Law and Order: SVU applying rape myths to victim representation

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LAW AND ORDER: SVU
APPLYING RAPE MYTHS TO VICTIM REPRESENTATION

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzed the portrayal of rape victims in seasons eight through twelve of *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*. This study sought to determine how rape victims are framed in *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* and how agenda setting is used to either perpetuate or cease the use of rape myths in the crime drama. Twenty-five episodes were qualitatively and quantitatively analyzed for framing devices, rape myths and agenda setting. Examination of the data and qualitative analysis indicated that rape victims in the show are mostly white non-Hispanic, single, and middle class, who also meet the American standards of beauty. This perpetuates the rape myth, that there is a typical victim. However, other rape myths were not as prevalent. Overall, rape victims were framed in either a positive or neutral way. This finding indicates that the portrayal of rape victims on *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* may be improving.
INTRODUCTION

As a crime, rape is as pervasive as it is controversial in the United States of America. Rape is the only crime in which a victim must prove that she\(^1\) did not give consent to the offender. Imagine a victim of a robbery having to explain that no, she did not want to have her money or possessions stolen; that no, she did not resist when a gun was held to her head because she feared for her life. This seems simple when highlighted under a different crime; obviously this victim did not choose to have her belongings taken. In the case of theft, the victim would not be re-victimized, first by police, then by the judicial system and finally by society as a whole. But for rape victims this is all too commonly a part of the ordeal. Many women and men never report being raped for fear of being blamed and isolated from society (Taylor & Gassner, 2010). Victims often have “fear of being disbelieved; fear of retribution by the offender or others connected to the offender; feelings of shame; embarrassment; living in an isolated environment; fear of being blamed; lack of confidence or trust in the legal system; and a lack of confidence or trust in police” (Taylor & Gassner, 2010, p. 214). These beliefs can be linked to the existence of rape myths in our society, which often leads to victim blaming.

American society perpetuates victims’ fears through rape myths, which myths they reinforce “the values that ignore or diminish women’s experiences” (Ardovini-Brooker & Caringella-MacDonald, 2002, p. 4). These myths can be seen in news coverage of rape cases as well as in fictional television shows and movies, particularly crime dramas. Crime dramas are some of the most popular shows on television; in fact

\(^1\) This study acknowledges that men can also be raped, but this study focuses on female victims of rape.
three of the top ten shows in October 2013 were crime dramas (Neilsen, 2013). During the average week, there are approximately eighteen crime dramas televised on the three major networks; NBC, ABC, and CBS (2012-13 United States network television schedule, 2012). CBS dominates the three networks when it comes to the number of primetime crime dramas aired each year. The network actually reserves Saturday primetime hours for a program block called “Crimetime Saturday” which includes reruns of many of their most popular crime dramas (Crimetime Saturday, 2013). Many of these crime dramas focus at least a few of their shows on rape stories, and others like Law and Order: Special Victims Unit, focuses the entirety of the show on cases of rape and often feature storylines related to victims. A combination of rape myths and statistical inaccuracies in these shows – about what rape is, who gets raped and who are the perpetrators –could lead viewers to false conclusions. These inaccuracies thus could lead to victims not reporting an incident, blaming of victims blaming by others, and diminishing victims’ experiences (Ardovini-Brooker & Caringella-MacDonald, 2002).

Some television shows and movies have taken steps toward portraying of rape victims in less mythical ways. Portrayals have tended away from presenting rape through a patriarchal lens, in which rape is portrayed as an issue of sexual desire rather than power, toward a feminist point-of-view which tries to avoid victim stereotypes and emphasizes that rape is about violence and anger towards women (Cuklanz & Moorti, 2011). However, there is room for a more accurate depiction of rape in crime dramas. Many of these shows portray women as being in the wrong place at the wrong time or wearing clothing deemed inappropriate and thereby sending mixed messages to the perpetrator. Another aspect of crime dramas that warrants examination is the portrayal of
the perpetrator. The relationship between perpetrator and victims’ demographic characteristics can often lead to victim blaming, particularly if there is a difference in their race or ethnicity.

Considering the frequency of TV crime dramas and the importance of the implications of rape portrayals, this study seeks to examine how female rape victims and male perpetrators are represented in fifteen seasons of CBS’s crime drama, *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*, using framing theory and agenda setting theory. Using content and textual analysis, this study examines the portrayal of rape victims in relation to rape myths and how rape victims are framed in the series from 2006 to 2011.
LITERATURE REVIEW

One out of every six American women will be a victim of rape or attempted rape (Rape Crisis Center, 2014). This ratio means that 17.7 million American women have been victimized in their lifetime (Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network [RAINN], 2009). Yet out of every one hundred rapes, only forty-six are reported to the police and only three of the one hundred rapists will serve time in prison (RAINN, 2009). In addition to other issues, the problems associated with reporting rape and low conviction rates are a part of a larger social stigma related to the crime.

Until the early 1970s, there were very few laws regarding rape (Kilpatrick, Resnick, Ruggiero, Conoscenti & McCauley, 2007). The anti-rape movement—which arose out of the second-wave feminist movement began to bring the issues of violence against women to the foreground (Kilpatrick et al., 2007). This movement brought about a number of changes in both rape law reform and society’s understanding of the crime (Kilpatrick et al., 2007). In terms of social education, the anti-rape movement raised awareness about the characteristics and impact of rape. It also helped to improve medical services and establish rape crisis centers (Kilpatrick et al., 2007).

One of the biggest impacts of the anti-rape movement was the redefinition of rape. Before the movement began, the common law definition of rape was, “A carnal knowledge of a woman not one’s wife by force or against her will” (Kilpatrick et al., 2007, p. 65). This definition leaves out the possibility of male rape, marital rape, and also requires the victim to prove that the rape was against her will. The 1962 U.S. Model Penal Code definition also had similar verbiage to the common law definition of rape.
(Kilpatrick et al., 2007). In the 1970s extensive changes to the definition of rape began to take place. These reforms included: gender neutrality, including all acts of sexual penetration, adding degrees of sexual assault and provisions related to taking advantage of incapacitated people, and changes to marital rape laws (Kilpatrick et al., 2007). Despite these major changes to state laws, it was not until 2012 that the FBI changed its definition of rape from “the carnal knowledge of a female, forcibly and against her will” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2012, para 7) to “The 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” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2012, para 1).

Despite the legal and social redefinition of rape, many victims may still feel isolated from society. How media portray rape, victims, and perpetrators, specifically through the persistence of rape myths, could contribute these feelings of isolation (Ardovini-Brooker & Caringella-MacDonald, 2002, p.4). The concept of rape myths was developed in the feminist movements in the 1970s (Burt, 1980, p. 217). These myths are often defined as a collection of prejudice, false, or stereotyped beliefs about rape (Burt, 1980, p. 217). Rape myths frame victims in a negative way, which can lead to harmful consequences for both victims and non-victims. Victims may be subjected to victim blaming and may have an increased sense of fear. Non-victims may be less likely to believe incidents off rape or perceive only certain types of rape as veritable rape cases. In this literature review I examine feminist theory’s relationship to rape myths, the definition and prevalence of rape myths in our society, and previous research on the portrayal of rape in primetime television.
Feminist Theories

Feminist theories examine the roles of women in society with the main goal of improving the lives of women (Brabeck & Brown, 1997). “Feminist theorists suggest that social structures perpetuate a culture of violence towards women, and foster a systematic tolerance of violent acts -- including rape” (Kahlor & Eastin, 2011, p. 226). Feminist theories have challenged institutions and traditional practices since the mid-1800s. One of the greatest achievements of feminist theories was breaking the silence of rape (Whisnant, 2013). Feminist views of rape fall on a continuum from liberal to radical. Liberal feminists define rape as a gender-neutral assault against an individual (Whisnant, 2013). On the other side of the spectrum radical feminists view rape as a patriarchal source of power over women as a group (Whisnant, 2013).

