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10.1111/asap.12312
Wrightson-Hester, A. R., Allan, A., & Allan, M. M. (2022). “I'm not batman” and other factors impacting bystander intervention against sexual violence in Australian nightlife settings. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 22(2), 669-693.
https://doi.org/10.1111/asap.12312
This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.
https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks2022-2026/640

Received: 27 September 2021 | Revised: 22 March 2022 | Accepted: 23 March 2022

DOI: 10.1111/asap.12312

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

asap Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy SPSSI WILEY

"I'm not batman" and other factors impacting bystander intervention against sexual violence in Australian nightlife settings

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Abstract

Unsolicited sexual behaviors that constitute sexual violence appear to be commonplace in nightlife settings in many countries and bystander intervention might be a way to eliminate them. However, few researchers have investigated the barriers and facilitators that affect Australian bystanders' likelihood to help, and these should be considered in the planning of bystander intervention programs. Using a grounded theory approach, we interviewed fourteen men and women about their perceptions of factors that might influence bystander behavior in Australian nightlife settings. The categories identified suggest that it is difficult for nightlife patrons to notice and identify sexual violence occurring around them. Further, nightlife patrons respect other patrons' right to engage in sexual behavior and will not intervene unless the recipient has been harmed by the behavior. Patrons are, also, much more likely to help when the recipient is a friend or a woman. Traditional bystander intervention programs on their own might not sufficiently address these barriers. Programs will also need to address patrons' perceptions of sexual violence

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and the prevailing social and gender norms in nightlife settings regarding sexual behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Nightlife settings (i.e., bars and nightclubs) have historically served an important social function as places where people go to relax, socialize, and perhaps find sexual partners (Ronen, 2010). Consequently, the continuum of sexual behaviors that occurs within nightlife settings is far greater than in other public spaces (Graham, Bernards, Osgood et al., 2014) and sexual advances that would not be accepted elsewhere (e.g., workplaces; McDonald & Charlesworth, 2016; Pina & Gannon, 2012) are sometimes welcomed and/or tolerated in nightlife settings (see Ronen, 2010). Qualitative researchers report that unsolicited grabbing, grinding, and kissing are commonplace and even normalized in nightlife settings (see Fileborn, 2017; Ronen, 2010). These behaviors nevertheless meet the World Health Organization's (2010, p. 11) definition of sexual violence: "any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments, or advances, … against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person …, in any setting."

The exact prevalence of sexual violence in nightlife settings is difficult to determine and research findings varies notably depending on the type of contact, the setting, from night to night and country to country. Sanchez, Santos, Sanudo et al. (2019) reported that 9.8% of men and women, who attended any of the 31 nightlife settings surveyed in Brazil, experienced forced groping and/or forced kissing on the night of the study. Graham, Bernards, Osgood et al. (2014) reported that 50% of patrons in large capacity bars and clubs in Canada experienced persistent or unwanted touching on a given night. United States researchers found that the lifetime prevalence rates for sexual violence in nightlife settings are consistently high, ranging from 57% for both men and women in a sample of mostly college students and graduates in the southern United States (see Becker & Tinkler, 2015) to 80% in a sample of women from the northern United States (see Kavanaugh, 2013). In most studies, women were more likely to experience sexual violence than men and less likely than men to be the perpetrators of these behaviors (Graham et al., 2006; Graham, Bernards, Osgood et al., 2014; Becker & Tinkler, 2015; Tinkler et al., 2018). Similar statistics are not available for Australian nightlife settings. A discussion of all the factors that contribute to an increased risk of sexual violence in nightlife settings is impossible within the confines of this paper but include a combination of alcohol (see Becker & Tinkler, 2015; Graham, Bernards, Abbey et al., 2014; Testa & Cleveland, 2017; Orchowski et al., 2018; Quigg et al., 2020), perpetrators' personality or beliefs (Testa & Cleveland, 2017), and victims' behavior (Jouriles et al., 2020).

Research has shown that unwanted touching and kissing violate the personal norms of most young nightlife patrons (e.g., Wrightson-Hester et al., 2019) and can cause distress to those who experience them (e.g., Kavanaugh, 2013). Researchers have therefore tried to better understand the dynamics that lead to these behaviors and have begun investigating how to address them (see Quigg et al., 2020). There are three broad categories of strategies to prevent sexual violence in public settings such as college campuses and nightlife settings. Traditionally public health style education and awareness campaigns, such as the Good Night Out Campaign in the United Kingdom (Good Night Out Campaign CIC, 2022), have been used to inform people how to behave appropriately (Brooks, 2011; Fileborn, 2017; Gunby et al., 2017). The highly sexualized environment of nightlife settings (Gunby et al., 2017) that encourages risky and aggressive sexual advances (Anderson et al., 2009), however, undermines the success of these programs. The second approach is to

educate patrons about what they can do to keep themselves safe during a night out (e.g., Fileborn, 2016; Graham, Bernards, Abbey, et al., 2014, 2017; Kavanaugh & Anderson, 2009; Kovac & Trussell, 2015). A criticism of these programs is that they place the onus on the potential victims to avoid sexual violence rather than addressing the cause of the behavior (Banyard et al., 2004). Some therefore argue for a third approach, bystander intervention, where the onus of stamping out sexual violence is on the relevant community and not on the potential recipients of such behavior (e.g., Banyard et al., 2007). Bystander programs are used to encourage intervention and have been developed for use in America (see Stand Up, Don't Stand By, n.d.), New Zealand (see RespectEd Aotearoa, n.d.), the UK (see STOP-SV, Quigg et al., 2018), and Australia (see Australia Says No More, 2018).

