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The Impact of Age and Race on Impressions of Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking Victims

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Abstract

In the present study, we examined perceptions of domestic minor sex trafficking victims based on the race and age of the victim using a mock juror paradigm. We hypothesized that participants exposed to Black victims and older victims would yield fewer pro-victim judgments, including fewer guilty verdicts and lower victim credibility. Likewise, we hypothesized there would be an interaction between victim race and age where the older Black victims would yield the fewest pro-victim judgments, and the younger White victims would yield the most. Additionally, we anticipated that participants with colder feelings toward younger teens on a feelings thermometer measure would hold more negative perceptions of the younger victims, and those with colder feelings toward older teens would hold more negative perceptions of the older victims. Participants \( N = 146 \) read a mock sex trafficking trial summary that depicted a victim as a girl who was either a Black 17-year-old, a White 17-year-old, a Black 13-year-old, or a White 13-year-old and was trafficked by an adult man. The results indicated that while participants had similar pro-victim judgments regardless of victim age or race, participants were significantly more likely to view the White 17-year-old victim condition as more similar to a typical prostitution case than any other victim condition. We discuss findings with regard to their legal and social implications, such as law enforcement and layperson identification of sex trafficking cases.

Keywords: child sex trafficking, domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST), expectancy violation, juror decision-making, victim age, victim race
The Impact of Age and Race on Impressions of Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking Victims

The sex trafficking of minors can cause significant psychological and emotional harm to victims. Additionally, victims may be blamed for their experiences by people who misunderstand the issues surrounding sex trafficking and have biases toward victims. People’s biases toward teenagers and biases based on race may lead victims to be blamed for their roles as victims. Sex trafficking is often treated as a criminal justice issue; thus, public biases and misconceptions toward victims based on age and race may have implications for prosecuting perpetrators of sex trafficking. As such, the present study explores how mock juror perceptions of underaged sex trafficking victims vary based on the victim’s age and race.

Sex Trafficking

The federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) defines sex trafficking as “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age” (TVPA, 2000). There are many incidents of sex trafficking every year. For instance, in 2020, the U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline identified 10,836 victims of sex trafficking (Polaris Project, 2022). However, this may be only a fraction of the current sex trafficking victims in the United States, as the actual numbers are unknown. These numbers are most likely underestimated due to misinterpretation, non-reported incidents, and non-identified cases of sex trafficking (Nichols, 2016). Human trafficking, and specifically sex trafficking, is largely a hidden crime (e.g., conducted behind closed doors or online), causing a lack of identifiable cases. Many cases of sex trafficking are falsely reported as prostitution (Kulig et al., 2020), and, in many areas, there is a lack of specialized law enforcement training to identify sex trafficking. Instead, tips from
community members, hotlines, and victim-service organizations are the first to identify and report the trafficking (Farrell et al., 2014). Community members are critical to identifying sex trafficking; however, they are susceptible to biases and misconceptions about sex trafficking, which may lead to a lack of recognition of victims. One common misconception community members make is the assumption that trafficking happens in the United States but does not happen in their communities. Such misconceptions and beliefs are a problem because the identification of trafficking cases partially relies on community members (Bouche et al., 2016), and these people may be eligible to serve as jurors in a sex trafficking case.

**Sex Trafficking Legislation**

Sex trafficking is considered a criminal justice issue due to the way the TVPA addresses trafficking: through prevention, protection, and prosecution (TVPA, 2000). Since one of the main components of the TVPA is prosecution, the criminal justice system and legislation have a significant role in how people view sex trafficking and its victims. Despite the federal law allowing for the prosecution of traffickers and protection for their victims, many identified cases of human trafficking are not prosecuted (Farrell et al., 2014). The limitations of the TVPA have led to states making their own legislation to fill in the gaps. However, these laws are relatively new, and some have unclear elements leading to prosecutors not wanting to take on these cases because they think they will not win the case, thereby leaving victims without justice (Farrell et al., 2014). Furthermore, some prosecutors are reluctant to take on sex trafficking cases when victims do not meet stereotypes (e.g., an immigrant or someone chained in a van) because they assume it is harder to convince a judge or jury the victim is a real victim due to false beliefs about whom a victim truly is (Farrell et al., 2014). For instance, in an interview Farrell et al. (2014) conducted with some state prosecutors, one state prosecutor described a situation in
which a judge let a defense attorney falsely claim in court that trafficking only happens to immigrants who were smuggled into the country. This caused the prosecutor to lose the sex trafficking case.

