Deconstructing dangerous discourse: an analysis of personal safety advice to students on UK universities' websites

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Abstract

In a society pre-occupied with managing risks, individuals are responsibilised to ensure their own safety. In the context of higher education, this might seem useful advice because young university students are at risk of violent victimisation, and they migrate to cities with which they are unfamiliar. However, using Foucauldian discourse analysis, we analysed text about personal safety on all UK universities' websites to draw-out the underlying discourse embedded in the safety advice. We find that students are advised where to walk, when to walk, how to walk or not to walk, and who with. In seeking to control the movements of potential victims to avoid victimisation, a victim-blaming discourse is evident. The offender is rarely mentioned. Such overt safety advice often impacts upon women more than men. It is argued that given the duplication of such advice across university websites as well as its dated nature, it is likely that universities have given little thought to how they advise their students to keep safe and the impact of this. We provide recommendations on how universities can update their personal safety advice to students to be more empowering.

Key words

personal safety advice, university websites, victim-blaming, empowering students, deterring offenders

Introduction

The public backlash in the wake of the murder of Sarah Everard came from women who were angry at the police reportedly advising women they should not 'go out alone at night in the area' (Petter, 2021:unpaginated). Women were angry because the focus was on them to modify their behaviour when it was not their behaviour that was the problem – it was the perpetrator's behaviour that was the problem. Many social media 'tweets' showed how women already adopt a range of strategies, day and night, to stay safe in public spaces. Indeed, the police advice given to women was the same as that given during the 'Yorkshire Ripper' murders in the late 1970s – almost half a decade ago, it had not changed (Petter, 2021). This backlash contrasts against a broader societal backdrop and discourse that is generally averse to risks (Furedi, 1997). Consequently, falling victim to crime is commonly thought of as preventable if the risks to them are reduced by potential victims. From this perspective, the onus is on them to prevent their victimisation. Whilst this may appear as sound practical advice, a deeper analysis of this perspective reveals the problematic foundations on which it is built and the implications it heralds. The paper begins this analysis by outlining the work of the early victimologists to understand positivist victimology to provide a framework in which to situate contemporary personal safety advice. Generally, their arguments focused on the victims' innate pathology and behaviour to explain why they were victimised. Garland's (1996:450, 452) later analyses of the 'new criminologies of everyday life' and a 'responsibilisation strategy' are unpacked because they similarly imply that the onus is on potential victims to reduce criminal

opportunities so that they avoid personal victimisation We analysed how personal safety advice is constructed on UK universities' websites, as part of a broader research project that focused on changing the culture of sexual violence at universities (see Roberts et al., 2023). We detail the methods of our study and our discourse analysis of the website pages. We present our findings which show how university website pages about personal safety construct: normality of crime in cities; dangerous spaces in cities; and dangerous behaviours in cities. In doing so, students are advised to expect to experience crime but by avoiding certain spaces and behaving appropriately, they can reduce their risk of becoming a victim. Consequently, the dangerous discourses from the early victimologists are embedded in UK universities' webpages about personal safety advice to students. For the most part, the university websites advising students about personal safety use gender-neutral language. This is not surprising given the potential for backlash when personal safety advice targets a specific population. If we are to avoid public backlash to messages telling potential victims what to do and how to behave in public spaces to reduce their personal victimisation, then closer scrutiny and challenge to texts on websites (and other formats) is needed. This article does this in relation to personal safety advice on university websites and lists recommendations for universities to enact so that they break away from dangerous discourses of victim-blaming.

