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TELEVISION SPORT EXPOSURE AND RAPE MYTH ACCEPTANCE: A CORRELATIONAL STUDY

Relatrice

Prof.ssa Irene Leo

Laureanda: Sofia Mariani

Matricola: 2019287

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Abstract

The present research investigates the indirect correlation between television sports exposure and rape myth acceptance on an Italian sample. Said effect has been found to be mediated by attitudes that objectify and devalue women, namely hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, and sexual objectification (Custers & McNallie, 2017). Drawing from existing literature, the present study contributes to the research on said topic by observing the differences in the correlations between television sports exposure and different types of sports, following the traditional gender classification (Metheny, 1965). Among the types of sports analysed - (1) masculine, and (2) feminine and neutral - the only common mediation effect happened through hostile sexism. Additionally, watching sports traditionally considered feminine or neutral was found to be indirectly and positively associated to rape myth acceptance through the effect of sexual objectification of women. Furthermore, a gender difference in the mediation effect has been found: the only significant mediator for men was hostile sexism, while for women it was benevolent sexism.

Keywords: Television, Sports, Rape, Rape myths, Sexism

Contents

Abstract

Introduction **3**

1 Background **5**

1.1 Sexual violence 5

1.1.1 Defining rape 6

The legal definition 6

Historical overview 6

Present day scenario 7

1.1.2 Underreporting rape 8

Prevalence in Italy 9

1.1.3 The social perception of rape 9

The Italian context 9

The role of media 10

1.2 The effects of media 11

1.2.1 Media Priming Effect 11

Examples of media effects 12

1.3 Sport 14

1.3.1 Gender-typing in sports 14

The traditional classification 14

1.3.2 Women in sports 15

Female participation in typically masculine sports 16

Sports uniforms: religion, objectification and inclusion 17

1.3.3 Sports media 18

The portrayal of sportswomen	19
2 State of The Art	21
2.1 Rape Myth Acceptance	21
2.2 Sexual Objectification	23
2.3 Ambivalent sexism	24
3 Present Research	27
3.1 Aims	27
3.2 Hypotheses	27
3.3 Variables	28
3.4 Method	28
3.4.1 Sample	29
3.4.2 Measures	30
3.5 Results	32
3.5.1 Indirect effects of television sports exposure on rape myth acceptance	33
3.5.2 Sports type	33
3.5.3 Gender differences	35
3.6 Discussion	37
3.7 Limitations and future prospects	38
3.8 Conclusion	40
Bibliography	51
Sitography	55
Acknowledgements	57

Introduction

Sexual assault is one of the least reported crimes, even though its incidence is high (Berkland, Ji, & Jain, 2022; Kelly & Stermac, 2008; Krug, Mercy, Dahlberg, & Zwi, 2002; Ortensi & Farina, 2020; Tavara, 2006; World Health Organization and others, 2014). Given that it has extremely serious consequences for victims (World Health Organization and others, 2012), strategies aimed at decreasing its prevalence should be considered.

Rape myth acceptance was found to be closely related to low reporting rates (Frese, Moya, & Megías, 2004; Iconis et al., 2008). Said construct together with similar ones (e.g. sexual objectification of women, sexist attitudes, tendency to sexual harassment) was found to be related to the exposure to a number of media types and content, such as objectifying television content, pornography, music videos and sport (Beentjes & Konig, 2013; Galdi & Guizzo, 2021; Guizzo & Cadinu, 2021; Hedrick, 2021). However, the literature on the link between sports exposure and rape myth acceptance is limited (Custers & McNallie, 2017).

On this matter, sports media is an intriguing type of content, as the sports field is still particularly sexist and sex-segregated. In fact, even though there have been a number of fairly recent improvements, sportswomen are often devalued and sexualised. For this reason, the female participation in sports has been a central theme in debates focused on both sports and feminism. A number of countries have changed the league of some female teams, going from amateur to professional, while a number of others are still asking for equal recognition and equal pay. At the same time, several teams have challenged the traditional gender roles by changing their uniforms, making the discipline itself less objectifying of the female body.

Given the singularity of the feminine portrayal in sports, it is important to shed light on the link between sports exposure and rape myth acceptance. The results found will be extremely useful in making sports more gender inclusive, with the aim of reducing the negative social effects of sports exposure, namely, sexism, objectification, and last but not least, the adherence to rape myths.

Most of the existing studies have been conducted in the US, a sample which does not completely represent the European reality. Specifically, sports culture is quite varied across the world, as the most popular sports vary from one country to the other. In Italy, the most popular sport is football (European football, hence soccer) (Martelli, 2014), and the country itself is fairly conservative, as it is characterised by quite traditional gender roles (Anxo et al., 2007). Additionally, the Italian population is noticeably prone to rape myths (ISTAT; Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, 2018), sexual assault is quite common (ISTAT; Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, 2014), and unsurprisingly it is particularly underreported (ISTAT; Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, n.d.). Said aspects create quite a unique social landscape, which deserves to be investigated further in order to better understand the relationship between television sports exposure and rape myth acceptance. The present study aims to contribute to the research on said topic by observing whether or not there is a greater correlation with one or more types of sport.

Chapter 1

Background

This section covers the theoretical basis on which the present research was created. The main aspects that will be subsequently encountered in this work are rape myth acceptance, media exposure, sexist attitudes, and sexual objectification of women. However, in order to work with said constructs, it is necessary to define some common ground, namely sexual violence, media effects, and sports; reviewing their definitions, the latest findings, and research background related to them. Specifically, the incidence of rape and its definition are necessary steps in order to understand the concept of rape myth acceptance; the effects of media and the content broadcasted by sports programs are a key step in understanding the effects of television sports exposure, above all when it relates to the portrayal of women; and gender-typing in sports has an important role in defining sport-related sexist attitudes, especially in the rare occasions when the female sports are televised. Additionally, the role of the aforementioned constructs will be described in the Italian context, where the present research took place.

1.1 Sexual violence

Gender-based violence is recognized by the United Nations to be a human rights problem. It includes emotional, physical and sexual violence. The latter is the most extreme form of gender-based violence, and has a number of consequences on women's physical, mental and gynaecological health (Tavara, 2006). However, the definition of sexual violence is not as universal as it may seem.

1.1.1 Defining rape

Sexual violence is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as "any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic or otherwise directed against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work" (World Health Organization and others, 2014).

The legal definition

Despite the existence of said definition, which defines sexual violence as any type of unwanted sexual act and sexual abuse, including rape, (World Health Organization and others, 2012) most individual states and countries worldwide have created their own. This is primarily due to the way said definition has to be used, as the healthcare and the legal systems work in different fields and have different purposes. Namely, the healthcare system has the aim of understanding the causes of a certain health condition and treating the effects on the population, while the justice system aims at determining whether or not a crime has taken place, in order to provide a fair punishment to the perpetrators. Therefore, there is the necessity of a definition of sexual violence specific for the legal system, which differs by country. Due to the anglocentrism of western culture, the most commonly definitions used in literature are the American and the British ones. Due to their popularity, they will be closely analysed, and they will be compared to the Italian definition, given the nationality of the sample recruited for the present study.

Historical overview

Historically, the laws on sexual violence reflected the typically patriarchal social values and traditions. Namely, in the American legal system rape originated as a crime against property, not a crime against a person (Tracy, Fromson, Long, & Whitman, 2012); and in Italy, until fairly recently (1996) it used to be a crime against morality (Bossini, 2017). In both legal systems, due to the fact that a husband could not legally be found guilty of raping his wife, marriage was a legitimate defence against rape accusations (Kruttschnitt, Kalsbeek, House, National Research Council, et al., 2014; Serpico, 2018; Tracy et al., 2012). Additionally, in Italy the so-called "reparative marriage" (in Italian: *matrimonio riparatore*) was effective until 1981: if the rapist married his victim, this would result in the erasure of his previous crime (Serpico,

2018). Considering that, at the time, rape was considered a crime against morality, and that virginity in women was highly valued, "reparative marriages" not only gave male rapists the possibility to avoid being found guilty of sexual violence therefore exonerating them from any kind of punishment, but it also gave female victims the chance to get married, as having lost their virginity, their chances to find a husband would be greatly hindered for cultural reasons.

Despite the fact that these definitions are now out of date, it is significant to note that they were modified only recently. Additionally, neither the current laws on sex crime reflect the dynamics of rape and sexual assault as they actually occur (Kruttschnitt et al., 2014), and still show a reminiscence of the patriarchal and hetero-centric social beliefs of the previous versions.

Present day scenario

Namely, in the American system, rape is currently defined as "penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim"; while until 2013 it used to be "the carnal knowledge of a female forcibly and against her will" (U.S. Department of Justice—Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2014). Despite the fact that the latest definition does have a less gendered description of the act, it is still extremely penetration-centric and does not include other forms of rape. For example, a cisgender woman could only commit rape by penetrating someone else using an object, while the forced contact of her sexual parts against someone else's body, or even the forced penetrative sexual act of someone else's sexual organ inside one of her orifices would not even be contemplated. Similarly, under current UK legislation, only a person with a penis can commit rape, as penetration is the *conditio sine qua non* of the sexual act (McKeever, 2019).

On the contrary, at the present time the Italian legal system seems to have a broader definition, as it defines rape as "non-consensual carnal conjunction" (in Italian *congiunzione carnale non consensuale*), which includes rape, as well as any type of coercion to perform or be subjected to sexual acts ("Art. 609 bis e segg.", 2022). This definition is the closest to the one by the World Health Organization, however, the Italian context is particularly challenging when it comes to the definition of consent. In fact, Italy is one of the few European countries where sexual education is not compulsory in school and is often not covered by the school curriculum (Damilano, 2022), and newspapers' headlines are often filled with victim blaming and statements that not only doubt the legitimacy of rape, but also defend and empathize with the perpetrator in cases of

sexual violence as well as revenge porn or gender-based murder (Bendinelli, 2020). These hetero-normative and often penetration-centric perspective of justice systems on sexual crimes play a crucial role in victims' perception of whether or not they were the victim of a crime and therefore if they are willing to report the crime to law enforcement (Tracy et al., 2012).

