

RAPE MYTH ADHERENCE AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

by

Cassidy Fitz-Randolph

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Cassidy Fitz-Randolph

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Approved by:

Dr. Scott Walfield

Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology, Thomas Harriot College of Arts and Sciences

Abstract

Sexual assault remains a prevalent issue on college campuses. Understanding the attitudes and beliefs of students towards rape and rape myth adherence is essential to combatting sexual violence. Rape myths, which are false beliefs or stereotypes about sexual assault, contribute to the stigmatization of survivors and impede initiatives aimed at preventing and addressing sexual violence. Neglecting these aspects undermines efforts to establish a secure and supportive campus atmosphere, particularly for sexual assault survivors. This study explores the correlates of female rape myth adherence among university students. Results indicated that men and athletes were more likely to adhere to rape myths. Knowing a victim had the opposite impact, where knowing a victim meant that the individual was less likely to adhere to rape myths. A more comprehensive understanding of this topic will contribute to the field as well as the development of thoughtful interventions by universities to challenge and reduce sexual assault on campus.

Keywords: college students; rape myths; sexual assault

Introduction

Sexual assault is a significant issue for women who attend higher education institutions. Sexual assaults are one of the most prevalent yet underreported crimes and disproportionately affect young women aged 16 to 24, making them the most frequently reported victims of rape (Fisher et al., 2000; Iconis, 2008). Reports of sexual assault victimization among college women are estimated to range from 51% to 70% (Abbey et al., 1996; Greene & Navarro, 1998; Gidycz et al., 1993; Humphrey & White, 2000). Likewise, estimates of sexual assault perpetration reported by college men vary from 25% to 61% (Abbey et al., 2001; Koss et al., 1987; Mills & Granoff, 1992; Wheeler et al., 2002; White & Smith, 2004). The frequency of sexual assault should not be understated, with the majority of college women reporting to have experienced some form of sexual assault, the most common occurrence being unwanted touching (Loh et al., 2005; Fisher et al., 2000; Koss et al., 1987; Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987; Campbell et al., 2017). Studies have highlighted the heightened vulnerability of college women, who are in the most danger of being raped during their first two years of college (Carey et al., 2015; Sinozich & Langton, 2014). College students exhibit a concerning low reporting rate, with only 20% of female students reporting their sexual assault to law enforcement, a rate approximately half that of non-students, according to RAINN (Rape, Abuse, and Incent National Network, n.d.)

Understanding the attitudes and beliefs of students towards rape is essential to combatting sexual assault on college campuses (Campbell et al., 2021; Cantor et al., 2017; McMahon, 2010). Rape myths are falsely held beliefs on the nature and significance of sexual assault encounters that often shift the blame for the assault from perpetrators to victims and undermine the seriousness of sexual violence (Burt, 1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). There are many concerning implications of rape myths, such as the stigmatization of sexual assault survivors as

well as the hinderance of efforts to prevent and address sexual violence. Edwards and colleagues' (2011) study examined several common rape myths, including "husbands cannot rape their wives," "women enjoy rape," "women ask to be raped," and "women lie about being raped." Prior research has demonstrated that between 25% and 35% of the population agrees with the majority of these rape myths (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). Some studies have even claimed that male perpetration of sexually violent crimes can be predicted by rape myth adherence (Boeringer et al., 1991; Loh et al., 2005). Nonetheless, it is widely accepted that rape myths serve as a means to justify acts of sexual violence against women whilst reducing the perpetrators personal responsibility (Edwards et al., 2011; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). Overlooking these implications can be detrimental to the creation of a safe and supportive environment for all students on college campuses, but especially survivors of sexual assault (Cantor et al., 2017; McMahon, 2010).

Rape Myths, Sexual Assault, and College Students

Research on rape myths have predominately utilized college student populations (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). College students are not simply a convenient population to study, but instead, are of particular interest when researching sexual assault. College students are overrepresented in statistics of sexual victimization and perpetration (Campbell et al., 2017; Cantor et al., 2017; Koss et al., 1987; Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987). The typical age and developmental stage of college students make them particularly susceptible to societal myths regarding gender, sexuality, and violence (Abbey et al., 2001). College campuses are a unique social setting where individuals frequently know each other, in varying degrees of relationship. This atmosphere may also lend itself to opportunities for sexual assault.

College student populations have uniquely high rates of acquaintance rape, or rape committed by a person who is known to the victim (Iconis, 2008). Prior research indicates that many sexual assaults on college campuses occur in social contexts, such as parties, where individuals may be familiar with each other (Krebs et al., 2007). Due to the unique social context that exists at a university, bystanders play a crucial role in determining the outcome of a sexual assault. As such, several studies have explored the bystander's intent to help and what factors impact this decision (Bennett et al., 2017; Cantor et al., 2017; Bennett & Banyard, 2016; McMahon, 2010).

