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# The Female Perception of Safety on a College Campus

Kimberly N. Miles

Western Kentucky University, [kimberly.miles440@topper.wku.edu](mailto:kimberly.miles440@topper.wku.edu)

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THE FEMALE PERCEPTION OF SAFETY ON A COLLEGE CAMPUS

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Bachelor of Social Work with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By:

Kimberly N. Miles

\*\*\*\*\*

Western Kentucky University  
2015

CE/T Committee:

Professor Gary Villereal, Advisor

Professor Gayle Mallinger

Professor Leila Watkins

Approved by

---

Advisor

Department of Social Work

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## ABSTRACT

Previous research has shown the prevalence of females on college campuses across the nation experiencing a generalized fear of being victimized or violently assaulted while on campus. This fear is generated by the knowledge of violent crimes towards women on campus, as well as the perception alone that there are assaults happening on campus. Studies have noted that this fear held by female students can significantly affect their academic progress and overall wellbeing while at school. This study chose to examine the female students of Western Kentucky University and their personal perception of safety on college campuses comparing students who live on campus versus students living off campus. The hypothesis was that female students living on campus would experience feeling safer than females living off campus due to access to emergency resources and informational safety programs provided by the residence halls. Data was collected using random surveys distributed to females on Western Kentucky University's campus. The study did not support the hypothesis, as the results found no significant difference between on campus and off campus female students. However, knowledge about the level of education surrounding safety was gained, as well as the need for further discussion and better intervention strategies.

Keywords: Safety, Title IX, Female, Student, Perception, Fear

Dedicated to my family and friends for supporting me through every twist and turn.  
Also dedicated to the critics who never thought I would get this far. Your antagonisms  
have been the driving force of my motivation to pursue greater knowledge.

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Finally, I want to say thank you to all of my friends and family for believing in me when I could not find the esteem to believe in myself. A special thank you to my roommates, for never letting me give up.

VITA

January 6, 1994.....Born – Louisville, Kentucky  
2012.....Bullitt East High School, Mt. Washington, Kentucky  
2013.....Western Kentucky University President’s Scholar  
2014.....Phi Alpha Social Work Honor Society  
2015.....BSW Scholarship Recipient  
2015.....University Academic Complaint Committee  
2015.....Bowling Green Evening Lion’s Club

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Social Work

Minor Field: American Sign Language Studies

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In recent news there has been an increase in the discussion about Title IX and the Clery Act. Title IX states that, "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance" (*WKU Judicial Affairs, 20115*). The Jeanne Clery Act requires that all colleges and universities receiving federal funding share information pertaining to crime on campus, what measures the school is taking to prevent crime, and to inform the public of crime in or around campus (*Clery Center, 2012* ). Cases such as Harvard University and law school's mishandling of reports of sexual misconduct<sup>1</sup>, two former Vanderbilt football players convicted of rape in a residence hall<sup>2</sup>, and the suspension of both of the Western Kentucky University men and women's swim team for up to five years after a Title IX investigation revealed charges of sexual harassment, battery, and emotional distress<sup>3</sup>, have all raised questions about the policies currently instate regarding Title IX and how thorough they may be. They also raise the question of how safe college campuses truly are for their students, and what affect do these reports have on the students level of comfort.

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<sup>1</sup> See (Eilperin, 2014)

<sup>2</sup> See (Moyer, 2015)

<sup>3</sup> See (Henderson, 2015)

