

Research Paper

## Examining the Predictive Role of Rape Myth Acceptance and Attitude towards Women in Rape Supportive Attitude among University Students

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### ABSTRACT

Rape is a social issue that impacts people and communities around the world. It's imperative to understand the factors contributing to rape supportive attitudes, which perpetuate and justify rape, in order to effectively prevent it. The present study investigated the predictive role of socio-cognitive factors, specifically rape myth acceptance and attitudes toward women, in rape supportive attitudes among university students in Jaipur, Rajasthan. The study involved 60 students from three universities in Jaipur, Rajasthan, with an equal number of male and female participants aged between 18 and 29. Convenience sampling was used to select the participants, and individual administration was employed to collect data. The researchers utilized the Updated Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale by McMahon and Farmer (2011), the Attitudes Towards Women Scale by Spence, Helmreich, and Stapp (1973), and the Rape Supportive Attitude Scale by Lottes (1991) to assess participant's rape myth acceptance, attitudes towards women, and rape supportive attitudes. Multiple regression analyses showed that both rape myth acceptance (Beta = 0.62,  $p < 0.001$ ) and attitudes toward women (Beta = -0.28,  $p = 0.034$ ) significantly predicted rape supportive attitudes among university students. Higher levels of rape myth acceptance and more negative attitudes toward women were associated with more positive attitudes toward rape. The implications of these findings for prevention and intervention efforts are discussed.

**Keywords:** *Rape myth acceptance, Attitude towards women, Rape supportive attitude, University students*

Rape is a heinous crime that has severe physical, psychological, and social consequences for survivors. It is a pervasive issue that occurs across cultures, age groups, and socioeconomic statuses. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2019), around one-third of women globally have encountered physical and/or sexual violence at some point in their lives, with rape being a prevalent form of sexual violence. In recent times, there has been growing attention towards comprehending the elements that contribute to attitudes supporting rape. These attitudes can perpetuate and normalize sexual violence, thereby increasing the vulnerability of women to victimization. **Rape supportive attitudes** refer to beliefs or attitudes that condone, justify or blame the victim of rape. These

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attitudes can be expressed through various forms such as victim blaming, minimizing the severity of rape, and endorsing rape myths.

Several studies have examined the role of social and cultural factors in shaping rape supportive attitudes, including rape myth acceptance and attitude toward women. **Rape myth acceptance** refers to the degree to which individuals endorse or believe in rape myths (Burt, 1980), while **Attitude towards Women** refers to individuals' beliefs, feelings, and behaviors towards women, and can range from positive to negative (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Both rape myth acceptance and attitude towards women develop and shaped through the societal and cultural norms. So, these socio-cognitive constructs of an individual influence the way they will perceive, and form attitude toward rape victims.

Rape myths are false and harmful beliefs about sexual assault that are widely held in society. This fact was supported by the findings of Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994). They reported that the belief that victims are to blame for their own assault due to their clothing, or behaviour, not only these the belief is also held that most reported rape cases are false. Such myths about rape signifies to a culture that not only tolerates rape but they justify sexual act and violence in acceptable way. This type of culture facilitates and encourages beliefs, attitude and behaviour of the individuals towards women and rape.

The attitude towards women may vary from culture to culture. It also varies with time and individuals. Women have faced disparities, domination and differentiated treatment in several societies. Now with time the scenario is to be observed to be progressing and changing towards gender equality.

There are different perspectives on attitudes towards women. **Progressive and egalitarian view**, such view support gender equality in education, employment and social roles of women. This view recognizes women's abilities, promote their inclusion and empowerment. **Discriminatory and biased views** towards women, support the cultural or religious beliefs toward women. This discriminatory view possesses unequal attitudes towards women which is generally viewed as support or encourages gender-based violence. Not only this the advocates of such views restricts the rights and roles of women in the society, and also inequality in accessing healthcare and education between man and women are due to such discriminatory and biased views toward women.

Previous research has found that higher levels of rape myth acceptance are associated with more rape supportive attitudes (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; McMahon & Farmer, 2011). Rape myth acceptance can lead individuals to blame the victim, minimize the severity of rape, and hold negative attitudes towards survivors, thereby contributing to a culture that normalizes sexual violence. Similarly, negative attitudes toward women, such as sexism and gender discrimination, have been shown to be associated with rape supportive attitudes (Murnen et al., 2003). Negative attitudes toward women can contribute to the objectification and devaluation of women, and may lead individuals to hold more accepting attitudes towards rape and sexual violence against women.

