored what young adults in Nova Scotia know about sex trafficking, its myths, and how levels of knowledge and myth acceptance related to and influenced their perceived personal safety related to sex trafficking. Nova Scotia has the highest rates per-capita of police-reported trafficking incidents in Canada (Ibrahim, 2021) and yet, there are few studies that have examined what at-risk age groups - namely, young adults – in the Maritimes understand about sex trafficking and how they view their level of personal safety. Therefore, the present study addressed a gap in the literature by assessing knowledge of sex

trafficking, measuring myth acceptance and stereotype awareness, and identifying how safe young adult Nova Scotians perceive themselves and their neighbourhoods to be from sex trafficking.

Results demonstrated that there was an association between presence of violence in a vignette depicting sex trafficking and a higher degree of victim blame. Further, an association was found between perceptions of personal safety and both knowledge of sex trafficking and believability in the appraisal of a vignette on sex trafficking. The present findings failed to find support for the moderating effect of knowledge on the association between violence and believability. A further aim of this study was to explore the associations between blame and victim citizenship, though the results suggested there was no significant association between these two variables. Despite these hypotheses being unsupported, findings of this study contribute meaningfully to the growing body of literature on sex trafficking in Canada.

Blameworthiness Attributed to Trafficking Victim

The vast majority of participants did not blame the victim for the trafficking situation, so there was a restricted range on this main outcome of interest (see limitations). This is an interesting finding, as most literature reports more nuanced blameworthiness, though women typically assign less blame to victims of trafficking (Cunningham & Cromer, 2016). The majority of the sample for the current study were White, educated, cisgender women which likely influenced the blameworthiness results.

Victim blame was explored in relation to vignettes of sex trafficking that depicted different types of violence (explicitly forceful or coercive) and citizenship (Canadian or Bulgarian). The present study found that explicit force was associated with victim blame, such that results supported the hypothesis that participants would assign less blame to the victim who

had been explicitly forcefully trafficked as compared to the victim who was coerced. This finding is in line with previous research that found that explicit and forceful depictions of sex trafficking generally elicit less blame than coercive depictions (Cunningham & Cromer, 2016; Silver et al., 2015). The present research suggests that these findings extend to a sample of Canadian young adults.

Previous research has established that most trafficking victims are either coerced through romantic relationships or are first provided basic needs to create dependency then are subsequently sex trafficked (Baird et al., 2020), and far fewer involve explicit force (Cunningham & Cromer, 2016). The current study, in conjunction with past literature (Cunningham & Cromer, 2016), demonstrates that less blame is attributed to victims who are trafficked with explicit violence, such that depictions of coercive sex trafficking, the more common trafficking scenario, elicited more blameworthiness toward the victim. This finding is significant because most trafficking stereotypes involve very violent and aggressive forms of sex trafficking (Babu et al., 2022), therefore likely influencing the idea that victims are less to blame when faced with aggression and force. This also fits with literature on sexual violence, where in cases of sexual violence, more explicit violence is associated with less victim blame (Gravelin et al., 2019). On the other hand, this perpetuates the notion that coercive methods of trafficking may be more avoidable, especially compared to more forceful methods, and therefore the victim may be deserving of blame.

In terms of citizenship, it was hypothesized that participants would assign less blame to non-citizens from Bulgarian than Canadian citizens, which was not supported by the current findings. Past literature has been divided on the impact of citizenship as Silver and colleagues (2015) found increased empathy and less blame toward Eastern European victims as compared to

American victims, while Cromer & Freyd (2009) highlighted that less blame is attributed to victims that are most similar to participants. Citizenship and sex trafficking is involved in many pervasive myths, such as that of the "ideal victim", where a woman or child from a low-income country is sex trafficked and forced to cross borders (Uy, 2011). This myth may have influenced participants' perceptions of blame as the author attempted to balance manipulating victim citizenship without provoking any myths or stereotypes. Another consideration that cannot be ignored is the ongoing war in Ukraine resulting in almost one million applications from Eastern Europeans seeking temporary residence in Canada (Immigration and Citizenship, 2023). Considering the non-Canadian victims in the vignette were from Bulgaria, the increased number of Eastern Europeans arriving in Canada and the subsequent media coverage may have inadvertently influenced participants and their perceptions of the victim.

Moreover, both depictions of the vignette victim, Canadian and Bulgarian, implied that the victim was White. However, if the victim was a different race there may have been more of an effect from the citizenship manipulation. For example, if the victim was from Southeast Asia, it may have enabled the majority White participants to view the victim as "other" (Uy, 2011). This othering would distance the participant from the victim and the trafficking they are experiencing, subsequently influencing perceptions of blame.

Perceptions of Personal Safety

Participants' perceptions of personal safety in relation to the vignettes and personal risk of being sex trafficked was of particular interest in this study. Perceptions of personal safety involved participants' concern about trafficking rates, risk within their neighbourhoods and Nova Scotia broadly, and how apprehensive they were about the risk of being trafficked when home alone, walking in the dark, and waiting for and/or taking public transit at night.

