

Television Viewing and Rape Myth Acceptance among College Women

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Abstract Prior research has shown that people who consume pornographic movies and magazines are more likely to accept rape myths. The results of the present study build on that research to link the acceptance of rape myths to *general, daily television use* among college women. Furthermore, our data show that college women who watch more television are more likely to believe that rape accusations are false. In addition, the data support a positive relationship between conservative political ideology and rape myth acceptance. However, the data do not support the cultivation hypothesis; that is, television use did not correlate with the overestimation of rape in society. The results suggest the need for additional research focused on the role that general television viewing may play in perpetuating rape-related misperceptions.

Keywords Television viewing · Rape perceptions · Rape myth acceptance · Cultivation · Sexual assault

There is a large body of research on sexual assault in the United States, which represents contributions from many disciplines, including sociology, psychology, public health,

women's studies, and mass communication studies. The literature covers myriad sexual assault-related topics that range from the social construction of rape myths to the effectiveness of specific interventions within targeted populations (for an annotated bibliography, see Ward 1994).

Within this body of research, however, one area remains relatively understudied: media effects. A number of studies analyze sex-related content in the mainstream mass media (for a summary, see Greenberg and Hofschire 2000), but only a handful of researchers have looked specifically at sexual assault-related content in the mainstream media (see Greenberg and Busselle 1996), and there is a dearth of studies that link such content to the audience's beliefs about sexual assault. Thus, our goal in the present study was to examine the link, if any, of beliefs about sexual assault—specifically rape myths—to television viewing. Such a link has implications for risk-reduction campaigns, particularly those aimed at women, and can open the door to additional research focused on the impact that television viewing may have on the rape-related misperceptions that have been linked to women's underestimation of their own vulnerability to rape (see, for example, Grayson and Schwarz 1999).

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Rape Myths

The U.S. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (2003), which published a report to Congress on medical examination and treatment for victims of rape and sexual assault, defined rape and sexual assault this way:

As a general matter, rape is a term that refers to forced or attempted sexual intercourse with a male or female, by an offender that may be of the same sex or a different sex from the victim. Sexual assault is usually defined to encompass rape, attempted rape, forced oral

and anal sex, penetration with objects, touching of intimate parts, and other types of threats or coercion in which unwanted sexual contact is attempted or occurs between the victim and offender (p. 13).

Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994) defined *myths* as “false or apocryphal beliefs that are widely held; they explain some important cultural phenomenon; and they serve to justify existing cultural arrangements” (p. 134). Rape myths, therefore, refer to false beliefs and stereotypes regarding forced or attempted sexual intercourse and the victims and perpetrators of such acts (Burt 1980; Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994).

As is the case with all myths, rape myths are believed to be quite prevalent among the general public (Gilmartin-Zena 1987). Two of the most common rape myths are: (1) victims lie about rape when they regret consensual sex after the fact, and (2) a victim’s provocative dress, suggestive behavior, or “bad reputation” is often to blame for the “mixed signals” that led to the rape (Cuklanz 1998; Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994).

Rape myths are believed to contribute to the public consciousness in myriad unproductive, damaging ways. They serve to demoralize victims, bolster perpetrators, and, ultimately, shift the “blame for the crime from the rapist to his victim” (Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994, p. 136). They also perpetuate what some call the “just world” phenomenon, which is that good things happen to good people and bad things happen (deservedly so) to bad people (Gilmartin-Zena 1987; Kelley 1967; Lerner 1980; Nisbett et al. 1982). In addition, such beliefs bolster a pervasive error in attribution of responsibility such that good outcomes are perceived to be the result of one’s own efforts, whereas bad outcomes are attributed to external factors (Gray et al. 1993). In other words, people think that they are not susceptible to rape because rape victims are not like them. Such perceptions may foster a false sense of security, which may, in turn, lead potential victims to place themselves in situations in which the likelihood of rape is elevated.

Rape and Sexual Assault in America: Fact and Myth

Ultimately, rape myths are believed to downplay the significance of a crime that victimizes a substantial portion of society—women, men, and children. For example, research conducted jointly in the mid-1990s by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institute of Justice indicated that, of the 8,000 women surveyed, about one in six (17.6%) had been the victim of a completed or attempted rape at some time in her life (Tjaden and Thoennes 2000).

