

Article

Effect of Victim Gender on Evaluations of Sexual Crime Victims and Perpetrators: Evidence from Japan

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Abstract: Recent legal reforms incorporating the concept of sexual consent into the Penal Code, alongside high-profile scandals involving male idol groups and comedians, have heightened societal attention to sexual crimes in Japan. Although studies have extensively examined this topic, findings have been predominantly from Western or English-speaking countries, which raises questions regarding their applicability to other cultural contexts. To address this gap, this study examined whether the results of prior research could be generalized to Japan. This study examined six hypotheses derived from previous studies. Using a vignette-based online survey ($N = 748$), participants read a hypothetical sexual assault case and answered questions on sentencing, negative social reactions, and victim/perpetrator blaming. An analysis revealed that only one hypothesis was supported: respondents recommended longer sentences for perpetrators when the victim was male rather than female. Additionally, women were more likely to exhibit egocentric reactions, such as expressing more anger toward the perpetrators than the victims, than men. No other hypothesized gender-based differences, which included victim-blaming or harsher sentencing by male observers, were supported. These findings highlight the risks of generalizing research findings across cultural contexts and emphasize the importance of conducting culturally specific studies.

Keywords: sentencing; gender; sexual crime; Japan



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1. Introduction

This study aimed to examine whether a victim's and respondent's gender affected blame and negative social reactions toward the victim as well as sentencing recommendations toward the perpetrator.

1.1. Legal Background in Japan

Sexual crimes have been a central focus of social and legal discussions in Japan, similar to many societies. This focus is driven more by legal and social changes than by an actual increase in sexual crimes, which has remained relatively stable [1]. The law regulating sexual crimes was revised and came into effect on 13 July 2023, partially owing to this increase. Under the previous provisions, the crime commonly referred to as “rape” was classified into two types: “forcible sexual intercourse” (*kyosei Seiko*) and “quasi-forcible sexual intercourse” (*jun kyosei seiko*). These were distinguished based on the means used: forcible sexual intercourse involved “assault or intimidation” (former Article 177 of the Penal Code), while quasi-forcible sexual intercourse occurred through other means (former Article 178(2)), such as exploiting the victim's loss of consciousness (*shinshin soshitsu*) or inability to resist (*kokyo funo*). In statutory language, the scope of punishing these crimes

appears narrow [2]; however, it has been broadened by various court decisions. These rulings clarified that “inability to resist” required “remarkable difficulty to resist,” rather than complete incapacity alone. Lowering the threshold for “inability” allowed courts to determine that acts by defendants, such as a golf coach, pastor, and school activity coach, who exploited their positions of authority to instill fear of consequences of refusal or intimidate victims, were judged as punishable [3].

Nevertheless, these previous provisions have faced continuous criticism for having an overly narrow scope for punishable acts [4]. Therefore, the revised provision consolidated the two crimes, distinguished by the method used, into a single crime of “non-consensual sexual intercourse” (*fudoui seiko*; current Article 177(1)). This crime is established when a prosecutor can prove that the defendant made it “difficult for the victim to form, express, or fulfill the intention not to consent” by committing one or more acts listed in Articles 176(1), 177(2), or 177(3). These include assault, intimidation, intoxication, mental or physical disability, or exploiting the victim’s fear owing to the defendant’s social or economic position.

1.2. Social Background in Japan

On a positive note, this revision marks progress by strengthening victim protection. It expands the definition of the crime and clarifies the criteria, consistent with the increasing emphasis on “non-consent” in modern legal trends [5]. However, the introduction of sexual consent into the Penal Code has not resolved the issue of sexual violence, as highlighted by several recent high-profile sexual violence cases reported in Japan.

The first case involved Johnny & Associates, widely regarded as Japan’s most famous and influential agency for male idols. In 2023, reports, triggered by a BBC documentary, emerged that the agency’s late founder and former chairman had sexually abused male idols under his management [6]. Several former members came forward in a press conference and alleged decades-long abuse [7]. Although the exact number of victims remains uncertain, a report indicated 993 claims, and the company confirmed 423 as victims by the end of May 2024 [8]. In response, Johnny & Associates acknowledged the allegations, issued a formal apology, and announced plans to compensate the victims [9]. However, public outrage persisted, which resulted in widespread criticism, the eventual dissolution of the company, and the creation of a new entity that partially assumed the former’s role [10].

The second case revolved around allegations made by two women who accused a prominent Japanese comedian of sexual assault. The accusations gained considerable public attention after *Shūkan Bunshun*, a prominent Japanese magazine known for uncovering scandals, published their accounts [11]. According to the article, the alleged assaults occurred in 2015 during a private gathering. The comedian and his agency initially denied the allegations, stated “there are no such facts at all” [12], and filed a lawsuit against the magazine [13]. However, they later withdrew the lawsuit [14], and the comedian suspended his career [15].