Bennett and Banyard (2016) found that there were two key aspects of the bystander intervention process: (1) a bystander's perception of the situation as a problem and (2) perceptions of safety to intervene. The relationship between a bystander, the victim and the perpetrator are complex, and varies with each unique set of circumstances. However, the authors found that generally, participants tended to perceive situations as problematic when they had a close relationship to the victim only. The bystander's perception of the situation as a problem diminished if they shared a close relationship to the perpetrator as well. A similar study found bystanders were more inclined to intervene in situations where the severity of the issue was higher and when the bystander happened to be female (Bennett et al., 2017). McMahon (2010) suggested that college students' endorsement of rape myths was negatively correlated with a students' willingness to intervene as bystanders.

The American college culture arguably contributes to a space where sexual assault is more likely to occur. Situational aspects of college culture that influence this understanding are high levels of alcohol consumption, regularity of drinking alcohol, hookup culture, and a lack of understanding about consent (Abbey et al., 2001; Crowell & Burgess, 1996; Abbey et al., 1998;

Abbey et al., 1996; Harrington & Leitenberg, 1994; Koss & Dinero 1989; Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987). These factors may contribute to an environment in which sexual violence can be much more prevalent than otherwise (Abbey et al., 1998; Abbey et al., 1996). Alcohol is never the cause of sexual assault, but it is often a contributing factor (Abbey et al., 2001; Abbey et al., 1998; Abbey et al., 1996; Harrington & Leitenberg, 1994; Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987; Koss & Dinero, 1989). At least half of college sexual assaults are associated with alcohol consumption, either by the perpetrator, the victim, or both (Abbey et al., 1998; Abbey et al., 1996; Koss & Dinero 1989; Mohler-Kuo et al., 2004; Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987; Testa & Livingston, 2002)

Male peer support groups, like fraternities, have been studied as a potential reason for the prevalence of sexual assault on college campuses. Researchers have explored different reasons for the connection between fraternities and sexual aggression. Peer influence within social groups, such as fraternities, can create social environments in which sexual coercion and dominance of women is normalized (Koss & Dinero 1989; Malamuth et al., 1991; Hummer & Martin, 1989). Several studies have found that women who were active sorority members experience a significantly higher incidence of attempted rape than non-sorority college women, with nearly half of victimizations taking place at a fraternity house (Copenhaver & Grauerholz, 1991; Mohler-Kuo et al., 2004). Individuals may feel reinforced by their peers, who can actively or subtly encourage sexual assault (Abbey et al., 2001; Boeringer et al., 1991; Mohler-Kuo et al., 2004). Another reason could be social events that involve high levels of alcohol consumption. Sexual coercion is not limited to physical coercion and can be utilized through nonphysical sexual strategies, like alcohol or drugs (Boeringer et al., 1991; Mohler-Kuo et al., 2004) College students perceive male rapists as less accountable for their actions when they were under the influence of alcohol (Richardson & Campbell, 1982). However, if the female victim was

intoxicated, individuals tended to view her as more culpable for the rape and criticize her character and morality.

Findings on the impact of fraternity membership on rape myth adherence have been inconsistent. Although several studies have found that fraternity men had higher rape myth adherence than other subgroups (Bleecker & Murnen, 2005; Canan et al., 2018; Martinez et al. 2018), other studies have found little to no differences between men involved in Greek-life and men not involved in Greek-life (Koss & Gaines, 1993; Schwartz & Nogrady, 1996). However, several of these studies agree that strong male peer support for victimization of women exists and can encourage the victimization of women and the perpetration of sexual assault (Bleecker & Murnen, 2005; Boeringer et al., 1991; Kanin, 1985; Schwartz & Nogrady, 1996).

Definitions and Measuring Rape Myths

Feminist perspectives of rape are often attributed to starting with Susan Brownmiller's book *Against Our Will – Men, Women and Rape* (1975), which differentiated rape from crimes of passion, as it was once categorized, and defined it instead as a collective social and political issue of violence, control, and power. Brownmiller's book reframed rape as a form of violence fundamental to the patriarchal domination of women. Other feminist scholars have also argued that rape is not just an individual act of violence, but a systemic problem that is rooted in social and cultural norms that devalue and objectify women (Edwards et al., 2011; Rozee & Koss, 2001). Feminist theories of rape focus on the culture of a society itself, examining aspects such as gender inequality that underpin themes of sexual aggression and objectification of women through media (Burt, 1980; Edwards et al., 2011; Rozee & Koss, 2001)

There have been several proposed measures to assess an individual's acceptance of rape myths to understand possible relationships. The two scales that have been used extensively

within the field have been the Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (RMAS; Burt, 1980) and the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMAS; Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999). Burt (1980, p. 217) first defined rape myths as “prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists”. A person’s adherence to rape myths influences their perception of sexual assault victims and perpetrators. Adherence to rape myths aids in the creation of hostile environments for victims of sexual assault. The RMAS was developed by Burt (1980) to assess and measure an individual’s endorsement or acceptance of rape myths. Since then, the RMAS has been widely used for research on sexual violence, specifically attitudes and public perceptions of sexual assault. Utilizing hypotheses derived from social psychological and feminist theory, Burt (1980) aimed to show that acceptance of rape myths can be predicted from attitudes such as sex role stereotyping, adversarial sexual beliefs, sexual conservatism, and acceptance of interpersonal violence.