Prior research has established a significant correlation between rape myth acceptance and rape supportive attitudes. For instance, McMahon and Farmer (2011) conducted a study that revealed a positive association between higher levels of rape myth acceptance and increased rape supportive attitudes among college students. Similarly, Payne (2017) conducted a study

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focusing on university students and found a significant correlation between higher levels of rape myth acceptance and greater victim-blaming attitudes. These findings highlight the link between accepting false beliefs about rape and endorsing attitudes that support or blame victims of sexual violence.

A study by Anderson and Whiston (2018) examined the role of rape myth acceptance in predicting attitudes toward sexual violence among college students and found that higher levels of rape myth acceptance were associated with more positive attitudes toward sexual violence. Similarly, a study by Orchowski, et.al. (2018) found that rape myth acceptance significantly predicted rape supportive attitudes among college students, particularly among males.

Recent studies have delved into the additional factors that may mediate or moderate the association between rape myth acceptance and rape supportive attitudes. For instance, Hayes-Smith and Levett (2021) conducted a study focusing on college students and discovered that rape myth acceptance served as a mediating factor in the relationship between gender role beliefs and rape supportive attitudes. This implies that gender role beliefs can indirectly impact rape supportive attitudes by influencing the acceptance of rape myths. This research highlights the complex interplay of various factors that contribute to attitudes supporting sexual violence.

Moreover, studies have also examined the role of cultural factors in the relationship between rape myth acceptance and rape supportive attitudes among university students. For example, a study by Martinez and Arias (2019) explored the influence of cultural norms on rape myth acceptance and rape supportive attitudes among Hispanic college students and found that higher levels of cultural traditionalism were associated with greater rape myth acceptance, which in turn predicted more positive attitudes toward sexual violence.

Viki, et.al. (2017) conducted a study among university students and found that hostile attitudes towards women were positively correlated with rape supportive attitudes. Their findings suggest that negative attitudes towards women contribute to the endorsement of rape myths and attitudes that support sexual violence.

Kalysh, et.al. (2019) conducted a longitudinal study among college students and found that hostile sexism, which reflects negative attitudes towards women, predicted rape supportive attitudes over time. They also found that this relationship was mediated by rape myth acceptance, indicating that attitudes towards women influence rape supportive attitudes through endorsement of rape myths.

McMahon and Banyard (2016) conducted a study among college students and found that ambivalent sexism, which encompasses both benevolent and hostile sexism, predicted rape supportive attitudes. They found that benevolent sexism, which reflects positive but patronizing attitudes towards women, was positively correlated with rape supportive attitudes.

These studies highlight the consistent findings that negative or hostile attitudes towards women are predictive of rape supportive attitudes among university students. The literature suggests that attitudes towards women may influence rape supportive attitudes through the

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endorsement of rape myths, and that both benevolent and hostile sexism may contribute to these attitudes.

Furthermore, recent research has also examined the role of other factors, such as gender role beliefs, social norms, and cultural factors, in shaping attitudes towards women and their predictive role in rape supportive attitudes among university students.

Becker et al. (2020) conducted a study among college students and found that adherence to traditional gender role beliefs, such as beliefs about women's roles in relationships or in society, predicted rape supportive attitudes. They found that individuals who endorsed more traditional gender role beliefs were more likely to hold rape supportive attitudes.

Suarez, et.al. (2018) found that cultural factors, such as acculturation, predicted rape supportive attitudes. They found that individuals who identified more with their traditional cultural values were more likely to hold rape supportive attitudes.

Thus, the rationale behind this study lies in addressing an important societal issue - rape and sexual assault - and understanding the factors that contribute to rape supportive attitudes among university students. Rape is a severe violation of an individual's autonomy, dignity, and fundamental human rights. It is crucial to study and address the factors that perpetuate and support such harmful attitudes in order to develop effective prevention strategies and interventions. By examining the predictive role of rape myth acceptance and attitude toward women, the study seeks to determine whether these factors contribute to the development and maintenance of rape supportive attitudes among university students. Understanding these predictors can shed light on the underlying cognitive and attitudinal mechanisms that influence individual's perceptions and reactions to rape, thus providing valuable insights for prevention efforts.

Despite the existing evidence linking rape myth acceptance and attitude toward women with rape supportive attitudes, there is a need for further research, particularly among university students who are a vulnerable population at risk for sexual violence. University students are at a critical developmental stage where attitudes and beliefs about gender, sexuality, and relationships are being formed and influenced by various social and cognitive factors.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate the predictive role of socio-cognitive factors, specifically rape myth acceptance and attitude toward women, in rape supportive attitudes among university students.

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### *Aim*

The aim of the study is to investigate the predictive role of socio-cognitive factors (Rape myth acceptance and Attitude toward women) in rape supportive attitude among university students.

#### *Objectives*

1. To explore the predictive role of rape myth acceptance in rape supportive attitude among university students.
2. To explore the predictive role of attitude towards women in rape supportive attitude among university students.