These two highly publicized cases offer valuable insights into understanding how certain incidents are addressed through extra-legal approaches and also highlight the limitations of existing legal systems in addressing harm. Regarding Johnny & Associates, legal punishment under the Penal Code was unfeasible because the alleged perpetrator was dead. Nevertheless, the company could still be held responsible for breach of fiduciary duty or tort liability, given its tacit approval for abusive behavior. Similarly, regarding the comedian, the incident theoretically fell within the scope of both criminal and civil law, which allowed for potential prosecution or litigation. However, reports suggest no legal action was initiated in either case, raising questions regarding the social and legal barriers to justice.

This apparent inaction suggests the victims' disadvantaged position. In both criminal and civil cases, victims face substantial psychological burdens, such as the stress of recounting their traumatic experiences during legal proceedings [16]. In civil cases, financial costs may further exacerbate these challenges, creating additional disincentives to seek justice. Moreover, in cases with considerable public attention, victims are frequently subjected to societal scrutiny, blame, and even negative reactions, all compounding their psychological burden.

Addressing these barriers necessitates broader societal change rather than only legal reforms. Public evaluations of the victim play a critical role in deterring individuals from pursuing legal recourse. Therefore, understanding victim characteristics that make individuals more susceptible to blame and negative social reactions is essential for developing effective interventions.

1.3. Previous Studies on the Gender of Victims and Respondents

1.3.1. Victim's Gender

These two famous cases differed in several ways, such as the roles of the accused and victim, the timing of the incidents, and the methods through which they were addressed. However, the most notable difference was the victims' gender: in the Johnny & Associates and comedian cases, the victims were males and females, respectively.

Previous studies have consistently revealed that female and male victims are evaluated and responded to differently. The most frequently mentioned difference was the level of blame, with male victims tending to be blamed more than female victims [17–20] (for a review, see [21]). For example, Sommer et al. [17] reported that their English-speaking respondents who read a scenario that depicted the victim as male were more likely to attribute blame to the victim compared with those who read a scenario that depicted the victim as female. Regarding an explanation for this difference, Davies et al. [22] suggested that one reason may be the perception that males had a greater ability to resist.

Male victims also face a greater degree of negative social reactions, such as stigmatization and distancing [23,24]. Mulder et al. [25] reported that in scenarios that depicted rape, German respondents were more likely to exhibit negative reactions when the victim was male rather than female, albeit with slight variations based on the type of reaction.

Somewhat surprisingly, given the abovementioned findings that male victims are more likely to face blame and negative social reactions, perpetrators whose victims are men tend to receive more punitive responses. Socia et al. [26] reported that when the victim was a male adult, American respondents recommended sentences that were approximately 1.6 years longer compared with when the victim was a female adult.

1.3.2. Respondent's Gender

In addition to the victim's gender, the respondent's gender also yields differences. Specifically, prior studies conducted in Western countries reported that male respondents were more likely to blame the victim compared with their female counterparts [19,27–29]. Other studies reported no significant effects (for a review, see [30]). Hockett et al. [31] presented a similar conclusion and analyzed the result from a feminist perspective.

Similarly to the victim's gender, the respondent's gender also affected negative social reactions toward the victim. Bosma et al. [32] reported that female respondents were more likely to positively evaluate the character of sexual crime victims.

Finally, sentencing recommendations also varied based on the respondent's gender. Savage et al. [33] reported that the preference for punishing the perpetrator with imprisonment was stronger among male respondents than female respondents, suggesting that male respondents recommended more punitive sentences.

1.3.3. Limitation of Existing Studies

These studies demonstrate that the gender of both the victims and respondents can lead to notable differences in various outcomes. However, they share a limitation: an overwhelming focus on Western or English-speaking societies. This limitation is critical to address, as sexuality is deeply influenced by cultural and societal factors. The sexual script theory [34] argues that sexual behavior is not driven by internal impulses alone; rather, it is shaped by learned societal norms and scripts that inform how individuals should engage in sexual behavior [35]. Consistent with this view, sexual behaviors and related perceptions vary widely across different cultural contexts. Laumann et al. [36] reported significant variations in responses to the question, “During the past 12 months, how physically pleasurable did you find your relationship with your partner to be?” Affirmative responses ranged from 9.8% among Japanese women to 79.7% among Austrian men.

