

The Influence of Disability on Attributions of Blame toward Victims of Sexual Assault

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BACKGROUND

- Victim blame in sexual assault occurs when the responsibility for the assault is placed on the victim instead of the perpetrator
- Cultural representations of disabled people as “sick and sexless” have been supported and sustained by a set of myths about individuals with disabilities (Brodwin & Frederick, 2010)
- One of the most prevalent myths is that individuals with disabilities are asexual beings – uninterested or unable to participate in sexual activities (Anderson & Kitchin, 2000)

HYPOTHESES

- A permanently disabled victim of sexual assault will be blamed less than their able-bodied counterpart
- A permanently disabled individual will be perceived as less in need of sex and affiliation than an able-bodied individual

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

- $N = 378$ (females = 284), recruited through a university, online forums, and social networking sites
- $M_{age} = 23.36$ years; $SD = 6.61$ years

DESIGN & PROCEDURE

- 2 (gender) X 2 (victim disability status) quasi-experimental design
- Randomized online survey (qualtrics.com) to vignette conditions of sexual assault:
 - Permanently disabled victim in a wheelchair
 - Able-bodied victim

MEASURES

- Blame Questionnaire** (Davies, Pollard, & Archer, 2006)
 - Victim Blame Subscale** ($\alpha = .91$)
 - e.g., “How responsible do you think Sarah was for what happened to her?”
 - Reaction toward the Perpetrator Subscale** ($\alpha = .75$)
 - e.g., “Should Max be punished for what he did to Sarah?”
- Need for Sexual Intimacy Scale** (Marelich & Lundquist, 2008)
 - Need for Affiliation Subscale** ($\alpha = .78$)
 - e.g., “Sarah needs to someone to hold her hand”
 - Need for Sex Subscale** ($\alpha = .88$)
 - e.g., “Sarah needs to have someone who is great in bed”

MANOVA AND FOLLOW-UP RESULTS

- Figure 1:** Significant main effect for condition (able-bodied vs disabled) → $V = .03$, $F(4, 369) = 2.83$, $p < .05$; partial $\eta^2 = .03$
- Figures 2 & 3:** Significant main effect for gender → $V = .07$, $F(4, 369) = 6.45$, $p < .001$; partial $\eta^2 = .07$

Figure 1. Need for Affiliation (1-5)

