Examining the Relationship Between Pornography Consumption and Rape Myth Acceptance Among Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

Rape myth acceptance has emerged as one of the key indicators of future perpetration of sexual violence, but little is known about the relationship between rape myth acceptance and exposure to pornography. In this observational study with a cross sectional design, undergraduate students (N = 149; 77% women) at a mid-Atlantic university were surveyed to determine if there is a positive correlation between rape myth acceptance and exposure to pornography and whether men and women differ in their rates of rape myth acceptance and exposure to pornography. We found that there is not a significant correlation between rape myth acceptance and exposure to pornography for men and women in this sample. However, there are significant differences between men and women's rape myth acceptance and exposure to pornography. Implications for public health practice, policy, and research are discussed.

Introduction

Sexual violence is an epidemic on college campuses. Prevalence rates of sexual assault are extremely high: one in five women and one in 16 men are sexually assaulted while in college (Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, & Martin, 2007). Some scholars even estimate that for college seniors, one in four (25%) may be a more accurate estimate for many campuses (Cantor et al., 2015; Krebs et al., 2007; Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, & Martin, 2009; Krebs, Lindquist, Berzofsky, Shook-Sa, B Peterson, Planty, … Stroop 2016). Sexual assault is a widespread problem that is associated with a number of adverse outcomes throughout life. Survivors of sexual violence are more likely to report psychological disorders, primarily major depressive disorder, generalized anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Nickerson et al. 2013). Additionally, survivors of sexual assault are more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol and drop out

of school compared to students who have never experienced sexual violence (Zinzow et al. 2011). These effects do not just harm the individual, but they harm the loved ones of the victims as well as disrupting the larger academic community (Streng & Kamimura, 2017). Because sexual assault is such a widespread and damaging issue, much research has been done on institutional level factors and individual attitudes and that condone this crime.

A number of institutional level factors contribute to the extremely high prevalence of sexual assault on college campuses. There is a presence of a rape-prone culture that is inherent at most universities in the United States. Rape culture is an environment in which sexual assault and date rape are accepted or tolerated, in this case, as part of campus life (Burnett et. al 2009). This culture is supported by individual attitudes as well as institutional factors that are unique to the college experience that reinforce traditional gender roles and create power dynamics that permit sexual assault. On the institutional level, many universities have high gender segregation, an ethic of male sexual conquest and getting sex, displays of masculinity through heterosexual sexual performance, high alcohol consumption, heterosexism and homophobia, and general norms of womens' subordinate status (Boswell & Spade, 1996; Sanday, 1996). These ideas are heightened on campuses that have Greek life and athletic teams. Research suggests that these groups are more likely to believe rape myths when compared to their non-affiliated peers (Binder, 2001). Athletes and fraternity men tend to have higher levels of hostility toward women and peer support for sexual violence (Humphrey & Kahn, 2000).

Rape myth acceptance has emerged in the literature as a key indicator of engagement in future sexual violence for young men. Rape myths are defined as attitudes and false beliefs held about rape that deny or minimize victim injury and/or blame the victims for their own victimization (Hayes-Smith & Levett, 2010). A meta-analysis by Suarez and Gadalla, (2010)

confirmed that among men, there was a strong positive association between rape myth acceptance and sexual aggression and other hostile attitudes and aggressive behaviors toward women. Additionally, much of the research of college students points to a significant relationship between rape myth acceptance and rape proclivity, meaning that a person who endorses rape myths is also more likely to commit rape (cite). There is a statistically significant positive correlation between belief of rape myths and men's likelihood of perpetration of sexual assault (Mouliso and Calhoun, 2013). Whereas rape myth acceptance is widely held among college men, less is known about the factors that are associated with rape myth acceptance. Future research must look at the processes underlying rape myths.

Pornography is widely consumed but often contains degrading and aggressive behavior (Hald, Malamuth, & Yuen, 2010). It is widely consumed through many forms, including the Internet. Widespread availability and consumption of pornography has been the focus of many research studies, as many researchers wonder if it is a cause for alarm. However, many of these studies have not considered the widespread changes that occurred in the streaming pornography industry in 2007. In the 1990s, the only way to access pornography online was with a credit card, which effectively acted as an age barrier, preventing those under 18 from accessing it. However, around 2007, one company consolidated the free pornography industry into one online location and allowed users to upload videos themselves, essentially creating the pornography version of YouTube. The users are able to upload copyrighted videos, increasing overall access to these explicit materials (Ronson, 2017).