The issue of sex trafficking becomes more critical when it involves minors (i.e., someone under 18 years old). Minors are psychosocially immature (e.g., easily succumb to influence and pressure) and cannot legally consent to sex acts (Reid & Jones, 2011). Thus, minors are given special protections by the law. Since prosecutors do not have to prove force, fraud, or coercion when the victim is a minor (TVPA, 2000), they have a lower burden of proof under the law (i.e., fewer requirements to prove beyond a reasonable doubt a crime was committed) making obtaining convictions easier in cases where victims are minors compared to when the victim is an adult (Bouche et al., 2016). Although cases with minor victims have a lower burden of proof, the protection this affords does not always extend enough to protect victims from other legislative issues surrounding domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST). State legislation for DMST is inconsistent, causing significant differences in the treatment of the trafficked minor and prosecution of the trafficker state-to-state (Bouche et al., 2016; Farrell et al., 2014; Kulig et al., 2020; Reid & Jones, 2011). Gaps in some state legislation allow minors to be classified as offenders of a crime rather than victims. There are many states where law enforcement would arrest trafficking victims for prostitution instead of recognizing them as DMST victims (Farrell et al., 2014; Kulig et al., 2020). To prevent trafficked minors from being prosecuted for prostitution, certain states have adopted Safe Harbor Laws, which provide specialized services to help under-aged victims, such as housing, medical assistance, language assistance, and legal services (e.g., Massachusetts; Polaris Project, 2015). When law enforcement arrests victims for prostitution, it can make the victims less likely to trust law enforcement and less likely to
cooperate with the investigation process (Farrell et al., 2014). This can become an issue as there are many times when a victim is the only witness to the trafficking, and the victim’s testimony and cooperation is vital to criminal prosecution in human trafficking cases (Farrell et al., 2014).

**Sex Trafficking Demographics**

While any minor could become a victim of DMST, some are more at risk than others due to several possible vulnerabilities that make them more susceptible to trafficking. Under certain models of sexual grooming for DMST, traffickers look for and target victims that are vulnerable emotionally, socially, environmentally, economically, or mentally (Winters et al., 2022). Economic instability and lack of access to food, clothing, and proper shelter can increase susceptibility to trafficking (Winters et al., 2022). Likewise, the housing situation of the victims can have an impact. Runaways, homeless youth, children raised in foster and group homes, and those raised in environments where crimes are common are more likely to be trafficked (Goldberg & Moore, 2018; Reid & Jones, 2011; Winters et al., 2022). Minors who experience physical, emotional, sexual, and verbal abuse, as well as minors who experience parental neglect, are at a higher risk of being targeted for DMST (Goldberg & Moore, 2018; Winters et al., 2022).

Much is unknown about the accurate statistics of sex trafficking and the demographics of its victims. Overall, victims of sex trafficking are more likely to be White or Black than other races, with the majority being Black (Banks & Kyckelhahn, 2011; Kulig et al., 2020; Winters et al., 2022). Between 2008 and 2010, data from the Human Trafficking reporting system suggested that 40% of all sex trafficking victims were Black, and 26% were White (Banks & Kyckelhahn, 2011; Winters et al., 2022). Similarly, in their study of the National Incident-Based Reporting System, Kulig et al. (2020) discovered that minors reported to be DMST victims or prostitutes were predominantly White or Black. Confirmed sex trafficking victims are primarily female (i.e.,
over 90%; Banks & Kyckelhahn, 2011; Kulig et al., 2020). Due to a lack of consistent reporting of incidents of sex trafficking and the demographics of the victims, it is hard to find the average age of victims of DMST, as various sources report different things. In one study, Kulig et al. (2020) found that the average age of a minor sex trafficking victim was 15.5 years old, and the average age of a minor arrested for prostitution was 16.4 years old. This shows that younger victims are more likely to be viewed as victims, while older victims are more likely to be viewed as prostitutes. These factors may provide an image of what could be considered a typical victim of DMST; however, real victims might not always fit this image, or this image might not align with what people expect a victim to look like. Therefore, to measure if people will negatively judge DMST victims based on their race and age, this study will use a mock juror design in which a hypothetical victim is either a Black girl or a White girl, and this victim will be either 13 years old or 17 years old.

