



Framing Empathy: Examining Audience Responses to Female-On-Male Sexual Violence

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Abstract

The purpose of this secondary study was to investigate readers' *empathic framings* in response to a female-on-male rape literary story, as articulated in online reviews on *Goodreads*. Drawing upon Nabi's "emotions-as-frames" approach, we conducted a qualitative framing analysis by using a combination of deductive and inductive strategies. Two overarching empathy frames already present in the literature (*bright*, and *dark empathy*) served as interpretive anchors for categorizing empathic responses. Additionally, sentiment analysis was used to assess responses' emotional valences. Qualitative findings yielded five main framings: (1) female-centered empathy and (2) sadistic empathy (aligning with the dark empathy frame); (3) empathic distress and (4) empathic anger (demonstrating overlaps between the bright and dark empathy frame), and (5) compassion (characteristic of the bright empathy frame). Sentiment analysis results showed a notable presence of mixed sentiments. Our findings highlight how empathy operates across a spectrum, encompassing various combinations of self-oriented and other-oriented framings with diverse emotional valences (positive, negative and mixed). These nuanced responses shape distinct paths of feeling *through*, *with/as*, *for*, or even *showing concern for* the fictional male victims. They further point to the significance of "feeling rules" that socially distribute empathy and establish hierarchies of "deserving" and "non-deserving" recipients. Departing from previous research that approaches empathic reactions to rape themes within a unidimensional perspective, our findings point to the importance of addressing the interrelations between audience responses and multi-dimensional, multivalent emotional flows. We further discuss the implications of the "darker" sides of empathic engagement for sexual violence prevention and efforts to challenge male rape myths.

Keywords Framing analysis · Emotions-as-frames · Empathy · Sexual violence against men · Audience responses · Sentiment analysis

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“Empathy can be what motivates conflict in the first place. When some people think about empathy, they think about kindness. I think about war” (Bloom, 2016, p. 188).

Introduction

Sexual violence (SV)¹ elicits strong emotional reactions. Particularly, in the fictional context, male-on-female rape is highlighted as a powerful narrative vehicle that can provoke a range of emotional responses, including voyeuristic pleasure, negative emotional reactions such as fear, disgust, revenge (Vaage, 2015), or empathy (Koopman, 2018).

In contrast, the sexual victimization of men is relatively underrepresented in media, with male-on-male rape within prison settings being the most prevalent portrayal. SV against men is frequently framed as either comic or retributive in movies with rape scenes either peripheral or central to their plot. Such portrayals may diminish viewer empathy or even promote identification with the offenders (Levan et al., 2011).

In recent years, rape narratives that “turn the tables” and depict female-on-male SV are increasingly being incorporated into the representational tropes of many media products. While female-on-male rape remains largely unacknowledged as a social reality (Carvalho & Brazão, 2020; de Oliveira, 2024), a vast variety of popular audiovisual media products (mostly televisual and musical²) portray women who sexually offend or rape men within a rape-revenge narrative logic (Cohen, 2014). The affective potential of the rape-revenge narrative pattern structured around the evocation of shame, disgust, rage, and feelings of vengeance has been also broadly used in films, such as *Kill Bill* (2003/2004), *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010) or *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011), indicating the existence of a distinct cinematic genre (Henry, 2014). Meanwhile, other cinematic representations of female-on-male rape (such as *Horrible Bosses* (2011) and *Get Him to The Greek* (2010) frame SV perpetrated by women against men as comedy, trivializing it as a “laughable impossibility” (Scarce, 1997).

However, despite the growing distribution of media content representing female-on-male SV, one largely understudied and under-theorized area concerns empathic audience responses to such depictions. An extensive body of quantitative research has focused on empathic responses to SV stories. For instance, Koopman and colleagues (2012) explored the impact of literary style on reader responses to fictional rape narratives. The study employed literary excerpts that depicted male-on-female

¹ The literature predominantly uses the terms *female* and *male* to address sexual victimization and rape myths. In this study, we have opted to use the terms *sexual victimization of women/men* and *SV perpetrated by women/men* to better emphasize the social dimensions of gender and to move away from notions of biological essentialism. However, we will occasionally use expressions such as *male-on-female rape*, *female-on-male rape*, or *female/male rape myths* to maintain consistency with existing literature.

² Cohen (2014) focuses mostly on televisual examples (e.g., the female-on male rape in *Desperate Housewives* (2007), the female gang rape of the male protagonist in *True Blood* (2011), multiple female-on-male rape acts in *Lost Girl* (2010–2015) and video music examples (e.g., in *Toxic* by Britney Spears (2004), *Please Don't Leave Me* by Pink (2009) and *Paparazzi* by Lady Gaga (2009).

rape scenes in various stylistic forms. The research did not confirm previous findings regarding the triggering of sexual arousal when exposed to rape depictions. Results indicated that participants responded to the more literary (aesthetic) and explicit accounts of rape with more empathy. However, this research focus has neglected to examine thoroughly the diverse empathic patterns of responses.

Another body of research has highlighted empathy's role in challenging rape attitudes and rape myths by using hypothetical fictional stories portraying the sexual victimization of women or men (O'Donohue et al., 2003; Stewart, 2014; LeBrun et al., 2024). Findings indicate that empathy induction significantly reduces female rape myth acceptance (RMA) (Leone et al., 2021), intentions toward sexual aggressiveness and sexual-assault supportive attitudes (Carich et al., 2004). Although there is a dearth of research on male RMA, recent studies suggest that affective empathy towards a fictional male rape survivor can significantly reduce male RMA (Patterson et al., 2022). In this respect, it can be argued that affective responsiveness promotes the humanization of male survivors, therefore acting as a stronger deterrent to victim blaming than cognitive empathy (Willmott & Widanaralalage, 2024). Nevertheless, the majority of this literature corpus typically employs a unidimensional or binary construction of empathy, overlooking its multiple facets.

