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Unveiling Bias: The Impact of Male Rape Myths and Stereotypes on Juror Verdicts in Male-on-Male Rape Trials

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how male rape myths, racial/ethnicity biases, and sexuality stereotypes influence verdicts in male-on-male rape trials—an area that is currently under-researched. A sample of 463 participants read a mock rape trial, where both the defendant and complainant were male, with defendant ethnicity (White, Black, Asian) and complainant sexuality (homosexual, heterosexual) manipulated across conditions. Participants completed the Male Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (MRMAS) before the trial and the Juror Decision Scale (JDS) afterwards. Results showed that defendant and complainant believability (subscales of the JDS) mediated the relationship between rape myth acceptance and verdicts, indicating that pre-trial biases shape jurors' story formation and verdict-making. Qualitative data demonstrates divergent narrative logics between high and low MRMA participants. Further, it was also found that both defendant ethnicity and complainant sexuality did not significantly influence verdicts. Findings highlight how underlying biases affect juror judgements and underscore the implications of this research are considered in the context of jury-reform initiatives already underway across the UK. Limitations and future research discussed within.

1 | Background

Over recent decades there has been a growing interest among academics, socio-legal scholars and activists to better understand why conviction rates in rape trials remain low (Willmott and Hudspith 2024). A common method for studying jury decision-making involves presenting mock trial materials for rape cases: these materials typically manipulate key information about the case, the defendant, witnesses, and complainants to examine how different variables influence jurors' perceptions and verdict. However, this research has mostly focussed on rape and sexual assault trials of female, Caucasian complainants (i.e., audio trial or written vignette; see Phillips 2024), limiting our understanding on how gender, sexuality, and ethnicity-based

biases may influence convictions in rape trials. This gap in knowledge is significant due to the impact of sexual violence against male survivors (Widanaralalage et al. 2022), the barriers to access health and criminal justice services (Widanaralalage et al. 2023), and the prevalence of male rape myths (MRMs) in the public domain (Turchik and Edwards 2012; Walfield 2021). Critically, MRMs do not exist in a vacuum but are often shaped by broader systems of homophobia, heteronormativity, and racialised assumptions about masculinity and sexual deviance (Widanaralalage and et al. 2024). Recent work raises questions around the role played by observers' gender and ethnicity in their endorsement of MRMs (Willmott and Widanaralalage 2024), with men and individuals from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds more likely to accept

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such myths. Parallel work also shows that racialised defendants are perceived as more aggressive or less credible (Davis et al. 2022; ForsterLee et al. 2006; Sommers 2007), and that non-straight men are viewed more suspiciously or are hypersexualised (Braun et al. 2009; Sternin et al. 2022). While this research provides valuable insight into the attitudinal landscape surrounding male sexual victimisation, little is known about how such attitudes translate into legal decision making. The present study addresses this gap by examining how defendants' ethnicity and complainants' sexual orientation influence jury decision making in male-on-male mock rape trials.

1.1 | Rape Myths and Male Complainers

Rape myths, defined as 'prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists' (Burt 1980, 217), have long informed public, social, and legal discourses around rape and its victims. These myths commonly suggest the false belief that woman routinely use accusations of sexual assault to blackmail or get revenge on men with power (Burt 1980; Leverick 2020). Further, commonly studied examples of rape myths include: 'Beliefs that blame the victim/survivor', 'Beliefs that cast doubt on allegations', 'Beliefs that excuse the accused', and 'Beliefs about what 'real rape' looks like' (Leverick 2020, 256). In recent years, psychological, criminological, and socio-legal research has attempted to measure and investigate the influence of rape myths upon juror decision-making (Willmott et al. 2021). Recent research has demonstrated how rape myth acceptance (RMA) can significantly distort jurors evaluation of evidence in rape trials involving female complainants. For example, L. J. Curley et al. (2024) using a mixed methods design, found that jurors high in RMA were less likely to perceive complainants' recall/testimony as accurate, yet were more likely to perceive the accused's testimony as reliable and credible. These biases were not merely abstract, but actively shaped interpretation of evidence during deliberation. One participant, for instance, stated the following when discussing the evidence and their decision: "The complainant's lack of concern, there was a lack of belief that she wasn't consenting. There was a 40-min delay in phoning the police and remove herself from a web of lies" (Juror 147, L. J. Curley et al. 2024). Here the participant proposes that just a 40-min delay suggested she had made up the accusation of sexual assault and rape. This illustrates how even minor deviations from idealised victim behaviour can be reframed as evidence of deceit. Comparable findings have been observed in other studies (Lilley et al. 2023; Willmott et al. 2018), suggesting that rape myths continue to exert a measurable influence on juror decision-making, often to the complainant's detriment.

Recent research has typically investigated the impact of rape myths when the complainant is female, however, much less empirical research focuses on rape myths when the complainant is male (see Leverick 2020). The focus on female complainants may be in part due to the significantly higher prevalence of sexual violence against women (Rape Crisis England and Wales 2024). However, this is a significant oversight given rates

of male sexual victimisation. For example, in 2022, the Crime survey for England and Wales reported that 275,000 men experienced sexual assault in a 1-year period (Office for National Statistics 2023). This equates to roughly 1 in 100 men experiencing sexual assault (including attempts) in one calendar year (Office for National Statistics 2023), with the true figure likely much greater given high rates of non-disclosure among rape victims (see Stewart et al. 2024). Further, research on so-called MRM suggests that male survivors encounter distinct, yet equally damaging, biases and beliefs (Turchik and Edwards 2012), which questions the authenticity of male rape incidents and the credibility of male survivors (see Weare and Willmott 2025).

Despite this, limited research has investigated the prevalence of male rape myths, with studies that do exist often using dated measures of MRM (for a review see Hine et al. 2021; Weare and Willmott 2025). Nonetheless, some demographic characteristics have emerged as important predictors of MRM beliefs, including age and gender, with older male respondents consistently more likely to believe in male rape myths, such as that males may falsely report rapes to the police (e.g., Walfield 2021; Willmott and Widanaralage 2024). Walfield (2021) also demonstrated that endorsement of traditional rape myths concerning female victims, alongside homonegative attitudes, significantly predicted the acceptance of male rape myths, highlighting the ideological continuity across different forms of sexual violence denial.

Hine et al. (2021) developed and validated the Male Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (MRMAS), one of the few instruments designed specifically to assess rape myths in cases involving male victims and male perpetrators (most MRM scales include items about female perpetrators or heterosexual dynamics), thus explicitly tailored to male-on-male sexual violence. Across two studies (study one, $N = 510$; study two = 527), Hine and colleagues identified six thematic domains—masculinity, sexuality, pleasure, perpetrators, context, and effect—before using exploratory factor analysis to extract two core dimensions: Blame and Minimisation/Exoneration. The Blame subscale captures beliefs that male victims are somehow responsible for their assault—often linked to assumptions that only 'gay or weak' men can be raped. The Minimisation/Exoneration subscale reflects the tendency to excuse or downplay the perpetrator's actions, often by invoking myths about male sexuality (e.g., the idea that physiological arousal implies consent).

Importantly, the MRMAS subscales illustrate how myths about male rape are closely intertwined with broader cultural stereotypes—particularly those targeting gay and bisexual men. For example, gay complainants may be viewed as inherently hypersexual or as having 'invited' the assault, while perpetrators may be exonerated on the basis of supposedly uncontrollable male sexual drives (Fingerhut and Abdou 2017). This raises a critical question about how complainants' sexual orientation shapes juror decision-making in male on male rape trials, especially when such cases challenge normative expectations about gender, consent, and sexual behaviour. Despite the availability of validated measures like the MRMAS, relatively few studies have examined how these attitudes manifest in

juror reasoning—particularly in methodologically rigorous mock trial experiments (for a recent systematic review see Millar et al. 2025). Furthermore, the impact of a complainant's disclosure of their sexual orientation (e.g., gay vs. straight) on jurors' evaluations remains underexplored, representing a significant gap in the literature on courtroom bias in same-sex rape cases.

Other factors that may influence decision-making in male rape trials is ethnicity and race. This is because racial biases have been shown to play a key role in juror and judicial decision-making in other charge types (e.g., murder; Curley, Munro, and Dror 2022; L. C. Curley, Murray et al. 2022; Curley and Neuhaus 2024; Esqueda et al. 2008; Lecci and Myers 2009; Sommers and Ellsworth 2009). Research focussing on rape trials where females are complainants has shown that jurors are more likely to convict when the accused was black compared to when the accused was caucasian (Hymes et al. 1993). Further, research from Landwehr et al. (2002) found that individuals who scored highly in right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) were more likely to perceive the testimony of a white female rape victim as more credible than a black female rape victim when the accused was a black, male. One explanation of these findings may be the representativeness heuristic (Kahneman and Tversky 1984; L. J. Curley et al. 2019). Another may relate to the fact that those who are high in RWA may be more likely to have hostility and negative perceptions of out groups (Landwehr et al. 2002).