**Psychological Theory**

There is an idea of a typical victim that people expect when they hear about sex trafficking; for example, many people expect that most trafficking victims are illegal immigrants and sex trafficking victims are almost always female (Bouche et al., 2016). However, many of these beliefs about who a sex trafficking victim is or should be are incorrect. These beliefs can impact people’s perceptions of victims when the victim falls in line with what is expected or violates the expectation. The impact of expectations on perception becomes important in ambiguous legal cases where expectancy may influence juror decisions. Individuals who experience an expectancy violation tend to perceive victims’ (of sexual or physical violence) character less favorably and see victims as less credible than when they did not experience an expectancy violation (Bosma et al., 2018). For example, in rape cases where a woman is
victimized by a stranger, she is expected to experience symptoms of PTSD; when a victim meets this expectation, jurors render more pro-victim judgments (e.g., finding the victim credible; Pickel & Gentry, 2017). People may react more positively or negatively toward a victim of sex trafficking depending on whether the victim aligns with their expectations of how a victim should look and behave. People may hold misconceptions about victims of sex trafficking and DMST; when these misconceptions and biases are not met, people may have a negative reaction which changes how people view the victim and how jurors render verdicts in these cases.

Mock Juror Studies

Currently, there is a gap in the literature on expectancy violation in the context of sex trafficking; however, other areas of victimization literature, such as child sexual assault literature, can provide relevant background to understanding how expectancy violation may impact perceptions of victims of DMST. In mock juror studies, violation of expectations sometimes has negative consequences for the victim. Victim credibility is important in sexual assault or rape cases, but it becomes even more important when the evidence in the case is ambiguous, and jurors must rely on their own assumptions of a victim to determine the outcome. In child sexual assault cases, when the victim demonstrates the emotion that the jurors expect them to have (i.e., sadness), the jurors will see them as a credible victim. Specifically, if the child victim is crying and not staying calm, jurors will display more pro-victim judgments, such as finding the victim more credible, accurate, and reliable (Golding et al., 2020). General expectations and stereotypes about victims based on their characteristics (e.g., age or race) can also influence juror decisions. People of color are often over-sexualized in media and pornography which has led to stereotypes of minorities being more sexually promiscuous (Bryant-Davis & Tummala-Narra, 2020). This stereotype has extended to children of color, who
are minors but are often viewed as more promiscuous and are sexualized at an earlier age than white children (Golding et al., 2020). When a victim of child sexual abuse is Black, jurors often view her as more responsible than a white victim for the sexual abuse and will hold the abuser less responsible for the assault (Bottoms et al., 2004). Age also impacts jurors’ perceptions and judgments of victims. When it comes to sexual abuse cases, jurors tend to believe child victims (i.e., children under 12) and see them as more trustworthy and credible witnesses than adolescent victims (i.e., 13 to 17; Golding et al., 2020).

**Present Study and Hypothesis**

The present study used a 2 (race: White, Black) x 2 (age: 13 years old, 17 years old) between-subjects experimental mock juror design to determine how victim age and race impact people’s perceptions of domestic minor sex trafficking victims. Participants first rated their feelings on various age groups using a feelings thermometer to capture their attitude toward the age groups used for the independent variable. They then read a mock trial summary of a domestic minor sex trafficking case trial. In the trial, the victim was a teenage girl (i.e., Black 17-year-old, White 17-year-old, Black 13-year-old, or White 13-year-old) who was trafficked by an adult man. After reading the trial summary and forming impressions of the case, victim, and defendant, participants individually indicated their verdict (i.e., whether the defendant was guilty or not guilty), how confident they were in their verdict, the reason for their verdict, and then answered a variety of questions on their impressions of the defendant and victim (e.g., credibility).

Considering that children of color are often more sexualized and perceived as more promiscuous (Golding et al., 2020), and that mock jurors view young Black girls who are victims of sexual assault as more responsible for their assault than young White girls (Bottoms et al.,
2004), we hypothesized that participants exposed to the conditions with Black victims would yield fewer pro-victim judgments (i.e., fewer guilty verdicts, lower victim credibility, higher blame for the victim) (H1). Similarly, mock jurors render fewer pro-victim judgments to older adolescent victims of child sexual assault (i.e., 16 years old) than younger adolescent victims (i.e., 12 years old; Bottoms et al., 2004), and older victims are more likely to be classified as prostitutes, while younger victims are more likely to be classified as victims (Kulig et al., 2020). Given these findings, we hypothesized that participants would render fewer pro-victim judgments in the 17-year-old victim conditions compared to the 13-year-old victim conditions (H2). Additionally, we hypothesized that there would be an interaction between victim race and victim age where participants render the most pro-victim judgments to the 13-year-old White victim and the fewest pro-victim judgments to the 17-year-old Black victim (H3). Finally, we examined how participants’ feelings toward certain age groups (e.g., children, younger teens, older teens, or young adults) predicted their feelings toward the hypothetical victim using a feelings thermometer. We expected participants with colder feelings toward younger teens would hold more negative perceptions of the 13-year-old victims than those with warmer feelings. Likewise, we expected those with colder feelings toward older teens would hold more negative perceptions of the 17-year-old victims than those with warmer feelings (H4).