In the early 1970s, feminist scholars began to examine the role of rape in the suppression of women across the world (Whisnant, 2013). They opened up a dialogue in the United States which eventually led to grassroots movements across the country demanding rape law reform (Futter & Mebane, 2001). The impact of these reforms had both symbolic and practical implications. Feminist rape law reforms helped to change the historical view of rape as a property crime against a male to a crime against the victim (Whisnant, 2013). While this concept seems obvious to our modern culture, it was a revolutionary step at the time. Some of the practical implications of reform included improvement of the treatment of rape victims, increasing the range of people covered by rape laws, redefining the offense, evidentiary reforms and statutory age laws (Futter & Mebane, 2001). Another major advancement feminists made was the introduction of shield laws which prohibit the use of the victim’s sexual past as evidence against her
These reforms were giant leaps from previous rape laws, despite these reforms, rape reporting remains low and conviction rates even lower. The Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network found that out of one hundred rapes only forty-six are reported to the police and only three of the one hundred rapists will serve time in prison (2009).

**Rape Myths**

In the 1970s the feminist scholars introduced the concept of rape myths, a collection of prejudice, false, or stereotyped beliefs about rape (Burt, 1980, p. 217). After examining the dispute with the several definitions of rape myths, Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994) developed another working definition: “attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women” (p. 2). For the purposes of this study, Lonsway and Fitzgerald’s (1994) definition of rape myths will be utilized. While these attitudes vary among cultures, rape myths “consistently follow a pattern whereby, they blame the victim for their rape, express a disbelief in claims of rape, exonerate the perpetrator and allude that only certain types of women are raped” (Grubb & Turner, 2012, p. 445). Rape myths are unconsciously used among both sexes for different reasons; for men they excuse sexual violence and for women they reduce their vulnerabilities (Johnson, Kuck and Schander, 1997, p. 695). Rape myths often appear in movies, television and the news. Television shows such as Law & Order, Law & Order: Special Victims Unit, CSI, and Without a Trace have all been studied for their use of rape myths (Rader & Rhineberger-Dunn, 2010) and have been critically studied in news media (Ardovini-Brooker & Caringella-MacDonald, 2002; Durham, 2012; Kahlor & Eastin, 2011). As Grubb and
Turner (2012) indicate, these myths can change the perception of victims in the eyes of viewers.

When examining media content, it is important to understand how common rape myths are operationalized and how widespread their acceptance is in society. This could help explain why some victims are framed in a negative way through rape myths and others are not.

Rape myths are generally broken down into seven domains: (a) “she asked for it”; (b) “it wasn’t really rape”; (c) “he didn’t mean to”; (d) “she wanted it”; (e) “she liked it”; (f) “rape is a trivial event”; (g) “rape is a deviant event” (Panye, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999, p.44). Other researchers have examined additional rape myths, which do not fit entirely into these categories. Examples might include, “a husband cannot rape his wife” (Edwards, Turchik, Dardis, Reynolds & Gidyez, 2011, p.763), or a typical rape victim is Caucasian and wealthy and a typical rapist is poor and a racial minority (Brownmiller, 1975, p.176, 333; Wood, 2013, p. 298). However, research conducted by Johnson, Kuck and Schander (1997) revealed that core rape myths are not upheld in demographic analysis (p. 706). These contrasting findings shows that additional study of various rape myths is warranted.

COMMON RAPE MYTHS RESEARCH

“SHE ASKED FOR IT”

The myth “she asked for it” is a catchall myth which includes ideas like “she is promiscuously dressed” and “she was walking alone” (Edwards et al., 2011, p. 766). Research by Carmody and Washington (2001) found that 21% of college women agreed that women were asking for trouble by dressing promiscuously (p. 431). Additionally, a study by Johnson, Kuck and Schander (1997) found that 27% of college men and 10% of
college women endorsed the myth that women provoked their own rape (p. 700). Furthermore, in a poll conducted by British Amnesty International, found that 28% of respondents believed that flirting made the victim at least partially responsible for the rape, another 20% said that dressing provocatively made the victim partially responsible and 17% believed that walking alone at night made the victim partially responsible (2005, p. 5). The use of alcohol or drugs also plays into this rape myth in unexpected ways. In cases where alcohol and/or drugs were involved, the belief in the perpetrators’ guilt was lowered (LaFree, Reskin & Visher, 1985, p. 401). However, later research by Finch and Munro (2005) found that when a woman was intoxicated, mock jury members wanted to know if this was a typical occurrence before they delivered a verdict (p. 31).

Throughout history, women have been expected to conform to a set of idealized standards and this is no different for victims of rape. In the past, they were truly only considered victims if they were “Caucasian, middle- or upper- class, pious, submissive” (Edwards et al., 2011, p. 766). This “ideal victim” continues today in more subtle forms. If there is any evidence of drinking or drug use, the victim’s morals and lifestyle are called into question by media and perhaps the jury (Edwards et al., 2011, pg. 767). Media, in particular, can escalate this rape myth by focusing on what the victim may or may not have done to contribute to the rape. In fact it has been argued that “media stories are often constructed from a viewpoint that is more favorable to the perpetrator rather than the victim, and the acquittals were more likely to make the front page of a newspaper than rape convictions” (Edwards et al., 2011, pg. 767).

**WOMEN LIKE RAPE**

A second rape myth that has some similarities to, “she asked for it” is the myth that women like to be raped. Before rape law reform, providing evidence of resistance
was one of the only ways to find a perpetrator guilty (Edwards et al., 2011, p. 765). This myth can be traced back to ancient Greece and can be seen throughout the legal history of both England and the United States, where if a woman lacked physical signs of struggle against her attacker it was assumed that she enjoyed the encounter and the case was thrown out (Schulhofer, 1998). While specific laws requiring evidence of a struggle have been removed, evidence of physical force is still often required to successfully prosecute the attacker (Bryden, 1998, p. 317). This also leads to the concept of “token resistance,” in which no really means yes (Loh, Gidycz, Lobo, & Luthra, 2005). A study in 2005 found that one-third of men had perceived token resistance from their partner and men who perceived token resistance were more likely to be sexually aggressive (Loh, Gidycz, Lobo, & Luthra, 2005).

**Typical Victim and Perpetrator**

A third common rape myth is the concept of a typical victim and a typical perpetrator (Brownmiller, 1975). An example of this myth is the belief that “most rapists are African-American men, and most victims are white [non-Hispanic] women” (Woods, 2013, p. 298). In reality three-fourths of rapes occur within races, not between (Woods, 2013, p. 298). According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network, only 17% of rape victims are white non-Hispanic, while women of American Indian descent account for 34% of all rapes, the highest percentage of all races that were accounted for (RAINN, 2009). On the other side, the majority of rape perpetrators, 52%, are white non-Hispanic (RAINN, 2009). Another myth about victim/perpetrator typology is the relationship between the two. Many people believe that the most common type of rape is stranger rape; however, more than 75% of rapes are committed by a person the victim knows (Wood, 2013, p.298). The Rape, Abuse, Incest National Network (RAINN) reports that
38% of rapists are a friend or close acquaintance, 28% are an intimate partner, and 7% are a relative of the victim (RAINN, 2009).

**Women Lie About Rape**

A fourth prominent rape myth is that women lie about being raped (Kahlor & Morrison, 2007). Studies have found that anywhere between 19-50% of people believe that women lie about rape (Burt, 1990, p. 222; Kahlor & Morrison, 2007, p. 702). Other studies show that this percentage is closer to the lower end of that spectrum (Kahlor & Morrison, 2007, p. 702). However, reports on the actual prevalence of false accusations approximate that only between 2-8% of reported sexual assaults are false (Edwards et al., 2011, p. 767). Media play an integral role in perpetuating these myths. The way in which a rape case is framed in the news impacts the viewer’s attitudes (Edwards et al., 2011, p. 768). Since many high profile cases involve false accusations or acquittals this may lead viewers to believe that false accusations occur more often than they do (Edwards et al., 2011, p. 768).