The representativeness heuristic is one of many heuristics studied by Tversky and Kahneman (1974) in the 70's and 80's. Heuristics are cognitive short-cuts which allow us to make decisions when information is complex, the decision environment is uncertain and the decision maker may lack cognitive load (Tversky and Kahneman 1974; Kahneman and Tversky 1984). The representativeness heuristic can be shown to occur when the decision makers ignore base rate information (i.e., objective, mathematical based information regarding prior probabilities) and instead uses stereotypes (gained from experience or the media) to inform their decision (see L. J. Curley et al. 2016 for a larger discussion). In relation to the Landwehr et al. (2002) study, participants may have been ignoring base rate stats and stereotyping white victims as 'innocent' and black victims as 'sexual' or at least complicit in the rape.

Research has shown that jurors commonly apply stereotypes centred on race and ethnicity (Esqueda et al. 2008; Lecci and Myers 2009; Sommers and Ellsworth 2009) when reaching verdicts. Gindrow (2023) suggests that black men are commonly stereotyped as being hypersexual and criminal, which may cause jurors to perceive black men, and potentially other men of colour, as more likely of committing the act of rape than white men, which may in turn influence verdict selections. Most research that has studied defendant ethnicity effects in the courtroom has focussed on comparing white/caucasian and black individuals. Therefore, there is currently a dearth of research investigating the impact of defendants from other ethnicities on decision-making. The race of jurors themselves has also been linked to verdict decision making in rape trials, with recent studies finding certain racial groups

were less likely to convict than others (see Lilley et al. 2023). Again, this warrants further exploration in male-on-male rape trials.

1.2 | Rape Myths and Story Construction

Male rape myths may influence how jurors reach verdicts through the construction of stories (Willmott et al. 2018). The story model (Pennington and Hastie 1992) suggests that jurors create stories through the course of a criminal trial in order to evaluate the evidence and reach a verdict. Jurors may use evidence to create their story explaining the trial, however, they may also use pre-trial beliefs centred on stereotyping (L. C. Curley, Munro, and Dror 2022; L. C. Curley, Murray et al. 2022), prior experiences from their lives, knowledge from the media, knowledge of similar trials, and everyday understanding of what makes a good story (see L. J. Curley 2024, for a further explanation) to inform their story construction (Pennington and Hastie 1992). Willmott et al. (2018) suggest the following:

In essence, the theory suggests that when hearing competing accounts of the same incident during trial, typically including one version put forward by a defendant and an alternative account put forward by a complainant, individual jurors construct differing narrative interpretations of what they believe actually occurred. At the end of trial and prior to deliberation, jurors then select one such narrative as the dominant, accepted version of events, they believe to be true (P. 1).

Therefore, Willmott et al. (2018) attempted to decrease the amount of cognitive load needed in story model to make it more realistic for the average juror, instead of creating an infinite number of complex stories, like Pennington and Hastie (1992) suggest, they propose that jurors create a story that either favours the prosecution or a story that favours the defence—this preference may be influenced by bias, such as the representativeness bias discussed prior. According to Pennington and Hastie (1992) once multiple stories are created, jurors must assess and select a story based on certainty principles. Stories are only accepted if they are seen to have a satisficing amount of coverage (i.e., can the evidence presented during the trial be fitted within the story), coherence (i.e., is the story consistent?), completeness (i.e., is there anything missing from the story?) and plausibility (i.e., is the story credible?). Another, certainty principle is uniqueness, where it is suggested that the more unique the constructed story is, the more confident a juror will be in their story—uniqueness does influence story construction, but influences story confidence more (L. J. Curley 2017; Pennington and Hastie 1992).

In addition to constructing and accepting narratives, jurors must also engage in the verdict representation phase, during which they are informed about different verdict categories and representations by the judge. This 'understanding' may also

be influenced by media portrayals of legal proceedings (L. J. Curley 2021). Jurors then match up the elements that make their chosen story with their verdict representations (L. J. Curley 2021; Pennington and Hastie 1992). Through this process jurors then choose a verdict which best matches their chosen story. Jurors who construct a story which aligns with the prosecution may choose a guilty verdict, whereas jurors who choose a verdict which aligns with the defence, may choose an acquittal verdict (Willmott et al. 2018).

Willmott et al. (2018) were one of the first to directly assess story construction within mock jurors. They created the juror decision scale (JDS), a 16-item self-report measure which has three subscales, two of which are aimed at assessing which narrative (prosecution or defence) was favoured by the juror: (1) Complaint believability; (2) Defendant believability. The third sub-scale, similar to the certainty principle of uniqueness, focusses on decision confidence (L. J. Curley 2021; Pennington and Hastie 1992; Willmott et al. 2018). The JDS has been shown to be a reliable and valid (Willmott et al. 2018; Stevens et al. 2024) way of gaining an insight into juror story construction, which may help illuminate how MRMs influence story construction and (Gindrow 2023; Hine et al. 2021) juror decision-making (L. C. Curley, Munro, and Dror 2022; L. C. Curley, Murray et al. 2022).

1.3 | Current Study

With legislative restrictions preventing researchers from speaking to real trial jurors at the time of writing, this study aims to examine whether specific mock juror biases, influenced by knowledge regarding the defendant's ethnicity and complainant's disclosure of sexuality, may impact male rape trial outcomes. Further, this study also looks to investigate if the effects of MRMs on jurors' verdict decisions is mediated through the story model's certainty principals (measured using defendant and complainant believability sub-scales of the JDS). Our hypotheses are therefore:

1. The defendant's ethnicity will significantly impact juror verdict decisions and perception of guilt, with more guilty verdicts and a higher perception of guilt rating being given for Black and Asian men when compared to Caucasian defendants.
2. Complainant sexuality will have a significant impact on juror verdict decisions and perception of guilt, with more guilty verdicts and higher ratings of defendant guilt being given when the complainant is gay compared to straight.
3. The subscales of complainant and defendant believability will mediate the relationship between male rape myth acceptance scores and juror verdict selections.

To complement the quantitative data, participants were also asked to provide open-ended justifications for their verdicts. These responses were subjected to thematic analysis to explore how participants interpreted the case and explained their decision-making. The qualitative strand was included to offer

additional, corroborative insight into how mock jurors made sense of the trial materials, and to examine whether and how individual reasoning might reflect broader narrative, cognitive, or attitudinal patterns.

2 | Methods

2.1 | Design

Our hypotheses were tested using an experimental design, with defendant ethnicity (Black [$N = 155$] versus Caucasian [$N = 151$] versus Asian [$N = 157$]) and complainant sexuality (gay [$N = 229$] versus straight [$N = 234$]) being utilised as between-subject's factors. This created six separate conditions: (1) Black Defendant, gay Complainant; (2) Black Defendant, straight Complainant; (3) Caucasian Defendant, gay Complainant; (4) Caucasian Defendant, straight Complainant; (5) Asian Defendant, gay Complainant; (6) Asian Defendant, straight Complainant. The following dependent variables were measured using an online questionnaire: (1) Verdict Decision (Guilty and Not Guilty); (2) Defendant Guilt Rating (zero = very not guilty, 100 = very guilty). In addition, male-on-male rape myths were also measured using MRMAS (Hine et al. 2021) and Complaint Believability, Defendant Believability, and Decision Confidence were measured using the JDS (Willmott et al. 2018). These variables were included in a parallel mediation model. These measures, additional questions and the mock trial vignettes are detailed in the materials section below. The study received ethical approval from the research ethics committee at host institution.

2.2 | Participants

The following exclusion and inclusion criteria were used to recruit participants partially in accordance with UK jury eligibility criteria: (1) aged 18+; (2) registered to vote in UK parliamentary or local government elections; and (3) participants must have lived in the UK, Channel Islands or Isle of Man for a period of at least 5 years since they were 13 years old. Participants were also asked the following questions relating to sentences (community and prison) and whether they have been detained, treated, or subjected to any order under provisions of the Mental Health Act 1983, or deemed to lack mental capacity under the Mental Capacity Act to ensure eligibility. No participants were excluded based on responses provided.