Interestingly, linguistics and word-choice are found to play an important part in the reporting of rape. In fact, the use of terms "rape" and "sexual assault" negatively correlated to findings of guilt, while terms like "non-consensual sexual intercourse" did not (Berkland et al., 2022). Therefore, it is possible that the Italian legal definition of rape has a positive role in encouraging the reporting of the crime.

1.1.2 Underreporting rape

Even though its exact prevalence is somewhat difficult to determine, due to the fact that only a fraction of all victims file police reports or seek medical help, sexual abuse is a frequent phenomena, of which women are the primary victims (Krug et al., 2002; Ortensi & Farina, 2020; Tavara, 2006). In the world, the percentage of women who have been forced to have sex at least once in their life is between 10% and 33%, a figure that is likely to still be a conservative estimate (Tavara, 2006). Specifically, the prevalence of forced sexual encounters or sexual assault among teenage girls is concerningly high, affecting about one-third of young females (Lehner, 2017), while intimate partner sexual assault affects about one in four women (Kelly & Stermac, 2008).

Despite being widely present, sexual assault is not as frequently reported, prosecuted, and punished as other crimes (Berkland et al., 2022; Custers & McNallie, 2017; Stuart, McKimmie, & Masser, 2019). For this reason, it is believed that available statistics on rape are an underestimate of the actual number of assaults committed (Kelly & Stermac, 2008; Russell, 1982). In fact, various studies show that fewer than a third of rape victims report their rape to the police (Lehner, 2017; Russell, 1982). Interestingly, an Italian study found that nearly half of the participants thought that acquaintance rape should be tried in a criminal court (Sarmiento, 2011). Among the various types of sexual assault, date rape has been known as particularly lowly reported (Kanin, 1984). Said low reporting rate is not related to the local police's attitude, be it encouraging or discouraging (Lehner, 2017). The reasons why victims find it difficult to report having experienced an act of sexual violence can be many, and they include guilt, shame, fear of being blamed or not believed, and being otherwise mistreated (Krug et al., 2002).

Unsurprisingly, male rape is even less frequently reported due to the social stigma associated with it being even stronger (Groth & Burgess, 1980).

Prevalence in Italy

Given the relevance to this study, there will be a focus on the Italian scenario. In Italy, 21% of women have experienced sexual violence in their lifetime, 5.4% of them have experienced the most serious forms of sexual violence such as rape and attempted rape. Among women who have experienced sexual violence, the most common are physical harassment (e.g. being touched or hugged or kissed against one's will), unwanted intercourse experienced as violence, rape and attempted rape. Rape was committed in 62.7% of cases by partners, in 3.6% by relatives and in 9.4% by friends (ISTAT; Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, 2014).

However, the percentage of women who report the crime is extremely low. In fact, more than 25% of victims of violence do not talk about it with anyone (28.1% in the case of partner violence, 25.5% for non-partner violence), and the percentage of those who do report it are extremely low (12.2% of partner violence and 6% of non-partner violence). Many women do not consider the violence they have suffered to be a crime. In fact, only 35.4% of women who have suffered physical or sexual violence from their partner believe that they have been the victim of a crime, 44% claim that it was something wrong but not a crime, and 19.4% consider violence to be just something that happened (ISTAT; Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, n.d.).

1.1.3 The social perception of rape

Nowadays, prejudice that blames women for sexual violence persists. Said prejudices, attitudes and beliefs have been referred to by scholars as "rape myths". Rape myths are generalized and false beliefs about sexual assault that trivialize a sexual assault or suggest that a sexual assault did not occur (Franiuk, Seefeldt, & Vandello, 2008). This topic will be dealt with in detail in the next chapter.

The Italian context

The Italian population seems particularly prone to rape myths. In fact, according to the Italian National Institute of Statistics, as many as 39.3% of the population believe that a woman is capable of evading sexual intercourse if she really wants. Additionally, the percentage of those

who think that women can provoke sexual violence by the way they dress is also high (23.9%). Furthermore, 15.1% think that a woman who experiences sexual violence when drunk or under the influence of drugs is at least partly responsible for it. According to 10.3% of the population, accusations of sexual violence are often false (more men: 12.7%, than women: 7.9%); for 7.2% of the population, 'when faced with a sexual proposal women often say no but actually mean yes', while for 6.2% serious women are not raped. Interestingly, only 1.9% believe that it is not considered violence if a man forces his wife/partner to have sexual intercourse against her will (ISTAT; Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, 2018).

The role of media

A factor which has a crucial role in this matter is the media. In fact, the narrative of rape perpetrated by the news plays a central role in the perception of facts: it has been found that the use of rape myths in the news has severe consequences for sexual assault victims and for maintaining sexual assault in our society (Franiuk et al., 2008). As a matter of fact, the use of rape myths creates a social perception of rape that minimises the crime and to some degree empathises with the offender. It has been observed that, when allegations of rape and sexual assault make the headlines, the actions and motivations of the female victim are frequently called into doubt. On the contrary, when the actions of the perpetrators are described, it is often done by minimising the violence and exonerating the subject (Benedict, 1993). In most cases, the linguistic framing used are found to be invoking social gender scripts that make women the gatekeepers of sex (Siefkes-Andrew & Alexopoulos, 2019).

However, there is indeed a difference in the perception of the different facts described. Interestingly, the level of stereotypicality plays an important role in the perception of rape as well. In fact, when the victim and the crime are characterised as stereotypical, the victim is viewed more favourably and the perpetrator more unfavourably (Stuart et al., 2019). Consequently, ambiguous scenarios are considered more challenging to be classified as sexual assault (Yndo & Zawacki, 2020). Additionally, men are more likely than women to place the blame for an assault on the victim, defend the attacker, and report more sexism and rape myths (Angelone, Cantor, Marcantonio, & Joppa, 2021; Berkland et al., 2022).

1.2 The effects of media

Media inevitably has an effect on viewers and, consequently, on society, a phenomenon which has led to a vast production of literature on the subject. It is widely known that media has a key role in shaping the social landscape of our communities. As a matter of fact, apart from our first-hand experience, our experience of the world around us mostly comes from media, therefore it inevitably shapes the way we see what surrounds us and modifies the lens we use to see facts, other people and even personal perceptions. In today's society, the effect of media on the physical world is as present as ever, given the constant presence of devices in our lives, from social media on our phones, television, laptops etc. Additionally, the way we see the world inevitably has an impact on our actions, as it defines what we consider acceptable, doable or even possible. Therefore, our thoughts are heavily influenced by media. As a result, our own personal code for moral conduct changes according to the media we come in contact with.

Among the traditional mass media communication means, content shown on television has an extremely important role, as it has been informing, educating and inevitably influencing minds for the past century. Social media is indeed central to nowadays society, but television still has its fair share of viewers across the world. Additionally, even though television itself may not be as central as it used to be, video content is still central in social media and screens in general. In fact, for what media priming effect may concern, the medium through which the video content is shown or watched does not seem to be particularly relevant.

1.2.1 Media Priming Effect

Since the early 1970s, cognitive and social psychologists have used priming paradigms to study various aspects of the cognitive system. In the late 1990s, research shifted its focus from whether media priming exists to how it works (Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen, & Carpentier, 2002).

According to the media priming theory, information from media content is used without the media consumer's knowledge (Hoewe, 2020).

Media Priming Effect is the process by which the activation of certain mental constructs influences the evaluation of subsequent stimuli, later behaviours, thoughts, or judgments. (Domke, Shah, & Wackman, 1998; Ewoldsen & Rhodes, 2019). This effect has proven useful in explaining a range of effects of media on people's thoughts, beliefs, judgements and

behaviour. For this reason, the ubiquitous nature of media makes it a powerful tool for priming various concepts, often outside our awareness, that can influence how we interpret subsequent information (Preiss, Gayle, Burrell, & Allen, 2006).

Examples of media effects

Specifically, media can have an influence on viewers through exposure. In fact, exposure to different types of media content has been proven to have a variety of effects on the real-life world, affecting both the viewers' beliefs and actions. Below, a review of the effects and correlations of media found in the available literature will be briefly presented. Due to the relevance for this study, this section will focus on the effect of video content on constructs such as sexual behaviour, rape myth acceptance, objectification and sexism.

Healthcare. Media coverage not only can be used as a source of information, but can also serve as a nudge. A number of studies have observed how mass media interventions can be an effective means of influencing positive behaviours, such as increasing screening uptake for health prevention (Grilli, Ramsay, & Minozzi, 2002; MacArthur, Wright, Beer, & Paranjothy, 2011; Morrell, Perez, Hardy, Cotter, & Bishop, 2010).

Advertising. For instance, alcohol advertising may predispose young people to drinking. In fact, awareness of television beer advertising was correlated with higher intentions to drink as an adult, more familiarity of beer brands and slogans, and more favourable attitudes about drinking (Grube, 1993).

Pornography. The effects of pornography exposure range from sexual behaviours to the acceptance of rape myths. For instance, consumption of violent pornography and general pornography was found to be correlated with greater rape myth acceptance (Hedrick, 2021); exposure to degrading pornography was found to be related to hostile sexism and sexual objectification of the women in the video (Skorska, Hodson, & Hoffarth, 2018); while increased exposure to pornographic content has been found to be even linked to a higher likelihood of having sex without a condom if the perceived realism of the content is also high (Wright, Herbenick, & Paul, 2022).

Music videos. It was found that time spent watching music videos, peer group discussions about music videos, and perceived realism of music videos are all positively related to the traditional attitudes that men dominate sexual relationships, and that women are sex objects (Beentjes & Konig, 2013). Additionally, watching music videos featuring highly objectified female artists was linked to increased acceptance of interpersonal violence and antagonistic sexual ideas (Aubrey, Hopper, & Mbure, 2011).