In the current study, perceptions of personal safety were explored in relation to knowledge of sex trafficking and believability of the trafficking situation. Results indicated that knowledge was significantly related to perceived personal safety, such that participants who reported less knowledge of sex trafficking were less concerned over personal safety from trafficking and reported taking fewer precautions as a result. Less believability was also significantly associated with less concern for personal safety and lower perceived risk of being sex trafficked. These are novel findings specifically relating to sex trafficking and perceived personal safety, but previous research has found that knowledge of potential risk influences safety-related behaviours (Logan & Walker, 2021), supporting the notion that perceptions of safety and associated preventative actions would be impacted by knowledge and believability of sex trafficking situations. This finding also suggests that being aware of sex trafficking in Nova Scotia prompts young adults to take precautionary measures to lower their personal risk.

When examining intercorrelations between the study variables, both perceptions of personal safety and taking preventative actions correlated with many variables of interest. Taking preventative action against the risk of sex trafficking was positively correlated with vignette believability, heightened concern over personal safety, knowledge about sex trafficking, and personal victimization. Preventive methods that were taken by participants were able to be examined based on the answers provided to an open-ended question in the survey. The most common types of preventative action included not walking alone in the dark, sharing one's location or using a tracking app, carrying protection/weapon, and being aware of one's surroundings. Notably, almost all types of prevention methods identified by participants were methods of preventing explicitly forceful trafficking. Participants reported carrying weapons, not walking home alone, and being wary of strangers, among other actions, yet these methods of

prevention do not address how most traffickers know their victims and establish trust and dependence on them before trafficking occurs (Menaker & Franklin, 2013). This finding is impactful because participants who report taking preventative action against the risk of sex trafficking may have an inflated sense of personal safety as their prevention does not truly account for how trafficking most commonly occurs and may even be solely preventing more explicit stereotypical trafficking methods. This finding was likely influenced by previous safety-related questions inquiring about perceived risk while walking alone or taking public transit, though it is still notable that only one response among all reported preventative actions was related to more coercive approaches to trafficking, and that was online safety.

A few participants reported being wary of engaging with strangers online and not meeting with anyone alone in person after connecting over social media. There is a growing body of research exploring the role of the Internet and social media in sex trafficking, and the literature suggests that social media and the Internet broadly can play a large role in establishing contact and grooming sex trafficking victims, especially among children and youth (O'Brien & Li, 2019). Previous research details the use of social media platforms primarily for advertising trafficked persons for sexual exploitation more often than online-facilitated trafficking recruitment (Gezinski & Gonzalez-Pons, 2022), though significantly more research on the role of social media and the internet is needed in regard to sex trafficking.

Interestingly, while some participants ($n = 7$) mentioned avoiding strangers, there was no mention of substance use, such as watching one's drink, not accepting drinks from strangers, or being careful with substance consumption while around strangers. There is a large body of research around sexual violence and alcohol within this age group, where substantial alcohol consumption is significantly associated with higher rates of sexual violence among university-

aged individuals (Burke et al., 2023). There are also well-established efforts to raise awareness among young adults about the increased risks of sexual violence and efforts to provide alcohol and drug use education; as a result, it was unexpected that there was no mention of substance use among the reported preventative actions.

Commercial Sexual Involvement and Victimization

Participants' commercial sexual involvement and victimization history were identified as potential covariates and variables of interest in the current study. Participants were asked to report if they had experience either selling or paying for sexual services while victimization involved any sexual act done to them without their consent. Unexpectedly, controlling for the covariates did not significantly influence any of the findings. This is contrary to previous research that has made connections between victimization and blame (Franklin & Menaker, 2015). There have been contrasting findings around the influence of victimization on believability (Cromer & Freyd, 2009; Cunningham & Cromer, 2016) so the lack of influence from the two covariates in the current study lend further evidence to this complex relationship.

As is well established in past research, individuals selling sexual services can face high risk of violence and various forms of victimization (Bungay et al., 2012). Additionally, victimization history increases risk of further revictimization, especially when initial abuse occurs at a young age (Barnes et al., 2009). Although it was not the main focus of analyses, the current study found that commercial sexual involvement was correlated with victimization. This finding deserves some consideration. Deering and colleagues (2014) identified that certain factors heightened victimization risk among those who sell sexual services, including type of sexual service provided and location. In the past few years, many have turned to online platforms to engage in sex work, which has had significant influence on the commercial sex industry

(Cunningham et al., 2018). This shift has granted more agency to individuals selling sexual services and has eliminated in-person victimization risk; however, as sex work evolves so too does risk. Current research posits that the increase and comparative ease and anonymity of online commercial sexual activity may encourage young adults and adolescents to start selling sexual content while underage and without being properly equipped with how to identify risk of manipulation and coercion while interacting with customers (Campbell et al., 2019).

Implications

Results from this study have several broad implications. The first implication involves education and prevention. As the Canadian province with the highest rates of trafficking per capita (Ibrahim, 2019), a more fulsome understanding of the realities of sex trafficking are essential to prevention, identification, and victim support. First, in the current study, a higher degree of blame was placed on victims who were trafficked using coercion rather than force, which is the more frequent method of trafficking (Baird et al., 2020). A possible implication is that sex trafficking is not being properly identified in coercive and manipulative situations and/or victims are being blamed for being trafficked. Should blame be placed on victims, it is more likely that the situation will be seen as something that can be left or stopped whenever the victim wanted, and proper supports and services may not be made available as a result. Victim blame measured in the current study established that there are clear misconceptions around the realities of sex trafficking and substantial harm can be done when victims are blamed for being sex trafficked. Participants also reported taking steps to prevent explicitly forceful sex trafficking, suggesting that knowledge is skewed, and it is possibly leading to behaviours that are less effective at prevention.

