Nature of Rape in the Late 1980s and Early 1990s: 
As Seen in Thelma & Louise

In the 1991 film Thelma and Louise an uncertain adventure is spurred from a brush with rape. One of the main characters, Thelma - who in the beginning of the film is generally portrayed as naïve and oblivious - becomes the victim of attempted rape after a night at a bar. Thelma's best friend Louise, typically a calculated and street-wise woman, comes to the rescue and in her rage murders the offender. Since the cause for the events throughout the film that follow are based on this series of crimes committed, it is inherent that the issue of rape is a theme that is central to the plot in Thelma & Louise.

In the early 90s, rape was viewed as a woman’s issue; men did not take clear responsibility, and it was not generally accepted when a woman pursued a certain, if any, amount of justice. This notion was evidenced in the film by the main characters’ automatic decision to deal with the issue on their own and silently flee the aftermath as opposed to pleading their case to local authorities. Furthermore, the audience later finds out that Louise had been raped in Texas prior to Thelma’s encounter, and had told no one. Not only was there a social stigma associated with rape in the early 90s, but a judicial one as well. As seen in the film, the majority of policemen did not associate the crimes committed by these women with the issue of rape; instead, it was dismissed as a formality in a greater series of criminal acts. Through these and similar messages displayed in the film’s narrative, the viewer gets a clear sense of how rape was being dealt with (or disregarded) during the time period and can better understand the greater argument that is being pressed by the filmmakers. This attitude toward such human atrocity begs the question: what kind of
progress has society made on this issue since the time period in which *Thelma and Louise* took place? In order to evaluate the current position of rape in our society today, it is essential to understand the flaws present in the approach to rape in a historical context.

Articles and newspapers from the time period, in addition to secondary sources reporting legal and causal trends with consideration to rape in the early 1990s, support arguments highlighting the inadequacy of lawful intervention in the issue of rape. One article in particular that was published on August 11, 1989 in *The New York Times* details just how rape was glossed over for a larger and apparently more meaningful cause. In University Park, Texas, a police officer was working undercover to investigate men with suspected drug charges. He witnessed these men rape a woman, and did not interfere simply because, “you don’t want to ruin your credibility” and justified his inaction by stating, “if it had been a life-threatening situation, I’d have blown my cover. I’d have had to. You can’t just let someone be killed” (“Officer Watched Rape Take Place” A17). Evidently, the common belief in this time period even by law enforcement, was that rape was not a priority simply because it was not automatically accompanied by murder and the physical, psychological and emotional toll on the victim was not considered.

There was a general consensus among Americans during the 90s that more conservative southern states were more likely to turn a blind eye to women’s social justice issues, including rape. However, there are indications that this type of ignorance was not confined to any area of the country, specifically, and still plagued those states which were considered more progressive or at least liberal. Another article published in *The New York Times* on April 29, 1994 demonstrates how in New York City, reports of rape were not of much interest to law officers. A Brooklyn woman reported being raped at a park when she
was walking home; a claim that was heavily supported by laboratory findings of semen on the running shorts she had been wearing. Although police officials “maintained that the woman’s account was being taken seriously” they were hesitant to say that there was any evidence of the crime because there had been no evidence “found to corroborate the rape report.” Furthermore, some unnamed policemen were documented saying that the “rape report was a hoax ‘by a woman looking for publicity’” (McFadden B3). This woman was not only discounted for her report because rape was an unspoken issue of the day, but also because she was an “outspoken lesbian” (B3). The fact that the police included this characteristic of the victim as a necessary part of the investigation showed that there were more women’s issues at the forefront of the early 90s, but nonetheless this apathetic attitude toward justice in the case of rape is apparent.

Perhaps the emerging trend during this time period for more violent entertainment and prevalence of pornography had an effect on public sensitivity toward crimes involving rape? According to a study published in The Journal of Sex and Research there existed a correlation indicating a causational relationship between increased exposure to this material and a decreased conscious response to the act of rape and its victims. One of the studies from the late 80s described in Linz’s article involved “[three phases] to examine the impact of nonaggressive and aggressive images on college men and women” (55). The participants read paragraphs, viewed images, and watched videos depicting acts ranging from non-violent to extremely violent. Afterward, they were asked to “make punitive judgments against a convicted rapist (and batterer) described in a one-page account of the crime” (56). The results showed that the violence and depravity of the media had no effect on the participant’s attitudes in a “multivariate analysis” – meaning when all variables were
considered as a group. However when individual variables were analyzed further, there were two specific types of sexual violence that yielded a consistently lower sentencing for the rapist: female-instigated sex acts and slasher films. Consequent studies testing this phenomenon resulted in the same findings; which gives this claim more substance and reliability. The growing popularity of these forms of entertainment in the late 80s and early 90s most likely had some effect on the decreased awareness or alarm toward violent acts against women, especially rape. The argument can be made that after a period of time, people become accustomed to the new stimulus and it no longer affects judgment when facing sexual violence; thus, these sorts of media had more of a negative effect on attitudes toward rape two decades ago even though they are still present today.