More recent studies have critiqued Burt’s original definition and scale for being outdated, citing newer evidence that rape myths deserve an updated and more nuanced perspective (Hahnel-Peeters & Goetz, 2022; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). One of the first studies to propose a new definition for rape myths was a literature review conducted by Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994), which offered a theory-based definition for rape myths as well as a critique of the current literature and measurements. Specifically, the authors critiqued the Burt (1980) definition for lacking the precision required for a formal definition. The absence of an established and comprehensive definition of rape myths was highlighted, with the primary concern being the diverse range of measures employed to assess the acceptance of rape myths. Thus, Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994, p. 134) used common characteristics of myths to propose an improved definition than previously utilized in the field: “Rape myths are attitudes and beliefs

that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women.”

Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994) further evaluated the construct and criterion validity limitations associated with Burt’s (1980) RMAS. A common criticism is that the scale primarily measures a basic hostility toward women and does not specifically assess attitudes and beliefs related to rape myths. Criticisms such as this demonstrate the oversimplification of rape myths as measured by the RMAS that many may find issue with, thus also calling into question its effectiveness in predicting relevant behavior and attitudes. Other faults of the RMAS may include its inapplicability outside of acceptance of violence toward women. Seeing this limitation, Lonsway and Fitzgerald proposed a more comprehensive and gender-neutral approach to measuring rape myths. Building upon this research, the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMAS) was developed only a few years later (Payne et al., 1999).

IRMAS is currently the most reliable and psychometrically demonstrated rape myth scale (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). The IRMA scale differentiated itself from the RMA scales focusing on the characteristics and role of the victim. In a more comprehensive approach, the scale included broader attitudes, such as society’s role in preventing rape and characteristics of the rapist. IRMAS is multi-dimensional in that it includes several rape myth subscales, which help conceptualize the structure and function of rape myth acceptance. The subscales are as follows: She Asked for It, It Wasn’t Really Rape, He Didn’t Mean To, She Wanted It, She Lied, Rape is a Trivial Event, and Rape is a Deviant Event.

The clarity and uniform understanding of wording among respondents is essential for the reliability and validity of a scale (Payne et al., 1999), yet former measures of rape myth acceptance faced issues regarding the wording and clarity of questions. As such, the IRMAS

strove to utilize clear and unambiguous language. Payne et al. (1999) emphasized the importance of accurate representation of the construct in the development of psychometric measures, emphasizing three interrelated properties: a well-defined, theoretically based construct; a clearly articulated domain of content; and a comprehensive understanding of the domain structure. The superiority of the IRMA scale over existing measures of rape myth adherence scale was found in fixing these identified limitations. One of the major concerns in developing an innovative measure of rape myth adherence was the use of colloquial phrases in rape myth items. Informal phrases such as “necking” can quickly become outdated, often have varying meanings for different people, and limited cross-cultural applicability (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994, p. 157). The challenge arises because sexual communication in American culture often relies on slang and other widely understood expressions. The development of the IRMA scale chose to compromise on this issue by including both traditional and euphemistic items. This allowed the items of the scale to maintain clarity whilst also avoiding excessive use of the term rape.

An issue that the RMAS and IRMAS share is the ability to fully encompass contemporary understandings of sexual assault. Similar to the RMAS, the language of the IRMAS has since become outdated. Thus, an updated version of the IRMAS was created that modified the language to be more applicable to college populations, as much of the research on rape myth acceptance has utilized this population (McMahon & Farmer, 2011). Language that is integral to student speech, such as “hooking-up” was added to the updated scale (McMahon & Farmer, 2011). One significant modification is the rewording of IRMA item “When women go around wearing low-cut tops or short skirts, they’re asking for trouble”, which was revised to reflect student discourse more closely: “When women go to parties wearing slutty clothes, they are asking for trouble.” This revision not only reflects modern language but also incorporates the

word “slut”, which is commonly associated with victim-blaming attitudes. The updated language is also better able to evaluate subtle rape myths, which are both more difficult to measure and more commonly held today.

Correlates of Rape Myths

Loh et al. (2005) contended that the most effective approach to reducing sexual assault is to focus on characteristics of perpetrators that increase the likelihood of assault, as opposed to the characteristics of victims. This perspective aligns with research on the many factors that influence rape myth adherence. The main demographic variables that have been studied are sex, race, age, and socioeconomic status. Anderson and colleagues’ (1997) meta-analysis revealed higher rape myth acceptance among men, older persons, and people of lower socioeconomic status. Rape myth adherence is often correlated with forms of discrimination, such as sexism, racism, classism, ageism, and homophobia. There is a notable gender difference in rape myth adherence, with men displaying significantly higher levels of endorsement when compared to women (Davies et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 1997; Feild, 1978; Giacopassi & Dull, 1986; Hayes et al., 2016; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Currier & Carlson, 2009; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). The strong association between gender and rape myth adherence supports the feminist hypothesis that gender inequality perpetuates rape myths. Race and ethnicity have also been shown to have a moderate effect on rape myth adherence, with white individuals demonstrating lower adherence (Feild, 1978; Giacopassi & Dull, 1986; Anderson et al., 1997). Other studies have cited lower education levels as a significant predictor of rape myth adherence (Kassing et al., 2005; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010).