Educational methods to correct these myths should be implemented, particularly targeted toward young adults to connect with this age group who may be more likely to be targeted by trafickers. Education on sex trafficking should be included in sexual violence prevention initiatives, and sexual health lessons in school should include how to look out for signs of grooming, coercion, and manipulation within relationships. Current public advertisements frequently only address explicitly forceful forms of trafficking and are often seen in airports and bus stations, which furthers the misguided belief that trafficking must involve the victim being removed from their environment. These public advertisements should instead report types of coercive behaviours, inform Nova Scotians that most victims know their traffickers (Ibrahim, 2021), and highlight the significant role substance use and addiction can play in sex trafficking (Gerassi, 2018). These educational measures would combat myth acceptance and ensure a more accurate understanding of sex trafficking in Nova Scotia.

Another important takeaway involves personal safety. The current study is the first of its kind to explore perceived personal safety from sex trafficking within Nova Scotia. Individuals with higher knowledge about sex trafficking demonstrated more concern for their personal safety. Interestingly, reported preventative action focused on defending against physical risk of forceful trafficking methods. Educators and community organizations can use this information to better educate young adults, even those who already have foundational knowledge about sex trafficking, on how to identify trafficking attempts and what coercive behaviours to look out for among peers, such as grooming, love bombing, and isolation, among many others. Being concerned about personal safety does not necessarily mean that the fear is well-placed, and so efforts to further diminish myth acceptance will be of great benefit.

Additionally, these reported preventative actions may be better suited to diminishing risk of being victim to other crimes, such as assault or theft. These findings can serve to amplify the message that general safety methods are still of great importance, even if they may not be directly averting sex trafficking as expected.

Lastly, as selling sexual services online continues to grow in popularity (Cunningham et al., 2018), commercial sexual involvement will evolve, as will the associated risks of victimization and sex trafficking. There is limited research on the prevalence of online trafficking in young adults, though it was encouraging that one of the responses from the current study was preventative action around online safety. Nonetheless, there is a need for clarity and enforcement of age restrictions, safe practices, and education on risk factors for online sex work to encourage sex work that is conducted safely and consensually. Adults can choose to do what they wish with their bodies and sex work *is* work. The focus simply needs to be on how to help those in the commercial sex industry keep themselves safe.

Limitations

There are several limitations within the present study. First, regarding generalizability, the study relied on self-report data and a convenience sample recruited from both online forums (Amazon MTurk, Instagram, and Reddit) and through SONA. Further, the sample was relatively well-educated given that they were predominately university students who would have been expected to have some knowledge on this topic. As such, these results may not be generalizable to the public. Further, participants may have self-selected to participate if they had an interest in the topic or had experience with these issues.

Moreover, there were significant challenges to participant recruitment; namely, it was difficult to recruit broadly online through social media and find participants who fit the

eligibility criteria via the platform that was used to recruit general community participants. Most notably, hundreds of individuals clicked the link from outside of Canada, only to be automatically denied due to the study's location criteria. Recruitment also occurred through Amazon MTurk, which at the time of the study launch, reported having approximately 1000 Canadian participants, though with eligibility restricted to just individuals in Nova Scotia, it was not a fruitful recruitment avenue. As a result, the majority of participants who were retained in the sample were from the online university research platform, SONA, which may have influenced external validity.

Likely due in part to majority of participants having been recruited from SONA, the sample size was comprised of mostly White, cisgender, educated women, which further limits generalizability. Post-hoc analyses found no statistically significant differences in the main outcomes of interest, though there was a small effect found in that men rated believability slightly lower than women (small effect and both were in the same range of strongly disagree). There were also some changes in the direction of the correlations between several variables of interest. While the sample of cisgender men is relatively small and these results should be interpreted cautiously, these findings suggest that there may be interesting differences between men and women which could be explored further in future research with a larger sample of men.

Past research has established that women in general worry more about their personal safety, educate themselves more on risks, and take more safety precautions than men (Logan & Walker, 2021). In addition, having an educated sample increases the likelihood of higher general knowledge of victimization and sex trafficking, especially considering the student participants were all enrolled in psychology courses. Further, young adults, in general, are

relatively socially aware and are more exposed to global issues than previous generations,

resulting in increased activism and advocacy. As such, this sample of mostly young,

educated cisgender women may have been previously exposed to more information

combatting myths and stereotypes around sex trafficking which would subsequently

influence their participation in the current study.

Further, with the disproportionate percentage of women in the sample likely

influencing the low levels of blame placed on the victim, it is important to consider the

blameworthiness results. The present study relied on a simple measurement of

blameworthiness which limited the opportunity for the nuance that is found in previous

literature. If the measure had been expanded upon to include other measures (e.g., empathy

for the victim) the results may have differed.

Participants who reported the highest knowledge of sex trafficking also reported less

belief in the statistically more common, coercive condition. This finding was surprising and

presents a possible limitation in the Knowledge about Sex Trafficking subscale of the Sex

Trafficking Attitudes Scale (STAS; Houston-Kolnik et al., 2016). Results suggest that the

subscale may instead measure concern about sex trafficking, thus following that higher

knowledge (or concern) is associated with greater believability in the explicitly forceful

depiction of sex trafficking. As a result, the Human Trafficking Myths Scale (Cunningham &

Cromer, 2016) alone may have been a better measurement of knowledge, such that it assesses

myth acceptance and belief, or disbelief, of misinformation.