Overall, 463 participants were recruited for this study. Data recruitment happened in two stages. Stage one was the pilot stage of the experiment where materials and logic on Qualtrics were checked to ensure that our online experiment was operating correctly (Andrade 2020), here 33 mock jurors were recruited. These participants were not compensated for their time during this stage of pre-testing. Opportunistic sampling was used to recruit these participants, with social media sites such as X (formerly twitter) and Facebook being utilised to host and advertise the link of the study. Stage two collected data from 430 participants, each paid £7.29 per hour for their participation and recruited from the site Prolific. The screening tools of

Prolific were used to ensure that participants met the inclusion criteria (e.g., eligible voter and eligible for jury duty).

As there were no issues at stage one, this data was combined with the stage two data for analyses. The full sample therefore consisted of 235 females (50.8%), 223 males (48.2%), 3 non-binary individuals (0.6%), one gender fluid person (0.2%), and one person who preferred not to say (0.2%). In total, 430 individuals reported their age ($M = 49.58$; $SD = 12.17$), ranging from 20 to 84 years old. The majority of the sample identified as Caucasian (92.4%), with 2.4% identifying as Asian or Asian British, 2.2% identifying as 'mixed race/dual heritage', 2.4% identifying as Black or Black British, 0.4% identifying as Latina/Hispanic, and one participant preferring not to say. In relation to education/qualifications, 37.1% of individuals reported having a bachelors degree, 25.9% reported having completed a college/vocational course, 17.3% reported having a master's degree, 12.3% reported their qualifications at secondary school or equivalent, or less, and 7.3% reported having a professional degree or doctorate. Some individuals reported through an open-text box that they had previously served on a jury, with trial types including burglary, sexual assault, and rape.

Based on our intended analyses, our sample of 463 participants meets the required N of 434 for a small effect size of $F^2 = 0.4$ (with alpha of 0.05 and power of 0.95) and three predictor variables.

2.3 | Materials

2.3.1 | Demographics Questionnaire

Participants were asked several demographic questions, including their current gender identity; gender assigned at birth, ethnicity and education level. These questions were presented using a mixture of forced-choice options (e.g., which of the following best describes your current gender identity? Male; Female; Non-Binary/Third Gender; Gender Fluid; Prefer not to say) and open-text boxes (if your highest form of education does not match one on the list above, please state your highest form of education in the text box provided).

2.3.2 | Male Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (MRMAS)

Participants were asked to complete 38 items from the revised MRMAS scale (see Hine et al. 2021). Participants could answer from strongly disagree to strongly agree, respectively coded as one and five. Examples of questions include: 'Even if force is used to initiate sex, the victims erection can be interpreted as pleasure', 'A male victim's reaction to rape is more likely to be practical than emotional', and 'Male Rape is only perpetrated by homosexual men'. Some items ($N = 4$) were reverse coded to prevent acquiescence bias, such as item 33: 'It is acceptable for a "real man" to show fear during a sexual attack by another man'. The subscales of Blame (25 items) and Minimisation/Exoneration (13 items) have been shown to exist within the measure. An example of an item within blame would be: 'I would find it

difficult to believe a man had been raped if he had previously consented to sex with the same man' and an example of Minimisation/Exoneration would be: 'In "real" cases of male rape, there will be some evidence of physical resistance'. Hine et al. (2021) found that both these sub-scales were shown to have good reliability and construct validity.

2.3.3 | Juror Decision Scale (JDS)

Participants were asked to complete 16-items across three different subscales: Complainant Believability; Defendant Believability; and Decision Confidence. All items collected ordinal data by giving participants the following options: 1 = 'not at all', 2 = 'not very'; 3 = 'somewhat'; 4 = 'very much'; 5 = 'extremely'. Complainant believability asked seven items, including: 'How well did the evidence match and cover what the complainant (Kyle Adams) said happened' and 'Overall, how much do you believe the complainants (Kyle Adams) version of events'. Defendant believability asked seven items, such as: 'how consistent was the defendants (Jake Walker) version of events with the evidence presented overall?' and 'How coherent was the defendants (Jake Walker) story, meaning that the different stages described as happening were logically connected?'. Finally, the last subscale was Decision Confidence, which was measured over two items, for example, 'Thinking about your individual verdict decision of "guilty" or "not guilty", how confident are you that you have made the correct decision'. The JDS scale has been shown to have good predictive reliability (Lilley et al. 2023), construct validity, test-retest reliability and differential predicative validity following confirmatory factorial analysis (CFA; Willmott et al. 2018).

2.3.4 | Mock Rape Trial

The written vignettes were made up of several sections. First, participants were presented with the details relating to the crime (i.e., who the accused was, where the court was, who the judge was and who the prosecution and defence barristers were). Second participants were presented with a charge sheet. The charge sheet read as follows: 'Count 1: Rape. Contrary to section 1 of the sexual offences act 2003, the defendant is charged with unlawful Rape of Kyle Adams at approximately 3:25 on February 9th 2021'. The end of this charge sheet also told the participants who the accused was and who the complainant was. This section also discussed their role, and what they should do once they have been provided instructions by the judge (i.e., decide whether to give a guilty or not guilty verdict). Third, participants were presented with clear instructions from the judge. This information instructed the mock jurors on their role in the courtroom, what the difference between a judge and jury is, and to postpone their verdict until the end of a trial. They were also warned of contempt of court (in order to increase ecological validity) and informed of the structure of the trial. After the judge's instructions, the participants were told of the undisputed case information, followed by the prosecution's case (testimony from the complainant and cross examination). This was then followed

by the defence's case, which provided testimony from the defendant and cross-examination. Depending on the condition (Black vs. Caucasian vs. Asian), participants were presented with different faces of the defendant, each representing different ethnicities (see images were selected from the Chicago face database (Ma et al. 2015) for examples). Each of these faces were rated similarly in relation to attractiveness and these materials were gained from the Chicago Face Database, a free resource consisting of high-resolution, standardised photographs of males and females between the ages of 18 and 40 years (Ma et al. 2015). A pilot study was conducted with 40 participants (20 men, 20 women) who rated a series of 15 faces (5 Black, 5 Asian, 5 Caucasian) in terms of attractiveness. The three photos used represent those who participants rated as moderately attractive overall with no significant differences found in attractiveness ratings given overall.

Participants were then presented with medical evidence from a forensic examiner (i.e., that the complainant had suffered 'some light bruising...to the rectum area, but had sustained no internal bruising within the anus'). Judges' instructions were presented next, with mock jurors being informed about aspects of the law, such as what the prosecution and defence invite them to do, that biases, emotions and rape stereotypes should be ignored, and the burden and standard of proof. Participants (depending on the sexuality condition) were informed that the complainant disclosed their sexuality as being either gay or straight during questioning at trial. Finally, participants were told the following before being able to reach a verdict: 'Please now reach your verdict. Please bear in mind that although you have simply read this case outside of the real trial itself, all of the evidence is drawn from a real case and the decisions you make are therefore going to have important implications in understanding that case. With this in mind we ask that you try to treat the decision making task as though you were making the decision as a juror in the real trial'.

2.3.5 | Post-Trial Questionnaire

Participants were asked here to state their verdict (guilty vs. not guilty) and their perception of guilty (0 being not at all guilty and 100 being extremely guilty). Qualitative data was also collected here, with participants being asked to state the main reasons for their verdict. The JDS was part of the post-trial questionnaire. In addition, participants were asked to state the race/ethnicity of the defendant (Black/Asian/Caucasian) and sexuality the (gay/straight) complainant as a condition checker.

2.3.6 | Ethical Materials

Participants were presented with relevant ethical materials, such as an information sheet, a consent form and a debrief sheet. This information made participants aware of their ethical rights, such as their right to withdraw and for their data to remain anonymous.

2.4 | Procedure

Each participant first read an online information sheet before they gave their consent to participate. After consenting, they gave their demographic information (age, gender, ethnicity) and answered questions relating to juror eligibility. Participants were then presented with the MRMAS (this was presented to them as the pre-trial juror questionnaire). After this, participants were presented with the written vignette, which provided them with legally relevant information such as instructions and evidence from the prosecution and defence. Depending on the defendant ethnicity condition, participants were presented with either the image of either the Black, Caucasian or Asian defendant. Again, depending on the complainant sexuality condition, participants were told that the participant was either gay or straight. Following the vignette, participants were asked to respond to the post-trial juror questionnaire, give their verdict, perception of guilt rating, and fill out the JDS. Finally, participants were fully debriefed via a debrief form. Here they were told the full aims of the study and given details of free and impartial UK support service that they could contact if they thought that such resources may be useful for them. Overall, the study took a median time of 24 min to complete.