The theoretical basis for these programs is the situational model of bystander intervention that Latané and Darley (1970) developed to explain bystanders' helping behavior in emergency situations. Their model outlines five stages of decision making those bystanders must move through; at each stage social and personal factors exist that might inhibit (i.e., barriers) or motivate bystander intervention (i.e., facilitators). Latané and Darley state bystanders must first notice the incident, second interpret the event as an emergency, third take personal responsibility for intervening, fourth decide how they will act, and finally, act. The model has been applied in many emergency situations and has robust support (see Fischer et al., 2011, for a meta-analytic review). In more recent years, the model has been applied to examine barriers that influence bystander behavior specifically in response to sexual violence (see Burn, 2009). Like Latané and Darley (1970), Burn (2009) found that there were barriers present at the different stages that inhibited bystanders' likelihood of responding to acquaintance sexual assault on American campuses. Burn, for instance, found that the party atmosphere can distract bystanders so that they fail to notice sexual violence occurring around them. Burn recommended the use of bystander programs on campuses to address the identified barriers and improve bystander intervention.

Quigg et al.'s (2020) recent review of sexual violence in nightlife settings, however, shows a lack of empirically tested bystander intervention programs in nightlife settings. They found only five studies referring to bystander behavior (Fileborn, 2017; Graham, Bernards, Osgood, et al., 2014; Haikalis et al., 2018; Powers & Leili, 2016, 2018). One study asked patrons how they think sexual violence should be addressed in nightlife settings with bystander intervention being one option that arose (Fileborn, 2017). Two studies examined the effectiveness of a bystander program training staff to be active bystanders (Powers & Leili, 2016, 2018), but to our knowledge no studies have evaluated a bystander program in nightlife settings with patrons as bystanders. The other two studies show that current rates of bystander intervention in public nightlife settings are low (Graham, Bernards, Osgood, et al., 2014; Haikalis et al., 2018). Notably Graham, Bernards, Osgood et al. (2014) found that in some cases bystanders might encourage the perpetrator of sexual violence rather than help the victim.

Due to a lack of nightlife specific research regarding peer bystander intervention, it could therefore be useful to look at research on peer bystander intervention against sexual violence in a similar context, such as social events on college campuses. North American college campuses use programs such as Bringing in the Bystander (Banyard et al., 2007), Friends Helping Friends (Amar et al., 2015), and The Men's Program (Gidycz et al., 2011) to encourage peers to take responsibility for preventing sexual violence. These programs encourage peer bystanders to intervene when they notice somebody who is the recipient of sexual violence and show promise in reducing sexual violence on campuses (see Kettrey & Marx, 2019).

Labhardt et al. (2017) conducted a systematic review of bystander interventions on college campuses, and they found that most of the research projects were quantitative studies that had been

undertaken in North America. They nevertheless identified three relevant factors that might influence bystander behavior. First, the gender of the bystander appears to impact bystander behavior, with women more likely to intervene, but the findings in terms of the intent and engagement of the different genders in bystander behaviors are inconclusive. Labhardt et al. recommend that future researchers should use qualitative methods to provide a more detailed description and understanding of how and why men and women might engage differently in both hypothetical and real incidents of sexual violence.

Second, "peer attitudes" (Labhardt et al., 2017, p. 21) appear to influence personal attitudes and subsequent bystander behavior but Labhardt et al. (2017) do not define peer attitudes. Most authors of the relevant papers they reviewed do not provide clear definitions either, except Banyard et al. (2014) who state they investigated descriptive norms (an individual's perception of how people typically behave in a setting, i.e., what does happen; Cialdini et al., 1990) and Fabiano et al. (2003) who followed a social norms approach (see Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986). The authors of the other studies appear to have investigated patrons' injunctive norms (an individual's perception of what is acceptable behavior in a setting, i.e., what ought to happen; Cialdini et al., 1990) as they asked how acceptable or unacceptable their peers would regard certain behaviors (e.g., Banyard & Moynihan, 2011; Brown et al., 2014; Brown & Messman-Moore, 2010). The findings vary across studies, with some papers finding that both descriptive and injunctive norms can increase or decrease bystander intervention or the intention to intervene, depending on the salient norm and whether it was supportive of bystander intervention (Banyard & Moynihan, 2011; Banyard et al., 2014; Brown et al., 2014). Other researchers found patrons are more likely to act in accordance with their own personal norms than social norms (Brown-Messman-Moore, 2010; Fabiano et al., 2003).

Third, the existence or lack of a prior relationship with the actor and/or recipient of sexual violence also appears to influence bystander behavior. People are loyal to their friends and feel a responsibility to help them (see Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and researchers therefore unsurprisingly found bystanders are more likely to assist their friends and acquaintances than strangers (Katz, Pazienza, Olin, et al. 2015) and in different ways (Palmer et al., 2018). Recent research, however, shows that the relationship between bystander intervention and a prior relationship is complex (Bennett et al., 2017; Bennett & Banyard, 2016). A prior relationship with the perpetrator of sexual violence can sometimes impede bystander behavior (Bennett et al., 2017; McMahon & Farmer, 2009; Nicksa, 2014). Researchers further found that bystanders are more likely to assist those they are unacquainted with when the incident observed is clearly an incident of sexual violence and the recipient is distressed (e.g., Harari et al., 1985; Shotland & Stebbins, 1980).

The findings from the campus bystander research are therefore inconclusive and sometimes contradictory. Kania and Cale (2021) furthermore demonstrated that findings from North American campuses and nightlife settings cannot be applied in Australia without further investigation. They conducted an online study of Australian university students using American measures and found that unlike American students (e.g., Bennett et al., 2014), who considered skills deficits and failure to take responsibility to be the major barriers, Australian students reported the failure to identify a situation as a high-risk situation as the largest barrier to intervening. Kania and Cale furthermore found that there were differences between domestic and international students' bystander behavior, and they concluded that their findings suggest that it would be unwise to simply adapt bystander programs from overseas for use in Australia without further examining the unique Australian context.

Despite the relative scarcity of international, and absence of Australian, research regarding the efficacy of peer bystander intervention programs in nightlife settings and in the face of evidence

that some peer bystander interventions can be counterproductive (see Graham, Bernards, Osgood, et al., 2014) Australia has started introducing bystander programs (e.g., Australia Says No More). Given the immaturity of the research in this field in Australia we decided to undertake a qualitative study as suggested by Labhardt et al. (2017) and Kania and Cale (2021) to better examine and understand young Australians' perceptions of the factors that influence bystander decision making in nightlife settings.

