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The myth of getting carried away: relationships between rape myth acceptance and disclosure of sexual violence among victims/survivors in university

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To examine the relationships between rape myth acceptance among victims/survivors of sexual violence and their disclosure behaviors, to inform more effective sexual violence prevention and support for victim/survivor public health strategies.

Participants: Undergraduate students ($n=342$) enrolled at a university, aged 18 or older ($m=21.12$, $SD = 4.12$), and who have experienced sexual violence.

Methods: An online survey was administered in 2020 at a racially and ethnically diverse public university. ANOVA tests compared rape myth acceptance scores across social groups, and binary logistic regressions examined the association between rape myth acceptance and disclosure of sexual assault.

Results: Regression results revealed that among college students who had experienced some form of sexual violence, there was no significant relationship between total rape myth acceptance scores and sexual assault disclosure. However, one rape myth was significantly associated with disclosure behavior: *Guys don't usually intend to force sex on a girl, but sometimes they get too sexually carried away.*

Conclusions: Findings may enhance sexual assault prevention training in high schools and colleges/universities, as well as public health campaigns aimed at improving social support for victims/survivors by targeting entrenched beliefs about rape myths that act as barriers to disclosure among victims/survivors.

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Disclosure; gender roles; rape myths; sexual violence; survivors/victims

Introduction

The scholarship on sexual violence disclosure among adolescents and college students reveals complex patterns, including variations influenced by gender, sexual orientation, and race (Cusano et al., 2023; Mennicke et al., 2022). Moreover, the anticipation of a negative reaction impacts victims/survivors' decision to disclose the experience and their ability to choose healthy coping mechanisms for recovery. This often leads to adverse health outcomes (Scheinfeld, 2023; Slatton & Richard, 2020), particularly for racially and sexually minoritized communities (Edwards et al., 2022; Nightingale, 2024; Ullman, 2023). Negative social reactions to sexual violence disclosures are influenced by larger societal norms and beliefs (Ullman, 2023), which are widespread and present in public discourse. For instance, during his 2024 Commencement Address at Benedictine College, Kansas City Chiefs kicker Harrison Butker confidently referenced hegemonic gender ideologies, reinforcing the essentialism that underpins victim-blaming and cycles of sexual and gender-based violence. His remarks reflect a broader backlash against gender diversity and a renewed push for rigid gender roles, evident in social media phenomena like 'trad wives' and the revival of the pronatalist movement. Highlighted by the Dobbs decision, which allows states to ban abortion even in rape and incest cases, this cultural shift attempts to limit women's sexual purpose to reproduction and ignores any need for consent or agency.

Essentializing men and women by their supposed distinct sexual motives justifies rape myths that excuse abusive behavior and reinforce stereotypes. Portraying rape as a man's sexuality being 'out of control' minimizes its impact and criminality. Rape, which we defined as non-consensual sexual penetration or attempted penetration, remains widely underreported. The stark reality remains that 43.6% of women (nearly 52.2 million) and 25% of men (approximately 27.6 million) have experienced some form of sexual violence, which includes a range of non-consensual sexual acts including rape, within their lifetime (Leemis et al., 2022; National Sexual Violence Resource Center Factsheet, 2015).

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Butker's remarks are especially problematic as he made them on a college campus, arguably one of the riskiest places for women to encounter sexual violence. Indeed, despite decades of rape prevention and awareness efforts across higher education (Hattery, 2022), victimization rates remain unwaveringly high. Current scholarship asserts that students are increasingly aware of the concept of consent and that there has been a steady decline in acceptance of rape myths (Jeffrey, 2024; O'Connor, 2021). However, certain rape myths – beliefs rooted in common stereotypes about rape, victims/survivors, perpetrators, and typically misleading narratives that lead to victim-blaming – persist (Burt, 1980; Johnson & Johnson, 2021). These enduring myths essentialize men's sexuality and sex drive and reinforce conservative norms of the social order (Murray et al., 2023; O'Connor et al., 2018). Two examples include *'Guys don't usually intend to force sex on a girl, but sometimes they get too sexually carried away'* and *'Rape happens when a guy's sex drive gets out of control'* (McMahon & Farmer, 2011). In this article, we interrogate the relationship between rape myth acceptance (RMA) and the likelihood of disclosing sexual violence to any individual or institution, including formal and informal sources, among a sample of college victims/survivors of sexual assault.