2.5 | Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

To explore the interpretative reasoning underpinning mock juror verdicts, we conducted a qualitative analysis of participants' open-ended responses justifying their decisions. Participants were selected for inclusion in the qualitative analysis based on their scores on the MRMAS. Z-scores were computed for all MRMAS responses, and participants whose scores fell ± 1 standard deviation from the mean were included in this phase of analysis. This procedure yielded two distinct subgroups: a High MRMA sample ($n = 70$) and a Low MRMA sample ($n = 52$). Open-ended responses from these participants were subjected to thematic analysis. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) and Naeem et al.'s (2023) reflexive thematic analysis framework. Author BKW conducted a comprehensive review of the verdict justifications and generated a preliminary coding framework. From these initial codes, a series of interpretative clusters were developed. These clusters captured recurring patterns in participants' reasoning, encompassing shared assumptions, explanatory logics, or evidentiary interpretations that shaped how individual jurors justified a guilty or not guilty verdict. Clusters served as analytical units bridging the descriptive coding and interpretive thematic generation.

Following this, a reliability check was conducted. Author JE independently reviewed the data and applied the cluster framework to all responses. Coding agreement was calculated at the level of individual verdict justifications, with partial agreement (e.g., one of two clusters matching) scored as 0.5. Inter-coder agreement was achieved in over 85% of cases. BKW then generated preliminary themes from the clustered data, identifying shared interpretive logics within and across the High and Low MRMAS samples. These themes were reviewed and

refined in collaboration with the broader author team (L.C., D. W., B.K.W., J.E.), who interrogated the internal coherence, analytic utility, and conceptual distinctiveness of each theme. The final thematic framework reflects the research team's consensus on the most salient patterns in participants' verdict reasoning, grounded in the cluster-level analysis and attentive to variation between high and low rape myth acceptance.

3 | Results

This section is divided into two parts. Part 1 presents the experimental findings addressing our hypotheses regarding the influence of defendant ethnicity, complainant sexuality, and MRMAS on juror decision-making. Part 2 reports the qualitative thematic analysis of participants' written justifications for their verdicts, focussing on those scoring high and low on MRMAS.

3.1 | Part 1: Experimental Findings

The descriptive statistics for each of the scale measures (e.g., MRMAS, Decision Confidence) can be found in Table 1 alongside internal consistency scores. Table 2 highlights the number of guilty and not guilty verdicts given depending on each of the different factors (ethnicity and sexuality). Table 2 shows that individuals were more likely to convict than acquit, regardless of the condition.

The alpha levels for the MRMAS and JDS subscales ranged from very good to excellent, helping to show that the subscales had good internal consistency; see Table 1.

3.2 | Manipulation Check

First, the construct validity of both factors' (defendant ethnicity and complainant sexuality) were checked through attention checkers. First, the defendant ethnicity condition was checked against the attention check question, where participants were asked to state the ethnicity of the defendant (Black, Caucasian and Asian). A Chi-Square test of Association found a significant association; $\chi^2(4) = 567.12, p < 0.001, \phi_c = 0.78$, which highlights a strong association. In the Black Defendant condition, participants reported the defendant as being black more than expected (Count = 146 vs. expected = 49.5). This was replicated across the Caucasian (Count = 151 vs. expected = 77.3) and Asian (Count = 78 vs. expected = 26.4) Defendants Conditions, showing that the

defendant ethnicity factor had good construct validity. First, the Complainant Sexuality condition was checked against the attention check question, where participants were asked to state the sexuality of the complainer (gay vs. straight). A Chi-Square test of Association found a significant association; $\chi^2(1) = 307.07, p < 0.001, \phi_c = 0.81$, which highlights a strong association. In the gay complainant condition, participants reported the defendant as being Gay more than expected (Count = 205 vs. expected = 110.8). This was replicated across the Straight complainer condition (Count = 215 vs. expected = 120.8), showing that the complainer sexuality factor had good construct validity.

3.3 | Generalised Linear Model—Effect of Ethnicity and Sexuality on Verdict

A Generalised Linear Model was conducted, to test the effects of ethnicity and sexuality on verdict. In this model, the binary logistic function was chosen. Initially, it was found that the model did not significantly outperform the null model ($\chi^2 [5] = 2.58, p = 0.76$). The Akaike's Information Criteria (AIC) was 666.86. Each of the main effects and interaction were then investigated.

First, it was found that the ethnicity had no significant effect on verdict ($\chi^2 [2] = 1.24, p = 0.54$). Second, it was found that sexuality did not have a significant effect on verdict ($\chi^2 [1] = 0.03, p = 0.87$). Third, it was found that no significant interaction existed ($\chi^2 [2] = 1.34, p = 0.51$). This was replicated with the attention check questions (i.e., what ethnicity and sexuality the participants believed the defendant/complainer were), no effects were found to be significant.

Sensitivity analysis was conducted to check the robustness of the above findings. Covariates such as Gender, Ethnicity and

TABLE 2 | Effects of sexuality and ethnicity on verdict.

Factor	Verdict	
	Guilty	Not guilty
Ethnicity		
Black	87	68
Caucasian	94	57
Asian	94	63
Sexuality		
Gay	135	94
Straight	140	94

TABLE 1 | Descriptive statistics relating to the MRMAS and JDS.

Variable name	Mean (SD)	Minimum	Maximum	Internal consistency (alpha level)
MRMAS	61.08 (18.15)	38	138	
Blame	33.40 (10.97)	25	87	0.94
Minimisation/exoneration	27.68 (8.87)	13	54	0.88
Decision confidence	7.4 (1.77)	2	10	0.93
Complainant believability	23.98 (5.11)	12	35	0.92
Defendant believability	20.26 (4.73)	7	35	0.90

qualifications were included. These predictors and interactions remained non-significant; see Supporting Information S1 for details. Age was not included in this, as age was collected from Prolific, not Qualtrics, meaning that individual age scores could not be aligned with verdicts or perception of guilt scores.

Following this, A Generalised Linear Model was conducted, to test the effects of ethnicity and sexuality on perception of guilt. In this model, a linear scale response option was chosen. Initially, it was found that the model did not significantly outperform the null model ($\chi^2 [5] = 8.69, p = 0.12$); AIC = 4427.80. First, it was found that the ethnicity had a significant effect on perception of guilt ($\chi^2 [2] = 6.54, p = 0.04$)—black estimated Marginal Means (EMM) = 61.06; Caucasian EMM = 69.26; Asian EMM = 66.30. Post-hoc comparisons (Bonferroni) found that black defendants were given significantly lower ratings than caucasian defendants ($p = 0.04$). Comparisons between black and asian ($p = 0.31$) and caucasian and asian ($p > 0.999$) were not significant. Second, it was found that sexuality did not have a significant effect on perception of guilt ($\chi^2 [1] = 0.445, p = 0.51$). Third, it was found that no significant interaction existed ($\chi^2 [2] = 1.78, p = 0.41$).

Sensitivity analysis was conducted to check the robustness of the above findings. Covariates such as Gender, Ethnicity and qualifications were included. These predictors and interactions mostly remained non-significant; see appendix for details. However, one significant predictor (i.e., defendant ethnicity) remained, ($\chi^2 [2] = 6.23, p = 0.04$). Specifically, it was found that the EMM's were significantly ($p = 0.04$) lower for the black defendant (EMM = 61.20) when compared to the caucasian defendant (EMM = 69.22); Bonferroni correction was applied. For non-significant post-hoc comparisons and further analyses in this model see the Supporting Information S1.

3.4 | Parallel Mediation Model—MRMAS, JDS and Verdict

A parallel mediation analysis (PROCESS Model 4, Hayes 2018) was conducted with MRMAS influencing Verdict through three mediators: (1) Decision Confidence; (2) Complainant Believability; (3) and Defendant Believability. Bootstrapped confidence intervals (5000 samples) were also to test indirect effects.

The model explained substantial variance in Verdict (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.71$); see Figure 1 for a visual illustration of the mediation model. MRMAS had a significant negative effect on Complainant Believability ($b = -0.074, p < 0.001$) and a positive effect on Defendant Believability ($b = 0.029, p = 0.02$), but no significant effect on Decision Confidence ($b = -0.008, p = 0.06$). In the logistic regression model predicting Verdict, Complainant Believability ($b = 0.467, p < 0.001$) and Decision Confidence ($b = 0.365, p = 0.002$) positively predicted the log-odds of a guilty verdict. However, it was found that Defendant Believability ($b = -0.308, p < 0.001$) significantly decreased the log

odds of a guilty verdict. In addition, the direct effect of MRMAS on Verdict was non-significant ($b = -0.012, p = 0.17$).

