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Power, romance, and aggression in statutory rape: comparing between male adolescent perpetrators with adult perpetrators and sexually inactive adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Enforcing statutory rape laws on adolescents exhibiting normative sexual behaviour with underage peers has been standard practice in many countries, including Malaysia. The enforcement of the laws on adolescent perpetrators implies that the assumption of deviance associated with adult perpetrators of statutory rape is also shared with those of adolescents. This exploratory study drew comparative data from 112 male adolescents and adults in juvenile detention centres and prisons around Malaysia pertaining to the characteristics of their sexual behaviour with underage partners. Results indicated that adolescent perpetrators were shown to have a lower perceived relative power in sexual relationships compared to their adult counterparts, but a higher level of perceived romantic love and aggression. In addition, the results did not support the model differentiating adolescents who had sex with underage partners and adolescents who did not have sex. The implications of the study are discussed.

PRACTICE IMPACT STATEMENT

The current enforcement of statutory rape laws reflects the presumption that having sex with underage females entails manipulation and exploitation, even when the perpetrators are adolescents themselves. This study challenges the current assumption that male adolescents who engage in sexual relationships with underage partners should be automatically assumed as deviant. Instead, this study calls for a more developmentally positive approach to regulating adolescent sexual behaviour.

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Introduction

Statutory rape laws are common in many countries where the enforcement is designed to prevent sexual intercourse with underage girls (Azizan, 2013; Bierie & Budd, 2016; High, 2016), consistent with the provision in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). These laws signify the commitment countries make to proactively protect young girls from being manipulated into

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sexual intercourse with the perpetrators. The protective measure from these laws stipulates that having sexual relationships with underage girls constitutes a crime even if the girls consent to the relationships.

While the purpose of the enforcement of statutory rape laws in the context of adult–child sexual relationships is clear, debates have taken place when it comes to its application in the context of sexual relations involving two minors. In some countries like the USA and Canada, considerations are made when sexual intercourse involves two similar-aged partners (Beck & Boys, 2012; Kanbur, 2021). In Malaysia, however, no similar measures exist to exempt male adolescents from being prosecuted by the law when having sexual intercourse with underage partners. This effectively criminalises sexual behaviour among male adolescents, equating them with adult perpetrators, contrary to early evidence that most of these adolescents are only exhibiting normative behaviour (Mohammad & Nooraini, 2020).

In Malaysia, the criminalisation of sexual behaviour by male adolescents with their female peers who happen to be underage is stipulated in the country's Penal Code, Section 375. According to the law, having sexual intercourse with a young girl below the age of 16 is illegal even if she provides her consent. The law does not discriminate perpetrators of any age, effectively putting adolescent perpetrators in the same basket as their adult counterparts. Even so, while their sexual behaviour is criminalised, it is important to note that the legal ramifications for adolescent perpetrators differ from their adult counterparts. In Malaysia, the Child Act 2001 is used to determine the legal ramifications for adolescents involved in crime, including statutory rape. These ramifications range from being given a warning to detention.

Having established the criminal status of the sexual behaviour of male adolescents with their underage peers, it is important to establish a little background on the prevalence of statutory rape by adolescent perpetrators. According to statistics provided by the Contingent Police Headquarters in Penang, one of the smallest states in Malaysia, between 2018 and 2022, there were 128 reported sexual offences involving adolescent perpetrators and underage victims. While some of these cases involved more objectively offensive acts such as incestuous cases, the current presence of statutory rape cases involving male adolescents and their peers who happen to be underage cannot be ignored and dismissed, especially when considering the harms resulting from the criminalisation of their sexual behaviour.

A study in the United States has shown that statutory rape cases involving two similar-aged adolescents are rarely reported and result in arrests (Bierie & Budd, 2016). The authors argued that this is not consistent with the assertion that the expansion of enforcement of statutory rape laws has largely targeted normative sexual behaviour of adolescents. Their findings, however, might reflect the more permissive general public opinion regarding premarital sex in Western societies. Therefore, we would exercise caution in generalising Bierie and Budd's (2016) findings into the Malaysian context given that Malaysian society tends to view premarital sex as immoral (Wong, 2012). The cultural nuances in the country regarding premarital sex would account for the languages used in various policies regulating sexual behaviour in society. For example, the Malaysian penal code only recognises females as the victims of rape and press coverage of sexual behaviour involving two adolescents would pervasively view the male adolescents as the perpetrators (e.g. Zamhari, 2019). Furthermore, the Malaysian Child Act 2001 requires anyone who knows about sexual conduct involving underage females (below 16) to report such incidents. This increases the chances of the male adolescents to be prosecuted by the law. Therefore, based on the observations above, Bierie and Budd's arguments against statutory rape laws targeting male adolescents might not be generalisable in the Malaysian context.

