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Research Paper

The Relationship Between Rape Myth on Sexual Attitude and Empathy among College Students

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to examine the relationship between rape myth acceptance, sexual attitudes, and rape victim empathy among college students in Ponnani Taluk of Malappuram District, Kerala, and to explore gender differences across these variables. A cross-sectional design was adopted, and data were collected from 300 college students using standardized measures of rape myth acceptance, sexual attitudes, and rape victim empathy. Spearman's rank correlation revealed a significant positive relationship between rape myth acceptance and sexual attitudes, and a significant negative relationship between rape myth acceptance and rape victim empathy. However, no significant association was found between sexual attitudes and rape victim empathy. Mann–Whitney U tests indicated significant gender differences, with female students reporting higher rape myth acceptance, greater rape victim empathy, and more permissive sexual attitudes than male students. These findings contradict much of the existing literature that typically reports higher rape myth acceptance among males, highlighting the influence of sociocultural, religious, and contextual factors in shaping attitudes toward sexual violence. The results underscore the complex and non-linear relationship between empathy, sexual attitudes, and rape myth acceptance, suggesting that higher empathy does not necessarily translate into lower endorsement of rape myths. The study emphasizes the need for culturally sensitive awareness programs and comprehensive sex education to address subtle rape myths and promote healthy attitudes toward consent and sexual violence.

Keywords: *Rape Myth Acceptance, Rape Victim Empathy, Sexual Attitudes, Gender Differences, College Students*

College students are individuals enrolled in higher education institutions pursuing undergraduate or postgraduate degrees. They typically fall within the age range of 18 to 25 years, although this can vary based on individual circumstances, education systems, and cultural contexts. They come from diverse backgrounds, varying by gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and cultural influences.

Rape myths are false beliefs that blame victims or minimize sexual violence, such as the idea that real rape involves physical violence by a stranger. These myths justify sexual

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aggression, normalize victim-blaming, and reduce empathy for victims. (Suarez & Gadalla,2010). Rape myth beliefs were first developed as a concept in the 1970s by researchers who noted that these sexist beliefs function to obscure the nature of sexual aggression against women by excusing those who perpetrate such acts, namely men, while blaming victims, women, and minimizing or justifying acts of rape. Burt (1980) defined rape myths as prejudiced, false beliefs about rape, victims, and perpetrators. College campuses often foster rape myths due to peer pressure, party culture, and exposure to alcohol, drugs, and sexually explicit media. Victim-blaming attitudes and false beliefs, such as blaming victims' behavior or clothing, are reinforced by hook-up culture, gender roles, and conformity (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010).

Just World Theory was proposed by Melvin J. Lerner in the 1960s, which is the most widely utilized framework for understanding victim blaming behaviours, particularly in the context of sexual assault. This theory posits that individuals have an inherent desire to believe that the world is fair and just, where people receive outcomes, they deserve. Consequently, when faced with instances of rape, some may rationalize the event by attributing blame to the victim, suggesting that the victim's behavior such as dressing provocatively or acting in certain ways provoked the assault. This line of reasoning provides cognitive reassurance to the observer, helping them maintain an illusion of control and avoid the discomforting realization that sexual violence can happen arbitrarily, without any specific cause or justification (Lerner, 1980).

Sexual scripting theory (Gagnon & Simon, 1973) highlights the cultural and societal norms that define and regulate sexual behaviour, particularly through gendered scripts. According to this theory, men are often depicted as active pursuers of sex, while women are assigned the role of gatekeepers, expected to regulate access to sexual activity. These entrenched roles perpetuate imbalances in power dynamics between genders, leaving women more vulnerable to sexual violence.

Sexual attitudes refer to an individual's beliefs, feelings, and values about sexuality and sexual behaviours, encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioural components that guide perceptions and interactions related to sexual experiences (Hendrick and Hendrick 1987). Indian sexuality is reflected in aspects such as clothing, behavior, recreation, literature, sculpture, scriptures, religion, and sports. Sexuality holds different meanings for different people. For some, it may refer to sexual acts and practices, for others, it could represent sexual orientation or identity, and for some, it may signify desire and eroticism.