These myths could easily be created and perpetuated by the type of rapes reported in news media and the portrayal of rape in television and movies.

**Rape Myths on Television**

The body of research on rape myths in news media is quite broad; however, research on rape myths on primetime television, specifically crime dramas, is narrower in scope. This study hopes to add to this body by focusing on rape myths in primetime TV. The study will examine how rape myth, demographics, and rape victim typology are represented in *NBC*’s primetime crime drama *Law and Order: SVU*.

**Reviews of Rape Myths on Television Research**
The majority (80%) of sex-related crimes on television are found in fictional movie and drama series (Kahlor & Eastin, 2011, p. 217). Moreover, research indicates that fictional content “consistently perpetuates rape myths” (Kahlor & Eastin, 2011, p. 217).

Research conducted in 1992 by Susan Brinson found that 46% of rape-based storylines suggested the victim was to blame for the assault (p. 366). Brinson also noted: “In each instance of ‘asking for it,’ the victim did not conform to cultural expectations for dress or behavior” (1992, p. 366). This refusal of cultural expectations sets the victim apart from society, and therefore places her beyond any support which society should provide. It further relieved the rapist of their responsibility (Brinson, 1992, p. 366). The study also revealed that this particular myth was only opposed by 38% of the storylines coded (Brinson, 1992, p. 367). Brinson suggests that this particular rape myth portrays rape as a punishment for women who do not conform to social norms (1992, p. 368). Brinson’s study also uncovered that 42% of the storylines indicated that the victim wanted to be raped and 38% suggested that the women lied about being raped (1992, p. 369). The only rape myth that Brinson’s research found less pervasive among the storylines was that women are not hurt by rape; when this was suggested it was often a male character referring to a lack of physical harm (1992, p. 371). Another important aspect of rape portrayals on television examined in Brinson’s research is the relation of rape myth prevalence and the type of rape (1992, p. 372). Each rape myth examined in this research had a higher prevalence in storylines that featured acquaintance rape (Brinson, 1992, p. 372).
A study by Kahlor and Eastin (2011) found that “daily television viewing significantly and positively predicted perceptions that rape accusations are false and the acceptance of rape myths” (p. 224). This study also supports the concept that television viewing is “related significantly to first- and second-order rape myth beliefs among adult men and women” (Kahlor & Eastin, 2011, p. 226). This means that examining media content through the theoretical lens of framing and agenda setting, the mass media could be shaping viewers’ perception of rape victims, the act of rape and news worthiness or non-news worthiness of rape stories.

**Rape Myths on Law and Order: Special Victims Unit Research**

*Law and Order: Special Victims Unit (SVU)* first aired in 1999 (Cuklanz & Moorti, 2006, p. 115). It is the only show on primetime television that focuses solely on sexual violence and, more importantly, looks at sexual violence from the victims’ perspective. Cuklanz & Moorti’s (2006) analysis of the show claims that while *SVU* storylines portray a feminist perspective, they nonetheless make assumptions that indict stereotypical feminine traits (p. 116). According to Cuklanz & Moorti, the *SVU* series does take a step forward in the representation of rape victims and the crime itself: “The series rarely depicts the sexual assault itself, thus omitting titillating and objectifying details” (2006, p. 117). This works against the myth of the stereotypical rape scenario and “sidestep[s] the problematic of rapes resistance to representation” (Cuklanz & Moorti, 2006, p. 117). In addition, *SVU* examines the judicial problems that can occur when a case is brought to trial. For example, some episodes look at the legal definition of consent or laws regarding who can press rape charges (Cuklanz & Moorti, 2006, p. 117). Research has found that *SVU* does try to use the feminist idea that there are no categories
of “good” or “bad” rape victims; while some characters in the show label victims as such, the main detectives do not use these labels (Cuklanz & Moorti, 2006, p. 118). Cuklanz and Moorti (2006) asserted that “SVU narratives repeatedly declare that a person’s sexual practices must not be used to undermine the person’s credibility. The series rejects the assumption that only virtuous and sexually chaste women can be violated” (p. 118).

An examination of SVU, by Britto, Hughs, Saltzman, and Stroh (2007), looked at victims and offenders rather than explaining the feminist underpinnings of the show. This study revealed that nearly all victims were white and they had been raped by an acquaintance (p. 46) It also showed that 60% of the victims were found dead, which could potentially help viewers connect rape and death (Britto et al., 2007, p. 45). The portrayal of offenders was more accurate to real life than the depiction of victims, with the majority of offenders portrayed as white males (Britto et al., 2007, p.47). Interestingly, the study showed that men were depicted as the victim in 39% of the observed cases, (Britto et al., 2007, p.46), when in reality statistics show that about 3% of men have been the victim of rape (RAINN, 2009).

Research conducted in 2010 by Rader & Rhineberger-Dunn, scrutinized the typology of victim characterization on television, particularly in primetime crime dramas. They examined female victims and found that 85%, and from the lower class (when social class was determinable) (Rader & Rhineberger-Dunn, 2010, p. 240). They also tried to determine how the victim was portrayed on a scale from innocent to manipulative (Rader & Rhineberger-Dunn, 2010, p.242). Most characters, 57%, were found to be generally innocent while 43% were unlikable or manipulative (Rader & Rhineberger-Dunn, 2010, p. 243). While this was the average for all shows observed, SVU was the
most likely to show victims in an unfavorable light, with 45% being labeled unlikable. However, no victims were portrayed as manipulative (Rader & Rhineberger-Dunn, 2010, p. 245). They also examined how the victim was portrayed in relation to the type of crime. They found sexual assault victims were mostly portrayed as innocent (45%), but victims of intimate partner abuse and non-intimate family violence were found to be manipulative or unlikable 50% of the time (Rader & Rhineberger-Dunn, 2010, p. 246). The relationship of the victim to the offender also appeared to play a role in the portrayal of the victim. Victims of stranger rape were more likely to be portrayed as innocent (64% of the time), while victims of romantic partners were depicted as manipulative (58% of the time) (Rader & Rhineberger-Dunn, 2010, p. 247). It is important to understand the current research on the portrayal of rape victims in crime dramas, particularly because the average American has very little real life experience with crime, especially rape. What people learn from television often becomes their primary knowledge source of the crime (Rader & Rhineberger-Dunn, 2010, p. 232). Understanding the typology of the victims portrayed in crime dramas is important because it is related to how viewers perceive both the victims and perpetrators of rape in real life.

Previous studies have focused on typology of victims, in terms of demographics, and how they are portrayed (negative or positive). However, researchers up until now have not studied how these elements, along with the use of rape myths, frame victims throughout an episode. Agenda setting and media framing help to critically examine the portrayal of rape in crime dramas today.
AGENDA SETTING

Shaw and McCombs (1972) first developed the theory of Agenda Setting in mass media. Their study found that the issues people viewed as important were linked to the issues presented in news media (Shaw & McCombs, 1972). “The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (Cohen, 1963). This is the basic concept of agenda setting theory. This theory postulates that one of the most powerful influences of the media is its ability to tell viewers what to think (Shaw & McCombs, 1972).

Two basic assumptions underlie most research on agenda-setting: (1) the press and the media do not reflect reality; they filter and shape it; (2) media concentration on a few issues and subjects leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues (Shaw & McCombs, 1972).

There is a link between media portrayal of rape victims and agenda setting. As media increase their portrayal of rape cases, viewers are more likely to think about the issue more. *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* is a prime example of increased portrayals of rape. This television show focuses on rape victims and most likely brought the issue to the forefront of society’s consciousness. Over time, as the portrayals of rape in increase, viewers start to gain a perspective on the issue of rape and on different types of rape (Edwards et al., 2011, p. 765).