Positivist victimology

The sub-discipline of criminology - victimology - emerged in the mid-20th century with founding *fathers*, Von Hentig, Mendelsohn, and Hindelang, Gottfredson and Garofalo, who were positivistic in outlook. They argued that there are differences between victims and non-victims: the latter are the normal standard against which the former and abnormal, are measured (Walklate, 2007). For example, Von Hentig (1979:404) argued that certain types of individuals,

such as the young and females are prone to being a victim because they are 'feeble in body' and 'belong to the weaker sex', respectively. In Hindelang et al's. (1978) work on finding an empirical base for a theory of personal victimisation, an individual's lifestyle, which comprises of daily routine activities of school, work, housekeeping, and leisure, is important in understanding their victimisation. They argue that 'the probability of suffering a personal victimisation is directly related to the amount of time that a person spends in public places (e.g., on the street, in parks, etc.), and particularly in public places at night' (1978:253). The evidence to support their arguments comes from an analysis of trends in victimisation surveys (Hindelang et al., 1978), which, when applied to violent victimisation in public spaces, is supported by more contemporary research (see Brennan et al., 2010; Miles, and Buehler, 2022).

Reinforcing the perspectives of the positivist victimologists is Nils Christie's (1986:12) analysis of 'the ideal victim', who is afforded complete victim status if the following attributes are met: i) 'the victim is weak', ii) 'the victim was carrying out a respectable project', iii) 'she was where she could not possibly be blamed for being – in the street during the daytime'. The victim is referred to as 'she' because heteronormative femininity characterises the 'ideal' victim (Donovan and Barnes, 2018). Non-'ideal' victims, who do not meet the attributes are not afforded complete victim status (Christie, 1986). These victim-blaming discourses unfortunately set the foundations for what was to come.

Risk and the 'new criminologies of everyday life'

Garland (1996) argues that the high crime rates and the limitations of criminal justice agencies to manage these, erodes the myth that the state alone can provide security and order to control crime. Consequently, new criminological discourses have developed to justify new forms of

crime control. One new (then) criminological discourse comprised ‘a set of cognate theoretical frameworks, including rational choice theory, routine activity theory, crime as opportunity and situational crime prevention theory’, which were collectively known as the ‘new criminologies of everyday life’ (see Clarke and Cornish 1986; Felson 1994; Heal and Laycock 1986; Clarke and Mayhew 1980 cited in Garland, 1996:450). The premise of this discourse is that crime is normal – ‘an everyday risk to be assessed and managed in much the same way that we deal with road traffic - another modern danger which has been routinized and “normalized” over time’ (Garland, 1996:446). Crime is viewed as normal because it arises out of everyday social interaction: it is not a result of one’s individual pathology (an innate dysfunction) nor is it the result of how one is socialised, and as such, there is no onus on the state to target the offender for intervention (Garland, 1996). The development of this discourse of the ‘new criminologies of everyday life’ meant that strategies to address crime control extend beyond the state and the criminal justice system to institutions and individuals in society (Garland, 1996:450). These new strategies are directed at potential victims because of their routine activities that give rise to criminal opportunities (Garland, 1996) – following much the same arguments as Hindelang et al. (1978). The goal is ‘to embed controls in the fabric of normal interaction’ to reduce risks and limit the opportunity of crime and thus personal victimisation by implementing situational crime prevention measures such as the use of CCTV cameras, night buses, dedicated walking routes and ‘Watch schemes’ (e.g., Neighbourhood, Cab) (Garland, 1996:451).

The ‘new criminologies of everyday life’ have given rise to a ‘responsibilisation strategy’ to persuade institutions and individuals, particularly those with the capability to reduce criminal opportunities, to act appropriately (Garland, 1996:450, 452). This might include institutions such as universities providing night buses (see University of St Andrews, 2023) or individuals coordinating *Neighbourhood Watch Schemes* to support campaigns (Neighbourhood Watch,

2020). The publicity campaign is an example of a responsibilisation strategy targeted at institutions, the public or groups of potential offenders or victims to 'create a sense of duty, and thus change practices' in the targeted group because the state alone is not responsible for controlling crime (Garland, 1996:452). For example, the Home Office's Crime Prevention (publicity) Campaign in the late 1980s advised *women* to adopt safety strategies, such as avoiding 'dimly-lit alleys', 'cover-up expensive-looking jewellery', 'walk facing the traffic', 'avoid using isolated bus stops' and 'arrange a lift home' (Stanko, 1990:86-87). Such a campaign today would likely invoke considerable public backlash given its focus on women. Yet the messages are clear - avoiding victimisation is the responsibility of the (potential) victim, regardless of how equipped they are to achieve this (Garland, 1996). Indeed, statistics show that some populations fail to avoid personal victimisation, as the next section illustrates.