METHOD

In the absence of bystander research in public nightlife settings in Australia we used a qualitative research method, namely grounded theory (see Birks & Mills, 2011; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Our intention was not to develop a theory, but grounded theory is an appropriate method to examine complex human interactions such as those found in nightlife settings and to ensure the findings are grounded in the responses of the participants (see Birks & Mills, 2011; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). We used theoretical sampling to ensure the representativeness of our sample and did not decide on the size of our sample in advance but rather aimed to recruit participants until we had achieved saturation (see Corbin & Strauss, 2015); a secondary goal was to achieve an equal number of interviews with men and women.

Participants

Participants were initially selected for the sample based on three inclusion criteria; gender, age (range 19–29), and whether they had attended a nightlife setting within the last 6 months. In later stages efforts were also made to select participants who had differing education backgrounds to better represent the diverse population of nightlife patrons. This meant the final sample consisted of 14 participants (seven men and seven women), whose highest level of education ranged from high school completion to bachelor's degrees. The frequency of the fourteen participants' visits varied from those who went at least once a week to those who only went for special occasions, such as music events or friends' birthdays. We did not inquire about participants' sexuality directly but during the interviews one person identified as a queer woman, and all other participants as heterosexual. Eleven participants (five men and six women) described incidents in which they had previously engaged in bystander behavior in a nightlife setting, ranging from removing the recipient from the situation to confronting the actor. Thirteen described incidents of sexual violence they had experienced (six men and seven women), ranging from unwanted sexual advances to genital grabbing.

Materials

The interview guide (see Supporting Information) consisted of a hypothetical vignette followed by open ended questions to elicit responses that were representative of participants' true views (see Hughes & Huby, 2004; Sheppard & Ryan, 2003). We asked participants questions to determine what barriers and facilitators they thought would influence whether they would intervene in relation to the vignette behavior. Each interview began by confirming that participants met all inclusion criteria and establishing how regularly participants frequented nightlife settings, described to

participants as any public nightlife setting such as a bar and/or nightclub. The following vignette was then read to all participants "Sarah (woman) is dancing in a crowd and John (man) who is a part of the crowd unexpectedly grabs her bum." We chose this behavior as Australian participants in Wrightson-Hester et al.'s (2019) study rated it the most typical of three nightlife behaviors presented and we anticipated most participants would be familiar with this type of behavior. The interviewer also invited participants to refer to similar behaviors they had observed in their responses. During the interview participants were also asked to consider their responses if the actor had been a woman rather than a man.

Procedure

We started recruiting participants after our institution's ethical approval by placing advertisements on social media and our campus, those who contacted the researcher were sent the study's information document and a consent form via email. We confirmed that potential participants met the inclusion criteria and arranged interviews with them once they returned their consent forms. The first author initially interviewed four participants (two men and two women). This data was then analyzed before recruiting further participants through the same aforementioned methods and snowballing. To avoid duplication of incidents discussed by friends, care was taken when using referred participants, the final sample included two pairs of heterosexual intimate partners (two men and two women) and one pair of friends (two men). Interview duration ranged from 29 min to 2 h and 21 min ($M = 42$ min), only two interviews were longer than an hour with both participants describing multiple incidents they had witnessed and/or experienced. All interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants and participants received a $20 gift voucher for participating.

Data analysis

Data analysis began during the data collection process as prescribed by grounded theory (Birks & Mills, 2011; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The first author conducted all transcription and initial line by line coding, in which similar codes were grouped together into an initial list of categories and sub-categories. These codes and emerging categories, along with the transcripts and exemplar quotes, were regularly discussed with other members of the research team and altered to ensure that the categories were representative of the participants' responses and that alternative meanings had been considered. Axial coding was then used to organize categories and sub-categories. Throughout this process new interview data were introduced and compared, differences and similarities between old and new data were considered and reconceptualization of categories undertaken when necessary. Quotes were selected in careful consideration by the first and second author. Relevant literature was used to organize and understand the categories discussed by the participants, in particular, Latané and Darley's (1970) bystander model and Burn's (2009) model.

FINDINGS

Nightlife patrons acknowledged that sexual violence occurs in nightlife settings and described a range of behaviors they had witnessed or experienced during their time at nightlife settings.

TABLE 1 Categories and sub-categories

Categories	Sub-categories
Nightlife settings (5 W, 6 M)	
Interpreting an incident as sexual violence (4 W, 6 M)	Ambiguity (4 W, 6 M)
	Social norms (6 W, 7 M)
Harm (7 W, 7 M)[a]	Intent (6 W, 5 M)[a]
	Vulnerability (7 W, 6M)[a]
	Recipient response (4 W, 6 M)[a]
Autonomy (4 W, 5 M)	
How to act (6 W, 7 M)	Own safety (5 W, 5 M)
Audience inhibition (4 W, 4 M)	
Friends (7 W, 7 M)[a]	

W, number of women who contributed to this category or sub-category. M, number of men who contributed to this category or sub-category.
[a]Indicates categories or sub-categories that improve bystander behavior.

Overall, participants find sexual violence personally unacceptable. However, they also admitted they have reservations when it comes to intervening and, in most cases, would not help a recipient of sexual violence. Our participants' attitude was well summed up by one of them who said *"I'm not batman. I'm just a regular guy! I'm not beating up bad guys"* (26M; excerpts throughout have been lightly edited to improve readability). Their perception is further that most other nightlife patrons would also do nothing.

> Erm just turn a blind eye, if you're just enjoying your night then I guess it wasn't erm affecting you then it's just easier to not... Clearly everyone else is taking the same idea they don't want to make a big deal about it. I just wanna enjoy my night. (23F)

We identified seven categories that appear to explain nightlife patrons' behavior or lack thereof in respect of the broad range of behaviors mentioned, hereon referred to collectively as sexual violence. See Table 1 for the number of participants' data each category and sub-category draws upon.