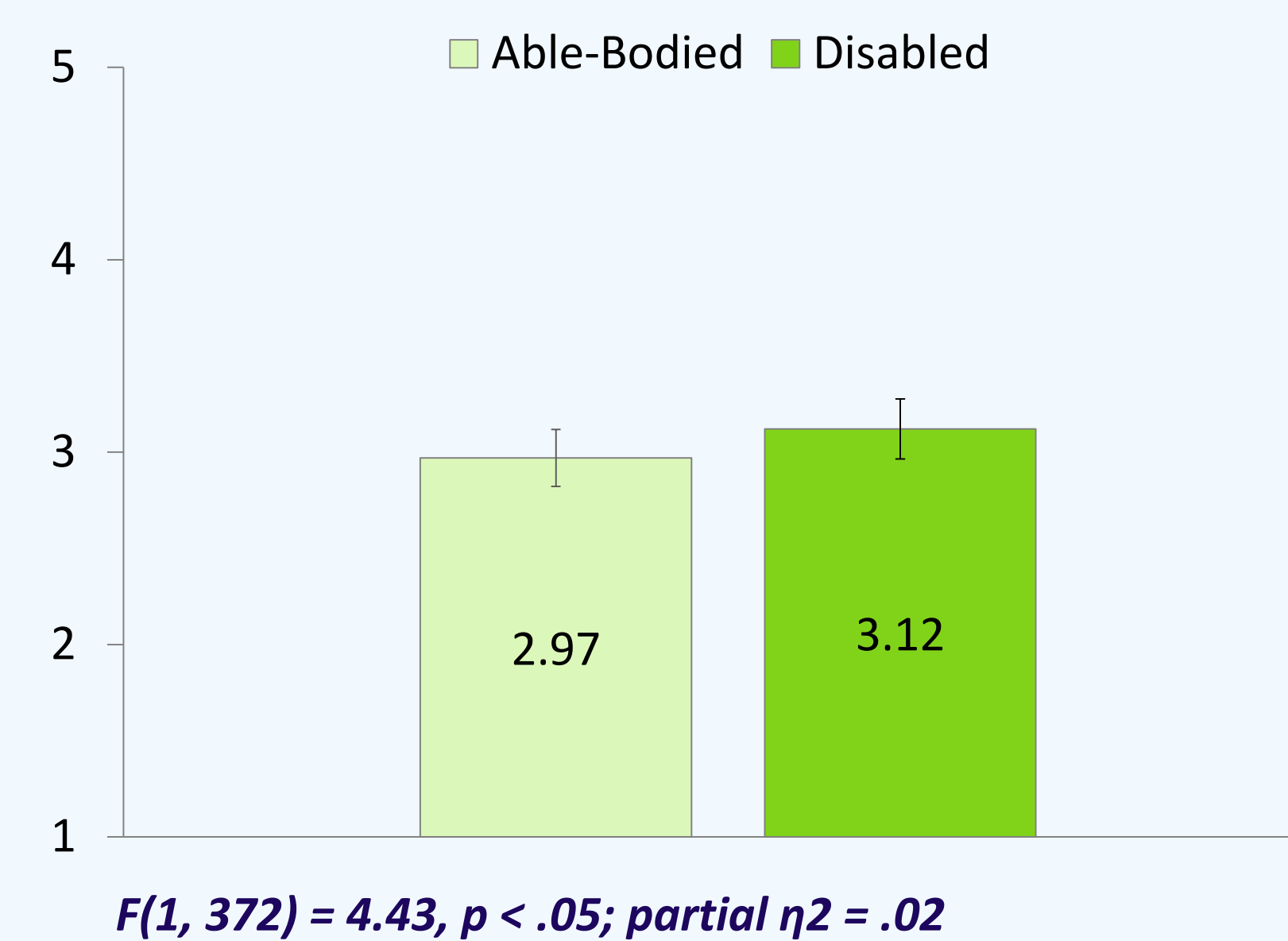


Figure 2. Blame Questionnaire (1-7)