This discussion provides support for the argument that male adolescent perpetrators are treated the same way as male adult perpetrators of sexual intercourse with underage females. But, this raises the question – should they be treated the same way? The reform of statutory rape laws in some countries that introduced the element of age gap (such as the Romeo and Juliet Law in the USA) acknowledges that adult perpetrators are more likely to exploit and manipulate their younger

partner (Koon-Magnin & Ruback, 2013). Despite the vast literature on statutory rape, limited attempts have been made to differentiate cases involving male adolescents and adult perpetrators of statutory rape cases.

Sexual development of adolescence: a brief account

Early adolescence is when rapid changes in the physical and social world of adolescents occur (Cacciatore et al., 2019). Adolescents gain greater autonomy from their families and experience an expansion of their social networks. This is an important milestone as it provides adolescents with the context to have a higher awareness of sexuality, also resulting in more inter-gender socialisation and romance. Adolescents' higher awareness of sexuality could be observed in a prevalence study of first sexual experience which recorded that 6.9% of adolescents globally had ever had sex (Jing et al., 2023). A similar trend has also been noted in the Malaysian setting (Institute for Public Health, Malaysia, 2022). While sexual experience in adolescence is regarded by scholars as a risky behaviour (e.g. Magnusson et al., 2019; Vasilenko et al., 2016) due to exposure to health risks and level of immaturity, the global trend signifies the universal developmental milestone in adolescent sexuality that characterises the growing importance of sexuality in an adolescent's life.

As mentioned, sexual development among adolescents also occurs in tandem with the expansion of adolescents' social networks. Peers emerge as one of their most influential networks, by which the types of peers could steer adolescents to engage either in normative or non-normative sexual behaviour (Clark et al., 2021). Relationships with peers have also been proposed to steer the direction adolescents take in forming romantic relationships which will increasingly become pertinent in adolescents' lives (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009). While adolescents engage more in romantic relationships, these relationships are not typically only marked by sexual intercourse, but also by social and other kinds of romantic events (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009; O'Sullivan et al., 2007). These milestones mark what has been regarded as normative sexual development among adolescents (Tolman & McClelland, 2011), and that being involved in romantic relationships provides some benefits on the adolescents' wellbeing (Furman & Collibee, 2014).

More studies have also demonstrated the existence of different classes of adolescents when it comes to their romantic and sexual relationships (Crissey, 2005; Vasilenko et al., 2016), such as the existence of romantic and sexually active adolescents or romantic but sexually inactive adolescents. For these adolescents, these studies have demonstrated that romantic relationships are a common setting for initiating sexual relationships. O'Sullivan et al. (2007) argued, via the findings of their study, that many adolescents used the romantic setting to assess sexual compatibility with their partners. This results in some adolescents not initiating sexual relationships due to its intricate decision-making process. Therefore, these past studies suggest that being situated in a romantic relationship without the sexual components is also normative in an adolescent's romantic and sexual development which differentiates sexually active and inactive adolescents.

In Malaysia, while adolescents also go on dates and get involved in romantic relationships (Shukri & Baharom, 2023), sexual behaviours of all ages outside of marriage are usually regarded as immoral (Wong, 2012). Even so, aligned with their sexual development, Malaysian adolescents continue to explore their sexuality. A study among representative school students between the age of 13 and 17 years old by the Institute of Public Health Malaysia (2017) recorded that 7.3% of adolescents had sex in 2017 an increase to 7.6% in 2022 (2022). The number might be higher, as it does not match other rates like teenage pregnancies (Abdullah et al., 2020). Hence, despite the prevailing cultural views on premarital sex, this figure highlights the growing significance of sexual identity and curiosity about sex among Malaysian adolescents, which demonstrates the inevitable trajectory of sexual development during adolescence despite the cultural identity in Malaysia.

The inevitable sexual development that all individuals will go through implies that while sexual behaviour outside of marriage is considered socially deviant in Malaysian society, it is still arguably developmentally non-deviant and normative. Some scholars have advocated for a positive

framework for understanding adolescent sexuality, breaking away from the usual societal consideration that aspects of adolescent sexuality are dangerous (Harden, 2014; Tolman & McClelland, 2011). Therefore, promoting healthy sexual development among adolescents still requires adult interventions (Drobac, 2017; Leitenberg & Saltzman, 2000) such as comprehensive sex education.