The National Institute of Justice published another report (Fisher et al. 2001) that suggested that between one-fourth

and one-fifth of college women may become the victim of rape or attempted rape during 4 years of college. Yet another report (National Institute of Justice 2004) indicated that by the end of 4 years of college, 79% of women had experienced at least one incident of sexual victimization. Sexual victimization refers to experiences that range from coerced sexual contact to rape.

In terms of unfounded accusations of rape (according to data available on request through the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reporting Program), in the United States the number of forcible rape complaints deemed unfounded was around 5% of the more than 90,000 complaints received in 2003 from law enforcement.¹ But it is equally important to note here that, according to US Department of Justice records (2003), only between 35 and 50% of rapes and sexual assaults are reported to law enforcement officials. In fact, between 1993 and 2002, compared to robbery and aggravated assault, rape was the most underreported violent crime in the United States, (US Department of Justice 2003).

Despite the reality of rape in America, rape myths pervade the public consciousness. For example, in their extensive review of the research on this topic, Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994) reported that between 25 and 35% of respondents agree with the majority of rape myths presented to them by researchers. The acceptance of rape myths is likely to have a notable impact on the public’s perceptions. For example, rape myths have the power to impact the perceived relevance of rape among women. They serve to “obscure and deny the personal vulnerability of *all* women by suggesting that only *other* women are raped” (Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994, p. 136). This clear distortion of the reality concerning sexual violence against women can influence perceptions, which, in turn, can affect public priorities and legislative agendas. It can also facilitate the internalization of rape myths, which can lead to men and women placing themselves in risky situations (Nurius et al. 1996) or misinterpreting situations that are likely to become risky (Roze et al. 1991). It can also undermine the effectiveness of education efforts intended to make women aware of their actual vulnerability: Women who believe that rape only happens to “other women” are less likely to see rape-reduction efforts as personally relevant. Research shows perceived personal relevance to be an important determinant of the effectiveness of health or safety related interventions (c.f., Markova and Power 1992). Audiences who do not perceive a topic (e.g., AIDS) to be personally relevant are less likely to see the relevance of a related message to their own behaviors (e.g., sexual

¹ To request data concerning “unfounded offenses” in the US, contact the Communications Unit of the Criminal Justice Information Services Division at the FBI, Module D3, 1000 Custer Hollow Road, Clarksburg, WV, 26306-0154, or email cjis_comm@leo.gov.

activity) and are therefore less receptive to messages designed to initiate changes in their own risky behaviors (e.g., unprotected sexual activity) (Markova and Power 1992).

Although men are significantly more accepting of rape myths, these distorted perceptions are held by both men and women (cf. Brady et al. 1991; Check and Malamuth 1983; Field 1978; Malamuth 1986; Malamuth and Check 1984; Russell 1990; also see Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994). Race and ethnicity are also believed to influence the acceptance of rape myths, if only as a function of “cultural history, religious tradition, sex role expectations, and sexual mores for different groups” (Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994, p. 143). For example, African American and Hispanic college students appear to be more accepting of rape myths than European Americans (Dull and Giacomassi 1987; Fischer 1987).

Rape Myths on Television

Relatively little research documents the presence of rape myths in television programming. However, the available data indicate that myths are fairly prevalent when the topic of rape is broached in programming. For example, Brinson (1992) analyzed 26 prime-time television storylines that contained references to rape, and found that the average storyline contained at least one reference to a rape myth. Brinson found that 42% of the storylines suggested that the rape victim wanted to be raped, 38% of the storylines suggested that the victim lied about the assault, and 46% of the storylines suggested that the victim had “asked for it” in the way that she dressed or acted (male and female characters were equally likely to make this accusation). On the other hand, only 38% of the storylines contained *any opposition* to the myth that the victim had “asked for it.”

Cuklanz’s (1999) data echoed those findings. Her results indicate that prime-time depictions of rape have consistently, over the course of nearly 15 years, perpetuated rape myths. However, Cuklanz also pointed out that there is an increasing trend in the entertainment media to portray rape with more complexity by infusing plots with proactive female characters and more ambiguous rape situations (e.g., more references to date and acquaintance rape than to violent stranger rape).