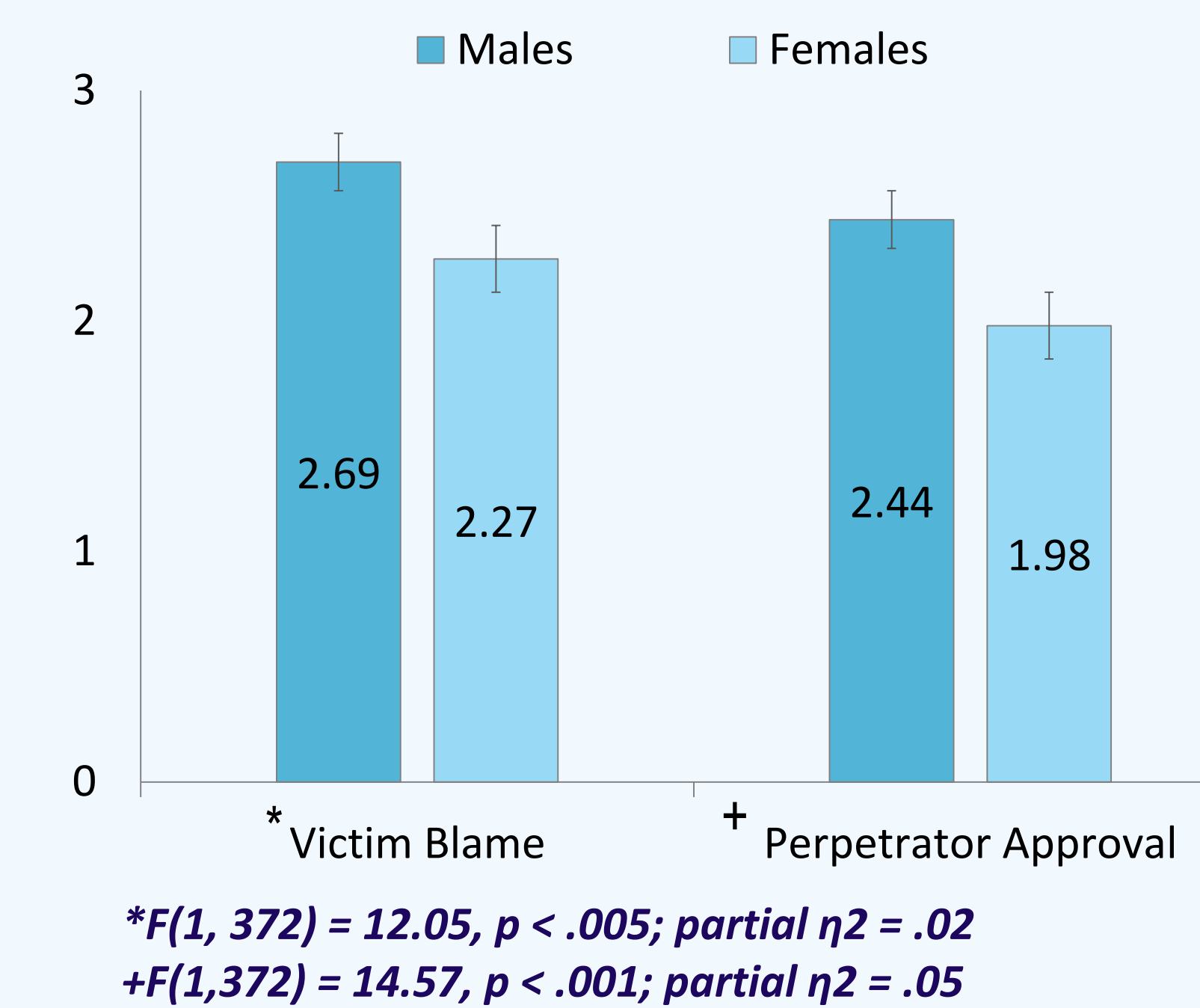