To our knowledge, to date, there is a dearth of research focusing on: (a) the *variety* of empathic responses to *female-on-male rape* narratives, (b) empathic responses elicited by narrative texts of *substantial length*. This is an intriguing focus of research, as deep reading processes rely heavily on the formation of readers' own mental images and differ significantly from shorter texts (Boot, 2020). This is where our study comes in. We argue that a more nuanced approach is needed to understand the intricacies of audiences' empathic responses to literary stories that depict SV perpetrated by women against men. To address these gaps, the central objective of the present study is to answer the following research question: What kinds of *empathic framings* are employed by readers in response to the novel *Any Man* - a female-on-male rape literary story - as articulated in user-generated online reviews on the book reviewing platform *Goodreads*?

Answering this research question will add to knowledge on the collective emotional articulations around the sexual victimization of men and sexual offending perpetrated by women and thus on the particular types of 'public' emotion work around rape issues performed in online spaces. On a practical level, it will also facilitate the identification of specific empathic framings that can be further examined in future research on sexual victimization and empathy.

Online Book Reviewing

The present study approaches online book reviewing platforms as spaces that have the potential to engender "affective publics", defined as "networked publics that are mobilized and connected, identified, and potentially disconnected through expressions of sentiment" (Papacharissi, 2016, p. 5). Affective publics can act as collective "structures of feeling" organized around discursive expressions of sentiment, in order to "effect impact, assert agency, and claim power" (Papacharissi, 2016, p. 6) over reading.

A sizable body of literature (cf. Boot & Koolen, 2020; Bourrier & Thelwall, 2020) views online book reviews as a distinct genre of naturally occurring self-narratives that emerge in online reading environments. The advent of user-generated book reviews has led, on the one hand, to an increased democratisation of content creation and to the empowerment of lay readers, while at the same time opening new avenues for empirical research into readership, including reader reception, review classification, social network analysis, and book impact assessment (e.g., Rebora et al., 2021). Online reader reviews reduce researcher intervention (Nuttall, 2017, p. 156), offering insights into readers' authentic concerns, expressed in the language they autonomously choose to use to describe their reading experiences, which lends them a high degree of ecological validity (Nakamura, 2013). However, it is important to note that online reader responses are often carefully curated with an audience focus (Koolena et al., 2020), since such platforms are, for all intents and purposes, *social networks*. In this respect, the emotional framings articulated in reviews hold the potential of structuring shared affective schemas about the appropriate feelings to be elicited in rape scenario-contexts.

Theoretical Framework

Framing Analysis and Emotions-as-Frames

Framing analysis stands as a prominent contemporary theoretical and empirical approach in communication studies. Essentially, framing theory asserts that the ways of presenting information and the perspectives adopted within a communication context can significantly impact receivers' responses. Building on Goffman's initial concept (1974), a frame is described as a "schema of interpretation" allowing individuals to "locate, perceive, identify, and label" events within their lives and the broader world. According to Entman, framing involves selecting "some aspects of the perceived reality to make them more salient" (1993, p. 52). As such, frames represent distinctions made by individuals, determining what holds importance and meaningfulness. However, most framing research has predominantly focused on the cognitive aspects of framing, overlooking the systematic incorporation of emotions into framing processes.

This study builds on Nabi's emotions-as-frames model (2003; 2007), an approach that combines appraisal theories and framing theory, suggesting that emotions elicited by a message can act themselves as frames. These frames impact cognitive processing, and thus the availability and accessibility of beliefs as well as the formation of subsequent judgments and decision making. Specifically, Nabi (2003) asserts that emotions can serve a framing function, such that "repeated pairing of certain emotions with particular ideas or events shapes the way in which one interprets and responds to those events" (p. 227). Within this context, emotions refer to "internal, mental states representing evaluative, valenced reactions to events, agents, or objects that vary in intensity. They are generally short-lived, intense, and directed at some external stimuli" (Nabi, 2003, p. 226). Over the past decade, there has been a growing focus on approaching emotions-as-frames, exploring distinct emotions such as sadness, fear and anger (e.g., Kühne & Schemer, 2015). However, this line of research

has not delved into how complex affective and cognitive imaginative processes such as empathy may also serve as frames during processes of reception.

“Bright” and “Dark” Empathy Frames³

Empathy is widely approached as a multidimensional construct with a complex architecture, encompassing both affective and cognitive components and involving self-oriented and other-oriented dimensions (e.g., Preston & Hofelich, 2012). Notably, de Waal’s (2008) Russian Doll model suggests that empathy operates on a multilayered scale, extending from an automatic level of emotional contagion to more complex and reflective forms of perspective-taking, compassion, and sympathetic concern. In this sense, at an affective level, empathy involves vicariously sharing an individual’s emotional states, whereas cognitive empathy is the process of consciously inferring and taking into perspective someone’s internal states and their possible causes.

This broad conceptual framework allows empathy to align with both constructive (pro-social) and destructive (anti-social) coordinates, as reflected in two overarching contrasting frames present in the literature: a “Bright Empathy” and a “Dark Empathy” frame.