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants ($N = 167$) were recruited through the online data collection platform Prolific. All participants had to be jury eligible, meaning they had to be at least 18 years of age and United States citizens. There were 2 participants removed for not putting in their Prolific worker ID or not indicating their citizenship. An additional 10 participants were removed for not completing
the verdict or manipulation check questions. Since we were testing the effects of race and age on domestic minor sex trafficking trial outcomes, an additional 9 participants were excluded for incorrectly recalling the charges the defendant faced. No participants incorrectly recalled the victim’s age. The final sample contained 146 participants. Most participants identified as White/Caucasian (111; 76%), 12 identified as Asian or Pacific Islander (8.2%), 16 identified as African American/Black (11%), 14 identified as Hispanic/Latino (9.6%), 3 identified as Native American (2.1%), and 4 identified as multi-racial (2.7%). A total of 73 participants identified as female (50%), 69 as male (47.3%), 2 as genderqueer (1.4%), and 2 as other/prefer not to say (1.4%). Most participants identified as heterosexual (n =119; 81.5%), 3 identified as homosexual (2.1%), 20 as bisexual (13.7%), and 4 other/prefer not to say (2.7%). Most participants had not served on a jury before (n = 124, 84.7%). Participants leaned toward being moderately religious (M = 2.77, SD = 1.898) on a 7 point-Likert scale (1 = not religious at all to 7 = extremely religious), and leaned moderate (M = 2.96, SD = 1.644) from a 7 point-Likert scale (1 = very liberal to 7 = very conservative). The ages of participants ranged between 18 and 76 (M = 38.44 SD = 12.57). Most participants (36.3%) reported having at least a bachelor’s degree, 18.5% had completed some college, 16.4% had a high school diploma or equivalent, 2.1% had some high school but no diploma, 8.2% had an associate’s degree, 15.1% had a master’s degree, 1.4 had a professional degree beyond a bachelor’s degree (e.g., MD, DDS), 1.4% had a doctorate degree, and 0.7% had a technical or occupational certificate.

Materials

Feelings Thermometer

To assess participants’ views on different age groups, they completed a feelings thermometer that rated how warm they felt towards groups on a scale of 0 (very cold) to 100
Participants rated how they felt towards children (i.e., 1-12 years old), young teens (i.e., 13-15 years old), older teens (i.e., 16-17 years old), young adults (i.e., 18-24 years old), adults (i.e., 25-64 years old), and older adults (65 and older). The age classifications were taken from the National Institutes of Health, which lays out an age designation for children, adolescents or teens, adults, and older adults (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022). We modified this classification to split the adolescent category into two (young teens vs. older teens) and the adults category into two (young adults vs. adults).

**Criminal Trial Summary**

Participants read a fictional trial summary that depicted a domestic minor sex trafficking case (adapted from Wasarhaley et al., 2016). In the case, the victim was either a 17-year-old Black girl, a 17-year-old White girl, a 13-year-old Black girl, or a 13-year-old White girl who was trafficked by a Hispanic adult man. We chose to control the defendant’s race as Hispanic so participants would experience a cross-racial effect of defendant and victim race in all conditions to prevent confounding judgments. We used a between-subjects design where participants were randomly assigned to one of the four trial summaries. In each of the four conditions, the summary included a description of the trial, a summary of the prosecution’s case, a summary of the defense’s case, a summary of the prosecution and defense’s closing arguments, and instructions the judge gave the jurors. The conditions were kept the same length, and the majority of information in them was kept the same. The only differences occurred in the manipulation of the victims’ age and race. We manipulated the victim’s name to indicate the victim’s race (i.e., Shanice Williams or Sarah Wilson; adapted from Lorjuste & Wasarhaley, 2023). To show the age manipulation, we gave statements of the victim’s age throughout the summary and a statement claiming the defendant was aware of the victim’s age. While reading
the mock trial summary, participants were asked various multiple-choice comprehension questions (e.g., “What is the name of the alleged victim”). If participants answered the questions incorrectly, they were prompted to read the trial more carefully.