The total indirect effect of MRMAS on Verdict was significant ($b = -0.047$, Bootstrapped SE = 0.010, 95% CI [-0.070, -0.030]), with Complainant Believability ($b = -0.035$, Bootstrapped SE = 0.007, 95% CI [-0.052, -0.023]) and Defendant Believability ($b = -0.009$, Bootstrapped SE = 0.004, 95% CI [-0.019, -0.002]) significantly mediating the relationship. These results indicate that higher MRMAS scores were associated with lower Complainant Believability and higher Defendant Believability, which in turn decreased the log odds of rendering a guilty verdict. Decision Confidence was not a significant mediator ($b = -0.003$, Bootstrapped SE = 0.002, 95% CI [-0.008, 0.0004]).

3.5 | Exploratory Analysis

An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to assess if male jurors were more likely to believe in rape myths than female jurors. The test found a significant effect, with males ($M = 82.81$) having a higher average on the MRMAS than females ($M = 76.51$); $t(432.52) = 3.891, p < 0.001$.

In addition, 2×2 between-subjects ANOVA's were conducted to investigate the effects of complainant sexuality and defendant ethnicity on each of the 3 subscales of the JDS and the MRMAS. No significant effects were found on the measures of decision confidence, defendant believability, or MRMAS, and thus will not be reported here (see Appendix A for more information).

However, some significant effects were observed when looking at effects of ethnicity and sexuality on complainant believability. First, ethnicity was found to have no significant effect; $F(2, 457) = 0.75, p = 0.47, np^2 = 0.003$. Second, no significant interaction was found; $F(2, 457) = 1.07, p = 0.34, np^2 = 0.005$. However, sexuality was found to have a significant effect; $F(1, 457) = 6.21, p = 0.01, np^2 = 0.01$, which is a small effect size. It was found that the complainant was believed more when their sexuality was reported as straight ($M = 24.56$) than gay ($M = 23.38$).

3.6 | Part 2: Qualitative Analysis of Verdict Decisions

To explore how MRMAS shaped juror reasoning, we conducted a thematic analysis of participants' verdict justifications, comparing those with high versus low MRMAS scores. Table 3 presents an overview of the two subsamples, comparing themes and constituent clusters identified in each group. While both groups were presented with the same trial materials, their interpretations diverged markedly. High MRMAS participants more often invoked evidentiary scepticism and relied on rape myths when explaining not-guilty verdicts. In contrast, Low MRMAS participants foregrounded

Notes. Coefficients are standardised. c' = direct effect. a = path a , b = path b . [] indicate 95% confidence intervals. Complainer Believability = CB; Defendant Believability = DB; Decision Confidence = Dcon.

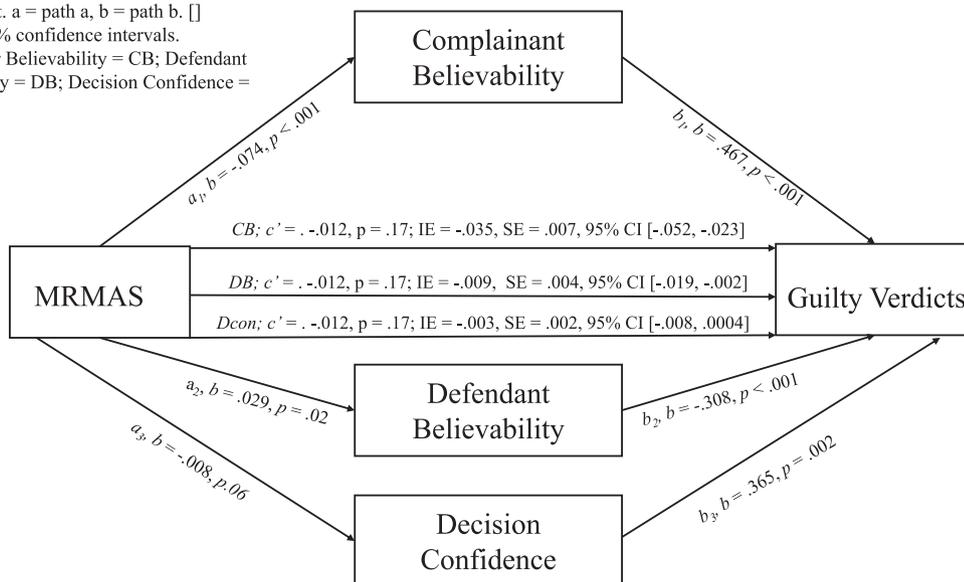


FIGURE 1 | Relationships between MRMAS, complainant believability, defendant believability, decision confidence, and verdict.

TABLE 3 | Comparative thematic structure: High versus low male rape myth acceptance (MRMA) samples.

High MRMA themes and clusters	Low MRMA themes and clusters
Theme 1: Evidentiary Scepticism and High Thresholds for Guilt	Theme 1: Incapacity as a Clear Violation of Consent
Evidentiary uncertainty and legal doubt	Physical incapacity negates consent
One Person's word against another	Responsibility to recognise and respond to incapacity
Memory gaps as barriers to guilt	Defendant's failure to confirm consent
High thresholds for reasonable doubt	Exploitation of vulnerability
Theme 2. Application of Rape Myth Scripts	Theme 2. Resisting Victim Blaming
Real rape victims resist	Resistance to discrediting intoxicated victims
Minimisation through alcohol framing	Rejecting identity-based assumptions
Mixed signals: Capacity and compliance	Attending to non-verbal indicators of non-consent
Force and physical resistance as necessary	Credibility grounded in consistency and context
Victim credibility undermined	

the complainant's incapacity and actively resisted victim-blaming tropes. The table illustrates how clusters were interpreted through different ideological lenses, producing distinct thematic structures across the two groups. Figure 2 instead presents a visual thematic map of these divergent reasoning pathways, highlighting how MRMAS shaped participants' priorities and story construction.

3.7 | High MRMA Themes

Among the high MRMAS group ($N = 72$), not-guilty verdicts were notably prevalent ($N = 42$; 60%). Two key patterns are discussed: a pronounced scepticism toward the evidence presented in the trials and a reliance on rape myth scripts. Participants frequently cited ambiguity, memory gaps, and lack of physical evidence as barriers to conviction, while simultaneously invoking narrow and stereotyped expectations of victim

behaviour and consent. These themes reveal how high MRMAS can shape juror interpretations of sexual violence, often resulting in elevated thresholds for guilt and diminished credibility of complainants.

3.7.1 | Theme 1. Evidentiary Scepticism and High Thresholds for Guilt

A defining feature in the High MRMA group was a strong orientation towards *evidentiary scepticism*, where doubts about the reliability, clarity, or sufficiency of evidence were dominant in not-guilty verdicts. Jurors regularly referred to the legal principle of *reasonable doubt* as a decisive barrier to conviction, especially in the context of intoxication, limited memory, and conflicting testimonies. For many, the lack of explicit corroboration rendered the case ultimately unprovable. As one participant stated, 'There is no way to know as