Since sexual crimes are closely tied to societal perceptions of sexuality, it is unsurprising that different societies perceive and respond to these crimes in varying ways. Mukai et al. [37] compared Canadian and Japanese respondents’ reactions to scenarios that involved potential sexual crimes. Participants were presented with 30 brief scenarios and assessed two aspects: the degree to which they perceived the victim as having consented and the appropriateness of punishing the perpetrator. The results revealed that Canadian respondents were more likely to view the victim as non-consenting and consider punishment as appropriate than Japanese respondents. In addition, a comparative study between Japan and South Korea [38] demonstrated that the two societies differ in their perceptions of rape. For example, in cases of rape involving abuse of power, Korean participants were more likely than their Japanese counterparts to perceive punishment as appropriate, whereas in cases of stealthing, Japanese participants were more likely than Korean participants to view punishment as appropriate.

These findings suggest that insights from prior research conducted in Western contexts may not necessarily apply to other contexts. Studies conducted in Japan contradict at least some of the findings of research conducted in Western contexts. First, while prior studies in Western contexts reported that male observers were more likely to blame victims (e.g., [25]), this was untrue in Japan. Three studies conducted in Japan [39–41] found that female respondents were more likely to blame victims, while two studies [42,43] reported no significant gender differences in victim blaming.

Second, research conducted in Western contexts indicated that men advocated for harsher punishments for sexual crimes compared to women [33]. However, the opposite pattern was observed in Japan: women tended to recommend harsher punishments for sexual crimes than men. This pattern was evident in cases that involved alcohol or drug use to facilitate sexual intercourse or exploit a victim’s fear or surprise, where women suggested longer sentences than men [44]. Thus, despite providing valuable insights, prior studies have often overlooked contextual factors and methodological limitations. Hence, further investigation is warranted.

1.4. Aim and Hypotheses

Based on these arguments, the current bias on sexual offenses toward Western or English-speaking societies should be alleviated by accumulating studies from other societies. Although related research exists, this study aimed to contribute new insights to literature by presenting findings from non-Western and non-English-speaking contexts. Based on the previous findings from research conducted in Western contexts, this study established the following hypotheses as tentative working hypotheses and assessed them:

H1: Respondents tend to attribute more blame to the victim when they read a scenario in which the victim was male compared with when the victim is female.

H2: Respondents tend to report a higher likelihood of exhibiting negative social reactions when they read a scenario in which the victim is male compared with when the victim is female.

H3: Respondents tend to recommend longer sentences when they read a scenario in which the victim is male compared with when the victim is female.

H4: Female respondents tend to attribute less blame to the victim compared with male respondents.

H5: Female respondents tend to report a lower likelihood of exhibiting negative social reactions compared with male respondents.

H6: Female respondents tend to recommend shorter sentences for the perpetrator compared with male respondents.

2. Methods

2.1. Study Design

To assess these hypotheses, a 2 (victim's gender: female, male) $\times$ 2 (respondent's gender: female, male) design web-based study was conducted. Respondents were randomly presented with one of two versions of a scenario that described a hypothetical case and were asked to complete the following measures. Subsequently, they were asked to complete the questionnaire.

2.2. Scenario

The scenario mimicked a popular news website to increase ecological validity and described a case in which (1) the alleged victims held a press conference stating that they were sexually victimized by the ex-chairman of an entertainment company; (2) they were unwilling to engage in sex, but unable to resist owing to the fear of losing their job or receiving disadvantageous treatment; and (3) the company's current board admitted to the victimization. The original and translated scenarios are presented in Figures S1–S4. The scenario was first developed by the author. The provisional version was proofread by another psychologist to check the readability and clarity.

2.3. Procedure and Participants

The questionnaire was designed by the author and presented on the webpage of a web-based survey company, iBridge. Potential respondents who accessed the webpage and were interested in participating were asked to read the instructions, which stated that the study was on sexual crime and other ethical terms. Those who accepted the terms completed the questionnaire. After completion, respondents received web-points that could be redeemed as cash and certificates. The survey was conducted between 8 April and 9 April 2024.

To increase the sample's representativeness, the respondents' gender and age were allocated according to the latest census at the time of the study. In addition, to exclude those who did not pay sufficient attention, three attention-check items regarding the scenarios were presented. Those who failed to provide correct answers were excluded.

No study could be directly referred to regarding sample-size design. In addition, while this study used a 2 $\times$ 2 design, the number of respondents in each condition differed due to exclusion by attention-check item. Furthermore, an adequate sample size of unbalanced analysis of covariance (ANOVA) was difficult to calculate. Therefore, this study focused on

the effect of the victim's gender and used the conventional threshold of a small difference of $d = 0.20$ [45] as the criterion. Sample-size calculation, which could detect this effect size with a power of 0.80 and significance level of 0.05, revealed that 787 respondents were required. Therefore, expecting 20% exclusion due to attention check, 948 respondents were recruited. Of these, 200 respondents (21.1%) were excluded for insufficient attention to the items. Therefore, responses from 748 respondents (410 women, 338 men, $M_{age} = 54.96$ years, $SD_{age} = 16.08$) were analyzed.