Objectifying television content. Similarly, exposure to sexually objectifying media has a number of effects. In fact, media that sexually objectify women, emphasising their physical beauty and sexual availability and reducing them to objects have been identified as a powerful cultural risk factor that encourages harassment and sexual violence (Galdi & Guizzo, 2021). In this respect, exposure to objectified images of the female figure has been proven to increase the tendency to sexual harassment (Galdi & Guizzo, 2021; Guizzo & Cadinu, 2021). Furthermore, objectifying media has been shown to contribute to several effects: normalisation of harassment behaviour, increased incidence of sexual harassment, victim acceptance of sexual harassment, and discouragement of bystander intervention (Galdi & Guizzo, 2021). Additionally, constant exposure to stereotypical television portrayals of women leads to a negative perception of women's role in real life, and this affects the opportunities that women are offered and that they say they are willing to accept (Adekusibe & Ojomo, 2019). The main mediator of this effect seems to be sexual objectification (Seabrook, Ward, & Giaccardi, 2019), even with regard to victims' acceptance of harassment behaviour (Galdi & Guizzo, 2021).

One possible strategy to mitigate this effect may be the use of media literacy programs (Seabrook et al., 2019). Awareness-raising videos against sexual objectification with the aim of mitigating sexual harassment and hostile sexism have been found to have the effect of lowering the level of tendency to harass, hostile sexism and sexual coercion, but also have the surprising effect of raising the level of benevolent sexism (Guizzo & Cadinu, 2021).

Sport programs. Finally, viewing highlight of women's sports has been found to decrease prejudice towards female athletes (Scheidler, Wagstaff, et al., 2018); while the exposure to sport programs has been found to be positively and indirectly correlated to the acceptance of rape myths (Custers & McNallie, 2017).

1.3 Sport

Sport has a significant social and economic impact and is deeply ingrained in our cultural fabric, it is related to socialisation and social change, and reflects the power and the dynamics present within society (race, class, gender etc.). For this reason, it offers interesting opportunities to study society itself through it (Frey & Eitzen, 1991; Jarvie, 2013), even though it is inevitably affected by social processes such as the spread of media popularity and globalisation (Washington & Karen, 2001).

1.3.1 Gender-typing in sports

Gender typing is defined as "expectations about people's behavior that are based on their biological sex, or the process through which individuals acquire and internalize such expectations" (APA; American Psychological Association, 2022). Said expectations are rooted in traditional gender roles, perpetrate sex segregation, and they are used to define what is socially appropriate and acceptable for men and women. These apply to anything: colours, toys, jobs, musical instruments, sport disciplines etc.

Generally, sport is a predominantly male-dominated field, mostly because it is defined by stereotypically masculine traits like strength, aggression, and competition. For this reason, female participation in sports has not always been accepted or valued (Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, & Kauer, 2004; Matteo, 1988; Zenker, 2022). Even though athletics itself can be considered to be prominently perceived as masculine, sports can be defined as more or less gendered. However, sport as an institution continues to contribute to the creation, maintenance, and perpetuation of male hegemony (Fink, 2008).

The traditional classification

The first classification of sports by gender was created in the 1960s (Metheny, 1965) with the aim of determining whether or not specific sports should be socially accepted for a specific gender, due to their characteristics of femininity and masculinity. According to how each activity adheres to conventional ideas of ideal feminine behaviour, this categorisation was used to determine whether or not female participation in specific sports is socially acceptable or inappropriate. This was also justified by the way in which bodies are used in the act of procreation, where the female supposedly receives and nurtures life, while the male creates

it by personal intent (Metheny, 1965; Scraton & Flintoff, 2002). Without needing to go into the conservative and sexist conception of sexual acts just described, which not only does not consider non-heterosexuality, but also relegates women to a passive role; it must be noted that the division into sports by gender was not only created more than fifty years ago, but is also strongly influenced by a very patriarchal rhetoric.

Since then, scholars have created new categorisations of sports, however, they continued following the traditional gender roles, in accordance with stereotyped expectations of femininity and masculinity. For this reason, the most recent categorisations are still divided in three categories: masculine, feminine, and neutral (Koivula, 2001; Matteo, 1988; Zenker, 2022). It is important to note that gender roles are still observed in the selection of sports on an individual level (Klomsten, Marsh, & Skaalvik, 2005; Riemer & Visio, 2003), therefore it is still somewhat relevant to today's society.

Specifically, masculine sports are disciplines involving direct physical contact, strength, and aggressiveness. They are mostly competitive sports that are potentially dangerous, risky, violent, fast-paced, physically demanding, and require teamwork (Alvariñas-Villaverde, López-Villar, Fernández-Villarino, & Alvarez-Esteban, 2017; Hardin & Greer, 2009; Koivula, 2001).

On the contrary, feminine sports are marked by aesthetic activities and characteristics such as grace and expressivity, such as dancing or coordinated movements (Alvariñas-Villaverde et al., 2017; Hardin & Greer, 2009; Koivula, 2001; Schmalz & Kerstetter, 2006). They can be summarised as non-contact individual sports. In fact, the level of social approval for sports such as volleyball, tennis, golf and gymnastics is high (Scraton & Flintoff, 2002).

Finally, neutral sports are the ones considered appropriate to both sexes, or simply played by both, such as track and field, tennis, volleyball, and badminton (Alvariñas-Villaverde et al., 2017; Koivula, 2001; Schmalz & Kerstetter, 2006).

1.3.2 Women in sports

In a 2022 interview to *Vogue*, Serena Williams announced her retirement from tennis, explaining the impossibility of being a woman as well as an athlete in today's society: "I never wanted to have to choose between tennis and a family. I don't think it's fair. If I were a guy, I wouldn't be writing this because I'd be out there playing and winning while my wife was doing the physical labor of expanding our family. [...] But these days, if I have to choose between building my tennis résumé and building my family, I choose the latter." (Serena Williams, as told

to Rob Haskell, 2022). A month later, Roger Federer also announced his retirement from tennis, but for completely different reasons: "I am 41 years old. I have played more than 1500 matches over 24 years. Tennis has treated me more generously than I ever would have dreamt, and now I must recognize when it is time to end my competitive career" (Ronald, 2022). Even though Williams and Federer are the same age, the reason behind her retirement is not a matter of age, but of gender. In fact, she would have played more if she had the possibility of having another child without going through pregnancy, but this is simply physically impossible. Williams' declarations opened a lively debate over female participation in sports, the role of women in our societies and the expectations society has from sportswomen, but this was not a brand-new topic.

Female participation in typically masculine sports

Regarding the latest news on female professional sports, the past few years have been particularly flourishing. For example, in 2022 female football finally became a professional sport in Italy (CONSIGLIO FIGC, 2022), while the female Barcelona football club, which has been professional for 20 years, has set new attendance record of 91.648 people (FC Barcelona, 2022; SPORT.es, 2022). Even Formula 1, which is a mixed sport but is only performed by men, launched an all-female championship in the 2019 season. This was supposed to provide equal opportunities for women and eliminate the financial barriers that have historically prevented them from progressing to the upper echelons of motorsport (W Series, n.d.); however, W Series champions are yet to compete in the actual Formula 1, and they often dispute their race on Saturday instead of Sunday. These examples are proof that feminine participation in typically male sports not only is increasing, but it is also being recognised. However, it is still challenging for female athletes to actually have the same opportunities as their male counterparts.

Furthermore, despite the fact that female participation in typically masculine sports (e.g. football) is increasing, media coverage is still low (Markula, Bruce, & Hovden, 2010), sports fans often claim it to be boring, and sportswomen experience a lower media coverage. Additionally, when present in media, they are often described for their social roles (e.g. mother) or body (Scheidler, Wagstaff, et al., 2018). For example, Serena Williams' body was defined as non-compliant with tennis, sometimes even giving a sexualised description of it by the press (Garofalo, 2022; Stancanelli, 2022). Such descriptions, not only give a clearly inaccurate depiction of a tennis champion, but they also show an extremely patriarchal and racist idea of

what a good tennis player should look like.

Findings showed that, to the extent that occupations were female dominated, feminine personality or physical attributes were thought more essential for success; to the extent that occupations were male dominated, masculine personality or physical attributes were thought more essential. It was found that personality or cognitive attributes required for achieving success in occupations with higher prestige and higher earnings are believed to be typically masculine (Cejka & Eagly, 1999). Given that sports is perceived as a male activity (Krane et al., 2004; Matteo, 1988; Zenker, 2022), when this effect is applied to sports, it shows the reason why female professional participation in sports is still devalued.

Sports uniforms: religion, objectification and inclusion

Another central theme when it comes to women in sports is clothing. In fact, not only female athletes' uniforms are different from their male counterparts, but they are also asked to comply with the national religious laws. For example, in 2017 Anna Muzychuk, two-times chess world champion at the time, chose to miss a tournament in Saudi Arabia because she decided "not to wear abaya, not to be accompanied getting outside and altogether not to feel myself a secondary creature" (Ellis-Petersen, 2017; Russo, 2017). On the other hand, headscarves have been banned in a number of sports, forcing the Muslim female players not to compete. For example, even though headscarves are vastly used by Muslim football players, such as the Iranian, Afghan and Saudi Arabian women's national soccer team, headscarves were in FIFA's banned list from 2007 to 2014 (Arbaoui, 2022), and are still banned in France (Williams, 2021). Such rules, which are usually created for supposed safety reasons, are perceived from the players as gendered Islamophobia (Ahmed, 2022). In fact, according to Islamic feminists, being pushed by women from a different culture to adopt cultural models not akin to their own identities is not a true spur to emancipation, but it is actually anti-Islamism (Giovagnoli, n.d.).

In 2021, Norway's women's beach handball team managed to succeed in having the regulations about their uniforms changed, in accordance with gender equality, as they were not only impractical but also objectifying (Holroyd, 2021). The fact that women's uniforms tend to be tighter, more showing and generally sexualising and at the same time impractical for the players, shows a clear set of priorities, where the male gaze (by the male viewer) is more important than the comfort of the female athletes.