Nightlife settings

Nightlife settings have features that make them a unique environment. These features might make them attractive but might also lead to experiences and behavior that could impair patrons' ability to observe the behavior around them, including possible sexual violence. These features include the physical setting, such as darkness, loud music, and crowding, which makes it difficult for patrons to see what is happening around them, whether the behavior is wanted or unwanted, and to act when they witness behavior they suspect to be sexual violence.

> Its dim, the lights are dim in a nightclub. I think also when it's over capacity or close to capacity, then you can't see it [sexual behavior] actually happen and then also the

> loud music and stuff. It would be so much harder to confront someone about it than just walk away from it. (29F)

Participants believe being under the influence of alcohol and other substances in a nightclub also impairs patrons' ability to understand what is happening around them and to therefore identify sexual violence. Participant 20M explained this by saying: *"You're confused your brains already going a million miles an hour. You're drunk or you're high. You don't know what you're seeing half the time."* Finally, many patrons are too engrossed in their friends and enjoying their night out because their *"focus of the night is to have fun, is to enjoy the music, … to be with your friends and so … there is a selfishness that comes with that"* (20F) and therefore are not aware of what is happening around them.

Interpreting an incident as sexual violence

Participants who observe sexual behaviors are often not sure whether the behavior is sexual violence because it could either *"be a compliment, or they might just not care, or they could be like no, this is unwanted behavior"* (27M). The ambiguous nature of many of these behaviors and the social norms of nightlife settings were highlighted as possible factors that contribute to this difficulty in interpretation.

Ambiguity

Two factors were mentioned by participants that mean interpreting ambiguous incidents can be difficult. First, patrons have difficulty ascertaining whether a prior relationship exists between the actor and the recipient when they notice sexual behavior because *"a lot of the times, you don't know what the situation is, they could be boyfriend and girlfriend"* (26M). Where a relationship exists, patrons believe that there is no need to get involved.

Second, the participants in this study thought that some nightlife patrons seek out sexual partners on a night out and could therefore potentially be looking to engage in sexual behaviors with strangers who would welcome them if they occurred.

> If you go out there could be people trying to make advances and stuff like that, so you shouldn't be offended. It's a good place that if you, if someone, wants to try and find a chick or wants to find a dude then it's good. (23M)

Social norms

The social norms present in nightlife settings can also interfere with the interpretation of sexual violence. The personal norm of most of our participants (except one man, who did go on to state that if a woman did not want the behavior, then a man should apologize and not do it again) was that unsolicited buttock grabbing was unacceptable. Participant 22F reported: *"I don't think it's acceptable. Like personally I don't think its ok"*. However, most patrons regarded sexual behavior, such as buttock grabbing, to be common and normal in nightlife settings; "I think they'd [other nightlife patrons] just ignore it really. I don't think they do anything about it because it's pretty

common to see" (20F). Patrons, are therefore, unlikely to notice the behavior as exceptional or of needing intervention.

Further, as nightlife patrons see few people being reprimanded or few negative reactions to incidents of sexual violence, they believe at least some nightlife patrons think these behaviors are acceptable and are therefore unlikely to react themselves.

Not that we think it's acceptable or that I think it's acceptable or I think I deserve it, but there is that undertone that at the club it's almost like you've chosen to be there. And it's almost like a free for all. (20F)

Patrons also seem to differentiate between behaviors performed by men and women, with behaviors performed by women regarded as more acceptable than those by men.

> Yeah, I'd say just based on societal norms or expectations if a guy's doing it it's pretty predatory but if it's coming from a female its sort of a bit seductive or a bit sexy…I suppose it is a bit more accepted if the contacts initiated by the female because it just seems like it's a little bit safer that they are saying its ok. (25M)

Harm

All participants discussed harm and the three sub-categories indicate how participants assessed whether harm had been done. When onlookers decided that overt harm was caused to the recipient of sexual violence bystanders were much more likely to get involved.

Intent

When deciding how harmful an incident is, patrons consider whether an actor had intended to cause harm or not to the recipient. When determining whether malice was intended patrons consider several factors. First, the intoxication of the actor; inebriated actors were considered less harmful as the behavior is perceived to be a result of poor decision making rather than a deliberate attempt to harm the recipient.

> I feel like if it's more of a risk that this person is going to keep sexually harassing people then I'll definitely try to find security. But if I feel like he's just…on that sort of blurred line…, Is he an issue or is he just a d******d? It's more likely that you'll just let it slide and just continue to try and enjoy your night. (23F)

Second, a behavior was more likely to be regarded as malicious if it was persistent or intrusive, compared to one-off behaviors or if the behavior continued after the recipient made it clear they did not like the behavior.

> I think that there is something about the persistence … and also how intrusive it is. If someone grabbed one of my friend's asses once and they could just…put a stop to it, if the guy stops then that's kind of like ok sort of thing. It's like o what a d*** but its fine, you know it's just some guy, you know he's just drunk sort of thing. Whereas if it keeps going then it kind of starts making people feel uncomfortable and …feel like they have to intervene because generally if some guys in that state where he's going

> to keep doing that sort of thing, he's probably doing other things that aren't as nice as well. (27M)

Third, a behavior was deemed malicious if a patron regarded it as premeditated or if the actor appeared to be looking for recipients to act against.

> I think the perpetrators behavior, if you can see that they are casing it... and it's like premeditated to a degree and they are still continuing watching and they have this sort of, face and everything, their expressions are just kind of saying "I'll just keep going".(23F)

Fourth, patrons perceived malicious intent if the behavior was forceful, violent or if they believed it could escalate to more violent behaviors.

> Yeah, I mean if it's just a grope and the guy goes away and its fine. Then it's just a grope and I feel like every guy has a grope... But then if you see a guy who's trying to forcefully grope someone or trying to talk someone into it [sexual engagement] and stuff that's not on. That's always at the back of your mind, well if they are willing to forcefully touch you then what else are they willing to do? (20F)

Vulnerability

If a recipient was perceived as likely to be harmed by the behavior they were experiencing nightlife patrons were more likely to intervene. The main criterion for vulnerability was gender. Both men and women thought women needed more assistance than men in nightlife settings. Both genders regarded men as powerful, whereas women by contrast were deemed to be weak, small, and fragile. Patrons believed it was unlikely that women could harm men.

