Are They Judging Me? - How a Threatened Moral Image Predicts an Offender´s Willingness to Participate in Victim-Offender Mediation

Simon Lohmann

Bachelor Thesis

25.06.2024

University of Twente

BMS Faculty

Psychology of Conflict, Risk, and Safety

First Supervisor: Dr. S. Zebel

Second Supervisor: Dr. Jiska Jonas

Abstract

Previous research has shown that participation in victim-offender mediation (VOM) can reduce an offender's risk of reoffending. However, it remains unclear if this effect is due to the restorative character of the practice itself or a self-selection bias. Since participation in VOM is voluntary, there might be preexisting differences between offenders willing and unwilling to participate in VOM, which could fully explain the positive effect of VOM on recidivism. To better understand this effect of VOM and unravel the self-selection bias, this research aimed to investigate whether differences in the need for a positive moral-social identity cause a difference in willingness to participate in VOM. It was hypothesised that offenders who experience a moral image threat are more likely to participate in VOM than offenders who experience no such threat and that this effect is explained by an offender's need for acceptance from family and victim. To answer the research question, a between-subjects research design with one independent variable, threat to moral image, with two conditions (moral-social identity threat vs. no-threat) was utilised (total N = 149). Participants had to imagine themselves in an offender role shown in a robbery video and then either received messages of disapproval of their criminal actions or messages indicating an understanding of the conducted crime from their social environment. Subsequently, participants' willingness to participate in VOM and key mediator and exploratory measures were assessed. In line with expectations, results indicated that a threatened moral image positively predicts an offender´s VOM participation. However, no support was found for the theorised mediating effect of an offender´s need for acceptance from family and victim. An explorative analysis suggested that the assed mediators operate differently than expected. These findings indicate that, in practice, offenders willing to participate in VOM are likely to experience a greater threat to their moral image, pointing towards the existence of a self-selection bias in VOM.

Introduction

Two distinct practices exist in the field of justice: Conventional justice and restorative justice. While conventional justice focuses on enforcing the law, determining guilt, and managing punishment, restorative justice focuses on resolving conflicts, repairing harm, and restoring relationships between the parties concerned (Hansen & Umbreit, 2018; Jonas et al., 2022, 2023; Saulnier & Sivasubramaniam, 2015). As outlined in the theory of restorative justice, the needs of the parties involved and the satisfaction of those needs through active exchange interactions between the parties, overseen and facilitated by a third party, are paramount to the realisation of justice in this practice (Hansen & Umbreit, 2018; Melèndez, 2021; Wenzel et al., 2008). Different types of restorative justice practices have emerged over time, such as family group conferencing, peacemaking circles, and victim-offender mediation (VOM), with the latter one being the most widely applied (Bradshaw & Roseborough, 2005; Palermo et al., 2013; Umbreit & Armour, 2011).

A government´s answer to crime should be evidence-based to effectively create a safe environment for all members of society (Welsh & Farrington, 2006). Therefore, it is crucial to investigate the effects of different answers to crime. Although not a central aim of restorative justice, it has been shown that the practice of VOM can contribute to a safer environment by reducing the risk of reoffending (Fulham et al., 2023; Jonas et al., 2020, 2022). However, it remains unclear if this effect of VOM is due to the restorative character of the practice itself or a self-selection bias. Since participation in VOM is voluntary, there might be preexisting differences between offenders willing to participate and those unwilling to do so. These two groups could differ, for example, in their feelings and motivations, which could fully explain the positive effect of VOM on recidivism. Offenders willing to participate in VOM may already be more motivated to change and avoid future criminal behaviour, while offenders unwilling to participate in VOM may be less motivated to do so. In line with this, other examinations have already shown that the motivations to take responsibility for the crime, to apologise to the victim, and to express regrets are linked to a lower risk of reoffending, yet the question about potential differences in motivations between offenders willing and unwilling to participate in VOM remains open (Hosser et al., 2008; Jonas et al., 2023). By examining if there are differences in motivations of offenders willing to participate in VOM and those unwilling to do so, the effect of VOM can be better understood, and the potential existence of a self-selection bias can be clarified.

Additionally, knowing what motivates an offender to participate in VOM might be relevant for preparing an offender during the preliminary phase of VOM. Since participation

in VOM is voluntary, offenders can refuse to participate, which hinders the realisation of its benefits. Various studies have found participation rates of around 40-60% for victims and around 50% for offenders, illustrating that the possibility of participating in VOM is often declined (Umbreit et al., 2001, 2004, 2007; Umbreit & Greenwood, 1999). One key motivation for offenders to take restorative actions seems to be restoring their moral image (Shnabel & Nadler, 2015; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2014). If offenders with a greater need to restore their moral image after interpersonal transgression are more willing to participate in VOM than offenders with a smaller need for restoring their moral image, interventions aimed at increasing the chances of participation in VOM could capitalise on these offenders' needs by explaining how the VOM procedure can contribute to the restoration of their moral-social identity. This could increase the motivation of offenders to participate and help to maximise the benefits of restorative justice practices. Therefore, the current study aims to investigate whether differences in the need for a positive moral-social identity cause a difference in willingness to participate in VOM. To explore the impact of this key motivation and contribute to unravelling self-selection biases.

VOM

VOM is a process in which the victim and the offender can engage in a voluntary dialogue about the offence supervised by a trained mediator. Participants can, for example, discuss the crime, its impact, and opportunities to make amends (Hansen & Umbreit, 2018; Umbreit & Armour, 2011). The aim is to resolve conflict through the active involvement of the concerned parties, with a strong emphasis on the interaction between the victim and the offender (Hansen & Umbreit, 2018). Voluntary participation of the victim and the offender, a neutral mediator, and the confidentiality of the process are basic requirements for this approach (De Mesmaecker, 2013). VOM consists of two phases: A preliminary or preparation phase during which the victim and the offender decide on whether to participate in the mediation and an execution phase in which the mediation session takes place provided that both parties agree on participating (Hansen & Umbreit, 2018; Jonas et al., 2023). This type of restorative justice can happen through direct contact between the parties through face-to-face meetings and indirect contact through online sessions, shuttle mediation and correspondence (Bonensteffen et al., 2022; Hansen & Umbreit, 2018). Research on VOM indicates that this form of restorative justice can offer many benefits. For example, Hansen and Umbreit (2018) concluded that VOM can reduce fear and anger in the victims, cause higher satisfaction with the justice process among victims and offenders, and provide psychosocial benefits for the parties involved. Additionally, a literature review by Jonas et al. (2023) indicates that VOM

can reduce the risk of reoffending, increase the offender´s chances of completing restitution agreements, and benefit the desistance process.

Participation in VOM

Research has indicated that there are different motivations for victims and offenders to participate in VOM or to refuse to do so (Jonas et al., 2023). Victims may refuse to participate in VOM due to concerns about safety, practical issues, and negative attitudes about VOM (Powell et al., 2015). In contrast, offenders can refuse to participate in VOM due to not wanting to admit guilt, work out problems themselves, practical issues, such as time constraints, and unfamiliarity with restorative justice practices (Gerkin, 2009; Jonas et al., 2023). Victims participate in VOM to actively engage in decision-making, counteract stereotypes associated with victimhood, find closure and emotional healing, learn about the offender's motives, and hold the offender accountable (Choi et al., 2010; Galaway, 1988; Jacobsson, 2012). Offenders do so to be able to influence judicial decisions, get an opportunity to show regrets, move on and feel better, be forgiven, clarify their role, provide an explanation for their actions, and make amends (Hansen & Umbreit, 2018; Kirkwood, 2010; Lauwaert & Aertsen, 2016). In addition, they may also participate in VOM to answer the victim's questions, settle disputes, and restore the relationship with the victim (Jonas et al., 2023; Lauwaert & Aertsen, 2016).