Having gained an understanding of the historical and social context surrounding rape when the film *Thelma and Louise* was released, comparisons of evidence from modern day society concerning women being raped or otherwise sexually assaulted can be made. The conclusion that many have arrived at regarding this issue is that while people are much more sensitive to the subject, society still has more steps to take in eradicating or at least significantly diminishing the incidence of rape in the United States. To begin, recent statistics have shown that sexual assault has decreased by 60 percent in this country since 1993. If such gains had not been made, approximately “an additional 2,546,420 Americans would have become victims of sexual violence” ("How Often Does Sexual Assault Occur?"). Therefore, it is safe to assert that efforts to decrease the amount of sexual injustice upon women have been made and are successful on some level.

In addition, this decade has been accompanied by a surge in legislation, which cracks down on rape more than it did in the early 90s, when *Thelma & Louise* took place.
Specifically, laws involving spousal rape have evolved into a firm establishment in our legal system as opposed to an option for some states to enforce on a semi-regular basis. It wasn’t until the mid-90s that some states including North Carolina “[considered] spousal rape a crime.” All exemptions have been removed regarding the circumstance under which rape takes place, and most recently, spousal rape has been deemed a federal offense (“National Center for Victims of Crime”). This is another example of how national legislation is being used to deter acts of sexual violence, now including those in the household. Both of the previous examples are major steps in improving the amount of sexual justice for women in present-day United States.

While laws are fully binding and fixed, law enforcement still seems to be dragging its feet as the magnitude of personal discretion among officials is still sizeable. This essentially undermines the legal framework and poses a threat to the protection of women by rape legislation. In 2005, an article published in The Washington Post gave an explanation as to why “St. Louis police report far fewer rapes than other cities” (Kholer A1). According to this investigation, most of the officers in St. Louis were not writing up formal incident reports for rape cases, but simply writing memos. In the specific case of Latisha Williams, who was raped after getting into a car with a man, there was no call made in response from the police after she reported the crime. This was not because the man had been taken into custody, but because “the officer did not believe a crime had been committed” so he never filed a report (A1). Classifying rape in this way does not only make the city seem safer than it actually is, it also weakens the victims right to justice while simultaneously strengthening the criminals’ confidence in getting away without punishment (thus increasing the actual incidence of rape).
Another publication in The Washington Post on June 19, 2006 detailed perhaps why there has been such an apparent decrease in rape over the last decade: “Rape reached a peak in about 1992, with 0.4 rapes per 1,000 people. Since then, reported rape has declined about 25 percent in 2004” (Fahrenthold A1). Furthermore, president of the National Organization for Women – Kim Gandy – was quoted saying “Overall there has clearly been a decline over the last 10 to 20 years. It’s very liberating for women, in terms of now being able to be more free and more safe” (A1). Statistically, there has been a significant decrease in reports between the 1990s and the new millennium; this is not up for debate. What is arguable is the reason behind the decline. Many criminologists argue that it could be somewhat of a delusion because of the fact that rape is “one of the most underreported crimes” (A1). It is also important to consider from where the statistical evidence is being gathered; for instance, in the Washington D.C. area incidences of rape sharply decreased in the cities but increased in suburban areas. Evidence collected for this article shows that although there is indeed a progressive movement in rape prevention, the public should still be weary and there is more room for improvement than the numbers may let on.

The encompassing theme of rape in Thelma and Louise brings about intriguing questions for policies in the time period and how they have changed as society moved into the future. What was shown in the film and evidenced by primary and secondary sources from the late 80s and early 90s was that enforcement and legislation regarding rape and sexual violence towards women was weak and the general attitude displayed by society was apathetic and insensitive. Thus, women did not have the confidence to report such crimes, and stories that may resemble that of Thelma and Louise although perhaps not as extreme were not unheard of. About a decade later, improvements were undoubtedly made
in a legal sense and generally people seemed to have more of a conscience when thinking about the victims of rape and the real psychological detriments that follow. There are certainly some exceptions that provoke doubt on the accuracy of the decline in rape but while certain individuals in law enforcement may be lacking in judgment regarding appropriate action to rape crimes, the more important movement is the national one; and this is the one that is growing in strength and credibility. Overall, the nature of how citizens and legal documentation view rape has changed to promote self-advocacy among women and self-respect for their rights to social justice.
Works Cited