Norms of rape culture and rape myth acceptance

Coercive sexual acts are legitimized by idioms like 'boys will be boys,' reflecting cultural views of aggressive masculinity and a strict adherence to heteronormative and cisnormative ideologies. This message is reinforced by rape culture, which is a hegemonic force that protects perpetrators while denying victims'/survivors' experiences (Burt, 1980; Johnson & Johnson, 2021; Kemp, 2020; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995). Even in the aftermath of the global #MeToo social movement, beliefs and perceptions about sexual violence continue to perpetuate rape myths and reaffirm harmful constructions of gender and sexuality (Bethel, 2018; Deming et al., 2013; Glace & Kaufman, 2020). Reductionist patriarchal beliefs, portraying men as driven by an uncontrollable sex drive and women as motivated to serve men, are resurging with powerful and influential messengers at the helm. These beliefs formulate the backbone of rape culture and lead to acceptance of rape myths. Since the 1980s, research consistently shows that men exhibit higher RMA than any other gender demographic (Bendixen & Kennair, 2017; Burt, 1980; Murray et al., 2023; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). Some assert this is due to an inability to identify with victims/survivors and the influence of sexism and hostile attitudes towards women based on traditional gender roles (Burgess, 2007; Canan et al., 2018; Glace & Kaufman, 2020; Murray et al., 2023; Shafer et al., 2018).

Recent scholarship has been more inclusive of boys and men who experience sexual violence, including increased attention to rape myths related to male victims/survivors (Hancock et al., 2021; Patterson et al., 2022) and the development of a male rape myth scale (Hine et al., 2021). Studies have shown a significant decrease in RMA over the last 30 years, yet dangerous myths persist (Murray et al., 2023). Those who endorse female rape myths are also more likely to adhere to male rape myths (Walfield, 2021). This stems from heteronormative narratives that portray men as unrapable and women as untrustworthy or irrational. College students adopting these essentialist gender norms may recognize sexual assault only through socially accepted signs of lack of consent, such as a verbal 'no' or physical evidence of violence (Shafer et al., 2018). This framing allows assault experiences to be questioned and denied, especially if the victim/survivor appears intoxicated, initially consented, or if the assault is regarded as a loss of control (Murray et al., 2023; Shafer et al., 2018). Thus, there is a need for considerable examination and discernment of the rape myths that continue to fuel the beliefs and behaviors of society.

Rape prevention/education on college campuses

While rape can happen anywhere, the risks are prominent in two institutions with high concentrations of young adults: higher education and the military (Hattery & Smith, 2019). According to Leemis et al. (2022), a staggering 80% of women reporting sexual assault were first raped before the age of 25. The 2020 AAU Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct also highlights this prevalence, with 25.5% of women and 7.9% of men reporting non-consensual sexual contact involving physical force or inability to consent since enrolling in college (McMahon et al., 2021). There are many reasons for the increased risk of sexual violence on college campuses, including the presence of fraternities (McMahon et al., 2021; Shah & Gu, 2020). For this study, we find it critical to examine the role of hegemonic constructions of gender (Reeves, 2022), particularly the essentializing of masculine and feminine sexuality, in both increasing risk for violence and suppressing disclosure in the aftermath.

For a variety of reasons, college campuses have always preferred to deal with sexual misconduct internally rather than through the criminal legal system (Hattery & Smith, 2019). Increased attention to sexual violence on college campuses, coupled with early attempts to use Title IX as a remedy, resulted in an uptick in lawsuits filed with the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights. Since 2010, the White House and the Department of Education have implemented a series of mandates aimed at requiring colleges and universities to establish standardized protocols for both intervention and prevention (Hirsch et al., 2018). Despite myriad prevention efforts on college campuses, including required programming that targets RMA, rates of sexual violence on college campuses have not declined (Hirsch & Khan, 2020). Some scholarship does indicate that RMA has declined, particularly among female students (Byrne et al., 2021). One reason for this may be

the persistence of rape myths rooted in hegemonic constructions of masculinity and femininity. For example, Newlands and O'Donohue's (2016) systematic review revealed that students are practiced in responding 'correctly' when presented with rape myths, but this has not necessarily translated into less adherence to victim-blaming beliefs. At the same time, rates of sexual violence have not declined. Given this context, this research is concerned with the relationships between rape myth acceptance and the disclosure of sexual violence, a question that remains critical to the landscape of sexual violence prevention on college campuses.

RMA and disclosing experiences with sexual violence among college students

It is widely estimated that less than 20% of all sexual violence is disclosed to anyone, let alone reported to the criminal legal system (Barrios et al., 2020). While disclosure can benefit well-being and recovery (Cusano et al., 2023; Edwards et al., 2022; Ullman, 2023), a society that normalizes rape culture and victim-blaming discourages victims/survivors from disclosing their experiences with sexual violence. Some reasons provided by victims/survivors for not disclosing include shame or self-blame, fear that they will not be believed, and fear of punishment or judgment for consuming drugs or alcohol (Alaggia & Wang, 2020; Barrios et al., 2020; Burgess, 2007; Chenneville et al., 2025; Mennicke et al., 2022) or a history of multiple sexual partners (Jordan & Sommers, 2024). The reasons victims/survivors do not disclose do not exist in a vacuum; rather they mimic the rape myths that remain entrenched in rape culture, contributing to victims'/survivors' fears and doubts around disclosure (Edwards et al., 2022; Orchowski et al., 2013; Ullman, 2023). Understanding the reasons victims/survivors do not disclose is critical in designing effective prevention messaging and intervention programming that will result in healing and recovery among victims/survivors of sexual violence.