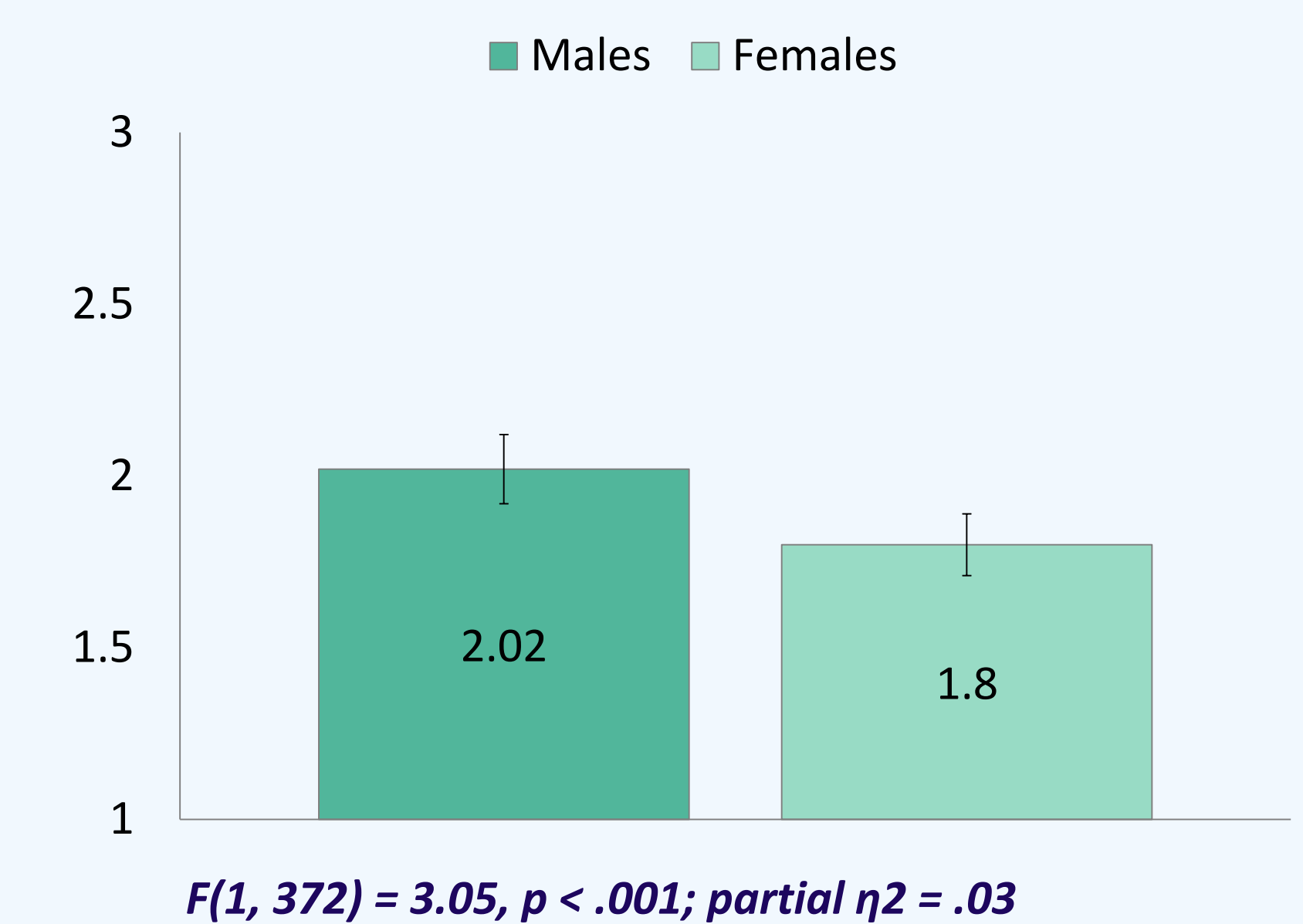