The overall purpose of this study was to closely examine the female student's personal perception of how safe they are whilst being on a college campus, specifically Western Kentucky University. The secondary purpose was to determine whether place of residence effected the way females perceive themselves to be safe. The primary goal was to determine whether females feel safe on a college campus, and if not, if living on campus in a residence hall as opposed to living off campus in either a house or an apartment was a determining factor to feeling unsafe. This study focused on female safety, as prior research has shown that more female students report feeling less safe than male students (Jordan, 2014). The hypothesis was that females living on campus in a residence hall would report feeling safer than females living off campus. Surveying was done by randomly distributing a Likert scale questionnaire and data was analyzed through a T-test. For students who participated in the survey, the intention was that the students would consider their own safety and become more aware of advanced safety measures on Western Kentucky University's campus.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In the WKU Annual Campus Safety & Security Report, WKU Police (2014) outline statistics regarding crime reported to the WKU Police Department in 2013. It also provides an overview of crime statistics from 2012 and 2011, as well as information on University crime prevention methods and services provided by WKUPD. Since this study began, the WKU Annual Campus Safety & Security Report for 2014 has been released, however since data was collected prior to this, the 2013 report will be used for the purpose of this study. Relative to the past 2 years, crime on campus appears to have decreased. In 2011 there were 131 cases of larceny, decreasing to 97 cases in 2013, 30 liquor law violations in 2011 decreased to 12 cases in 2013, 129 drug abuse violations decreasing to 88 in 2013, 99 cases of alcohol intoxication in 2011 decreasing to 54, 5 cases of forcible rape in 2011 decreasing to 1 case in 2013 (WKU Police, 2014). In other cases, statistics have risen recently. In 2011 there were 32 cases of burglary, but 37 cases in 2013, 36 cases of DUI in 2011 rising to 51 in 2013, and 0 cases of attempted rape in 2011 and 2012 rose to 1 in 2013 (WKU Police, 2014). While crimes such as larceny and drug abuse have dropped significantly in recent years, the crime rate is still relatively high.

WKU Police gives information in the report on security and prevention methods in use such as residence hall security, police escort service, emergency phone poles, and

the Police Explore Post 825 (WKU Police, 2014). Overall, the information in this annual report is clearly stated, available for any student, parent, faculty, or individual interested, and provides information that could significantly impact a person's knowledge of the safety measures being taken on WKU campus. The report itself was more geared towards crimes happening on main campus, as the statistics listed for regional campuses and extensions of WKU had near zero reports for all crimes.

In a study conducted by Pryor and Hughes (2013) on the female's fear of rape on college campuses, it is found that women fear rape more than any other crime, and not only in the United States – globally young women have a significant fear of being raped regardless of race, social class, geography, sexual orientation, time of day, etc. This study in particular looks to examine the social psychological reasons as to why this fear of rape and sexual victimization is ever present in a young woman's mind (Pryor & Hughes, 2013). The researchers look specifically at college campuses and college aged women, due to the notion that, “college campuses are no longer “insulated” enclaves, but places where crime and sexual violence are ever present” (Pryor & Hughes, 2013, p. 444). In the discussion portion of this study, the researchers discuss their findings about stranger rape versus acquaintance rape, and how a “fear shield”, or a female's own perception about their personal level of vulnerability, decreases the woman's level of fear (Pryor & Hughes, 2013). It also states how some women do not believe they would ever be victimized due to the current “cautious” lifestyle they are living (Pryor & Hughes, 2013). This study does an excellent job of bringing this perception into the light, and seeing how this perception does affect how safe a woman feels. It ends with a call for more research

on this topic due to the ever changing generations of new college students, and the introduction of social media websites into the mix.

In “The Safety of Women on College Campuses: Implications of Evolving Paradigms in Postsecondary Education”, Jordan (2014) exposes college campuses lack of response to issues of violence, victimization, and sexual violence and provides a significant case as to why this issue should be a priority (Jordan, 2014). The researcher discusses how college campuses are undergoing several technological advances beyond anything dreamed in past decades, and are consistently focused on growing. However, with this growth comes larger class sizes, more diversity, and a lack of attention on what is happening on the ground (Jordan, 2014). Ultimately, Jordan is demonstrating that prevalence of violence, stalking, sexual assault, etc. greatly impacts not only one community of students, but the university as a whole (Jordan, 2014). She explains,

“If women are fearful of crime on their college campuses, which could certainly impact large-scale choices such as where to go to school or where to live on campus, to smaller decisions such as whether to go to a library to join a study group on a particular evening, whether to socialize with other students whom she does not know, and more” (Jordan, 2014, p. 144).