While college students have often been the primary focus in studying the impact of RMA on victims' disclosure and social support, complexities still necessitate further research. Studies have shown that RMA inhibits sexual assault disclosure and reduces the likelihood of seeking support from both informal and formal sources (Grandgenett et al., 2022; Lathan et al., 2023; Paul et al., 2009; Ullman & Relyea, 2016). According to some studies, victims/survivors fear that their peers and family will have high RMA and victim-blaming beliefs, often resulting in a lack of disclosure and an increase in posttraumatic symptoms or maladaptive coping (Dworkin et al., 2019; Hakimi et al., 2018; Slatton & Richard, 2020). Supporting this concern, Grandgenett and colleagues (Grandgenett et al., 2022) found that higher endorsement of rape myths is associated with less emotional support and more negative responses to disclosure. However, a history of sexual victimization among those who receive disclosures can weaken this relationship with RMA and is associated with more emotionally supportive responses (Grandgenett et al., 2022).

Internalization of rape myths and disclosure behaviors

Victims/survivors are affected by the normalization of sexual violence stemming from rape culture and consequently may internalize victim-blaming beliefs. As demonstrated by prior research, victims/survivors may internalize rape myths as a protective act to avoid being disbelieved or retraumatized (Bhuptani & Messman-Moore, 2019; Lathan et al., 2023; Ullman, 2023). The scholarship on the internalization of rape myths among victims/survivors asserts that self-blame and shame are barriers to disclosing to friends and family and reporting to authorities due to the anticipated rejection or denial of their experience (Barrios et al., 2020; Hayes et al., 2016; Murray et al., 2023). Furthermore, the persistence of these myths, including 'they were both drunk' or 'he didn't mean to,' may lead the victim/survivor to reframe the incident as consensual (Ryan, 2019; Sears et al., 2022; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010) or a bad experience rather than an assault.

Studies of sexual behavior on college campuses have revealed that another barrier to disclosure is the social victimization of perpetrators, or the belief that disclosure may 'ruin someone's life' (Dick & Ziering, 2016; Hirsch & Khan, 2020). Many victims/survivors who attempt to report a campus sexual assault are dissuaded by faculty, coaches, administrators, and even other students who advise them that doing so would ruin a young man's life (Hirsch et al., 2018). These victim-blaming responses not only disregard the well-being of the victim/survivor but also put the responsibility of the perpetrator's future on the person who they victimized. To make this message effective, those who dissuade victims/survivors from further disclosure or seeking justice reinforce the status quo of a gendered hierarchy, emphasize the success of perpetrators (typically men) over the well-being of victims/survivors (typically women), and maintain a confusing dynamic of culpability and shame (Persson & Dhingra, 2022).

The status quo of heteronormativity and cisnormativity, and the current intensification of traditional gender roles, emboldens widespread acceptance of victim-blaming beliefs. This is particularly concerning for the internalization of rape myths or self-blame among victims/survivors. While there have been decades of scholarship that examine the relationships between RMA among the general population, particularly among college students, there is less focus on how victims/survivors accept rape myths and how that may influence disclosure (Paul et al., 2009; Sears et al., 2022). Our examination of the specifics of each myth related to disclosure behaviors among victims/survivors addresses an important gap in the literature, because prevention and intervention efforts often encourage victims/survivors to seek help through disclosure (Lathan et al., 2023; Mennicke et al., 2022). These same programs may not consider how victims/survivors frame their experiences of sexual violence due to the internalization of rape myths. Thus, there is a need for further scientific inquiry that analyzes the

relationships between victim-blaming internalization and non-disclosure among those who have experienced some form of sexual violence. Therefore, this article is guided by two hypotheses and two primary research questions:

Research Question 1: What is the relationship between RMA and disclosure of sexual violence among college student victims/survivors?

H1: Victims'/survivors' RMA will be inversely correlated with disclosure of sexual violence.

Research Question 2: What primary rape myths are associated with the disclosure of sexual violence among college student victims/survivors?

H2: Victims/survivors who have high RMA, specifically the myths that essentialize male hypersexuality (i.e., men can't control themselves sexually and may engage in behaviors they 'didn't intend to') will report lower rates of disclosure of sexual violence.

Methods

To gauge experiences of sexual violence, disclosure behavior, and RMA among college students, an online survey was administered through Qualtrics at a racially and ethnically diverse public university from August to December of 2020. Undergraduate students ($N=579$), aged 18 or older, were recruited through a departmental research pool and received course credit for participating. The Institutional Review Board of George Mason University approved the study. Participants provided electronic written consent on the first page of the online survey by indicating that they were 18 years or older and gave their consent to participate in the study. Included in this consent form was information that data would be used for the publication of study results and further research development. All identifiable information (i.e. IP address) was removed from the survey data, and results were completely anonymized before analysis.