Figure 3. Need for Sex (1-5)



DEMOGRAPHICS

Figure 4. Gender (%)

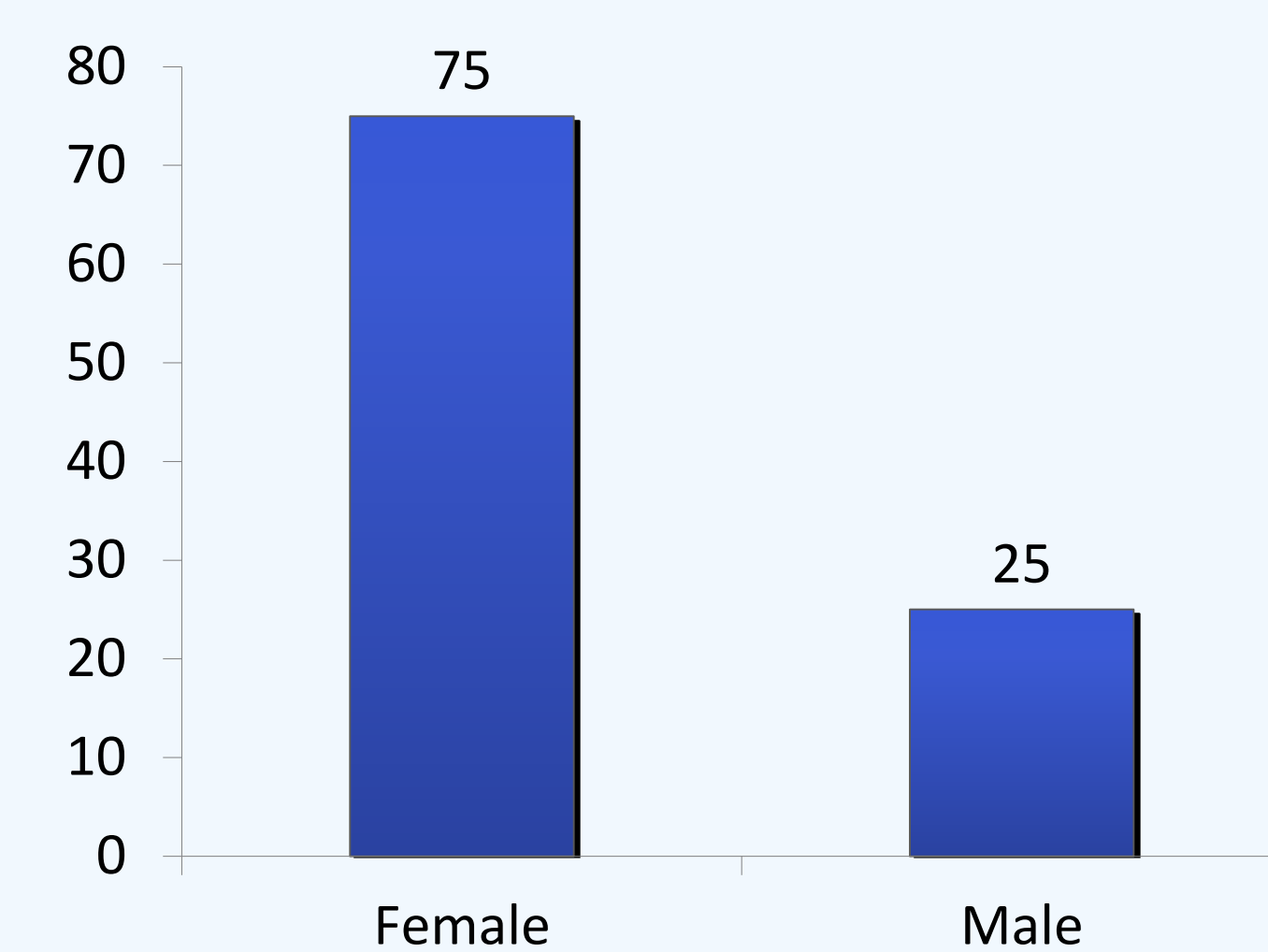


Figure 5. Sexual Orientation (%)