Finally, the violence condition manipulation presents a possible limitation. The author

determined that the coercive condition could have been more clearly identified within the

vignettes; for example, the trafficker could have explicitly told the victim that she owed him

for providing housing and the only way to achieve this would be by having sex for money.

The definition of coercion could also have been provided to participants, which may have

allowed a greater number of participants to properly identify the coercive behaviour in the

vignette. Many participants in the coercive condition were failing the manipulation check,

despite passing the citizenship manipulation check and all four attention checks. Those

participants were retained in the sample as a result, though this presents the question of

whether the manipulation was strong enough overall, which lends some skepticism to the

analyses involving violence condition.

Future Research Directions

Despite these limitations, the present study offers ample opportunity for future

research. Perceived personal safety from sex trafficking is an understudied topic that would

benefit greatly from additional research. This study primarily explored participants' concern

over risk of trafficking broadly, and in situations such as waiting for public transit in the

dark, walking alone at night, or being home alone, which are far from the only occasions

when trafficking occurs. It would be beneficial to assess perceived personal safety in relation

to the complexities of sex trafficking that occur under the guise of romantic relationships and

other trafficking situations (Baird et al., 2020). These types of research studies could be

important for educational initiatives that aim to equip participants with evidence-based

recommendations on reducing risk and identifying human trafficking.

Similarly, it would be beneficial to conduct a similar study with professionals within

the criminal justice system and those who create policy and/or interact with victims of sex

trafficking. Research such as this would help to inform a better understanding of knowledge,

myth acceptance and believability among those who have vast influence on how sex

trafficking is dealt with and how its victims are supported. It would also provide insight into the understanding of professionals who make decisions that could impact victims and the way their case might be handled.

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18 U.S. Code § 1591

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Table 1.

Demographic Variables of Participants.

	Total Participants n = 206	SONA Participants n = 189	Non-SONA Online Participants n = 17
	N (%) or M (SD)		
<u>Age</u>	20.33 (2.05)	19.63 (1.91)	22.19 (2.62)
17	6 (2.9%)	5 (2.6%)	1 (5.9%)
18	22 (10.7%)	22 (11.6%)	-
19	44 (21.4%)	43 (22.8%)	1 (5.9%)
20	47 (22.8%)	44 (23.3%)	3 (17.6%)
21	38 (18.4%)	36 (19%)	2 (11.8%)
22	14 (6.8%)	13 (6.9%)	1 (5.9%)
23	13 (6.3%)	12 (6.3%)	1 (5.9%)
24	9 (4.4%)	6 (3.2%)	3 (17.6%)
25	6 (2.9%)	2 (1.1%)	4 (23.5%)
Prefer not to answer	6 (2.9%)	5 (2.6%)	1 (5.9%)
Missing	1 (0.5%)	1 (.5%)	-
<u>Gender</u>			
Cisgender woman	166 (80.6%)	160 (84.7%)	6 (35.3%)
Cisgender man	22 (10.7%)	16 (8.5%)	6 (35.3%)
Transgender	4 (1.9%)	3 (1.6%)	1 (5.9%)
Non-binary	4 (1.9%)	1 (.5%)	3 (17.6%)
Gender non-conforming	5 (2.4%)	4 (2.1%)	1 (5.9%)
Prefer not to answer	4 (1.9%)	4 (2.1%)	-
Missing	1 (0.5%)	1 (.5%)	-
<u>Racial/ethnic identity</u>			
Aboriginal/Indigenous	3 (1.5%)	2 (1.1%)	1 (5.9%)
Arab/West Asian (e.g., Armenian, Egyptian, Iranian, Lebanese, Moroccan)	9 (4.4%)	9 (4.8%)	-
Black (e.g., African, Haitian, Jamaican, Somali)	6 (2.9%)	6 (3.2%)	-
Chinese	5 (2.4%)	4 (2.1%)	1 (5.9%)
Filipino	1 (0.5%)	1 (0.5%)	-
Japanese	1 (0.5%)	1 (0.5%)	-
Latin American	1 (0.5%)	1 (0.5%)	-
South Asian	9 (4.4%)	9 (4.8%)	-
South East Asian	2 (1%)	2 (1.1%)	-
White (Caucasian)	158 (76.7%)	144 (76.2%)	14 (82.4%)
Other	8 (3.9%)	7 (3.7%)	1 (5.9%)
Prefer not to answer	2 (1%)	2 (1.1%)	-

Note. Dashes designate no data for the specific category.

Table 2.

Descriptive Statistics for Study Correlates.

Scale	Mean	*SD*	Min.	Max	Skew	Kurtosis
Human Trafficking Myths Scale	1.56	.44	1.00	3.63	1.32	2.61
Sex Trafficking Attitudes Scale	3.94	.34	2.85	4.67	-.06	-.26
General Social Survey on Canadian's Safety (Victimization)	2.72	.72	1.14	4.20	-.076	-.68
Blameworthiness	1.37	.71	1.00	5.00	2.20	5.31
Believability	4.28	.72	2.00	5.00	-.63	-.24
Knowledge	2.73	.24	2.21	3.61	.83	1.21

Table 3.

Frequencies of Commercial Sexual Involvement (CSI) Questionnaire Items.