We argue that the socially deviant status of premarital sex and the language used to describe this phenomenon could explain why male adolescents who have sex with underage peers are still prosecuted for statutory rape if reported in Malaysia. According to High (2016), the view of "bad adolescent sex" has given adults the belief that there needs to be some kind of judicial approach to handling sexual relationships with underage females. In Malaysia, judicial approaches such as arrests and detention effectively criminalise male adolescents' normative sexual behaviours.

Psychosocial and psychosexual characteristics of sexual relations involving underage partners: a theoretical framework

Sexual relationships with underage partners have been given considerable attention in research for the past decades. One of the most cited elements in this type of relationship is the element of power. This is an important element because an imbalance of power in sexual relationships may result in the use of coercion or pressure by one partner (Jeglic & Winters, 2023; Lippert et al., 2022; Mitchell & Raghavan, 2021). Consistent with the dyadic power theory, one of the first theories describing the dynamics of powers existing in dyadic relationships, it describes power as an element in relationships where one person has the ability to influence the behaviours of another person (Dunbar, 2004). Preventing young girls from being exposed to such influence, through coercion or pressure, to engage in sexual relationships is a large reason why statutory rape laws are enforced.

Dyadic power theory also emphasises the role of perception in power differences that is argued to be more powerful in driving a person's motivation to influence. A large age gap is a source of this perception by which an imbalance of power is more likely to manifest in relationships involving partners with larger age differences (Kaestle et al., 2002). Studies have shown that female adolescents are more likely to engage in sexual intercourse with adults than their peers (Kaestle et al., 2002), and it was argued that this might be the result of younger girls being more vulnerable to manipulation and coercion by the older partners (Leitenberg & Saltzman, 2003; Lippert et al., 2022; Tener et al., 2014). In contrast, adolescent relationships are often characterised by equal or nearly equal power (Cuccì et al., 2020). To engage in coercion and manipulation, various tactics are employed by the older partners including developing nonsexual connections to elicit emotional attachment from minors (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2018).

Developing emotional attachment with the underage partners introduces the element of romance in sexual relationships. In dyadic power theory, relative power is increased by relative resources that can be in different forms – one is fulfilling the emotional or romantic needs of their underage female partners. Compared to the element of power, when it comes to romantic feelings, the literature seems to be more complex. While eliciting emotional attachment from children via the expression of love is argued to be a strategy of grooming (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2018), another study suggests that adults attracted to minors do feel romantic feelings towards children, on top of their sexual interest (Houtepen et al., 2016; Konrad et al., 2018). Meanwhile, romantic and sexual relationships involving two adolescents are often viewed by others as superficial (Furman & Shaffer, 2003). Even so, these romantic and sexual relationships are important milestones in adolescents' lives that shape their developmental trajectories.

Another element pivotal in understanding sexual relationships with underage females is aggression. One interesting angle of power as explained by dyadic power theory is that the relationship between relative power and control attempt is curvilinear. According to Dunbar (2004), "partners who perceive their relative power as extremely high or low will make fewer control attempts, although partners who perceive their relative power as equal or nearly equal will make more control attempts" (p. 240). This is consistent with past findings that found the perception of low

power to be associated with a higher level of aggressive tendencies as a form of control attempts (Babcock et al., 1993). Generally, adults attracted to minors are found by past studies to be less overtly aggressive compared to other kinds of offenders (Okami & Goldberg, 1992; Sigre-Leiros et al., 2015). On the contrary, they are found to be high in passive-aggressiveness (Cohen et al., 2002). The findings indicating a lower level of aggressiveness suggest that adults perceive themselves as having more power, reducing the need for resorting to aggression to attain sex within their sexual relationships with underage partners.

When it comes to adolescents, there is evidence that aggression is associated with a lower perceived power in a relationship among adolescents (Landa et al., 2024) which reflects back the curvilinear relationship between perception of relative power and control attempts as argued by dyadic power theory. Even so, overt and physical aggression is prevalent among less than 5 per cent to more than 30 per cent of adolescents across the world (Tomaszewska & Schuster, 2021; Wincentak et al., 2017). Furthermore, aggression among adolescents may be related to alcohol consumption (Lawler et al., 2021; Matuszka et al., 2017), by which the aggressive tendencies could seep into their dating life (Collibee & Furman, 2018). There is also discussion relating aggression and violence to pornography consumption (Mestre-Bach et al., 2024), which may stem from the desire to maintain the position of power. These findings seem to suggest that overt aggression is not a normative part of adolescent dating as a function of their sexual development.