Although rape depictions are becoming increasingly complex, they are also occurring with greater frequency on television. In their review of the literature on television sex, Greenberg and Hofschire (2000) reported that, in soap operas, references to rape increased between 1985 and 1994 from one per every ten episodes to one per episode. They attributed this trend partially to fluctuations in media coverage of rape trials and the tendency of the soap operas to draw plots from the headlines. However, as a further testament to this trend, NBC has, since 1999, aired a prime-time crime drama dedicated to the topic of rape and sexual

assault—“Law & Order: Special Victims Unit.” The show has been on the air for seven seasons. Typical storylines involve serial rapists, date rape, stranger rape, gang rape, incest, and pedophilia.² The ubiquity of these types of depictions over the course of several decades has led mass communication researchers to examine not only how rape themes play out in the media, but also whether those themes have an impact on their audiences.

Linking Media Content to Audience Effects

Cultivation theory (Gerbner 1969; Gerbner and Gross 1976; Gerbner et al. 1994) is one of the most often cited media effects theories in mass communication research. The theory posits that heavy consumption of television leads to the *cultivation* of distorted, media-influenced perceptions of reality. For example, heavy consumers of television estimate their own likelihood of becoming a victim of violent crime to be 10 times higher than light consumers’ estimates. Put simply, heavy consumers of television view the world as a more violent place (cf., Gerbner 1998; Gerbner et al. 1994; Morgan and Shanahan 1997; Romer et al. 2003; Signorielli et al. 1995; Signorielli and Morgan 1996).³ Cultivation effects surface regardless of the content and regardless of audience race or gender. In addition to crime and violence, cultivation research has located relationships between media consumption and perceptions related to such topics as gender roles (cf. Holbert et al. 2003; Morgan 1982; Signorielli 1989; Signorielli and Lears 1992), marriage (Signorielli 1991), aging (Signorielli 2004), the environment (Shanahan et al. 1997), nutrition (Signorielli and Lears 1992), and race (Armstrong et al. 1992).

Two assumptions underlie the cultivation hypothesis. One is that television-influenced perceptions of reality are cultivated via television consumption over time. The other is that television presents to heavy viewers a unified, homogenized view of reality, one that reflects the dominant, mainstream values of society (Gerbner et al. 1994). This homogenized view of reality is internally consistent, regardless of the specific content that is viewed. It is the amount of television viewed, rather than the type of television viewed, that predicts cultivation effects.

² Plot summaries are available for each episode in the show’s 7-year history at http://www.nbc.com/Law_&_Order:_Special_Victims_Unit/episode_guide/index.html.

³ According to Gerbner et al. (1994), heavy viewing is a relative term, based on the overall viewing habits of the sample under study. Thus, heavy viewing is not standardized across samples, but must be calculated on a sample-by-sample basis. Within a given sample, the best way to determine heavy viewers is to split the sample evenly three ways—into heavy, medium, and light segments—based on viewing duration. “The heaviest viewers of any sample of respondents form the populations on which cultivation can be tested” (p. 26).

However, there is a related body of research that has sought to illuminate the potential for specific television content (e.g., situation comedies, news, cartoons, crime dramas) to impact the cultivation of social reality (cf. Hawkins and Pingree 1981; Potter and Chang 1990). The researchers have focused on two types of cultivation effects: First order (i.e., the cultivation of beliefs about the prevalence of a social phenomenon) and second order (i.e., the cultivation of related beliefs about society). This body of research shows that viewing specific types of programming is still more predictive of both first and second order beliefs than is total time spent viewing television (Potter and Chang 1990). To date, it appears that neither cultivation nor social reality researchers have explored the relationship between media consumption and the cultivation of perceptions about rape or sexual assault.

In contrast, media effects regarding rape-related media content have emerged outside of the cultivation research approach. During the 1980s, several notable experimental studies were conducted that focused on the effects of exposure to printed rape depictions (Check and Malamuth 1983), audiotaped rape depictions (Malamuth and Check 1983), and depictions of nonconsensual sex and rape in films released in mainstream theatres (Malamuth and Check 1981). These experiments demonstrated positive relationships between men's exposure to these depictions and their acceptance of violence against women and between men's exposure to such depictions and their self-reported likelihood of raping. In yet another experiment, Zillmann and Bryant (1982) found a positive relationship between viewing pornography and the trivialization of rape. This finding was evident in both men *and* women. In a study of only women, Mayerson and Taylor (1987) found greater acceptance of rape myths among college women who read pornographic stories. (For a review of this body of literature, see Malamuth et al. 2001).