MEDIA FRAMING

Robert Entman postulated the theory of Media Framing in 1993. He states that, “Analysis of frames illuminates the precise way in which influence over human consciousness is exerted” (Entman, 1993, p.51). Media framing is closely related to the
theory of agenda setting, but focuses more on the portrayal of a particular issue rather than a general topic (Entman, 1993). “The basis of framing theory is that media focus attention on certain events and then places them within a field of meaning” (Entman, 1993). The core assumption of framing is that media gatekeepers present events and topics in a specific way to give them social meaning (Entman, 1993). Entman defines the frame as “communicating text or message to promote certain facets of a ‘perceived reality’ and make them more salient in such a way that endorses a specific problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or a treatment recommendation” (Entman, 1993, p. 51). By highlighting certain pieces of information about a main topic of a news stories, media raise the salience of the issue (Entman, 1993, p. 53). The term salience means “making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audience” (Entman, 1993, p. 53). Increasing salience makes it more likely that the audience will remember the information (Entman, 1993, p. 53). While this is similar to agenda setting, it goes one step farther by telling the audience not only what to think about but also how they should think about it (Entman, 1993).

Entman (1993) furthered explains framing using four key concepts (p. 56). The first is audience autonomy and the dominant meaning (Entman, 1993, p. 56). “The dominant meaning can be identified by a particular framing of a situation that is frequently mentioned in the text and is the most common opinion among the audience” (Freyenberger, 2013, p. 13). In relation to the portrayal of rape in the media, it is important to understand the common views among viewers of television, because this could be related to how the crime is framed. The second concept is journalistic objectivity. “Journalists may follow the rules for ‘objective’ reporting and yet convey a
dominant framing of the news text that prevents most audience members from making a balanced assessment of a situation” (Entman, 1993, p. 56). The third element that Entman discussed is content analysis (1993, p. 57). Researchers need to be aware when drawing conclusions about dominant meanings; however, if they use proper coding they can find valid results about media framing (Entman, 1993, p. 57). The final concept that Entman used is public opinion. The framing of any topic can have a major influence on public opinion (Entman, 1993, p. 57). Media framing can potentially have an effect on any issue that is portrayed in the media and framing has become a popular topic in research studies throughout the world (Freyenberger, 2013, p. 14).

De Vreese argues that framing can have major consequences on both and individual and societal level (2005, p. 52). On the individual level, consequences could include “altered attitudes about an issue based on exposure to certain frames” (De Vreese, 2005, p. 52). “On the societal level, frames may contribute to shaping social level processes such as political socialization, decision-making, and collective actions” (De Vreese, 2005, p. 52). Ultimately, framing can have an effect on viewers’ knowledge of topics presented in the media, and therefore an important part of studying how the media portrays rape, particularly rape victims.

Framing is manifest in rape cases when victims and perpetrators are cast in certain lights. As noted above, the victims are often cast in a negative light using frames that consist of rape myths such as “she asked for it” or “she enjoyed it” (Edwards et al., 2011, p. 767). Fountain (2007), found that when victims were framed in these negative terms, college students were more likely to engage in victims blaming. Based on these findings
the argument can be made that this type of framing in crime dramas influences how viewers perceive rape victims.

The purpose of this study is to examine how rape victims are framed in *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit (SVU)*. SVU was selected because of its primary focus on victims of sexual violence. As noted earlier, current studies have shown that while SVU may have feminist underpinnings (Cuklanz & Moorti, 2006), the show nonetheless uses stereotypes and rape myths to portray victims (Britto et al., 2007). SVU is critically acclaimed and has won and been nominated for numerous Golden Globe and Emmy awards (*Law and Order*, 2013). It is also important to note that SVU is aired on NBC, one of the three major networks. Network television is free to viewers; therefore more are likely to have the opportunity to watch the series. To this end, the current study seeks to further understand how victims are portrayed on the television crime drama *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*, utilizing feminist theory, framing and agenda setting.

This study hopes to answer the following research questions:

**R1:** What framing devices are used to portray female rape victims in *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*?

Based upon previous research regarding rape victims on television the following hypotheses were formed:

**H1:** Rape victims in *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* are more likely to be portrayed in a demographically inaccurate way.

**H1a.)** Rape victims are more likely to be portrayed as white non-Hispanic than any other race.
H1b.) Rape victims are more likely to be portrayed as primarily between the ages of 20-29.

H1c.) Rape victims are more likely to be portrayed as victims of stranger rape than marital rape or acquaintance rape.

H1d.) Rape victims are more likely to be portrayed as single than married, divorced or other.

H1e.) Rape victims are likely to be portrayed as lower class or lower-middle class than middle to upper class.

H2: Rape victims are more likely to be portrayed in a negative frame than in a positive or neutral frame.

H3: Minority rape victims are more likely to be portrayed in a negative way than Caucasian rape victims.
METHODODOLOGY

A framing analysis using content analysis was used for the purpose of this study. The content analysis examined how victims were portrayed in relation to demographic variables and rape myths. Sample selection, units of analysis, and variables will now be delineated.

SAMPLE SELECTION

Seasons eight (2006-2007), nine (2007-2008), ten (2008-2009), eleven (2009-2010) and twelve (2010-2011) of NBC’s Law and Order: SVU were selected, based on availability, for this research. The total number of episodes sampled for the research was 135. The research then used purposeful sampling to select only episodes with female rape victims. A total of 36 episodes were realized. Out of the 36 episodes 25 episodes were then randomly selected for the study (See Appendix B).

UNITS OF ANALYSIS

An individual episode served as a unit of analysis in this study. Each episode was assigned a number and the name of the episode, the date it aired, and the plot of the episode was all recorded.

For episodes with multiple victims or rapists, each was assigned a number and an additional coding sheet was utilized for each victim (See Appendix A for Coding Sheet). The number of victims, race, age, socioeconomic status, type of rape, location of rape, the victim’s status post-rape were noted. Additionally, the attire the victims wore was coded if it was discussed in the episode on an individual basis; for example, if the detective
uncovered that the perpetrator raped more than one woman and the other victims were only mentioned briefly, other victims were not coded.

In order to establish inter-coder reliability, both coders read the coding notes (description of Operationalization of Variables). Both coders then viewed approximately 10 percent (n=3) of the total episodes to be examined. An inter-coder reliability of .76 was achieved.

In addition to the quantitative analysis utilizing the coding sheet, qualitative analysis was also used. Each episode was qualitatively analyzed for details such as clothing, usage of language and body language. The qualitative analysis sought to determine how each episode framed victims, through language and various nonverbal cues such as body language.

**OPERATIONALIZATION OF VARIABLES**

The following variables are important to the portrayal of rape because, through the lens of agenda setting and framing, the inference is made for the audience about who gets raped and how they should think about victims of rape.

*Rape*

The operational definition of rape used during content analysis was, “The 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” (The United States Department of Justice, 2012).

**DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS**

**RACE**
“White non-Hispanic,” “Black,” “Hispanic,” “American Indian,” “Asian/Pacific Islander,” and “other,” were coded in this study. Race was determined through either being verbally indicated in the show’s dialogue, or indicated through social cues (e.g. language or accent) or physical appearance.

AGE

The age ranges coded were, 19 and under, 20-29, 30-39 and 40+. Ages were determined either through verbal statements or through social cues. For example if the actors did not explicitly state the victims age, but she was in college and looked like a traditional student, she was labeled as 20-29.

MARITAL STATUS

Single, divorced, married and unsure were the categories coded in the demographic of relationship status. This was determined through explicit statements or through social cues. For example, a 13 year old was labeled as single even if it was not explicitly stated. Unsure was selected if the victim’s relationship status was never mentioned.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

Socio-Economic status was broken into: lower, lower-middle, middle, upper-middle, and upper class. Where the victim lived, what type of job she or her family had, being explicitly stated, or other social cues determined this.

