

Lack of media skepticism tied to belief in rape myths

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People who tend to recognize similarities between people they know and people depicted in the media are more likely to believe common myths about sexual assault, according to a new study co-led by a Cornell researcher.

The data, culled from more than 280 interviews with students at eight [community colleges](#) in the southeastern United States, suggests that [media](#) literacy education could help raise awareness about sexual violence, and improve sexual violence prevention programs on college campuses.

"There is work establishing connections between media that people consume and their beliefs about rape, but less is known about how people make sense of those media messages," said Kristen Elmore, assistant director of the Program for Research on Youth Development and Engagement in the College of Human Ecology's Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research. "And what we found is that there's a positive relationship between 'seeing other people I know in media,' and beliefs that endorse the myths that women who are raped are 'asking for it,' or that men never really intended to do it."

Elmore is first author of "Rape Myth Acceptance Reflects Perceptions of Media Portrayals as Similar to Others, But Not the Self," which published March 23 in the journal *Violence Against Women*. It was co-authored with researchers at Innovation Research and Training, an independent social sciences research firm in Durham, North Carolina,

who conducted the survey in 2015.

"In that dataset was an opportunity to explore these questions about beliefs in rape myths and how they might be related to representations of rape in the media," Elmore said. "It helps us try to answer a question that many of us have been thinking about since the #MeToo movement began, which is: Where do these myths about rape come from?"

The researchers asked participants to rate their agreement with 13 statements associated with rape. They then asked them whether people portrayed in various types of media, including music, movies and television, were similar to them, similar to people they knew, or realistic portrayals, and whether they aspired to be like the people depicted in media. The survey also asked about [religious background](#) and past experience with dating violence.

They found men were more likely than women to believe three rape myths—that women who are raped were "asking for it"; that men "didn't mean to rape" but couldn't help themselves; and that "it wasn't really rape" unless it was by a stranger. For two of the three rape myths, they found that both men and women were more likely to believe them if they reported seeing similarities between people they knew and people they saw in the media.

The fact that there was no correlation between belief in rape myths and seeing themselves in media could reflect what's known as "optimism bias," Elmore said—people's belief that good things are more likely to happen to them and bad things are more likely to happen to others.

Elmore said that although the study doesn't show that perceptions of the media cause [belief](#) in rape myths, it suggests that depictions of rape in media could shape people's views.

"If I know something about how people interpret media," Elmore said, "I can at least predict something about their beliefs about rape, though there may be some third variable influencing both of those things."

Because the survey was conducted before most of the recent revelations arising from the #MeToo movement, future work will assess whether portrayals of [sexual violence](#) in the media—as well as people's perceptions of rape myths—have changed for the better, Elmore said.

"We're at this interesting time where media narratives about [sexual assault](#) may be changing in really important ways," she said, "and there seems to be more space for discussion that challenges common [rape](#) myths."

More information: Kristen C. Elmore et al, Rape Myth Acceptance Reflects Perceptions of Media Portrayals as Similar to Others, but Not the Self, *Violence Against Women* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/1077801220908335](#)

Provided by Cornell University

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