> I think because they [men] are bigger and stronger. I couldn't imagine myself being able to force myself on someone physically, I wouldn't do it obviously, but I couldn't imagine myself being able to force a man into something because they are all stronger and bigger and, you know physically it doesn't seem like it would be possible. (20F)

Men in contrast were regarded to be more capable of causing harm to women.

> I think it's just like the risk associated with a male being predatory, being that they are generally bigger or stronger. Not always but generally that's the case, that's just our physiology. A man's more likely to be able to harm a female than the other way around. (25M)

Consequently, participants believed men can look after themselves when they experience sexual violence by women; *"if it was a girl doing it to a guy, I wouldn't say anything, because I feel like he would have a better chance of defending himself than me"* (22F). Nightlife patrons were therefore unlikely to assist men.

Further, our participants were more likely to place and discuss men in the position of perpetrator of sexual violence and women as the victims of sexual violence, even though during the

interviews both genders were positioned as perpetrator and victim. There was also a perception that behaviors by men were more likely to escalate to more serious sexual violence.

> It's always in the back of your head that men rape, men sexually assault, men do this. And you don't really think that a guy can get raped at a club. Or a guy can get date raped or anything like that. So, I just feel like women are more vulnerable because of that. (20F)

Finally, some participants (two women and one man) suggested that intoxicated recipients were also vulnerable, unable to help themselves or might even be unaware of what is happening to them and therefore, more worthy of assistance.

> If it's past a certain point [intoxication] then definitely. Lots of people drink there so I wouldn't say the more drinks you have, it's not linear, but there is a point where they are vulnerable and it's not ok to be touching them when they can't consent. Or tell you to go away because they just can't manage their body very well.(22F)

Recipient response

Finally, when a bystander witnesses an overt negative response from a recipient of sexual behavior, it makes it clear to them that the recipient does not want the behavior and is potentially distressed by it.

> I'd have to see someone feel uncomfortable and…I feel like I would just know when they feel uncomfortable, especially if it's a girl…I feel like I'd be able to see that in someone and hopefully walk over to them and give them that reason to do something else or to go somewhere else. (20F)

Autonomy

Nightlife patrons respect the rights of others to decide what behavior they engage in and what behavior they receive in nightlife settings. Therefore, intervention is not deemed socially appropriate unless a recipient requests help, or it is obvious to the bystander that they want or need help.

> Even then a person might be in a difficult situation but it's still their business until they explicitly start to show that they are distressed. It's still their business as to whether they want it or not. (27M)

How to act

Nightlife patrons who decide to intervene saw three options. They could choose to engage with the recipient, confront the actor or inform security. Participants indicated they would be most likely to engage with the recipient.

> Something we do very often even to strangers actually, that girls do, is they can see that someone's getting unwanted attention we would just dance in between the guy and the girl. To not make a scene but get the guy away from the chick. (22F)

Participants only appear to confront actors if recipients were in immediate danger, or the actor had become aggressive.

> Don't really want to resort to physical violence but if they sort of got arked up [aggressive] about it I'm sure the boys would jump in and say to them look mate you can't do that. (23M)

Patrons are more likely to engage security when the behavior is deemed persistent, violent, or particularly aggressive; *"If I feel like it's a risk that this person's going to keep sexually harassing people then I'll definitely try to find security."*(23F). However, nightlife patrons believe that security guards are reluctant to get involved in ambiguous sexual behaviors as they see it as outside of their responsibilities: "*They don't want to deal with stuff like that really. They don't see it as within their purview"* (27M). In some instances, finding and getting assistance from security can be particularly difficult and deterred bystanders from intervening.

> You'll be at the top floor, and you have to work your way through to the bar or somewhere where there's a security person. Then try and explain the situation, and then if someone else has got another issue that's more serious like a fight or something then they'll just pan you off [send you away]. And by that time, you've lost interest as well because you're like "I'm not going to just waste my night following you around". (23F)

Own safety

Both men and women are concerned about being harmed themselves whilst helping someone else and this impacts their decision whether to intervene or not. Bystanders are concerned about both verbal and/or physical retribution.

> Just conflict like physical or verbal conflict. I just don't have time for it. So, obviously I would always do everything I could to help the chick but if it was at risk of my own safety I don't know. If I can avoid conflict, then I'm going to avoid conflict especially if I don't know if it's worth anything? (23F)

They also think other nightlife users are unpredictable.

> You never really know how people are going to react I think that's why some people would stand away when they see something because like if you're in that environment people are obviously drinking…so they might react violently so then you're going to end up getting hurt.(23M)

Audience inhibition

There appears to be an injunctive norm that intervention is unacceptable in nightlife settings. By intervening the bystander risks being perceived poorly or can potentially ruin a night out for both the bystander and those around them.

> As a man to go "aww I keep seeing this guy, he keeps hassling this chick near me… I've actually left my time to come and tell you [Security] about a situation I know very little about because I'm a good Samaritan". No. That makes you look like a busybody. (26M)

Another reason not to intervene was the perception that one could ruin another man's chances of engaging with a woman, but the same fear was not mentioned in relation to women.

> I feel based on men's ideas of going out that I'd be encroaching on something he doesn't want me to be interfering with. Because maybe he did want to get grabbed on the bum, now he can engage with this girl. And then there is the thoughts of other people, "why were you stepping in in that situation?" Because everyone else's thoughts are good on him. (27M)

Some participants even described feeling and being pressured by their friends not to intervene.

> I think one of the biggest issues, especially when it comes to bystander stuff, is that I've had times where one guy has just touched ten girls that are all my friends… then I've wanted to take it further and go to security but then everyone's like "no don't do it. Don't make a big deal about it". (23F)

Nightlife patrons might also purposefully ignore what is happening around them to preserve their good time, because "*if somethings going on, they sort of turn a blind eye to it because they don't want it to ruin what's happening with them*" (23M). Finally, patrons believe that intervention when it is not wanted or not needed could potentially make a situation worse.