TYPE OF RAPE PERPETRATOR

Type of rape refers perpetrator to the victim’s relationship to the perpetrator. The categories used were marital, acquaintance/date, stranger and other. Marital rape occurred between spouses. Acquaintance/date rape occurred when the victim knew her attacker.
Stranger rape occurred when the victim did not know the perpetrator, and “other” was selected when the categorization was unclear.

Analysis of these variables will help this study understand how television shows portray who are victims of rape. In terms of framing it will be crucial to understand if victims with certain demographic characteristics are portrayed using a specific typology and tone more often than other demographic characteristics. It is also important to examine which victim demographic characteristics are victimized on television compared to actual statistics about the crime of rape.

Rape Myths

For the purpose of this study Lonsway and Fitzgerald’s (1994) definition of rape myths will be utilized. They are “attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women” (p.2). Four rape myths will be analyzed in this study. The first rape myth examined was the concept of a typical victim and perpetrator. This myth was analyzed by recording and examining demographic characteristics such as race, age, and marital status.

The second and third myths will be examined by the support or opposition of the myth in the show and how often it is either supported or opposed. The myth “she asked for it.” This myth is defined as “something she did provoked a man to rape her” (Burt, 1980). This was operationalized in several ways, it could be her behavior, being in the wrong place, or wearing the wrong clothes (Brinson, 1992, p.4). An example displaying this myth would be portraying the victim in provocative attire or doing provocative things before or after the rape. Another way that this myth could be supported is by another
character stating or insinuating that she deserved to be raped. An example of opposing this myth would be ignoring the way she was dressed or previous sexual behavior.

The third rape myth coded was that women want to be raped or enjoy rape. Brownmiller (1975) explained that in this myth “rape is an act that men do in the name of their masculinity, [so] it is in their interest to believe that women also want rape done, in the name of femininity” (p. 346). This myth was operationalized through the concept of force. If it cannot be proven that the woman resisted, she must have wanted to be raped. Another form of this myth is token resistance (Edwards et al., 2011, p. 765). An example of supporting this myth would be highlighting a lack of resistance and linking it to consent, or portraying the victim as giving a token resistance. Opposition to this myth could be portrayed through characters highlighting that “no” means “no,” or pointing out why there may not be many signs of resistance or a struggle.

The fourth myth coded was “she lied about it,” “which argues that the woman consented to sexual intercourse, but changed her mind afterward and decided to ‘cry rape.’… This myth focuses on the woman as vindictive, trying to blame the innocent man” (Brinson, 1992, p. 5). This myth was analyzed in two ways. The first was to record if the rape claim was false, and why the victim falsely reported the rape. The second will be to record how many times it was insinuated that the victim was lying.

**Victim Typology**

This study used Rader and Rhineberger-Dunn’s (2010) definitions of victim typologies were used. “Innocent” victims are presented in the episode as “completely faultless for the crime as well as perfect in character” (2010, p. 242). “Innocent with character flaws” is defined as a “victim who is portrayed as faultless for the crime itself”
but also portrayed as having slight character problems” (2010, p. 242). “Unlikable but not culpable victims” are “portrayed as extremely unlikable but not portrayed as responsible for their victimization” (2010, p. 242). The final typology is “manipulative,” which Rader and Rhineberger-Dunn defined as “victim viewed as contributing to or lying about her victimization” (2010, p. 242).

**OVERALL TONE OF THE EPISODE**

The overall tone of the message regarding victims in an episode was defined as the entirety of expressed attitudes through words and illustrations in regards to the rape victim(s) in a particular episode. Ardovini-Brooker and Caringella-Macdonald defined a “negative or blaming” tone as placing fault on the victim or reproaching the victim for their behavior (2002, p. 6). This would include the use of rape myths to describe the victim or the details of the rape. They defined a “positive or sympathetic” tone as referring to the “victim in a positive light that diverts blame away from the victim and minimizes the nature of the wrongdoing on the part of the victim” (2002, p. 6) An example of a “positive” tone would be placing blame on the offender despite the circumstance of the rape. A “neutral” tone would consist of simply stating facts about what occurred without assigning blame. In episodes where there are conflicting tones regarding the portrayal of rape victims, coders looked for the more pervasive tone throughout the episode. If neither was pervasive the coders labeled the tone as “neutral.”
RESULTS

Upon analysis of 25 episodes of *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*, results showed that there were a total of 58 victims and 27 perpetrators. There were 2.3 victims per episode. The number of victims per episode ranges from 1 to 7. There were 1.1 perpetrators identified in each episode. The range of number of perpetrators per episode was 1 to 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Victims</th>
<th>Perpetrators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>1-2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1: Total Number of Victims and Perpetrators**

Portrayal of Rape Victims

**H1** Rape victims in *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* are more likely to be portrayed in a demographically inaccurate way.

**H1a.** Rape victims are more likely to be portrayed as white non-Hispanic than any other race.

This hypothesis was supported. White non-Hispanic women were most likely to be portrayed as rape victims on *Law and Order: SVU*. White non-Hispanic women comprised 81% of all the victims coded. In regard to sexual violence within and between races, *SVU* portrayed 75.9% of rapes occurred within races.

Black victims made up for 13.8%, and 3.4% were Asian and Pacific Island victims. Out of the 58 victims identified only one was Hispanic (1.7%). None of the victims observed were American Indian. The majority of rape perpetrators in *SVU* were white non-Hispanic (70.4%). Blacks were more likely to be portrayed as the perpetrator
25.9% of the time and 3.7% of the perpetrators were from another race beside White non-Hispanic, Black, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander or American Indian. Hispanics, Asian/Pacific Islanders or American Indians were not portrayed as perpetrators in any of the observed episodes.

Table 2: Race of Victims

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Number of Victims</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White non-Hispanic</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/ Pacific Islander</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analyzing whether rapes were between races or within races also helps to determine if the portrayal of rape victims on Law and Order: Special Victims Unit accurately reflects statistical information about rape victims. The majority of rapes that were coded occurred within races (75.9%). These rapes were solely between either white non-Hispanic pairs or black pairs. Rapes between races occurred in 24.1% of the cases, a total of 14 rapes out of 58. Out of these 14 rapes, 6 portrayed a black perpetrator and a white non-Hispanic victim and 4 portrayed a white non-Hispanic victim and a perpetrator categorized as “other.”

H1b.) Rape victims are more likely to be portrayed as primarily between the ages of 20-29.

This hypothesis was not supported. 43.1% percent of the victims were age 19 or under and 41.4% were between the ages 20 and 29. Victims aged 30 to 39 years were the third largest demographic, with 12.1% of the victims being in this bracket. Only 3.4% of
the victims were above the age of 40. Most perpetrators observed were over 40 years old, 44.4%. The next largest age group portrayed as perpetrators was 30-39, 40.1%. Both 20-29 year olds and those under 19 were portrayed as the perpetrator in only 7.4% of the time.

Table 3: Age of Victims

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number of Victims</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19 or Under</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 or Older</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

H1c.) Rape victims are more likely to be portrayed as victims of stranger rape than marital rape or acquaintance rape.

This hypothesis was supported. The majority of rapes were stranger rapes (72.4%), the second most frequently utilized type of rape was acquaintance/ date rape, which was utilized in the show 25.9% of the time. In the observed episodes none of the victims were victims of marital rape. The remaining victim 1.7% of victims was a sex slave in Africa. This particular show did not indicate whether the victim knew her kidnapper and rapist before her captivity.

Table 4: Type of Rape

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Rape</th>
<th>Number of Victims</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stranger</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquaintance</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**H1d.** Rape victims are more likely to be portrayed as single than married, divorced or other.

This hypothesis was supported. In the observed episodes 63.8% of the victims were described as single. Relationship statuses for 25.9% of the victims were never disclosed, 8.6% were married and only 1.7% of the victims were divorced. The majority of perpetrators were also single (74%). The perpetrators were equally likely to be described as married or not given a relationship status (11%). Only 4% of the perpetrators were described as divorced.