Similarly, in 2022 the British female football team asked to change the colour of the bottom

of their uniform for practical reasons. Specifically, due to the fact that white shorts may well get stained during menstruation, a topic that was confirmed by other sportswomen who admitted not feeling comfortable when wearing white while menstruating (Ricchiuti, 2021). The necessity of asking for such changes shows a lack of perception of the necessities of women in sports. In fact, they seem to be treated simply according to rules designed on men's sports, without assessing the real necessities of the female body.

1.3.3 Sports media

Sports were an important part of the development of television, especially when it first became the preeminent global medium between 1960 and 1980 (Whannel, 2009). Nowadays sports have become a global media spectacle (Maguire, 1999). In fact, since the 1970s, major sport events like the Olympics and the Football World Cup, which are currently broadcast to more than 200 countries across the globe, have increasingly attracted larger viewers than the normal weekly sporting events (Martelli, 2014; Whannel, 2009). Sports mega-events, mediated by TV or by new media, are a pleasant experience for viewers, as they fulfil the audience's desires at a physical, psychological, social and cultural level (Shanahan, Shanahan, James, & Morgan, 1999). In Italy and many other nations, viewers' preferred sport is football (Martelli, 2014).

Nowadays, sports-related content is widely present in social media as well as in the traditional media. In fact, news about sports champions and teams are present in social media, where athletes and teams often have their own pages and communication channels; sports fans engage in fantasy sports, visit numerous websites, write about their favourite teams and athletes in blogs and discussion forums, and enjoy playing sports video games (Martelli, 2014). Even though social media is indeed a great communication channel, television is still the central medium to inform public opinion on sporting events, as sports offers an exception: a situation in which millions of people watch something live at the same time. (Martelli, 2014; Whannel, 2009).

However, this history and information mostly refer to predominantly male sports events and/or competitions. In fact, only few sports are regularly televised, and they tend to be mostly played by males (Rowe, 1996), whilst female athletes receive significantly less media coverage (Scheidler, Wagstaff, et al., 2018).

The portrayal of sportswomen

Women's sports media coverage is indeed less frequent when compared to men's sports: it makes up between zero and 10% - 25% of routine newspaper or TV sport coverage (Markula et al., 2010). Furthermore, when women sports are broadcast on TV, the selection is mostly focused on typically feminine disciplines, such as gymnastics and volleyball (Arth, Pike, & Angelini, 2022; Ortega, 2020). Such biased representations have a role in constructing and reinforcing traditional gender beliefs (Yip, 2018).

Even though it is frequently claimed by sports enthusiasts that, when compared to men's sports, women's sports are more boring (Scheidler, Wagstaff, et al., 2018), the dynamics behind sports programming on television is much more complex than that. In fact, the choice of which sports competitions are televised is based on several factors, which have been studied by a number of scholars (Jarvie, 2013; Martelli, 2014; Rowe, 1996).

It has been found that, apart from economic and sponsorship related issues which are related to the under-representation of female athletes, sexism is extremely frequent in the rare appearances of sportswomen in media. In fact, sports media portrays female athletes more negatively than male players by focusing on specific areas, such as athletic weaknesses, negative skills and mental weaknesses. They are also often described as being less athletic and combative than their male counterparts, and non-competitive factors such as appearance, attire, family and personal relationship play a bigger role than they do in their male counterparts' media coverage (Hardin, Chance, Dodd, & Hardin, 2002; Sheffer, 2020; Yip, 2018). This is due to the fact that, even though there seems to have been a slight improvement in this sense, sport's marketing has been perpetuating the notion that the best way to market women's sport is to focus on traditional standards of femininity and/or heterosexuality, and female players are prone to gender marking and gender-bland sexism when referred to (Fink, 2019; Yip, 2021).

This proves that sexism is deeply rooted in the broadcasting of women's sports, which inevitably has an impact on the perception of sport's fans. In fact, it has been found that athletes' gender has an influence on the nature of fans' public shaming on social media, which is often objectifying females and reflects victim blaming (MacPherson & Kerr, 2020)

Chapter 2

State of The Art

Over the past two decades, the relationship between media exposure and violence against women has been the subject of much psychological and sociological research. The purpose of these investigations was to stop its normalisation and acceptability.

Despite being extremely common, gender-based violence is not as frequently recorded as other crimes. Among the various types of gender-based violence, the most serious and most under-reported crime is rape (Berkland et al., 2022; Stuart et al., 2019). It is believed that said low reporting rate is linked to a number of factors, among which Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA), which stands for the adherence to rape myths (Custers & McNallie, 2017).

Among others, exposure to television content such as sports programs, pornography and reality shows has been associated with greater adherence to rape myths (Custers & McNallie, 2017; Seabrook et al., 2019). However, contrarily to objectifying media exposure, the relationship between sports exposure and rape myth acceptance remains a correlation, therefore no causal link can yet be drawn (Custers & McNallie, 2017).

The main mediators of this effect seem to be (a) sexual objectification, (b) hostile sexism and (c) benevolent sexism (Custers & McNallie, 2017).

2.1 Rape Myth Acceptance

Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA) is defined as stereotypical and generalized attitudes and beliefs about rape that, although false, are widespread in society and have the role of justifying or denying the reality of sexual assault. They blame the victim, absolve the perpetrator, and trivialize the violence, suggesting that a sexual assault did not occur (Chapleau, Oswald, &

Russell, 2007; Franiuk et al., 2008; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). Summarising, they are beliefs used to downplay or dismiss sexual assault.

This myth is driven by the concept that men are pursuing or hunting women, which turns sexual encounters into a contest where the woman's job is to stop the encounter because the man's ultimate objective is to have sex with her. Said view of masculinity may make it particularly difficult to hold a man accountable, as he is perceived as opportunistic and not as a criminal. (Berkland et al., 2022).

The list of specific rape myths has various sections. Some of them are about the victim: they suggest that she may be lying, she may have deserved the sexual assault, or may have asked for it because of how she was acting or what she was wearing. Others excuse the perpetrator by suggesting that he could not help himself or that he is not the type who would commit a sexual assault. Finally, some of them downplay the seriousness of the sexual assault by suggesting that it was a trivial, or even natural, situation (Burt, 1980).

In this research, feminine pronouns are used to refer to victims and masculine pronouns are used to refer to perpetrators, as used in previous studies. However, it is known that both genders can be victims and perpetrators.

Said construct has been associated both with the perpetration of sexual assaults, as well as its low reporting rates (Custers & McNallie, 2017; Iconis et al., 2008). In fact, RMA contributes to influencing the attitudes toward rape: its interaction with situational clues explains constructs such as victim blaming, estimation of trauma, and the likelihood of reporting the crime to the police (Frese et al., 2004). Unsurprisingly, the less stereotypical a rape situation is, the greater the influence of attitudes toward rape is (Frese et al., 2004).

It was found that acceptance of rape myths affected a person's perception of guilt in situations involving sexual misconduct. Specifically, stronger rape myth acceptance was consistently associated with a decreased likelihood of finding the offender guilty or projecting harsh punishment on them (Berkland et al., 2022).

RMA can be predicted from attitudes such as sex role stereotyping, adversarial sexual beliefs, sexual conservatism, and acceptance of interpersonal violence (Burt, 1980), and has been found to be associated with a number of constructs and beliefs. For instance, hostile sexism towards women positively correlated with rape myth acceptance (Chapleau et al., 2007). Additionally, it has been found to be indirectly and positively associated with television sport exposure through the following variables: hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, and sexual objectification of women

(Custers & McNallie, 2017). Not surprisingly, it has been observed that religiosity strongly predicts both sexism and rape myth acceptance in the US and in Italy (Prina & Schatz-Stevens, 2020). The association between gender and RMA has been found to be mediated by hostile sexism, complementary gender difference, and heterosexual intimacy (Angelone et al., 2021).

2.2 Sexual Objectification

Sexualisation is defined as the portrayal of people with an emphasis on sexual appearance, physical beauty, and sexual appeal to others. Specifically, it occurs whenever (a) a person's worth is exclusively or mostly based on their sexual attractiveness or behaviour, disregarding all other qualities; (b) a person is judged by a criteria that links narrowly defined physical appearance with being seductive; (c) a person is sexually objectified; or (d) sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person (American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2007; Karsay, Knoll, & Matthes, 2018). Today's mainstream media (television, print materials, video games, social networking sites etc.) often choose this type of presentation (American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2007). If said portrayal reduces them to sexual objects, sexualisation becomes sexual objectification. Therefore, sexualisation includes sexual objectification (Karsay et al., 2018).

Sexual objectification is defined as the practice of viewing, using, and/or valuing a person as an object whose worth is based primarily on their physical and sexual attractiveness. According to the objectification theory, living in a society that sexually objectifies women's bodies has various negative impacts (Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998). Given that sexual objectification is widely present in our society, it is no surprise that experiences of lived or observed sexual objectification teach girls and women that being sexually appealing is a key component of the feminine gender role and is therefore something they should work for (Fredrickson et al., 1998). Said experiences include the social pressure to create, show, uphold, and continuously improve an attractive appearance and encourage women to adopt and internalise a third-person viewpoint in which they perceive their bodily selves as objects. (Fredrickson et al., 1998; Zurbriggen, 2013).

Self-objectification is defined as the act of viewing the self, particularly the body, from a third-person perspective (Quinn, Kallen, Twenge, & Fredrickson, 2006). It is thought to be a learned attribute which can also be momentarily elicited, such as through media consumption,

and can result in a state of self-objectification (Calogero, 2011; Moradi & Huang, 2008). Self-objectification has been found to have a number of effects, such as increasing body shame, disrupting attention, and negatively predicting well-being (Breines, Crocker, & Garcia, 2008; Fredrickson et al., 1998). It was positively related to higher levels of body surveillance and more body dissatisfaction (Calogero, Herbozo, & Thompson, 2009). It can even have negative cognitive effects, such as a slower performance on the Stroop colour-naming task (Quinn et al., 2006). These objectifying experiences are also said to play a role in the mental and physical health issues, such depression, sexual dysfunction, and eating disorders, that disproportionately affect women (Mercurio & Landry, 2008). It is linked to body shame, self-esteem, and life satisfaction (Mercurio & Landry, 2008). In women, self-objectification has been found to increase body shame, which in turn predicted restrained eating (Fredrickson et al., 1998).