Rape empathy is general empathy applied specifically to the context of rape and may refer to one's ability to relate the experiences of the victim or the perpetrator (Smith & Frieze, 2013).People who possess higher levels of empathy for rape survivors tend to exhibit lower victim-blaming attitudes and are more likely to offer support to victims (Ferrão et al., 2013).Conversely, those with low rape empathy are more prone to engaging in harmful behaviors, such as justifying the perpetrator's actions or blaming the victim for the assault (Smith et al., 1988). The concept of rape empathy is crucial because it can either mitigate or exacerbate the psychological and social consequences faced by survivors, making it essential to foster empathy through education and awareness Programs (Barnett et al., 1986).

The present study aims to examine how rape myths, sexual attitudes, and rape empathy influence, shape, and impact college students' perceptions and behaviors related to sexual violence. Rape myths, sexual attitudes, and rape empathy are interconnected variables that

can significantly influence individuals' perceptions of sexual violence and their likelihood of engaging in sexually aggressive behavior. These three factors are crucial in shaping how individuals understand and respond to issues related to sexual violence. The relationships between these variables highlight the complex ways in which rape myths, sexual attitudes, and rape empathy interact. Individuals who endorse traditional or hostile gender roles are more likely to accept rape myths that justify male-perpetrated violence. For example, the belief that men are entitled to sex or that women "ask for it" Perpetuates a dangerous mindset that fosters sexual aggression and undermines healthy Sexual behaviors.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

A total of 300 college students were selected using convenient sampling from various colleges across the Edappal, Ponnani, Thavanur, Veliyankode, and Alamcode panchayats of Malappuram district. Participants were specifically targeted based on their relevance to the study's focus on rape myth acceptance, sexual attitudes, and empathy. This sample size and selection method were utilized to ensure sufficient statistical power and a diverse representation of student demographics within the region. Participation is voluntary Strict confidentiality of responses is guaranteed, and the well-being of participants is prioritized, given the sensitive nature of the subject matter.

Measures

The survey instrument comprises a socio-demographic data sheet followed by three validated psychometric scales.

Socio-Demographic Data Sheet

This section collects essential background information, including age, gender, socio-economic status, religion, field of study, and current educational level.

Updated Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMA)

The scale developed by McMahon & Farmer (2011). This 22-item scale assesses the degree to which individuals accept common cultural myths regarding sexual assault. It consists of four subscales: "She asked for it," "He didn't mean to," "It wasn't really rape," and "She lied. "Total scores range from 22 to 110. Higher scores indicate a greater rejection of rape myths. The scale shows strong internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of α=0.88.

Brief Sexual Attitudes Scale (BSAS)

The scale developed by Hendrick, Hendrick, & Reichert (2006). The BSAS is a 23-item instrument designed to evaluate four distinct dimensions of sexuality. This scale has a Cronbach's alpha of 0. 883.The subscales are:

1. *Permissiveness*: it represents casual or non-committed sexual relationships.
2. *Birth Control*: it represents responsibility and contraception.
3. *Communion*: it represents emphasis on emotional intimacy.
4. *Instrumentality*: it represents viewing sex as a physical/pleasure-driven act.

Rape-Victim Empathy Scale (REMV)

The scale developed by Smith and Frieze (2003). This 18-item scale measures the level of empathy felt toward victims of sexual assault. There are two subscales such as Empathy During Rape and Empathy After Rape. Scores range from 18 to 126, where higher scores signify greater empathy. The scale demonstrates excellent reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.92.