The victim 'fights' back

The *Crime Survey for England and Wales* (CSEW) shows that individuals aged between 16 and 24 are most likely to be victims of violence, particularly men (but excluding domestic abuse). This age group for men is one of the highest groups for homicide rates (ONS, 2022). Given that most violent crimes are reported as occurring in public spaces (ONS, 2021), including male homicide (ONS, 2022), such spaces are risky for young men. Research is needed to explore if young men, including students, perceive such spaces as risky to understand why they are frequently victimised in these spaces. Women do not entirely avoid personal violent victimisation in public spaces. Research carried out on UK university students, shows that women experience sexual harassment and sexual assault on and off campus (NUS, 2011; Phipps and Young, 2015; Roberts et al., 2022; Stenning et al., 2013), including in the pubs and clubs (Roberts et al., 2019). However, in Roberts et al's. (2019) research, they found that

women students resisted the sexual harassment and assaults committed against them as well as attempts, by enacting several strategies. These strategies are responsibilisation strategies because the students and others, who are the (potential) victims, reduced criminal opportunities by: moving away from the perpetrator, confronting the perpetrator, others intervening during the incident, reporting the incident, and modifying behaviours after the incident. The ways in which women students modify their behaviours in public spaces, particularly in the night-time has been well-documented in research, in the US (Tomsich et al., 2011; Woolnough, 2009) and UK (Roberts, 2019, 2022; Roberts et al., 2022). Women students modify their behaviour by not using certain public spaces at night particularly when they are out alone, or they avoid them altogether by not going out (Roberts, 2019, 2022; Roberts et al., 2022). Women students adopt these protective and avoidance strategies, respectively, because they are fearful for their safety in public spaces in the night-time. This has been documented in US (Braaten et al., 2020; Fisher and Nasar, 1992; Fox et al., 2009; Maier and DePrince, 2020; Merianos et al., 2017; Tomsich et al., 2011; Woolnough, 2009), and UK (Roberts, 2022; Roberts et al., 2022) research.

This raises questions about the advantages and disadvantages of responsibilising potential victims to control crime by reducing criminal opportunities in their everyday social interactions, because the mantle appears to be taken-up by women, predominantly. On the one hand, responsibilisation strategies may reduce their personal victimisation in public spaces (see Roberts, 2019). On the other hand, it may exacerbate their fears because individuals who are fearful can live in an ever-perpetuating spiral of insecurity (Loader and Walker, 2007) because the safety measures, which they have come to rely upon to ensure their safety, e.g., controlled access, security patrols, CCTV, bright lighting (Roberts, 2022, 2023), can fail or be absent (Isin, 2004). More radical critiques about responsibilising potential victims to ensure their own safety, what has been termed engaging in ‘safety work’ (Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020:265),

consider that women are trading freedom for safety (Vera-Gray, 2018). Ultimately, in responsibilising potential victims to alter their social interactions to reduce criminal opportunities and their personal victimisation, they are held responsible when they are victimised. In much the same arguments as Hindelang et al's. (1978) theory of personal victimisation, victims are victimised because of their lifestyles, which expose them to high-risk situations of criminal opportunities at high-risk times, in high-risk places by high-risk people. Victims who fail to alter their exposure to these kinds of lifestyles are then blamed for their victimisation.

Methodology

Universities UK (2016:33, 2019:12) insist that universities are responsible for ensuring the safety of students, including improving their perceptions of safety. This makes sense because students are at a heightened risk of violent victimisation because of their young age (ONS, 2021, 2022), many (49%) are aged 21 and under (Advance HE, 2022), and because of their 'student' lifestyle, which may lead them to spend more time in public spaces in the night-time (see Hindelang et al., 1978). Moreover, many students migrate to cities they are unfamiliar with. In the lead author's role as an advisor on a university crime prevention group, she has advised campus security about the use of language in their safety advice to students, given the contentious nature of responsibilisation strategies and victim-blaming discourses in the literature. Whilst the written safety advice to students is gender-neutral, certain students may be targeted with crime prevention devices. A few years ago, the lead author was forwarded a well-versed written complaint via e-mail from a student at the university about the focus of the safety advice given, which centred on predominantly women students being given devices designed to protect them from victimisation. The annoyed student felt it was not their behaviour