> I wouldn't go up to someone. No, because why would you? Because that's causing an, if there is no incident say, that's causing an incident. That's how you get beaten up. (26M)

Friends

Finally, whether the recipient was known or not known to the bystander had a profound effect on a bystander's willingness to intervene. Bystanders are reluctant to help strangers, but if they have an existing relationship with the recipient, they are more likely to help. Firstly, this was attributed to their proximity to friends. Patrons are more often physically closer to their friends in nightlife settings, and it is easier to observe what is happening.

> Be easier to help my friends because I know them and I can physically see that they are uncomfortable…I think I'd see it more as well because I'd be looking out for my friends, I'd be seeing what my friends are doing whereas it might not be as obvious to me if I don't know the person. (20F)

Second, friends know each other better so can judge more accurately than strangers whether the recipient is likely to enjoy the behavior or not.

> Yeah, it's easier to help my friends because I guess I've got a better sense of perhaps what they do or don't like. Also, I still give them their freedom, but they are more likely to come to me or one of my friends and be like "hey I don't like what's going on".(27M)

Third, people also felt a responsibility to ensure their friends were safe and happy on a night out.

> Sometimes you put other people's safety before your own when you know them. Which isn't something that I like to do but I know that I do it. With my friends I'm like "you need to be happy not me!" (19F)

Fourth, bystanders felt more comfortable helping their friends as it was much less likely the recipient would react negatively to the assistance, knowing the bystander was trying to help.

> Because these girls know … that we are on their side and we would generally protect them sort of thing…There's this kind of thing, you know these are our women…and we will protect them from other tribes. This is what happens in the clubs I guess; people just revert to a primal stage. (27M)

DISCUSSION

We set out to understand young Australians' perceptions of the barriers and facilitators influencing peer bystander intervention when incidents of sexual violence occur in nightlife settings. Our participants believe sexual violence is unacceptable and ought not to occur in nightlife settings, but in most cases, they are reluctant to intervene and believe most other patrons are as well, with one striking exception, and that was when recipients of sexual behavior are their friends. The participants as a group support Burn's (2009) findings that bystanders in nightlife settings experience barriers across all five stages of Latané and Darley's (1970) model, and that any one of these barriers might result in inaction. We will first discuss these barriers when the recipient of sexual violence is a stranger, then when the recipient is a friend, before finally discussing the implications for bystander intervention programs in Australia.

Strangers

Stage 1 – Notice event

Key features of nightlife settings can influence a patron's ability to notice sexual violence in *nightlife settings*. The dark and crowded environment, along with loud music and their use of alcohol and other drugs could make it difficult for bystanders to see what is happening to those around them (see Ham et al., 2019). Their preoccupation with enjoying the night out also means bystanders usually are not actively observing the behaviors of strangers. Ironically, the features that attract young people to nightlife settings such as the atmosphere created by poor lighting, tolerance of behavior not tolerated elsewhere (Christmas & Seymour, 2014) and alcohol (see Leone et al., 2018 for a review on the role of alcohol in bystander behavior) could therefore interfere with their observation of sexual violence.

Stage 2 – Identify situation as needing intervention

Onlookers who observe sexual behaviors must then define them as sexual violence (see Latané & Darley, 1970). While our participants acknowledged that being intoxicated in a nightlife setting could also interfere with their ability to identify an incident as sexual violence (see Oesterle et al., 2018), most participants discussed how the *ambiguity* of the situation and *social norms* of nightlife settings make it difficult for them to make this determination. *Ambiguity* was attributed to two factors; first, the belief that some patrons in nightlife settings would welcome behaviors such as someone touching their buttocks, chests, or genitals, because for them the purpose of visiting a nightlife setting is to meet sexual partners (see Ronen, 2010). Second, the behaviors are considered appropriate and consensual courting behaviors if those involved are already in an intimate relationship. Bystanders might therefore take time to consider whether those engaging in the behavior are in an intimate relationship or whether the behavior is wanted and the longer they delay the decision the less likely they are to act (see Latané & Darley, 1970).

Further, patrons' *social norms* in the form of descriptive (i.e., what is normal) and injunctive (i.e., what is acceptable) norms regarding sexual behavior in nightlife settings could restrain them from defining what they observe as sexual violence. The reports of our participants suggest that these social norms are influenced by the high frequency of sexual behavior in nightlife settings (see Graham, Bernards, Abbey, et al., 2014) and the minimal negative reactions and social sanctions in response to most sexual behaviors, including incidents of sexual violence (see Fileborn, 2017; Kavanaugh, 2013).

Finally, participants' social norms differed according to the gender of the actor, with participants much less inclined to define women's behaviors as sexual violence and perceive men as requiring assistance. This difference appears to be driven by entrenched stereotypical gender views of women as victims and men as perpetrators of sexual violence (see Bates et al., 2019; Patterson et al., 2019). Indeed, even though the interviewer enquired about sexual violence by both genders, participants often discussed their response's as if the actor were a man.

Bystanders are, however, more likely to interpret behavior as sexual violence if they believe the actor is harming the recipient and they consider the *intent* of the actor, *vulnerability* of the recipient, and the *recipient's response* in this regard. An overt and negative recipient response, especially by a recipient who is perceived as vulnerable, generally removes ambiguity about the

unwelcomeness of the behavior (see Harari et al., 1985; Shotland & Stebbins, 1980) because it is seen as a demonstration of the recipient's fear or experience of harm (see Cushman et al., 2012; Greene et al., 2001).

Stage 3 – Take responsibility

Further, bystanders' perception that recipients are being harmed also makes them more motivated to take personal responsibility (see FeldmanHall et al., 2016). Our participants considered actors who persist with forceful, violent and/or stalking behaviors despite a negative *recipient response* as showing malicious *intent* and believed this increased the likelihood that some bystanders might take personal responsibility and intervene. Bystanders are, however, unlikely to conclude that actors have malicious intent towards recipients it they are intoxicated, their behavior is a one-off, and/or they stopped when the recipient asked them to. Most participants believed bystanders see sexual behavior under these circumstances as the result of poor decision making due to intoxication and believe recipients can handle such situations themselves and are therefore less likely to take responsibility to intervene.