Needs of Offenders

Next to the motivations of victims and offenders, their needs also appear to play a decisive role in their participation in VOM. Different theories present similar needs that offenders may have after a criminal offence. However, especially the psychological and social needs of offenders resulting from crime and their influence on restorative justice practices have not been addressed sufficiently in research. In this regard, Obi et al. (2018) implicate that offenders have several psychosocial needs after conducting a crime, such as the need for accountability, the need for healing from factors facilitating their crimes, the need for treatment for their actions or problems, the need for advancement of their competencies, and the need for integration into the community. This last need is also similarly displayed in the Needs-Based Model by Shnabel and Nadler (2015). This model explains the dynamics between victims and perpetrators within the apology-forgiveness cycle, indicating that the need for agency and the need to restore one´s moral image and gain (re)acceptance in the social community are central to the reconciliation process of conflicting parties.

Shnabel and Nadler (2015) indicate that transgressions can threaten the perpetrator's moral-social identity, creating the need to erase the implied role of the immoral perpetrator

and restore the offender's positive identity and regain acceptance in the community. This can be achieved through an exchange interaction with the victim who satisfies the offender's need for acceptance and fosters the restoration of trust and reconciliation (Shnabel & Nadler, 2015). In line with this, Gausel et al. (2016) postulate that transgressions can cause feelings of shame in the offender, creating the need to restore the damaged self-view and that this restoration is effectively done by apologising or offering compensation to and gaining acceptance from the victim. VOM can be seen as one way to accomplish such a positive exchange by offering acceptance from the victim and the broader community to the offender, potentially repairing the damaged moral self-view, and fostering reconciliation (Gausel et al., 2016; Jonas et al., 2023; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008, 2015; Suzuki et al., 2022;). Next to that, Shnabel and Nadler (2015) describe the need for agency as a characteristic of the victim. However, in the context of VOM, this need also appears to be important for the offender: As the offender can influence the judicial outcome of his own case, participation in VOM can be seen as an opportunity for self-empowerment satisfying the offender's need for agency caused by a threat to his autonomy through the potential legal consequences of his crime (Abele & Wojciszke, 2013; Lauwaert & Aertsen, 2016; Shnabel & Nadler, 2015).

The offender´s needs for agency and positive moral-social identity can each be allocated to one of the psychological needs in the Self-Determination Theory (Ryan, 1985). This theory postulates that people's behaviour is fundamentally motivated by fulfilling three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness (Legault, 2017). The need for agency refers to the psychological need for competence, while the need for a positive moral-social identity is linked to the psychological need for relatedness (Abele & Wojciszke, 2013; Legault, 2017; Shnabel & Nadler, 2015). Consequently, these two needs are important determinants of offenders' behaviours and seem decisive for their participation in VOM. However, in this context, the need for a positive moral-social identity and the associated social integration appears to be most important, as it is mentioned by both groups of authors (Obi et al., 2018; Shnabel & Nadler, 2015). Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate the effects of differences in this motivation on offenders' participation in VOM. For this purpose, the following research question has been established:

Is there a difference in willingness to participate in victim-offender mediation among offenders with a higher need to restore their moral-social identity compared to offenders with a lower need to do so?

By answering this question, this research will help to better understand the existence of a potential self-selection bias in VOM, which could explain the positive effects of VOM on

offenders. Ultimately, this study aims to understand the conditions under which successful VOM can happen, contributing to better implementation of restorative justice practices.

Shame in Offenders

Transgressions can trigger shame in the offenders, which indicates a threat to their social compatibility and thus creates the need to restore their own moral standing by acquiring the acceptance of the victim or the community (De Hooge et al., 2008; Gausel et al., 2016; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2014). Shame after offending can be caused by two types of social disapproval, which influence the offender's reaction to the shame and the likelihood of re-offending (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2014). Stigmatising social disapproval negatively labels the offender, leading to a corresponding self-image and adverse social consequences (Harris, 2006). In contrast, reintegrative social disapproval points to the offender's wrongdoing while preserving the offender´s identity as fundamentally good. Therefore, reintegrative shaming matches the character of VOM by focusing on the offence and its consequences rather than the personal judgement of the offender.

One effect of reintegrative shaming is that it motivates restorative action and reconciliation. (De Hooge et al., 2011; Gausel et al., 2012). Therefore, a reintegrative use of shame could motivate offenders to participate in VOM by causing a threat to the offender's moral-social identity. In line with this, Shnabel and Nadler (2015) identified two routes through which a successful exchange between victim and offender can promote reconciliation. On the offender side, the implied picture of the immoral perpetrator can be erased by restoring a positive self-view, and trust can be regained through messages of acceptance from the victim (Shnabel & Nadler, 2015). In a series of experiments, they found support for this hypothesis regarding interpersonal transgression. They used a creativity-test paradigm to investigate the relationships between perpetrators' moral images, their need for acceptance by the victim, and their readiness to reconcile. In the experimental condition, victims were disadvantaged by the perpetrator's actions, whereas this disadvantage was externally caused in the control condition. Therefore, the perpetrators in the experimental condition exercised direct transgressions towards the victims, whereas in the control condition, this was not the case. It was found that the offenders in the experimental condition had the worst moral image and the highest need for acceptance compared to those in the control condition (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008, 2015). In a subsequent experiment utilising a similar design, participants additionally received messages of empowerment, acceptance, or neither after the transgression. They found that the perpetrator's readiness to reconcile was the highest in the acceptance condition of the experiment, confirming that the potential

satisfaction of the perpetrator's need to restore their moral-social identity opens them to reconciliation. Relating this to VOM, not just shame created by threatened moral image but also a high need for acceptance might increase the likelihood of an offender participating in VOM as this creates the need to restore their moral image.

In the context of VOM, reintegrative shaming could not just happen through the disapproval of the victim, but also through the judgement of the offender´s social environment. According to Labelling Theory, external judgement can influence an offender's self-concept and behaviour (Renzetti, 2008). Importantly, the judgement of socially meaningful individuals has a greater impact on an offender's self-concept than disapproval of unrelated others. Therefore, judgment through the offender´s social environment could cause significant shame and seriously threaten the offender´s moral-social identity, creating the need to gain acceptance from the offender's social environment. Next to that, research has not yet considered the impact of potential dynamics between offenders and their family members or friends on VOM, highlighting the importance of exploring this direction. Therefore, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: Offenders whose moral image is threatened by their social environment are more likely to participate in victim-offender mediation than offenders whose moral image is not threatened.

H2: The effect of an offender's threat to their moral image on their participation in victim-offender mediation is mediated by the offender's need for acceptance from the family and the need for acceptance from the victim.

Figure 1 depicts the theorised relationships between the variables. A threatened moral image is hypothesised to predict an offender's willingness to participate in VOM positively, and this relationship is presumed to be explained by an offender's need for acceptance from family and victim. This study uses an experimental design with two conditions to test the hypotheses.

Figure 1.