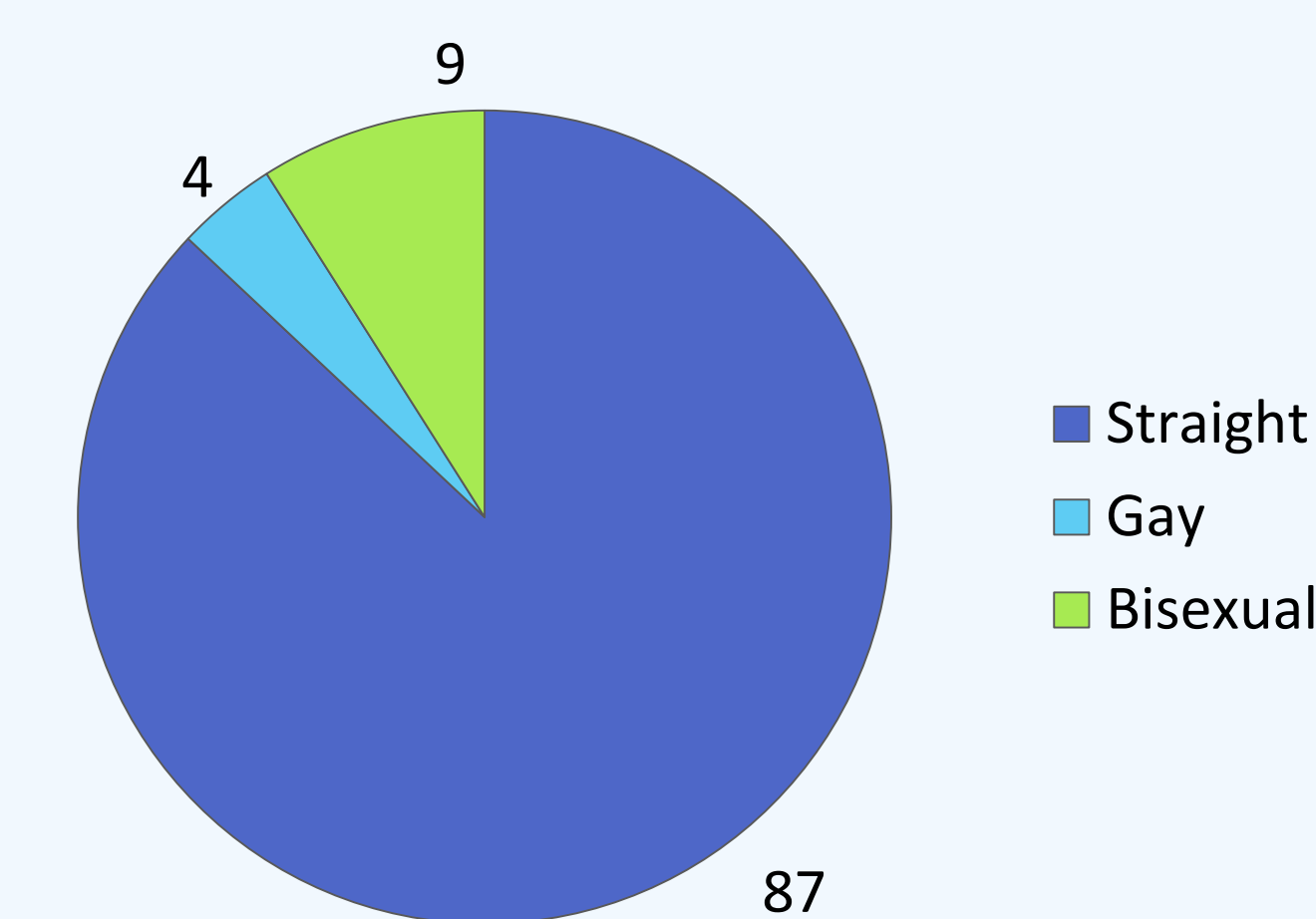


Figure 6. Ethnicity (%)