This fear of being victimized on campuses significantly effects students’ progress, wellbeing, and academic success in school. According to Jordan, college administrations need to step up and take interest into this issue on campus as women continue to face these high rates of victimization (Jordan, 2014).

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

The tool used to obtain data for this study was a random survey approved by Western Kentucky University's Institutional Review Board. The surveys were based on general ideas and perceptions of safety on Western Kentucky University's campus, specifically comparing females who lived on campus and females who lived off campus. The hypothesis of this study was that the females surveyed who lived on campus would report feeling safer than the females surveyed who lived off campus. The surveys were distributed randomly in all-female residence halls and to random females walking through campus, in random parts of campus. Completion of each of the surveys was completely voluntary and the identities of the individuals remained anonymous, with only demographical information being revealed. The survey contained two sections.

The first section of the survey was devoted to the demographics of the students volunteering to participate. The questions included in the demographic portion were chosen specifically to reflect the intended hypothesis. The demographic information asked was current residence (on campus or off campus), gender, age, year of college (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior), and ethnicity or race. These questions were a nominal method of measurement.

The second section of the survey contained 10 specific questions and 2 questions that were dependent on current residence (#10 – I feel good about the level of security in

my residence hall, #11 – I feel good about the level of security in my neighborhood/complex). The questions were based on feelings and perceptions while walking through campus at various times of day and the participant's awareness of WKU safety measures such as the emergency poles and escort services. The Likert scale was used to answer the questions rating from 1 to 5 (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). A score of 39 or higher ( $n > 39$ ) indicated the highest possible feeling of safety and a score of 27 or lower ( $n < 27$ ) indicated the lowest possible feeling of safety. This scale is based on an ordinal level of measurement.

Out of 100 surveys handed out and completed by participants, 96 were included in the data for this study. Three surveys were discarded due to the participant not answering the last 6 questions that were on the back of the survey. One was discarded because the participant identified themselves as male. The surveys were handed out in Meredith Hall (a single gender, female residence hall), in random American Sign Language and Social Work classes, in Academic Complex, in Downing Student Union, and in the middle of campus by Centennial Mall. Before completing the survey, each participant was shown the consent form, told that participation was completely voluntary, and that their identities would remain completely anonymous. After the surveys were collected, they were locked in a cabinet in Dr. Villereal's office in the Social Work department and will remain there for 3 years.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### DEMOGRAPHICS

Since this study's focus was on the female perception of safety, the participants who took the survey were all female. Out of the 96 who did partake, the on campus sample size was 64 and the off campus sample size was 32. A vast majority of the participants identified as white: 93.7% on campus; 71.8% off campus, which although it is not diverse, it reflects WKU's demographics which are 77.3% white according to the WKU fact book (2013).

Most of the on campus females were either ages 19 (34.3%) or 20 (37.5%) and were either freshmen (31.25%) or sophomores (48.4%). This statistic may be due to the WKU housing policy requiring all first and second year students to live on campus (Hilltopics, 2014). The majority of off campus students were age 20 (37.5%) and were either juniors (53.1%) or seniors (31.2%). In both samples, there were some participants who did not identify their age or education classification.

**Figure 1.1 On Campus Demographics**

On Campus							
Age		Year		Race		Gender	
18	7 (10.9%)	Freshman	20 (31.25%)	White	60 (93.7%)	Female	64 (100%)
19	22 (34.3%)	Sophomore	31 (48.4%)	Hispanic	0		
20	24 (37.5%)	Junior	6 (9.3%)	Black	2 (3.1%)		
21	5 (7.8%)	Senior	3 (4.6%)	N.American	1 (1.5%)		
22	1 (1.5%)	Grad	1 (1.5%)	Asian	1 (1.5%)		
24	1 (1.5%)	No Answer	3 (4.6%)	Other	0		
25	1 (1.5%)			No Answer	0		
No Answer	3 (4.6%)						
<b>TOTAL</b>	64		64		64		64