Conceptual model (IV=independent variable, DV=dependent variable, M=mediator variable)

Method
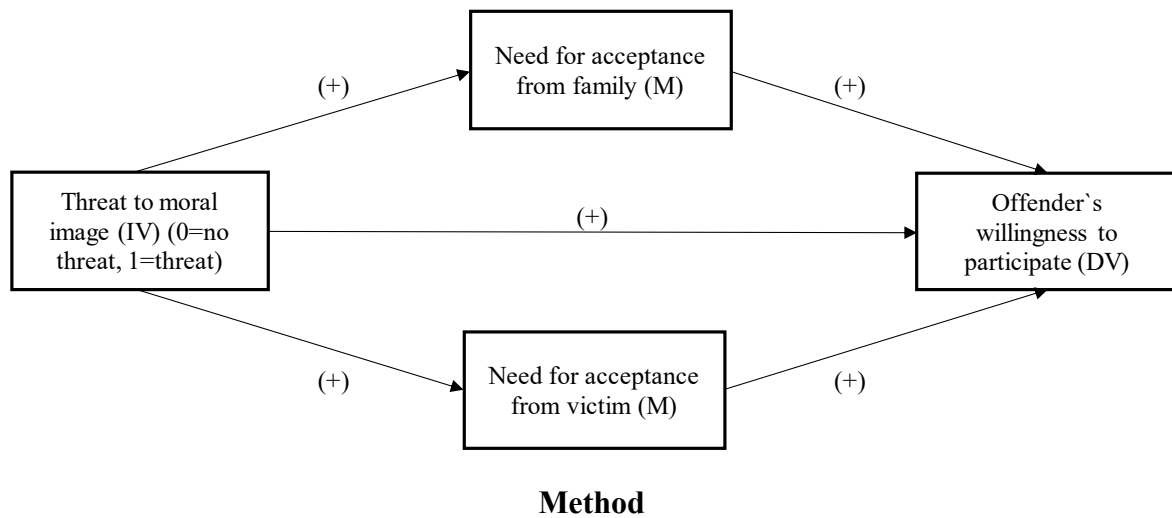
Design

      This study adopted a between-subjects research design with one independent variable, "Threat to moral-social identity", which was experimentally manipulated (moral-social identity threat vs no threat). The dependent variable was the offender's willingness to participate in VOM, and the key mediator variables were the offender's need for acceptance from the family and the victim.

Participants

      The participants of this study were recruited via the SONA experiment management system and the researcher's personal networks, such as WhatsApp or email. In total, 149 participants started the questionnaire. However, only 89 participants completed the questionnaire. Of the 60 participants who did not complete the questionnaire, 9 participants had a response rate of 95% because they had not clicked on the "Next" button on the last page. These participants were also included. In total, the data of 98 participants were thus used for the analysis. The remaining sample consisted of 53 women (54%), 44 men (45%) and one person who did not specify their gender (1%). The participants were between 18 and 63 years old (*M*=23). Respondents were predominantly German (73 (75%)) and Dutch (17 (17%)); 8 participants (8%) had different nationalities. Of the participants, 41 (42%) had a secondary school degree, 54 respondents (55%) had a bachelor's degree, 2 (2%) had a master's degree, and 1 participant (1%) did not provide any information about their education. All participants had given their informed consent. No person-related exclusion criteria were met.

Materials

During the study, the participants were shown a video of a crime (see Appendix A). The video pictured a person from the first person perspective robbing a supermarket together with two others. The video was found online and is suspected to be real; however, this cannot be determined with complete certainty. Participants had to imagine themselves being the person from which perspective the crime was filmed. After watching the video, the moral-social identity of half of the participants was threatened through statements of disapproval by the offender's social environment, while the other half of the participants received statements indicating an understanding of their actions from their social environment implicating no threat. The participants were randomly assigned to either the moral-social identity threat or no-threat condition. An identical set of questionnaires was administered after the experimental manipulation to examine the participants' willingness to participate in VOM. Participation required a technical device with a stable internet connection and the ability to speak English.

Independent Variable

Manipulation of Threat to Moral Image. After watching the crime video, participants in both conditions received a message from their friends and family commenting on the crime. In the moral-social identity threat condition, the social environment disapproved of the offender's criminal actions. In contrast, the message in the no-threat condition contained statements indicating some understanding of criminal behaviour and social support (see Appendix B). This manipulation was intended to threaten the offender's moral-social identity, creating the need to erase the implied role of the immoral perpetrator, restore the offender's positive identity, and regain acceptance of the social environment.

Manipulation Check Measure. A manipulation check measure was created to determine whether the threat to the moral-social identity of the offenders worked as intended. For this purpose, five items were administered, one of which was "After reading the messages of my friends and family, I felt threatened by how others saw me." All items were measured utilising a five-point Likert scale ([1] strongly disagree - [5] strongly agree).

A principal component analysis of the items indicated one underlying component with an eigenvalue of 2.35, explaining 59% of the variance. All items for the manipulation check measure loaded strongly on this component (.55 to .88). Based on these findings, a manipulation check scale was created, which proved to be reliable ($\alpha = .87$).

A sample t-test has been conducted to assess whether the manipulation through messages from the participants' friends and families in the two conditions had the intended effect. The test showed a significant difference in the means of the perceived threat to the moral-social identity between the threat condition (M=4.24) and the no-threat condition

(*M*=3.37); t(81)= -4.82, p<.001. As expected, the participants in the threat condition perceived higher levels of threat to their moral-social identity than participants in the no-threat condition, showing that the manipulation worked as intended.

Dependent and Mediator Measures

After having seen the video and being divided into two conditions, participants received additional information on VOM (see Appendix C). They were then asked if they would like to participate in a VOM session with the victim whom they directly threatened in the video (see Appendix D). They were told that the victim had contacted a victim advocacy organisation for help in dealing with the experience and were asked by a mediator if they were willing to take part in a mediation. This enquiry by the mediator entailed the information that the victim had already indicated their willingness to participate in the VOM session.

Willingness to Participate in VOM. The dependent variable representing the offender's willingness to participate in VOM was measured using four items, one of which was "Are you willing to participate in a victim-offender mediation session with that victim?" All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ([1] Not willing at all - [5] Very willing).

A principal component analysis of the items indicated one underlying component with an eigenvalue of 2.94, explaining 59% of the variance. The items for the willingness measure loaded strongly on this component (.59 to .85). Based on these findings, a willingness to participate scale was created, which proved to be reliable (α = .84).

Need for Acceptance Family. The mediator variable representing the offender´s need for acceptance from the family was measured using six items, one of which was "After reading the messages of my friends and family, I felt the need to regain their acceptance." All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ([1] Strongly disagree - [5] Strongly agree).

A principal component analysis indicated one underlying component with an eigenvalue of 3.65, which explained 61% of the variance. The items for this measure loaded strongly on this component (.70 to .88.). Based on this, a need for acceptance from the family scale was created, which proved to be reliable (α = .90).

Need for Acceptance Victim. The other mediator variable representing the offender´s need for acceptance from the victim was also measured with six items. One of the items was, "After hearing about the victim´s request for mediation, I felt the need to show the victim that I am not a bad person". The items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ([1] Strongly disagree - [5] Strongly agree).

A principal component analysis revealed one underlying component with an eigenvalue of 3.57, which explained 60% of the variance. The items for this mediator variable loaded strongly on the underlying component (.55 to .93). Based on this, a need for acceptance from the victim scale was created, which proved to be reliable (α = .90).

Exploratory analysis

Next to the independent, dependent, and key mediator measures, a number of exploratory measures were administered to assess other potentially relevant (mediator) variables. These were the offender's need for agency, the offender's need to take responsibility, the offender's need to apologise to the victim, and the offender's need to provide an explanation to the victim. The offender´s need for agency was included because it is presented in the Needs-Based Model by Shnabel and Nadler (2015). The other variables were already shown to be related to an offender's participation in VOM (Hansen & Umbreit, 2018; Jonas et al., 2023; Lauwaert & Aertsen, 2016).

Need for agency. The offender´s need for agency was measured using three items. One of the items was, "After hearing about the opportunity for a mediation session with the victim, I wanted to gain influence on my case." The items were measured utilising a five-point Likert scale ([1] Strongly disagree - [5] Strongly agree).