2.4. Measures

2.4.1. Victim/Perpetrator Blame

Victim blame was rated via a translation of a scale created by Adolfsson et al. [46], while perpetrator blame was created by replacing the term "victim" in the original scale with "perpetrator." Although perpetrator blame was not included in the hypotheses, it was included in this survey as examining it alongside victim blame, as carried out in previous studies, was considered valuable for future research. Both constructs included four items each (e.g., "Ms. A/Mr. B was responsible for this crime happening"). Respondents rated their agreement on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from strongly *disagree* (1), *disagree* (2), *cannot say either* (3), *agree* (4), to *strongly agree* (5).

2.4.2. Negative Social Reactions

Ullman [47] created the Social Reactions Questionnaire, which included five factors: stigma (e.g., "Pulling away from her/him"), distraction (e.g., "Telling her/him to stop talking about it"), take control (e.g., "Making decisions or doing things for her/him"), victim blame (e.g., "Telling her/him that she/he could have done more to prevent this experience from occurring"), and egocentric (e.g., "Expressing more anger at the perpetrator than she/he does"). Considering the concern, raised by victim advocates that asking victims of their experiences could cause psychological burden, Mukai and Watamura [40] added a sixth factor, intrusiveness (e.g., "Saying that you want to know the details of what was done to her/him"), and reduced the number of items per factor. This resulted in a 18-item six-factor scale with three items for each factor. This scale was used in this study. Respondents were asked, "If you were Ms. A's friend and heard the story from her, how likely were you to exhibit the following behaviors?" and rated their responses on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from *very unlikely* (1), *unlikely* (2), *cannot say either* (3), *likely* (4), to *very likely* (5).

2.4.3. Sentencing Recommendation

Respondents evaluated the type of sentence they considered appropriate for the depicted perpetrator. They were instructed with the statement "If you were a lay judge participating in the trial of the perpetrator (the ex-chairman), how severe a punishment would you want to impose on the defendant?" and asked to provide their answer in the format "() year(s) () month(s)" for an appropriate sentence length. The subsequent analysis used values calculated with the formula "year + month/12".

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Statistics

First, sample characteristics were evaluated. As shown in Table 1, gender was nearly balanced (54.8% women, 45.2% men), and age groups were fairly distributed, with the largest proportion in their 70s or older (28.1%). Marital status (55.6% married, 44.4% single) and parental status (50.9% with children, 49.1% without children) were also evenly split. Household income was similarly balanced across the three categories.

Table 1. Sample characteristics.

	<i>n</i>	%		<i>n</i>	%
Gender			Marital status		
Woman	410	54.8%	Married	416	55.6%
Man	338	45.2%	Single	332	44.4%
Age			Parental status		
20s	63	8.4%	With children	381	50.9%
30s	91	12.2%	Without children	367	49.1%
40s	129	17.2%	Household income		
50s	132	17.6%	<3 million yen	241	32.2%
60s	123	16.4%	3–5 million yen	270	36.1%
70s or older	210	28.1%	≥5 million yen	237	31.7%

Next, Cronbach’s α coefficient was calculated. Consequently, the values for “take control” ($\alpha = 0.63$) and “egocentric” ($\alpha = 0.65$), part of the negative social reactions, were slightly low. However, considering the small number of items and satisfactory values in the confirmatory factor analysis (comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.913, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.082), no major issues were identified. Therefore, the arithmetic means of each variable were used for analyses (Pearson’s correlations between variables for the entire sample as well as for subsamples divided by the victim’s gender and respondent’s gender are provided in Tables S1, S2, and S3, respectively):

Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations of each variable separated by the gender of the victim and respondent. Notably, the standard deviation (SD) of the sentencing recommendations was exceptionally large. Upon further examination of their distribution (Figure 1), outliers, such as 50 and 100 years, were identified. Including these outliers could introduce bias into the analysis results. However, their arbitrary exclusion could compromise the robustness of the findings. Therefore, outliers were excluded based on two criteria. First, since the maximum prison sentence in Japan was 30 years (Article 12, Paragraph 1 of the Penal Code), any sentencing recommendation that exceeded 30 years was excluded. Second, from a statistical standpoint, recommendations more than 2 SDs from the overall mean (35.31) were excluded. Accordingly, 26 (3.5% of the total valid sample) and 22 participants (2.9%) were excluded according to the first and second criterion, respectively.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations by conditions.