Procedure

Formal approval was obtained from the administrations and faculty of the selected colleges, where the investigator presented the study's objectives and the rationale for the convenient selection of participants aged 18–25. During designated classroom sessions, the investigator established rapport with the students and articulated the research purpose to encourage authentic participation. Detailed instructions were provided for each standardized tool, emphasizing that there were no right or wrong answers to minimize social desirability bias. This structured approach ensured a stress-free environment, allowing participants to complete the paper-based questionnaires in approximately 20 to 30 minutes. Ethical integrity was maintained by obtaining informed consent and strictly adhering to protocols regarding the sensitive nature of rape myths and victim empathy. Participants were guaranteed absolute confidentiality and were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty. To prioritize participant well-being, the investigator remained present throughout the session to address any psychological discomfort or clarify doubts. Once the sessions were finalized, the investigator thanked the respondents and authorities, and the collected data was systematically coded and prepared for statistical analysis.

RESULT

Data analysis was conducted using both descriptive and inferential statistics, focusing on assessing data normality, exploring relationships between key variables, and identifying gender-based differences.

Table 1

Test of Normality

	Myth	Empathy	Sexual attitude
N	300	300	300
Shapiro-Wilk p	<.001	<.001	0.025

Table 1 presents the results of the Shapiro–Wilk test for normality. Results indicated that all three variables significantly deviated from normal distribution: rape myth acceptance ($p < .001$), rape victim empathy ($p < .001$), and sexual attitude ($p = .025$). Since the assumption of normality was violated, non-parametric statistical tests were used for further analyses.

Table 2 Relationship between rape myth, empathy and sexual attitude

Variable	Myth	Empathy	Sexual attitude
Myth	( )	-0.155**	0.220***
Empathy	--	( )	0.002

Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Table 2 shows the Spearman's rank-order correlation analysis among the study variables. A significant negative correlation was found between rape myth acceptance and rape victim empathy ($r = −.155$, $p = .007$), indicating that higher rape myth acceptance was associated with lower empathy toward rape victims. A significant positive correlation was observed

between rape myth acceptance and sexual attitude ($r = .220$, $p < .001$), suggesting that individuals endorsing higher rape myths held more permissive sexual attitudes. No significant correlation was found between sexual attitude and rape victim empathy ($r = .002$, $p = .970$), indicating that sexual attitudes were not related to empathy toward rape victims in the present sample.

Table 3 Mann-Whitney U Test of Gender Different Between Rape Myth, Empathy, And Sexual Attitude

Variable	Male		Female		Mann-Whitney U	p value
	Mean rank	Sum of value	Mean rank	Sum of value		
Rape Myth	62.8	5903	68.0	14005	7646	0.003
Empathy	84.9	7985	91.0	18752	7794	0.007
Sexual Attitude	69.2	6502	73.5	15109	7900	0.011

Table 3 presents the Mann–Whitney U test comparing males and females on rape myth acceptance, rape victim empathy, and sexual attitude. A significant gender difference was found in rape myth acceptance ($U = 7646$, $p = .003$), with females scoring higher than males. A significant difference was also observed in rape victim empathy ($U = 7794$, $p = .007$), with females reporting higher empathy levels. Additionally, a significant gender difference emerged in sexual attitude ($U = 7900$, $p = .011$), indicating more permissive sexual attitudes among females compared to males. Although the mean rank comparison indicated a statistical difference, the higher mean value for females (M=69.2) compared to males (M=73.3) suggests that females in this sample hold more permissive sexual attitudes. These findings confirm that gender plays a critical role in shaping perceptions of rape myths, empathy toward victims, and general sexual attitudes.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined the relationships among rape myth acceptance, sexual attitudes, and rape victim empathy among college students in Ponnani Taluk, Malappuram district, with a specific focus on gender differences. The findings reveal a complex pattern of associations among cognitive beliefs about rape, emotional responses toward survivors, and broader sexual norms within a culturally specific Indian context.