A principal component analysis indicated one underlying component with an eigenvalue of 2.20, which explained 68% of the variance. The items for this agency measure loaded strongly on this component (.72 to .92). Based on this, a need for agency scale was created, which proved to be reliable (α = .86).

Need to Take Responsibility. The offender´s need to take responsibility was also measured using three items. One of the items was, "After hearing about the opportunity for a mediation session with the victim, I wanted to take responsibility for my actions." All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ([1] Strongly disagree - [5] Strongly agree).

A principal component analysis revealed one underlying component with an eigenvalue of 1.8, which explained 60% of the variance. The items for this responsibility measure loaded strongly on the underlying component (.57 to .90). Based on these findings, a need to take responsibility scale was created, which proved to be reliable (α = .80).

Need to Apologise. The offender´s need to apologise to the victim was measured using three items. One of the items was, "After hearing about the opportunity for a mediation session with the victim, I wanted to apologise to the victim." All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ([1] Strongly disagree - [5] Strongly agree).

A principal component analysis indicated one underlying component with an eigenvalue of 2.03, which explained 68% of the variance. The items for the apologise measure loaded strongly on the underlying component (.80 to .86). Based on this, a need to apologise scale was created, which proved to be reliable ($\alpha = .86$).

Need to Explain. The offender´s need to provide an explanation to the victim was measured using three items. One of the items was, "After hearing about the opportunity for a mediation session with the victim, I wanted to share the reasons for my actions". All items were measured utilising a five-point Likert scale ([1] Strongly disagree - [5] Strongly agree).

A principal component analysis revealed one underlying component with an eigenvalue of 2.52, which explained 84% of the variance. The items for the need to explain measure loaded strongly on this component (.91 to .93). Based on these findings, a need to explain scale was created, which proved to be reliable ($\alpha = .94$).

Control Variables

Perceived Realness Video. A control measure was created to assess the perceived realness of the shown crime video. It was measured by the item "To what extent did you experience the presented video of the crime as real?" which was rated on a five-point Likert scale ([1] very unreal - [5] very real).

A sample t-test was conducted to assess whether there was a difference in the perceived realness of the crime video between the threat and no-threat conditions. The test showed no significant difference in the means of the perceived realness of the video between the no-threat condition (*M*=3.60) and the threat condition (*M*=3.71); $t(93)= -.47$, $p=.64$. As expected, participants in the threat and no-threat condition perceived the shown video as real to the same extent.

Ability to Imagine the Offender Role. Another control measure was created to assess the ability of the participants to imagine themselves in the role of the offender in the video. It was measured by the item "To what extent were you capable of imagining yourself in the role of the offender in the video?" which was also rated on a five-point Likert scale ([1] Not capable at all - [5] Extremely capable).

A sample t-test was conducted to assess whether there was a difference in the ability to imagine the offender's role per condition. The test showed no significant difference in the means of the ability to imagine the offender's role between the no-threat condition (*M*=2.90) and the threat condition (*M*=3.04); $t(93)= -.69$, $p=.49$. As expected, participants in the threat and no-threat condition were able to imagine the offender role to the same level.

Seriousness of Participation. A third control measure was created to assess the seriousness of participation. It was measured by the item "To what extent did you seriously participate in this study?", which was reported on a five-point Likert scale ([1] Not serious at all - [5] Extremely serious).

A sample t-test was conducted to assess whether there was a difference in the seriousness of participation per condition. The test showed no significant difference in the means of the seriousness of participation between the no-threat condition (*M*=4.06) and the threat condition (*M*=4.15); t(92)= -.59, p=.55. As expected, participants in the threat and no-threat condition took part in the study equally serious.

Procedure

The participants conducted an online survey designed with Qualtrics. First, they were informed that all information about them is anonymised, that participation is voluntary, that they can stop at any given moment, and that the study would include watching a video of a crime entailing violent actions. Informed consent forms were provided, and demographic data were collected. The participants also received a short description of the study procedure, which entailed additional information about VOM (see Appendix D). They were informed about the purpose of VOM and its steps. Secondly, the video of the robbery was shown to them, and participants were instructed to imagine being in the offender's position and having conducted the crime in the video. After watching it, the participants either received messages of disapproval of their actions from their friends and family and a description of the consequences for the victim or no messages at all. Thirdly, participants filled out a questionnaire assessing their willingness to participate in VOM, the perceived threat to their moral-social identity, and the need for acceptance from their social environment and the victim. Lastly, the participants were debriefed, and upcoming questions about the study were answered.

This study was approved by the Board of Ethical Commission of the Faculty of Behavioural, Management, and Social Sciences of the University of Twente (Request number 240360).

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Results

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Descriptive statistics

The correlations were calculated using Pearson`s r (Table 1) to examine how the scales were interrelated. Participants generally scored moderately high on the perceived threat to their moral-social identity, their need for acceptance from their family, their perceived realness of the video, and their seriousness of participation. Respondents also scored

moderately high on the four exploratory variables: need for agency, need to apologise, take responsibility, and need to explain. Participants scored more neutral on their willingness to participate in victim-offender mediation, their need for acceptance from the victim, and their ability to imagine themselves in the offender's role in the video. Concerning the control variables, participants scored high on the seriousness of their participation and the perceived realness of the video and more neutral on the measure assessing the ability to imagine the offender's role.

A significant, high positive correlation was found between the manipulation check measure and the need for acceptance from family (.73). This means that participants with a higher perceived threat to their moral-social identity also have a higher need for acceptance from their family and vice versa. In comparison, the correlation between the manipulation check measure and the other hypothesised mediator variable, the need for acceptance from the victim, turned out to be low (.36). Next to that, significant, moderately high correlations were found between the dependent variable willingness to participate and three of the four exploratory variables need to take responsibility, need to apologise, and need to explain (.50 to .63). This means that participants who have a higher need to take responsibility for their actions, to apologise to the victim, and to explain their behaviour to the victim are also more willing to participate in the victim-offender mediation session and the other way around.

Similar to the manipulation check measure, willingness to participate also had a significant, although just moderately high, positive correlation with the need for acceptance from the victim (.53). The other mediator variable, the need for acceptance from family, only had a significant low positive correlation (.39) with willingness to participate. This means that participants who are more willing to participate in the victim-offender mediation session also have a higher need for acceptance from the victim and vice versa. In addition, the need for acceptance of the victim had a significant, high positive correlation with the need to apologise (.71) and a significant, moderate positive correlation with the variable need to explain (.51). This means that participants with a greater need for acceptance by the victim also have a higher need to apologise to the victim and explain their actions and the other way around. Lastly, it is noteworthy that the perceived realness video measure has a significant, low positive correlation with role imagination (.41). This means that there is a slight trend that participants who perceive the video of the robbery as more real were also more able to imagine themselves in the role of the offender in the video and the other way around.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics of the dependent variable (DV), key mediator variables (M), exploratory mediator variables (EM), and control variables

	M	SD	Min	Max	R	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Manipulation check measure	3.80	0.99	1	5	4	1	.29**	.73***	.36***	.15	.29**	.42***	.29**	-.02	.05	-.24*
2. Willingness to participate in VOM (DV)	3.47	0.99	1	5	4		1	.39***	.53***	.32**	.63***	.63***	.50***	.04	.03	.04
3. Need for acceptance from family (M)	3.87	0.94	1	5	4			1	.49***	.30**	.36***	.47***	.42**	.08	.22*	-.01
4. Need for acceptance from victim (M)	3.32	0.98	1	5	4				1	.26*	.57***	.71***	.57***	.11	-.05	-.16
5. Need for agency (EM)	3.77	0.95	1	5	4					1	.36***	.24*	.25*	.13	.08	.07
6. Need to take responsibility (EM)	3.62	0.98	1	5	4						1	.72***	.55***	.00	-.08	-.25*
7. Need to apologise (EM)	3.66	1.09	1	5	4							1	.67***	.05	.00	-.41***
8. Need to explain (EM)	3.80	1.11	1	5	4								1	.17	.10	-.18
9. Perceived realness of video	3.66	1.08	1	5	4									1	.19	.41***
10. Seriousness of participation	4.11	0.71	2	5	3										1	.18
11. Ability to imagine the offender's role	2.97	1.03	1	5	4											1