The “bright empathy frame” casts empathy as the essential cornerstone for moral judgment and motivation, as well as for fostering meaningful interpersonal relationships. Under this light, empathy is perceived as a critical tool in political and social contexts, inherently tied to prosocial and morally oriented behavior (Maibom, 2017). Although various terms for empathic states that drive prosocial motivation and behavior have been offered (such as sympathy, and compassion), on an analytical level, we can approach them separately. Sympathy can be viewed as other-oriented and involves feelings of pity, sorrow, or concern without a need to affectively share or cognitively understand others’ emotional states. Compassion further combines concern with a desire to alleviate the other’s suffering (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 1989; DeSteno, 2015).

Conversely, the “dark empathy frame” highlights empathy’s limitations, by focusing on its parochial nature and susceptibility to biases and motivational flaws (Bloom, 2016; Prinz, 2011). It is argued that empathy favors those who are similar to oneself, which restricts its scope to a narcissistic projection and self-reiteration (Gallagher, 2012). Empirical studies reveal that empathy often results in selectivity, preferential treatment, and in-group bias, with people displaying greater concern for family, friends, and those of the same ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation (Prinz, 2011). Experimental studies also demonstrate the costs of empathy (e.g., effort, aversion, inefficacy) by highlighting it as cognitively taxing, leading people to consistently avoid it in the absence of rewards (Ferguson et al., 2021). Similarly, empathic/personal distress arises from affective overarousal: an intense, involuntary reaction that shifts to overwhelming self-focused feelings of discomfort. While it may lead to helping behavior, it is primarily motivated by wanting to ease one’s own distress.

³ In this study we distinguish between: i) “frame”, which signifies a more a static structure or perspective through which information, events, or issues are organized, understood, and communicated; and ii) “framing”, which denotes the more dynamic process of construing or modifying frames in communication or discourse (Van Hulst & Yanow, 2016).

“Darker” sides of empathy have been further explored, with Breithaupt (2019) coining the term “sadistic empathy” to describe the paradoxical pleasure derived from observing others’ suffering. Similarly, other scholars have shown how empathic perspective-taking can be used within “tactical” contexts for advancing manipulation, aggression, and warfare (Bubandt & Willerslev, 2015).

Method

This paper presents findings from a secondary data analysis. Qualitative secondary analysis (QSA) involves utilizing qualitative data originally collected to address a different research question (e.g., Ruggiano & Perry, 2019). It can be viewed as a process of re-visiting, reworking, and recontextualizing a dataset from a prior study. This approach allows for a more detailed examination of emerging aspects that were not fully explored in the original study. In this light, this secondary analysis draws on data from a primary qualitative study aimed at exploring the range of cognitive response patterns to a female-on-male rape story. Our previous study illustrated how reviewer’s responses articulated on *Goodreads* largely revolved around feminizing the sexual victimization of men and downplaying sexual offending perpetrated by women. Particularly, our findings indicated that the feminization of sexual victimization operated as an overarching interpretative cognitive schema. This framework encompassed three response patterns: one centered on females, recognizing women as the sole credible victims of rape; another that was gender-inclusive, which however established a hierarchy of “ideal” victims and offenders; and a gender-neutral pattern that treated sexual victimization in isolation from gender-specific references. Both latter patterns indirectly primed the sexual victimization of women. However, alternative response patterns also emerged, embracing gender inclusivity or aiming to de-gender sexual victimization. The initial analysis employed Braun and Clarke’s (2021) reflexive thematic analysis method. Further details on the methods and findings are available in Tselenti and colleagues (2024).

In this study, we employ framing analysis as our main methodological guide, by extending Nabi’s (2003, 2007) “emotion-as-frame” approach to the context of online book reception. We use both a qualitative framing analysis and a quantitative sentiment analysis (Paltoglou & Thelwall, 2017), in order to more effectively capture the spectrum of affective and emotional framings.

The primary dataset for this secondary analysis was extensive, offering the potential to explore empathic framings that whilst related to the area of interest of the primary research, were not the focus of it. To build the dataset, a convenience sampling approach was used prioritizing reviews that included textual content rather than solely star ratings. We used the same sample of 429 online reviews analyzed in terms of cognitive responses in our prior study. Thus, the sample consisted of 351 women (with an average value of 3,7 stars), 47 men (with an average value of 3,85 stars), 30 unidentified reviewers and 1 reviewer identified as non-binary. It included 17 1-star reviews, 38 2-star reviews, 92 3-star reviews, 172 4-star reviews and 110 5-star reviews (with an average value of 3,7 stars).

Qualitative Framing Analysis

Qualitative framing analysis was utilized for identifying empathic framings because it allows comprehensive and in-depth assessment of content. The method “involves repeated and extensive engagement with a text and looks holistically at the material to identify frames” (Connolly-Ahern & Broadway, 2008, p. 369). This approach makes possible the identification of how certain viewpoints and interpretations are promoted or de-emphasized. In the analysis, we paid special attention to both the lexical level for the identification of direct affective words expressed in raw forms, as well as to the syntactical level, for the identification of embedded emotions, revealed by elaborated expressions and interpretations pointing to emotional experiences. As Kleres notes, “emotions are inextricably interwoven with the meaning dimension of texts to the point where the distinction between cognition and emotion becomes blurry” (2011, p. 197).

We applied a combination of inductive and deductive strategies. Initially, we employed a deductive approach, which involved defining specific framings prior to coding (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). During this stage, we assessed whether the sexual victimization of men was discussed within the context of a “bright” or “dark” empathy frame, considering both affective and cognitive aspects and self-oriented or other-oriented dimensions. Subsequently, we employed an inductive, bottom-up approach, allowing alternative framings to emerge during the analysis (De Vreese, 2005). The unit of analysis was the entire review text. Following Coleman and Dysart (2005), we examined the data using a “close reading”.