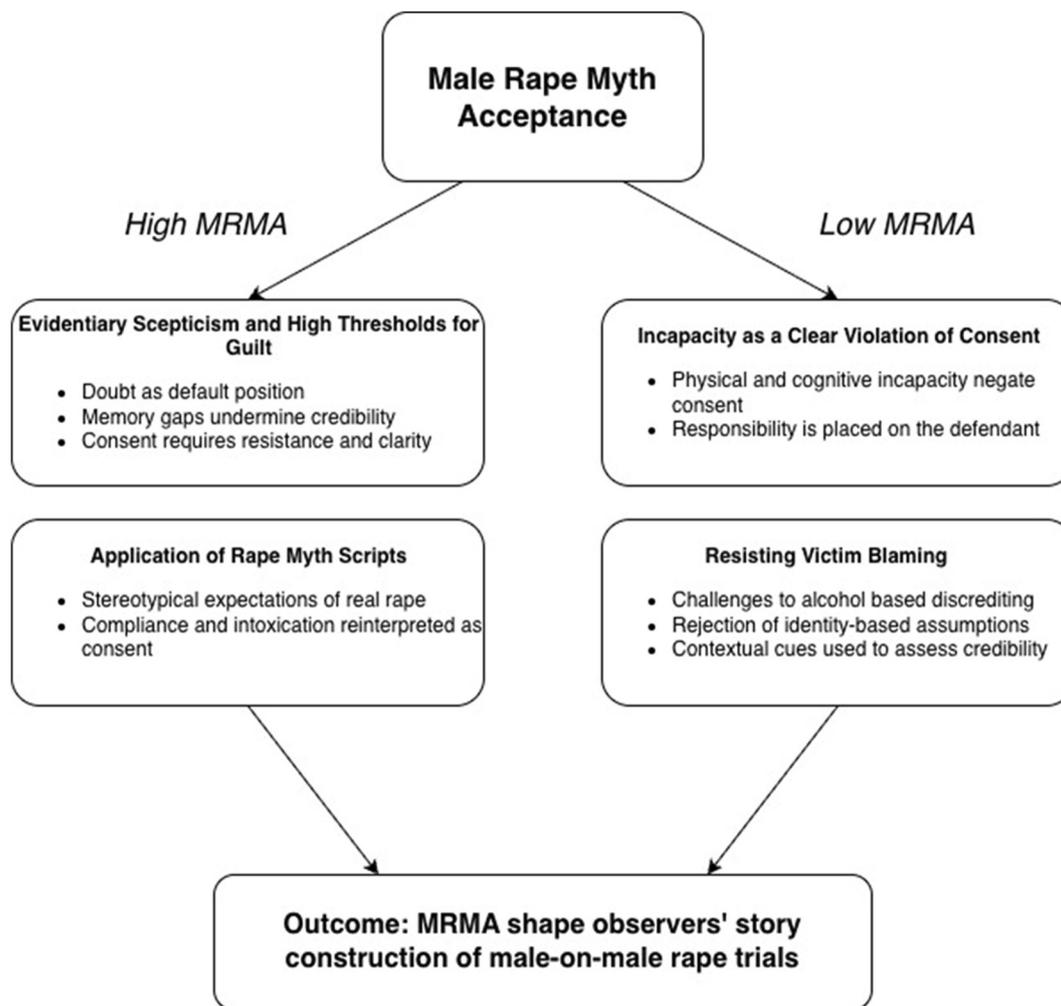


FIGURE 2 | Visual thematic map of participants' verdict reasoning by MRMA group.

it's one word against the other', a phrase that captures the broader sentiment of uncertainty overriding evaluative judgements of harm or wrongdoing. Others echoed this with statements like:

In these cases of two people disagreeing on the version of events it is for me too hard to find the defendant guilty. There is too much doubt.

Some participants acknowledged cues of incapacity—such as vomiting or instability—but ultimately framed them as insufficiently definitive. One juror commented on the conflicting implications of the CCTV:

Kyle is clearly not in control of his actions. The fact that he was vomiting and collapsed on the floor indicates his incapacitated state. Jake must have been aware of Kyle's condition.

Yet, such recognition of vulnerability did not always translate into certainty of guilt. Even when jurors believed that something non-consensual may have occurred, limitations in the complainant's memory led them to refrain from attributing legal responsibility. As one noted:

As the memory of the alleged rape is so vague I cannot hand on heart agree that the defendant is guilty, there are too many grey areas.

Thus, high rape myth acceptance was often linked to an elevated evidentiary threshold and a reluctance to interpret ambiguity in favour of the complainant.

3.7.2 | Theme 2. Application of Rape Myth Scripts

The High MRMAS sample frequently drew on traditional rape myths and scripts of how sexual violence is expected to occur—and how victims should behave. In doing so, participants justified not-guilty verdicts by setting narrow criteria for what constitutes 'real' rape, often emphasising a lack of overt resistance, physical force, or clearly communicated non-consent. Several participants referenced an *absence of resistance* as indicative of consent, drawing on the notion that 'real' victims fight back. As one participant explained:

He didn't at any point say no or stop him touching his penis. Removed his own clothes, rolled over. There's not enough evidence to prove guilt.

Such interpretations elevate *active refusal* as a necessary marker of non-consent, despite legal and psychological evidence to the contrary. Participants also frequently framed events through the lens of *alcohol-induced regret*, minimising the seriousness of the complainant's allegations. One juror stated:

I think it was possibly a drunken mistake which got out of hand for both parties.

This framing simultaneously diffuses the defendant's responsibility and recasts the complainant's experience as ambiguous or misinterpreted. A particularly detailed example illustrates the role of *mixed signals*, where the complainant's behaviour—such as touching or clothing removal—was read as compliance:

There is simply not enough evidence to categorically prove that the sexual intercourse... was not consensual... There is no dispute that the words yes or no were not used... nor was there evidence of any physical resistance... The important element of alcohol has to be considered too... there is no argument that he was intoxicated, but he was not so much so that it rendered him unconscious.

This extract highlights how compliance was conflated with consent, and how intoxication was minimised or rationalised in ways that benefit the accused. Further, *victim credibility* was often questioned using contradictory logic. Some jurors cited the complainant's *detailed memory* as undermining his claims of intoxication (e.g., 'had a good memory... more sober than he let on'), while others used *memory gaps* to discredit his account altogether (e.g., 'The complaint's memory is unreliable and he is only guessing what happened'). These contradictory assessments of memory reflect a broader pattern of discrediting the complainant's testimony, regardless of its content. Finally, some jurors relied on assumptions about physical positioning or behaviour during the encounter to rule out non-consent:

The position with him lying on his back would require the complainant to be allowing the accused to have sex with him... The complainant can't have been unconscious... would be wrong to convict.

This illustrates the invocation of *force-based scripts*, where lack of physical struggle is equated with willing participation. Taken together, this theme shows how High MRMA participants often drew on cultural narratives and myths to interpret the evidence, casting doubt on the complainant's account while reinforcing narrow constructions of what rape looks like.

3.8 | Low MRMAS Themes

In the Low MRMAS group ($N = 52$) non-guilty verdicts were significantly *less* common ($N = 13$, 25%). Two central themes are discussed: a strong recognition of intoxication as a clear barrier to consent, and a deliberate rejection of victim-blaming narratives. Participants in this group consistently interpreted signs of

incapacity as definitive indicators of non-consent, placing ethical and legal responsibility on the defendant to ensure mutual agreement. They also challenged stereotypes about victim credibility, instead grounding their judgements in contextual cues, non-verbal signals, and the internal consistency of the complainant's account. These themes reflect a more nuanced and victim-centred approach to evaluating sexual assault allegations, in stark contrast with themes in the High MRMAS group.

3.8.1 | Theme 1. Incapacity as a Clear Violation of Consent

Low MRMAS participants consistently framed the complainant's *intoxication* as a clear and sufficient condition for negating consent. This theme centres on participants' repeated assertions that the complainant's *incapacitation*—as evidenced by vomiting, physical disorientation, patchy memory, and inability to move unaided—rendered him legally and ethically unable to consent to sex. Rather than viewing intoxication as a source of ambiguity, Low MRMAS participants identified it as a critical indicator of vulnerability and a definitive marker of non-consent. Participants frequently pointed to the *responsibility of the defendant to recognise and respond to signs of incapacity*. As one participant observed:

The defendant did not take all reasonable steps to ensure the complainant consented, especially as both had consumed alcohol. Consent should have been confirmed not assumed.

This perspective reframes the legal threshold of consent as an active duty, not a passive presumption—contrasting sharply with the High MRMAS group, where the absence of refusal often stood in for assumed permission. The complainant's physical condition was also cited as *direct evidence of an inability to consent*. One juror remarked:

The complainant was too drunk to consent, drunk enough to cause sickness and need support in moving to his bedroom, if he can't move around by himself he cannot consent to sex.

In such reasoning, capacity is measured not only by verbal articulation but also by observable physical and cognitive functioning. This view was often anchored in *victim-centred definitions of rape*, whereby consent is invalid in the absence of mutual awareness and capability. As one juror put it:

There is an onus to ensure that both parties are in a fit state to consent and that they actually do consent. Without that consent, the act is rape.

Such accounts position incapacity not as a technical ambiguity but as a structural failure in the ethics of sexual negotiation. A strong undercurrent in this theme was the perception of *exploitation of vulnerability*. Several participants interpreted the defendant's actions as opportunistic, highlighting power

imbalances that were heightened by alcohol consumption. For example:

It appeared that the victim was not in a position due to being intoxicated to fend off the advances or be able to voice no. He was taken advantage of in a situation where he was not able to speak his own mind.

Another participant elaborated:

The state of the victim by both parties shows that he was very drunk... The defendant admitted that he didn't really know if [the victim] actually fully agreed to the sex or not. He took advantage of the vulnerable state of the victim for his own needs, probably thinking he won't remember a lot of this.

This theme underscores a distinct ethical and evidentiary logic within the Low MRMAS group: the complainant's incapacity is not merely a complicating factor, but the *central violation* that renders the defendant culpable. Consent is not seen as implied or assumed through silence or passivity, but as something that must be clearly, consciously, and mutually affirmed—particularly in contexts involving alcohol and impaired cognition.

3.8.2 | Theme 2. Resisting Victim Blaming

Jurors in the Low MRMAS group consistently demonstrated a critical awareness of how rape myths function to delegitimise complainants and shift responsibility away from defendants. Unlike those in the High MRMAS group, these participants actively *rejected* attempts to undermine the complainant's credibility based on intoxication, sexual orientation, memory gaps, or the absence of explicit verbal refusal. Their verdict justifications revealed a stronger alignment with contemporary understandings of affirmative and contextual consent. Several jurors dismissed *attempts to discredit the complainant* on the grounds of intoxication or impaired memory. One stated:

The complainant didn't give consent, and the defence tried to discredit him because he was drunk and didn't remember things properly.

