Who is worthy of help?
Constructing the stereotype of the "ideal victim" of child sexual abuse

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The stereotype of the "ideal victim" often determines who is considered deserving of victim status, especially in sexual violence cases. In this chapter, we explore how the so-called "ideal victim" stereotype is constructed and what are the elements necessary for the perception of "ideal victimhood". We use empirical data from an unmoderated anonymous Estonian online forum that hosts various topic threads from children and young people, including posts about personally experienced sexual violence (N = 28) and replies to these posts (N = 361). The data was analyzed by combining a discursive psychological approach with qualitative thematic analysis. Results reveal and illustrate how the stereotype is constructed from various elements and characteristics of social scripts, perceived gender roles, and misconceptions about sexuality. We unveil how these social constructions affect responses and attitudes towards sexual abuse victims to provide input for designing prevention efforts that support disclosure and help-seeking.
Keywords: child sexual abuse, online communication, sexual violence, stereotypes, victim-blaming

Every year, millions of children around the world suffer due to sexual abuse (UNICEF, 2020). In Estonia, where our study is located, nearly 90 % of reported sexual violence victims are minors, averaging at 12 years, with the youngest victim less than a year old (Ahven et al., 2018). There is an enormous gap between sexual abuse victimization and reported cases (Priebe & Svedin, 2008; Ullman, 2002), and statistics do not even tell us half of the story. Disclosure and help-seeking are dialogical processes (Reitsema & Grietens, 2016) where society and others play a pivotal part in victims' access to help and justice. Unfortunately, societal and cultural framing of sexual violence and victims' experiences often prevents dialogue (Hershkowitz et al., 2007; McElvaney et al., 2014). To that end, Internet may offer more suitable or safer ways to share concerns and offer or seek help while maintaining the own identity private (Friesen 2017). However, online communities are not excluded from, or immune to, wider societal attitudes toward sexual violence; thus, others' reactions, even when anonymous, may still define or redefine victims' experiences (Eelmaa & Murumaa-Mengel, 2020). If the world deems you unworthy of help, would

you still seek it? The notion of some sexual abuse victims being more deserving of victim status than others – and therefore worthy of compassion and support – is the focus of this chapter.

To be clear, we are fully aware that the term "ideal victim" carries linguistic connotations we do not want to enforce; thus, we take extra care when framing our results with this theoretical concept. By "ideal victim" we mean that victim status is socially constructed (Daly, 2014, p. 378), and so is the ideal victim concept – it is always determined by society or others. Society gives structure and meaning to everyday life, and collectively (re)told stories that surround us make up the "rules and resources recursively implicated in the production of social systems" (Giddens, 1984, p. 377). Even when victims define or redefine themselves, they do it based on socially constructed understandings of the so-called "ideal victim" that is built on and from rape myths (Adolfsson, 2018), gender stereotypes (Lips, 2017), and sexual scripts (Sun et al. 2016). Criminologist Sarah Jankowitz (2018, p. 70) argued that "encountering victimhood as socially constructed enables an analysis of wider socio-structural processes which define the 'victim,' who has the power to do the defining and how the label of victim produces certain realities, beliefs, and knowledge." Here, we construct the archetype of the ideal victim of child sexual abuse (CSA) and investigate the implications of the categorization. In other words, we aim to define or find those specific elements and reconstruct the stereotype by following the reactions of the audience to online forum posts describing personally experienced CSA incidents. For that, we seek answers to the following research questions: How is the ideal victim stereotype constructed, and what are the following observable implications to victims?

Finally, as we focus on stereotype construction and meaning-making of a controversial term, the victim-survivor dichotomy and the rationale for our approach should be reflected. As this is mainly a victimology study focusing on a phenomenon addressed with the phrase "victims", we decided to use it throughout the study. We recognize the term carries some negative connotations and may have stigmatizing consequences. On the other hand, the phrase "victim" is linked to criminal law and therefore conserves some critical nuances. For one, the phrase has juridical value; victim status comes with legal implications such as specific rights during criminal proceedings, rights for a civil claim, or access to victim assistance services. Secondly, the phrase is used in the context of criminal acts and, in most cases, connects an offender to the equation, which brings attention to the one culpable for the incident. Moreover, avoiding a term due to its potential adversarial connotations, while extensively used and relevant at least in judicial settings, would only further stigmatize victimhood.