As such, the current study builds and expands upon the literature on empathy’s multi-faceted architecture. On the basis of our previous research, we expected to find empathy frames that fall within both master frames, entailing affective as well as cognitive framings along with self- focused and other-oriented dimensions.

In the following section, we outline the main key empathic framings identified along with associated exemplar quotes. While the framings are presented as unique entities, it is important to recognize their synergistic and interrelated nature.

This study relied on data from an online book reviewing platform where participants had consented to public viewing of their reviews under the platform’s privacy policy – no login is necessary for anyone to obtain access to these published reviews. However, since participants did not explicitly consent for their content being used for research purposes and since their responses could entail sensitive information regarding rape, identifying details (such as usernames and demographic information) were removed and included quotes were slightly paraphrased, in accordance with well-established ethical practices in internet-based qualitative research (Cravens et al., 2015).

Sentiment Analysis

To complement and expand our qualitative framing analysis, we conducted a sentiment analysis. Sentiment analysis, or opinion mining, began as an automated way of quantitatively identifying sentiment polarity from short length texts such as movie reviews, product reviews and other social media texts. It involves the computational

processing of written text expressions that convey personal subjective states, which are not objectively observable or verifiable. Individuals articulate sentiments regarding particular topics or entities with varying degrees of strength and intensity and these sentiments are closely linked to their personal emotions or feelings (Paltoglou & Thelwall, 2017).

Sentiments are generally considered as broad manifestations of affect (reflective of feelings and attitudes), classified to positive, negative, neutral or ambivalent valence categories, whereas emotions are seen as more refined and discrete characterizations of affect, such as happiness, sadness, anger, etc. However, as Thelwall and colleagues (2010) note, the terms can be used interchangeably and treated as synonymous in the context of sentiment analysis.

The chosen software for the second part of our study is SentiStrength, a lexicon-based software, whose lexical basis contains 2310 sentiment words and word stems derived from emotional dictionaries such as the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) program, the General Inquirer list of sentiment terms as well as ad hoc manual additions made during testing (Paltoglou & Thelwall, 2017). SentiStrength divides a text into sentences and outputs for each text segment a positive sentiment score ranging from +1 to +5 and a negative score ranging from -1 to -5, where +1 denotes a neutral sentiment and +5 an extremely positive sentiment. Similarly, -1 indicates the absence of negative sentiment and -5 an extremely negative sentiment. This dual scoring system reflects the human brain's ability to process positive and negative emotions concurrently (Thelwall & Kappas, 2014).

In this study, we used the freely available **SentiStrength 2.3** version downloaded from <https://mi-linux.wlv.ac.uk/~cm1993/sentistrength>.

Analysis was performed on 139 review references, which included responses denoting both aesthetic evaluations⁴ and emotional framings. Following the extended line of research, which identifies a strong interplay between aesthetic and narrative feelings (cf. Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015), we aimed at extracting the overall sentiment expressed within this meaningful relational context, rather than analyzing the whole corpus of reviews.

The Message: Framing the Properties of Any Man

Amber Tamblyn's novel, "Any Man" revolves around the experiences of six men who are attempting to heal after being violently raped by a female serial rapist named Maude. Through first-person narratives, the novel presents both aestheticized and explicit portrayals of the rape scenes, detailing violent sexual acts of coercion, intoxication, and manipulation. The story delves deeper into the effects of the sexual victimization of men, by addressing a wide range of responses (including feelings of shame and humiliation, self-destructive and even offending behaviors). It further challenges rape culture by critically exposing male rape myths and critiquing media

⁴ Examples of responses that contained evaluations of the story's aesthetic features are the following: "The writing is outstanding, but so is the interesting format, like the entire chapter that is a view of someone's online activity" (positive valence), "The premise was interesting, but the execution was SUPER weird at times" (mixed valence), "Tamblyn's style of writing was confusing. A lot of repeating words, chats, and narrative" (negative valence).

portrayals that blame the victims and their credibility or even commodify their suffering. The female rapist is approached as an enigmatic figure that defies conventional societal expectations of femininity. By avoiding an anti-hero or rape-revenge plot-line, Maude's actions lack any clear motivations and are devoid of any redeeming qualities. With this novel, Tamblyn intends to cultivate empathic understanding and pro-social action in response to sexual assault issues, by prompting readers to affectively and cognitively align with the characters' experiences (Pacheco, 2018).

Findings

Our findings yielded five main empathic framings employed by reviewers in response to the story, each aligning in different ways with the two master frames of empathy, the "bright" and "dark" frame.

Female- Centered Empathy (Dark Frame)

An important framing revolves around the existence of female-centered empathic responses. Within this framing, reviewers' responses indicate a failure to cognitively and affectively shift to a male-centered perspective. This framing is salient among female reviewers and combines two interrelated claims. On the one hand, the female-on-male rape script is seen as a vehicle to heighten empathy for female rape victims.

There is a genuine fear women face today embodied by the threat of "any man." If this book effectively communicates that fear by creatively reversing reality and portraying it through fiction, then all the better I say! (3 stars reviewer)

Tamblyn's narrative decision to portray sexual assault from the male perspective, across multiple viewpoints, is particularly effective. We experience the same pain we would from female perspectives. We feel the same humiliation and shame. We feel the same anger, grief, and helplessness. We experience the same dysfunctional survival tactics. (5 stars reviewer)

On the other hand, the moral claim promoting empathy hinges on the premise that women are the "real" sufferers of SV, leading to the perspective that men should be the ones fostering empathy toward women rather seen as deserving empathy themselves. As such, this framing positions women as the primary recipients worthy of empathy.