McMahon (2007) found that student athletes were less inclined to directly blame the victim, but expressed beliefs that share an indirect relationship with victim-blaming, including

factors such as revealing clothing, intoxication, and flirting as a potential precursor to rape. Individuals with experience or exposure to rape victims are less accepting of rape myths (McMahon, 2010; Walfield, 2018). Although formerly predicted (Feild, 1978), having previously been victimized themselves has not been found to be associated with decreased rape myth acceptance (Jenkins & Dambrot, 1987; Anderson et al., 1997; Hayes et al., 2016; Walfield, 2018).

Sexual assault programming has been explored as a way to confront and diminish rape-supportive attitudes. Education on the reality of rape may confront adherence to rape myths and related behaviors. Overall, sexual assault education programs have demonstrated effectiveness in short-term impact in decreasing rape-supportive attitudes (Breitenbecher, 2000; Davis & Lidell, 2002), although some studies have suggested a reemergence of rape-supportive beliefs over time (Anderson et al., 1998). Longer interventions may be more effective in creating enduring shifts in attitudes toward rape than short-term interventions (Anderson & Whiston, 2005). However, it is uncertain whether rape programming is effective in reducing incidences of sexual assault (Breitenbecher, 2000).

Several studies have linked negative stereotypical attitudes and beliefs about women with an increased acceptance of rape myths in samples of college students (Davies et al., 2012; Holcomb et al., 1993; Johnson et al., 1997; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Wheeler et al., 2002). Anderson and colleagues' (1997) meta-analysis determined several attitudes to be predictors of rape acceptance, including traditional gender role beliefs, adversarial sexual beliefs, conservative political beliefs, and aggressiveness among other variables. Burt (1980, p. 218) defined adversarial sexual beliefs as "the expectation that sexual relationships are fundamentally exploitative, that each party to them is manipulative, sly, cheating, opaque to the other's

understanding, and not to be trusted.” Adversarial sexual beliefs can manifest as hostility towards individuals involved in sexual activity. Traditional gender roles are societal expectations, norms, and stereotypes regarding the behaviors and characteristics deemed appropriate for an individual's gender (Baber & Tucker, 2006). Traditional gender beliefs prescribe roles for the genders to fulfill, such as the traditional male role of dominance, and the traditional female role of submissiveness to the male. According to feminist theories, men may respond to women that behave inconsistent to traditional gender roles as an adversarial, which could lead to accepting the use of force for sexual domination (Anderson et al., 1997). Burt (1980) described acceptance of interpersonal violence as a predictor of rape myth adherence, which refers to the idea that force and coercion is an acceptable means to attain compliance, and are especially legitimate within intimate, sexual relationships. An individual's acceptance of traditional gender roles can also contribute to the creation of double sexual standards for men and women, wherein the genders have different expectations and judgements regarding sexual behavior. In the context of rape myth adherence, an individual may be more likely to hold certain prejudices about sexual activities or blame the victim of a sexual assault, asserting that behaviors and choices made by the victim justify the assault, particularly in cases where the victim has deviated from their traditional gender role. There is still, however, much more data needed to understand the demographic determinants of rape myth acceptance.

Impact of Rape Myths on Victims

Victims may choose not to report their sexual assault for several reasons, such as the fear of not being believed, self-blame, the fear of retaliation, and a lack of trust in authorities. Individuals who hold misconceptions about rape, specifically the stereotype of “real rape” (Estrich, 1987), which refers to aggravated rape committed by a stranger through threat of force

with resistance from the victim, might not recognize their own experience as rape. This reluctance to label their assault as such could stem from a concern that others share similar false beliefs about rape, leading to a fear that their account will not be believed (Reed et al., 2020). Avoiding the acknowledgment of their own victimization may serve as a defense mechanism, helping to mitigate feelings of vulnerability and fear. In many cases, women may refrain from characterizing their assault as a crime, due to factors such as embarrassment, a misunderstanding of the legal definition of rape, reluctance to classify their assailant as a rapist, and self-blame (Fisher et al., 2000). Numerous studies have shown that a significant proportion of women, often exceeding 50%, who have experienced non-consensual vaginal, oral, or anal intercourse opt for alternative labels rather than categorizing their experience as rape (Cohn et al., 2013; Kahn et al. 2003; Bondurant, 2001; Kahn et al., 1994; Koss, 1985; Littleton et al., 2003). Victims that do not label their rape as rape are unlikely to report the assault, leading to the assailant remaining unidentified and unpunished (Kahn et al., 2003). Cohn et al. (2013) found that over half of the women who chose not to report to the police did not identify their experience as rape, even though it met the legal definition.