Nightlife patrons stereotypical gender views appear to play a role here as well because participants considered women more *vulnerable* to experiencing sexual violence and being harmed by it. They supported a view that has been reported in the literature (see Bates et al., 2019; Patterson et al., 2019; White & Dutton, 2012) that the same behavior by both genders, is perceived as more harmful when the actor is a man. Participants from both genders indicated that they are more likely to help women and described women as small, weak, and fragile, and men as big, strong, and dominant. This reflects benevolent sexist attitudes towards women in adherence to traditional gender norms (see Glick & Fiske, 1996). This finding exposes a hidden dilemma with bystander programs that encourage men to intervene because it is possible that they could reinforce stereotypical gender beliefs if men assist women because they see themselves as protectors of women (see Leone & Parrott, 2021).

Of the participants that discussed intoxication of the recipient, all said they would be more willing to assist intoxicated recipients of sexual violence than sober ones, describing intoxicated recipients as incapable of knowing what is going on and as unable to look after themselves or consent to sexual behaviour. This finding is contrary to previous American (e.g., Burn, 2009; Jozkowski et al., 2021) and Australian (Kania & Cale, 2021) campus sexual violence research that suggests that bystanders often view intoxicated people, especially women, as being responsible for their own difficulty and therefore unworthy of assistance. Our finding is, however, in line with those of Pugh et al. (2016) and Zelin et al. (2019) whose participants also identified intoxicated individuals as being at greater risk of harm and therefore more in need of assistance, on college campuses and in nightlife settings respectively.

Young Australians' respect for the *autonomy* of others, that is, their belief that people should be allowed to make their own personal choices about the behaviors they engage in, appears to restrain many nightlife patrons from intervening and policing others' behavior even when such behavior conflicts with their own personal norms. Bystanders further believe that because recipients are autonomous people it is their responsibility to ask for assistance if they find other people's behavior intrusive. Bystanders who become aware of a negative *recipient response*, however, believe they are justified to form the intention to intervene because recipients have made it clear they find the actors' behavior unwelcome. In some cases, bystanders' own discomfort with the situation might also motivate them to act. Even though it was not a category participant 20F noted *"if they keep*

hassling you then its uncomfortable for everyone else … to watch" and participant 27M said that *"if it keeps going then it kind of starts making people feel uncomfortable and … feel like they have to intervene"*. These comments echoed Latané and Darley's (1970) finding that bystanders who observe someone's obvious discomfort appear to intervene to alleviate their own vicarious distress.

Stage 4 – Decide how to Intervene

Once bystanders decide they have a responsibility to intervene, they must decide *how to act* (see Latané & Darley, 1970) and they might choose indirect methods of engagement out of concern for their *own safety*. One method is to try to engage with the recipient, either by dancing between the actor and recipient or talking to the recipient allowing them a chance to leave the situation. Another method is by contacting security, but they often find it difficult to find a security guard and anticipate that they will be reluctant to intervene unless they are certain that the sexual behavior is unwanted. Bystanders therefore generally only think it is appropriate and effective to alert security guards when actors behave in a particularly aggressive or violent manner.

Stage 5 – Act to intervene

Bystanders must finally act (see Latané & Darley, 1970) but there is a pervasive injunctive norm in Australian nightlife settings discouraging bystanders from intervening even after having successfully passed through the first four stages. Nightlife patrons fear they could potentially ruin their friends' night out and face social sanctions if they get involved in what they view as other people's business (see Carmody, 2009; Exner & Cummings, 2011). Bystanders do, however, appear motivated to act and help strangers when there is an unambiguous and immediate risk of serious harm, usually to a vulnerable recipient.

Friends

Bystanders' position is, however, notably different when the recipients of sexual behavior are their *friends*. Patrons are more likely to notice when one of their friends is the recipient of sexual behavior as they are usually in their friends' proximity and actively observing and looking after them (see, Bennett et al., 2014; Burn, 2009; Fleming & Wiersma-Mosley, 2015; McMahon, 2010). Bystanders are also more likely to know whether their friend is inclined to welcome sexual behavior (see Bennett & Banyard, 2016; Carlson, 2008; Harari et al., 1985; Koelsch et al., 2012; McMahon et al., 2015; Shotland & Stebbins, 1980). Therefore, it is generally easier for bystanders to determine whether the incident is one of sexual violence and whether they should take personal responsibility to intervene (see Katz, Pazienza, Olin, et al., 2015). The belief that people should look after their friends is well-documented (see Levine & Crowther, 2008; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and this has also been found in campus-based research (see, Bennett et al., 2014; Burn, 2009; Fleming & Wiersma-Mosley, 2015; McMahon, 2010). Patrons therefore feel compelled to act and will rarely have a problem deciding what to do. Australians furthermore appear to trust that their friends will welcome their assistance and are, therefore, less concerned about feeling embarrassed if they mistakenly intervene to help a friend than American students (see Exner & Cummings, 2011). However, both men and women still seemed reluctant to help men, who they think can look after

themselves and are potentially welcoming of the behavior, regardless of whether they knew the man or not.

Implications

The findings of this study add to the growing body of literature (e.g., Burn, 2009; Deitch-Stackhouse et al., 2015; Yule & Grych, 2020) showing that Latané and Darley's (1970) situational model of bystander behavior is useful in examining the barriers and facilitators in non-emergency situations, sexual violence in nightlife setting in this case. The practical implications of our findings regarding the use of bystander programs in nightlife settings is, however, complex. Patrons in nightlife settings are already using several strategies to intervene and help their friends and others they deem at risk of serious harm, despite the potential risk to themselves. However, the unique nightlife setting makes it difficult for patrons to notice the experiences of those around them, which is a barrier to moving through the first stage of Latané and Darley's (1970) model. It would be possible in theory to address the relevant problems of nightlife settings (loud music, crowding, alcohol and other substance use) but doing that could make these settings unattractive and spoil their social functionality. Attempts to change these aspects of nightlife settings will be difficult and Australian nightlife patrons have indicated their reservations about such interventions (Fileborn, 2017).