Maude is a female serial rapist who preys on men. As unfortunate as it may seem, the experiences the men in this book face are all too familiar to many women. That is what makes Any Man so powerful and so painful - it initiates a new discussion, one that is relevant for EVERYONE. It provides a realm of empathy for men to understand the female experience that has tragically affected too many. (5 stars reviewer)

As such, the male subjective experience of suffering and pain might fail to generate any empathic feelings on its own merit, possibly because a share of reviewers cannot relate effectively to them, or because they frame the narrative as an instrumental empathic device exclusively (or primarily) for men to relate to women's experience.

The survivor responses resemble textbook chapters detailing the emotional stages following assault: from internal suffering and self-blame to anger, shame, confu-

sion, guilt, and ultimately acceptance. The op-ed essay written by the first victim towards the conclusion of the book reminded me of my local agency's survivor speakers bureau. But it didn't touch me the way that a survivor story should, in spite of all the florid prose poetry. (female, 3 stars)

Sadistic Empathy (Dark Frame)

This framing mostly puts forward an instrumental, self-centered engagement, which perceives the act of empathy as a tool for personal gratification disconnected from any empathic connection with the male suffering characters. We can distinguish between different empathic framings that appear to solely serve the empathizers in a self-oriented manner, particularly involving the hardships faced by the male characters. One framing stresses the interweaving of enjoyment and negative emotions (such as fear), prioritizing the overall positive enjoyment that readers derived while engaging with the characters' traumatic experiences or internal turmoil.

Loved the visceral reaction each encounter elicited in me. Definitely painted a horrifying (but inherently captivating) scene depicting the events that unfold for the characters. (4 stars reviewer)

The book depicts rapes in vivid detail, with graphic descriptions that evoked feelings of terror in me. But even saying that, I still found this book enjoyable. (4 stars reviewer)

In an alternative framing, reviewers emphasize the pure enjoyment they gained from the suffering of characters while reading, without stressing any negative effects it might have had on them.

I was fully engaged, although I found myself taking short breaks because it's just... wow. I should mention that Any Man didn't leave me upset despite the subject matter - it's a lot to take in, but it didn't feel emotionally heavy to me. Simply fascinating. (5 stars reviewer)

In the same vein, some reviewers present noteworthy quotes from the book that depict the characters' internal struggles, in order to highlight the experienced sense of satisfaction.

Holy shit. "How can you go on living when you're now being lived in? When you've been invaded? How can you tell a joke and enjoy laughter without hearing the one laugh that owns every root in you now? How can you forgive this person who has no intention to understand, who is nowhere forever and everywhere inside you for eternity? How can you end your own suffering, without ending completely? How can you accept touch? Or walk through your life, a lived wound, forever avoiding some terrible, inevitable wind." (5 stars reviewer)

A last framing advocates for extending and prolonging the characters' portrayal of suffering, as an effective means to further connect empathically with their anguish and distress.

It delves into a wide range of emotions, but I would have preferred it to be longer. There was still a lot more she could've explored. For instance, what would it be like for those men to date after being raped? [...] It was such a fascinating book that I wished the story had extended further. (5 stars reviewer)

Empathic Distress (Dark/Bright Frame)

This framing primarily involves affective empathic responses denoting self-implicated/self-centered feelings of personal distress. The empathizers mostly attribute the source of their distress to the emotions experienced by the suffering characters, leading to a sense of “feeling with” them.

This book was an intense rollercoaster hell-ride, and it resonated deeply with me. It devastated me. Tamblyn skillfully immersed me in the characters experiences, and it was odious. It was like a piece of horror fiction, except my brain recognized it was somehow REAL. (5 stars reviewer)

There are so numerous moments when you can feel the character's anger and pain. It's difficult not to read those words and experience those emotions as if they were your own. (5 stars reviewer)

Another framing of empathic distress shifts the focus to the reviewer's personal story of being a sexual victim, which can be regarded as a way to add empathic value by drawing on personal experiences that closely parallel the emotional situations of the male characters.

This book expressed all the feelings of guilt and shame of being a survivor of sexual assault, articulating emotions I had struggled to put into words myself. It was incredibly triggering. I broke down numerous times [...] I suffered and so did these characters, and Tamblyn adeptly portrays the challenging journey of overcoming the stereotype of being a man who was raped (5 stars reviewer).

One final framing centers on other-oriented distress responses that extend beyond merely negative feelings triggered by the characters' suffering. The source of distress is placed on a broader disappointment with humanity, thereby perceiving SV as a systemic problem.

After reading this, I didn't feel any lingering man-hating rage, or a desire to seek retribution against them. Instead, I was left with a deep sense of sorrow for what humans are capable of doing to each other, and the structures that sustain it all. (5 stars reviewer)

Empathic Anger (Dark/Bright Frame)

This framing is predominantly built around a moral outrage perspective. Reviewers express their anger either by attributing blame to the female perpetrator or by placing responsibility on wider societal structures for the harm done to victims of SV. A first framing focuses on the female perpetrator's malevolent intentions and the wrongfulness of her actions, rather than on the harm inflicted upon the victims.

Wow! This book was incredibly short but made me so angry. I've never loathed a character as intensely as Maude. She is truly an awful human being.” (3 stars reviewer).

“I can say that I felt the same level of hatred and fear towards the woman who tormented these men as I have towards the men who typically take her place. (5 stars reviewer)

A second framing entails moral judgments that posit societal structures as the primary perpetrator accountable for causing harm to victims.