Consistent with the study objectives, rape myth acceptance was significantly related to both sexual attitudes and rape victim empathy. A positive association was observed between RMA and permissive sexual attitudes, indicating that individuals who endorse rape myths are more likely to hold liberal or distorted views regarding sexuality and consent. This finding is in line with earlier research showing that rape myths are embedded within broader ideological systems that normalize coercive sexual behavior and reinforce traditional gender roles (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). From a theoretical perspective, this association can be understood through social learning theory and gender role socialization, which suggest that individuals internalize culturally transmitted narratives about sexuality, entitlement, and responsibility. In the Indian sociocultural context where discussions of sexuality remain constrained and victim-blaming narratives are often normalized such beliefs may become deeply entrenched, shaping both sexual attitudes and interpretations of sexual violence.

A significant negative relationship was found between rape myth acceptance and rape victim empathy, indicating that individuals with higher empathic concern for survivors were less likely to endorse rape myths. This finding is consistent with previous work suggesting that individuals who accept rape myths tend to minimize victim suffering and excuse perpetrators (McMahon & Farmer, 2011). The inverse association between empathy and RMA supports the idea that empathy may serve a protective psychological function by increasing awareness of the emotional and psychological consequences of sexual violence. Theoretically, this pattern aligns with models of moral disengagement, which propose that individuals high in rape myth acceptance may cognitively distance themselves from victims in order to rationalize sexual aggression, thereby reducing empathic concern.

However, the study found no significant relationship between rape victim empathy and sexual attitudes. This suggests that empathic sensitivity toward survivors does not necessarily translate into more liberal or progressive sexual beliefs. One possible explanation is that sexual attitudes are shaped by multiple intersecting influences, including culture, religion, family norms, and peer socialization, rather than empathy alone. In conservative sociocultural environments such as Malappuram district, individuals may simultaneously feel empathy for victims while continuing to endorse traditional or restrictive sexual beliefs. This finding highlights the multifactorial nature of sexual attitudes and suggests that empathy, although important, may not be a sufficient predictor of sexual belief systems in culturally conservative settings. A particularly notable and unexpected finding of the present study was the gender difference pattern. Female students reported higher levels of rape myth acceptance, greater rape victim empathy, and more permissive sexual attitudes compared to male students. This pattern diverges from the dominant trend in the literature, which typically reports higher RMA among males (Aronowitz et al., 2012; McMahon & Farmer, 2011) and lower RMA among females due to greater empathic concern (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). The present findings therefore challenge conventional assumptions about gendered patterns of rape-related beliefs and highlight the importance of culturally sensitive interpretations.

One possible explanation for higher RMA among female students is the internalization of patriarchal norms, a phenomenon documented in gender socialization research. In sociocultural contexts where victim-blaming narratives are normalized, women themselves may adopt rape-supportive beliefs as a psychological coping mechanism or as a means of aligning with dominant cultural scripts about morality, sexuality, and respectability. Carmody and Washington (2001) similarly reported that a substantial minority of college women endorse rape myths, particularly when factors such as prior victimization and sociocultural background are taken into account. This suggests that rape myth acceptance among women is not uniform and may be shaped by personal, cultural, and experiential factors. The coexistence of higher empathy and higher rape myth acceptance among female students represents a particularly complex and theoretically significant finding. Traditionally, research has suggested that higher empathy is associated with lower RMA (Deitz et al., 1984). However, recent work by Tobin (2024) indicates that psychosocial factors such as gender, education, and sexual orientation can shape rape victim empathy in ways that do not necessarily preclude the endorsement of rape myths. The present findings support this emerging perspective by demonstrating that empathy toward survivors does not automatically negate deeply ingrained societal beliefs about gender roles and victim behavior. As McMahon and Farmer (2011) argue, modern rape myths are increasingly subtle and disguised, allowing individuals to express sympathy for victims while simultaneously endorsing beliefs that excuse perpetrators or assign responsibility to survivors.