Such responses reflect resistance to long-standing tropes that treat intoxication as undermining reliability rather than as a vulnerability requiring heightened safeguarding. One participant directly challenged *identity-based assumptions* about sexual availability, rejecting stereotypes associated with sexuality (e.g., 'Why were police called if it didn't happen? Being gay does not give you consent.'). *illustrating how* consent cannot be presumed from identity or sexual orientation, countering myths that frame gay men as universally sexually available, or predatory encounters as expected. A prominent feature of this theme was the attention to *non-verbal and contextual indicators of non-consent*. Jurors recognised the limitations of requiring verbal refusal when the complainant was visibly incapacitated. One noted:

No consent was given, and the guy was clearly drunk, had just been sick and wasn't fully aware of things, and he complained of pain and curled up away to try and stop it.

Another added:

I chose this verdict because Kyle was not able to consent, had made specific body language signs he was not consenting, and had not said yes. He was far too incapacitated to agree to the sexual encounter and he was a heterosexual male, who did not want the sexual attention.

Finally, jurors foregrounded *credibility* not as a function of stereotype conformity, but purely on the *internal coherence and consistency of the evidence presented to them*:

I found the defendant guilty based on the complainant's consistent and credible account, including his clear expressions, both verbal and non-verbal, of non-consent.

In doing so, participants shifted attention away from perceived flaws in the complainant's behaviour to the substantive indicators of incapacity and coercion. Taken together, this theme captures how Low MRMAS jurors demonstrated rape myth rejection by affirming the complainant's credibility, recognising non-verbal expressions of distress or refusal, and rejecting identity-based or intoxication-based discrediting narratives. Their reasoning suggests a more nuanced understanding of how power, impairment, and social scripts interact in cases of sexual violence.

4 | Discussion

The current study tested three hypotheses. The first was that the defendant's ethnicity would significantly impact verdicts and perception of guilt, with more guilty verdicts and a higher perception of guilt rating being given for Black and Asian men when compared to Caucasian Men. This hypothesis was rejected. Previous theory and psychological literature suggested that the ethnicity of the defendant may have influenced decision-making through stereotyping and cognitive bias (L. C. Curley, Munro, and Dror 2022; L. C. Curley, Murray et al. 2022; Esqueda et al. 2008; Gindrow 2023; Landwehr et al. 2002; Lecci and Myers 2009; Sommers and Ellsworth 2009; Kahneman and Tversky 1984) when reaching verdicts. There might be two explanations for the null effects observed; (1) social desirability bias (Larson 2019); (2) the elaboration likelihood model (Petty et al. 1986). It should be mentioned, however, that defendant's ethnicity was a significant predictor of perception of guilt. However, these effects did not impact on the outcome that real jurors would choose (i.e., verdicts), meaning that the perception of the defendant may differ depending on their ethnicity, but that these effects do not translate to verdicts. Likewise, readers should be cautious of this finding as caucasian defendants were

judged more harshly in comparison to black defendants, which may represent a social desirability bias (Grimm 2010). The below paragraph will further explore why defendant ethnicity and verdicts was not associated.

First, the participants in the Black and Asian condition may not have responded how they would have in a realistic jury scenario as they were worried about being judged, or perceived to be racist, by the researchers. Second, the materials presented to participants, although legally accurate, lacked ecological validity (e.g., the median time was 24 min, when most trials can take weeks) and may not have been cognitive taxing on the mock jurors. In this context, the stimuli employed to manipulate defendants' ethnicity may not have been sufficiently effective in influencing participants' perceptions of the defendant. The elaboration likelihood model suggests that when the environment is taxing, decision makers may rely on cognitive shortcuts and biases to make decisions, whereas when it is not cognitively taxing, they may have enough cognitive resources to reach the decision rationally (for a full overview of model see Petty et al. 1986). Therefore, the experimental nature of the current study may have allowed jurors to use their cognitive resources to ignore the effects of ethnicity, whereas jurors in realistic studies, who may be overwhelmed with forensic evidence and legalese, may lack these cognitive resources and thus rely on bias to inform their decision-making (L. J. Curley and Peddie 2024). Notably, the absence of a causal relationship between the defendant's ethnicity and the verdicts was corroborated by the qualitative findings of our study, wherein none of the participants made references to the defendant's race as a justification for their verdicts.

The second hypothesis was that the complainant's sexuality would have a significant influence on both verdicts and perception of guilt, where jurors in the gay complainant condition would be more readily believed than their counterparts in the straight complainant condition. This hypothesis was also rejected. Other research related to sex-based crimes and stalking has shown that the sexuality of the victim (i.e., complaint) and perpetrator (i.e., accused) does not influence perceptions relating to the crime (Brenik et al. 2025; Cook and Duff 2022; Stevens et al. 2024), thus suggesting that sexuality of the legal actors involved (complainer/victim) may play a minor role in perceptions and decision-making. This does not mean, however, as we will discuss later, that rape myths are not dependent on the gender and sexuality of the victim (Hine et al. 2021), rather it means that the sexuality of the complainer itself may not shape decision-making.

Interestingly, however, sexuality was found to influence complainant believability judgements on the JDS, with jurors being more likely to believe straight complainants over gay complainants. Although it should be acknowledged this is a small effect. This may then suggest that the effects of knowledge regarding the sexuality of the complainant may have a small, yet significant effect, on a part of story construction (i.e., complainant believability) (Pennington and Hastie 1992; Willmott et al. 2018), which might then shape the verdict that is selected. However, this effect is not large enough to influence verdict decisions directly and should be further explored in

future research. Similar to discussion with the first hypothesis though, when studied in more realistic environments, where the cognitive resources of the decision maker are more likely to mirror those of real jurors, the size of this effect may increase. Indeed, although a small effect of complainant sexuality was discovered, only one guilty verdict alluded to it in their qualitative responses to the complainant sexuality, thereby reinforcing the established male rape myth that men who assert they have been raped do so because they regret having sexual intercourse with another man (Widanaralalage et al. 2024).

Hypothesis three was that the subscales of complainant and defendant believability would mediate the relationship between MRMAS and juror verdicts. This hypothesis was accepted. Interestingly, this analysis suggests that male rape myths may influence verdicts through story construction. Willmott et al. (2018) showed similar results, where their research highlighted that the creation of stories (as measured through the JDS) may mediate the relationship between traditional rape myths, focussed on females, and verdicts, within rape trials (see Willmott et al. 2018). Further, the findings from the current paper, similarly to Pennington and Hastie's (1992) original work, suggest that jurors create narratives during a trial, in part formed by pre-trial biases—in this case male rape myths—and then chose a verdict (guilty or not guilty) which best matches their story. What is not clear, however, is whether jurors create multiple stories and then select using certainty principles (as Pennington and Hastie 1992 suggest) or jurors only create one story (a prosecution or a defence based narrative). Our qualitative findings, thus, provide a unique insight into jurors' decision-making process by showing that those high in MRMAS overwhelmingly constructed singular, defence-aligned stories shaped by evidentiary scepticism and rape myth scripts, whereas those low in MRMA produced prosecution-oriented narratives grounded in vulnerability, contextual cues, and rejection of victim-blaming.

This divergence in narrative construction highlights how rape myths operate along a continuum, shaping the extent to which observers interpret contested accounts of sexual interaction in favour of, or against, male complainants and defendants. While many participants—particularly those in the high MRMAS group—explicitly framed their verdict justifications in terms of doubt or uncertainty, the consistency in the sources of that doubt (e.g., memory gaps, absence of resistance, lack of physical evidence) reveals a deeper polarisation in evaluative reasoning. These patterns suggest that rape myths influence not only verdict outcomes but also the evidentiary standards jurors apply when assessing credibility (Smith and Skinner 2017). In particular, MRMAS appears to elevate thresholds for conviction beyond what is required in law, functioning as an interpretive filter that distorts how evidence is weighed (Larcombe et al. 2016). This is especially salient in light of persistent difficulties in prosecuting rape cases (Hudspith et al. 2023, 2024). If rape myth scripts are used to raise the burden of proof, they not only erode the presumption of credibility but impose a biased test unrelated to legal norms—one that disproportionately deters reporting among marginalised groups, including LGBTQ+ individuals and, as our findings suggest, male survivors of sexual violence (Widanaralalage et al. 2022, 2024, 2025).