It stirred up anger within me towards our society and the way we react to situations and treat people. It evoked empathy for survivors. (5 stars reviewer)

I was angry and I felt that I had witnessed similar situations repeatedly, both in news, on twitter. (4 stars reviewer)

In this context, it is noteworthy that some responses accentuate patriarchal culture as the driving force behind such moral violations, representing a gendered framing that amplifies the attribution of blame.

I feel sad and angry and I find myself increasingly resentful towards the concept of men. I don't want to hate men but I think I do. Not individuals (K, there are a few) but "man" culture and toxic masculinity. This book has really heightened these feelings in me. (3 stars reviewer)

A last framing assigns blame to stereotypical societal perceptions by shifting the focus, however, on their detrimental impacts on the male victims. This empathic response requires an understanding of the victims' experiences and emphasizes the actual effects of moral violations anchored in rape myths.

Tamblyn skillfully constructs the narrative, gradually introducing us to the victims and the psychological impact of the assaults. Then we are confronted with ignorant views towards these men who are considered 'weak' because they 'should've been able to push a woman off'. This part legitimately made me so angry because of the assumption that these men 'brought this on themselves' because their gender has historically inflicted this type of assault on women (5 stars reviewer).

Compassion (Bright Frame)

This framing focuses on empathic engagements with affective and cognitive components, that have provided powerful cues to readers to develop a relational comprehension of the effects of rape culture. This understanding is coupled with an other-directed concern, which corresponds to a motivation to help and care for the welfare of victims of SV. A share of reviewers draws on a compassion framing that calls for an inclusive concern for all survivors of SV.

Embedded within Tamblyn's writing is a profound sense of compassion for Maude's victims - and, by extension, all victims/survivors – coupled with a keen and incisive understanding of the trauma they've experienced. Tamblyn prompts us to extend compassion to all victims, even those who are unlikable. (5 stars reviewer)

This book delves deeply into the emotional and physical aftermath of a sexual assault, offering profound insights. The result is a tremendous sense of empathy for every single person, female and male, that has ever been violated. (5 stars reviewer)

Within this framing, some reviewers are shifting their empathy framings from their individual experience to a collective responsibility, in order to address a need for a shared sensitivity to justice and a concern for the well-being of survivors of SV.

By delving into the victims' perspectives and reliving the accounts of the rape they each experienced, this book offers a profound exploration of contemporary rape culture. Not only do we gain insight into the brutal pain that each victim endured and the crippling effects that it has on their lives, but we also witness society's perception of the information and reaction to it as well. Many times, I found myself horrified at the indignities and realities of our culture in regards to this topic. We often think that by

Table 1 Average values of positive and negative scores distributed according to the different types of aesthetic valences and emotions

Aesthetic Impact Valences	Positive Aesthetic Valence		Negative Aesthetic Valence		Mixed Aesthetic Valence	
Emotional Impact Valences	<i>Positive Score</i>	<i>Negative Score</i>	<i>Positive Score</i>	<i>Negative Score</i>	<i>Positive Score</i>	<i>Negative Score</i>
Positive emotions	3,3	-2,9	2,8	-3,3	3	-2,8
Negative emotions	2,8	-2,5	2,2	-3,7	2,5	-3
Mixed emotions	2, 7	-3,1	2,8	-3,6	2,6	-3,4

offering prayers and good thoughts through social media will somehow provide comfort to these victims, when instead, we are many times just adding fuel to the media fire. We are taking a hands-off approach to actually doing something about changing the culture itself. (5 stars reviewer)

Sentiment Analysis Results

The sentiment analysis aimed to further explore the valence of the central empathy framings that emerged from the qualitative analysis and hence to quantitatively expand and specify in a more-fine-grained way the general emotional impact of reviews. Our results show that there is an overall negative emotional orientation in the reviews posted (see Table 1.).

Overall, ambivalence is evident in the significant coexistence of positive (8.8) and negative (-8.5) sentiment scores among readers who appreciate the story's aesthetic qualities. Conversely, readers who have a negative aesthetic perception of the story exhibit much higher total negative ratings (-10.6) than positive scores (7.8), indicating a mostly negative emotional reaction. Finally, for readers with mixed aesthetic valences, the sentiment scores reflect a stronger inclination toward negative emotions (9.2), though positive sentiments also remain significantly present (8.1).

These findings depart from the majority of sentiment analysis studies that classify textual data as either positive, negative, or neutral by determining which type of valence is predominant, and retained both positive and negative sentiment scores. As such, the identified close scores, especially within the context of negative emotions and positive/mixed aesthetic valences, express a significant presence of mixed sentiments that cannot go unnoticed for the sake of a uni-polarized perspective. In this light our findings advocate for an acknowledgment of emotional ambiguity, which is crucial for understanding empathy as a multifaceted phenomenon.

Discussion

The backdrop of this study lies at the intersection of cognitive psychology, communication studies, and sexual science. It contributes to the interdisciplinary literature on empathic responses to female-perpetrated SV by providing an in-depth analysis of the empathic framings articulated in readers' reviews of a female-on-male rape story.

A key finding concerns the existence of female-centered empathic responses, which indicate a failure to cognitively and affectively shift to a male-centered per-

spective. This implies that the male subjective experience of suffering and pain may be regarded as secondary or irrelevant in these responses. This finding aligns with previous studies on the role of categorical empathy, which involves identifying with individuals who are similar to oneself in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, and other shared characteristics. (Hogan, 2003). Since most reviewers in our study were women, this finding supports evidence from our previous study indicating that empathetic engagement for a big share of reviewers was enacted through re-familiarizing male rape experiences through the cognitive schema of the sexual victimization of women, resulting in interpretative shortcuts (Tselenti et al., 2024).