**Figure 1.2 Off Campus Demographics**

Off Campus							
Age		Year		Race		Gender	
19	1 (3.1%)	Freshman	0	White	23 (71.8%)	Female	32 (100%)
20	12 (37.5%)	Sophomore	3 (9.3%)	Hispanic	0		
21	5 (15.6%)	Junior	17 (53.1%)	Black	7 (21.8%)		
22	6 (18.7%)	Senior	10 (31.2%)	N.American	1 (3.1%)		
23	2 (3.1%)	Grad	0	Asian	1 (3.1%)		
25	3 (4.6%)	No Answer	2 (6.2%)	Other	0		
27	1 (3.1%)			No Answer	0		
No Answer	2 (6.2%)						
<b>TOTAL</b>	32		32		32		32

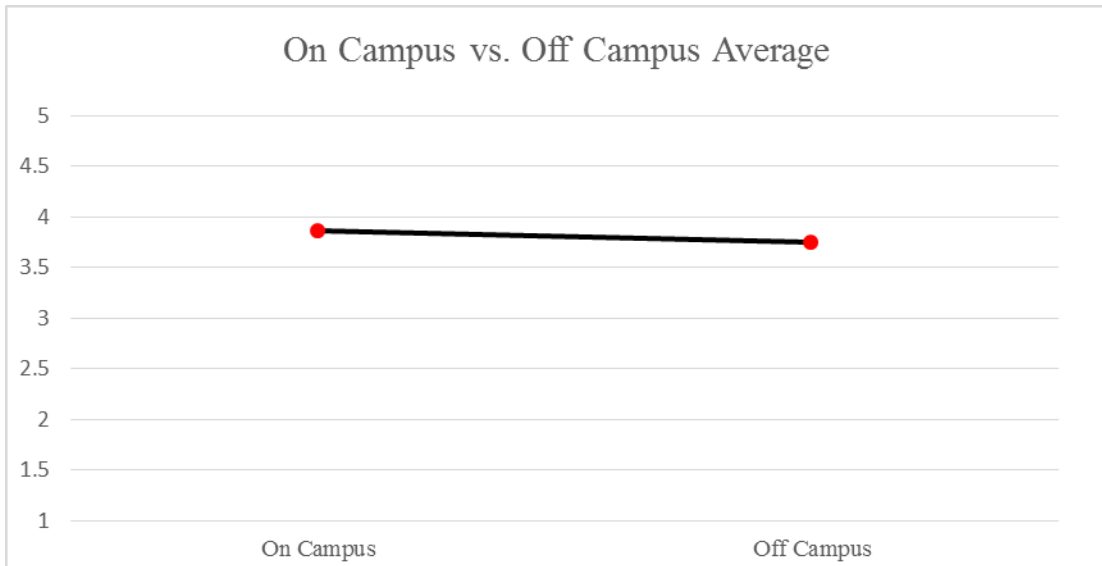
## CHAPTER FIVE

### RESULTS

The purpose of this comparative quantitative analysis was to look at the female perceptions of personal safety while living on Western Kentucky University's campus compared to the female perceptions of personal safety while living off campus and only being on campus for classes. The study conducted did not support the hypothesis as there was no statistical significance in the difference between the two comparison groups.

Out of 96 surveys used, 64 were on campus females and 32 were off campus females. In response to the 12 question Likert scale survey, the female students living on campus reported an average score of 3.86, with the female students living off campus reporting an average score of 3.75. The number of on campus females reporting above the average ( $n > 3.86$ ) indicating a greater sense of safety was 30. Twenty seven on campus females reported a lower sense of safety ( $n < 3.86$ ), and 7 on campus females reported the average. In comparison, 14 off campus females indicated a greater sense of safety ( $n > 3.75$ ), 13 off campus females reported a lower sense of safety ( $n < 3.75$ ) and 5 reported the average. These results indicate that both on campus and off campus females on average have an overall feeling of safety on WKU's campus. The average results from the questionnaire are shown in Figure 2.1.