Victim Gender		Woman				Man			
Respondent Gender		Woman (<i>n</i> = 197)		Man (<i>n</i> = 165)		Woman (<i>n</i> = 213)		Man (<i>n</i> = 173)	
	α	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Blame									
Victim blame	0.87	2.22	0.92	2.18	0.89	2.13	0.94	2.21	0.89
Perpetrator blame	0.81	4.29	0.79	4.25	0.85	4.28	0.79	4.28	0.75
Negative social reactions									
Stigma	0.84	2.28	0.88	2.44	0.81	2.47	0.89	2.46	0.91
Distraction	0.85	2.26	0.88	2.35	0.82	2.42	0.88	2.42	0.91
Take control	0.63	2.54	0.73	2.57	0.73	2.45	0.72	2.54	0.73
Victim blame	0.79	2.28	0.90	2.34	0.85	2.34	0.90	2.38	0.94
Egocentric	0.65	2.83	0.77	2.69	0.75	2.79	0.75	2.70	0.82
Intrusiveness	0.85	2.66	0.92	2.58	0.91	2.51	0.95	2.65	0.91
Sentencing									
Sentencing recommendation	—	8.98	15.39	8.73	13.57	10.00	13.32	8.26	9.10

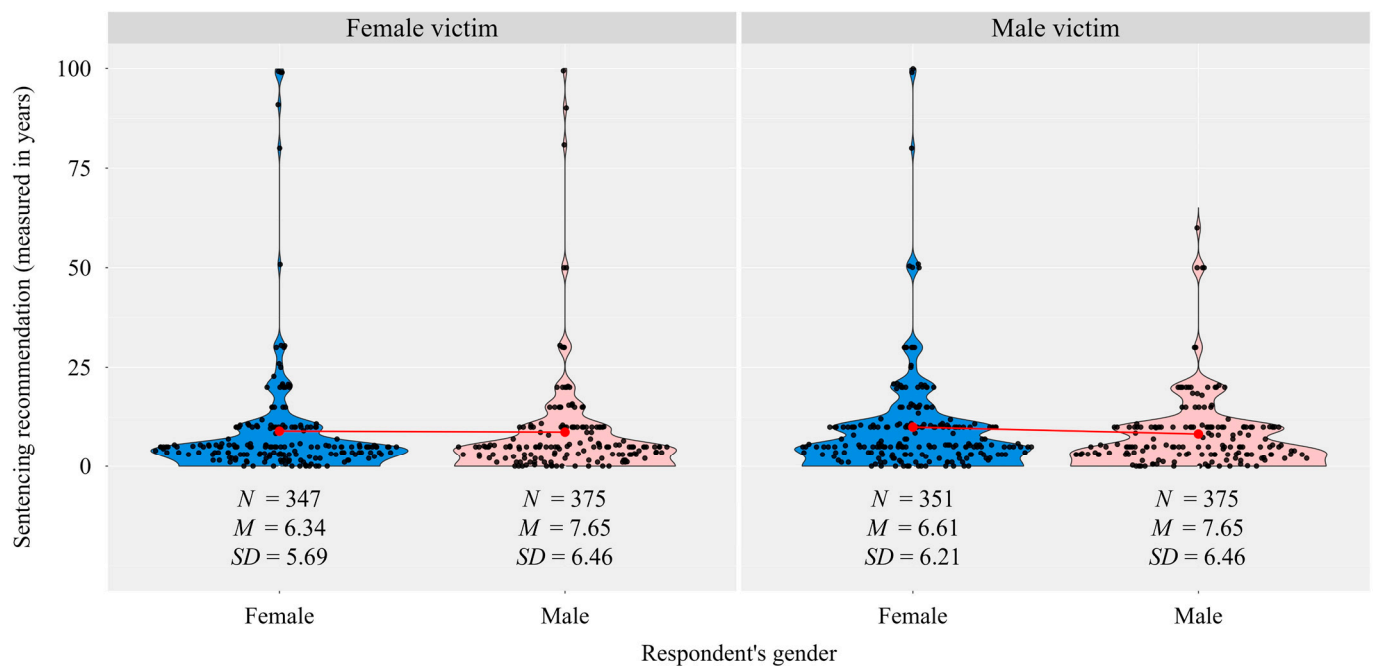


Figure 1. The distribution of sentencing recommendation by victim's and respondent's gender. Notes: The red dots represent the mean of each group.