Survey research has also provided some support for such media effects. For example, Malamuth and Check (1985) found a relationship between exposure to sexually explicit magazines, such as *Penthouse* and *Playboy*, and men's acceptance of rape myths. Likewise, in a sample of men and women, Perse (1994) found that self-reported exposure to sexually explicit materials (e.g., X-rated magazines, movies, and books) was directly and positively related to rape myth acceptance.

Although informative for the current research effort, none of these studies directly concerns exposure to televised images of rape and the acceptance of rape myths or violence against women. In addition, only a few of these studies addressed the effects of sexually explicit media exposure on women. A meta-analysis published in 1995 (Allen et al. 1995) illustrated that only a handful of 24 studies on the link between exposure to pornography and rape myth

acceptance employed female respondents and only two demonstrated a positive link (c.f., Zillmann and Bryant 1982).

There is a substantial body of research that links exposure to violent television content and audience impact (for a summary, see Anderson et al. 2003) and exposure to sexual television content and audience impact (see Greenberg and Hofschire 2000). Attitude and behavioral effects surfaced for both women and men in both bodies of literature. For example, Anderson et al. (2003) reported in their review of the media violence research that "Research on violent television and films, video games, and music reveals unequivocal evidence that media violence increases the likelihood of aggressive and violent behavior in both immediate and long-term contexts" (p. 81).

Hypotheses

The first two-part hypothesis is consistent with the research on media use and rape myth acceptance. H1a deals with rape myths more generally, while H1b concerns one specific rape myth.

H1a: Television use will correlate positively with the acceptance of rape myths.

H1b: Television use will correlate positively with perceptions that rape accusations are false.

The specific myth identified in H1b was chosen because, should the predicted relationship surface, we could also compare the myth's prevalence with reality; the reality in this case is that 5% of the more than 90,000 complaints received in 2003 from law enforcement are deemed false accusations.⁴

The second hypothesis is consistent with the research on rape myth acceptance and with the research on cultivation effects (that is, the positive relationship between television viewing, regardless of content viewed, and the overestimation of crimes).

H2: Television use will correlate positively with a general overestimation of rape in society.

The third hypothesis was based on research that demonstrates that rape myths obscure the vulnerability of all women to rape and thus have the potential to undermine informational campaigns intended to highlight the personal relevance of rape to women. Thus, if television serves to perpetuate rape myths, as is advanced in H1, then:

H3: Television use will correlate negatively with the perceived personal relevance of sexual assault.

⁴ To request data concerning "unfounded offenses" in the US, contact the Communications Unit of the Criminal Justice Information Services Division at the FBI, Module D3, 1000 Custer Hollow Road, Clarksburg, WV, 26306-0154, or email cjis_comm@leo.gov.

Method

Participants

This sample consisted of 96 undergraduate women from a large midwestern university. The women's ages ranged from 18 to 21, with a mean age of 19 years. About 80% of the sample indicated that they were college sophomores. Nearly 4% of the sample indicated that their country of origin was outside of the United States, and 5% of the sample identified themselves as People of Color. Twenty-four percent of the sample described themselves as conservative on economic issues, 40% as neither conservative nor liberal, 31% as liberal, and 3% as very liberal (no one in the sample described herself as economically very conservative). Nineteen percent of the sample described themselves as conservative on social issues, 25% as neither conservative nor liberal, 46% as liberal, and 10% as very liberal (no one in the sample described herself as socially very conservative).