	N (%)	Mean (SD)
Throughout your lifetime, how many times have you been kissed, touched, or done anything sexual with another person who you did not want to do so and/or did not provide consent?		1.66 (.48)
Never, 0 times	71 (34.5%)	
1+ times	135 (65.5%)	
Throughout your lifetime, how many times have you been involved in camming, escorting, sugaring, and/or providing virtual or in-person sexual exchanges?		1.15 (.36)
Never, 0 times	175 (85%)	
1+ times	31 (15%)	
Throughout your lifetime, how many times have you paid for camming, escorting, sugaring, and/or virtual or in-person sexual exchanges?		1.02 (.15)
Never, 0 times	201 (97.6%)	
1+ times	5 (2.4%)	

Table 4.

Bivariate Spearman's Rho Intercorrelations for Variables of Interest.

	Blameworthiness	Believability	Personal Safety	Knowledge	CSI	Victimization	Preventative Action	Myth Acceptance
Blameworthiness	-							
Believability	-.119	-						
Personal Safety	-.060	.184**	-					
Knowledge	.091	.017	.210**	-				
CSI	.082	-.037	-.083	.016	-			
Victimization	-.140*	.086	.253**	-.037	.274***	-		
Preventative Action	-.185**	.242**	.671**	.194**	-.104	.258**	-	
Myth Acceptance	.327***	-.207**	.104	.560***	.048	-.170*	-.073	-

Note. CSI = Commercial sexual involvement
$*p < .05, **p < .01. ***p < .001.$

Table 5.

Summary of Moderated Regression Analysis Predicting Believability.

| | *B* | *t* | *p* | 95% CI | | *F Value* |
				LL	UL	
						1.53
Constant	4.28	87.72	.000	4.18	4.38	
Violence	-.16	-1.61	.108	-.36	.036	
Knowledge	.048	.22	.823	-.37	.47	
Violence – Knowledge Interaction	-.64	-1.46	.147	-1.51	.23	

*Note. *p < .05, **p < .01. ***p < .001.*

Table 6.

Conditional Effects of Violence Condition.

					95% CI	
Knowledge	Effect	SE	*t*	*p*	LL	UL
-1 SD	-.009	.14	-.06	.949	-.29	.28
Mean	-.16	.10	-1.58	.115	-.36	.04
+1 SD	-.31	.1	-2.14	.034	-.60	-.02

Table 7.

Results of Hierarchical Linear Regression for the Association of Violence Condition on Blameworthiness Controlling for Commercial Sexual Involvement and Victimization.

| | *b* | *SE* | 95% CI | | *β* | *p* | *F Value* |
			LL	UL			
Step 1							1.65
Constant	1.27	.16	.95	1.59		<.001	
Victimization	-.06	.04	-.14	.02	-.10	.156	
CSI	.20	.14	-.07	.47	.11	.137	
Step 2							4.00
Constant	.80	.23	.35	1.25		<.001	
Victimization	-.05	.04	-.13	.04	-.08	.262	
CSI	.19	.13	-.08	.45	.10	.162	
Violence Condition	.29	.10	.09	.48	.20	.004	

Note. CSI = commercial sexual involvement.

*p < .05, **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Table 8.

Results of Hierarchical Linear Regression for the Association Between Citizenship Condition and Blameworthiness Controlling for Commercial Sexual Involvement and Victimization.

	b	*SE*	95% CI		*B*	*p*	*F Value*
			LL	UL			
Step 1							1.65
Constant	1.27	.16	.95	1.59		<.001	
Victimization	-.06	.04	-.14	.02	-.10	.156	
CSI	.20	.14	-.07	.47	.11	.137	
Step 2							1.29
Constant	1.39	.23	.94	1.84		<.001	
Victimization	-.06	.04	-.15	.02	-.11	.139	
CSI	.20	.14	-.06	.47	.11	.133	
Citizenship Condition	-.08	.10	-.27	.12	-.05	.447	

Note. CSI = commercial sexual involvement.

*p < .05, **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Table 9.

Results of Hierarchical Linear Regression for the Association Between Knowledge and Perceptions of Personal Safety Controlling for Commercial Sexual Involvement and Victimization.

	b	*SE*	95% CI		*B*	*p*	*F Value*
			LL	UL			
Step 1							9.81***
Constant	2.73	.19	2.36	3.11		<.001	
Victimization	.21	.05	.11	.31	.30	<.001	
CSI	-.40	.16	-.71	-.08	-.18	.013	
Step 2							11.58***
Constant	.34	.67	-.98	1.66		.611	
Victimization	.22	.05	.12	.31	.31	.001	
CSI	-.44	.15	-.74	-.13	-.19	.005	
Knowledge	.89	.24	.42	1.36	.24	<.001	

Note. CSI = commercial sexual involvement.

*p < .05, **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Table 10.

Results of Hierarchical Linear Regression for the Association Between Believability and Perceptions of Personal Safety Controlling for Commercial Sexual Involvement and Victimization.

| | *b* | *SE* | 95% CI | | *β* | *p* | *F Value* |
			LL	UL			
Step 1							9.81***
Constant	2.73	.19	2.36	3.11		<.001	
Victimization	.21	.05	.11	.31	.30	<.001	
CSI	-.40	.16	-.71	-.08	-.18	.013	
Step 2							9.13***
Constant	1.81	.39	1.04	2.59		<.001	
Victimization	.20	.05	.10	.29	.28	<.001	
CSI	-.37	.16	-.68	-.06	-.16	.020	
Believability	.21	.08	.06	.27	.18	.008	

Note. CSI = commercial sexual involvement.

*p < .05, **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Table 11.

Summary of Moderated Regression Analysis Predicting Believability Controlling for Commercial Sexual Involvement and Victimization.