The survey included items measuring demographic and individual characteristics, attitudes and beliefs regarding sexual violence (i.e. rape myths), experiences of sexual violence, and experiences of disclosure, among other variables. The survey was accessed through Qualtrics and completed in an average of 23 minutes. All data analysis was done through SPSS v. 27. For the purposes of this study, only college students who reported 'yes' or 'maybe' to any of the five questions under sexual

Table 1. Demographics of individuals experiencing sexual violence ($n=342$).

Variable	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Woman	205	59.9%
Man	128	37.4%
Transgender, Gender Non-Conforming, and/or Genderqueer	9	2.6%
Race		
White	127	37.1%
Asian	97	28.4%
Other	46	13.5%
Black or African American	43	12.6%
Multiracial	26	7.60%
American Indian or Alaska Native	2	0.60%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1	0.30%
Ethnicity		
Not Hispanic or Latinx	285	83.3%
Hispanic or Latinx	57	16.7%
Sexuality		
Heterosexual	256	74.9%
Bisexual	48	14.0%
Prefer not to say	13	3.80%
Gay or Lesbian	17	5.00%
Other	8	2.30%
Age		
Traditional (18 to 22 years old)	272	79.5%
Contemporary (23+ years old)	68	19.9%
Not reported	2	0.60%
Enrollment Status		
First Year	94	27.5%
Second Year	85	24.9%
Third Year	90	26.3%
Fourth Year	65	19.0%
Other	8	2.30%

violence experiences were included in this manuscript. This yielded a sub-sample ($n=342$) of students who had any form of sexual violence experience (see Table 1), which was approximately 59% of the larger sample.

Measures

Rape myth acceptance

This study used the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMA) (McMahon & Farmer, 2011) to examine RMA. This scale had 22 items that fell under four subscales: (1) 'She asked for it'; (2) 'It wasn't really rape'; (3) 'He didn't mean to'; and (4) 'She lied.' Examples of items under each subscale include the following: (1) 'If a girl initiates kissing or getting hooked up, she should not be surprised if a guy assumes she wants to have sex'; (2) 'If the accused 'rapist' doesn't have a weapon, you really can't call it rape'; (3) 'It shouldn't be considered rape if a guy is drunk and didn't realize what he was doing'; and (4) 'A lot of times, girls who claim they were raped have emotional problems.'

Participants indicated agreement on a Likert scale (from 1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree) for a total score for all rape myths between 22 and 110. There was high internal reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = 0.935$ and a McDonald's omega of $\omega = 0.933$.

History of sexual victimization

Five questions were included in the survey about sexual violence, described broadly as 'any unwanted sexual experience' and including 'forced penetration.' The questions were adopted from the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) Draft Instrument for Measuring Campus Climate Related to Sexual Assault (2016) (Krebs et al., 2016) and the Sexual Experiences Survey–Short Form Victimization (SES-SFV) (Koss et al., 2007). Items included questions like 'Have you experienced any form of unwanted sexual contact?' and 'Have you ever been in a position where you were unable to provide consent because you were incapacitated, passed out, unconscious, blacked out, or asleep?' (Yes/No/Maybe). There was high internal reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha=.836$ and a McDonald's omega of $\omega=.8$.

Disclosure of sexual assault

Disclosure of any unwanted sexual experience was based on the Modified #iSpeak Campus Climate Survey (Cantor et al., 2015). We included two questions that asked participants about disclosing their experiences of sexual assault: (1) 'Did you ever tell anyone about this experience?' (Yes/No) and (2) 'If No, why didn't you tell anyone?' (check all that apply), with 21 options including: 'It was a private matter,' 'I thought nothing would be done,' 'Didn't want others to worry about me,' and 'Wanted to forget it happened.' If participants checked 'no' to disclosure, the skip pattern directed them to 21 different 'reasons' derived directly from the BJS (2016) Draft Instrument for Measuring Campus Climate Related to Sexual Assault. They could choose any, and all, reasons they felt were applicable.

Analysis

One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were performed to RMA scores across different social groups (see Table 2), as well as descriptive statistics for RMA scores as stratified by gender (see Table 3). Then, binary logistic models were used to answer

Table 2. ANOVAs Comparing rape myth acceptance (RMA) scores.