In the trial summary, the defendant was being tried for the trafficking of persons under 18 years for sexual servitude by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (Massachusetts General Law, 2023). The defendant pleaded not guilty to this charge. The prosecution’s case involved testimony from the victim and the officer who initially took the victim’s statement. The victim stated she met the defendant at a mall kiosk on her birthday. The defendant initiated a conversation with her, and then they went out for coffee. From here, the defendant mentioned his lavish lifestyle and how the victim could live with him instead of in her unstable home environment. The victim and defendant began a friendship, and eventually, the victim ran away from home to live with the defendant. After two months of living with the victim, the defendant began bringing men to the apartment and coercing the victim into engaging in sexual acts with the men. The victim stated that the defendant was often physically abusive toward her and threatened to harm her family if she refused sex with the men. The victim claimed that she was never physically restrained in the apartment, but she felt too afraid of the defendant to leave him. The responding officer stated that when he arrived on the scene, the victim disclosed that for the past seven months, she had been forced to engage in sexual acts with strangers by the defendant. He also testified that the victim told him that she thought if she left the defendant, he would brutally beat her or would hurt members of her family, as he was physically abusive toward her on several occasions.

The defense’s case involved testimony from the defendant’s tenant from the apartment complex he owns as well as from the defendant. The tenant testified that she was his tenant for
three years and that he was a nice and helpful man. She stated that she had frequently seen the victim come and go from the apartment. The tenant also claimed that she saw several other people going in and out of the apartment frequently and heard arguing coming from the apartment. The defendant testified that he had been in a close, caring relationship with the alleged victim for almost a year. He claimed that if the victim was truly unhappy, she could have left. He testified that the victim had developed an expensive taste while they were together and that when he said she would have to start assisting in paying for the expensive items she wanted, the victim began engaging in sexual acts with strangers on her own. The defendant also claimed he was never physically abusive toward the alleged victim. He also testified that he and the victim had gotten into a big argument prior to the investigation and that the victim just wanted to get him in trouble to get back at him. The defendant explained that he and the victim did argue frequently and that he was aware of her exact age (i.e., either 13 or 17).

**Trial Questionnaire**

After reading the trial summary, participants rendered their verdict (i.e., guilty or not guilty) and rated their confidence in their verdict on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely). The participants then rated how guilty they found the defendant (1 = not at all guilty to 7 = completely guilty). They were then asked to explain the reasons for their verdict in an open-ended response. Following these questions, participants were asked to rate how credible, honest, and believable they found the victim and defendant on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = not at all to 7 = completely). Additionally, participants rated how much they blamed the victim and defendant, how responsible they found the victim and defendant for the trafficking, and how credible the police officer was on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = not at all to 7 = completely). Participants were also asked how much sympathy and anger they had towards the victim and
defendant on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = none to 7 = a lot). They also indicated how similar and how typical the victim and defendant were to actual victims and defendants in sex trafficking cases, and how similar the victim and defendant were to what they expect a victim and trafficker to be on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = not at all to 7 = very much). Finally, the participants were asked how similar the case scenario was to a typical sex trafficking, prostitution, or child abuse case on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = not at all to 7 = very much).

During the analyses, we created three scales by averaging relevant ratings. The scales included victim credibility (credibility, honesty, and believability; α = .96), victim blame (blame and responsibility; α = .91), and victim typicality (victim similarity to trafficking victims, victim typicality, and the extent to which the victim was like someone the participants would expect to be trafficked; α = .89).

Procedure

Participants began this survey via Qualtrics software after being recruited from Prolific. They were first provided with a consent form to review and agree to before they could begin the study. Participants were asked to complete a feelings thermometer where they rated how they felt about certain age groups on a scale of 0 (very cold) to 100 (very warm). After completing the feelings thermometer, participants read the juror instructions, which asked them to assume the role of a juror and read a randomly selected trial summary. They were told to read the trial carefully so they could answer questions about it, and they would not be able to go back and change their responses once they answered a question. Participants were told in these instructions that in any criminal case, the defendant is presumed to be innocent unless he or she is proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. Then, they were randomly assigned to one of the four mock trial conditions and were asked to read the mock trial summary. Throughout the mock trial
summary, participants were asked to complete comprehension questions to ensure they paid sufficient attention. After reading the trial summary, participants were given the trial questionnaire. Finally, the participants were debriefed about the study. The average completion time for participants was around 20 minutes.