The objectification of others leads to societal change that promotes a culture of violence and is incompatible with the ideals of equality, respect for others, and civil rights (Zurbriggen, 2013).

Sexual objectification is conveyed through a number of media, and has a number of effects. When compared to watching television, using video games and/or internet media had larger self-objectification effects (Karsay et al., 2018).

Unsurprisingly, identifying as a feminist was found to be negatively associated with acceptance of sexual objectification and sexually objectifying gaze in men (Modica & Murnen, 2022).

2.3 Ambivalent sexism

Ambivalent sexism is a cross cultural measure which explains how the structural relations among the sexes generate ambivalent attitudes by each sex towards the other (Glick & Fiske, 2001; Glick, Sakalli-Ugurlu, Ferreira, & Souza, 2002).

Traditionally, sexism used to be defined primarily as a type of hostility towards women, however, in the early 1990s researchers noticed that sexist attitudes are not limited to that. In fact, differently to other types of prejudice, sexist attitudes not only do not follow the classic group dynamics, but are also more subtle and include a number of positive beliefs and traits (Glick & Fiske, 2011). Thanks to these findings, the term "ambivalent" was introduced.

By definition, ambivalence, as a cognitively conflicted state, implies that people shouldn't

simultaneously acknowledge or support both of its poles (Thompson, Zanna, & Griffin, 1995): they would at any given time embrace and act upon one of the poles of their ambivalence while suppressing the other (Katz, Wackenhut, & Hass, 1986). However, sexism does not follow this rule.

In fact, it can be defined in two sides, called Hostile Sexism and Benevolent Sexism.

Hostile Sexism (HS) is defined as hostility, overtly angry attitudes and behaviours toward women who oppose or fail to conform to traditional roles (Bosson, Pinel, & Vandello, 2010; Travaglia, Overall, & Sibley, 2009), and is closely linked to the objectification of women (Glick & Fiske, 2011). Additionally, it is a predictor of less favourable evaluations of women in a nontraditional role (e.g. career women, scientist...) (Glick, Diebold, Bailey-Werner, & Zhu, 1997).

Benevolent Sexism (BS) is defined as well-intentioned and paternalistic attitudes and behaviours toward women (Glick, n.d.), which seem to celebrate women's stereotypically traditional traits and roles, often rooted in women's role as nurturers (Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Travaglia et al., 2009). Because of its protective, paternal nature, benevolent sexism may come across as relatively benign to observers (Bosson et al., 2010). In fact, said attitudes toward women are still considered acceptable or even romanticised (Glick & Fiske, 2011). Additionally, it is a predictor of favourable feelings toward women in a traditional role (e.g. homemakers, mothers...) (Glick et al., 1997).

Both aspects of sexism not only can coexist and be supported at the same time, but are also complementary and mutually reinforcing ideologies (Glick & Fiske, 2011). This peculiar combination essentially creates hostile and benevolent cultural convictions that, on a systemic level, support the justification of traditional gender roles and relationships and therefore the patriarchal structure itself, which has a detrimental effects on the well-being of both genders (Bareket, Kahalon, Shnabel, & Glick, 2018). In fact, men and women embrace these views to different degrees on a personal level, which has an impact on how they see and interact with people of each sex (Glick & Fiske, 2011).

For example, both hostile sexism and benevolent sexism positively correlate with attitudes that legitimise abuse. In fact, even though benevolent sexism is unrelated to wife abuse attitudes, it does not seem to protect women from violence if they are believed to have questioned a husband's authority or transgressed traditional gender roles (Glick et al., 2002).

Similarly, both benevolent and hostile sexism provide justifications to male-perpetrated

sexual assault (Chapleau et al., 2007), which are indeed different, but equally valuable and true to their logic. Specifically, effects of benevolent sexism and hostile sexism are mediated by different perceptions of the victim: behaving inappropriately and as actually desiring sex with the rapist respectively. Therefore, even though benevolent sexism and hostile sexism underpin different assumptions about women, they both generate sexist reactions toward rape victims (Abrams, Viki, Masser, & Bohner, 2003), which are subsequently used to justify rape (Chapleau et al., 2007).

Given the dualistic nature of sexism, the measure of ambivalent sexism (Ambivalent Sexism Inventory; ASI) is divided in two subscales: Hostile Sexism (HS) and Benevolent sexism (BS). The former is the subjectively negative subscale which includes items targeting sexuality as combat, competing gender roles, and women challenging male dominance; while the latter is the subjectively positive subscale and targets romantic intimacy, complementary gender roles, and women as cooperative subordinates (Glick & Fiske, 2011).

It is true that sexism towards women is culturally transmitted to men and women. However, men typically report more hostile sexism than women do (Glick, n.d.; Glick et al., 2000). In the united States, men usually report a higher level of benevolent sexism, while in other nations, especially those that have more traditional gender roles, women's level of benevolent sexism is equal to, or perhaps even higher, than men's (Chapleau et al., 2007).

Adherence to sexist beliefs is associated with higher acceptance of rape myths (Burt, 1980; Chapleau et al., 2007; Custers & McNallie, 2017).

Chapter 3

Present Research

The present research traces back to the 2017 study done by Custers and McNallie: "The Relationship Between Television Sports Exposure and Rape Myth Acceptance: The Mediating Role of Sexism and Sexual Objectification of Women". In fact, it follows the same overall structure, but adds new original aspects, such as the nationality of the sample and the additional questions related to the type of sports watched, as well as the subsequent analyses on the role of the mediators. Specifically, the present study is aimed at assessing the replicability of the model as well as its applicability on an Italian sample, while adding new variables, such as the type of sport watched.

3.1 Aims

The aim of the present study is to get further insight on the relationship between television sport exposure and rape myths acceptance. Specifically, investigating the roles of the mediators in relation to the type of sport watched. To do so, the type of sports were divided into three groups following the traditional gender classification (Metheny, 1965).

3.2 Hypotheses

Based on past research on the topic of television sports exposure and rape myth acceptance, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): television sports exposure is indirectly and positively related to rape

myth acceptance (RMA) through the mediation effects of: (1) hostile sexism, (2) benevolent sexism and (3) sexual objectification of women.

Additionally, drawing from the traditional classification of sports by gender, this exploratory hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): the type of sport watched, namely (1) masculine, and (2) feminine and neutral, influences the role of the mediators, namely (1) hostile sexism, (2) benevolent sexism and (3) sexual objectification of women.

Specifically, given that sports considered suitable for females - female sports and neutral sports in the traditional classification - show an aesthetic use of the body, it is hypothesised that:

Hypothesis 3 (H3): exposure to sports that are traditionally considered feminine or neutral is linked to rape myth acceptance through the mediating role of sexual objectification of women.

3.3 Variables

The predictor variable in the model was television sports exposure, the outcome was rape myths acceptance, and the mediators were (1) hostile sexism, (2) benevolent sexism and (3) sexual objectification of women.

Said model was tested in previous research (Custers & McNallie, 2017), and is presented in figure 3.1.

3.4 Method

Data collection took place in June and July 2022, by means of an online questionnaire. Recruitment of participants took place via social media, mostly on Facebook groups on a number of topics, mainly sports-related (e.g. Formula 1, Fantasy Leagues, Rocket League).

The participation in the study was voluntary. Participants were asked to respond to a *Qualtrics* survey, with a duration of approximately 10 minutes.

Data was collected and processed preserving the anonymity of participants. The research

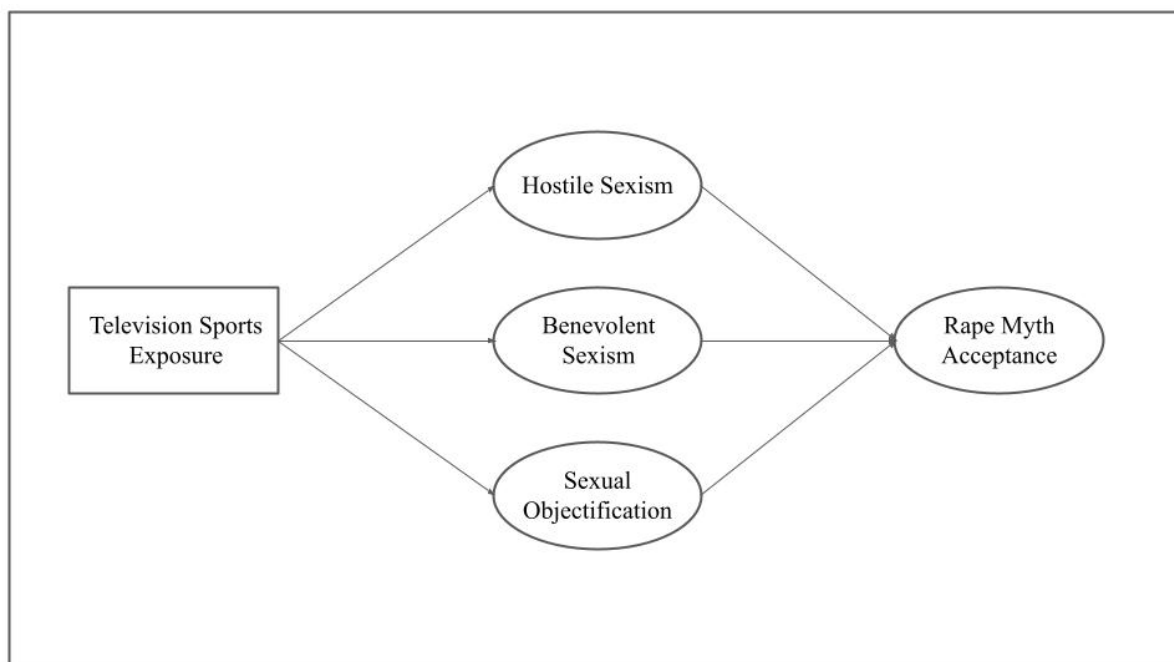


Figure 3.1: Structural equation model showing the indirect relationship between television sports exposure and rape myth acceptance.

was approved by the Ethical Committee of the University of Padua (Italy).