that was the problem so the focus should not be on them, echoing the same subsequent arguments of women in the public backlash to the safety advice they were given in the wake of the murder of Sarah Everard. This backdrop was influential in us analysing all UK universities' outward facing webpages about student safety and support with a particular focus on personal safety, for this paper.

Analysis of universities' websites has been the focus of several recent studies analysing varying content: the relationship between Australian university websites and its international student enrolment (Jayawardena et al., 2020); discourses of support for international students in US universities' websites, using a critical discourse approach and neo-racism framework (Wang and Sun, 2021); how US universities communicate about sustainability through their websites, using a quantitative content analysis approach (Dade and Hassenzahl, 2013); how sexual health and substance use is presented on US study abroad websites, also using a quantitative content analysis approach (Marcantonio et al., 2019); and how student life is constructed (Svendsen and Svendsen, 2017). In the latter study, the authors analysed one Danish university's website pages of *Student Life* using a critical discourse analysis approach to show how student life is constructed to cushion the demanding nature of being a university student for the benefit of the university in attracting students (Svendsen and Svendsen, 2017). More specifically, Lund and Thomas (2015) carried out a content analysis of 102 colleges and universities' websites in the US to find out about the content of sexual assault information. Ninety (88%[1]) institutions provided some information. However, 10 (11%) institutions 'endorsed some form of victim blaming' on their websites (Lund and Thomas, 2015:535). From these studies we learnt what website content could be analysed and how it could be analysed.

[1] Percents are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Our research aimed to analyse all UK universities' webpages for student safety and support with a particular focus in this paper on personal safety advice. We began with The Sunday Times (2021) *Good University Guide 2022* as the sampling frame consisting of 132 ranked UK universities. These universities were categorised as: traditional (n=29), Russell Group (n=24), post 1992 – old polytechnic (n=33), post 1992 (n=37), post 1992 with traditional university roots (n=4) and with central institution roots (n=5) (see Russell Group, 2022; Wikipedia, 2022a, 2022b). Norman Fairclough (2010) showed in his application of critical discourse analysis how a traditional university's institutional voice can be different to a newer university's institutional voice because the former has a more settled identity whereas the latter is actively constructing its identity. This finding may have relevance to our analysis. The universities, in order of rank, were entered into an Excel document. Data was then gathered from these universities' webpages during February and March 2022 (with some updates of data a year later). We began from the university's home page and clicked on links to pages about personal safety – the focus of this paper - and/or used the websites' search engines to find the pages. From these pages, text, images and weblinks were copied and pasted into the Excel document at the row corresponding to the university. The text was also copied and imported into NVivo; a computer assisted data analysis software to facilitate the analysis.

In total, 94 (71%) universities' websites had content about personal safety – 57 (43%) universities provided comprehensive advice and 37 (28%) universities provided general advice. Universities' that provided comprehensive advice were more likely to have a dedicated webpage to personal safety with detailed advice about safety across a range of contexts. Universities that provided general advice were more likely to summarise this generally in a