Measure

Rape myth acceptance Ten Likert-type scale items intended to capture rape myth acceptance were subjected to principal component factor analysis (varimax rotation). These items were primarily borrowed from Burt (1980; a 19-item scale) and Field (1978; a 32-item scale).⁵ Each item was chosen in hopes that it was reflective of a "modern" college audience. Thus, we selected items that did not use outdated colloquialisms and added several items that explicitly dealt with alcohol-related scenarios.⁶ Scale pre-testing indicated that the 10-item index was more stable (one component, Cronbach's $\alpha = .78$) than what surfaced in the final analysis. In the final analysis, only seven of the original ten items emerged on one factor. The Cronbach's α for this factor was .64, which, although minimally acceptable, fell within the range of alphas (.62–.88) reported in Lonsway and Fitzgerald's (1994) review of the rape myth literature. These seven items read: (1) The degree of a woman's resistance should be the major factor in determining if a rape has occurred; (2) In the majority of rapes, the victim is promiscuous or has a bad reputation; (3) In order to protect men, it should be very difficult to prove that a rape has occurred; (4) Women who make it a habit of getting drunk at parties should expect to eventually end up in a situation where a man will have sexual intercourse with her while she is passed out; (5) Having sex with someone

when they really don't want to or when they are too drunk to really talk about it is not rape; (6) Any female can get raped (reverse coded for analysis); and (7) A woman who goes to the home or apartment of a man on their first date implies that she is willing to have sex. Response options (and corresponding values) were "strongly disagree" (1), "disagree" (2), "neither disagree or agree" (3), "agree" (4), "strongly agree" (5); thus, a higher score indicated more agreement with these myths.

Perception that rape accusations are false As another indicator of rape myth acceptance, participants were asked: "On a scale of 0–100, in your opinion, what percentage of rape accusations are false?" Responses ranged from 1 to 90%, with a mean of 18.6 (SD=15.98).

Estimation of rape in society Participants were asked: "On a scale of 0–100 (with 0 = not at all and 100 = extremely), how common do you think it is to go ahead and have intercourse with another person when that person does not want to or is too intoxicated to give consent?" Responses ranged from 1 to 100, with a mean of 39 (SD=21.98). This is a measure of first order beliefs.

Perceived personal relevance of sexual assault To capture whether they identified with the topic of sexual assault as personally relevant, participants were asked: "On a scale of 0–100, how relevant is the topic of sexual assault to you?" Responses ranged from 0 to 100, with a mean of 60.73 (SD=32.39).

Television use Three items captured general daily television use: television entertainment, television news, and music video programming. These items were subjected to principal component factor analysis (varimax rotation), and all three loaded onto one factor. The Cronbach's α for this index was .67, which makes it minimally acceptable. On a typical weekday, the average respondent watched 1–2 h of entertainment television, up to 1 h of television news, and up to 1 hour of music videos.

Cultural identification Two items captured cultural identification: race/ethnicity and country of origin. These items asked respondents to indicate their "country of origin" and the "racial/ethnic group" with whom they most identify. The response option was open-ended for both. The items were subjected to principal component factor analysis (varimax rotation), and both loaded onto one factor. Ultimately, the lowest score indicated White individuals of US origin. The Cronbach's α for this index was .85.

Political ideology Two items captured political ideology. These items read: "How would you describe yourself when it

⁵ For a summary of more than 20 established rape myth scales that are available to researchers today, see Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994).

⁶ Studies point to the important role that alcohol plays in sexual assault and rape scenarios. See, for example, Murphy et al. (1998).

comes to economic issues,” and “How would you describe yourself when it comes to social issues?” Response choices were “very conservative,” “conservative,” “neither conservative nor liberal,” “liberal,” and “very liberal,” with very conservative = 1 and very liberal = 5. These items were subjected to principal component factor analysis (varimax rotation), and both loaded onto one factor. The Cronbach’s alpha for this index was .78.

Knowledge of involuntary intercourse This variable was captured with the item: “Do you know someone who has had intercourse with another person involuntarily or when he/she was too intoxicated to give consent?” Fifty-two percent of the sample reported that they knew someone who had, by this definition, been raped. This survey did not differentiate between self-knowledge or knowledge of other’s experiences.

Procedure

Participants were recruited from an introductory mass communication theory course. An announcement briefly describing the study was made during lecture and students were offered extra credit for participation. Students were told the study was designed to help the researchers to learn more about “general media use among undergraduates, as well as their knowledge of and beliefs about sensitive campus topics.” Students who chose not to participate were offered an alternate extra credit option. Participants completed the consent form and survey in a supervised classroom during specified hours offered outside of scheduled class time. They were asked to answer all questions thoughtfully and honestly, and they were repeatedly assured of their anonymity, which was of the utmost importance given the sensitivity of the topics. The survey, which consisted of opened- and closed-ended questions, took about 30 minutes to complete. After they had completed the survey, each student was directed to place it into an unmarked envelope and then put it into a secured

box. Consent forms were collected separately. The survey and its consent form were approved by the host university’s institutional review board. Later in the semester, students learned of the preliminary results during lecture and the study was discussed in more detail within the context of class readings.