Nevertheless, in interactional settings, we advocate respecting language preferred by victims/survivors.

Theoretical framework

We are mostly rooted in the social constructivism paradigm with its core idea that the world and its meanings are constructed by constant social interaction. It means reality is plastic, shared, collaborative by nature, kept "real" by people's thoughts and actions (c.f. Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Giddens, 1984). Social interaction can take place as one-to-one or many-to-many (Castells, 2009), face-to-face or computer-mediated communication, in-depth conversations, or small acts of engagement (Picone et al., 2019); it can be mediatized and mediated (Couldry & Hepp, 2018) or experiential. Combined, all these interactions form grand narratives and specific stereotypes on various aspects of social life. In this study, we are investigating the construction of the "ideal victim" stereotype in the context of child sexual abuse in online environments.

Though the "categorization" of the victim is relevant in legal contexts as it provides grounds for certain rights, social categorization often overrides the legal aspects. For instance, social categorization may work to revoke victim status or undermine victims' access to justice. Walklate (2007) described the process of becoming a victim as something to be achieved; victim status is negotiated during personal acknowledgment of victimization through social and institutional recognition. Construction of the victim label mirrors the societal awareness and beliefs about victims, offenders, and different crimes, yet often it reinforces stereotypical judgment of victims (Jankowitz, 2018). Holstein and Miller (1990) argue that producing the meaning of victimhood is interactional; that is to say, victimhood does not inherently lie in someone or come as an invariable axiom but instead is interpreted, constructed, and understood through social interactions. Norwegian criminologist Nils Christie (1986) introduced a conceptual hierarchy between victims, claiming some are considered more legitimate or real. His theory of the "ideal victim" has made an immense contribution to the field of criminology. Christie (1986, p. 18) believed the ideal victim is "a person or category of individuals, who, when hit by crime, most readily are given the complete and legitimate status of being a victim." When introducing the concept, Christie relied on polarizing examples of two different victims to illustrate the point: a vulnerable old lady who was robbed in the middle of the day on the street by a big scary man on one side, a man at a pub who got into a drunken altercation

with an acquaintance on the other side (Christie, 1986). The ideal victim has to be vulnerable and blameless, whereas at the same time the ideal offender has to be deviant. The ideal victim stereotype is influenced by individual victim-related aspects, the victim-offender relationship, the level of physical violence, induced injuries, and victim's lifestyle (Stewart et al., 1996). According to Susan Estrich (1987), the proximity of sexual violence to the archetype of "real rape" is the resolving factor of how severe and genuine someone's experiences are deemed.

Discourses surrounding sexual violence are burdened by several stereotypes, myths, and beliefs about how "real" crime or "true" victim or offender is supposed to be. The tacit question of who is "worthy" of victim status (Christie, 1984), often operating on a subconscious level, leads to the construction of "ideal" cases and victims. Myths are the grand narratives that shape social structures of life and serve as tools for meaning-making. The values, power dynamics, and conflicts interwoven into these myths are presented as natural, thus hiding the socially constructed nature and socioculturally situated historical development of these myths (Fiske, 2010). In other words, we view myths as collectively built and maintained overarching stories we (re)tell ourselves to make sense of social structures and reinforce them. Stereotypes can be viewed as sentences within these stories, smaller entities that bolster the grand narrative. To give an instance, our research has to consider rape myths (Adolfsson, 2018), narratives that do not view rape as an act of violence (but as a sexual one), the image of the rapist as an aggressor (someone who is unable to control sexual urges), and a tendency to assign blame to the victim (Manoussaki & Veitch, 2015). These myths comprise stereotypes and misconceptions about gender, sexuality, power dynamics, and roles in violence (Anderson & Doherty, 2007; Lips, 2017; Sun et al. 2016). Pickering (2007) has emphasized that most stereotyping uses a distancing mechanism, reducing the stereotype into an idiosyncratic attribute and separating those stereotyped from those among whom the stereotypes are reproduced. Children are incredibly perceptive to recurring stereotypes in their surrounding (Sherman et al., 2013). Additionally, broader societal values are a factor of the discourses of "ideal victims", as conservative and authoritarian ideologies and acceptance of traditional gender roles predict the derogation of gender violence victims (Spaccatini et al., 2019) and the acceptance of rape myths (Manoussaki & Veitch, 2015).