Present study and hypotheses

The discussion above has an important practical implication on the current standard of indiscriminate enforcement of statutory rape laws among both adolescent and adult perpetrators. By enforcing statutory rape laws indiscriminately on both adolescent and adult perpetrators in many countries, including Malaysia, it suggests that the assumption of deviance applies to offenders of all ages. This directly contradicts the multitude of literature on adolescent development that points towards what is normative in adolescent sexual development. This is especially important to consider given that sexual recidivism among adolescents is shown to be lower compared to other kinds of offences (Lussier et al., 2024). Furthermore, a meta-analysis found that youths involved in sexual crime are not more antisocial than youths involved in other types of crime, including holding antisocial views and particular attitudes about women (Seto & Lalumie, 2010).

A study among adult sexual offenders also demonstrated that many \ began offending later in life (Smallbone & Wortley, 2004), further differentiating them from adolescent perpetrators. Given the contextual and developmental differences between adolescents and adults, engagement in sexual relationships with an underage partner should be distinguished by different factors among these two groups of perpetrators. Furthermore, to honour our focus on what could be considered a normative sexual relationship (sexual relationships among adolescent peers), we concentrate the context of our study on the underage sexual partners of the males who have crossed the threshold of the age of menarche, which is typically 10 and above (Lacroix et al., 2023), indicating the threshold for achieving sexual maturation.

Against the backdrop of this discussion, this study aims to compare different psychosocial characteristics between those who committed statutory rape as adolescents and as adults, particularly through the lens of several variables mostly discussed in the realm of sexual relationships with underage females, including perception of perceived power, perceived romance, aggression, and alcohol and porn consumption. To accommodate the aim of the study, a hypothesis was formed as the following:

> H_{1a}: Perceptions of power, perceptions of romance, and aggression predict the odds of engaging in sexual relationships with an underage female as an adolescent or as an adult.

In addition, past studies have also highlighted the existence of adolescents who are in romantic relationships but do not have sex. These adolescents are differentiated from sexually active

adolescents due to the intricate decision-making process of engaging in sex with partners. Therefore, to further explore the issue, a supplementary hypothesis was formed to investigate if there were differences in the characteristics of male adolescents who had sex with an underage female and male adolescent who were in a romantic relationship with an underage female but did not engage in sex. The hypothesis was as follows:

> H_{1b}: The odds of male adolescents engaging in sexual activity with underage peers can be predicted by their perception of power, perception of romance, and levels of aggression.

Methods

Participants

The characteristics of the male sample (and the descriptive statistics of other variables) are shown in Table 1. A total of 112 respondents were recruited which included 77 male adolescents (68 per cent) recruited from juvenile detention centres and 35 male adults (32 per cent) recruited from prisons. Out of the 77, 43 adolescents (56 per cent) had already engaged in sexual relationships with underage females (by which they were charged with statutory rape), while the rest had not even though they were in a romantic relationship with an underage female (although they were detained for

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

	n	*m*	SD	range
Adolescents	77			
Had sex (detained for statutory rape)	43			
Had not had sex (detained for other offences)	34			
Adults	35			
Parental relationships				
Married				
Adolescents	40			
Adults	13			
Divorced				
Adolescents	26			
Adults	12			
Deceased				
Adolescents	11			
Adults	10			
Age during sexual relationships				
Adolescents who had sex		15.14		13–17 years old
Adults		24.11		18–63 years old
Age of partner during sexual relationships				
Adolescents who had sex		14.74		12–17 years old
Adults		14.42		11–17 years old
Average perpetrator-victim age differences				
Adolescents who had sex		0.4 years		
Adults		9.7 years		
Alcohol consumption				
Adolescents		0.883	0.96	
Adults		1.000	1.00	
Pornography consumption				
Adolescents		1.41	0.675	
Adults		1.62	0.877	
Relative power				
Adolescents		6.72	1.70	
Adults		6.91	2.68	
Romantic love				
Adolescents		66.97	21.11	
Adults		49.31	27.73	
Aggression				
Adolescents		22.8	9.5	
Adults		13.4	10.9	

other offences such as substance abuse and property crimes). Although the age of consent in Malaysia is 16, some respondents had partners who were just under 16 when the sexual relationships occurred, making it illegal. However, respondents reported their partners' ages as 16 based on the year, so we recorded the ages as reported. The mean age of the adolescents when sexual relationships took place was 15.14 old, while the mean age of their partner was 14.7 years old. The mean age of the adult respondents when the sexual relationships took place was 24.11 years old, while the mean age of their partner was 14.4 years old.