Taken together, our findings confirm prior studies that have emphasized the importance of the influence of the victim's and the perpetrator's gender on the acknowledgement of rape. Previous studies have shown that in scenarios involving a female aggressor and a male victim, participants expressed lower levels of certainty regarding whether the situation can be framed as rape and exhibited greater approval towards the aggressor than in other rape scenarios (Hannon et al., 2000). It has also been consistently shown that for individuals without sexual victimization experiences, greater levels of empathy are expressed towards victims raped by a man than by a woman (e.g., Osman, 2011). Therefore, it appears that incidents where men are sexually perpetrated by women are often taken less seriously than cases of male-on-female sexual aggression (e.g., Davies et al., 2001). Furthermore, in studies where a gender-neutral rape empathy measure has been utilized (e.g., Smith & Frieze, 2003), it is widely accepted that participants most probably envisioned a female victim and a male rapist, as this conforms to the culturally dominant prototype of a rape scenario (e.g., Osman, 2011).

These findings further correspond to the notion of “*feeling rules*”. As described by Hochschild (1979), feeling rules are norms guiding the acceptable and appropriate expressions of emotions. As such, people typically tend to experience empathy only if they value the welfare of the person or group in question, meaning thereby that one must be considered worthy of the other's empathetic regard (Ruiz-Junco, 2017). Consequently, doing empathy involves identifying situations and recipients deemed as empathy-deserving. One crucial determinant of empathy and compassion, according to Clark (1997), is the absence of blame. Potential empathizers need to determine if individuals merit empathy, based on the degree to which they are seen as responsible for their hardships. Our findings indicate that although the male victims in the story were not regarded as responsible for their suffering, a significant share of reviewers established a social hierarchy of “deserving empathy recipients”, favoring women over men. These findings expand upon Clark's framework on the presuppositions of sympathy/compassion. For victims to be seen as valid recipients of empathy, they not only must be blameless in respect to their troubles, but most importantly, they should not be perceived as potential perpetrators that in another context might cause suffering to others.

Our finding of a self-centered sadistic empathic framing is in line with a body of work that challenges the strictly positive value of empathy in connection to fiction reading by suggesting that a character's suffering can be regarded as a basic presupposition for narrative empathy to be triggered and emerge (Breithaupt, 2019). In this

regard, the reader's empathic engagement depends on continuing the character's suffering and is more self-focused than other-directed.

The identified empathic distress and compassion framings are in accordance with similar findings from other research on empathy (cf. Koopman, 2016, 2018), supporting a line of research that indicates that empathy for another's suffering may result in either other-oriented response of empathic concern or a self-centered response of empathic/personal distress (cf. Singer & Klimecki, 2014).

Our findings have further indicated that affective reactivity, as exhibited mostly in sadistic empathy and empathic distress framings, may not necessarily lead to compassion or a strong sensitivity to justice. It is thus unclear whether motivation for justice is primarily guided by emotional contagion/personal distress, or by more controlled cognitive processes such as cognitive empathy/perspective taking. As such, encouraging perspective taking and cognitive reasoning might be more effective in fostering care and concern for others than solely emphasizing emotional sharing with the other's suffering (Decety & Yoder, 2016). This contradicts previous findings suggesting that affective empathy is more effective than cognitive empathy in deterring victim blaming and the de-humanization of male survivors (Willmott & Widanaralalage, 2024).

The identification of self-centered and other-oriented framings of negative emotional valence, such as in the case of empathic distress and empathic anger, cast further light on the seemingly contradictory phenomenon within media consumption, namely deriving pleasure from experiencing negative emotions (e.g., Oliver, 1993). A significant body of literature shows that people voluntarily engage with stories that evoke unpleasant feelings, like sadness and fear. This "drama paradox" refers to the apparently irrational appreciation of experiences of intense negative emotions as gratifying when engaging for instance with dramas or horror films (cf. Oliver, 1993).

Overall, our findings depart from earlier conceptualizations of empathy as primarily related to sadness (Koopman, 2016). Instead, we demonstrate that emotions like joy, fear, anger, and distress also significantly contribute to empathic response patterns. This aligns with Nabi's (2015) concept of emotional flow, which describes how emotions dynamically evolve during exposure to a message, often involving shifts between different emotional states. To a large extent, this notion of emotional flow shares similarities with the sequential pattern observed in mixed emotions (Carrera & Ocejja, 2007) and can be extended to understand empathy as well.

Empathy, thus, can encompass diverse combinations of multi-valenced framings (positively, negatively, and mixed), reflecting varied, nuanced paths of feeling *through*, *with/as*, *for*, or even *showing concern for* the suffering victims. Each type of empathic response can lead to drastically different prosocial or even antisocial outcomes.

Limitations

This study's findings need to be qualified by some limitations, which also point to potential directions for future research. Although there is evidence that book reviewers are experienced readers (Boot & Koolen, 2020, p. 7) and that exposure to fiction

reading positively correlates with empathy, studies using additional individual traits could offer more valuable insights.

Using online reviews from Goodreads limited our ability to collect sociodemographic data about participants, in terms of age, class, ethnicity, sexual minority status and other identity-related factors, preventing conclusions based on sample characteristics. Given that the sample primarily consisted of women, future research should aim to increase male representation. Additionally, since SV is a highly mediatized topic, it is possible that social desirability bias influenced participants' responses, leading them to present their reading practices in ways that align with current social norms. Further research could also replicate this study in a cross-cultural context to identify potential differences in empathy framings, including comparisons between Western and non-Western countries.

We also limited our study to explore the empathic framings employed by readers in response to a literary story, without delving into how these framings translate into specific interactional patterns and behaviors. Since literary reception operates within an "art schema" (Wagner et al., 2016), where the experienced situations are secure and lack immediate practical concerns, future research could further elaborate on how these framings manifest in real-world actions.