short paragraph. Thirty-eight (29%) universities' websites had no advice about personal safety. A qualitative content analysis was initially carried out on the data. Whilst this type of content analysis does not measure aspects of texts like previous studies had done (see Dade and Hassenzahl, 2013; Marcantonio et al., 2019), it is quantifying words, and sentences as 'indications of something else' (Boreus and Bergstrom, 2017:25). This 'something else' is the kernels of discourse. Rather than use a critical discourse analysis, particularly Fairclough's, as previous studies had done (see Svendsen and Svendsen, 2017; Wang and Sun, 2021), albeit similar, we drew on a Foucauldian perspective of discourse: 'a discourse can be described as a system of rules that legitimises certain knowledge but not other knowledge and that indicates who has the right to express themselves with authority' (Bergstrom et al., 2017:212). The broader analysis focuses on how 'particular knowledge is created, perpetuated and reproduced as well as which effects this knowledge can have' (Bergstrom et al., 2017:213). The effect of this knowledge, for Foucault, is the power of discourse: to construct behaviours as problematic and to govern populations based upon this construction (Bergstrom et al., 2017). To this end, social constructionism is the philosophical lens used to make sense of how problematic behaviours are constructed in discourse and how populations are powerfully controlled by them (Burr, 2003). Our data was coded and categorised thematically by drawing on the key concepts outlined earlier in the literature review about lifestyle, 'ideal victim' and responsibilisation to guide the analysis. We were interested in analysing text as discourse to answer specifically how is advice about personal safety to students constructed and what are its implications? As academics in higher education and teaching professions, we are acutely aware of the impact of what we write about the ranked hierarchy of universities (colleges and schools) in the sampling frame. We are therefore unselective and unbiased in our presentation of data from the 94 university websites analysed to reflect the dominant discourses about personal safety advice, centred on constructing: the normality of crime, dangerous spaces, and dangerous behaviours.

We present data only once from a university's webpage/s and data we present is typical of data we found on other universities' webpages. All website pages are unpaginated.

Limitations

Whilst our data collection was methodical, it must be recognised that webpages and hyperlinks can be buried, missed, moved, and updated. However, if we have missed them in our analysis then students may also miss them. Moreover, we analysed webpages that are outward facing. We could not access university's inward facing webpages about personal safety, those which require logins and passwords. For this reason, our findings are presented broadly of most universities in the research and our arguments are qualitative in nature rather than specifically quantitative.

Findings

Constructing the safe city and the normality of crime

Whilst there are many aspects to different universities (see Barnett, 2018), they are often theorised as neoliberal entities driven by corporate and market interests (del Cerro Santamaria, 2020). Their media ranking in the sampling frame used and discussed in the methodology is evidence of universities as businesses who are competing for customers because such league tables are used by prospective students and their parents/carers to guide their decisions about where to study (Beer, 2016). Consequently, universities will be careful not to publish any outward facing material that will adversely affect their prospective customer-base. So, constructing the normality of crime is important because it sets the context of what students

are to expect when they study in the city. Consequently, some universities begin their webpages on personal safety as follows:

> Hull is a safe city and most of our students do not encounter any problems, however, as within any city crimes do occur. (University of Hull, 2023).

Universities are careful to construct the city as safe yet contradictorily within this backdrop to set students' expectations they are reminded like any other modern danger that crime occurs – it is normal (Garland, 1996). This paves the way for advice that follows across university websites about how students can stay safe in the city by avoiding this normal danger.

Constructing dangerous spaces

The university websites construct aspects of cities as safe and unsafe highlighting the contradictory nature of text and discourse (see Gill, 2000). Cities are not safe for lone walkers. Many universities advised students to never walk around the city by themselves.

> When you are out in town with friends, make sure you travel in groups. (University of Worcester, 2022).

Unlit spaces are particularly dangerous when alone.

> Stick to *well-lit, safe routes* [italics represent hyperlink to map of safe walking routes] that can easily be overseen. Avoid dark and narrow alleyways and quieter areas, particularly at night (University of Warwick, 2021).

Students were advised across university webpages about personal safety to avoid all these areas too: car parks, rivers, waste grounds, parks, commons, lanes, underpasses, walkways, side streets, and housing estates, particularly if they are dark. Such advice is problematic. Firstly, there is little urban space left to tread. Secondly, it creates or reinforces the perception that urban spaces in the dark are dangerous. The advice could be read as it is not safe to go out at

night. Moreover, the use of language on the webpages, ‘make sure’, ‘avoid’ signifies that whilst there are unsafe places in cities, students’ behaviours could add to the problem of their safety. Through such safety advice the student becomes responsible for *their* behaviour. By not following this safety advice, students could place themselves where they should not be, e.g., not in a well-lit area, and in doing so, they could lose claim to ‘ideal victim’ status (see Christie, 1986) if they were victimised.