Rape myths perpetuate victim-blaming narratives, suggesting that victims were responsible for their own assault. The “just world” phenomenon has been defined as “the predisposition to believe that the world is a just place where good things happen to good people and bad things happen only to those who deserve them” (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Gilmartin-Zena, 1987). Thus, rape myths and the misconceived notion of a “just world” serve to rationalize that rape victims brought about their own fate. Victim-blaming beliefs may include ideas such as victims should avoid certain behaviors, locations, and attire to avoid assault (Warshaw, 1988). Individuals who internalize rape myths are more likely to blame themselves,

questioning if it was their actions and choices that provoked the assault. The acknowledgment that, in some situations, the victim might have made alternative choices that could potentially have prevented the rape does not, under any circumstances, make them responsible for the crime (Warshaw, 1988).

Victims may fear retaliation from the perpetrator if the assault is reported. This fear is heightened if the perpetrator is someone known to the victim (Singer, 1988). Victims may experience a lack of trust in authorities for various interconnected reasons, which can be attributed to pervasive rape myths that shape society's perception of rape. Authorities may question the credibility of a victim or engage in victim-blaming, suggesting that the victim somehow contributed to or is lying about the assault (Page, 2010). According to Cantor et al. (2017), the most common reason that victims had for not reporting incidents of sexual assault and sexual misconduct was the perception their incident was not serious enough to report. Other reasons that were noted were embarrassment, shame, the emotional difficulty involved, or a belief that taking action would yield no real results. Rapes that deviate from traditional conceptions of sexual assault are more likely to be disregarded as false or not a "real rape". Lonsway et al. (2009) found that in reported sexual assault cases for which the sole determinant of the veracity of the reported assault was the police, the cases were an estimated 10.9% more likely to be declared a false allegation than studies that utilized methodologies designed to systematically evaluate these classifications (Harris & Grace, 1999).

The findings of the studies in rape myth literature suggest the necessity of expanding societal understanding of rape, particularly through education, rape prevention programs, and policies that address both rape myth adherence and other oppressive beliefs (Currier & Carlson, 2009; Hayes-Smith & Levett, 2010; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). A more thorough understanding of

how a person's adherence to rape myths affects perpetration and response to sexual violence is essential for developing effective strategies to combat sexual violence. This study attempts to fill some of the current gaps in the literature by examining the correlates of rape myth adherence amongst a college student population.

Methodology

Data. To test these research questions, the data in this study are derived from survey data from a cross-section of undergraduate criminal justice students at East Carolina University who were enrolled in criminal justice courses in the fall semester of 2019 ($n = 125$). Several students did not complete the full survey, resulting in a final sample of 118 respondents. The faculty members responsible for teaching the courses gave permission to survey these students. Students were briefed on the purpose of the survey as well as participant requirements for the study in class. Both the consent form and survey were hosted at Qualtrics. Students were emailed a link to participate, and after consenting, the participants were permitted to complete the survey online. The survey had about 100 items and was estimated to take 15 to 20 minutes to complete. The questionnaire covered a range of topics beginning with the demographics of the students who were surveyed. The questionnaire utilized several established and validated scales related to gender roles for both men and women, sexual double standards for men and women, social desirability, myths about male and female rape, and experiences of sexual victimization, either personal or experienced by someone they know.

Outcome variable. The dependent variables of the study were taken from the Modified Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (McMahon & Farmer, 2011). This study focused on two of the five subscales: She Asked for It and He Didn't Mean To (Intoxication). These subscales were chosen due to their significant implications for challenging sexual violence on college campuses

specifically. The She Asked for It subscale assesses the extent to which individuals believe rape myths that blame the victim by implying that the victim's behavior or clothing provoked the assault. An example of an item belonging to this subscale is "If a woman is raped while she is drunk, she is at least somewhat responsible for letting things get out of control". The He Didn't Mean To (Intoxication) subscale measures attitudes regarding the culpability of perpetrators of sexual assault who were under the influence of alcoholic substances, often including excuses or justifications for sexually aggressive behavior, such as attributing it to impaired judgment rather than malicious intent. An example of a question for this subscale is "If both people are drunk, it can't be rape." Each question was rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The mean of these answers was then taken. Higher scores are associated with the rejection of myths. The internal consistency of the scales was acceptable, with Cronbach's alpha values of 0.88 for the subscale She Asked for It and 0.71 for the subscale He Didn't Mean To (Intoxication).

Independent variables. Respondents provided basic demographic information, such as gender, class standing, and sexual orientation, experiences related to rape, and attitudes towards gender and sexuality. *Gender* was coded as a binary variable (1 = Female; 0 = Male). *Class standing* contrasted upperclassmen (1) relative to lowerclassmen (0). *Sexual orientation* contrasted individuals who identified as LBGTQ (1) relative to those who are heterosexual (0). While originally collected using three categories, *athletics* contrasts students who participate in varsity or club sports (1) to those that do not (0) due to small cell counts. *Greek life affiliation* was measured as either current or former member (1) in contrast to those that are not involved.