3.2. ANOVAs

ANOVAs were conducted with the genders of both the victims and respondents as independent variables and various dependent variables. The results (Table 3) indicated that the effects of the victim's and respondent's gender on sentencing recommendation were not significant, presumably due to its large standard deviations. Nevertheless, the effect of victim's gender was significant when outliers were excluded. Specifically, as illustrated in Figure 2, offenders were recommended longer sentences when the victim was male, even when responses recommending sentences that exceeded 30 years ($F(1, 747) = 7.75$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$, $p < 0.01$) and more than 2 SDs longer than the overall mean were excluded ($F(1, 747) = 4.43$, $\eta_p^2 < 0.01$, $p = 0.04$). Nevertheless, the effect sizes were relatively small and explained only approximately 1% of the variance in sentencing recommendation.

Table 3. Results of ANOVAs.

	Victim's Gender			Respondent's Gender			Interaction		
	<i>F</i>	η_p^2	<i>p</i>	<i>F</i>	η_p^2	<i>p</i>	<i>F</i>	η_p^2	<i>p</i>
Blame									
Victim blame	0.30	<0.01	0.59	0.09	<0.01	0.77	0.83	<0.01	0.36
Perpetrator blame	0.02	<0.01	0.88	0.18	<0.01	0.67	0.17	<0.01	0.68
Negative social reactions									
Stigma	2.73	<0.01	0.10	1.33	<0.01	0.25	1.64	<0.01	0.20
Distraction	3.47	<0.01	0.06	0.41	<0.01	0.52	0.50	<0.01	0.48
Take control	1.29	<0.01	0.26	1.19	<0.01	0.28	0.22	<0.01	0.64
Victim blame	0.51	<0.01	0.47	0.55	<0.01	0.46	0.03	<0.01	0.87
Egocentric	0.05	<0.01	0.83	4.39	<0.01	0.04 *	0.22	<0.01	0.64
Intrusiveness	0.34	<0.01	0.56	0.18	<0.01	0.68	2.39	<0.01	0.12
Sentencing									
Original	0.08	<0.01	0.77	1.07	<0.01	0.30	0.59	<0.01	0.44
Excluding > 30 years	7.75	0.01	0.01 **	0.60	<0.01	0.44	0.95	<0.01	0.33
Excluding + 2SD	4.43	<0.01	0.04 *	0.49	<0.01	0.49	0.97	<0.01	0.32

Notes: Degree of freedom is 3 for all models. ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

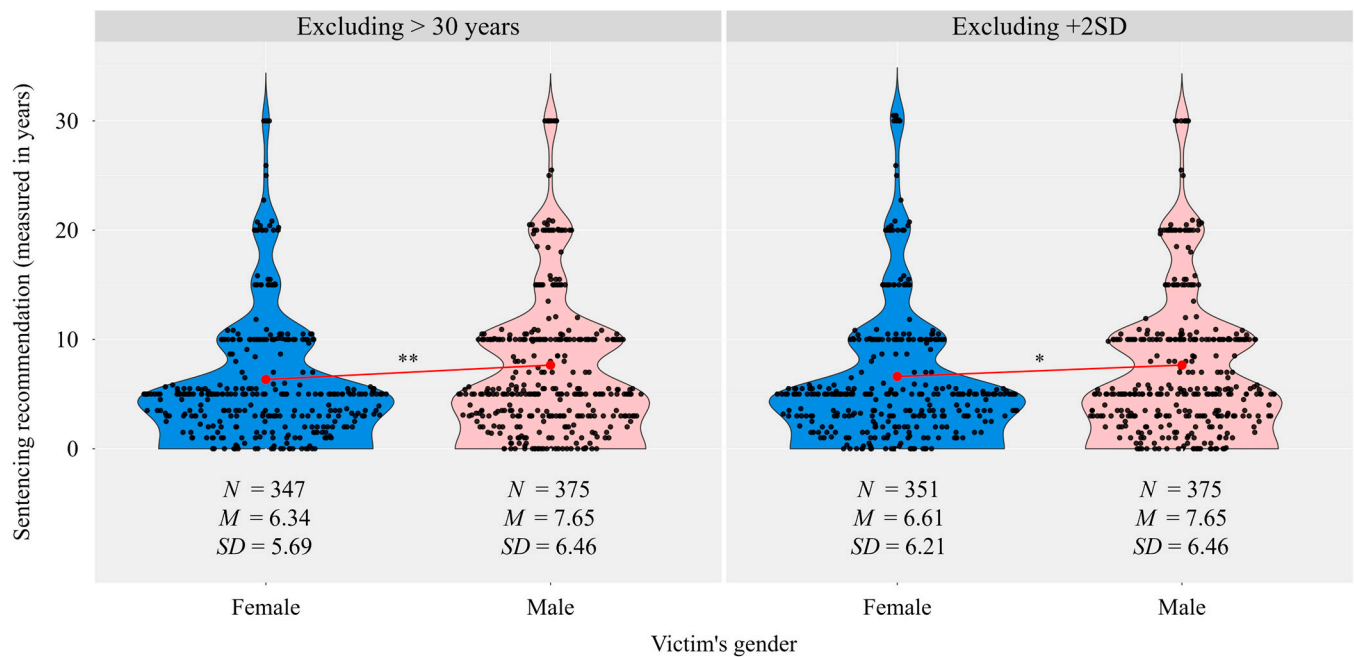


Figure 2. The distribution of sentencing recommendation by victim's gender. Notes: The red dots represent the mean of each group. ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