Results

The overall conviction rate across the four conditions was 71.2%. We used a logistic regression analysis to determine if the conditions with the Black victims and older victims led to more guilty verdicts than the White victims and younger victims. In step one of the logistic regression analysis, we tested both age and race to determine if there was a significant main effect on guilty verdicts. We also controlled for participant gender. In step two of the logistic regression, we tested the interaction term for age and race to determine if the variables had an interactive effect on guilty verdicts. We also performed univariate ANCOVAs on all the victim and defendant trial rating variables to determine if the manipulated conditions led to fewer or more pro-victim ratings. In the ANCOVAs, we controlled for gender of the participant. Finally, we examined the correlations between the victim ratings and feelings thermometers to determine if higher pro-victim ratings correlate with warmer feelings towards certain age groups.

Our first hypothesis predicted that participants exposed to the conditions with a Black victim would render fewer guilty verdicts and have lower pro-victim judgments. The logistic regression analysis revealed that the victim’s race was not a significant predictor of verdict (OR = 1.22, p = 0.609). The ANCOVA revealed that there were no significant effects of victim race on victim ratings (all ps > .05).
The second hypothesis stated that participants exposed to the conditions with the older victims would render fewer guilty verdicts and have lower pro-victim judgments. The logistic regression analysis revealed that age of the victim was not a significant predictor of verdict (OR = 1.33, p = .458). The ANCOVA revealed that there were no significant effects of victim age on victim ratings (all ps > .05).

Hypothesis three predicted an interaction between victim race and victim age such that participants would provide fewer guilty verdicts and lower victim ratings when the victim was a Black 17-year-old more than any other condition. The logistic regression analysis indicated that the interaction term was not a significant predictor of verdict (OR = 3.01, p = .161). However, one victim rating was significantly affected by the interaction between victim race and victim age: similarity to a typical prostitution case ($F[4,137] = 2.66, p = .036$). Pairwise comparisons revealed that participants were significantly more likely to view the condition with the White 17-year-old victim as more similar to a typical prostitution case than any other condition (see Figure 1). There were no other significant effects of the interaction on victim ratings.

The fourth hypothesis predicted that there would be a correlation between participants’ feelings towards younger and older teen-age groups and victim ratings. For this hypothesis, we conducted a correlation between the victim rating scales (i.e., victim credibility, victim blame, and victim credibility), sympathy for the victim, anger toward the victim, confidence in the verdict, guilt of the defendant, and the feelings thermometer ratings for younger and older teens. Contrary to our hypothesis, the feelings thermometer ratings were not correlated with any other victim or defendant ratings (all ps > .05; see Table 1).

Gender was a significant predictor of verdict, such that women were about three times more likely to judge the defendant as guilty (OR = 3.24, p = .004). We also found significant
gender differences in several of the rating variables and subscales, including how guilty the participants rated the defendant \( (F[1,137] = 4.09, p = .045) \), how much sympathy the participant had for the victim \( (F[1,137] = 4.86, p = .029) \), how similar the scenario was to a typical trafficking case \( (F[1,137] = 4.65, p = .033) \), and how similar the scenario was to a typical prostitution case \( (F[1,137] = 4.18, p = .043) \), such that female participants rated these higher than male participants. There was also a significant gender difference in the victim blame scale \( (F[1,137] = 5.26, p = .023) \), and the victim typicality scale \( (F[1,137] = 8.40, p = .004) \), such that women had less blame for the victims and rated the victims as more typical.

**Discussion**

We designed the present study to determine the effects of race and age of a female domestic minor sex trafficking victim on juror decisions and perceptions of the victim. Contrary to predictions based on expectancy violation theory and current research on domestic minor sex trafficking and child sexual assault, results indicated that participants had similar pro-victim judgments regardless of the victim’s age or race. Previous studies using expectancy violation theory note that individuals experiencing a violation of their expectations tend to perceive victims’ (of sexual or physical violence) character less favorably and see victims as less credible than when their expectations were not violated (Bosma et al., 2018). Given this theory, we expected that participants would react more favorably and give more pro-victim ratings to the victims that fell in line with who they would expect to be victims. Previous literature on child sexual assault suggests that children of color are more sexualized than their White counterparts (Bryant-Davis & Tummala-Narra, 2020; Golding et al., 2020). Given this literature, we expected that the participants exposed to the Black victims would give fewer pro-victim judgments because they would see the victim as more promiscuous, and thus, more responsible for the
trafficking situation. However, this was unsubstantiated in the present findings, where the Black victims and White victims were given similar pro-victim ratings for almost all of the ratings. Similar child sexual assault research finds that Black victims of child sexual assault are seen as more responsible than White victims for the assault (Bottoms et al., 2004). Our results show that participants assigned similar levels of responsibility for the trafficking to the victims despite their race. The lack of evidence supporting our hypotheses could result from differences in perceptions of child sexual assaults versus DMST. While both crimes are of a sexual nature and involve children, perceptions of these crimes are not always the same due to the circumstances surrounding them (e.g., money is exchanged in trafficking). It may be that while Black children are more sexualized and blamed more for their assault in child sexual assault contexts, this is not the same for DMST.