Disclosing sexual abuse is a sensitive process. Face-to-face synchronous communication can be immensely stressful for victims, especially when victim-blaming is widely accepted and internalized by children and young people as a "natural" response to such crimes. Screen-mediated online

communication that structurally supports anonymity and asynchronous interactions, providing a sense of control over the communicative situation (Friesen, 2017), can offer opportunities for help-seeking, sharing, and support. On the other hand, written communication of anonymous online forums echoes and reinforces harmful stereotypes and myths related to sexual violence. In fact, "media's intrusive ubiquity" (Silverstone, 2005, p. 190) is influencing micro-level individual experiences and perception of different societal phenomena, whether we are talking about screen-mediated communication or media representations being perceived as accurate replicas of reality (which itself is problematic in the context of social constructivist thought). As media devices and media services are increasingly omnipresent "at home and at school, during training and in leisure time" (Paus-Hasebrink et al., 2019), it comes as no surprise that help-seeking processes become mediated and mediatized as well, and although our study does not focus on the technological mediation, nor screen-mediated communication, it is an important contextual factor that shapes our results.

Methods

This study is based on 28 individual forum posts about personally experienced sexual violence (described to happen in between ages 5 and 17) and 361 answers to these posts. The data was collected in late 2019 from an unmoderated Estonian online forum where children and young people can anonymously discuss various topics such as relationships, health, hobbies and interests, sexuality, risk behavior, violence, etc. The specific forum had over 330 posts under the sexual violence sub-thread. For in-depth qualitative analysis, we narrowed down the posts using the following criteria: 1) The post entailed a clear assertion of personally experienced sexual violence or threat of it; 2) an indication that the victim was a minor during the incident; 3) an indication that the author of the post was a minor when creating the post; 4) at least two verbal reactions from different people to the post. The empirical data consists of 20 descriptions of rape cases (three of which fit the definition of multiple perpetrator rape), while eight cases either refer to an attempted rape, sexual harassment, threatening with rape, or other sexual violence (e.g., child sexual exploitation or online sexual abuse). The cases included in our study were published on the forum between 2007 to 2018.

To analyze these texts, we relied on qualitative thematic analysis and discursive psychological approach. As we worked with a large data set (for a qualitative study), thematic qualitative text analysis was helpful for

identifying "what is common to the way a topic is talked or written about and of making sense of those commonalities" (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). Thematic coding helped to organize the data set by allowing us to systematize it according to common themes. Firstly, to identify who was deemed an ideal victim, we followed the reactions of the audience. We were seeking compassionate, encouraging, and supportive reactions towards victims. Of 28 cases, solely four of such were found. In all other cases, adverse reactions such as victim-blaming, shaming, and non-believing were present. Thus, the initial themes were: negative reactions, positive reactions, and victims' subsequent reactions. This helped identify the markers for the stereotype construction and what observable implications such stereotyping has on victims. The stereotype markers were categorized into three themes: victim-related elements, situation-related elements, and offender-related elements.

In the second phase of the analysis, we followed the way audience negotiated different characteristics or elements to explain how exactly these stereotypes are constructed. For that, we employed the discursive psychology approach, a form of discourse analysis, which means the key is to look in depth of the text and scrutinize the text in a context. Discursive psychology essentially aims to find psychological themes from the language people use, understand how psychological notions are utilized in a discourse (Potter, 1998), and see how language is used as a social activity (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). We identified patterns (e.g., if the offender is a peer, the abuse is more often justified; reporting to police is usually recommended when the incident is recent) and rhetorical devices (e.g., the sociolinguistic construction of blame and justifications), which are shaped by sociocultural determinants. We illustrate our analysis by using representative quotes and interpret those in a broader context of the conversation.

To protect the privacy of people involved in this highly sensitive research topic, we used ethical fabrication (Markham, 2012) by reconstructing texts as examples of dominant discourses and repertoires within. The paraphrasing was done with careful consideration of not changing the meaning but merely ensuring the exact sentence would not be directly recognizable. This was done by translating from Estonian to English, grammar correction, replacing jargon and abbreviations with more formal language, and using terms or passages equivalent in denotation to replace some distinctive or idiosyncratic language. On a final note, throughout the study the phrases "stereotypical" or "stereotype" refer to the "ideal victim" stereotype and the phrase "non-stereotypical victim" to those deemed not to fit the stereotype. For clarity, these are not objective classifications or

our personal convictions but constructions of online forum participants' views.