Note: N = 98; M = mean; SD = standard deviation; Min = minimum; Max = maximum; R = range; *p<0.05 (two-tailed); **p<0.01 (two-tailed), ***p<0.001 (two-tailed)

Hypotheses testing

In general, linear regression can be used to model the relationship between a dependent and one or more independent variables. In this study, the "stats" package of the statistical software R-studio 4.4.0 was used to fit such a model. A simple linear regression was used to test hypothesis one to see if the independent variable threat to moral image significantly predicted the dependent variable willingness to participate in VOM. It was hypothesised that offenders whose moral-social identity is threatened are more willing to participate in the victim-offender mediation session than offenders who experience no such threat. In line with the expectations, it was shown that the threat to moral image significantly predicted the willingness to participate in VOM ((B=.37), t(95)=1.86, p=.034 [one-tailed]).

The second hypothesis stated that the relationship between the independent variable threat to moral image and the dependent variable willingness to participate in VOM is mediated by the offender's need for acceptance from family and the need for acceptance from victim. In general, mediation analysis examines how an independent variable influences a dependent variable and investigates the mediating variable that explains the relationship. This study used the "PROCESS model 4 and 6" function for R-studio version 4.3.1, written by Hayes.

Results from the first parallel mediation analysis indicated that threat to moral image is, against the expectations, not indirectly related to willingness to participate in VOM through its relationships with need for acceptance from family and need for acceptance from victim. First, as seen in Figure 2, participants in the threat condition reported a higher need for acceptance from their families than participants in the no-threat condition. However, a higher need for acceptance from participants' families was subsequently unrelated to a higher willingness to participate in VOM. Second, participants in the threat condition did not report a higher need for acceptance from the victim than participants in the no-threat condition, but a higher need for acceptance from the victim was related to a higher willingness to participate in VOM. A 95% confidence interval based on a 5000 bootstrap sample indicated that the indirect effect through the need for acceptance from family (a_1b_1=.04) was not entirely above zero (-.04 to .15), making it insignificant. The same counts for the indirect effect through the need for acceptance from the victim (a_2b_2=.12), which is also not entirely above zero (-.07 to .33), making it insignificant. Therefore, no support was found for hypothesis two.

Figure 2

The effect of threat to moral image on willingness to participate in VOM mediated by need for acceptance from victim and need for acceptance from family
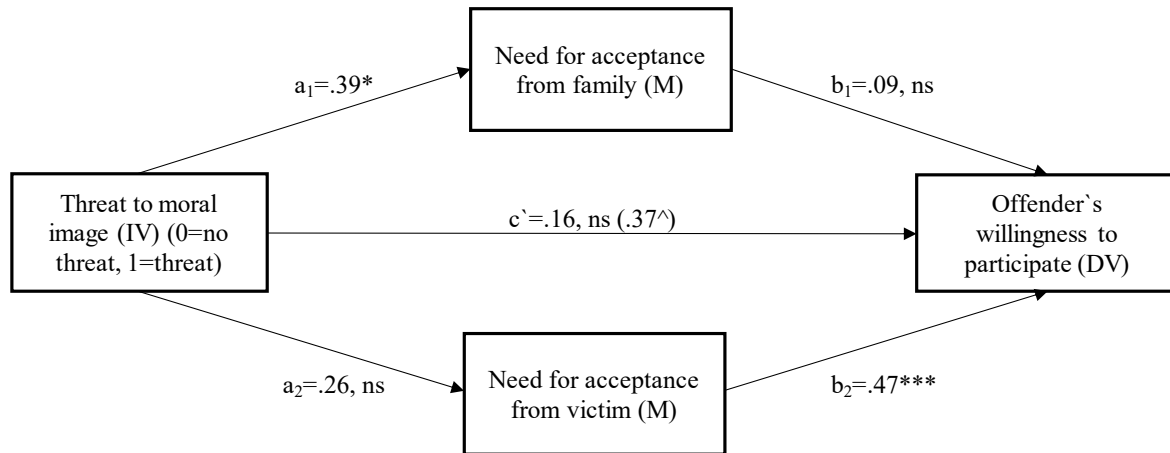

Exploratory analysis

The second hypothesis was not supported. However, due to the significant paths found in the analysis depicted in Figure 2 (a_1=.39, b_2=.47) and the moderate correlations between both needs for acceptance (.49), it was suspected that both of these needs function as mediators but operate differently than theorised. Therefore, in addition to testing the hypotheses, an exploratory analysis was conducted to determine the exact functions of the suspected key mediators in the relationship between threat to moral image and willingness to participate in VOM. Next to that, the role of the other exploratory measures was assessed.

Results from the first explorative serial mediation analysis indicated that threat to moral image is indirectly related to willingness to participate in VOM through need for acceptance from family and victim, but differently than theorised in hypothesis two. As seen in Figure 3, participants in the threat condition reported a higher need for acceptance from their family than participants in the no-threat condition, a higher need for acceptance from their family predicted participants' need for acceptance from the victim, and a higher need for acceptance from the victim predicted participants willingness to participate in VOM. A 95% confidence interval based on a 5000 bootstrap sample indicated that the indirect effect (a_1db_2=.10) was entirely above zero (.01 to .22), making the effect significant. The mediators in this model explain 27% of the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. This finding explains the results of the second hypothesis testing. It is suggested that the two mediators function serially rather than parallel, meaning that they influence each other sequentially. Moral image threat can trigger an offender's need for acceptance from

family, which can then trigger the need for acceptance from victim, which can, in turn, trigger an offender's willingness to participate in VOM.

Figure 3

The effect of threat to moral image on willingness to participate in VOM mediated through need for acceptance family and need for acceptance victim
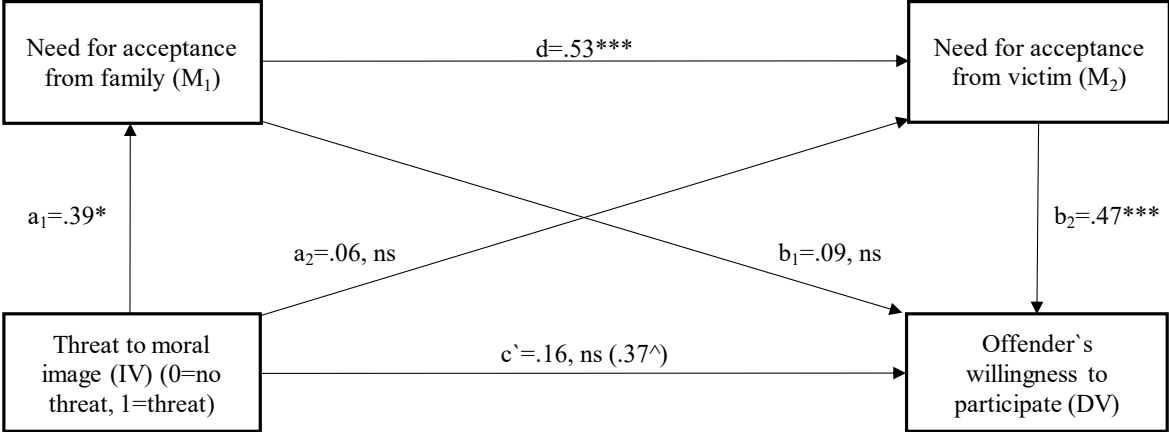
Next to the key mediator variables, four exploratory mediators were assessed in the questionnaire: the offender's need to take responsibility, apologise, and explain to the victim were included due to their association with offender participation in VOM, and the need for agency was assessed due to its role in the Needs-Based model. All variables were included in one parallel mediation model to explore the relevance of these measures for the relationship between moral image threat and an offender´s willingness to participate in VOM. Results from this first explorative parallel mediation analysis indicated that threat to moral image is not indirectly related to willingness to participate in VOM through its relationship with the need for acceptance family, need for acceptance victim, need to apologise, need for agency, need to take responsibility, and need to explain. First, as can be seen in Figure 6, participants in the threat condition reported a higher need for acceptance from their families than participants in the no-threat condition, but a higher need for acceptance from participants' families was not related to a higher willingness to participate in VOM when the other mediators were included in the model. Second, participants in the threat condition did not report a higher need to take responsibility than participants in the no-threat condition, but a higher need to take responsibility was related to a higher willingness to participate in VOM. A 95% confidence interval based on a 5000 bootstrap sample showed that all indirect effects were insignificant.