RMA score	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>p</i>
Full Sample	35.26	13.626	
Gender			
Man (comparison)	40.70	15.122	<0.001***
Woman	32.11	11.471	
TGNC	29.67	12.874	
Race			
Asian (comparison)	40.21	16.901	0.023*
Other	36.49	13.494	
Multiracial	35.96	15.162	
Black or African American	32.40	12.138	
White	31.87	9.348	
Sexuality			
Other	41.00	20.270	0.052*
Prefer not to say	40.54	13.445	
Gay or Lesbian	35.88	16.598	
Heterosexual	35.77	13.049	
Bisexual (comparison)	29.94	13.353	

Notes. The Games-Howell post hoc test was used to compare groups. Men had a significantly higher mean score than women and TGNC students. Asian students had a significantly higher mean score than white and Black or African American students. Bisexual students had a significantly lower mean score than heterosexual students.

* $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 3. Individual Rape myth acceptance (RMA) mean scores, stratified by gender.

Gender Mean RMA score	Men		Women		TGNC	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
If a girl is raped while she is drunk, she is at least somewhat responsible for what happened	1.56	0.945	1.22	0.663	1.22	0.667
When girls go to parties wearing revealing clothes, they are asking for trouble	1.60	0.991	1.20	0.674	1.00	0.000
If a girl goes to a room alone with a guy at a party, it is her own fault if she is raped	1.47	0.939	1.19	0.653	1.00	0.000
If a girl hooks up with a lot of guys, eventually she is going to get into trouble	2.48	1.328	1.74	1.005	1.78	1.394
When guys rape, it is usually because of their strong desire for sex	2.89	1.399	2.41	1.381	1.67	1.000
Guys don't usually intend to force sex on a girl, but sometimes they get too sexually carried away	2.44	1.284	1.94	1.114	1.67	1.118
Rape happens when a guy's sex drive gets out of control	2.47	1.363	2.11	1.313	1.44	1.333
If a guy is drunk, he might rape someone unintentionally	2.13	1.238	1.89	1.204	1.67	1.414
If both people are drunk, it can't be rape	1.87	1.195	1.33	0.779	1.44	1.014
It shouldn't be considered rape if a guy is drunk and didn't realize what he was doing	1.46	0.869	1.18	0.634	1.11	0.333
If a girl doesn't physically resist sex—even if protesting verbally—it really can't be considered rape	1.37	0.922	1.20	0.650	1.00	0.000
If a girl doesn't physically fight back, you can't really say it was rape	1.32	0.832	1.13	0.545	1.22	0.667
When girls get raped, it's often because the way they said "no" was unclear	1.34	0.917	1.12	0.533	1.11	.333
If a girl initiates kissing or getting hooked up, she should not be surprised if a guy assumes she wants to have sex	1.28	0.793	1.12	0.539	1.33	1.000
A rape probably doesn't happen if a girl doesn't have any bruises or marks	1.27	0.820	1.06	0.428	1.00	0.000
If the accused "rapist" doesn't have a weapon, you really can't call it rape	1.21	0.717	1.04	0.374	1.00	0.000
If a girl doesn't say "no" she can't claim rape	1.87	1.237	1.33	0.862	1.56	1.333
A lot of times, girls who say they were raped agreed to have sex and then regret it	2.16	1.169	1.63	0.943	1.44	1.014
Rape accusations are often used as a way of getting back at guys	2.16	1.025	1.65	0.952	1.33	0.707
A lot of times, girls who say they were raped often led the guy on and then had regrets	2.03	1.086	1.43	0.847	1.22	0.667
A lot of times, girls who claim they were raped have emotional problems	2.07	1.183	1.61	1.104	2.00	1.500
Girls who are caught cheating on their boyfriends sometimes claim it was rape	2.28	1.126	1.62	0.931	1.44	1.014

our primary research questions. First, we estimated the association between total RMA and disclosure of sexual assault among the sample. Next, we determined which individual rape myths are significantly associated with sexual assault disclosure (see Table 4). Missing data were excluded from all analyses.

Results

The subsample used in this article was composed entirely of victims/survivors. This sample was approximately 60% women, 37% men, and 3% transgender, gender non-conforming, and/or genderqueer (TGNC) students. Out of this subsample of victims/survivors, approximately 57% of women, 30% of men, and 89% of TGNC students had disclosed their sexual violence experience. More demographic information is outlined in Table 1.

Within the sample, men ($M=40.70$, $SD = 15.122$) had a significantly higher RMA mean score than women ($M=32.11$, $SD=11.471$, $p<0.001$) and TGNC students ($M=29.67$, $SD = 12.874$). Compared to men's average score of 40.70, TGNC students have a particularly low average RMA score of 29.67. Perhaps this difference was not statistically significant due to the low number of TGNC participants in the sample (2.6%). Asian students ($M=40.21$, $SD=16.901$) had a significantly higher mean score than white ($M=31.87$, $SD=9.348$, $p<0.001$) and Black or African American students ($M=32.40$, $SD=12.138$, $p=0.023$). Bisexual students ($M=29.94$, $SD=13.353$) had a significantly lower RMA mean score than heterosexual students ($M=35.77$, $SD=13.049$, $p=0.052$). See Tables 2 and 3.