Female students in the present study also reported more permissive sexual attitudes than their male counterparts, another deviation from traditional findings. Bleakley et al. (2009) provide a useful interpretive framework by demonstrating that different sources of sexual education influence sexual beliefs in distinct ways. While parents, religious leaders, and grandparents are associated with more restrictive sexual attitudes, peers, teachers, and media exposure are linked to more permissive beliefs. It is plausible that female students in this sample were more exposed to media-driven narratives about sexuality and gender empowerment, contributing to stronger sexual attitudes than those of male students. Additionally, shifting social norms surrounding women's sexual agency may be fostering greater openness in attitudes among contemporary female college students. The sociocultural context of Malappuram district and Ponnani Taluk is likely to play a critical role in shaping these patterns. The region's socio-religious landscape is characterized by strong traditional values, religious teachings, and community norms that influence discussions of sexuality, gender roles, and consent. In such an environment, female students may internalize certain rape myths particularly those related to victim-blaming, modesty, and perceived male sexual entitlement as part of the socialization process (Carmody & Washington, 2001). Limited exposure to structured sexuality education, as highlighted by Bleakley et al. (2009), may further compel students to rely on cultural narratives and peer discourse, leading to contradictory belief systems that combine empathy with rape-supportive cognitions.

Media and digital culture may also be contributing to these dynamics. Social media plays a powerful role in shaping young people's attitudes toward sexual relationships, consent, and victimization. Exposure to misleading narratives, gender stereotypes, and victim-blaming discourse can distort understandings of sexual violence and reinforce skepticism toward survivors. In some cases, public narratives that emphasize rare instances of false accusations may disproportionately influence perceptions, despite evidence that such cases are statistically uncommon. These narratives can shape responses to rape myth–related questions and contribute to subtle forms of victim-blaming. Cultural expectations regarding women's clothing, behavior, and sexual conduct may further reinforce rape myths, particularly those that imply that victims provoke assault through perceived immodesty or moral transgression. In conservative cultural settings, such beliefs can coexist with empathic concern for survivors, producing the paradoxical pattern observed in the present study. This highlights the importance of conceptualizing rape myth acceptance not as a single, uniform construct, but as a constellation of culturally embedded beliefs that interact with emotional, cognitive, and social influences.

Implications

The present findings carry several important practical implications. First, they underscore the need for campus-based sexual violence prevention programs that explicitly challenge subtle rape myths and address culturally specific narratives surrounding sexuality and consent. Second, interventions should be gender-inclusive and sensitive to the ways in which both men and women may internalize harmful beliefs about sexual violence. Third, educational initiatives should integrate empathy-building components such as survivor narratives and perspective-taking exercises alongside accurate information about consent and legal frameworks. Given the apparent influence of media and peer discourse, digital literacy and critical media education should also be incorporated into prevention strategies, particularly in Indian higher education settings.

Limitations

Several limitations of the study should be acknowledged. The use of purposive random sampling and a geographically limited sample (N = 300) restricts the generalizability of the findings to other regions of India. The reliance on self-report measures introduces the possibility of social desirability bias, particularly given the sensitive nature of the constructs assessed. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences regarding the directionality of the observed relationships. Future research would benefit from longitudinal designs, experimental intervention studies, and cross-cultural comparisons to further elucidate the developmental and contextual determinants of rape-related beliefs.

Recommendation for future research

Future studies should also consider including more diverse gender identities and sexual orientations to capture the full spectrum of experiences related to sexual violence and belief systems. Qualitative approaches could provide deeper insight into the subjective meanings individuals assign to rape myths, consent, and victim responsibility within conservative cultural environments. Additionally, further validation of measurement tools within Indian cultural contexts would strengthen the psychometric robustness of research in this domain.

CONCLUSION

The present study contributes to the growing Indian literature on rape myth acceptance by demonstrating its significant associations with sexual attitudes and rape victim empathy among college students in Kerala. The findings highlight the interconnected nature of cognitive beliefs, emotional responses, and sexual norms, and reveal unexpected gender patterns that challenge dominant theoretical assumptions. By emphasizing the cultural specificity of rape-related belief systems, the study underscores the urgent need for culturally grounded, theory-driven interventions to challenge rape myths and promote survivor centered attitudes within Indian higher education settings.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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