**Table 5: Victim’s Relationship Status**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship Status</th>
<th>Number of Victims</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**H1e.** Rape victims are likely to be portrayed as lower class or lower-middle class than middle to upper class.

This hypothesis was not supported. The majority of victims were middle class (63.8%). The next most represented socioeconomic class was lower middle class (15.5%) followed by lower class (13.8%). People of upper-middle class and upper class were represented less, 5.2% and 1.7% respectively. Unlike the victims, the majority of perpetrators were in the lower-middle class (33.3%), which was closely followed by the middle class (29.6%). Interestingly, perpetrators were portrayed as middle-upper and upper, 18.5% and 11.1% respectively. Perpetrators were only portrayed as lower class 7.4% of the time.
### Table 6: Victims Socio-Economic Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socio-Economic Status</th>
<th>Number of Victims</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower-Middle</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper-Middle</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 7: Perpetrators Socio-Economic Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socio-Economic Status</th>
<th>Number of Perpetrators</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower-Middle</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper-Middle</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**H2:** Rape victims are more likely to be portrayed in a negative frame than in a **positive or neutral frame.**

This hypothesis was not supported; the majority of victims were portrayed in a “neutral” frame (50%). The next most utilized frame was a “positive or sympathetic” frame, which was used 44.8%. A “negative” frame was the least used, at 5.2% of the time. Most victims were also portrayed as “innocent” (72.4%), followed by “innocent with character flaws” (24.1%). Only two victims were portrayed as “unlikable but not culpable” (3.4%). None of the victims were portrayed as “manipulative.”

### Table 8: Victim Frames

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame</th>
<th>Number of Victims</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive or Sympathetic</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>44.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative or Blaming</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
H3: Racial minority rape victims are more likely to be portrayed in a negative way than white non-Hispanic rape victims.

This hypothesis was supported. Racial minority victims were portrayed in a “negative” frame 9% of the time compared to 4% of white non-Hispanic victims. Black and Hispanic victims were also portrayed as less innocent than white non-Hispanic victims. Blacks were portrayed as “innocent with character flaws” 50% of the time and 12.5% were portrayed as “unlikeable but not culpable.” White non-Hispanic victims were portrayed as “innocent with character flaws” 19.1% of the time and “unlikeable but not culpable” 2% of the time. The only Hispanic victim was portrayed as “innocent with character flaws.” On the other hand, all Asian or Pacific Islanders were portrayed as “innocent.” In total, 54.5% of minority victims were portrayed as “innocent with character flaws,” and 9% were portrayed as “unlikeable.”

Table 9: Victim Typology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Typology</th>
<th>Number of Victims</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Innocent</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>72.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innocent with Character Flaws</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unlikable but not Culpable</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipulative</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10: Victim Frames by Race

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame</th>
<th>White non-Hispanic</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Asian/Pacific Islander</th>
<th>American Indian</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>All Minorities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive or Sympathetic</td>
<td>47.1%</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>36.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>48.9%</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>54.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative or Blaming</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Table 11: Victim Typology by Race**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Typology</th>
<th>White non-Hispanic</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Asian/Pacific Islander</th>
<th>American Indian</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>All Minorities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Innocent</td>
<td>78.9%</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>36.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innocent with Character Flaws</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>54.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unlikable but not Culpable</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipulative</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**R1: What framing devices are used to portray female rape victims in *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*?**

After viewing and coding the episodes, four frames emerged from both the qualitative and quantitative analysis. The frames that emerged from this research were: a stereotypical rape victim, stranger rape scenario, acquaintance rape scenario and the “he said, she said” frame.

**Stereotypical Victim Frame**

In the episodes analyzed *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit (SVU)* creates a typical rape victim. Based upon the observed episodes, *SVU* portrayed rape victims as white non-Hispanic females, under the age of thirty. These victims were also most likely lower middle to middle class and single or their relationship status was not mentioned. They are violated by strangers, in places that are unfamiliar to them such as cars or the perpetrators’ home. Twenty-four out of 58 of the victims met these exact criteria for a typical victim. Victims that meet these standards were portrayed as innocent 95.8% of the time; only one victim was portrayed as less than completely innocent. This corresponds with Woods’ (2013) research regarding beliefs about stereotypical rape victims.

The use of stereotypical victims in *SVU* is a form of media framing. By utilizing a specific demographic of a victim and portraying her as innocent the majority of the time,
the TV show sends the message to viewers that rape victims, who are completely innocent, are white non-Hispanic, single, lower to middle class, and under the age of thirty. Many of these victims also were found to meet American beauty standards and are raped by strangers in places that they do not know. This frame tells viewers to perceive a certain type of victim as a true victim. It also can be dangerous for rape victims who do not meet this standard.

In the episodes analyzed, a second aspect of the typical rape victim myth is that strangers rape victims. Of all of the rapes coded, strangers committed 72.4% of rapes. This use of framing works to perpetuate the belief that acquaintance rape and marital rape either do not occur or are very rare. In terms of victim blaming, portraying stranger rape as the primary type of rape may lead viewers to be less likely to believe victims of acquaintance or marital rape.

Most victims who are attacked by strangers are either dragged into a car, a dark corner of the park, or taken to the perpetrators house or their “torture room.” As with the framing victims in a stereotypical way, this frame creates false standards for rape victims. This also can create a fear of strangers and of walking down the street, especially for women.

While most of the rape cases on SVU, were stranger rapes, they also frame acquaintance rape and portray some some rape myths. Of the 25.9% of the victims that were attacked by acquaintances 75% were portrayed as innocent but with character flaws. While victim’s credibility is not seriously attacked, smaller attacks on victims’ characters were highlighted in the show. For example, in episode 7 of season 8, Underbelly, all of the victims are child prostitutes. Three of the girls were raped and killed by their pimp.
While detectives were interviewing the pimp, Victor, he called the girls “society’s trash.” Comments such as this are made throughout the episode. Another girl was found who worked for the pimp. As the defense attorney and the prosecution were talking, the defense remarked that the girl should be arrested.

**Defense:** “Why isn’t she being arrested?”

**Prosecution:** “She’s a victim.”

**Defense:** “She’s a whore.”

These comments, which label victims negatively, reflect on the three victims who died in the show and on victims of child prostitution generally. While the prosecutor refutes the defense, the statement could stick in viewers’ minds and could make them question if child prostitutes are even at the very least victims of statutory rape.

**She asked for it**

The rape myth “she asked for it” was displayed in 60% in either acquaintance/date rape cases, by the defense, or as callous remarks made by one of the detectives. If a detective or the defense made a remark that would be considered a rape myth it was quickly refuted by either the prosecution or another detective. An example of this is in episode 1 of season 11. A victim is telling the detectives how she ran from her rapist for blocks before she was spotted.

**Kendall (a police officer):** First smart thing you did

**Benson:** It’s not your [the victim] fault.

Interestingly Benson, the only female detective character, is normally the one to refute rape myths used by male detectives.
Another example of “she asked for it” frame was in episode 9 of season 12, *Gray*. The episode deals with a female college student who claims she was raped by a fellow student. There was no evidence from a rape kit because the campus police did not have her complete one. Both students gave their sides of the story, which match perfectly until the end. Both of them admitted that the girl was drinking and that the boy offered to let her stay at his house. She claimed to have blacked out and fallen asleep, only to wake up to him raping her. He claimed that she came on to him and that she wanted it. The officers had a conversation about what consent means and who is responsible.

**Benson**: “This is some poor girl trying to get justice. Bethany was drunk; she was incapable of giving consent.”

**Finn**: “What if Chuck was drunk?”

**Munch**: “What did she think was going to happen; they would play scrabble?”

**Benson**: “It’s the guy’s responsibility to not take advantage”

**Finn**: “It’s like a guy needs a permission slip to get past first base.”

This conversation was continued throughout the episode, and several characters suggested that the female victim was drinking, therefore she was asking for it, while other aspects of the episode also indicate that she was also lying about being raped to get revenge for being dumped. Eventually the detectives and prosecution decided that there was no way to take the case to trial. The prosecution called it a “gray rape,” meaning consent was unclear. In this case the victim received no justice. Instead, more people doubted her innocence.