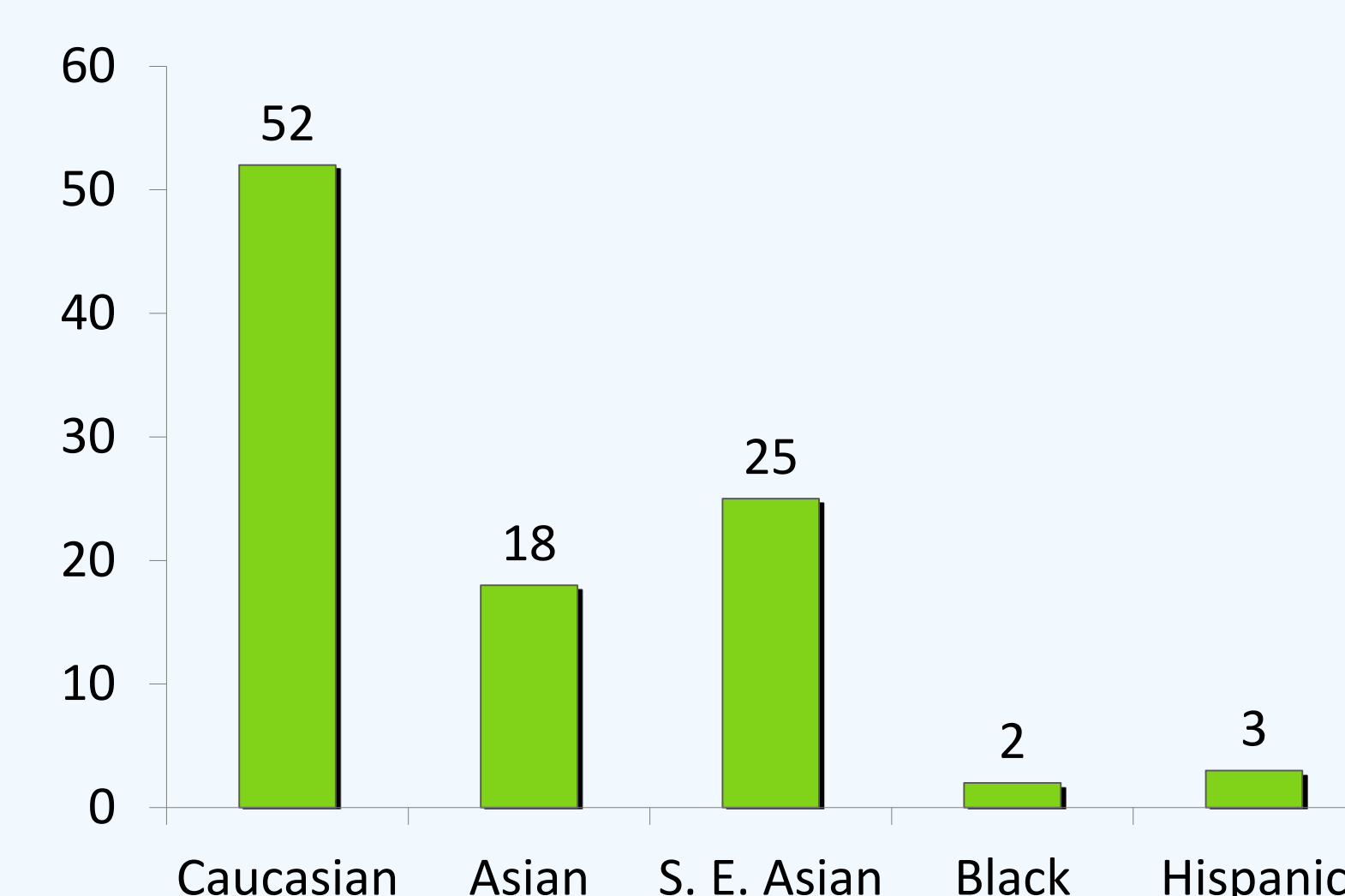


Figure 7. Disclosure of Knowing a Victim (%)



DISCUSSION

- ☒ **Hypothesis 1: No effect of condition on victim blame**
 - However → victim with disability was seen as needing *more* companionship and affiliation than their able-bodied counterpart
 - Potentially explained by perception of individuals with disabilities as undesirable companions who lack opportunities for intimacy (Chance, 2002; Crawford & Ostrove, 2003), and are therefore in need of greater companionship
- ☒ **Hypothesis 2: The permanently disabled vignette character was not perceived as less in need of sex or affiliation**
 - Gender effect found → males reported greater victim blame, more support for the perpetrator, and a greater need for sex in the vignette character, regardless of condition
 - Unsurprising → greater victim blame and support for perpetrators has been previously reported (Grubb & Harrower, 2009; Newcombe, Van Den Eynde, Hafner, & Jolly, 2008)
 - Males also generally report a greater need for sex relative to females
- **Limitations of the present study:**
 - Convenience sample of predominately university students → increased education reduces generalizability
 - Ecological validity of vignettes → scenario intentionally challenged notions of asexuality in women with disabilities
 - Insufficient representation of male participants