Procedure

The current study was part of a larger project examining the perpetrators of sexual relationships involving underage females. The larger project has been granted an ethics approval by the Ethics Committee of Universidade de Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro. The aim of the current study required the recruitment of both male adolescents and adults who were detained or incarcerated for engaging in sexual relationships with an underage female. For the purpose of our study, we used the Malaysian Child Act 2001 for the definition of adolescents/children, which is individuals below 18 years old. While some scholars argued for expanding the age of adolescence to 24 years old (e.g. Sawyer et al., 2018), we still chose 18 years old as the age cut-off due to its important criminal justice implications in the Malaysian context. Therefore, we categorise our respondents as adolescents if they were below 18 years old when the sexual relationships took place. Adult respondents were individuals above this cut-off point of age. The criteria of participation for both adolescents and adults were: (1) male, (2) detained for a sexual crime, specifically under the Malaysian Penal Code, Section 375, (3) it did not involve intrafamilial sexual offence or involving forcible rape. The current enforcement of statutory rape laws in Malaysia does not differentiate between the engagement of sexual relationships with underage partners due to incest, forcible rape or normative sex with peers (such as the one occurring in romantic relationships). Given that we are focusing on the sexual behaviour characterised by what has been argued to be normative among past scholars, the final criterion was necessary.

For the purpose of collecting data for the second hypothesis, sexually inactive adolescents who were detained for other offences were also recruited. The participation criteria for these adolescents were: (1) male, (2) have been in a romantic relationship with an underage female, and (3) have not had engaged in sexual relationships with underage females. To recruit all the respondents, approvals were obtained from the Social Welfare Department and the Prison Department of Malaysia. The Social Welfare Department was the parent agency that managed all juvenile detention centres, which were visited for recruitment of adolescent respondents. The approval by the Prison Department was needed to visit prisons for the recruitment of adult respondents.

Recruiting the sample in carceral settings is necessary because recruiting respondents in the general population would be challenging due to the Malaysian cultural taboo in talking about sex, which might result in social desirability bias. Furthermore, recruiting adults in the general population who admitted to having sex with an underage female would present a difficult ethical dilemma, by which the researcher would be faced with the legal requirement of reporting the crime to the authorities, which then would violate the researchers' neutral role in research. Recruiting the respondents in institutions addressed these challenges.

After approvals from each parent agency, approvals from all individual institutions (juvenile detention centres and prisons) were obtained for individual visits. Seven juvenile detention centres and 10 prisons all around Malaysia gave their permissions. In each visit, the juvenile detention centres and prisons were the ones making the selection of potential respondents to the study based on availability and suitability. All selected respondents would meet the researchers for an initial screening by which the interviews began when they passed the screening. Honorarium was given first to those who did not satisfy the criteria of participation before they returned

back to their usual routine. All respondents were clearly informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Each respondent was requested to provide their consent after a briefing regarding the research.

Instrument

Our instrument began by collecting basic background information of the respondents that included the institution they were recruited from, their age, types of offence, alcohol consumption and their parents' marital status. Furthermore, we asked for some information pertaining to the nature of their sexual or romantic relationships with the underage partner which consisted of their age when the sexual relationship took place (only for those who already had sex), the age of their underage partner (only for those who already had sex), and pornography consumption.

Several scales to measure the main predictors in this study were adapted from other scholars. All adapted scales were translated into Malay using a back translation method, supplemented with a direct translation done by a professional translator. All respondents were asked to keep in mind that the questions pertained to their time before the detention or incarceration. The first scale is to measure the perception of relative power. For this variable, the sub-scale of relative power from The Network of Relationships Inventory (NRI) was adapted from (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). The sub-scale of relative power from NRI contained three items that asked the respondents their perception of the relative power in their social networks. In this study, the respondents would provide a rating of between "1" to "4" (the higher the rating, the more relative power the respondents perceived to hold in the relationships). Each respondent was asked to name the underage partner they had engaged in a sexual or romantic relationship with (pseudo-name was acceptable) and to keep in mind the questions pertaining to their relationship with the named person. The Cronbach's alpha value for this sub-scale is $\alpha = 0.605$.

To measure the perception of romantic love, we adapted the love scale developed by Rubin (1970). The scale comprised 13 items measuring the respondents' perception of romantic love with their partners. In this study, the respondents had to provide a rating of between "0" and "8", where a higher rating would indicate a higher level of perception of romantic love. The respondents were still requested to answer the questions keeping in mind the person they named previously. The Cronbach's alpha for this scale is $\alpha = 0.918$.