Among college students who had experienced some form of sexual violence, our first binary logistic regression revealed no significant relationship between total RMA and sexual assault disclosure ($p=0.228$). The sample of victims/survivors had an average total RMA score of 35.26, which is approximately 1.6 out of 5 points per rape myth, and our analysis indicates no significant effect of rape myth score on sexual assault disclosure. However, our second binary logistic regressions between individual rape myths and sexual assault disclosure revealed one significant association ($p=0.016$). The significant rape myth is as follows: '*Guys don't usually intend to force sex on a girl, but sometimes they get too sexually carried away.*' This finding suggests that participants who have a higher endorsement of this rape myth are less likely to disclose their experience with sexual assault to others. Regression results are reported in Table 4.

Discussion

Sexual violence continues to be a widespread public health crisis that is rooted in structural power dynamics and perpetuated through cultural narratives that excuse harm, obscure accountability, and silence victims/survivors. The findings from this

Table 4. Regression model predicting sexual violence disclosure.

Variable	β	S.E.
Rape myth acceptance total	-0.010	0.008
If a girl is raped while she is drunk, she is at least somewhat responsible for what happened	0.002	0.141
When girls go to parties wearing revealing clothes, they are asking for trouble	-0.017	0.135
If a girl goes to a room alone with a guy at a party, it is her own fault if she is raped	-0.116	0.148
If a girl hooks up with a lot of guys, eventually she is going to get into trouble	-0.012	0.093
When guys rape, it is usually because of their strong desire for sex	-0.139	0.081
Guys don't usually intend to force sex on a girl, but sometimes they get too sexually carried away	-0.230*	0.096
Rape happens when a guy's sex drive gets out of control	-0.086	0.084
If a guy is drunk, he might rape someone unintentionally	-0.018	0.091
If both people are drunk, it can't be rape	-0.126	0.114
It shouldn't be considered rape if a guy is drunk and didn't realize what he was doing	-0.079	0.151
If a girl doesn't physically resist sex – even if protesting verbally – it really can't be considered rape	-0.005	0.149
If a girl doesn't physically fight back, you can't really say it was rape	-0.164	0.176
When girls get raped, it's often because the way they said "no" was unclear	-2.18	0.171
If a girl initiates kissing or getting hooked up, she should not be surprised if a guy assumes she wants to have sex	-0.066	0.174
A rape probably doesn't happen if a girl doesn't have any bruises or marks	-0.156	0.191
If the accused "rapist" doesn't have a weapon, you really can't call it rape	-0.129	0.220
If a girl doesn't say "no" she can't claim rape	0.025	0.108
A lot of times, girls who say they were raped agreed to have sex and then regret it	-0.111	0.107
Rape accusations are often used as a way of getting back at guys	-0.144	0.114
A lot of times, girls who say they were raped often led the guy on and then had regrets	-0.130	0.115
A lot of times, girls who claim they were raped have emotional problems	-0.046	0.096
Girls who are caught cheating on their boyfriends sometimes claim it was rape	-0.117	0.106

Notes. Dependent variable: Disclosure binary variable.

* $p < 0.05$.

study illustrate how specific rape myths – particularly the belief that 'guys get too sexually carried away' – function within patriarchal, heteronormative, and cisnormative frameworks that reframe coercion as accidental and reduce perpetrator accountability. These dominant cultural narratives contribute to victims/survivors blaming themselves and hesitating to share their experiences, all while reinforcing social conditions that sustain sexual violence as a public health issue. Beyond understanding RMA as a collection of individual attitudes, we place these findings within broader systems of gendered power, social control, and institutional complicity that perpetuate inequities in both the perpetration of sexual violence and the marginalization of those who experience it. In this discussion, we critically examine these dynamics and suggest comprehensive public health strategies to address the structural and ideological roots of rape culture by implementing early education, campus interventions, and population-level prevention efforts.

Like many rape myths, this specific myth about 'guys getting carried away' is rooted in misinformed biological determinants of sexual behaviors that excuse sexual violence and its harmful effects on victims/survivors by drawing on stereotypes of masculinity and hypersexuality (Deming et al., 2013; Shafer et al., 2018). By implying that rape occurs because 'guys' (not 'men') are unable to control their sexual urges, this myth excuses the act as an accident or a byproduct of biology. Victims/survivors may feel less inclined to report the assault as they do not want to punish seemingly 'good guys' for something they cannot seem to control. This framing of sexual violence is predictable based on rape culture, because the victims/survivors who believe this myth are less likely to disclose due to minimization of culpability on the part of the perpetrator, attributions of self-blame, and internalization of responsibility for the perpetrator's actions. The findings in this article also illustrate how gender essentialism perpetuates rape culture and endangers people of all genders specifically through reinforced cis-hetero-patriarchal sexual script (Hirsch & Khan, 2020).