Results

The stereotype of the "ideal victim" of child sexual abuse

Discerning the audience, particularly their reactions to victims' help-seeking, we identified six victim-related markers and four situation/offender-related markers that circumscribe the social categorization of the victim, commencing below with the former six.

The central **victim-related element** of the stereotype is vulnerability – the ideal victim ought to be weak and defenseless. Vulnerability as a trait itself insinuates victim's age, meaning "ideal victims" are young children who cannot fight back due to their age or inability to recognize abuse. In this study, all stereotypical victims were under the age of 14; the youngest was five to six years old when the abuse happened. Forum participants were quick to emphasize age and agency in their responses:

> "It is not your fault; you were just a child ..."

Here, the message reflects the paradigmatic construction of an innocent child and the perception, not expressed but intended, that children are not responsible for their safety. However, when one is not considered a child anymore but becoming an adult, one should be able to protect oneself. Accordingly, others (e.g., Back & Lips, 1998) have found older victims of CSA attributed to greater responsibility than younger victims. The responses evidenced that children over the age of 10 are expected to protect themselves from sexual abuse or at least comprehend abuse. This proposes that the ideal victim is below the age of 10; yet, if other characteristics of the stereotype are present, children between the ages of 10 and 13 may still fit it. A common assertion was that children above 14 should have sufficient physical strength to resist abuse:

> "I agree; this story does sound a bit hard to believe. Your writing implies you are a teenager; you should be faster and stronger than your grandfather ..."

Similar patterns were present in other discussions in our data. Case in point, a 14-year-old girl described being raped by a classmate in the school lavatory, and the reactions were comparable; the victim was predicted to be "old enough" and physically able to counter abuse. Here, perhaps the

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specific cultural and sociolegal context may offer some sense to this – for example, the legal age of sexual consent is 14 in Estonia, and sexual intercourse between a 14-year-old child and an adult is not a crime. The difference in expectations between children below 14 and below 10 is also identical to our current criminal law. Estonian Penal Code § 145 criminalizes sexual intercourse or other act of sexual nature with a child less than 14 years of age. The *actus reus* does not require violence or threats; the lawmaker has relied on the premise that obtaining consent from a child under that age always assumes exploitation. However, § 147 declares a child below the age of 10 legally incapable of giving sexual consent. Consequently, sexual intercourse or other act of sexual nature with a child below the age of 10 always constitutes rape. The age of consent is a negotiation between biological, legal, and sociocultural foundations that promulgates the expected level of maturity, responsibility, and capacity legally required to give consent (Moore & Reynolds, 2018). These assertions insinuate that childhood innocence and child sexuality are juxtaposed as antithetic concepts with exclusionary effect. Following the data, the fixation on children's agency to resist abuse was relentless:

> "How could you let him rape yourself? He couldn't be that much bigger and stronger than you; I think you actually wanted it."

The above quote manifests a widely prevalent victim-blaming praxis: If victims do not actively resist or fight their abusers, "*they must want it.*" A fundamental problem with such contention is that it is based on the "no means no" concept, not affirmative consent ("yes means yes"). The responses reveal a concerning approach towards sexual consent, meaning consent is inferred from the fact the other person is not actively resisting sexual activities. Yet a conviction supposing that resistance is the test of whether someone consented or not obscures the line between voluntary and criminal sexual activities. Regrettably, this sentiment has a long sociolegal history, as many jurisdictions have situated their acknowledgment of non-consent in the "utmost resistance" (Estrich, 1987; Little, 2005).

Resisting abuse was "required" from victims over the age of ten; even more so, it was a prerequisite for the act to be considered violence:

> „Wait, but if you didn't resist, is it actually rape? Maybe this guy thought you were just inexperienced and didn't understand you don't want to have sex."

The language again reflects how rape and sex are perceived so alike that differentiating one from the other may easily confuse people. As the anterior segment already discussed the issue, we now move on to the

third marker for the ideal victim stereotype: suffering a violent attack with visible injuries. The level of resistance needed to fit the stereotype was bound to the physical violence level present in the attack. Likewise, Little (2005) outlined that physical injuries legitimize victim status and serve as evidence. Relating this to our study, having evidence and being able to prove that violence happened was an essential factor for others to believe the victim. Besides physical injuries, respondents sometimes asked for other plausible evidence such as messages, videos, or photos to prove the abuse.