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### *Hypotheses*

1. Rape myth acceptance will predict rape supportive attitudes significantly among university students.
2. Attitude towards women will predict rape supportive attitude significantly among university students.

### *Sample*

The study included a sample of 60 students, with an equal number of males and females, ranging in age from 18 to 29 years. The sample was collected through convenience sampling from private universities in Jaipur city, Rajasthan.

### *Research Design*

A cross-sectional study design was used.

### *Tools*

- **Updated Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (McMahon & Farmer, 2011):** This scale aimed to measure subtle rape myths and was an updated version of the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale tailored specifically for college students. It focused on victim blaming and language commonly used in college settings. Participants rated their level of agreement on a 5-point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The scale consisted of 22 items, and examples of items included statements like, "If a woman is raped while she is intoxicated, she is at least somewhat responsible for putting herself in that position" and "When a woman goes home with a man she doesn't know, it is her fault if she is raped." The scale demonstrated good internal reliability with a coefficient of 0.93 (McMahon & Farmer, 2011). Previous research has shown that the scale has predictive validity in relation to men's actual rape proclivity and sexual aggression (Stephens & George, 2009), as well as related variables such as hostile sexism toward women (Chapleau, et.al., 2007).
- **The Attitudes Toward Women Scale (Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1973):** This scale consisted of 25 items designed to assess beliefs about the roles of women in society. It aimed to capture individuals' attitudes towards women and their perceptions of gender roles and expectations. Examples of items included statements such as "Swearing and obscenity are more repulsive in the speech of a woman than of a man" and "Women should take increasing responsibility for leadership in solving the intellectual and social problems of the day." Participants were required to indicate their level of agreement on a scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The scale demonstrated good internal reliability with reported alpha and split-half reliabilities of .89 and .86, respectively.
- **Rape Supportive Attitude Scale (RSAS) (Lottes, 1991):** This scale consists of 20 items which assesses negative attitudes toward rape victims, including beliefs about perpetrators and misconceptions about rape. The scale measures various beliefs such as the enjoyment of sexual abuse by women, the responsibility of women in preventing rape, the motivation for rape being solely sex instead of power, the occurrence of rape only for certain types of women, the diminished desirability of women after being raped, the false reporting of rape allegations by women, and the acceptance of rape in certain situations. Participants were asked to indicate their agreement with the statements on a Likert scale. Some of the items of the scale includes: "If a person dresses provocatively, they are partially responsible if they are sexually assaulted", "Some women falsely claim rape as a way to seek attention or get back at men." The

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internal consistency reliability of the Rape Supportive Attitude Scale, as indicated by Cronbach's alpha, was reported as .91 for each participant sample.

### *Procedure*

Participants who met the inclusion criteria were screened and provided with a Participant Information Sheet that explained the study details, followed by an Informed Consent Form for voluntary consent. Once consent was obtained, participants completed a form that captured socio-demographic information. The questionnaires used in the study included the Attitudes Towards Women Scale, the Rape Supportive Attitude Scale, and the Updated Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale. The data for this study was collected from three different universities in Jaipur, Rajasthan including one girl's university and two co-educational universities. The inclusion of Girl's University in the sample aimed to capture the unique perspectives and experiences of female students and the inclusion of co-ed colleges in the sample aimed to provide insights from a mixed-gender student population.

## RESULTS

The present study aimed to examine the predictive role of socio-cognitive factors, specifically rape myth acceptance and attitudes towards women, in relation to rape supportive attitudes among university students. The sample for this study included 60 university students, with an equal number of male and female participants, ranging in age from 18 to 29 years, with a mean age of 20 years old. Data collected were analyzed using SPSS version 19.0, and multiple regression analysis was employed to analyse the data.

*Table 1: Regression analysis investigating the predictive role of rape myth acceptance and attitude towards women in rape supportive attitude*

PREDICTOR VARIABLES	BETA	p-value	R <sup>2</sup>
Rape Myth Acceptance	0.62*	<0.001	0.43
Attitude Towards Women	-0.28*	0.034	0.15

\* Correlation significant at 0.05 level.

In the table 1, the predictor variables are Rape Myth Acceptance and Attitude towards Women. The results suggest that rape myth acceptance (Beta = 0.62,  $p < 0.001$ ) predict rape supportive attitudes, while attitude towards women (Beta = -0.28,  $p = 0.034$ ) significantly predicted rape supportive attitudes among university students.

## DISCUSSION

Rape is a grave social issue with significant psychological, social, and cultural impacts on individuals and communities globally. Apart from the physical and emotional trauma, survivors of rape often encounter social stigma from others. The understanding of rape and its consequences is complex, involving various socio-cognitive factors that shape individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors towards this issue. The way individuals perceive and think about rape, including their attitudes and beliefs, is considered to have a significant influence on the emergence and perpetuation of sexually violent behaviors.