	B	*t*	*p*	95% CI LL	95% CI UL	*F Value*
						1.35
Constant	4.36	26.10	.000	4.03	4.69	
Violence	-.15	-1.45	.148	-.35	.053	
Knowledge	.072	.34	.735	-.35	.49	
Violence – Knowledge Interaction	-.75	-1.69	.093	-1.62	.12	
CSI	-.17	-1.19	.237	-.44	.11	
Victimization	.05	1.18	.238	-.03	.14	

Note. CSI = Commercial Sexual Involvement

*p < .05, **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Table 12.

Responses and Sample Excerpts from GSS Safety Open-Ended Question

Question	Response	Sample narrative excerpts
"Do you routinely take any preventative measures to avoid being sex trafficked? If yes, what are they?"	Not walking alone in the dark ($n = 44$)	"I try to avoid walking alone at night"
	Sharing location or using a tracking app ($n = 26$)	"sharing my location with friends and my mom when I go out" "I have a tracking app (Life360) on my cell"
	Carrying protection/weapon ($n = 25$)	"hold keys between knuckles" "I carry an alarm on my keys" "keep pepper spray with me"
	Awareness of surroundings ($n = 23$)	"check my surroundings regularly" "no headphones when walking at night"
	Calling someone ($n = 14$)	"always have someone on the phone" "pretend or actively be on the phone with someone during walks home"
	Planning route in advance ($n = 11$)	"plan my route and know where I'm going" "staying in lightened or visible areas"
	Locked doors ($n = 8$)	"doors are always locked (car and house)" "lock all doors immediately after closing them"
	Knowing self-defence/physical preparedness ($n = 7$)	"I train in martial arts for defence" "ensuring my hands aren't constrained"
	Avoiding strangers ($n = 7$)	"I do not speak, roll down my window fully, or exit my car to speak to strangers"
	Online safety ($n = 7$)	"I avoid talking to people I don't know online"

	"I avoid posting locations and personal information on social media"
No transit/Uber alone (*n* = 5)	"never get in an Uber or cab by myself"
	"avoid taking public transportation after 9pm"
Looking unapproachable (*n* = 3)	"walk with confidence (don't fuck with me attitude)"
	"try to make myself look as unapproachable as possible and dress more masculine"

Figure 1.

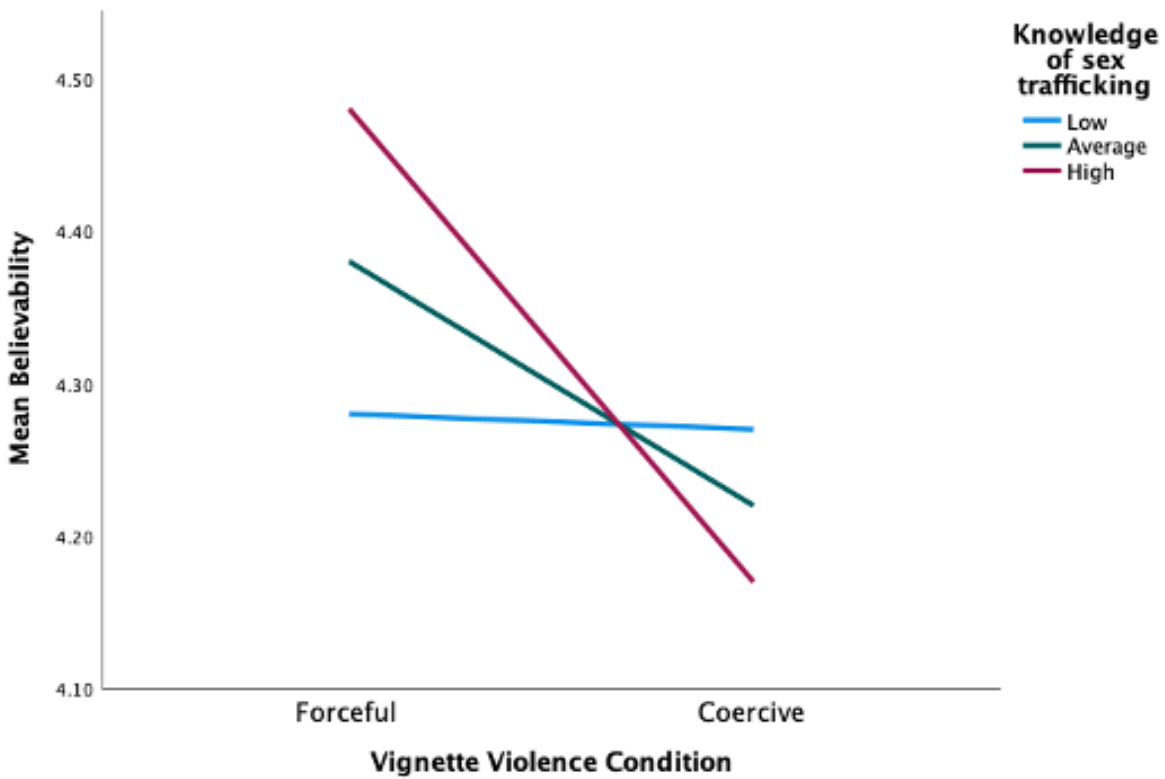*Moderating Effect of Knowledge on the Interaction of Violence Condition and Believability.*

Figure 1. Simple slopes of violence condition predicting believability for 1 *SD* below the mean of Knowledge, the mean of Knowledge, and 1 SD above the mean of Knowledge.