**Figure 2.1 On Campus vs. Off Campus Average** – on campus average ( $n=3.86$ ) off campus average ( $n=3.75$ ).



**Figure 2.2 On Campus vs. Off Campus Scores**

<b>On Campus</b>		<b>Off Campus</b>	
Above Average $>3.86$	30	Above Average $>3.75$	14
Average $=3.86$	7	Average $=3.75$	5
Below Average $<3.86$	27	Below Average $<3.75$	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>32</b>

## CHAPTER SIX

### DISCUSSION

The findings of this study were not completely in congruence with the hypothesis since no statistical difference was found between on campus females and off campus females. However, the on campus females did report feeling safe while on WKU's campus adding legitimacy to the hypothesis. One explanation for why females both on campus and off campus did report feeling safe, could be because of the level of awareness of campus security measures. Most all of the participants scored high when asked if they were aware of WKUPD escort services and the blue Emergency poles. This increased awareness could have contributed to the perceptions of safety, along with being aware that if something were to happen they would not be far from help. Because the on campus participants were mostly freshmen or sophomores, the knowledge of these security measures could be attributed to safety education provided during the freshman orientation, M.A.S.T.E.R. Plan (Making Academic and Social Transitions Educationally Rewarding), or the programs provided in the residence halls by housing and residence life staff. It would be interesting to go back and see which of these participants also participated in M.A.S.T.E.R. Plan and note if it made a significant difference.

Although no significant difference was found between on campus and off campus females, it was interesting to see that 43% of the African American off campus participants scored below the average, meaning they feel less safe. This may be due to

there being a greater proportion of African American participants in the off campus group. Since there is a greater number of African American participants in the off campus group, this finding may be representative of African American female student perceptions. Perhaps if this study was conducted again, one could compare white female perceptions versus African American female perceptions to see if there is a statistical difference. Other ethnicities represented in the study did not have enough participation to evaluate a significant finding.

### **Limitations**

One of the main limitations for this study was the lack of demographic representation. The on campus participants were almost entirely white, so representation of African American, Native American, Hispanic, and Asian populations on campus may be slightly skewed. A majority of the surveys were handed out in Meredith Hall, whose population is made up of upperclassmen sorority women. Because of this specification, almost all of the residents were of similar age, race, religion, socioeconomic class, and shared similar values and ideas. This may have also skewed results some. There is a potential for a Type 1 error in this study, which is when the researcher does not find a difference when there is the possibility that there is a difference.

Another limitation was the inconsistency of answers provided. Because six of the questions were located on the back of the survey, some participants missed those and did not provide answers. Perhaps if the survey was shorter or fit on one side of a page, participants would be more encouraged to finish the whole survey.

## **Person in Environment (P.I.E)**

This study was conducted examining female students' Person in Environment (P.I.E). According to the Encyclopedia of Social work, the P.I.E. is a perspective through which one looks at the individual and understands the environmental context in which that person lives and acts (Kondrat, 2008). It basically means to understand why a person behaves in certain ways or reacts to particular situations, one must first understand the person's environment. The environment of the on campus females is somewhat similar to one another. It can be assumed that they either belong to varying middle-upper socioeconomic status, or are receiving federal financial aid, since all of the residence halls range from \$2,085-\$2,270 per semester (WKU Housing and Residence Life, 2015). As for the off campus females, Bowling Green has an estimated median household income of \$33,714 as well as 28.9% of residents living under the poverty level (United States Census Bureau, 2014). It is difficult to assume what the socioeconomic status of the students living off campus is since it was not asked in the survey, however taking into consideration the fact that they have found the resources to attend college and live in some form of residence in Bowling Green, one can say that they are at least in the lower class range if not all the way into the upper class.

In this study, not only was the environment of living on campus or off campus being looked at, but the social context of personal characteristics. Although matters such as class, religion, and sexual orientation were not identified from the participants, these social backgrounds and contexts could suggest reason for fear in certain situations.

Alternatively, it could explain a lack of fear. As mentioned before, there was a difference in scores in terms of ethnicities between African American females and White females. This could be due, in part, to the history and context of the African American females, and the level of oppression or discrimination they have faced in their lifetime.