To add to ‘cities as dangerous', universities advise students about strategies that they need to adopt to ensure they stay safe and do not become a victim of crime. This advice requires an element of planning beforehand:

> Always pre-book a taxi/mini cab in advance […] (St. Mary’s University, 2023).

There was much written on the webpages about students safely using taxis: some universities advised on using their ‘Safe Taxi Schemes’ (see Cardiff University, 2023). As with discourse, taxis were also constructed as dangerous spaces if they are unlicensed and if you are alone, respectively:

> If you are getting into a taxi, make sure it is a licensed one. If you are unsure, do not get in. Ensure the taxi takes you right to your door, and have your keys ready as you leave it. (Glasgow Caledonian University, 2022).

> If you are getting a taxi, it is still sensible to do this with a friend. (Queen’s University Belfast, 2022).

Students are placing themselves, as advised, where they should be – in a registered taxi, with a friend. Further personal safety advice about night travel was provided on additional webpages by some universities that reinforced these messages about dangerous spaces as dark and desolate (see Roberts, 2022):

> If you're waiting for a bus after dark then stand in a well-lit place and, if possible, near to groups of people. Try to stay away from isolated bus stops. (University of Strathclyde, 2022).

Such intricate personal safety advice implies that universities seek enhanced control over their student populations by advising them where they should be - in lit and populated spaces - giving further specific advice on where these spaces are so that students can follow the 'right route':

> **Plan ahead**: If you are walking at night or you are visiting a new area and you are aware, plan your trips ahead by knowing the routes you can take to get to where you want to be. If you're a student living in High Wycombe, check out our 'Right Routes' [hyperlink] (Buckinghamshire New University, 2022, **their emphasis**).

One university displayed a video of a campus manager walking a 'Recommended Walking Route' advising students to use it because of CCTV, extra lighting, and security patrols. Yellow signs to follow the route were highlighted in the video. The video even advised students to 'always use a pedestrian crossing and always make sure that vehicles have stopped before you cross' and 'always consider using a personal safety app when out walking' (Oxford Brookes University, 2023). Indeed, the monitoring of student bodies for safety is highly recommended.

> It is important that we *all* download SafeZone so that when you are on campus you can *be checked in*. But don't worry, you won't have to do this every time you are on campus; the app can be set up to do it automatically so that you don't have to even think about it. It will even check you out of campus too (University of Aberdeen, 2022, *our emphasis*).

This surveillance of students extends beyond the campus boundaries.

> Try to avoid walking alone at night. Take a friend with you if you have to go out. Always let someone know where you are going and what time you may be back. (Edge-Hill University, 2022).

Being in a friendship group ensures your safety in the night-time.

> When you're out with friends, look out for each other and stick together. Everyone is more vulnerable when they're alone. (University of Bath, 2023).

So, universities' websites advise that cities are not safe to walk around alone, and students need to be seen. Unlike Nils Christie's (1986) construction of the 'ideal victim' as female, universities' text about personal safety are mostly ungendered. However, students are responsibilised to heed the advice about avoiding dangerous spaces and to ensure they are visible. This responsibilisation continues in the advice given on universities' websites about how students are to behave when out walking.

Constructing dangerous behaviours

Crime is normal, remember. The websites go further than just advising students where to walk, where not to walk, when to walk, and who to walk with, they advise on how to walk and what they should be doing when they are walking, respectively.

> Walk facing traffic so you can see what's heading towards you and so a car can't pull up behind you unnoticed. (University of Sheffield, 2023).
>
> Keep your valuables hidden – cover-up expensive looking jewellery, mobiles, keys, cash and cards (University of Kent, 2023).

Students are advised to hide property on their person and if it cannot be hidden, how to protect it.

> If you are carrying a bag, try to have it across your chest and keep your hand over the fastening. (Aston University, 2022).

They are also advised on what not to wear and how not to behave.

> **Stay aware of your surroundings**. Avoid wearing headphones, texting and playing games on your phone while walking alone to ensure you are aware and alert of your surroundings. You can also share your location with a friend as an extra safety precaution. (University of Wolverhampton, 2022, **their emphasis**).