To measure aggression in this study, the Short Form of the Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire as refined by Bryant and Smith (2001) was adapted. The scale contained 12 items measuring aggression through four dimensions: physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger and hostility. In this study, the rating given by the respondents ranged between "0" and "4", where the higher rating indicated a higher level of aggression. The Cronbach's alpha value for this scale is $\alpha = 0.835$.

Analytical strategies

In short, three main predictors were included in the analysis, namely perception of relative power, perception of romantic love, and aggression. Logistic regression was utilised as it functions to categorise outcomes or predictions (Hilbe, 2016). In our study, we did not simply examine the differences between adolescents and adults; instead, we focused on the occurrence of engaging in sexual relationships as an adolescent or as an adult (a binary outcome). This necessitated the use of logistic regression, which is appropriate for modelling binary dependent variables and examining the influence of predictors. For Hypothesis 1a, the outcome of the analysis was committing statutory rape as adolescents (below 18 years old) or adults. For Hypothesis 1b, the outcome was whether the adolescents engaged in sex with an underage partner or not. Two control variables were included, alcohol consumption and pornography consumption based on their potential influence on the relationships. Furthermore, while parental marital status has been shown to affect children's behaviour, as our analysis also included adult respondents where parental influence was not as potent, we

excluded parental marital status from the analysis. Before the hypotheses were tested, descriptive statistics were employed to summarise the demographic and main variables. Then, we used binary logistic regression analyses to test the two hypotheses presented above. To begin the analyses, we first checked multicollinearity via correlational analyses.

Results

Table 2 summarises the results from the correlational analyses between the main predictors to check for multicollinearity. The analyses confirmed that the assumption of no high correlation (i.e. no multicollinearity) among all the predictors was met. Despite a significant correlation between the perception of relative power and perception of romantic love, and the perception of romantic love and aggression, the r values are considerably low (0.391 and 0.386 respectively) to assume multicollinearity.

Table 3 demonstrates the results of the logistic regression analysis on the comparison of perception of power, perception of romance, and levels of aggression between adolescent and adult perpetrators of statutory rape cases. The model shows a good fit to the data of 78 respondents ($\chi^2 = 28.994$, df = 5, $p < 0.000$). The Hosmer-Lemeshow test also indicated a good model fit ($\chi^2 = 9.041$, df = 8, $p = 0.339$). The model as a whole explained between 31% (Cox and Snell R square) and 41.5% (Nagelkerke R squared) of the variance in the age status of the perpetrators. Pertaining to classification accuracy, the model successfully predicted adolescent perpetrators for 76.7% of respondents and adult perpetrators for 80% of respondents. The positive predictive value stood at 82.5%, while the negative predictive value was 73.6%. These results suggest that male adolescents who had sex with an underage partner differed in perception of power, perception of romance, and levels of aggression as compared to their adult counterparts (hypothesis 1a).

As shown in Table 3, each predictor made a unique statistically significant contribution to the model. The strongest predictor of the age status of the respondents was aggression, with an odds ratio of 1.1. This indicates that respondents who were categorised as an adolescent perpetrator had 1.1 higher odds to report aggressive tendencies on average. The odds ratio of the perception of relative power was less than 1 (at 0.721), indicating that adolescent perpetrators had 0.72 less odds of perceiving having power over in the sexual relationship with their underage partner. In regard to the perception of romantic love that recorded an odds ratio of 1.03, this demonstrates that adolescent perpetrators had 1.03 higher odds to report seeing their partner romantically.

Table 4 shows the logistic regression analysis between adolescents who had sex and adolescents who did not have sex (but in a romantic relationship with an underage partner). The results of the analysis recorded a poor fit to the data, according to both Omnibus ($\chi^2 = 10.153$, df = 5, $p = 0.071$) and Hosmer–Lemeshow ($\chi^2 = 9.067$, df = 5, $p = 0.337$) tests of coefficients. The poor fit of the model indicates its lack of ability to accurately predict the groups of adolescents (sexually active vs. sexually inactive) based on the set of predictors. However, while the model as a whole did not have a good fit to the data, among the individual predictors, only two variables were statistically significant in the equation, alcohol consumption and the perception of relative power. In summary, non-significant tests of data fitness suggest that the model is not supported (hypothesis 1b); even so, this does not rule out the possibility of individual predictors being significant.

Table 2. Correlational tests for the main predictors.

	Perception of relative power	Perception of romantic love	Aggression
Perception of relative power	1	0.391[a]	0.124
Perception of romantic love		1	0.386[a]
Aggression			1

[a]Correlations are significant at the .01 (2-tailed).

Table 3. Adolescents vs. adults comparison data.