In addition, though our study finds a significant association between the rape myth '*Guys don't usually intend to force sex on a girl, but sometimes they get too sexually carried away*' and nondisclosure, this study did not investigate whether this stereotype suppressed disclosure for victims/survivors in our sample as these findings are correlational. However, since this was the only rape myth significantly associated with nondisclosure out of a 22-item scale, our findings point to the possible unique negative effect of this rape myth on disclosure behavior.

There are several rape myths in which the acceptance scores were higher than most among the sample, though not statistically significant, when analyzed by likelihood of disclosure. Those myths fall under the subscale theme: '*He didn't mean to*'. Two of these subscale myths include: '*When guys rape, it is usually because of their strong desire for sex*' and '*Rape happens when a guy's sex drive gets out of control*'. Therefore, examining the rape myth that '*Guys don't usually intend to force sex on a girl, but sometimes they get too sexually carried away*' through the lens of these previous rape myths offers a unique insight into the framing of RMA. We assert that the significance of this rape myth, among a small cluster that is not significant but which showed variance, is likely the result of (1) the specific wording and meaning behind the rape myth that reinforces gendered scripts, (2) the stereotypical assumptions about men's sex drives encompassed in this myth, and (3) how this rape myth persists and is internalized by victims/survivors because of not wanting to categorize the incident as non-consensual.

As Hirsch and Khan's research reveals, students express additional ambivalence about their experiences when non-consensual sex occurs after the involved individuals had been drinking, using drugs, or both. Many people wonder why one person may be held responsible under the influence and the other is not (Hirsch & Khan, 2020). Assessing consent while impaired engages

and reinforces the rape myth that rape happens by accident, as the myth already establishes that men can't control their sexuality and may be 'unable' to stop. Moreover, these myths that focus on the lack of malicious intent of the act (i.e., '*Guys just get too sexually carried away*') obscure the truth about sexual violence as an act of disempowerment. Consequently, a lack of disclosure that is related to the myth of a man's inability to control himself reaffirms the belief systems that hold rape culture in place.

The role of rape myths

Though people (i.e., men and women, the victim/survivor and the accused) may be viewed differently by the role that rape myths play in both the perpetration and disclosure of sexual violence, it is important to consider how the same hegemonic ideologies that underpin rape myths, like the one we interrogate in this article, impact everyone. We must recognize that perpetrators of sexual violence are individuals who engage in harmful behaviors. As asserted by Danielle Sered, director of Common Justice, '[P]eople who commit violence are not monsters. They are, in fact, fully human.' (Sered, 2019) This statement is not intended to minimize the act of rape or the real devastation it causes, as we maintain that the impact on the victim/survivor is more important than intent of the perpetrator. Instead, we present this perspective to encourage and explore more effective intervention strategies for sexual citizenship (Byrne et al., 2021), as we will never be able to reduce sexual violence if we restrict our understanding of rape to individual traits and 'bad apple' logic. This approach often leads to the justification of punitive practices and solutions that solely punish offenders without making meaningful efforts to prevent such violence from recurring, a strategy that we know disproportionately affects marginalized communities and is ineffective in creating change. By failing to recognize the nuanced humanity of perpetrators, we also forfeit the opportunity for any accountability process that could intervene and transform behaviors that lead to and manifest in sexual violence. By acknowledging the structural roots of sexual violence and its wide-ranging impacts on individual victims/survivors as well as the greater community, U.S. society, and world in which we live, we may be able to intervene in violence more effectively while being better equipped to prevent it from occurring in the first place.

In addition to the micro-level impacts perpetuated by sexual violence, there are macro-level consequences as well that pose a significant threat to public health. Similarly, men's adherence to rape myths is well documented throughout the literature and remains steadfast, even when adhering to these myths leads them to perpetuate harm. Moreover, women's adherence to the rape myth that men get carried away, as demonstrated in this study, serves to suppress disclosure and may negatively impact the healing process in the aftermath of sexual violence.

As the individuals most directly harmed and impacted by sexual violence, non-disclosure should always remain the choice of victims/survivors. However, the continued suppression of disclosure trickles out into our societal reactions, perpetuating rape myths in real-time, and reifying this dehumanizing cycle of abuse and rape culture for all involved. The mental health consequences of not addressing abusive behavior often impact the perpetrator of the abuse and contribute to the wider public health crisis threatening men: depression, social isolation, and rising rates of suicide (Reeves, 2022). For the victims/survivors targeted by this violence, non-disclosure often impedes them from receiving the support and resources they need to heal and thrive (Halstead et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2017; Ullman & Relyea, 2016). Consequently, the outcome on college campuses is often that victims/survivors report experiencing declines in their academic performance, changing majors, transferring, and even dropping out entirely. The person who perpetrated the violence, who may have experienced assault themselves, is also denied access to resources to heal the potential trauma, miseducation, and harmful beliefs that undergird the abusive behavior. Thus, further studies are required to examine the complexities of non-disclosure behavior as a public health concern.