3.4.1 Sample

The total number of participants was 891. Subjects who failed to complete the survey ($n = 294$) were removed from the final sample, resulting in 597 completing participants. No time limit completion was set.

Participants were mostly white (94.6%, $n = 565$) Italian speakers (93.3%, $n = 557$), aged between 18 and 81 years (Mean = 32.16, Median = 28.00, SD = 11.271). The vast majority of the sample was made up of Italian people (92.6%, $n = 553$) residing in Italy (90.6%, $n = 541$). As far as gender is concerned, the sample was fairly balanced between male and female participants (Female: 49.4%, $n = 295$; Male: 48.2%, $n = 288$), which made up most of the sample, while gender nonconforming¹ individuals made up only a small part of the studied sample (2.3%, $n = 14$). In regard to sexual orientation, the vast majority of participants were heterosexual (81.9%, $n = 489$), followed by bisexual individuals (8.7%, $n = 52$).

¹*Gender nonconformity* is used as an umbrella term for all gender identities that do not fall into the categorization of masculine or feminine gender norms. Specifically, people who responded "non binary" and "other" to the question about gender were included. No one responded "prefer not to say".

3.4.2 Measures

Television exposure. In order to measure overall television exposure, participants were asked if they usually watched TV. If they indicated they did, they were asked the amount of days per week using a 8-points Likert scale ranging from "less than a day per week" to "every day", and the amount of hours per day, using a 6-points Likert scale ranging from "less than one hour" to "five hours or more". They were prompted that "Television" referred to television content, regardless of the platform it is viewed on (television, streaming, OnDemand, DVR, mobile, etc.), and that it included films, TV series and videos, as well as platforms such as Netflix, Prime Video, HBO, Sky Go etc. A weekly average was computed by multiplying the number of hours by the number of days. The most lateral options were rounded up to the nearest whole number (e.g "five or more" was rounded up to five), therefore the final amounts could go from 0 to 35 hours per week.

Television sports exposure. Similarly to television exposure, sports exposure was measured by asking participants if they usually watched sports. If they stated that this was the case, they were asked to estimate the number of hours they spent watching sports using the same methodology as the one used to determine their overall television viewing habits described above. They were prompted to take into consideration tournaments and the Olympic Games as well. The weekly average for this measure was calculated in the same way as television exposure: multiplying the number of hours by the number of days. Similarly, the most lateral options were rounded up to the nearest whole number.

Sport type. Participants were asked to choose the sports they watched from a list of twenty well-known sports (e.g. soccer, volleyball, motorsports), with the option of adding more in "others". Said sports were subsequently recoded in three groups: masculine, feminine, and neutral sports; following the traditional gendered classification of sports (Metheny, 1965). Specifically, they were divided as follows. Masculine sports: heavy athletics, baseball, basketball, football (both American football and soccer), hockey, motorsports, and rugby. Feminine sports: figure skating, artistic and rhythmic gymnastics, and volleyball. Neutral sports: cycling, cricket, equestrianism, golf, ski, swimming, tennis, and track and field. Sports added by the participants were manually coded into said groups following the same guidelines (e.g martial arts as masculine, padel as neutral).

Hostile and benevolent sexism. In order to assess the level of hostile and benevolent sexism, a shorter version of the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI; Glick and Fiske, 1997) was used. The original scale consists of 22 items measuring hostile (11 items) and benevolent sexism (11 items), while the shorter version used in this study consisted of 5 items taken from the benevolent sexism scale and 4 from the hostile sexism scale. This version has been validated in previous research on similar topics (Custers & McNallie, 2017). Specifically, the corresponding items were chosen by an Italian validation (Manganelli Rattazzi, Volpato, & Canova, 2008). Both scales showed a good level of reliability (Benevolent sexism: $\alpha = 0.76$; Hostile sexism: $\alpha = 0.85$). Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with the items using a 5-point Likert-type scale with anchors of the 5 points ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". The mean of the answers was calculated, resulting in a figure of benevolent sexism and a figure of hostile sexism for each subject, ranging from 1 to 5.

Sexual objectification of women. In order to assess the level of sexual objectification of women we used the "Women Are Sexual Objects" subscale of the revised version of the Attitudes Toward Dating and Relationships Measure (Ward, 2002; Ward & Friedman, 2006). The scale showed a good level of reliability ($\alpha = 0.80$). Said eight items were measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale, with the anchors of the 5 points ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". An individual mean was computed for each subject.

Rape Myth Acceptance. The level of rape myth acceptance was measured using the Subtle Rape Myth Acceptance (SRMA) scale (McMahon & Farmer, 2011), which is a revised version of the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMA; Payne, Lonsway, and Fitzgerald, 1999). It includes 23 items divided into four subscales to assess to which level the respondents agree with certain myths: (a) he didn't mean to, (b) it wasn't really rape, (c) she was asking for it, and (d) she lied about it being rape. A validated Italian translation of the scale was used (Martini, Tartaglia, & De Piccoli, 2022). All four scales showed a good level of reliability (He didn't mean to: $\alpha = 0.79$; It wasn't really rape: $\alpha = 0.76$; She was asking for it: $\alpha = 0.80$; She lied about it being rape: $\alpha = 0.88$).

Direct and indirect unwanted sexual experience. Questions about the participant's or a known person's direct or indirect unwanted sexual experiences were measured by asking

whether the participant or someone they knew had (a) experienced an unwanted sexual act, (b) been sexually assaulted, or (c) been raped. These items were recoded so that selecting "yes" for an experience of rape received a value of 3, selecting "yes" for an experience of sexual assault received a value of 2, and selecting "yes" for an experience of unwanted sexual activity received a value of 1. An index with a 0–6 range was created by summing the items measuring personal unwanted sexual experience. An index for indirect experiences was also made using the same procedure. This measure has been validated in prior studies. (Custers & McNallie, 2017; Kahlor & Eastin, 2011; Kahlor & Morrison, 2007).

3.5 Results

Data analysis was carried out using SPSS. The model used was created using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression path analysis.

The vast majority of the participants stated that they watched TV (92.6% $n = 553$), with a self-reported computed weekly average of roughly 13 hours (Mean = 12.61, SD = 8.820). The sports viewers made up around half of the overall sample (53.8%, $n = 321$), and the amount of hours spent watching sports were around one third of the overall television exposure (Mean = 3.35, SD = 5.649). The sports watched the most were masculine ones (47.2%, $n = 282$; only masculine sports: 30.8%, $n = 184$), followed by neutral sports (34.5%, $n = 206$; only neutral sports: 10.2%, $n = 61$) and feminine sports (21.6%, $n = 129$; only feminine sports: 2.0%, $n = 12$). Given the strong overlap between the variables of this measure, the analyses concerning sports type (H2) were carried out comparing the group of participants who only watched masculine sports with the rest of the sports viewers.

As far as the measures on sexist attitudes are concerned, sexual objectification (“Women Are Sexual Objects” subscale of the revised version of the Attitudes Toward Dating and Relationships Measure; Ward, 2002; Ward and Friedman, 2006) scored the lowest figures (Mean = 1.78, SD = 0.72); while the scales measuring hostile sexism and benevolent sexism (ASI; Glick and Fiske, 1997) scored higher values. Specifically, the benevolent sexism measure scored slightly higher than the hostile sexism one (Benevolent Sexism: Mean = 2.258, SD = 0.8006; Hostile Sexism: 2.1926, SD = 0.96453).

The rape myth acceptance measure (SRMA; McMahon and Farmer, 2011) was observed both in its overall score, as well as in its subscales’ scores. Specifically, the levels found were

lower than the scales on sexist attitudes (Mean = 1.63, SD = 0.62), and the highest subscale used was "he didn't mean to" (Mean = 2.03, SD = 0.93; it wasn't really rape: Mean = 1.21, SD = 0.52; she was asking for it: Mean = 1.45, SD = 0.71; she lied about it being rape: Mean = 1.71, SD = 0.81).

As far as direct and indirect sexual experience is concerned, the figures found scored higher for indirect sexual experience (Mean = 2.20, SD = 2.45; direct sexual experience: Mean = 0.91, SD = 1.52).

3.5.1 Indirect effects of television sports exposure on rape myth acceptance

The mediation model was tested by using PROCESS for SPSS. PROCESS is an observed variable OLS and logistic regression path analysis modeling tool. Specifically, Model 4 was used.

The model used is depicted in Figure 3.2.

The study assessed the mediating role of (1) benevolent sexism, (2) hostile sexism and (3) sexual objectification of women on the relationship between television sports exposure and rape myth acceptance. The indirect effects of television sports exposure on rape myth acceptance were significant, as the standardised bootstrap confidence interval did not include 0 (BootLLCI = .17; BootULCI = .28). Specifically, the standardised regression weight for the indirect effect was .22 ($p < .001$). The results revealed a significant indirect effect of television sports exposure on rape myth acceptance through all three variables (benevolent sexism: $b = .03$, $t = 6.22$; hostile sexism: $b = .05$, $t = 6.98$; sexual objectification: $b = .03$, $t = 5.33$). The standardised coefficients and their p -values can be observed in Figure 3.2. Therefore, H1 was supported, which predicted the presence of an indirect relationship.

Similarly to results found in previous research (Custers & McNallie, 2017), the direct effect of television sports exposure on rape myth acceptance was non significant ($p = .96$).