Appendix A

Vignettes

Domestic/Explicitly Forceful & Foreign/Explicitly Forceful

Sarah is a White 18-year-old from Canada/Bulgaria who has left her family home and moved to Nova Scotia to escape her abusive father in search of a better life. She was unemployed and living in poverty when she met Brian, who was only a few years older than Sarah. Brian let Sarah move into an apartment he owned, only charging her very little rent. He then invited her to join him at a nearby hotel for a night, but when she arrived, two men, strangers to Sarah, blocked her from leaving Brian's room. Brian told Sarah that she could only stay in the apartment if she was occasionally willing to have sex with other men for money and give him her earnings, threatening her physically if she did not comply. Under threat of violence and inability to find other housing, Sarah has been routinely having sex with men for money for the past 6 months.

Domestic/Coercion & Foreign/Coercion
Sarah is a White 18-year-old from Canada/Bulgaria who left her family home and moved to Nova Scotia to escape her abusive father in search of a better life. She was unemployed and living in poverty when she met Brian, who was only a few years older than Sarah. Brian let Sarah move into an apartment he owned, only charging her very little rent. He then invited her to join him at a nearby hotel for a night, but when she arrived, two men, strangers to Sarah, were also in Brian's room. Brian told Sarah that she could only stay in the apartment if she was occasionally willing to have sex with other men for money and give him her earnings. Feeling unable to say no, and being unable to find other housing, Sarah has now been routinely having sex with men for money for the past 6 months.

Post-Vignette Questions:

Please rate the following on a scale from 1 to 5.

To what extent is Sarah to blame for her situation?
1 = not at all to blame; 5 = entirely to blame

To what extent does reading about Sarah's situation make you concerned for your own personal safety?
1 = not at all; 5 = extremely

Do you find this situation believable?
1 = not at all, 5 = entirely

Appendix B

Manipulation & Attention Checks

Manipulation Check Items

1. Where was Sarah from?
    a. Canada
    b. Bulgaria

2. Did Brian explicitly threaten Sarah with violence?
    a. Yes
    b. No

Attention Check Items

Will be randomly embedded in the survey:

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral (neither agree nor disagree)	Agree	Strongly agree

1. I have never used a computer.

2. I have been to Mars.

3. I can walk on water.

4. I eat cement.

Appendix C

Demographics Questionnaire

Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your age? _____

2. With which racial or ethnic group do you identify? If you identify equally with multiple groups, please specify using the "other" option below.

    a. Aboriginal/Indigenous

    b. Arab/West Asian (e.g., Armenian, Egyptian, Iranian, Lebanese, Moroccan)

    c. Black (e.g., African, Haitian, Jamaican, Somali)

    d. Chinese

    e. Filipino

    f. Japanese

    g. Korean

    h. Latin American

    i. South Asian

    j. South East Asian

    k. White (Caucasian)

    l. Other, please specify: _____

3. To which gender identity do you most identify?

    a. Woman

    b. Man

    c. Transgender Woman

    d. Transgender Man

    e. Gender Non-Conforming

    f. Other, please specify: _____

    g. Prefer not to answer

Appendix D

Commercial Sexual Involvement (CSI) Questionnaire

1	2	3	4	5
Never, 0 times	1-2 times	3-4 times	5+ times	10+ times

1. Throughout your lifetime, how many times have you been kissed, touched, or done anything sexual with another person when you did not want to do so and/or did not provide consent?

2. Throughout your lifetime, how many times have you been involved in camming, escorting, sugaring (i.e., sugar baby, momma, daddy), and/or providing virtual or in-person sexual exchanges?

3. Throughout your lifetime, how many times have you paid for camming, escorting, sugaring (i.e., sugar baby, momma, daddy), and/or virtual or in-person sexual exchanges?

    a. *Camming* is defined as performing activities, often sexual, on camera, which often includes a financial or goods exchange (Gesselman et al., 2022).

    b. *Escorting* is defined as offering time or companionship to someone for a fee, whether that is financial, substances, or material goods. There is no requirement for a sexual component with escorting, though sexual services are frequently involved (Nelson et al., 2020).

    c. *Sugaring*, other terms often used include sugar baby/sugar mommy/sugar daddy, is defined as an arrangement, often ongoing, where one person provides intimacy, companionship, or other forms of attention in exchange for benefits such as financial support, material goods, or professional advancement (Scull, 2022).

Appendix E

Human Trafficking Myths Scale (HTMS; Cunningham & Cromer, 2016) – Author-adapted

5-point Likert Scale (1= definitely false; 2 = probably false; 3 = unsure; 4 = probably true; 5 =

definitely true)

1. Sex trafficking is another term for prostitution.

2. Sex trafficking must include elements of physical force, restraint, bondage, and/or
   violence.

3. Sex trafficking does not happen in Canada.

4. If someone did not want to be trafficked, he or she would leave the situation.

5. Canadian citizens are trafficked in their own country (*reverse coded*).

6. Sex trafficking victims will seek help as soon as they have the opportunity.

7. People from other countries who are trafficked in Canada are always illegal immigrants.

8. Normal-appearing, well-educated, middle-class people are not trafficked.

9. Sex trafficking victims will tell authorities they are being trafficked as soon as they have
   the opportunity.

10. Sex trafficking must involve some form of travel, transportation, or movement across
    state or national borders.

11. If persons are trafficked in Canada, they are always from poor, uneducated communities.

12. If a child solicits sex from an adult in exchange for money, food, or shelter, he or she is
    not a victim.

13. Only foreigners and illegal immigrants are trafficked.

14. Sex trafficking is always controlled by organized crime.

15. A person who is trafficked will always feel negatively toward the person(s) trafficking him or her.

16. If a person receives any kind of payment for sex, he or she is not being trafficked.

17. Sex trafficking only occurs in undeveloped countries.

Appendix F

Sex Trafficking Attitudes Scale (STAS; Houston-Kolnik et al., 2016) Author-adapted