	β	SE	p	Exp (B)	95% CI [LCI, UCI]
Constant	−0.06	1.13	0.96	0.94	
Alcohol consumption	−0.41	0.29	0.17	0.67	[0.38–1.18]
Pornography consumption	−0.29	0.35	0.42	0.75	[0.38–1.5]
Perception of relative power	−0.33	0.14	0.02[a]	0.72	[0.54–0.96]
Perception of romantic love	0.026	0.012	0.03[a]	1.03	[1.002–1.05]
Aggression	0.095	1.13	0.003[a]	1.1	[1.03–1.17]

[a]The predictor is significant at $p < .05$.

Discussion

The current study sought to explore the perception of relative power, perception of romance, and levels of aggression of male perpetrators involved in statutory rape cases, comparing between adolescents and adults. Furthermore, we ran similar analysis, but comparing adolescents who had sex with an underage partner (detained for statutory rape) and those who had not (detained for other offences) but were in a romantic relationship with an underage partner.

The logistic regression results comparing the data between the adolescent and adult perpetrators have supported Hypothesis 1a, suggesting that the adolescents who had sex with an underage partner differed in terms of their characteristics with adult perpetrators, namely their perception of relative power, perception of romance, and aggression. The perception of relative power emerged as one of the significant individual predictors indicating these characteristic differences. The literature has highlighted coercive and exploitative elements in sexual relationships between adults and children/adolescents as partners (Leitenberg & Saltzman, 2003; Lippert et al., 2022) and the current study contributes to the literature by establishing a connection between the heightened likelihood of perceiving relative power and the age status of perpetrators who engaged in sexual relations with underage females.

Although our findings indicate a higher perception of relative power among adult respondents, having a lower perceived power among adolescent respondents does not necessarily imply a lower perceived power if compared to their own underage partners (since we did not collect data from female partners which is a potential future research avenue). In addition, while the overall results comparing adolescents who had sex to those who did not return were non-significant, the individual predictor, particularly the perception of relative power still recorded a higher perception of power among those who did not have sex. This is important to note given that past studies pertaining to the perception of power in romantic relationships among adolescents have been shown to be mixed (Bentley et al., 2007; Cuccì et al., 2020). There are also cultural differences that need to be taken into consideration here given that the current sample came from a culture by which data on sex roles are scarce, although one study in the early 1980s has shown male Malaysians to exhibit more dominance compared to their female counterparts (Ward & Williams, 1982).

In our study, aggression was recorded as the strongest predictor of the differences between adolescent and adult perpetrators of statutory rape. The results found that the adolescent sample had a higher level of aggressive tendencies which can be explained in two ways. Firstly, it has to be noted

Table 4. Adolescents who had sex vs. who did not have sex comparison data.

	β	SE	p	Exp (B)	95% CI [LCI, UCI]
Constant	2.66	1.36	0.05	14.27	
Alcohol consumption	−0.52	0.27	0.05	0.59	[0.35–0.997]
Pornography consumption	−0.26	0.37	0.49	0.78	[0.38–1.6]
Perception of relative power	−0.37	0.17	0.028[a]	0.69	[0.497–0.96]
Perception of romantic love	0.008	0.014	0.57	1.01	[0.98–1.04]
Aggression	0.017	0.027	0.53	1.02	[0.96–1.07]

[a]The predictor is significant at $p < .05$.

that the low prevalence of aggression among adolescents (Tomaszewska & Schuster, 2021; Wincentak et al., 2017) may suggest that aggression is not a normative part of adolescent development. However, the current study situated the respondents in the context of sexual and romantic contexts. Considering adolescents in these contexts aligns with dyadic power theory which asserts that perception of equal or nearly equal power can lead to more control attempts, potentially manifesting as aggressive tendencies. While the aggression scale we adapted from Bryant and Smith (2001) was not specifically about aggressive behaviour in romantic settings, past evidence has proposed that these aggressive tendencies could seep into their dating life (Collibee & Furman, 2018).

Secondly, a more simplistic explanation would be that recruiting adolescents in juvenile detention centres may result in the participation of adolescent respondents who had a higher level of aggressive tendencies. This argument is consistent with a past review that finds that adolescents in adolescents in detention were marked with several behavioural and mental problems compared to those in non-clinical settings (Borschmann et al., 2020). While we cannot confirm this assertion given the lack of data among non-clinical adolescents in our study, this study highlights a potential avenue of future research that compares the data of sexual behaviour not just among detained adolescents, but among non-clinical adolescents as well.