Practice Implications and Future Research Directions

Considering the key role of empathy in shaping broader attitudes towards victims of SV, a promising direction for future research could involve exploring different operational definitions of female-on-male sexual aggression - not exclusively focusing on rape, (such as "sexually victimized", "sexually assaulted", "sexually coerced", "sexually abused", "made to penetrate", etc.) - as predictors of empathy towards various types of male victims. As evidenced (e.g., Osman, 2016), in the case of rape victim empathy, which refers to the capacity to understand the perspectives, emotions, and responses of individuals who have experienced rape, acknowledgment labeling may influence the ability to empathize with victims.

Victim-empathy training has been shown to be an important component of wider rape prevention programs, such as bystander training initiatives aimed at reducing SV occurrence. However, evaluations of interventions incorporating victim-empathy elements have yielded conflicting results, with several studies indicating that although interventions can lead to increases in participant's empathy, they do not consistently show a direct reduction of RMA (Hudspith, 2023). As such, it is important to highlight how general beliefs around power, privilege, and gender roles may be better indicators of prejudicial attitudes around SV and aggression regardless of gender, and more resistant to change. Indeed, it has been consistently shown that both female and male RMA strongly associate with several measures of homophobia, sexism, and racism (e.g., Davies et al., 2012; DeJong et al., 2023).

Particularly, scholars have extensively examined the attitudes of criminal justice professionals (police officers, judges, lawyers, juries, etc.) towards rape given their crucial roles in preventing and addressing SV, as their attitudes can critically affect reporting and conviction rape rates (Krahé et al., 2008; Sleath & Bull, 2017). Particularly, a body of research that focuses on RMA of prospective "experts", including

criminology and criminal justice students (Kim & Santiago, 2020), as well as law and psychology students (Sleath & Bull, 2015), uncovers the existence of high levels of patriarchal beliefs and RMA, that persist even among students who have taken courses on SV and victimology. As such, future studies could focus on the specific impact of SV courses on RMA and the particular empathic framings promoted by investigating course contents, their duration and depth, as well as faculty attitudes.

As such, our research has wider implications for the *ways* SV prevention efforts are being delivered. Sexual assault primary prevention programs must expand their approaches (including different kinds of media interventions). Further research is necessary so as to develop specialized training programs aimed at fostering brighter framings of empathy based on unbiased forms, in domains where male rape myths are an ongoing concern (e.g., among police officers, healthcare providers, and judicial professionals) (e.g., de Oliveira, [hese2024](#)). As research indicates more socially conscious media (e.g., music and songs related to the impact of sexual assault) can significantly reduce RMA when lyrics are paired with video visuals (Bowman et al., 2019). As such, future research could also compare the differing effects of media as a change mechanism for advancing different forms of empathy.

To broaden our perspective, it is crucial to challenge the existing “empathy maps” that distribute empathy on the basis of “high-empathy, low-empathy, and no-empathy zones” (Hochschild, 2013, p. 38) towards “ideal” and “less ideal” victims. As shown, exploring empathy through both bright and dark frames can function as a heuristic ethical axis enabling an interrogation of the articulatory interrelationships between diverse multivalent empathic framings. This approach also brings to light the “shadow work” needed to dismantle the “empathy walls” that confine certain individuals or groups to low-empathy or no-empathy realms.

As such, rather than framing empathy in abstract and neutral terms, we suggest putting *empathy in the frame* on the basis of the following critical questions: Under what conditions are certain individuals/groups recognized as worthy victims through empathy? From which identity positions of power do empathizers express their responses? What benefits do these empathic responses offer to the empathizers and their communities? What exclusions and biases are inherent in and reinforced by these responses? What are the merits and costs of non-empathizing?

In attempting to answer these questions, the process of acknowledging the dark sides of our own empathic engagements can uncover profound insights about the fragile (im)possibilities of interrelatedness. This realization may be understood as the achievement of striving to meet the other - in the absence of any certain and reliable path to mutual understanding. Each such encounter - in its incompleteness - contributes to shaping a social world that may move closer to embracing the vital differences that underpin our shared humanity.

Conclusion

This study employed a qualitative framing analysis and a quantitative sentiment analysis in order to investigate readers’ empathic framings in response to a female-on-male rape literary story, as articulated in online *Goodreads* reviews. Five main

framings were identified: (1) female-centered empathy and (2) sadistic empathy (aligning with the dark empathy frame); (3) empathic distress and (4) empathic anger (demonstrating overlaps between the bright and dark empathy frame), and (5) compassion (characteristic of the bright empathy frame). Sentiment analysis findings showed a significant presence of mixed sentiments. These findings illustrate how empathy manifests within “bright” and “dark” empathy frames, encompassing varied combinations of self-centered and other-oriented dimensions with diverse emotional valences (positive, negative and mixed). These nuances reflect distinct pathways of feeling *through*, *with/as*, *for*, or even *showing concern for* the fictional male victims.

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Data Availability Due to the sensitive nature of the data, and the fact that it was collected from a naturalist setting, and considering the latest ethical guidelines for naturalistic web research, we have not made the data publicly available as a dataset. However, the data is freely available on the platform from where it was extracted, and the dataset in specific can be requested to the corresponding author with a justification for the need to access the dataset.

Code Availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Ethical Approval This study has received ethical approval from the Ethical Committee of the University of Porto (Comissão de Ética (CE) da Faculdade de Psicologia e de Ciências da Educação da Universidade do Porto).

Conflicts of Interest The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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