They must also consider how *they* may look like an attractive target.

> Walk tall and be confident; never show that you are feeling insecure, don't look like an easy target. (Bangor University, 2020).

Instead, the advice is to be pro-active in protecting yourself against personal victimisation and thus to expect the normality of crime.

> Consider self-defence classes to build your confidence. (St George's University of London, 2022).
>
> Carry a personal attack alarm and security wrist bands. (University of Bristol, 2023).

The personal safety advice given to students on universities' webpages assumes that students have the capability to prevent their own personal victimisation. Where the offender was mentioned, it was mostly in relation to the potential victim's behaviour and what they should be doing:

> *Shout and scream* as loud as you can if you're being attacked, are threatened, or at risk of being attacked. This will alert people who may be able to help. It is also likely to cause the offender to run off. (University of Oxford, 2023, *our emphasis*).

Or if the offender is mentioned, it is to reinforce the potential victim's behaviour as the final text shows - ultimately epitomising the findings from the research.

> Robbers are also opportunists, though in general, they're not as common as thieves. They are likely to act with accomplices, and prefer lone targets in dark places. **Don't walk home alone at night**. Walk in a group, travel by taxi or stay over with friends. Your safety is worth more than the cab fare home! If you find yourself unable to pay for a taxi, call a friend or relative and ask them to pay for your ride at the other end. If you are walking at night, stay on wide, well lit routes. In Leicester, main routes are covered by CCTV; dark, narrow streets are not. On and in the immediate vicinity of DMU's campus, you can call DMU Security on […] - we can monitor you using our cameras for your peace of mind for as long as you're within the area our CCTV system can observe. (De Montfort University, 2023, **their emphasis***)*.

Only one university gave safety advice to the (potential) offender. Here the language used was extraordinarily gendered – the potential offenders were men, and the potential victims were

women. The website provided a list of 8 strategies for men to do to make women feel safe and be safe (see London South Bank University, 2022).

Discussion

The findings present an analysis of personal safety advice to students on 94 university websites in the UK. The ranked nature of the universities does not appear to be relevant to the findings. The argument of this paper is that such advice appears overly controlling, reinforcing a society preoccupied with reducing risks (Furedi, 1997). The advice given is framed within the 'new criminologies of everyday life' (Garland, 1996:450). Here crime and personal victimisation is normalised, and individuals are responsibilised to ensure their own safety (Garland, 1996) by following the personal safety advice given. Following the advice means that potential victims are 'where [they] could not possibly be blamed for being' (Christie, 1986:12), e.g., in lit populated spaces. Failing to follow the safety advice may mean that victims are blamed for their own victimisation. Victim-blaming has its roots in the perspectives of the early victimologists (Hindelang et al., 1978; von Hentig, 1979). Their legacy is perpetuated by universities' websites framing personal safety advice to students in the 'new criminologies of everyday life' (Garland, 1996:450) about where to walk, how to walk, how not to walk, who to walk with, and how to behave, particularly at night, because as Hindelang et al. (1978:253) argued 'the probability of suffering a personal victimisation is directly related to the amount of time that a person spends in public places (e.g., on the street, in parks, etc.), and particularly in public places at night'. This discourse of victim-blaming is thus perpetuated and legitimised as the dominant narrative – an ultimate 'truth'. The impacts of such a discourse may be found in the existing research that shows women students restricting their use of public space at night (Roberts, 2019, 2022; Roberts et al., 2022; Tomsich et al., 2011; Woolnough, 2009) because

they are more likely to be fearful and feel unsafe than men (Braaten et al., 2020; Fisher and Nasar, 1992; Fox et al., 2009; Maier and DePrince, 2020; Merianos et al., 2017; Roberts, 2022; Roberts et al., 2022; Tomsich et al., 2011; Woolnough, 2009).