Victims' gender is another significant marker for victim categorization. The central argument here was that boys are strong enough to resist and escape violence, though it appeared to pertain only to adolescents. This line of reasoning reflects the general societal discourse towards male sexual abuse victims and, at the same time, conforms to the heteronormative expectations of "weak and vulnerable women" and "strong men". Previous studies have found sexual scripts to exclude males as possible victims of sexual violence (Javaid, 2018) or consider male victims of rape by women as "lucky". Such discourses may hinder prevention activities aimed at boys but also impede boys' willingness to disclose abuse (O'Leary & Barber, 2008).

The fifth marker was victim's appearance, primarily concerning clothing along with hair color, make-up, and body shape. It has been previously identified that victims' attire and the amount of revealed skin is perceived as an imperative part of ideal victim construction – short skirts and revealing cleavages deny women of victim status (Spaccatini et al., 2019). As per our data, those who wear "provocative" or "sexually-suggestive" clothes are more inclined to be assaulted.

> "For the most part, sexual violence is dependent on a woman's clothing – the more provocative, the greater the chance of being raped."

This statement alleges that women can choose to become a victim, and the recurrence of sexual violence in their life is under their control. Another problematic sentiment with such an assertion is the gender implication: Women's victimization is reliant on clothing or behavior. Equally important is how language is used as a rhetorical tool: A euphemistic reconceptualization of children and underage girls to young women was a common way of diminishing the severity of violence and shifting focus to victims' responsibility. In addition, such mode of expression adds to the practice of premature sexualization of children. And not only clothes matter; merely by having a body, women are often perceived to violate gendered territoriality and treated not as persons but as bodies (Fairchild

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& Rudman, 2008) – a dehumanizing innuendo of female shape "inviting" advances and aggressions.

The sixth marker was victim's behavior in the aftermath of abuse. The "ideal victim" had to be visibly traumatized and notably emotional, and victims were expected to display their emotional state. Victims who did not explicitly express their fear, anxiety, or other emotions were not taken seriously. The psychological discourse of harm depicts the victim as *ipso facto* traumatized and permanently damaged (O'Dell, 2003). This narration creates a frame and a script for expectations on victims' mental and emotional state, behavior, and feelings. Besides being traumatized, another aftermath behavior evaluated was disclosure. The later victims are seeking help, the less likely they are believed. Alongside the timing of disclosure, the frequency of abuse added to the stereotype construction. Following the responses, sexual abuse had to be isolated, not a recurring circumstance. The reasoning was that younger children would at least accidentally tell someone and older children would not let someone repeatedly assault or abuse them (unless *"they wanted it"*). The reactions reflected a belief that "real" victims would report CSA immediately, not months or years later.

> "It is hard to believe a child could keep a secret like that for that long ..."

Unfortunately this is another widely accepted misconception, as most children do not disclose abuse immediately (Hershkowitz et al., 2007; Priebe & Svedin, 2008; Ullman, 2002), and even when children do disclose, the abuse is rarely reported to the authorities or other professionals (Priebe & Svedin, 2008). The assumption about the unlikelihood of ongoing abuse may be influenced by both the selective media reporting of isolated stranger rape cases (Marhia, 2008) and general misconceptions about the complexity and dynamics of CSA. The main reason children refrain from disclosing is being afraid of blaming and shaming and feeling scared (Hershkowitz et al., 2007; McElvaney et al., 2014). A 2007 study in Israel revealed that 63 % of parents were unsupportive (i.e., angry and accusatory) when children disclosed sexual abuse, above all when the perpetrator was known to the child (Hershkowitz et al., 2007). Ergo, children are justifiably scared to disclose CSA, as negative reactions and harmful attitudes are common in disclosure.

The underlying doctrine of **situation-related elements** of the stereotype appears to lie in the unavoidability of the attack. In other words, sexual violence has to be unforeseeable and inevitable to count as "real". A violent and unexpected sexual assault by a stranger in a dark alley is the "real

rape" archetype (Estrich, 1987); hence the more resemblant an incident is to the archetype, the more likely it is taken seriously. The majority of victims in our study were raped at a party or in their own home. In some cases, the unavoidability was met with victim-related elements, such as being unable to resist or avoid abuse due to specific vulnerabilities such as victim's age. In two cases when the victim was over the age of ten, the unavoidability of violence was situation-related. By way of explanation, an example of a "stereotypical" case in our sample was the rape of a 13-year-old girl walking home from practice in the evening; she was suddenly and violently attacked and then raped by an intoxicated stranger. In most cases, being sexually assaulted at home was not perceived as unavoidable.