Respondents were asked to provide information about their experiences with sexual assault using five items from the National Violence Against Women Survey (Tjaden &

Thoennes, 2006). Individuals who responded yes to one of the items were coded as *sexually victimized* (1 = Yes; 0 = No). Respondents were then asked if they knew someone, whether it be a co-worker, friend, or family member, if they had experienced one of the five screening items to create the variable, *know a victim* (1 = Yes; 0 = No). Respondents were also asked whether they had attended sex or *sexual assault programming* at East Carolina University within the past year (1 = Yes; 0 = No).

Four scales were included in the analysis: Double Social Standard (DSS; Caron et al., 1993); Social Roles Questionnaire (SRQ; Baber & Tucker, 2006), comprised of two subscales: Gender Linked and Gender Transcendent; Male Rape Myth Scale (MRM; Melanson, 1999); and Social Desirability Short Form (SD; Strahan & Gerbasi, 1972).

Male Rape Myth (MRM). The Male Rape Myth Scale (Melanson, 1999) measures attitudes and beliefs specifically related to male victims of sexual assault, including perceptions of victim credibility, characteristics of perpetrators, and adherence to gender stereotypes. Items range from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 6 (*strongly disagree*), with higher scores reflecting greater adherence. The mean of the scale is used ($M = 2.21$, $SD = 0.80$, $\alpha = 0.92$). An example of an item is “A man can enjoy sex even if it is being forced upon him”.

Double Social Standard (DSS). The Double Social Standard Scale (Caron et al., 1993) measures an individual’s perceptions of traditional gender roles and sexual behavior. Items range from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*), with higher scores reflecting greater support of gender equality. The mean of the scale is used ($M = 3.83$, $SD = .69$, $\alpha = .80$). An example of an item is “It is worse for a woman to sleep around than it is for a man”.

Social Roles Questionnaire (SRQ). The Social Roles Questionnaire (Baber & Tucker, 2006) is comprised of 13-items, ranging from 0% to 100%, with higher scores indicating greater

acceptance of gendered stereotypes for both men and women. This scale is divided into two subscales: Gender Linked and Gender Transcendent. The Gender Linked subscale describes attitudes that identify certain roles with each gender, whereas gender transcendent means that the respondent may think of gender in nondichotomous ways and might not assign as strict of gender roles. Gender Linked questions include items such as “Men are more sexual than women” or “Only some types of work are appropriate for both men and women” ($M = 37.41$, $SD = 17.4$, $\alpha = 0.78$). Examples of Gender Transcendent questions include “Tasks around the house should not be assigned by sex” and “People should be treated the same regardless of sex” ($M = 84.13$, $SD = 15.20$, $\alpha = 0.61$).

Social Desirability (SD). The last scale is the short form of the Social Desirability Scale, X1 (Strahan & Gerbasi, 1972). This scale helps to account for the influence of social desirability bias on participants’ responses which is the tendency for individuals to respond in a manner they believe will be viewed favorably by others or align with societal norms, rather than expressing their true attitudes or beliefs. Including this scale allows for a more accurate interpretation of the data as well as the identification of genuine attitudes and beliefs related to sexual violence. Items included 10 true-false statements, with higher scores indicating greater social desirability. The additive scale ranged from 0 to 10 ($M = 4.88$, $SD = 1.99$). An example item is “I have never been irked when someone expressed ideas very different from my own” – answering true on this item would result in a higher SD score.

Results

Table 1 presents the demographics of the sample. There were slightly more women (55%) than men (45%) and was approximately half upperclassmen (49.2%) and half lowerclassmen (50.8%). About 7% of the sample identified as queer. Approximately 15% were involved in athletics,

Table 1. *Demographic Characteristics of Participants*

	<i>N</i>	%
Male	55	45.0%
Upperclassmen	60	49.2%
LGBTQ	9	7.4%
Athletics	18	14.8%
Greek life	17	13.9%
Rape victim	33	26.4%
Know a victim	68	58.1%
Programming	39	33.3%

which included both varsity sports as well as club sports. 14% percent were involved in Greek life, meaning they were affiliated with a fraternity or sorority at ECU. About one-quarter (26.4%) of the sample identified as a prior victim of sexual assault, however, nearly two-thirds (58.1%) stated that they knew a victim of sexual assault, whether it be a friend, co-worker, or family member. Only one-third (33.3%) of the sample had attended programming or some education on sexual assault.

Table 2 presents the t-tests comparing the first dependent variable, She Asked for It with the categorical variables. Of the eight variables that were tested, three were statistically significant: gender, athletic involvement, and knowing a victim. Gender significantly influenced rape myth adherence, with women ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 0.75$) reporting significantly higher scores than men ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 0.92$), $t(117) = 4.57$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.84$. No significant differences were found between lowerclassmen ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 0.99$) and upperclassmen ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 0.82$), $t(117) = 0.19$, $p = .847$. Although there was a trend towards higher scores among respondents who identified as LGBTQ+ ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 0.91$), the difference did not