**She Wanted It**
The myth “she wanted it,” which was used for 24% of the victims, framed victims in a way that highlighted that they may have been interested in having sex with the person who raped them. In episode 8 of season 11, a high school girl named Nikki Sherman accused a football player of raping her. She claimed to have been raped at a party. Stabler’s son told his father about the accusation.

**Son:** “Everyone says she’s a lying slut.”

**Stabler:** “Don’t ever talk about a victim like that.”

Stabler reprimanded his son for this comment; this moment shows how *SVU* is attempting to fight rape myths. This excerpt also shows how students at the girl’s school blamed her by using the rape myth “she wanted it.” Other comments indicate that she wanted to have sex with the football player and later regretted it. As the case is investigated, a photo emerges of the victim at another party looking intoxicated and promiscuous; she was wearing very little clothing and in a compromising position with many males around her. This leads the detectives and the prosecutions began to doubt her and to doubt whether or not they can win the case.

**Benson:** “This [the photo] doesn’t mean she wasn’t raped.”

**Prosecutor:** “You think the jury’s going to buy her story after this photo?”

The victim claims that she was drugged at that party. However, the prosecution believes that the photo will help the defense’s argument that she wanted it and then lied about it later.

**She Lied About It**

The myth “she lied about it” was also displayed in *SVU*, 24% of the rape victims were accused of lying.
In season 9 episode 3, a teacher is accused of statutory rape. The teacher claimed that her student raped her. Throughout the episode the detectives doubted the teacher, and believed several false statements about her. They thought that she was lying to protect herself from rape charges. The teacher and the student’s stories came down to a “he said she said” case. Eventually the teacher’s side of the story is only believed once it is discovered that the student was a sex addict and had been sleeping with prostitutes as well. Ultimately there is a clear answer in this case. However, the female victim is accused of lying throughout the episode and only detective Stabler believed her story.

The rape myth that victims are lying was suggested several times throughout the coded episodes, but only if the victims actually lied about being raped. She was attacked by a black man, and decided to claim rape because she thought that nobody would believe her if she had claimed that she was just attacked.

Many of the rape myths and frames were combined in a single episode, while some episodes were notably devoid of rape myths. Rape myths appeared more often when the victim knew the perpetrator, 67% of acquaintance rape cases displayed rape myths while only 21% of stranger rape cases displayed rape myths. This may be why some episodes used multiple rape myths and others used none.
DISCUSSION

Based upon the results it is clear that *SVU* portrays rape myths in its storylines. The rape myth that there are typical victims is still very prevalent in *SVU*, other rape myths such as “she asked for it,” “she wanted it,” and “she lied about it,” were not used in as many episodes, however it is important to discuss how the use of rape myths in some plot lines frames certain victims.

Media framing on *SVU* tells viewers to think of rape victims as young, white non-Hispanic, middle-class, single and pretty and they are attacked by strangers. In reality only 17.7% of rape victims are white (RAINN, 2009) and 73% of victims know their rapist (U.S. Bureau of Justice). Portraying rape victims with only these demographic characteristics diminishes rapes involving women of other races, especially American Indian women and Hispanic women, who are greatly underrepresented in the show. Nationwide rape statistics show that American Indian women are the largest demographic of rape victims, at 34%, followed by black women (18.8%), (RAINN, 2009). Thus, such inconsistencies between media depictions and real life can impact how viewers see rape victims, especially minority victims. This finding supports what other researchers have found regarding the majority of rape victims depicted as white (Britto et al., 2007, p.46; Rader and Rhineberger-Dunn, 2010) Clearly white non-Hispanic victims are portrayed more often than any other race. While this is inaccurate, it also goes to heart of how frames are applied to the victims of rape on TV. By increasing the salience of the white non-Hispanic victim, audience members are more likely to remember them as victims and may also be less likely to blame white non-Hispanic victims in real life.
Interestingly, in all the episodes analyzed, most of the rape victims also met society’s typical standards of beauty. While this was not coded, it was clear throughout the episodes viewed, that all of the victims, while possibly not reaching the epitome of social beauty standards, they would all be considered as beautiful women. None of the victims were overweight or disfigured in anyway.

*SVU* continues to perpetuate the rape myth that there is a typical victim. However, based on qualitative data, other rape myths were not highly utilized to frame victims. This contradicts other findings. Brinson (1992) found that only 38% of storylines opposed the myth that rape victims are “asking for it”; however, this research found that even when this rape myth was utilized, another character in the show opposed the myth. The findings from this research support research conducted by Cuklanz & Moorti (2006), which found that *SVU* did not label victims as good or bad.

Some characters in the show do try to label victims, but rarely does the cast of main detectives do so. An example of this is in episode seven of season eight, *Underbelly* when the defense calls the victim a “whore,” in response to the prosecution labeling her a “victim.” Earlier in the same episode the victims are called “societies trash.” Other labels used throughout the episodes viewed were, “slut,” “bitch,” and “liar.” The use of label such as these can be related to the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis. If media outlets continue to use derogatory labels to describe victims of rape, this could lead to a negative self-perception for real life rape victims.

Overall, these findings indicate that rape myths are being used less on *SVU* than was found in prior research. Since the show has a large audience and its focus is on victims, this could lessen the amount of victim blaming.
Rape myths were used most often in cases involving acquaintance rape. Of the 25.9% of the victims who were attacked by acquaintances, 75% were portrayed as innocent but with character flaws. While not a major attack on the victim’s credibility, these victims have small assaults on their characters that are highlighted in the show. Three of these episodes with acquaintance rape came down to the “he said, she said,” argument. In these episodes, rape myths were highly utilized, particularly “she asked for it,” “she wanted it,” and “she lied about it.”

While coding the episodes, an interesting trend developed. The amount of actual screen time for rape victims and screen time for discussing the rape case appeared to be fairly low compared to other topics. In several episodes the rape was simply an introduction to a bigger event that was happening. In these episodes the rape and/or rape victim were almost ignored compared to the other plot. For example, episode one of season eight, begins with the rape of a girl in her twenties. The detectives discover that she is a part of an eco-terrorist cell. The majority of the episode, after the initial introduction of the rape, focuses on an undercover operation to stop a terrorist attack. A similar pattern occurs in several other episodes. This lack of focus on the rape victim almost places the entire crime on a secondary level compared to other crimes that are committed in the show.

The results of this study show that rape victims in SVU are not subjected to the same amount of rape myths and ridicule that previous researchers have found. However, they are still framed as stereotypical victims who are attacked by strangers. This lack of variety in the type of victim who is framed in a positive and innocent manner, leads
viewers to believe that victims who do not meet the standards are at least in a small part, responsible for their rape.

**Limitations and Opportunities for Further Research**

Several limitations of this study are acknowledged and present opportunities for further research projects. This project was limited by sample size. A larger sample would allow for more episodes to be viewed, which could lead to a deeper understanding of the framing of rape victims in *SVU*. Further research should include viewing more *SVU* episodes, and expanding the number of crime dramas viewed. Future studies should also investigate the portrayals of rape on television shows from other genres than crime dramas. It would also be good if some focus can be placed on movies as well.