Figure 4

The effect of threat to moral image on willingness to participate in VOM mediated by need for acceptance from family, need for acceptance from victim, need to apologise, need for agency, need to take responsibility, and need to explain
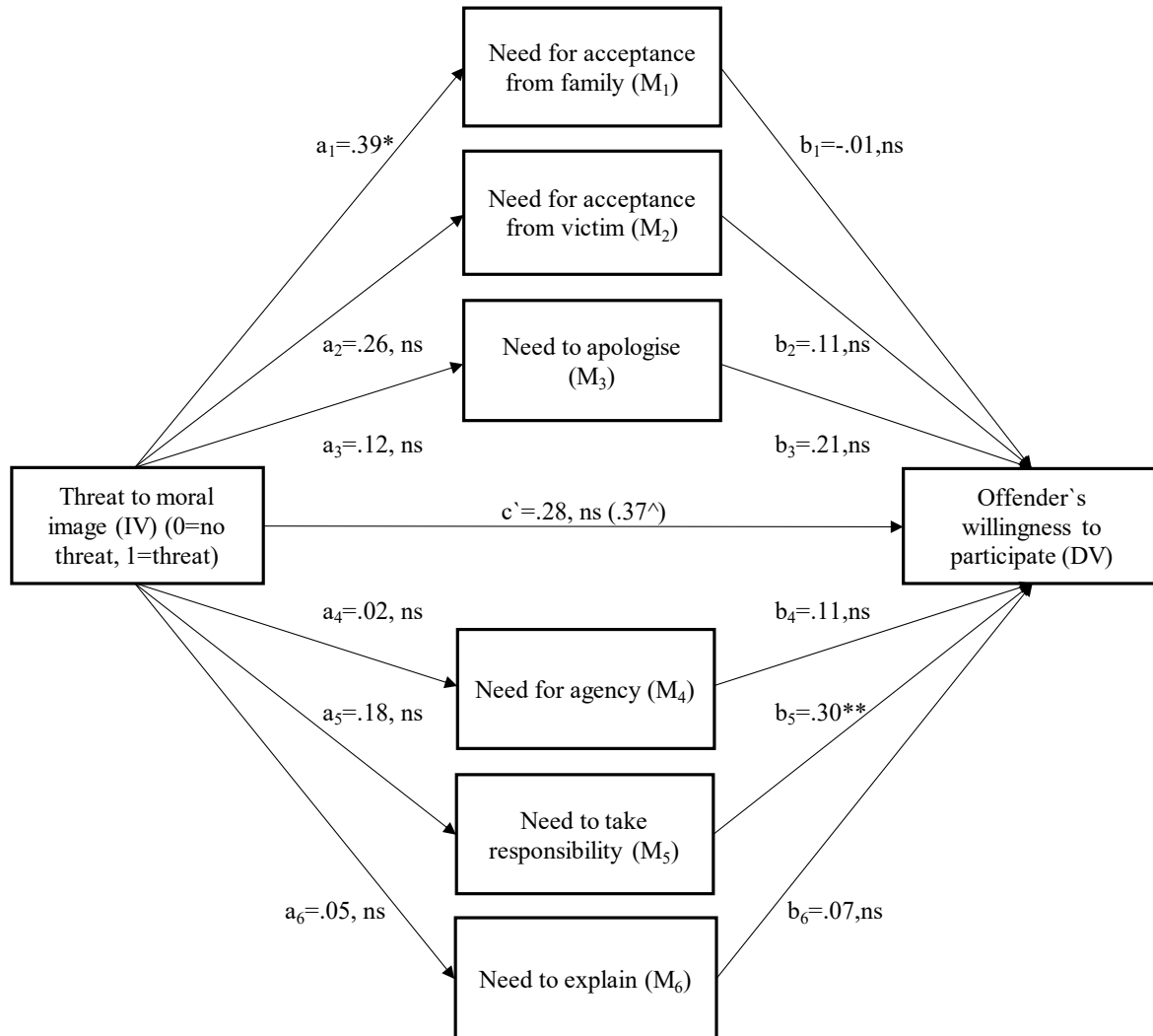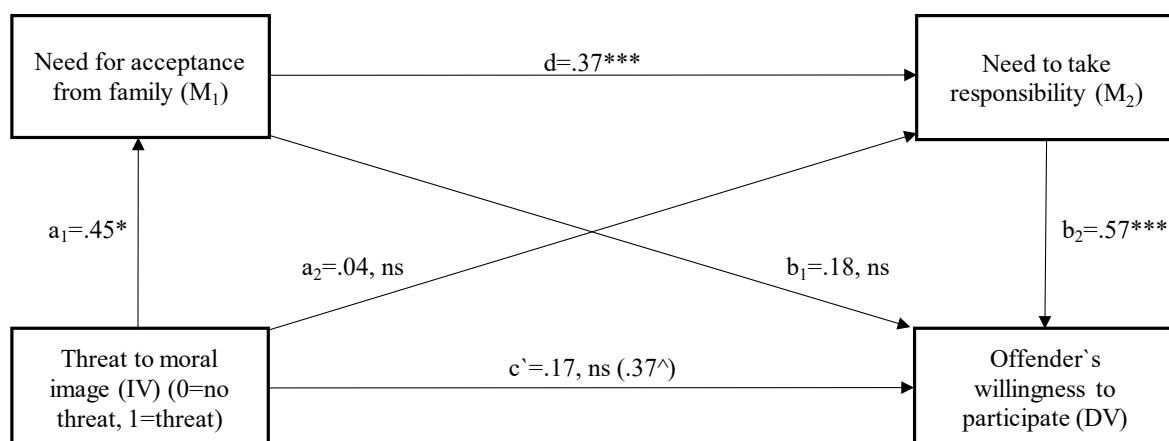

When the need for acceptance from family, the need for acceptance from victim, the need to apologise, the need for agency, the need to take responsibility, and the need to explain were included as parallel mediators of the relationship between threat to moral image and willingness to participate in VOM, all indirect effects turned out insignificant. However, this model suggested that the need to take responsibility is the strongest predictor of willingness to participate in VOM, which was further explored in combination with the offender's needs for acceptance as mediators. In this context, the mediating effect of the offender´s need for acceptance from family in combination with the need to take responsibility was assessed first. Results from this second explorative serial multiple mediator analysis indicated that threat to moral image is indirectly related to willingness to participate in VOM through need for

acceptance from family and need to take responsibility. As seen in Figure 5, participants in the threat condition reported a higher need for acceptance from their family than participants in the no-threat condition, a higher need for acceptance from their family predicted participants need to take responsibility, and a higher need to take responsibility predicted participants willingness to participate in VOM. A 95% confidence interval based on a 5000 bootstrap sample indicated that the indirect effect (a_1db_2=.09) was entirely above zero (.01 to .20), making the effect significant. The mediators in this model explained 24% of the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. The analysis suggested that the mediators in this model influence each other sequentially. Moral image threat can trigger an offender's need for acceptance from family, which can then trigger the need to take responsibility, which can, in turn, trigger an offender's willingness to participate in VOM.