3.5.2 Sports type

The mediating role of (1) benevolent sexism, (2) hostile sexism and (3) sexual objectification of women on the relationship between television sports exposure and rape myth acceptance was also assessed comparing the different types of sports viewed. Specifically, the mediation model was utilised comparing the viewers of only masculine sports (MS) to the viewers of only

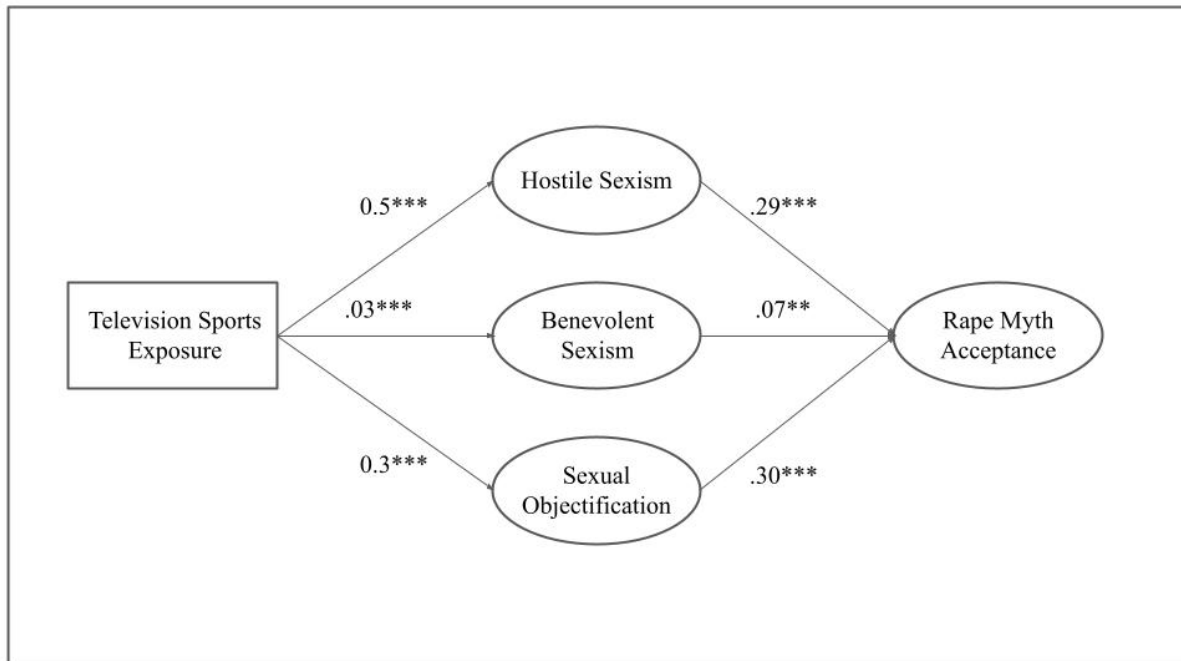


Figure 3.2: Structural equation model depicting the indirect relationship between television sports exposure and rape myth acceptance ($n = 597$). All the coefficients shown are standardised. Ovals represent latent variables. Rectangles represent manifest variables. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

feminine and neutral sports (FS).

Similarly to the overall sample, the direct effect of television sports exposure on rape myth acceptance was non significant for both groups (MS: $p = .61$; FS: $p = .43$). However, a few differences in the mediation effects can be observed.

As can be deduced from Figure 3.3, viewers who only watched masculine sports (MS) show non significant correlations in the mediation effect of both for benevolent sexism and sexual objectification. Therefore, the only significant mediation of the effects of television sports exposure on rape myth acceptance happens through hostile sexism.

On the other hand, viewers who only watched feminine and neutral sports show two significant mediation effects, specifically through hostile sexism and sexual objectification. In fact, although the benevolent sexism p -value is significant, the standardised bootstrap confidence interval of the completely standardised total effect includes 0 (BootLLCI = $-.01$; BootULCI = $.05$), showing a non-significant mediation.

To summarise, the type of sport watched influences the role of the mediators. Namely, the correlation effect of television sports exposure of masculine sports on rape myth acceptance was only mediated by hostile sexism; while the correlation effect of television sports exposure

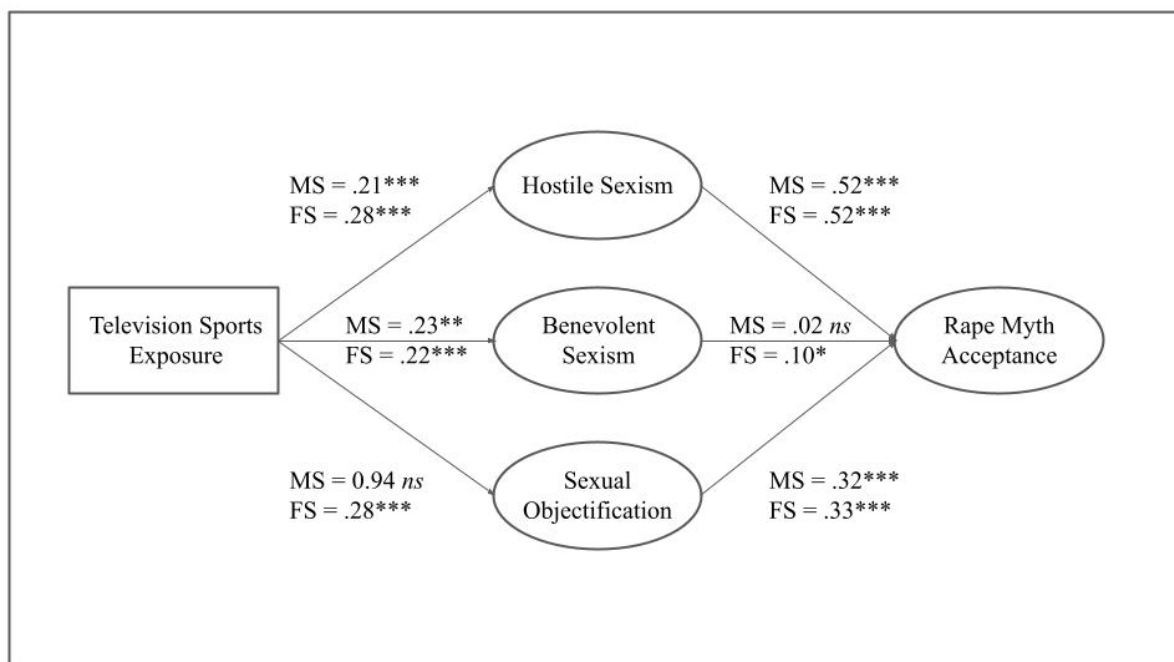


Figure 3.3: Structural equation model depicting the indirect relationship between television sports exposure and rape myth acceptance (MS: $n = 184$; FS: $n = 225$). All the coefficients shown are standardised. Ovals represent latent variables. Rectangles represent manifest variables. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

of feminine and neutral sports on rape myth acceptance was mediated by hostile sexism and sexual objectification. Therefore H2 was supported, which predicted a difference between the mediators effects on the viewers of masculine sports and the viewers of feminine and neutral sports. Additionally, H3 was supported, which hypothesised a mediation effect between television sports exposure and rape myth acceptance through sexual objectification of women.

3.5.3 Gender differences

Given that masculine sports were mostly watched by male participants (72.2%; female: 27.8%), while in the feminine and neutral sports group the gender variable was more balanced (Feminine sports: female = 41.6%, male = 58.4%; Neutral sports: female = 50.5%, male = 49.5%), an additional analysis was carried out in order to control whether the support for H2 was simply due to gender factors of it was actually due to the type of sport viewed.

As can be deduced from Figure 3.4, male participants show similar values to the viewers of masculine sports. In fact, in both groups the only significant mediation of the effects of television sports exposure on rape myth acceptance happens through hostile sexism.

As far as the female part of the sample is concerned, the only significant mediation

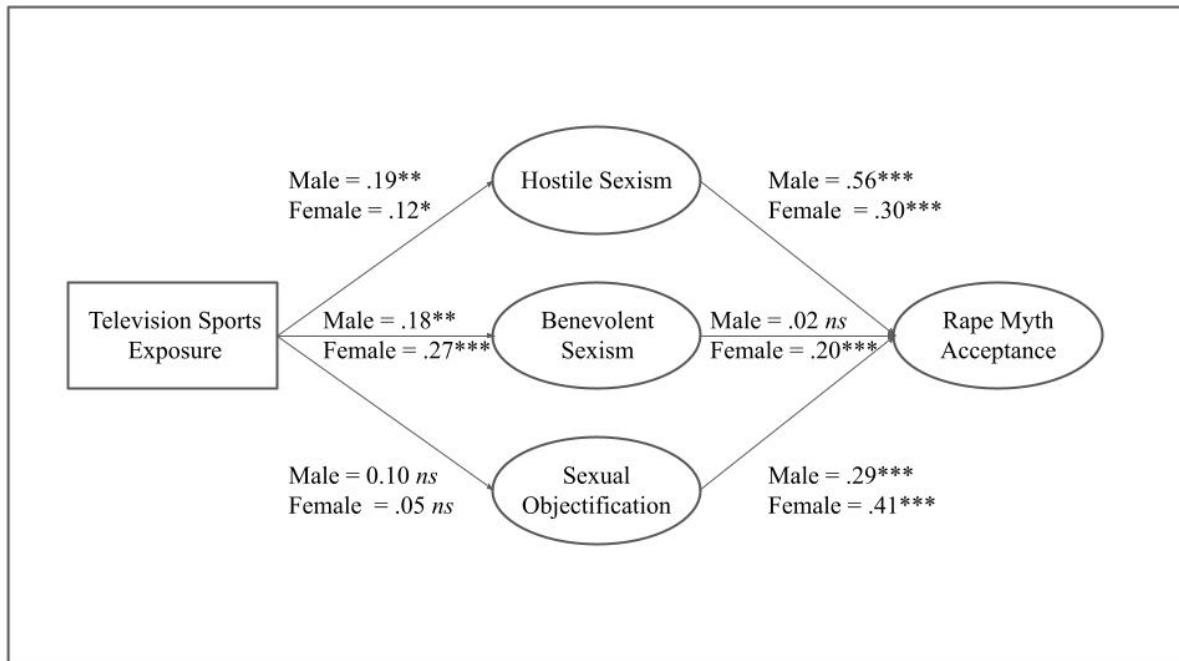


Figure 3.4: Structural equation model depicting the indirect relationship between TV sports programming and rape myth acceptance (Male: $n = 288$; Female: $n = 295$). All the coefficients shown are standardised. Ovals represent latent variables. Rectangles represent manifest variables. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

effect happens through benevolent sexism. In fact, even though the hostile sexism individual correlations are significant, the completely standardised indirect effect mediated by hostile sexism shows a standardised bootstrap confidence interval which includes 0 (BootLLCI = $-.0002$; BootULCI = $.0773$).