Additionally, among the negative social reactions toward the victim, egocentric reactions revealed significant differences between respondents' genders (Figure 3). Specifically, female respondents were more likely to engage in intrusive behaviors, such as asking detailed questions regarding what happened or inquiring how the victim felt during the incident ($F(1, 747) = 4.39$, $\eta_p^2 < 0.01$, $p = 0.04$). No other main effects were significant, and no significant interaction effects were observed.

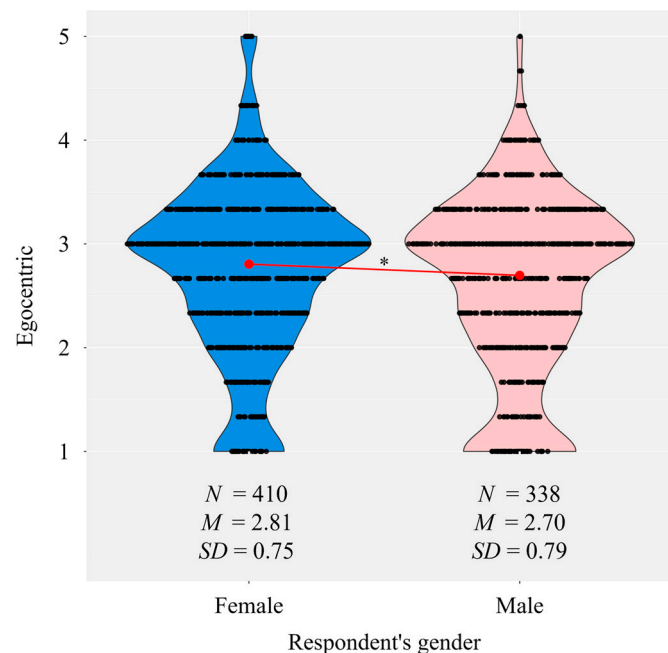


Figure 3. The distribution of egocentric reaction by gender. Notes: The red dots represent the mean of each group. * $p < 0.05$.

4. Discussion

This study examined whether previous findings on responses to sexual crimes, predominantly biased toward Western or English-speaking countries, could also be observed in different societies. Consequently, only one of the six hypotheses based on previous research was supported, whereas other findings differed from those of prior studies. Specifically, the hypothesis that longer sentences would be recommended for perpetrators when the victim was male compared with when the victim was female was supported. Conversely, contrary to expectations, women were more likely to exhibit egocentric reactions among the social negative responses.

The finding that longer sentences were recommended when the victim was male was consistent with those of previous research [26]. While no specific explanation was offered regarding this result in the previous study, a possible explanation would be the social expectations placed on men. Research on gender roles suggested [48,49] that while women were expected to embody communal attributes, such as being affectionate, helpful, and kind, men were expected to display agentic attributes, such as being independent, dominant, and confident. Male victims of sexual crimes violate these widely accepted societal expectations, which may have led to the perception of greater severity in the harm caused, and ultimately influenced the recommendation of a longer sentence.

Another possible explanation could be the rarity of male victims. Similarly to many other societies, an overwhelming majority of sexual crime victims in Japan are female, and cases involving male victims are relatively uncommon. Research suggested that people tended to perceive novel or unfamiliar events as riskier and more threatening than familiar ones [50]. Furthermore, fear of crime was a robust predictor of punitiveness [51–53]. Therefore, respondents who read scenarios that depicted male victims, a less common occurrence, could have felt heightened anxiety regarding the crime, which led them to recommend more punitive sentences.

This study's findings are valuable as they highlight the potential for inequities in Japan's criminal justice system. Criminal justice systems are expected to operate fairly; fairness does not necessarily mean treating everyone identically (absolute equality), but rather treating individuals differently based on their circumstances (relative equality). Therefore, varying sentences based on the victim's gender does not inherently constitute unfairness. However, the key factors influencing sentencing, such as the severity, likelihood of recidivism, and impact on society, are unlikely to change based solely on the victim's gender. Hence, differential sentencing on this basis is likely to be inconsistent with the principle of equality. Future research should identify the specific factors driving these gender-based differences in sentencing and explore interventions to mitigate them.