Another important point of divergence concerned the groups' interpretation of intoxication, with high MRMAS participants minimising the defendant's accountability and treating intoxication as a source of ambiguity or regret, while low MRMAS participants framed it as definitive evidence negating consent. This dual interpretation is particularly salient considering well-established associations between intoxication, rape myth acceptance, and victim-blaming (Grubb and Turner 2012; Sleath and Bull 2017). In our study, the same evidentiary cue—alcohol consumption—produced unequal standards of justice, contingent on jurors' myth acceptance. Notably, high MRMAS jurors often undermined complainant credibility regardless of how memory was presented: detailed recollections were taken to suggest insufficient intoxication, whereas vague or fragmented memory was treated as inherently unreliable. This asymmetry reveals a motivated, rape myth-informed decision-making process, whereby evidence is selectively interpreted to reinforce a defence-supportive narrative. These patterns align closely with our mediation findings, which showed that higher MRMAS significantly reduced complainant believability and increased defendant believability—both of which mediated the relationship between MRMAS and verdict. The qualitative data thus provide crucial insight into the mechanisms behind these statistical effects, illustrating how credibility is not assessed neutrally but filtered through myth-based narrative construction.

4.1 | Strengths, Limitations and Future Research

One of the strengths of the present study is in its mixed-methods design, which examines jury decision making process and MRMAS by integrating mediation models and qualitative insights from respondents' own justifications of their verdicts. This allowed for a more nuanced examination of MRMAS influences and respondents' interpretative processes, providing new insights into how jurors' construct stories in male-on-male rape trials, an under researched phenomenon, but widespread phenomenon of interest for the UK criminal legal system. By examining the topic in a well-powered, diverse and representative public sample (via Prolific), our study's findings move away from student samples and ensure good external validity (Diamond 1997; L. J. Curley and Peddie 2024). A second strength of the study was that the vignettes were legally relevant and used official looking court materials to increase ecological validity as much as possible, whilst also ensuring experimental control (Krauss and Lieberman 2017).

The limitations of the current study relate mostly to ecological validity. The current study lacked juror deliberations, did not use video materials, and lacked consequentiality (i.e., jurors knew it was not a real trial). Further, the study took a median time of 24 min, which is a stark contrast to actual trials that unfold over days and weeks. This is not just unique to the current research and has widely been critiqued within the literature (L. J. Curley and Peddie 2024; Weiten and Diamond 1979; Willmott and Hudspith 2024); these issues persist due to factors associated with the time and cost that full deliberations take. These factors may decrease both the external and ecological validity of the current study, thus limiting the

generalisability of the findings. Further, the absence of jury deliberations may further limit the generalisability of the results, as verdicts are reached in the UK through deliberations between a jury and not individual juror cognitions. Given the study's logistic constraints requiring a controlled setting to establish which factors were associated with verdicts (L. J. Curley and Peddie 2024), future research is required to investigate if these factors continue to influence verdicts when deliberations are included. Nevertheless, limited realism, time constraints, and lack of deliberations do limit the generalisability of the findings.

A second limitation regards the use of abstract measures of rape myths (i.e., the use of MRMAS), as some researchers (see Daly et al. 2023) suggest that these measures underestimate rape myths and do not count for how deliberations are used in practice. The authors agree with these critiques but also propose that these measures have good predictive validity and internal consistency (Hine et al. 2021) and although they may underestimate rape myths, they do give an indication of the negative association they may have with decision-making in the courtroom.

A third limitation is that the use of the JDS did not fully capture the dynamic and iterative process of narrative construction that jurors may use during the trials to make sense of the evidence and reach verdicts (Pennington and Hastie 1992). And, that the use of the JDS might be accused as a reductionist attempt to fully capture the nuances of the Story Model. However, internal consistency scores show that the scale was good at capturing key elements of the Story Model (such as the relevant certainty principles) in a male-on-male rape trial. The scale has also been validated in a traditional rape trial, where the complainant was female (see Willmott et al. 2018). However, to fully explore the Story Model, future research may benefit from complementary methodologies that more directly assess the dynamic aspects of narrative construction, such as think-aloud protocols (see Oliver et al. 2021, for a discussion of specific think aloud protocols).

Based on the limitations above, future research should extend on our research by moving from a highly controlled experiment towards a more nuanced and realistic experiment with high ecological validity (see Willmott et al. 2021 for six minimum criteria that mock rape trial research should consider). Specific efforts should be made to explore and examine the effects of rape myths and racial/ethnicity biases within a mock trial scenario. This scenario should utilise a realistic trial stimulus and incorporate mock jury decision-making. This would allow researchers to increase the ecological validity of the study and capture rich qualitative data from the deliberations.

5 | Conclusion

In conclusion, complainant and defendant believability have been shown to mediate the relationship between male rape myths and verdicts. This may suggest that pre-trial biases influence story formation, which may then have an impact on the verdicts that jurors reached. Interestingly, the defendant's ethnicity and the complainant's sexuality did not significantly

influence guilt ratings (at least in expected direction) or verdicts. However, complainant sexuality did have a weak effect on complainant believability, with straight men being more likely to be believed, suggesting that this factor may influence story construction. Through its mixed-methods approach, the study also offers new qualitative insights into the mechanisms by which rape myths shape juror reasoning in male on male rape trials, demonstrating divergent narrative logics between high and low MRMA participants. These findings challenge assumptions about juror neutrality and point to the interpretive labour involved in trial decision-making, particularly in cases that deviate from stereotypical rape scripts. Future research should build on these findings by incorporating more realistic trial simulations that include group deliberation to understand how biases are negotiated within high-stakes group settings. Nevertheless, our findings have important implications for rape myth education, juror screening, and legal reform discourse (Hudspith et al. 2023, 2024; Willmott and Hudspith 2024). They show how rape myths pose a substantial challenge to justice in male-on-male rape trials, particularly when complainants are intoxicated or do not conform to heteronormative expectations.

Author Contributions

Lee J. Curley: methodology, investigation, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing, project administration, quantitative data analysis. **B. Kennath Widanaralage:** methodology, investigation, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing, qualitative analysis. **Dominic Willmott:** conceptualization, methodology, investigation, writing – review and editing, project administration. **Joanna Ermenkova:** qualitative data analysis, writing – review and editing.

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Ethics Statement

Ethical approval was obtained from the Loughborough University. The procedures used in this study adhere to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki and the BPS, and all participants gave their informed consent prior to data collection.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Anonymised data and mock trial transcripts can be provided on request from the lead author.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.

Supporting Information S1: bsl70044-sup-0001-suppl-data.docx.

Appendix A: Analysis.

Table A1

TABLE A1 | ANOVA investigating influence of ethnicity and sexuality on decision confidence.

Tests of between-subjects effects						
Dependent variable: DCon						
Source	Type III sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.	
Corrected model	13.825 ^a	5	2.765	0.882	0.493	
Intercept	25,273.542	1	25,273.542	8060.897	0.000	
RaceCondition	1.082	2	0.541	0.173	0.842	
SexualityCondition	3.916	1	3.916	1.249	0.264	
RaceCondition × SexualityCondition	8.918	2	4.459	1.422	0.242	
Error	1432.844	457	3.135			
Total	26,768.000	463				
Corrected total	1446.670	462				

^aR Squared = 0.010 (adjusted R Squared = -0.001).

Table A2

TABLE A2 | ANOVA investigating influence of ethnicity and sexuality on defendant believability.

Tests of between-subjects effects					
Dependent variable: DB					
Source	Type III sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Corrected model	99.359 ^a	5	19.872	0.886	0.491
Intercept	189,710.082	1	189,710.082	8454.124	0.000
RaceCondition	58.548	2	29.274	1.305	0.272
SexualityCondition	18.802	1	18.802	0.838	0.360
RaceCondition × SexualityCondition	23.460	2	11.730	0.523	0.593
Error	10,255.056	457	22.440		
Total	200,345.000	463			
Corrected total	10,354.415	462			

^aR Squared = 0.010 (adjusted R Squared = -0.001).

Table A3

TABLE A3 | ANOVA investigating influence of ethnicity and sexuality on MRMAS.

Tests of between-subjects effects						
Dependent variable: mrmass						
Source	Type III sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.	Partial eta squared
Corrected model	546.715 ^a	5	109.343	0.330	0.895	0.004
Intercept	1,724,340.977	1	1,724,340.977	5196.493	0.000	0.919
RaceCondition	422.061	2	211.030	0.636	0.530	0.003
SexualityCondition	114.463	1	114.463	0.345	0.557	0.001
RaceCondition × SexualityCondition	11.663	2	5.831	0.018	0.983	0.000
Error	151,645.329	457	331.828			
Total	1,879,532.000	463				
Corrected total	152,192.043	462				

^aR Squared = 0.004 (adjusted R Squared = -0.007).