Results

A series of four multiple regressions were performed. Each of the dependent variables—rape myth acceptance, perception that rape accusations are false, estimation of rape in society, and personal relevance of sexual assault—were regressed on the following independent variables: age, cultural identity, political ideology, experience with rape, and television use. Consistent with multivariate analysis concerning rape myth acceptance, age, cultural identity, political ideology, and experience with rape—or, in this case, knowledge of involuntary intercourse—were all included as control variables (c.f., Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994).

Hypothesis 1a predicted a positive relationship between television use and rape myth acceptance. This relationship was found to be significant, $\beta = .22$, $p < .05$. As Table 1 indicates, the more one watches television, the more one is likely to accept rape myths. Thus, Hypothesis 1a was supported. Hypothesis 1b predicted a positive relationship between television use and perceptions that rape accusations are false. This relationship was found to be positive and significant, $\beta = .29$, $p < .01$. Thus, Hypothesis 1b was also supported.

Hypothesis 2 predicted a positive relationship between television use, regardless of content, and estimation of prevalence of rape in US society. The relationship was found to be negative, and it did not achieve a level of significance. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was not supported. We also calculated a post hoc Pearson correlation between television use and estimation of rape prevalence among the heaviest television viewers (that is, those who viewed 7 or

Table 1 Summary of hierarchical multiple regression analyses of rape myth acceptance, rape estimation, perceived relevance, and false accusations ($N=96$).

Standardized regression coefficients (betas) reported; * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$, § $p = .07$.

	Rape myths	Estimation	Relevance	False
Age	.05	-.07	.03	-.01
Culture	.31**	.07	-.19	-.05
Ideology	-.20*	.03	.24*	-.05
R^2 change	.15**	.01	.09	.00
Know victim	-.14	.13	.15*	-.26**
R^2 change	.02**	.01	.02*	.06
Television use	.22*	-.11	-.19§	.29**
R^2 change	.04**	.01	.03*	.08*
Adjusted R^2	.16***	0	.09*	.09*

more hours per day and, therefore, fell in the upper one-third television viewing segment within this sample). Again, the relationship was not significant and was not in the predicted direction, $r = -.04$, ns. Finally, based on the argument put forth by proponents of social reality theory, which suggests that specific television content is a more powerful predictor of television effects than general television use, we also calculated post hoc Pearson correlations between estimation of rape prevalence and three specific television content categories. Those were television entertainment, $r = .08$, ns, television news, $r = -.15$, ns, and music video programming, $r = -.11$, ns. All of those relationships were not significant and were not in the predicted direction.

Hypothesis 3 predicted a negative relationship between television use and the perceived personal relevance of sexual assault. The relationship was in the predicted direction, but it did not reach statistical significance, $\beta = -.19$, $p = .07$; thus, Hypothesis 3 was not supported.

Several unpredicted relationships also surfaced in the analyses. There was a positive and significant relationship between cultural identification and rape myth acceptance, $\beta = .31$, $p < .01$, which indicates that individuals of Color and individuals with origins outside the U.S. were more likely than other people to accept rape myths. There was also a significant negative relationship between political ideology and rape myth acceptance, $\beta = -.20$, $p < .05$, which indicates that the more conservative individuals were, the more likely they were to accept rape myths. There was also a significant positive relationship between political ideology and perceived personal relevance of sexual assault, $\beta = .24$, $p < .05$, which indicates that the more liberal individuals were, the more likely they were to see sexual assault as a relevant topic. A significant positive relationship also was found between knowledge of involuntary intercourse and perceived personal relevance of sexual assault, $\beta = .15$, $p < .05$, and a significant negative relationship was found between knowledge of involuntary intercourse and the perception that rape accusations are false, $\beta = -.26$, $p < .01$.