Current literature on DMST suggests that younger minor victims of sex trafficking are more often viewed as victims, but older victims are more likely to be mistaken as prostitutes (Kulig et al., 2020). Previous literature on child sexual assault suggests that younger victims are often seen as more credible (Bottoms et al., 2004; Golding et al., 2020) and older victims are seen as more responsible for their assault, and the defendant in their cases also receive fewer guilty verdicts than a younger victim (Bottoms et al., 2004). Given this literature, we expected that the participants exposed to older victims would give fewer pro-victim judgments because they would see the victim as less credible and more responsible for their trafficking. However, this was not supported by the present findings, where older victims and younger victims were given similar pro-victim ratings for almost all of the ratings. It is possible that the difference in ages between our older victims and younger victims in this study was not significant enough to cause participants to have major differences in their opinions of the victims.
In child sexual assault research, younger victims tend to refer to victims younger than 13, while older victims are victims 13 and older (Bottoms et al., 2004; Golding et al., 2020). Victims younger than 13 would still be classified as children, while victims 13 and older would be classified as adolescents or teens. Most people have a view that children and teens are significantly different, which can explain those differences in child sexual assault literature. However, since our study looks at two ages that classify as adolescents, participants might not view them as being different in many ways, and thus, they judge them similarly in a DMST context. Previous DMST research indicates that older victims may be viewed as more responsible for their actions and therefore labeled prostitutes, while younger victims are more viewed as victims (Kulig et al., 2020). We may not have found this favorability toward younger victims because of the participant sample of that prior research versus ours. Specifically, law enforcement was the sample in the prior research (Kulig et al., 2020) while our participant sample was made up of lay people who may have a different view than law enforcement on who typically is a victim, and our sample might not base that assumption on age as strongly as law enforcement.

While there were no main effects of our independent variables, we found an interaction between victim race and age in regard to the rating of how similar the scenario was to a typical prostitution case. The White 17-year-old victims were more likely to be seen as similar to a typical prostitution case falling partially in line with previous research on DMST. Previous research has suggested that older victims are more likely to be seen as prostitutes than younger victims, and White victims are less likely to be seen as prostitutes than other races (Kulig et al., 2020). While our results do not support previous findings that Black victims are more likely to
be seen as prostitutes, there is some support that older victims are more likely to be seen as prostitutes.

While we do not know why the White 17-year-old condition was more likely to be seen as a prostitute than other conditions, there is a possibility that younger participants have seen the movement on social media and other types of media explaining that sex trafficking victims are more likely to be from vulnerable groups, and marginalized groups are more likely to be trafficked. The White victim may be seen as someone who has a choice, compared to the Black victim who is from a minority population and may be more vulnerable. The same explanation can fit for younger victims who could also be considered from a vulnerable group. However, this explanation might not apply to all participants because the participant sample was from a wide range of ages, and many of the older adults may not be on the same social media that the younger participants may get this information from. Although, all participants were giving similar responses despite their age group.

Our findings of gender as a significant predictor of verdict align with previous studies on sex trafficking, child sexual assault, and victimization more broadly. Previous victimization literature suggests women give more pro-victim ratings compared to men (Bosma et al., 2018; Golding et al., 2004). Our sample provided the same results, as women were more likely to render guilty verdicts. Women also had more sympathy for the victim, had less blame for the victim, rated the victim as more typical, and viewed the scenario as more similar to a typical prostitution case than men.

Limitations and Future Directions
For this study, we used a mock juror paradigm, one limitation of which is that the experimental simulation is not always accurate to the behavior of real-life jurors (Bornstein et al., 2017). However, this paradigm has been repeatedly tested and is consistent with other behavioral and psychological research that uses simulations to test real-world behaviors. (Bornstein et al., 2017). Another limitation was the use of written materials for the trial presentation. Participants read a summary of a criminal trial online, a method which is standard in the mock juror paradigm. While there is the possibility that the results could differ if we used a different trial presentation (e.g., staged audio recording of a trial), mock juror literature shows few differences between the use of different trial presentations (Bornstein, 1999). Specifically, in the written materials, we used a particular manipulation technique where the race of the victim was manipulated by writing out a name that is stereotypically White or stereotypically Black. Using names as the race manipulation leaves some room for error. Although the chosen names were borrowed from a previous study that used similar names to manipulated race in the conditions, we intended to add a manipulation check question to determine if the manipulation was working as we intended for our participants. However, due to an oversight, the manipulation check question for race was left out of the questionnaire.