5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = unsure; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly

agree)

Attitudes Toward Ability to Leave Sex Trafficking

1. A trafficked person has the ability to leave her circumstances. *(reverse coded)*

2. It is not a person's choice to be trafficked.

3. Some women choose to be trafficked. *(reverse coded)*

4. Some girls choose to be trafficked. *(reverse coded)*

5. A trafficked person could go to the police, but she chooses not to. *(reverse coded)*

6. If a trafficked person chose to leave, the problem would be over. *(reverse coded)*

7. A person who is trafficked has been deceived or forced into the situation.

Knowledge About Sex Trafficking

8. A person is trafficked if she is kidnapped and employed in the sex industry.

9. A person is trafficked when someone uses fraud to employ her in the sex industry.

10. A person is trafficked when someone uses coercion to employ her in the sex industry.

11. A prostitute can become trafficked if she is restrained from leaving her occupation.

12. Someone under the age of 18 who works in the sex industry is trafficked.

13. Compared to the rest of Canada, Nova Scotia has very high rates of trafficking.

Empathic Reactions Toward Sex Trafficking

14. I am angry about the issue of trafficking.

15. I empathize with trafficked persons.

16. I become emotional thinking about trafficking.

17. Trafficking does not upset me. *(reverse coded)*

18. I do not care much about the issue of trafficking. *(reverse coded)*

Attitudes Toward Helping Survivors

19. If it is for the trafficked individual's own good, an outsider should do whatever is needed to make decisions for the trafficked person. *(reverse coded)*

20. An outsider should make whatever decisions are needed about a trafficked person's daily living when the trafficked person doesn't seem to care what is done. *(reverse coded)*

21. Even if a trafficked person objects, an outsider should do whatever they think is best for the trafficked individual in the long run. *(reverse coded)*

Awareness of Sex Trafficking

22. I am aware of organizations that work against trafficking.

23. I have heard about sex trafficking in the news.

24. I have read about sex trafficking.

25. I have seen public awareness announcements about sex trafficking.

26. I am not informed about sex trafficking. *(reverse coded)*

27. I do not understand the issues surrounding sex trafficking. *(reverse coded)*

Appendix G

General Social Survey on Canadian's Safety (GSS Safety; Statistics Canada, 2019) Author-

adapted

1. In general, how satisfied are you with your personal safety from sex trafficking? (1 = very dissatisfied; 2 = relatively dissatisfied; 3 = neither dissatisfied nor satisfied; 4 = relatively satisfied; 5 = very satisfied)

2. Compared with other areas in Canada, do you think your neighbourhood has a higher amount of trafficking, about the same, or a lower amount of trafficking? (1 = lower amount; 2 = about the same; 3 = higher amount; 4 = unsure)

3. During the last five years, do you think that trafficking in your neighbourhood has increased, decreased, or remained about the same? (1 = decreased; 2 = remained the same; 3 = increased; 4 = unsure)

4. While waiting for or using public transportation alone after dark, how do you feel about your safety from being trafficked? (1 = very worried; 2 = somewhat worried; 3 = not at all worried) *(reverse coded)*

5. When alone in your home in the evening or at night, how do you feel about your safety from being trafficked? (1 = very worried; 2 = somewhat worried; 3 = not at all worried) *(reverse coded)*

6. How safe do you feel from being trafficked walking alone in your area after dark? (1 = very unsafe; 2 = relatively unsafe; 3 = neither unsafe nor safe; 4 = relatively safe; 5 = very safe) *(reverse coded)*

7. Do you routinely take any preventative measures to avoid being sex trafficked? (1 = No; 2 = No, but I feel like I should; 3 = Yes, occasionally; 4 = Yes, always)

a. If yes, what are they? _____

Appendix H
Bivariate Spearman's Rho Intercorrelations for Variables of Interest with Cisgender Men Participants

	Blameworthiness	Believability	Personal Safety	Knowledge	CSI	Victimization	Preventative Action	Myth Acceptance
Blameworthiness	-							
Believability	.195	-						
Personal Safety	-.055	.062	-					
Knowledge	.330	-.238	.293	-				
CSI	-.072	-.067	.068	.191	-			
Victimization	-.379	.-005	-.110	-.236	-.268	-		
Preventative Action	-.163	-.154	.746***	.380	.094	-.232	-	
Myth Acceptance	.146	-.412	.102	.619**	.166	-.124	.150	-

Note. CSI = Commercial sexual involvement
*p < .05, **p < .01. ***p < .001

Appendix I
Results of Mann-Whitney U Tests for the Comparison Between Gender and Believability and Blame

	Cisgender women Mean Rank	Cisgender men Mean Rank	Z	p
Believability	96.51	79.34	.75	.128
Blame	92.99	105.89	.60	.179

Note. *p < .05, **p < .01. ***p < .001