Discussion

The most notable contribution of the present study is that it establishes a link between television viewing and rape myth acceptance. Although prior research has established a relationship between the viewing of “pornographic” and “erotic” media and rape myth acceptance, what really sets this effort apart is the attempt to generalize these findings to media content defined more broadly. Our data establish a link between *general, daily television use* and the acceptance of rape myths.

The findings of the present study are consistent with one aspect of the research on television’s impact on the construction of social reality. Hawkins and Pingree (1982) explained that, despite its convincing realism, the television world “contains systematic distortions and biases” (p. 224). From a social learning perspective, these distortions, if left un-refuted, can lead to shared misconceptualizations of reality (Bandura 1994). Content analyses of television programs that depict rape scenarios confirm such systematic distortions; for example, prime-time depictions of rape have, over the course of nearly 15 years, been shown consistently to perpetuate rape myths (Cuklanz 1999).

The acceptance of these myths (e.g., only women who are more promiscuous are raped) is particularly notable because such beliefs may influence perceptions of self efficacy and outcome expectations (Bandura 1994). In other words, the acceptance of rape myths may lead individuals to put themselves in risky situations; after all, bad things only happen to bad people. Further research is needed to see if this is the case.

The relationship between television use and belief in rape myths is particularly problematic from a health communication perspective; it suggests that television use has the potential to erase, over time, the already limited effects that rape education campaigns have on audiences (for a discussion of those limited effects, see Lonsway 1996). For example, it is unlikely that one education effort can offer long-term influence when contrary information continues to be disseminated through television content. Educators interested in overcoming these barriers may wish to build some media literacy training into their rape prevention efforts.

Our data also establish a positive relationship between television use and perceptions that rape accusations are false. As reported above, responses to the question of what percentage of rape claims are false ranged from 1 to 90%, with a mean of 19%. In reality, according to the FBI, the number of unfounded rape accusations is closer to 5%.⁷ Clearly mainstream beliefs about false rape accusations are notably distorted. It is difficult to say, however, at least based on the data presented here, whether television is merely a reflection of an already well-established myth or whether it is responsible for the propagation of that myth. Still the data do indicate that watching television increases one’s likelihood to believe that women are lying when they identify themselves as victims of rape. However, knowledge of situations involving involuntary intercourse makes one significantly less likely to believe that rape accusations are false; reality does appear to have

⁷ To request these data, contact the Communications Unit of the Criminal Justice Information Services Division at the FBI, Module D3, 1000 Custer Hollow Road, Clarksburg, WV, 26306-0154, or email cjis_comm@leo.gov.

the potential to temper this distorted version of reality that is reflected in television content.

In addition, because the literature indicates that, in order to be successful, an information campaign must be perceived as personally relevant (cf., Biek et al. 1996; Liberman and Chaiken 1992; Markova and Power 1992; Stockdale et al. 1989), it matters whether television content is affecting audience members' likelihoods to see sexual assault as a personally relevant topic. On television, rape victims are, after all, "other" women. Thus, we expected a negative relationship between television use and perceptions that rape is personally relevant. This was not supported. However, it is important to note that the relationship approached significance. This suggests the need for further research.

It is interesting that our data did not support the cultivation hypothesis, at least not entirely; that is, television use did not correlate with the estimation (or overestimation) of rape in society—a first order belief. This could be an artifact of the methodology. One criticism of cultivation research (cf., Holbert et al. 2003; Hughes 1980; Potter 1994) is that Gerbner and colleagues (cf., Gerbner 1998; Gerbner et al. 1994; Signorielli et al. 1995) employed the universal term "television" and did not differentiate among genres. We followed Gerbner's lead and looked at general television use. It may well be that, when the universal term television is used, cultivation effects do not surface among relatively homogeneous audiences who share similarities in viewing habits. For example, if audiences primarily watch situation comedies, such programming is not likely to perpetuate the belief that the world is a more violent place than it actually is (Rubin et al. 1988). Research has shown that situation comedies are one of the most watched genres of television among college undergraduates (Hawkins et al. 2001). In future research, we need to extend our breakdown of television content beyond the three macro genres tested in the post hoc correlation analyses (entertainment, news, and music videos) to encompass more specific viewing choices including situation comedies, types of news programming, crime dramas, medical dramas, and reality shows.