Aside from increasing or altering the sample, future research should also use different forms of analysis. For example further research could look at the amount of screen time rape and rape victims received in each episode. Another interesting addition to this research would be to examine how the crime is described in the episode description. Is the victim attacked, sexually assaulted, or raped? Examining these questions may help to further answer how rape victims are portrayed and why they are portrayed in a specific manner.
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**APPENDIX A**
**CODING SHEET**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID #_____</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Name of the Episode:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Date originally aired:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Plot (found on IMBD)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 12. Location of rape |
| a. Home of victim |
| b. Home of friend or neighbor of the victim |
| c. Parking garage |
| d. Other Description:________ |

| 13. Status post rape |
| a. Alive |
| b. Deceased |

| 14. Attire |
| a. Normal (Jeans, t-shirt) |
| b. Dressy (professional, dress pants etc.) |
| c. Provocative (low cut top, short skirt) |
| d. Unknown |

| 15. Rapist’s #_____ |

| 16. Rapist’s Race |
| a. White non-Hispanic |
| b. Black |
| c. Asian/ Pacific Islander |
| d. American Indian |
| e. Hispanic |
| f. Other |

| 17. Rapist’s Age (estimated unless stated in episode) |
| a. 19 or under |
| b. 20-29 |
| c. 30-39 |
| d. 40’s and above |

| 18. Rapist’s Marital Status |
| a. Married |
| b. Divorced |
| c. Single |
| d. Unsure |

| 19. Rapist’s Socio-Economic Status (estimated unless stated in episode) |
| a. Lower |
| b. Lower-Middle |
| c. Middle |
| d. Middle-Upper |
| e. Upper |

| 4. Number of Victims_____ |
| 5. Number of Rapists_____ |
| 6. Victim #_____ |
| 7. Victim’s Race |
| a. White non-Hispanic |
| b. Black |
| c. Asian/ Pacific Islander |
| d. American Indian |
| e. Hispanic |
| f. Other |

| 8. Victim’s Age (estimated unless stated in episode) |
| a. 19 or under |
| b. 20-29 |
| c. 30-39 |
| d. 40’s and above |

| 9. Victim’s Marital Status |
| a. Married |
| b. Divorced |
| c. Single |
| d. Unsure |

| 10. Victim’s Socio-Economic Status (estimated unless stated in episode) |
| a. Lower |
| b. Lower-Middle |
| c. Middle |
| d. Middle-Upper |
| e. Upper |

| 11. Type of rape |
| a. Stranger |
| b. Acquaintance or Date Rape |
| c. Marital Rape |
| d. Other______________ |
20. Rape myths utilized

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Myth: She asked for it</th>
<th>Tally</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Suggested</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Myth: She wanted it    |       |       |
| Suggested              |       |       |
| Opposed                |       |       |

| Myth: She lied         |       |       |
| 1. Did the victim falsely accuse rape (yes/no) |       |       |
| 2. If she lied what was the reason (if not explicitly stated, use context) |       |       |
| 3. Tally of remakes that insinuate she lied |       |       |

21. What is the overall tone of the message regarding rape victims in this episode
   a. Negative/ Unfavorable/Blamed
   b. Neutral
   c. Positive/ Favorable/Sympathetic

22. Notes on overall tone

23. Victims Typology
   a. Innocent
   b. Innocent with character flaws
   c. Unlikable but not culpable
   d. Manipulative

24. Notes on Typology
APPENDIX B

EPISODE GUIDE

S8E1 “Informed”  September 19, 2006
“When a particularly brutalized rape victim resists all efforts to help her, Olivia takes her as a cause and turns up an old acquaintance during the investigation.”

S8E3 “Recall”  October 3, 2006
“Stabler and his new partner go after a possible serial rapist with the help of an unlikely victim from 30 years earlier.”

S8E6 “Infiltrated”  October 31, 2006
“The environmental group Olivia is infiltrating for the FBI is accused of murdering the CEO of a pharmaceutical company. But when she discovers that the crime may be sexual in nature, she conducts her own independent investigation.”

S8E7 “Underbelly”  November 14, 2006
“A fourteen year old girl who was brutally beaten, raped, and killed shares the same dog paw tattoo as two other young female homicide victims. Despite warnings from Stabler, Dani becomes overly involved in the case.”

S8E12 “ Outsider ”  January 16, 2007
“Fin reluctantly works with a Brooklyn detective who thinks that Fin's rape cases are connected to his unsolved murder cases.”

S8E22 “Screwed”  May 22, 2007
“Fin’s nephew, Darius, goes to trial and seems determined to take the unit down with him.”

S9E3 “Impulsive”  October 9, 2007
“Benson and Stabler arrest a high school teacher for having sex with one of her students, but the teacher alleges that the student raped her.”

S9E12 “Signature”  January 8, 2008
“Detectives Benson and Lake get the help of an FBI agent as they search for a serial killer who brutally attacks young women. However, there are signs that the agent may not be able to handle the mental and emotional weight of the case.”

S10E4 “Lunacy”  October 21, 2008
“Stabler runs into an old friend when the team investigates the rape and murder of an astronaut.”

S10E10 “Smut”  December 9, 2008
“SVU tries to make a case against an accused serial rapist who drugs his victims so that they have no recollection of the incidents.”

S10E17 “Hell”  March 31, 2009
“A former African child refugee's throat is slashed, and SVU connects the case to two former Ugandan war criminals--one a ruthless killer, the other a sympathetic former child soldier trying to change his life.”

S11E1 “Unstable”  September 23, 2009
“SVU gets the help of an angry, violent police officer to solve a rape case. They soon discover that they may be dealing with a serial rapist, and the wrong man may be in prison for one of his crimes.”

S11E8 “Turmoil”  November 11, 2009
“ADA Cabot is being investigated by the state bar because of a rape case, but Benson and Stabler are too preoccupied to come to her aid because Stabler's son and best friend are missing.”

S11E18 “Bedtime”  March 31, 2010
“A rape and murder helps Benson and Stabler crack a case involving a serial rapist and killer from the 1970s. However, one copycat crime remains open when investigation reveals that the crime was committed by a woman.”

S11E20 “Beef”  April 21, 2010
“Investigation reveals that a victim with multiple DNA samples whose throat was slashed was an aspiring investigative journalist about to expose the highly unsanitary practices at a meat-packing plant.”

S11E22 “Ace”  May 5, 2010
“While investigating the disappearance of a pregnant woman who was raped, SVU uncovers a Bulgarian baby-smuggling ring, and ADA Marlowe is forced to be creative and deceptive to ensure a conviction.”

S11E23 “Wannabe”  May 12, 2010
“The arresting officer in a serial rapist case turns out to be a 16-year-old impersonating a police officer, and his actions put ADA Marlowe's case in jeopardy.”

S12E2 “Bullseye”  September 22, 2010
“Benson and Stabler reluctantly get help from a neighborhood vigilante group leader to help find out which registered sex offender may have raped two young girls.”

S12E3 “Behave”  September 29, 2010
“A rape victim claims that she has been raped 4 times and harassed across the country by the same man, and the investigation reveals that she may not be his only victim.”

S12E7 “Trophy”  November 3, 2010
“While investigating a serial rapist and killer case, an interview with a victim's daughter leads Olivia to believe that she may be looking for her own biological father.”

S12E8 “Penetration”  November 10, 2010
“FBI agent Dana Lewis is the victim of a sexual assault, but Benson and Stabler's investigation could compromise her undercover operation involving a right-wing militia group.”

S12E9 “Gray”  November 17, 2010
“Benson and Stabler discover that an accused campus rapist may have used a drug to make his girlfriend have an abortion without her knowledge.”

S12E13 “Mask”  January 12, 2011
“Stabler goes undercover as a sex addict to catch a predator after the daughter of a respected sexual psychotherapist is attacked. The therapist, however, is reluctant to cooperate and suspects that he may be responsible.”

S12E15 “Flight”  February 2, 2011
“SVU investigates whether a wealthy and powerful defense contractor forced an underage French girl to give him an inappropriate massage, and whether he used his ex-girlfriend to arrange the encounter.”

S12E21 “Reparations”  April 6, 2011
“Casey Novak returns to the DA's office to prosecute a man accused of rape. However, Los Angeles ADA Jonah Dekker comes to New York City to serve for the defense as a favor to his family.”

Source: Law & Order: Special Victims Unit (1999– ) Episode List