Limitations and recommendations for future studies

While this study provides a more nuanced view of rape myths, there are some limitations. For instance, the wording of the rape myth scale uses the phrase 'forced sex' instead of rape or assault, resulting in a more passive view of the act. While there has been significant scholarship about rape myths and rape culture, there have been recent development (after the study was conducted) using gender inclusive language in the IRMA scale (Johnson et al., 2023), thus further research is needed to examine the relationships with disclosure behaviors using this updated scale. Although only one rape myth was significant in this analysis, this may be due to the aggregation of disclosure types. Disaggregating disclosure behavior could reveal RMA linked more significantly to specific sources, such as friends and family versus formal actors like doctors and police, showing differing effects on disclosure behavior.

Future work would benefit from the inclusion of qualitative research that could examine the perception of victim-blaming beliefs among a culturally diverse sample of victims/survivors and their experiences of disclosure since the study identified differences in RMA among racial groups and by sexual identity, specifically lower RMA scores among Black, Asian, and bisexual students. Future studies should investigate the links between types of sexual violence and reasons for nondisclosure. Different types may induce varying levels of shame or self-blame, increasing barriers to disclosure and help-seeking for victims. Additionally, focusing on specific reasons for non-disclosure could lead to more effective public awareness campaigns that support victims. While this article primarily addresses RMA and broad non-disclosure, the authors intend to delve into individual reasons in future research.

Practical implications and recommendations

The results of this study tell a more nuanced narrative illustrating the need to reexamine persistent rape myths and the social structures that sustain them through a public health lens. Our research highlights that the most enduring and damaging myths – particularly those rooted in heteronormativity, cisnormativity, and traditional gender roles – operate in ambiguous ‘gray areas’ that often suppress disclosure and reinforce victim-blaming (Grandgenett et al., 2022; Murray et al., 2023; Ullman, 2023). We propose three recommendations for public health education and promotion for high school students, college/university students, and the broader population:

1. High school programming on harmful beliefs about sexual behaviors. By the time students enter college, beliefs about gender and sexuality are already well-formed through families, schools, media, and religious institutions (Clayton et al., 2023; Holman & Kellas, 2015). High school offers a key opportunity for upstream prevention, particularly to address harmful beliefs about violent masculinity (Shafer et al., 2018). Embedding anti-sexual violence education within college readiness or youth development programs could not only reduce acceptance of rape myths but also lower rates of sexual violence and increase disclosures (Edwards et al., 2015; Orchowski et al., 2023; Scull et al., 2022). Moreover, evaluating RMA among college-bound youth can help measure the long-term impact of such early interventions.

2. Campus-based anti-rape myth training. Current sexual violence prevention programs on college campuses often fail to address the underlying sociocultural systems that uphold rape myths (Bonar et al., 2022; Newlands & O’Donohue, 2016). These training programs tend to focus on behavior modification (e.g., how to ask for consent) without engaging with the structural and ideological roots of sexual violence, including patriarchy and rigid gender norms (Halstead et al., 2017). We advocate for education that explicitly challenges myths associated with hegemonic masculinity, femininity, and beliefs like ‘getting carried away.’ Programming should facilitate critical discussions about power, gender, and social scripts, with outcomes measured through pre- and post-assessments and disclosure tracking tools.

3. Public health messaging to counter victim-blaming and increase help-seeking. Public health campaigns such as the #MeToo movement and various prevention initiatives can be utilized to shift cultural norms away from victim-blaming and thus create a context in which rates of disclosure and help-seeking increase. By highlighting the widespread and lasting mental health impacts of sexual violence and framing it as a societal issue rather than just an individual one, victims/survivors would be encouraged to disclose their experiences and seek help and resources to mitigate short- and long-term negative health outcomes. Utilizing intersectional and ecological models would enhance messaging across multiple levels, from individuals to communities.

Conclusion

To tackle sexual violence as a structural public health crisis, we must interrogate cultural and institutional systems sustaining rape myths, inhibiting disclosure, and reproducing gender-based violence. Prevention efforts should complement individualized behavior change models to confront heteropatriarchy, gender essentialism, and victim-blaming ideologies that perpetuate interpersonal violence and reduce help-seeking behaviors, including disclosure. A crucial area is addressing self-blame among victims and survivors who internalize the myth that perpetrators lack control. A public health approach necessitates multi-level interventions that center individual agency (especially for victims/survivors), challenge dominant narratives, and hold institutions accountable for changing conditions that enable sexual violence.

Author contributions

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Informed consent statement

Informed consent was electronically obtained from all participants at the start of the electronic survey.

Institutional Review Board statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and was approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of George Mason University (protocol code 1472160, 20 July 2020).

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, RDM, upon reasonable request.

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