The finding that women were more likely to exhibit egocentric reactions may initially appear contradictory to previous results [32], which suggested that women generally demonstrated greater sympathy toward victims. However, this apparent contradiction may be resolved by reconsidering the nature of egocentric reactions and instructions in the present study. Egocentric reactions include behaviors, such as "expressing more anger toward the perpetrator than the victim does", that can be interpreted as reflecting a stronger sense of empathy for the victim. Additionally, the present study instructed respondents to imagine the victim as their friend. This may have led to greater perceived closeness to the victim and, in turn, elicited more sympathetic reactions. From this perspective, the present finding on egocentric reactions is consistent with that of prior research [32], suggesting that women are more inclined to engage in behaviors that demonstrate support for the victim.

Although no significant differences were observed, other than the two abovementioned results, these negative findings contribute to the literature. Previous studies reported that male respondents tended to attribute blame to victims (e.g., [19]), and male observers

recommended harsher sentences (e.g., [33]). However, these findings were not replicated in this study. This questions the generalizability of previous research rather than the robustness of its findings. Reactions to sexuality, and by extension, sexual offenses, vary across societies. Therefore, assuming that findings from one society can be generalized to others has risks. This study supports this risk and suggests that researchers must identify the context in which the studies are conducted and carefully consider the extent to which the findings can be generalized.

Although this study is valuable, some limitations are worth acknowledging. First, the scenario used in the study warrants further scrutiny. To enhance ecological validity, this research focused on a case that involved an entertainment company; however, unforeseen factors may have influenced the results. For example, an international comparative study on sexuality [36] has shown that among the 29 countries surveyed, the proportion of individuals who consider sex to be important in their lives is higher in Western European and European-linked Western countries (such as Australia and the United States), but lower in East Asian countries, including Japan. These findings suggest that cultural and societal differences shape perceptions of sexuality, which in turn likely influence attitudes toward sexual crimes. The relatively small effect sizes observed in this study may be partly due to the omission of such potential confounding variables. To confirm the robustness of the findings, examining whether the same results would be observed in different scenarios is necessary. A related concern involves the measurement scales employed in the study. The victim/perpetrator blame scale [46] and the negative social reactions scale [47] were translated and adapted to align with the objectives of the present research. However, these modifications and linguistic adjustments might have impacted the validity and reliability of the original instruments. This concern might be further underscored by the finding that the victim blame factor from the victim blame scale and that from the negative social reactions scale—although intended to measure the same underlying construct—were not as highly correlated as would typically be expected for conceptually overlapping measures ($r = 0.58$). A closer examination of the items (see Tables S4 and S5) reveals a likely reason for this discrepancy: the former includes more explicit statements such as “The victim is to blame for what happened” and “The victim is responsible for the incident”, whereas the latter uses more indirect expressions like “Saying that the victim could have done something to prevent the incident”. Given these differences in item phrasing, the observed correlation may still be considered reasonably strong. Nevertheless, future studies should systematically assess the validity of these adapted scales.

The second limitation pertains to the sampling. The present study aimed to ensure the validity and representativeness of the responses by including attention-check items and allocating samples according to the census data. While these measures went beyond those typically required in research, the possibility cannot be excluded that due to the constraints of conducting an online survey, respondents may be frequent Internet users selectively exposed to certain information. Revalidation via different methods would be beneficial.

5. Conclusions

Acknowledging a research focus bias stemming from the predominance of studies conducted in Western or English-speaking societies, the present study examined attitudes toward sexual crimes in a different cultural context—Japan. Of the six hypotheses derived from previous research, only one was supported, suggesting the presence of social and cultural differences in attitudes. These findings highlight the need for caution when generalizing conclusions drawn from specific societies to other cultural settings.

However, the study incorporated certain modifications in translation and design to align with its specific aims, and thus does not constitute a strict replication of prior research.

Methodological differences may thus also have contributed to the observed discrepancies. Furthermore, because confounding variables were not explicitly analyzed, the study could not identify the specific social or cultural conditions that shape attitudes toward sexual crimes. Future research should continue to build an empirical foundation and promote cross-cultural investigations into public perceptions of sexual offenses.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/sexes6020018/s1>, Figure S1: Translated scenario: Male victim; Figure S2: Translated scenario: Female victim; Figure S3: Original scenario: Male victim; Figure S4: Original scenario: Female victim; Table S1: Pearson’s correlation between variables in the overall sample; Table S2: Pearson’s correlation between variables by victim’s gender; Table S3. Pearson’s correlation between variables by respondent’s gender; Table S4: Original items of the victim/perpetrator blame scale used in the study; Table S5: Original items of the negative social reactions scale used in the study.

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