Figure 5

The effect of threat to moral image on willingness to participate in VOM mediated through need for acceptance family and need to take responsibility


Next, the offender's need for acceptance from victim was added to the model as a third mediator next to the need for acceptance from family and the need to take responsibility to see if all these relevant mediators could be included in one model. Results from this third explorative serial multiple mediator analysis indicated that threat to moral image is indirectly related to willingness to participate in VOM through need for acceptance from family, need for acceptance from victim, and need to take responsibility. As seen in Figure 6, participants in the threat condition reported a higher need for acceptance from their family than participants in the no-threat condition, a higher need for acceptance from family predicted participants' need for acceptance from victim, participants' need for acceptance from the victim predicted the need to take responsibility, and a higher need to take responsibility predicted participants willingness to participate in VOM. A 95% confidence interval based on

a 5000 bootstrap sample indicated that the indirect effect ($a_1d_1e_1b_1=.05$) was entirely above zero (.05 to .15), making the effect significant. The mediators in this model explained 14% of the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. This analysis suggested that the three mediators can operate sequentially. Moral image threat can trigger an offender's need for acceptance from family, which can then trigger the need for acceptance from victim, which can, in turn, trigger an offender's need to take responsibility, which can ultimately trigger an offender´s willingness to participate in VOM.

Figure 6

The effect of threat to moral image on willingness to participate in VOM through need for acceptance from family, need for acceptance from victim, and need to take responsibility
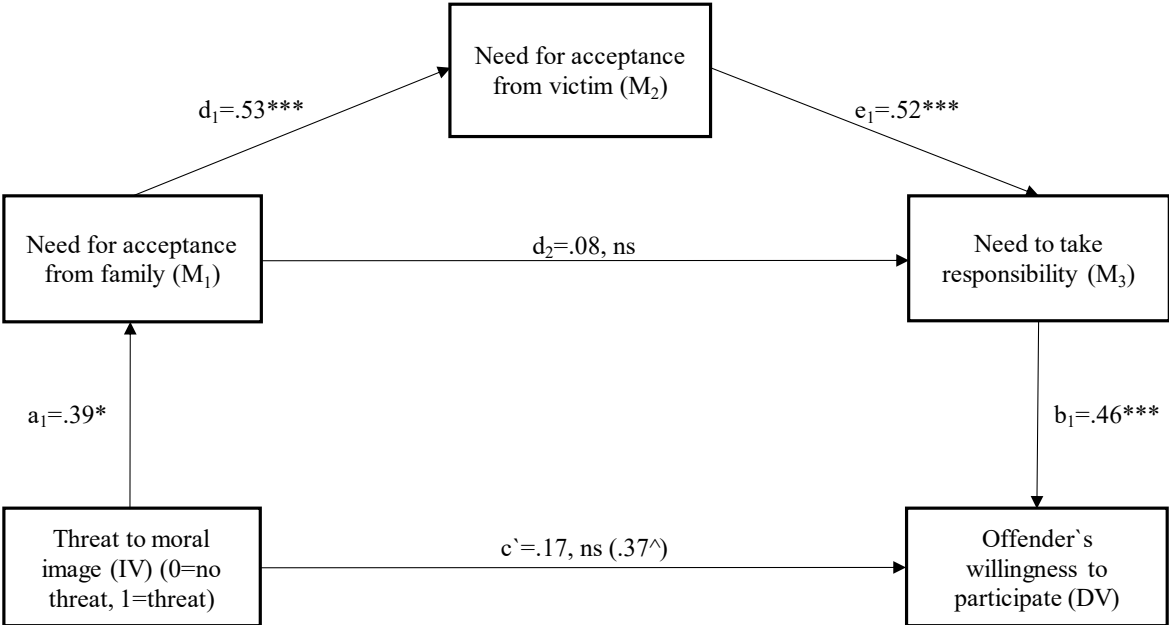
Discussion

Research shows that offenders generally have different motivations influencing their participation in VOM (Hansen & Umbreit, 2018; Jonas et al., 2023). This research experimentally explored whether differences in the need for a positive moral-social identity cause a difference in willingness to participate in VOM. It was examined if offenders whose moral-social identity was threatened by their social environment were more likely to participate in VOM than offenders whose moral image was not threatened. In addition, the mediating effect of the offender´s need for acceptance from their family and the victim was investigated. It was found that offenders whose moral-social identity was threatened by their social environment are more likely to participate in VOM than offenders whose moral image was not threatened. Additionally, no support was found for the theorised mediating effects of

the need for acceptance from family and the need for acceptance from the victim. However, an exploratory analysis suggested that both variables have a mediating function but operate differently than expected.

In line with expectations, a threatened moral image predicted an offender's willingness to participate in VOM positively. Participants whose moral-social identity was threatened were more willing to participate in VOM than offenders whose moral-social identity was not threatened. This finding aligns with the results from Shnabel and Nadler (2008), who found that the opportunity to satisfy a perpetrator's need to restore their moral-social identity opens them to reconciliation which can also be achieved in VOM. The explanation for this is indicated by the second hypothesis testing and the related exploratory analysis, which suggests that a moral image threat is linked to different needs in offenders, which in turn promote VOM participation.

Contrary to expectations, the second hypothesis testing found no support for the idea that the need for acceptance from the family and the victim parallelly mediates the relationship between a threatened moral image and the offender's willingness to participate in a VOM. However, the subsequent exploratory analysis suggested that the effect can be explained by the sequential mediation of the offender's need for acceptance from the family, the victim, and the need to take responsibility. A threatened moral image predicted an offender´s need for acceptance from the family, which predicted an offender's need for acceptance from the victim, which then predicted an offender's need to take responsibility, which ultimately predicted VOM participation. In this context, both needs for acceptance had the greatest explanatory power as the serial mediation model, including only these two needs sequentially, explained the most variance between the moral image threat and the offender´s willingness to participate in VOM. When adding the need to take responsibility to the model, the explained variance decreased indicating that this need is not as important for the effect of a moral image threat on an offender´s willingness to partake in VOM. However, the need to take responsibility was the best predictor of an offender´s willingness to participate in VOM and was also most strongly connected to the need for acceptance from the victim. This aligns with earlier findings from Zebel et al. (2009), highlighting the connection between the acceptance from the victim and the need to take responsibility. They found that an offender's focus on the victim predicts focus on the harmful actions towards the victim, which in turn promotes responsibility taking. One explanation for this difference in the importance of the mediators is that the need for acceptance variables could explain the process by which moral image threat leads to VOM participation, while the need to take responsibility might be a

more fundamental driver of the willingness to participate. Offenders who generally feel more responsible for their actions might be more inclined to participate in VOM, regardless of the pathway through which this effect happens. Additionally, this study design emphasised the role of family acceptance in the mediation process, which might have inflated the significance of this need in the mediation analysis, causing the differences in explanatory power between the mediator combinations for the effect of moral image threat on VOM participation.