Our findings have also demonstrated that adult respondents were less likely to perceive the relationship with their partners romantically. Romantic element in the form of emotional fulfilment in adult–child relationship has been observed in the past (Tener, 2020). In the current study, when considered alongside the findings on the perceived relative power, adults perceiving the relationships as less romantic may suggest the possibility that romance might be used as a means to exploit the child into a sexual relationship. According to a past systematic review (Tener, 2020), children coaxed into a sexual relationship with an adult may be swayed by the emotional support provided by the adult partner which is a disguise of their grooming techniques.

Finally, both patterns of alcohol and pornography consumption did not seem to differ between the adolescent and adult respondents in the current study, although the pattern of alcohol consumption differed between adolescents who had sex and did not have sex. Alcohol consumption was included as a control variable in the current study because past arguments have pointed to the possibility that consuming alcohol among non-abstinent Muslims (which is the background of the majority in Malaysia) might be symptomatic to other problematic behaviour (Carol et al., 2020; Mohammad & Banse, 2023). Furthermore, past studies have shown that sexual offenders are often found to have difficulties related to alcohol abuse (Abracen et al., 2006; Baltieri & de Andrade, 2008). In light of the current findings, the adolescent and adult samples showed some level of prevalence of alcohol consumption and did not seem to differ in terms of alcohol consumption which suggests that alcohol might not be a risk factor to differentiate perpetrators of different ages.

When it comes to the results predicting sexually active and inactive adolescents, results on the individual predictor showed a significant difference on their pattern of alcohol consumption (i.e. adolescents who had sex reporting a lesser prevalence of alcohol consumption). In this case, this finding is counterintuitively contrary with past studies demonstrating a significant relationship between alcohol consumption and risky sexual behaviour (e.g. Cho & Yang, 2023; Dunn & Yannessa, 2022). One possible explanation to this finding could be attributed to the fact that while the adolescents who consumed alcohol more did not have sex, they were detained by other delinquent acts such as drug abuse, assault and conduct problems. Considering this, our finding is actually consistent with other studies correlating between alcohol consumption and delinquency (French & Maclean, 2006; Gatti et al., 2015). This prompts an intriguing question for future research: does alcohol consumption serve as a more influential risk factor for engaging in risky sexual behaviour or delinquency?

Limitations

This study has some limitations. While this study aimed to explore the differences in characteristics of adolescent and adult perpetrators of statutory rape cases, it is crucial to recognise the limitation

imposed by the small sample size. This limitation necessitates us to consider this study as exploratory and prevents confidence in generalising the findings to perpetrators in a broader setting. In relation to this, the respondents were recruited in carceral settings – i.e. juvenile detention centres and prisons, which also possibly prevents our ability to generalise the findings to individuals in non-clinical, non-carceral settings. The current limitation came from the recognition that recruiting adolescents and adults in non-clinical settings would pose a greater risk of bias, particularly social desirability bias. The Malaysian culture that views talking about sex as taboo would prevent most individuals from admitting of having premarital sex to avoid from facing social stigma, even when assured with research ethics related to privacy.

Another limitation of the current study is the lack of focus on religiosity as a possible control variable. For the current study, at first, we did include one item related to religiosity in the sub-section pertaining the demographic backgrounds of the respondents, "how important do you think your religion is in your life?" with a majority recording their response as "very important". However, after collecting the data halfway, we realised that given that the Malaysian identity is very closely tied to their religion, it would be logical that almost all respondents would find their religion as important. The better item to ask to supplement the previous question (for future research) is, "how frequent do you observe mandatory religious ritual in your life?" which might further dissect into the abstinent vs. non-abstinent identity as proposed by past studies.

Conclusion

All in all, the current study provided some insights into certain differences that could be captured between adolescent and adult perpetrators of statutory rape. While the self-reported method of data collection of the current study may receive criticisms due to risks of bias, past studies have shown that self-reports are reliable in studying problematic behaviours (Cashel, 2003; Vahl et al., 2014). The current study also highlights the need to further examine the relationship between the enforcement of statutory rape cases on adolescents and the Malaysian traditional view of sex roles. The findings could be used to reinforce the efforts in improving the enforcement standard of statutory rape laws that operates using a developmentally positive framework. Therefore, the assumption that male adolescents who have sex with their underage peers is wrong because there is the possibility of deviance should be re-examined further in these efforts of policy reforms. Ideally, efforts that employ more holistic approaches in regulating adolescent sexual behaviour, such as a comprehensive sexuality education, should be given priority by different parties, particularly parents and authorities in the legal system.

Open Scholarship

This article has earned the Center for Open Science badge for Open Data. The data are openly accessible at .

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