To summarise, male participants' figures show a mediation effect of hostile sexism only, while the female part of the sample only shows a mediation effect through benevolent sexism.

Given that the majority of masculine sports watchers are males, and that there is a similarity between the results of masculine sports watchers (MS) and male participants, the effects of television sports exposure on rape myth acceptance through the mediation of hostile sexism is likely due to the gender of the participants and not to their sports viewing habits.

However, this does not apply to feminine and neutral sports viewers, as this group shows opposite figures when compared to both the gendered groups. In fact, even though the feminine and neutral sports viewers group is balanced in terms of gender, they show a unique mediation effect. Specifically, the correlation effect of television sports exposure on rape myth acceptance is mediated by hostile sexism and sexual objectification. Therefore, H3 is confirmed.

3.6 Discussion

The goal of this study was to determine the role of the mediators on the correlation effect of television sports exposure on rape myth acceptance. Specifically, the mediators observed were benevolent sexism, hostile sexism, and sexual objectification of women.

Drawing from previous research (Custers & McNallie, 2017), benevolent sexism, hostile sexism, and sexual objectification of women were all found to be significant mediators of the correlation effect of television sports exposure on the adherence to rape myths, which was confirmed in the present study. However, unique to the present study, it was found that the type of sports watched had an impact on which construct mediated said effect.

All types of sports - masculine (MS), and feminine and neutral (FS) - analysed showed the significant mediating effect of hostile sexism. Given that hostile sexism is defined as hostility, overtly angry attitudes and behaviours toward women who oppose or fail to conform to traditional roles (Bosson et al., 2010; Travaglia et al., 2009) and it is a predictor of less favourable evaluations of women in a non-traditional role (Glick & Fiske, 1997), the findings of the present research confirmed the concept that sport in general is perceived as masculine. In fact, as a typically masculine activity, it may well endorse patriarchal values related to hostile sexism, as sportswomen are an example of women in a non-traditional gender role, and therefore are perceived with hostility.

Furthermore, it was found that watching traditionally masculine sports (e.g. football, soccer, basketball) is indirectly and positively associated to rape myth acceptance through hostile sexism only; while watching traditionally feminine or neutral sports (e.g. feminine: gymnastics, volleyball; neutral: tennis, swimming) is indirectly and positively associated to rape myth acceptance through the mediation effect of hostile sexism and sexual objectification of women. These results may imply that the portrayal of women in feminine and neutral sports is different than the one of typically masculine sports. In fact, feminine and neutral sports, which in the traditional classification (Metheny, 1965) are considered as such because of their aesthetic activities with an emphasis on grace and expressivity, or appropriate for both sexes respectively, may well have a bigger component of sexual objectification of women. In fact, there is a consistent female participation in both feminine and neutral sports, often accompanied by activities where the female body is used for its grace and aesthetic movements, which may well foster the idea that the female body's primary function is to please the eye of the viewer,

possibly in a sensual or sexual way. For this reason, rape myth acceptance is mediated by the sexual objectification construct as well.

Additionally, it has been observed that a gender difference exists in the mediation effect. Previous research had observed that men typically report more hostile sexism than women (Glick, n.d.; Glick et al., 2000), and in nation with traditional gender roles, women's level of benevolent sexism is equal to, or perhaps even higher, than men's (Chapleau et al., 2007). Similarly, this study has observed that the correlation effect of television sports exposure on rape myth acceptance is mediated by different constructs. Specifically, the only significant mediator for men is hostile sexism, while for women is benevolent sexism. These results are in line with previous research, as Italy is still a nations with traditional gender roles.

3.7 Limitations and future prospects

These findings add to the current conversation regarding media exposure and rape myth acceptance, above all regarding the type of sports watched and the gender differences of the participants. However, there are also a number of limitations and several directions for future research worth mentioning.

First of all, it is necessary to point out that the majority of the sample identified as Caucasian and heterosexual. However, said traits are also typical of the Italian population. Additionally, although every effort was made to connect with diverse populations, people who did not identify as either male or female (non-binary, bigender etc.) were an extremely limited sample.

Regarding the questionnaires used, it is worth mentioning that the rape scenarios described in the Rape Myth Acceptance questionnaire depicted a heterosexual interaction where the perpetrator was male and the victim was female. It is important to note that sexual misconduct happens in a variety of contexts between diverse populations, and the gender of the victim(s) and the perpetrator(s) are not defined. In fact, possibilities are quite a lot: in some situations, perpetrators can be female and victims can be male, they can both be of the same gender, non-binary etc. For this reason, it would be necessary to create new up-to-date questionnaires on rape myth acceptance which do not have this kind of bias.

Additionally, self-reported data can be biased due to cognitive reasons, such as incorrect memory or motivational reasons such as social desirability (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). In this case, social desirability may have played a crucial role when answering questions about

sexism, objectification and rape myth acceptance. It is also worth mentioning that, given that the levels of rape myth acceptance found were lower than the ones observed on the scales on sexist attitudes, it is possible that in nowadays society such scale (SRMA, McMahon and Farmer, 2011) is not as subtle as it was 10 years ago. In fact, even though the revised version is quite recent, it may have scored particularly low scores due to it not being that indirect and therefore activating social desirability. On the contrary, the scales on sexist beliefs (ASI; Glick and Fiske, 1997; shorter version as used in Custers and McNallie, 2017) seem to be still relevant today.

An additional limitation is related to the Italian translation of a few scales, which could not be found in previous studies probably due to a lack of research on Italian samples, and therefore an original translation was provided. Said translations could not be validated due to time and means constraints. Specifically, such translation was provided to the “Women Are Sexual Objects” subscale of the revised version of the Attitudes Toward Dating and Relationships Measure (Ward, 2002; Ward & Friedman, 2006), which was used to measure the level of sexual objectification of women; in the television exposure and in the television sports exposure measure; as well as for the direct and indirect sexual experience questions. Further research could validate the original Italian translation used in the present study.

Finally, although this study demonstrated links among television sports exposure, benevolent sexism, hostile sexism, sexual objectification, and rape myth acceptance, the nature of the data is correlational. Thus, we cannot draw any definitive conclusions about the causal order of the variables based on these data. In fact, it is possible that those individuals who scored higher on sexist attitudes and sexual objectification are more likely to watch sports programs on television. Therefore, further research could implement longitudinal designs, in order to draw causal conclusions. It would also be necessary to further investigate the effects of sports exposure on rape myth acceptance and the role of the mediators of this effect, and to report more extensively on the measures regarding the type(s) of sports watched, in order to define the characteristics of sports conveying certain beliefs - such as sexist attitudes and sexual objectification - without being limited to the traditional classification of sports. However, present results are an important step in understanding the relationship between the exposure to different types of sports and rape myth acceptance.

Additionally, future work should examine the sex typing of sports in Italy. As the traditional classification of sports may not fully represent the cultural perception of sports in Italy, and therefore not be completely relevant in this specific cultural context. For this reason, the

perception of gender appropriateness for various sports disciplines in Italy should be investigated.

3.8 Conclusion

Sexual violence is a recognised health problem by the World Health Organisation, as it has severe consequences, both physical and mental, as well as social (World Health Organization and others, 2012, 2014). In Italy, one fifth of women have experienced sexual violence in their lifetime (ISTAT; Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, 2014), a number that may well be much higher due to the low reporting rates of said phenomena (Kelly & Stermac, 2008; Russell, 1982). Additionally, the Italian population seems particularly prone to adhering to rape myths (ISTAT; Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, 2018), a construct has been associated both with the perpetration of sexual assaults, as well as its low reporting rates (Custers & McNallie, 2017; Iconis et al., 2008).

It has been observed that the media have a central role in influencing its viewers, therefore it is important to identify which types of media are associated with the adherence to rape myths, in order to make an attempt to limit the spread of such myths and possibly reduce the rates of sexual assault as a result.

The present study contributes to this aim by defining which type of sports media has a stronger association with rape myths acceptance through the mediation effects of sexist attitudes and sexual objectification of women. Overall, it was found that exposure to sports was linked to rape myth acceptance through the mediation effect of benevolent sexism, hostile sexism, and sexual objectification of women. Additionally, when dividing by type of sport (masculine, and feminine and neutral) it was found that the only common mediator was hostile sexism, while the mediation effect of sexual objectification of women was unique to viewers of traditionally considered feminine or neutral sports. Furthermore, a gender difference in the mediation effect was found: the only significant mediator for men was hostile sexism, while for women it was also benevolent sexism.

The results could also have practical implications, supporting the decision of a number of female sports teams around the world that decided to change their official uniforms to make it more practical and less showing, more similar to their male colleagues and therefore less objectifying.

Additionally, it would be crucial to raise awareness of issues such as the relationship between

sports and rape myth acceptance, sexual objectification of women, and sexist attitudes, with the aim of improving the local community. This could be done through group discussions at a local level, especially in small communities where sport is indeed practised, but sexist issues may be particularly rooted. As well as in formal education settings, such as schools, where a simplified version of the topic can be presented to children and adolescents with the aim of raising awareness of the importance of gender equality and encouraging them in practising sports regardless of traditional sexist beliefs.

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