

# Sports media use linked to belief in rape myths

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Young men in a recent study who were regular consumers of sports media were more likely to accept rape myths, a set of false and prejudiced beliefs that can serve to excuse or downplay sexual assault.

This connection held even after accounting for participants who believed in certain negative "masculine norms," namely that men should control

[women](#) or they should be sexually permissive and try to have sex with as many women as possible.

"Sports media exposure had a unique contribution, and it was significant," said Stacey Hust, a professor at Washington State University's Murrow College of Communication and the study's lead author. "Even after accounting for beliefs about controlling women and sexual permissiveness, sports media use still appeared to have an effect. This was true among fraternity members and non-fraternity members."

The good news in the study published in the *Journal of Health Communication* was that overall rape [myth](#) acceptance was low among the participants. The researchers also emphasized that the findings established only a connection and did not necessarily mean that sports media consumption caused belief in rape myths.

Hust pointed out the problematic connection is most likely related to media production around athletic events, not about the sports themselves.

"It's the production of sports in [media coverage](#) that essentially portrays men as these hyper-masculine aggressors, and in contrast, women are shown as trophies or props," said Hust. "This has changed slightly over time as women have gained more prestige in sports, but overall, the media still promotes men's sports far more than women's, and you still see this same formula where men are shown as dominant and women as sexual objects."

For this study, the researchers surveyed a little over 500 male college students, including those who did, and did not, belong to fraternities. They asked the students to rank their agreement to a series of statements related to rape myths, masculinity and sports media use. The media included both traditional and online outlets such as sporting magazines

like Sports Illustrated and specialty TV channels like ESPN as well as sports-themed YouTube channels and websites.

Rape myths include such false beliefs as women who "tease" men or dress in a certain way deserve anything that might happen, or that rape has to involve a weapon. Other research has shown that rape myth acceptance is tied to a proclivity for [sexual assault](#) and sexual coercion.

As expected, the study revealed that participants who held "masculine norm" beliefs related to controlling women and male sexual permissiveness had a strong connection to rape myth acceptance. This connection held whether or not they belonged to a fraternity, and no [direct relationship](#) was found between belief in rape myths and fraternity membership.

The findings point to some ways to combat rape myth acceptance, Hust said. For instance, educators can work to debunk those specific negative masculine norms. Greater attention and more research can look into how sports [media](#) are produced and what aspects may be contributing to [rape](#) myth acceptance.

"We need to find ways to emphasize the more positive aspects of masculinity," said Hust. "Parents may also want to talk to their kids about the ways women and men are portrayed in sports and help their children evaluate those messages more critically."

**More information:** Stacey J.T. Hust et al, Explaining College Men's Rape Myth Acceptance: The Role of Sports Media, Masculine Norms & Fraternity Membership, *Journal of Health Communication* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/10810730.2023.2222077](https://doi.org/10.1080/10810730.2023.2222077)

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