There are many possible future directions that can stem from the current study. First, future studies could use a different manipulation for the age and race of the victim. Instead of using the names of the victims only and continually mentioning the name and age of the victim as a method of manipulation, future studies could also include photos of their hypothetical victim. Seeing a victim of a certain age or race may make the manipulation more concrete for the participants, and they might feel differently toward the victim after seeing a picture of them, rather than only reading about them.
Another future direction can further examine the finding of the White 17-year-old being the most similar to prostitution. Future researchers can investigate the causes and implications of this result. An exploratory analysis we conducted of this finding suggested that there is a significant correlation between victim credibility and similarity to prostitution ($r_{140} = .26, p = .002$). This means that the more the victim is viewed as a typical prostitute, the more she is perceived as credible. Given that our sample was made up of lay people, the exploratory correlation suggests a more positive representation of prostitution for lay people compared to law enforcement. Typically, if a victim of sex trafficking is perceived to be a prostitute, it is more likely that she will be arrested by law enforcement (Kulig et al., 2020), suggesting a negative interpretation of prostitution. Our results, which focus on lay perceptions, suggest lay people have a more positive view of prostitutes as similarity to prostitution is relating to increased credibility. Future studies should investigate the differences in perceptions of prostitutes and sex trafficking victims through the eyes of law enforcement versus lay people.

Conclusion

Overall, the results of this study do not support the idea that DMST victim age and race have differing impacts on many pro-victim ratings (i.e., guilty verdicts, victim sympathy, victim credibility), but further research is still needed. Although most results contradicted previous research on child sexual assault, the finding of the participants seeing the White 17-year-old as most similar to prostitution compared to other conditions provided partial support for current literature on DMST. The present research suggests that a DMST victim’s age and race may not impact juror perceptions as much as one might assume, given previous literature on child sexual assault. However, age and race may have an interactive effect on people’s assumptions about
whether or not a victim is a prostitute. This could have implications for the misinterpretation of sex trafficking victimization by the public.
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Table 1

**Guilty Verdict Rate and Trial Ratings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>White 13-year-old</th>
<th>White 17-year-old</th>
<th>Black 13-year-old</th>
<th>Black 17-year-old</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>( n = 35 )</td>
<td>( n = 35 )</td>
<td>( n = 37 )</td>
<td>( n = 39 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guilty verdict rate</td>
<td>68.6%</td>
<td>68.6%</td>
<td>81.1%</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim</td>
<td>5.34 (1.39)</td>
<td>5.48 (1.18)</td>
<td>5.50 (1.53)</td>
<td>5.35 (1.37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim credibility</td>
<td>5.18 (1.34)</td>
<td>5.68 (1.07)</td>
<td>5.52 (1.34)</td>
<td>5.41 (1.39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim blame</td>
<td>1.66 (0.93)</td>
<td>1.84 (1.21)</td>
<td>1.76 (1.35)</td>
<td>1.83 (1.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim typicality</td>
<td>5.06 (1.43)</td>
<td>5.46 (1.31)</td>
<td>5.00 (1.31)</td>
<td>5.36 (1.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarity to sex trafficking</td>
<td>3.97 (1.20)</td>
<td>\textbf{4.91 (1.42)}</td>
<td>4.11 (1.98)</td>
<td>4.28 (1.73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarity to prostitution</td>
<td>4.43 (1.46)</td>
<td>4.74 (1.60)</td>
<td>4.73 (1.68)</td>
<td>4.28 (1.95)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarity to child abuse</td>
<td>5.40 (1.46)</td>
<td>5.26 (1.88)</td>
<td>5.57 (1.66)</td>
<td>5.21 (1.75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defendant guilt</td>
<td>58.60 (23.95)</td>
<td>59.00 (27.92)</td>
<td>51.32 (26.16)</td>
<td>55.62 (23.89)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thermometer young teens</td>
<td>58.83 (22.17)</td>
<td>61.77 (25.73)</td>
<td>53.51 (23.93)</td>
<td>55.77 (21.95)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textbf{Note:} Ratings presented as \(M(SD)\). Trial ratings were rated on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (completely). The feelings thermometer was rated on a scale from 0 (very cold) to 100 (very warm). Bolded value indicates a difference at \(p < .05\).
Figure 1

*Similarity to prostitution by victim condition*

![Graph showing similarity to prostitution by victim condition.](image-url)