In addition, our methodology differed slightly from those traditionally employed by cultivation researchers. For example, we did not utilize a forced choice between two responses when we asked about perceptions of vulnerability to violence. As Hughes (1980) noted, Gerbner et al. (1994) typically asked respondents to rate their chances of being involved in violence, and they offered a choice between only two options—1 in 10 (10%) or 1 in 100 (1%). We offered the full range of response options from 0 to 100 (0–100%).

However, it is also important to note here that the support we found for the relationship between television viewing and rape myth acceptance is, in effect, support for the relationship between television viewing and the cultivation of second order beliefs, that is, general (relevant) conclusions about society. Indeed, the lack of a first order relationship could be evidence of the power of these specific myths. That is, rape myths perpetuate beliefs that *not just anyone* gets raped—only bad girls get raped (Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994). Such myths may work against the cultivation of first order beliefs when it comes to perceptions of rape. Further research is needed to differentiate among, not just the type of content viewed, but also the relationship between viewing and the cultivation of first and second order beliefs.

Our results regarding political ideology and rape myth acceptance are consistent with the findings of Holbert et al. (2003), who reported that the more liberal one's political ideology, the more likely one is to support women's rights. Our data similarly indicated that the more liberal one's political ideology, the less likely one is to believe in rape myths (which could be said to be the very antithesis of women's rights). In addition, our findings regarding the relationship between cultural identification (race/ethnicity and country of origin) revealed that women not of US origin and Women of Color were more accepting of rape myths than were White US-born women. This too is consistent with previous research (Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994). Our findings suggest that educational campaigns that are intended to reduce rape myth acceptance should consider that people who self-identify as conservative, foreign-born, and/or People of Color may be more resistant to the campaign's messages. In such cases, extra effort may be needed to develop culturally relevant (or value-sensitive) messages that truly resonate with the target audience. This is an area that deserves immediate research attention.

In a 2003 report on crime victimization, the US Department of Justice reported that People of Color—specifically Black people—were victims of rape and sexual assault at rates significantly higher than White people. Yet, according to Wyatt (1992), Black women are less likely than women of other races to perceive themselves as sexual assault victims and are less likely to define their sexual assault experience as rape. This may explain why some researchers (Kaukinen 2004; Wyatt 1990, 1992) have found that Black women are less likely than White women to report these incidents to the police and to seek social service support. In this current study, the higher acceptance of rape myths found among Women of Color and women not of US origin might contribute to an increased vulnerability and reluctance to report rape. This needs to be explored in future research efforts, along with the

possible role that socioeconomic status⁸ and the media may play in this phenomenon.

There are some limitations in the present study that need to be recognized. As mentioned earlier, the scales we employed demonstrated only minimally acceptable reliabilities. Our attempt to merge existing rape myth scales in order to create an index more reflective of our audience of “modern” college women yielded a less stable index than was indicated in our pretest. Future research may be better served through the consistent use of Burt’s or Field’s scales. In addition, we focused on a relatively small sample of college-aged women, most of whom were White, which means that we cannot generalize our findings much beyond those limits. However, given the likelihood that college women are exposed to more rape awareness activities (e.g., on-campus marches, related student organizations)⁹ than the average citizen, it is also possible that extending this study to a more representative sample would actually yield more powerful results. Women also tend to be less accepting of rape myths than men, which further suggests that a sample of both men and women would yield more powerful results (cf. Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994).

In sum, we were able to accomplish the primary purpose of this research effort, which was to establish a statistically significant, positive relationship between television viewing and the acceptance of rape myths. Although this relationship is based on cross-sectional data (i.e., it is impossible to say whether people who hold rape myths seek out and confirm those myths through the television that they view or whether television viewing is a significant source for those myths), further research can establish the parameters of this relationship and lead us toward an even better understanding of this socially significant phenomenon.

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⁸ Results of a study by Nagel et al. (2005) suggest that socioeconomic variables may mitigate the relationship between race and perceptions of rape victims.

⁹ At the time of the present study, there were ten on-campus student organizations active at the University of Wisconsin at Madison whose collective purpose was to address issues of rape awareness, personal violence, and sexuality. There was also an annual “Take Back the Night” campus march intended to raise awareness of rape and violence against women.

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