Bystander programs should instead focus on subsequent stages of the bystander model to improve the likelihood that bystanders who do notice incidents intervene. Bystander programs would most likely be more successful if accompanied by parallel programs that focus on the nightlife patrons' gender bias and the permissive social norms of nightlife settings (see Deitch-Stackhouse et al. 2015; Gidycz et al., 2011). Regarding the social norms, there appears to be a need for programs that reassure patrons that their personal norms about the unacceptability of sexual violence are shared by most other patrons (see Wrightson-Hester et al., 2019) and that others will therefore support their appropriate action. Gender bias might be difficult to address and require programs aimed at the wider community to shift entrenched gender norms and stereotypes. However, to ensure that all victims of sexual violence are protected programs should point out that men are also harmed by sexual violence (see Katz, Pazienza, Olin, et al., 2015; Katz, Colbert, & Colangelo, 2015).

It is also necessary for researchers to consider young Australians' respect for individual autonomy and develop ways to encourage intervention while also allowing individual freedom within nightlife settings. Although, we cannot exclude the possibility that respect for autonomy is a mere rationalization of bystanders' inaction; respect for the autonomy of others is a deeply held Australian value and has influenced public health decisions and legislation in the past (see Haynes et al., 2017). Participants proposed empowering recipients to ask for help, and indicated they were more likely to intervene if it was clear the recipient wanted someone to intervene (see Harari et al., 1985; Shotland & Stebbins, 1980). However, our participants conceded, and prior research supports (see Fileborn, 2012; Graham et al., 2017; Gunby et al., 2020; Kovac & Trussell, 2015; Snow, Robinson, & MCall, 1991), that people, especially women, might refrain from either protesting sexual violence or asking for help in nightlife settings for several reasons, including personal safety (e.g., Graham et al., 2017; Gunby et al., 2020; Kovac & Trussell, 2015). Addressing these barriers and empowering recipients could require larger community-based interventions that address widely held social and gender norms, and beliefs about sexual violence and gender. It could also be

worthwhile educating bystanders on how to intervene in ways that respect the recipient's autonomy even if they do not explicitly ask for help.

Finally, bystanders are understandably concerned about their own safety in situations where there are many intoxicated people and the risk of physical violence is high. So, while patrons might want to help others, they are unlikely to do so if it puts them at risk. This suggests that nightlife patrons are most likely to use indirect methods of intervention because they are the safest. One such method currently receiving attention is the training of venue staff to be active bystanders (see Powers & Leili, 2016, 2018). Australian patrons have, however, voiced their reluctance to have staff policing their sexual behaviors (see Fileborn, 2017). For these types of interventions to work in Australia it could be necessary to enhance receptivity to staff involvement and change perceptions of staffs' roles in nightlife settings.

Limitations and future research

Like with other qualitative studies, our findings cannot be generalized and limits our ability to quantify the level of influence each category has on bystander behavior. We also concede that participants' responses to the hypothetical scenario we used might only be their rationalizations of patrons' behavior, and therefore, not reflect the true decision-making process that bystanders undertake when they witness problematic behavior (see Latané & Darley, 1970), in this case sexual violence (see FeldmanHall et al., 2012). Another possible limitation is that social desirability bias might have influenced what participants reported about their observations within nightlife settings (Latkin et al., 2017).

Our aim was to understand the young Australian's perception of the barriers and facilitators to bystander intervention in nightlife setting. This question, informed by our social psychological (specifically social norms) approach, generated data and focused our analysis. However, Cislaghi and Heise (2018) have criticized social norm researchers and practitioners for not considering other factors that influence behavior, relevant in this instance the influence of gender norms (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020). Our findings suggest that gender differences in behavior and perceptions in nightlife settings might be influenced by gender norms that are emphasized within nightlife settings (see Cantillon, 2015; Kovac & Trussell, 2015; Ronen, 2010). We believe that it will be useful for future researchers to also explore gender norms that are "embedded in formal and informal institutions" (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020, p. 415) and how they affect nightlife patrons' bystander behavior, which could inform decisions regarding the introduction of bystander programs in nightlife settings.

Future quantitative research should aim to measure the amount of influence each category had on bystander behavior to identify which factors are worth addressing with a larger representative sample. Researchers should specifically try to establish how influential Australian bystanders' respect for the autonomy of other patrons is and whether it might be less influential if other categories are more prominent, especially the risk of harm. Further, more observational, and ethical experimental studies should be undertaken to understand how bystanders behave in response to sexual violence. Finally, while there are many similarities between the categories we have identified and those in the college campus literature, there appear to be some important differences, notably the perception that recipients who are intoxicated should be helped rather than blamed. Researchers should aim to better understand the contextual factors, for example differences between college and public settings, that influence bystanders' evaluation of intoxicated recipients, and the implications this could have for intervention efforts.

CONCLUSION

Despite the limitations of this study its findings emphasize the impact knowing the recipient has on bystander behavior (see Labhardt et al., 2017), and that the environment and social and gender norms appear to play an influential role in whether people observe and intervene when sexual violence occurs in Australian nightlife settings. We conclude that bystander programs in isolation are unlikely to improve bystanders' ability to identify and respond to sexual violence in nightlife settings, and other forms of intervention will be necessary to address some of the barriers bystanders' face.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors thank the participants who took part in the study and made this research possible. The first author would, also, like to acknowledge the support of the Australian Government through an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The materials used in this study, the interview guide and vignette presented to participants, are available as supplementary material: https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks2022-2026/344/.

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How to cite this article: Wrightson-Hester, A.-R., Allan, A. & Allan, M.M. (2022) "I'm not batman" and other factors impacting bystander intervention against sexual violence in Australian nightlife settings. *Anal Soc Issues Public Policy*, 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1111/asap.12312