Predominantly, the elements associated with the non-ideal victim stereotype were non-negotiable. One of these non-negotiable elements was alcohol. If victims were under the influence of alcohol or in a situation where people consume alcohol (e.g., at a party), the reactions towards them were always negative:

> "It is your own fault that you got yourself so irresponsibly drunk and let someone take advantage of you."

Being intoxicated decreases the perceived victimhood, and, according to common perception, women who consume alcohol are considered at least partially responsible for what was done to them (Reynolds, 2017).

Moving on to the **victim-offender relationship**, we see dynamics that function either as legitimizing or depreciating the victim. Following earlier studies (Gravelin et al., 2019; Reynolds, 2017), the closer the relationship with the offender, the more likely was the victim regarded as not fitting the ideal victim stereotype and the grand narrative of "real" rape. Our empirical data has evidence of an "ideal offender" profile that would, in turn, legitimize victim status. The "ideal offender" is antisocial, extremely violent, ideally a stranger, and always a male. But most importantly, the offender must be somehow deviant and different from the norm; the landmark works of this field confirm the requirement of the "big bad" offender (Christie, 1986).

Around two-thirds of our sample were acquaintance rape cases. Only two of these cases met the ideal victim stereotype; however, for an acquaintance rape victim to be categorized as an ideal victim, the assault had to be unavoidable, unforeseeable, and carried out with extreme violence. Hence, as most victims were formerly familiar with their assailant, the assault was not taken seriously, and victims received less support and were more likely to be blamed. From previous research, we know that children assaulted by a perpetrator known to them are more likely to avoid reporting or

disclosing abuse (Hershkowitz et al., 2007). The same tendency was again present in our study. What is more, when victims were assaulted at their home, in general it was by their partners, usually their boyfriends. However, none such cases were categorized as fitting the stereotype. In fact, precisely the contrary – intimate partner rape by a peer, even when the victim is a minor, was not regarded as a crime but instead morally wrong and, at times, delineated to a mere misunderstanding.

> "Of course, it wasn't nice of him to take advantage of you like that, but as I understood, he was also drunk and didn't quite realize what he was doing."

Firstly, the above quote demonstrates a widespread hypocritical paradox: For victims alcohol is an aggravating marker, whereas for perpetrators it is a mitigating determinant. Secondly, peer sexual abuse here is framed as an immoral or impolite act, not as a violent or criminal one. Studies show victims as more likely to disclose sexual abuse perpetrated by an adult than a peer: 34 % would not tell when being victimized by an adult, compared to 82 % when the offender was a peer (Radford et al., 2011). However, peer-on-peer sexual violence makes up one third to half of CSA cases (Vizard et al., 2007).

For some reason, victims of multiple perpetrator rape were rarely believed and never deemed to fit the ideal victim stereotype. Similarly, studies have found that multiple perpetrator rape victims are not believed and lead to greater degrees of victim-blaming (Adolfsson, 2018). This suggests that the "facts" of sexual violence are subordinate to personal beliefs and perceived stereotypes, serving as rhetorical means rather than contemplated reasons.

To sum up, attitudes observed in reactions CSA victims received blatantly epitomize common rape myths (Larcombe, 2002) present in social interactions and popular media formats. Media is a common source of information on CSA (Pullins & Jones, 2006), but it is also the reason why a discrepant image of victims and offenders persist in society (DiBennardo, 2018). Media still maintains narratives framing female victims as responsible for sexual violence and constructing perpetrators as primarily violent, antisocial, and predatory, oftentimes in connection to kidnappings and murders (DiBennardo, 2018). Research confirms that media is disproportionately representing the most violent and aggravating stranger rapes when reporting sex crimes (Marhia, 2008). Given the media's power in shaping beliefs, it is problematic that most perpetrators have little in common with media representations: If the perpetrator differs from the

stereotype, is less "other", the young might not regard the harmful actions and abuse as such, to begin with.