Support for the suggestions in the exploratory analysis can be found in findings from Gausel et al. (2016), highlighting the importance of shame for restorative actions. They found that the social environment's disapproval of the criminal action causes shame in the offender, signalling a threat to the offender's acceptance in the social group (De Hooge et al., 2008; Gausel et al., 2016). The offender is motivated to mitigate this threat, satisfy the need for a positive moral-social identity, and gain (re)acceptance in the social community by erasing the implied role of the immoral perpetrator through restorative actions. Therefore, this research also highlights the offender´s need for acceptance from the social environment as an explanation for restorative actions; however, in Gausel et al. (2016), this need for acceptance is caused by shame, which, as a mediator, was not measured in this research.

Implications

These findings suggest that, in general, offenders who are willing to participate in VOM may be more likely to experience a greater threat to their moral-social identity and have corresponding needs for acceptance from their families, the victims, and a need to take responsibility, compared to offenders who are unwilling to participate. This speaks for a potential self-selection bias in the context of VOM, explaining the positive effects of VOM on offender outcomes. Not all offenders will experience an equally serious threat to their moral-social identity after committing a crime, which, therefore, results in differences in participation in VOM.

Next to that, the results suggest that offenders´ self-directed motivations might be more decisive for their participation in VOM than their altruistic motivations. Self-directed motivations, like wanting to keep their own records clean, exclusively target the offender, while altruistic motivations target the victim in the context of VOM (Jonas et al., 2023; Meléndez, 2015). The self-focused motivation to restore the own moral image and the associated need to get acceptance from the family was found to trigger the victim-focused need to take responsibility, and other altruistic motivations, like apologising or providing an explanation to the victim, were found to be unrelated to VOM participation. Therefore, the

self-directed motivation of offenders seems to be more decisive for their participation in VOM.

Lastly, these findings can be used to create interventions to increase offender´s motivations to participate in VOM. Explaining to offenders how VOM could satisfy the need for a positive moral-social identity, offer acceptance from the victim and the family, and be an opportunity to take responsibility could increase offenders' motivations to participate in VOM, thereby maximising the benefits of VOM. However, compliance with ethical principles and the preservation of voluntariness as a core element of VOM must be guaranteed here.

Strengths and Limitations

An important strength of this study is that the needs of offenders are considered to motivate participation in VOM. Previous research has not sufficiently addressed the psychosocial needs of offenders and their impact on restorative justice practices. This study examined offenders´ core needs to restore their moral-social identity and explored the impact of differences in this need on offenders' willingness to participate in VOM.

Another strength is that the exploration of the effect of differences in the need to restore one's moral image on an offender's willingness to participate was done experimentally. Participants were randomly allocated to the threat and no-threat conditions, increasing the study's external validity. In practice, it is challenging to allocate real offenders randomly to conditions that could influence their possibility of restorative justice for ethical reasons. Conducting the study with innocent people enabled this random sampling, which makes these results more meaningful.

One limitation of this study is that the experiment was conducted with supposedly innocent people who had to imagine being an offender rather than with people who have committed a crime. Participants might not have been able to correctly imagine how they would feel and behave if they had performed the criminal act in the video. In addition, participants were just moderately capable of imagining themselves in the offender's role. However, there was no difference in the ability to imagine the offender's role between the conditions, suggesting that this study's results are still meaningful. Future research could repeat this study with convicted criminals or use a quasi-experimental study in which participants must remember conflicts of their own lives to address these issues.

Another limitation of this study is the small number of participants. A substantial number of participants had to be excluded from the study due to not completing the questionnaire, resulting in 98 participants. Therefore, the findings might not represent the larger population of offenders and might be limited in their generalisability; nevertheless,

despite limited statistical power due to a small sample size, significant relationships between the variables were detected, indicating that the effects found could be meaningful. Therefore, future research with a larger sample size is needed to confirm these results.

Implications for future research

This study showed that a greater need to restore one's moral image is associated with a need for acceptance from family and victim, responsibility taking, and a greater willingness to participate in VOM, thereby pointing towards the existence of a self-selection bias in VOM. However, there might still be other differences between offenders who are willing and unwilling to participate in VOM, explaining the positive effects of this restorative justice practice. Therefore, future research could compare VOM participants to non-participants. A survey of offenders eligible for VOM, including questions about feelings, motivations, and general beliefs related to an offender's criminal actions, could help to compare those who choose VOM and those who decline to identify other differences that point to a self-selection bias. Furthermore, this study was limited to a smaller sample size, which is why the findings should be interpreted cautiously. Therefore, future research could replicate this study with more participants to improve the generalisability and statistical power of the outcome. Lastly, future research could investigate how offenders communicate their attempts to make things right again to their social environment. This study showed that the need for acceptance from the offender´s family is a decisive determinant of the offender´s actions; however, how offenders interact with their social environment to gain acceptance remains unclear. Answering this question could help to address the social needs of offenders, which could benefit their desistance process.

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During the preparation of this work the author used no artificial intelligence tools.

Appendix A

Link to video

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MtEdKlySbcg

Appendix B

Messages from friends and family

Threat (Condition 1):

Please imagine the following situation as vividly as possible:

After having conducted the crime depicted in the video you have been caught and arrested by the police. While being held in custody waiting for the progress of your legal procedure, you receive messages from your friends and family. They want you to know that they disapprove of your actions in the extreme and condemn you for what you have done. They find your actions extremely morally reprehensible and antisocial. They tell you that they are deeply disappointed in you and that they would never have thought that someone from their environment could carry out such a cruel act. Some even speak of a loss of trust in you. They also tell you that they will continue to follow your case and hope that you will do better and put things right again.

No threat (Condition 0):

Please imagine the following situation as vividly as possible:

After having conducted the crime depicted in the video you have been caught and arrested by the police. While being held in custody waiting for the progress of your legal procedure, you receive messages from your friends and family. They want you to know that they can, considering your personal situation, understand your actions to some extent and that they can make sense of why you did what you did. They also want you to know that they still love you and will continue to stand by your side.

Appendix C

Additional information victim-offender mediation

Additional information on victim-offender mediation:

In the field of justice, two distinct practices exist: Conventional justice and restorative justice. While conventional justice focuses on enforcing the law, determining guilt, and managing

punishment, restorative justice focuses on resolving conflicts, repairing harm, and restoring relationships between the parties concerned. The most common form of restorative justice is victim-offender mediation.

Victim-offender mediation is a process in which a trained mediator facilitates a discussion between the victim of a criminal offence and the person who committed the offence. The aim of mediation is to give both parties the opportunity to express their feelings, share their views and possibly reach some form of resolution or agreement. Participation in victim-offender mediation is voluntary and both parties have the opportunity to decide whether or not they wish to take part. The process is a confidential and non-confrontational way for both parties to communicate and deal with the impact of the offence.

Victim-offender mediation gives the offender the opportunity not to be passively at the mercy of the criminal proceedings, but to play a constructive role in resolving the conflict, take responsibility for the offence, show remorse and make amends. The victim is given the opportunity to step out of the passive witness role and actively participate in shaping the course and content of the criminal proceedings. The victim can describe how they have been affected, clarify unanswered questions and receive compensation for pain and suffering through a compensation agreement.

Appendix D
Mediation Scenario

A day after you have received the message from your friends and family you are contacted by a mediator and asked to participate in a victim-offender mediation session with the victim whom you directly threatened with your weapon and whom you forced to open the safe. The mediator indicates that the victim in your case has contacted a victim advocacy organisation for help in dealing with the experience. As a result, the mediator has been instructed to carry out a screening to determine whether your case is suitable and whether you are willing to participate in victim-offender mediation. The victim wants to talk about your motives for the offence and tell you about the personal consequences of your actions. The mediator asks you if you are willing to participate in a mediation session with that victim.