Table 2. *Bivariate Results – She Asked for It*

Variable	Categories	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i> -test	<i>p</i> -value	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Gender	Male	3.80	0.92	4.57	<.001	.84
	Female	4.50	0.75			
Class	Lowerclassmen	4.16	0.99	0.19	.847	–
	Upperclassmen	4.19	0.82			
LGBTQ+	Heterosexual	4.13	0.91	1.82	.071	–
	LGBTQ+	4.69	0.75			
Athletics	Athlete	3.69	0.96	2.49	.014	.88
	Non-athlete	4.26	0.87			
Greek life	Greek	4.47	0.82	1.36	.177	–
	Non-Greek	4.13	0.91			
Rape victim	Victim	4.40	0.80	1.74	.085	–
	Non-victim	4.08	0.93			
Know a victim	Yes	4.41	0.76	3.55	<.001	.87
	No	3.84	0.99			
Programming	Yes	4.21	0.96	0.29	.775	–
	No	4.15	0.89			

reach statistical significance ($t(117) = 1.82, p = .071$). Athletics also influenced rape myth adherence, with athletes ($M = 3.69, SD = 0.96$), reporting significantly higher scores than non-athletes ($M = 4.26, SD = 0.87$), $t(117) = 2.49, p = .014$. Results indicated that respondents who reported being victims of sexual assault did not significantly differ in their rape myth adherence compared to non-victims, $t(117) = 1.74, p = .085$. However, respondents who knew a victim of sexual assault reported significantly higher scores ($M = 4.41, SD = 0.76$) than those who did not ($M = 3.84, SD = 0.99$), $t(117) = 3.55, p = < .001$.

Table 3 presents the t-tests comparing the second dependent variable, He Didn't Mean To

Table 3. *Bivariate Results – He Didn’t Mean To (Intoxication)*

Variable	Categories	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i> -test	<i>p</i> -value	Cohen’s <i>d</i>
Gender	Male	3.77	.81	3.26	.001	.76
	Female	4.23	.72			
Class	Lowerclassmen	4.03	.79	0.12	.905	–
	Upperclassmen	4.01	.80			
LGBTQ+	Heterosexual	4.01	.81	0.48	.632	–
	LGBTQ+	4.14	.49			
Athletics	Athlete	3.43	.67	3.59	<.001	.75
	Non-athlete	4.12	.77			
Greek life	Greek	4.10	.75	0.43	.665	–
	Non-Greek	4.00	.80			
Rape victim	Victim	4.09	.72	0.63	.529	–
	Non-victim	3.99	.82			
Know a victim	Yes	4.21	.71	3.39	<.001	.76
	No	3.73	.82			
Programming	Yes	3.97	.82	0.33	.742	–
	No	4.03	.78			

(Intoxication), across the categorical variables. The findings were in the identical direction of the previous subscale, and the effect sizes were large.

Table 4 displays the Pearson correlations between the two dependent variables and the scales.

The correlation between the dependent variables She Asked for It and He Didn’t Mean To (Intoxication) was significant ($r = 0.577$, $p = < .001$), suggesting a moderate positive correlation between beliefs about victim-blaming and beliefs about the role of intoxication in reducing a perpetrators responsibility for the assault.

There was a strong negative correlation between the Male Rape Myth Scale with She Asked for It ($r = -0.68$, $p < .001$) and moderate negative correlation with He Didn’t Mean To

Table 4. *Correlations for Study Variables*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. She Asked for It	–						
2. He Didn't Mean To (Intoxication)	.577	–					
3. Male Rape Myth Scale	-.675	-.425	–				
4. Double Standard Scale	.501	.405	-.439	–			
5. SRQ-Gender Linked	-.413	-.300	.457	-.492	–		
6. SRQ-Gender Transcendent	.377	.311	-.467	.393	-.479	–	
7. Social Desirability	-.043	-.073	.099	.055	-.126	.002	–

(Intoxication) ($r = -0.43, p < .001$). For the Male Rape Myth scale, higher scores indicate greater rape myth adherence. For the subscale She Asked for It, higher scores indicate lower rape myth adherence. A negative correlation between these two measures implies that individuals who are more likely to adhere to male rape myths are also likely to adhere to female rape myths. A negative correlation between the Male Rape Myth scale and the He Didn't Mean To (Intoxication) subscale indicates that individuals who endorse myths related to male sexual assault are more likely to believe that intoxication excuses or mitigates the responsibility of the perpetrator.

There was a strong positive correlation between the Double Standard scale with She Asked for It ($r = 0.50, p < .001$) and a moderate positive correlation with He Didn't Mean To (Intoxication) ($r = 0.41, p < .001$). For the Double Standard scale, higher scores indicate greater support of gender equality. A positive correlation between these two measures means that individuals who endorse gender equality are less likely to hold victim-blaming attitudes regarding rape. A positive correlation between the Double Social Standard scale and the He Didn't Mean To (Intoxication) subscale implies that individuals who endorse traditional gender

roles and permissive attitudes towards sexual behavior are more likely to believe that perpetrators of sexual assault, especially when intoxicated, did not intend to commit the act.