The observable implications of victim stereotypes

The "ideal victim" stereotype played a pivotal part in others' reactions and the observable outcome for the victim. In our study, four cases out of 28 matched the ideal victim stereotype. The only children receiving the help they sought from the forum were children categorized as "ideal victims". Hence the only ones receiving help were the ones whose experience was legitimized, who were supported and guided to further action. According to available data, those who did not fit the stereotype did not receive the help they expected. Instead, their attempts were met with doubt, an "if it is true … it is your own fault" trope.

These reactions do not include only blaming and shaming but also redefining the experience and victim status. Rape was often reduced to something less, sometimes even to the extent of the act being normalized as if it was somehow inevitable or a routine feature of sexual interactions, at most "sex gone wrong". Sexual aggression was portrayed as a normal part of male masculinity and female victims as naive and stupid, but at the same time as flirtatious and deviant "gate-keepers" of male sexuality. The non-stereotypical victims were rarely guided any further. When victims of sexual violence fit the profile of the ideal victim, they are more likely to get help and compassionate responses (Krahé et al. 2008), as they "did not deserve what happened to them."

Research shows that negative reactions when children disclose sexual abuse are not rare (Hershkowitz et al., 2007; Hlavka, 2019). When children do disclose, others' reactions are critical determinants of whether the child gets help, treatment, and support (Reitsema & Grietens, 2016) or child's endeavors to seek help are impeded (Ahrens, 2006) and the victim is silenced. Seeking help from police or mental health specialists is rare in sexual violence cases (Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2011). Moreover, when victims seek help, the above-described stereotypes and discourses reinforce victims' stigmatization, eminently in formal contexts such as courts or the police (Greeson et al., 2016). Underage victims of sexual violence do not use communicative coping strategies (talk to an adult, seek help), because they carry a deeply rooted fear of not being believed (McElvaney et al., 2014) – precisely what we witnessed in our study.

Besides establishing empathy, supportive attitudes, and guidance being crucial in the help-seeking process, it is noteworthy that specific guidance

given to children can, too, be consequential. The victim of the stranger rape case was instructed to report the abuse to authorities, and later, when expressing gratitude for the support from others, she also reported contacting the police. In parallel, a victim of a violent sexual assault by a peer was primarily guided to tell her mother and seek psychological counseling. When later expressing gratitude for the support and guidance, she announced telling her mother and receiving psychological counseling. However, some recommendations may have detrimental consequences for victims, as was the case of one ("stereotypical") victim from our sample who was encouraged to retaliate. Again, later she expressed feeling empowered and grateful for the support and confirmed success in retaliation. Thus, it is not merely the apt approach to support victims that affect victims' help-seeking but correspondingly what exactly is recommended to them. Our results suggest that victims are more inclined to choose more comprehensively described recommendations.

Conclusions

In this study, we sought to establish how the stereotype of the ideal victim of CSA is constructed and what implications the stereotype has on victims. Such "ideal victims" are young children, primarily girls, who are supposed to be traumatized by what happened, displaying (semi)performative signs of distress, and seek help or engage in communicative coping strategies soon after the incident. In the center of all is the stereotype of an innocent and vulnerable child, as opposed to sexualized, pathologized, and demonized "child-seductresses" who are not deserving of victim status. After all, myths and misconceptions are the primary way CSA is conceptualized, and for most victims the ideal victim archetype seems to act as a barrier to help.

As the study relied on self-reported accounts of sexual violence and the following reactions, we were only able to examine the implications visible in the discussions. Thus, the results must be interpreted with caution. Another important limitation is that the sample included only girls; a thorough insight into online help-seeking of boys and non-binary people should be subject to further investigation.

On a final note, findings presented in this chapter provide insight into the struggles children face when seeking help. Reducing the critical gap between the realities of sexual abuse victimization and reporting could be supported by tailoring intervention efforts that specifically address such barriers. Defining sexual acts clearly and normalizing the use of

specific terminology in public discussions and sexual health education is crucial in providing language tools for prevention and help-seeking strategies. Teaching affirmative consent to children helps to create a clear line between consensual sexual activities and sex crimes. Along with that, the message "it is not your fault" seems fundamental to validate victims' experiences and empower them. Furthermore, as demonstrated, the recommendations children receive are focal to the outcome. Adequate information should be made available and easily accessible to all children. Step-by-step guidance on how to seek help or disclose abuse is advisable. Our concluding message is aimed at owners and moderators of various online platforms: Ensuring that necessary support is available for children seeking help may prevent other adverse effects. No child should feel unworthy of help.

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