The university websites analysed in this paper construct cities in the night-time as dangerous spaces. When such webpages are read in their totality, they may invoke fear and feelings of unsafety, particularly for women students, because often a lengthy list appears of what to do and what not to do to keep safe – it is simpler, and it appears safer, not to go out. However, this is speculation and further research is needed to corroborate this statement. Nonetheless, our Foucauldian discourse analysis is important because a victim-blaming discourse is powerful - it constructs certain behaviours, such as those of victims, as problematic, and populations such as potential victims, are governed based upon the construction of the discourse (Bergstrom et al., 2017). The personal safety advice given to students is duplicated across university websites. It is also dated. The advice is reminiscent of the Home Office's Crime Prevention (publicity) Campaign in the late 1980s, which advised, albeit the focus then was on women, to adopt safety strategies, such as avoid 'dimly-lit alleys', 'cover-up expensive-looking jewellery', 'walk facing the traffic', 'avoid using isolated bus stops', and 'arrange a lift home' (Stanko, 1990:86-87). Consequently, we surmise that universities have given little thought to what is written about how they advise students to keep safe and the impact of this. But universities must pay careful attention to what they write on their webpages because as an institution of higher education with a duty to ensure students' safety (Universities UK, 2016, 2019), the perception is that they have 'the right to express themselves with authority' (Bergstrom et al., 2017:212) and thus be heard and listened to.

Universities have a responsibility to their students, who are at a heightened risk of violent victimisation, to ensure their safety, including improving their perceptions of this (Universities UK, 2016, 2019). A careful balance is needed between giving personal safety advice to students that is constructive but that does not entirely responsibilise them for their own safety nor does it engender fear and the control of their movements in public space. The advice should be carefully constructed so as not to create a disproportionate sense of risk for women students, albeit most language used on university websites is gender neutral. Individuals who live under conditions of enacting and relying upon pervasive security measures are likely to remain fearful because of an ever-perpetuating spiral of insecurity (Loader and Walker, 2007) because of the perceived failure or absence of safety measures (Isin, 2004), e.g., CCTVs may not work, foot patrols and access control may not be present, lighting may be poor. Hence why it is women students who are more likely to call for such measures to be enacted when they are absent or not good enough (Roberts, 2022, 2023). Yet, women students are unlikely to choose to roam freely in public spaces at night, instead, they will trade their freedom for safety (see Vera-Gray, 2018), consciously acting with agency, either by not going out at all or taking precautions when they are out (Roberts, 2019, 2022; Roberts et al., 2022). They are thus unlikely to take risks. Thus, recommendations about how to reframe the personal safety advice given to students on universities' websites are needed to avoid constructing and perpetuating dangerous discourses of victim-blaming.

Recommendations

For the 38 universities where we could not find any personal safety advice, they need to provide some. For the 37 universities who provided general advice about personal safety, they need to enhance it for comprehensiveness. For the 57 universities who provided comprehensive advice

about personal safety, they need to reframe it, as do all universities following the recommendations here:

- A standard template about personal safety advice to students to be used on all UK universities' websites, to be designed.
- The contents of the template should ensure:
    - what the institution does and can do to ensure students' safety on *and* off campus is fore-grounded
    - there is a balance of advice given to potential victims *and* potential offenders so that there is emphasis on the offender's behaviour as the problem. If crime is opportunistic as the 'new criminologies of everyday life' (Garland, 1996:450) suggest, then advice that deters potential offenders might be appropriate
    - the use of language is positive and empowering rather than negative and controlling – avoid the use of 'avoid', 'do not', 'make sure', 'always'
    - that the *Crime Survey for England and Wales* and *Homicide* statistics of young men's rates of violent and fatal victimisation in public spaces are stated
- The Association of University Chief Security Officers (AUCSO) with universities are integral in designing and disseminating the standard template.
- The standard template about personal safety advice should be situated within easy reach of universities' home webpage.
- A publicity campaign targeted at potential offenders to deter them from committing violent victimisation in public spaces. The campaign should be evaluated.

Further research is needed from the students' perspective about the current personal safety advice given to them on UK universities' websites, including their awareness of the webpages and whether they read them. The findings can be used to inform the design and implementation of the standard template.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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