Additionally, the SRQ-Gender Linked scale exhibited a moderate negative correlation with She Asked for It ($r = -0.41, p < .001$) and He Didn't Mean To (Intoxication) ($r = -0.30, p < .001$). A negative correlation between the Gender Linked subscale and the She Asked For It subscale indicates that individuals who strongly adhere to traditional gender roles are more likely to believe that victims provoke or deserve sexual assault and that intoxication mitigates responsibility of the perpetrator. Similarly, there was a moderate positive correlation between the SRQ-Gender Transcendent scale with both She Asked for It ($r = 0.38, p < .001$) and He Didn't Mean To (Intoxication) ($r = 0.31, p < .001$), suggesting that beliefs about transcending gender norms are associated with lower adherence to rape myths. Individuals who think about gender in non-dichotomous ways are also less likely to endorse victim-blaming attitudes.

Finally, the Social Desirability scale showed weak correlations with all other variables, indicating that the tendency to respond in a socially desirable way does not predict or significantly correlate with respondent's adherence to rape myths.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to better understand the attitudes and beliefs of students towards rape and rape myths. The findings indicate that some student demographics are more likely to adhere to rape myths than others. Both males and athletes were found to display greater rape myth adherence than their counterparts, which is consistent with prior findings. Negative stereotypical attitudes and beliefs about women have been consistently linked to a higher acceptance of rape myths among college students (Davies et al., 2012; Holcomb et al., 1993; Johnson et al., 1997; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Wheeler et al., 2002). These repeated results

demonstrate the persistence of gender stereotypes that perpetuate victim-blaming attitudes and contribute to the perpetuation of rape myths among college students.

Likewise, the association between athletic status and greater rape myth adherence suggests the presence of unique social dynamics within the athlete community that warrant further exploration. Similar to what has been studied as peer influence within fraternities, athletic culture may contribute to the reinforcement of traditional masculinity norms, which in turn influences more permissive attitudes towards sexual violence. McMahon (2007) found that student athletes held subtle rape myths, which avoid directly blaming the victim, but still contribute towards a culture that blames victims and misunderstands sexual violence. Interventions that are tailored to address subtle rape myths as well as other problematic attitudes in populations that have a high risk of perpetration may be a more effective approach to reducing rape than targeting victim populations (Loh et al., 2005). Strategies such as bystander intervention programming and the promotion of positive masculinity could be effective in addressing rape myth adherence within these demographic groups (Currier & Carlson, 2009; Hayes-Smith & Levett, 2010; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010).

Previous studies have found inconclusive results on the impact of fraternity affiliation on rape myth adherence. In the present study, affiliation was not found to be statistically significant. One possible explanation for this result could be the small sample of this population included in the study ($n = 17$). It may be beneficial for future research to delve deeper into the relationship, exploring important factors associated with Greek-life, such as heavy alcohol consumption and peer influence.

The finding that individuals who know a victim are less likely to adhere to rape myths is also consistent with prior findings. This finding highlights the potential impact that having a

personal relationship with a previous victim has on rape myth adherence. Although the prevalence of sexual assault often goes unrecognized, the reality is that a significant portion of the population is likely to know someone who has been a victim of sexual violence, even if they are not aware of it (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2015). To challenge these statistics, it is important to create a societal dynamic that encourages openness and empathy to survivors, as well as accountability for perpetrators. If personal connections to victims reduces a person's adherence to myths about sexual violence, making sure that victims feel believed, empowered, and comfortable when reporting their assault and speaking about it could affect community attitudes towards sexual violence.

The fact that the majority of the literature on rape myths has consistently found gender, athletic status, and knowing a victim to influence perceptions of rape emphasizes the need for targeted interventions and educational initiatives to challenge misconceptions within different demographic groups. The results of this study contributes to our understanding of university students adherence to rape myths, but it is not without limitations. First, the small sample size, which was drawn from three criminal justice courses, may restrict the generalizability of the findings to a broader population. Second, the study relied on a convenient sample of college students rather than a random sample which may impact the generalizability of the results. Finally, the study's scope was confined to bivariate analysis, potentially overlooking more complex relationships among variables.

Conclusion

A continued understanding of the causes and motivations for college students to adhere to rape myths is essential to combatting sexual assault on college campuses. Rape myths not only contribute to the stigmatization and victim-blaming of survivors, but hinder efforts to prevent

and respond to sexual assault effectively. Universities have a responsibility to confront sexual violence and educate their student body on the realities of rape and the dangers of pervasive rape myths in society. They must strive to create a campus environment that prioritizes safety, respect, and consent for all members of its body. The findings of this study indicate the need for universities to take proactive measures and enhance efforts to hold perpetrators of sexual assault accountable. It is imperative that universities adopt comprehensive strategies aimed at creating a campus environment where survivors of sexual assault are not only supported but also provided with avenues to seek justice. Through these initiatives, universities can ensure that they are playing an active role in the creation of a safe, empathetic, and supportive environment for all students. These efforts may also contribute to reducing the prevalence of rape myths and sexual assault in society. Despite the limitations of the study, these findings offer valuable insights and contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding rape myth adherence among university students.

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