### **Intervention Methods**

Although most participants claimed that they were aware of the WKU safety measures implemented currently, there was still a prevalence of participants feeling unsafe on campus. This means that although WKU has succeeded in implementing effective safety and security methods and educating students about those methods, the students are still feeling unsafe. When asked whether the participants felt safe walking through campus at night, 48% of on campus females and 44% of off campus females reported that they did not. Perhaps adding the amount of lighted pathways and street lamps that stay on, as opposed to the motion sensor lights, would alleviate this issue.

An intervention method that could potentially find solutions to all of the campus safety concerns would be to hold an open floor town hall meeting on campus. Invite representatives from Student Government Association, Housing and Residence Life, different safety organizations on campus such as the “Green Dot” program and WellU, Commuter Student Ambassadors, Hall Councils, general commuter and on campus students, and keep it open to the public. Before one can create intervention strategies, they must engage with the community to discover the real issues. Another idea would be to go to the commuter parking lots and simply ask females about the safety issues they have encountered. That way the students living off campus can be reached as well. Another way would be to ask students inside of residence halls to get their thoughts on



what can be improved as well. Overall there is a significant need for a stronger discussion about safety on this campus and in what ways the methods can be improved.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### CONCLUSION

The actualization of sexual violence and harassment on college campuses is real and apparent throughout the United States. One in four college women have reported surviving rape or attempted rape (One in Four, 2015). This extremely high rate as well as the universities' response to each unique case warrants a major improvement in the area of sexual violence. Even if the student has not experienced violent crimes personally, the fear alone that it will happen to them can be inhibiting to their academic career. While this study did not find any significant differences in perceptions of safety between where a female student resides, it did uncover a need for more discussion and opportunity for better intervention methods. This study hopes to aid in the implementation of new creative safety measures on college campuses. This study also hopes to add to the conversation and assist further research on the topic of sexual violence towards females.

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## Appendix

### Demographics:

1. I currently live: on-campus or off-campus (circle one)
2. Gender: Male or female or other (circle one)
3. Age:
4. Year of college: Freshmen, Sophomore, Junior, Senior (circle one)
5. Ethnicity or Race: (choose one)
  - a. White
  - b. Hispanic or Latino
  - c. Black or African American
  - d. Native American or American Indian
  - e. Asian / Pacific Islander
  - f. Other

### Questionnaire:

1. I feel comfortable walking through campus by myself:  
Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Neutral    Agree    Strongly Agree  
                          1            2            3            4            5
2. I am aware of WKUPD's escort service:  
Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Neutral    Agree    Strongly Agree  
                          1            2            3            4            5
3. I am aware of the location of Emergency poles:  
Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Neutral    Agree    Strongly Agree  
                          1            2            3            4            5
4. I have felt like I'm being followed while on campus:  
Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Neutral    Agree    Strongly Agree  
                          1            2            3            4            5
5. I have felt uncomfortable walking through campus at night:  
Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Neutral    Agree    Strongly Agree  
                          1            2            3            4            5

6. I have felt uncomfortable walking through parking garages alone:  
 Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Neutral    Agree    Strongly Agree  
                           1            2            3            4            5
7. I have felt uncomfortable walking through parking lots alone:  
 Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Neutral    Agree    Strongly Agree  
                           1            2            3            4            5
8. When I go home I know that I am in a safe environment:  
 Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Neutral    Agree    Strongly Agree  
                           1            2            3            4            5
9. I know where I can go to get help if I have an emergency where I live:  
 Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Neutral    Agree    Strongly Agree  
                           1            2            3            4            5
10. I feel good about the level of security in my residence hall (for on campus students):  
 Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Neutral    Agree    Strongly Agree  
                           1            2            3            4            5
11. I feel good about the level of security in my neighborhood/complex (for off campus students):  
 Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Neutral    Agree    Strongly Agree  
                           1            2            3            4            5
12. Overall I feel that I am safe on WKU's campus:  
 Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Neutral    Agree    Strongly Agree  
                           1            2            3            4            5