The present study was aimed to investigate the predictive role socio-cognitive factors (rape myth acceptance and attitude towards women) in rape supportive attitude among university students. The sample included 60 university students (30 males and 30 females) aged 18–29 years. Multiple regression analysis was used to analyse the data.

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**The findings of this study revealed that both rape myth acceptance and attitude towards women significantly predict rape supportive attitudes among university students.**

**Specifically, higher levels of rape myth acceptance were found to be positively associated with more rape supportive attitudes, while a negative association was found between attitude towards women and rape supportive attitudes.**

The positive association between rape myth acceptance and rape supportive attitudes is consistent with previous research (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995; Payne et al., 2017), which suggests that individuals who hold more rape myths, such as beliefs that victims are responsible for the assault or that rape is a normal part of male behaviour, may be more likely to endorse attitudes that are supportive of rape. This may be due to the normalization and acceptance of harmful beliefs and misconceptions about rape, which can contribute to victim-blaming attitudes and a lack of empathy towards survivors (Payne et al., 2017).

Furthermore, research has shown that rape myth acceptance can also influence behaviours that perpetuate sexual violence. A study by Murnen et al. (2002) found that individuals who accepted rape myths were more likely to engage in victim blaming behaviors, such as making derogatory comments about the victim or doubting their credibility. Another study by McMahan and Farmer (2011) found that higher levels of rape myth acceptance were associated with lower intentions to intervene in situations where sexual assault was occurring or could potentially occur, indicating a lack of willingness to take action to prevent sexual violence.

The relationship between a rape myth acceptance and rape supportive attitudes is complex and impacted by a number of factors. Males tend to support rape myths more than females do, and males who have more conventional gender role attitudes are more likely to embrace rape myths, according to several research (Burt, 1980; McMahan & Farmer, 2011). However, acceptance of rape myths is not restricted to any particular gender and can be found in everyone regardless of gender.

Social norms and cultural factors can also play a role in contributing to the acceptance of rape myths and supportive attitudes towards sexual violence. According to a Lambert et al. (2019), those who believed that their friends accepted rape myths more were more inclined to support rape myths themselves. It implies that peer influence and social norms can shape the attitude of an individual in regard to sexual violence.

Furthermore, research shows that those with more positive attitudes towards women may be less likely to endorse rape supporting attitudes (Murnen et al., 2016; Viki et al., 2003), which is consistent with the negative relationship between attitude towards women and rape supportive attitudes. This could be as a result of the fact that people who have more egalitarian and respectful views towards women would be less inclined to hold harmful ideas about rape and might be more empathetic to victims.

Several studies have investigated the relationship between attitudes towards women and rape supportive attitudes, and their findings are consistent with the result of the current study. A study by Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1995) found that negative attitudes towards women, such as endorsing traditional gender roles and stereotypes, were positively correlated with rape supportive attitudes among college students. Another study by McMahan and Farmer (2011)

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showed that hostile attitudes towards women were associated with higher levels of rape myth acceptance and rape supportive attitudes among college students.

These findings emphasize the importance of promoting positive attitudes towards women and gender equality as well as addressing and challenging rape myths in prevention and intervention efforts, particularly among university students who may be at risk of endorsing such attitudes.

### CONCLUSION

**In conclusion**, this study shows that among university students, attitudes towards women and acceptance of the rape myth both strongly predict opinions that are supportive of rape. These findings emphasise the need for interventions that challenge myths about rape, encourage favourable attitudes towards women, and address social norms and attitudes that reinforce attitudes that are pro-rape. We might be able to prevent sexual assault on college campuses and in general by addressing these issues and lowering the frequency of rape-supportive attitudes among university students.

### Implications

The findings from this study have significant implications for understanding and addressing the presence of rape supportive attitudes among university students. It proposes that implementing measures that aim to diminish the acceptance of rape myths while promoting favourable attitudes towards women could prove to be an effective strategy in preventing the adoption of rape supportive attitudes. For instance, educational initiatives that challenge and discredit rape myths while imparting accurate knowledge about sexual assault and fostering positive attitudes towards women and gender equality may have positive outcomes in preventing the development of rape supportive attitudes among students in college (DeGue et al., 2014; Katz et al., 2015). Such measures may also comprise talks on consent, healthy relationships, bystander intervention, as well as addressing social views and attitudes that fuel rape supportive attitudes (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995; Payne et al., 2017).

### Ethical Considerations

Approval was obtained from the Department's Research Ethical Committee. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants after providing detailed information about the study and the voluntary nature of participation. Confidentiality of the study participants was maintained throughout the study.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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