Much of the controversy over pornography relates to aggression and degradation. Evidence suggests that degrading pornography increases dominating and harassing behavior toward women and loss of compassion for female rape victims. One content analysis by Bridges

and colleagues (2010) of adult videos found that only 89.8% of films contained one or more aggressive acts and only 9.9% of the films contained positive behaviors. Physical aggression was the most common act observed and women were overwhelmingly the targets of these acts. One alarming finding from this study was that women expressed enjoyment while being aggressed against (Bridges et al., 2010). This could have significant implications for consumers of pornography. Social cognitive theory as explained by Bandura (1994) suggests that an individual will model aggression learned from viewing media depending on whether or not the act observed was rewarded or punished. Essentially, this means that viewers of pornography are learning that aggression during a sexual encounter is pleasurable for both men and women. This begs the question: does this type of learning have a social implication?

Currently, the literature is not in consensus about whether or not pornography consumption is correlated with rape and sexual assault. Many of the studies were conducted before 2007, prior to the ubiquitous availability of free, streaming pornography. One study by Hald et al. (2010) found that the relationship between pornography exposure and rape and sexual assault perpetration was significantly stronger for violent pornography than for non-violent pornography, though both types showed significant positive associations with attitudes supporting violence against women. However, a literature review by Ferguson and Hartley (2009) looking at the influence of pornography on sexual aggression in both experimental and correlational studies found weak evidence in support of this association.

The purpose of this research study is to determine if there is a relationship between frequency of pornography consumption and rape myth acceptance among undergraduate college students. There were three main hypotheses: (1) there is a positive correlation between rape myth acceptance and exposure to pornography among undergraduate college students; (2)

undergraduate male students have higher rape myth acceptance; (3) undergraduate male students have higher exposure to pornography.

Method

Sample and Setting

All study procedures were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board prior to beginning the study. The current observational study employed a cross-sectional design. We developed an online survey (software: Qualtrics) and distributed a link to the survey in four classes at a mid-Atlantic university. Undergraduate students were invited to complete the optional survey. The classes included Human Sexuality, Community Health Engagement, Introduction to Behavioral and Community Health, and Foundations in Public Health. The majority of the responses came from the Human Sexuality class. The total number of respondents was 149, with a total response rate of 26.7%. Participants were aged 18 to 32 years (mean 20.89 years, *SD 1.46)*, majority female (77%), majority senior class standing (68%), majority heterosexual (87%). This group of undergraduate students is racially and ethnically diverse, including 56% white students, 19% Black/African American students, and 18% Asian American students, and 8% other races. Demographics are summarized in Table 1.

Measures

These standardized, valid, and reliable measures used were the Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (Burt, 1980) and Exposure to Sexual Materials Questionnaire (Frable, Johnson, & Kellman, 1997). The Rape Myth Acceptance Scale has 36 items (such as "a rape probably didn't happen if the woman has no bruises or marks" and "a lot of women lead a man on and then cry rape"), to which participants respond on a scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The Exposure to Sexual Materials Questionnaire asks participants to rate on a scale from one to

seven, one being zero times in the last three years, and seven being more than 100 times in the last three years, how frequently they have done the following things. One questions asks if participants have seen pornography that degrades women.

Analytic Procedures

We conducted a series of descriptive analyses to test our three hypotheses. First, we examined the Pearson correlation coefficients between the following variables: exposure to pornography and rape myth acceptance. Next, we conducted two independent samples *t*-tests to statistically test differences in men and women's mean score on the Rape Myth Acceptance Scale and sum score on the Exposure to Sexual Materials Scale.

Table 1: Demographics

Age (in years)		
	Mean	20.89
	Standard deviation	1.46
	Minimum	18
	Maximum	32
Academic Year		
	Freshman	4%
	Sophomore	7%
	Junior	15%
	Senior	68%
	Super Senior	6%
Gender identity		
	Male	21%
	Female	77%
	Non binary/third gender	1%
	Prefer to self describe	1%
Sexual Orientation		
	Bisexual	7%
	Heterosexual/straight	87%
	Gay/lesbian	3%
	Other	3%
Race		

	American Indian/Alaska Native	0%
	Asian	18%
	Black/African American	19%
	Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	1%
	White	56%
	Other	1%
	Multiracial	6%
Ethnicity		
	Hispanic/Latino	12%
	non-Hispanic/Latino	88%

Results

Table 2: Correlation

	ESMQ	RMA	Gender	Sexual Orientation
ESMQ	-			
RMA	-0.099	-		
Gender	0.363*	-0.268*	-	
Sexual Orientation	0.32*	0.133	0.086	-

* *Correlation is significant at the* $p < .001$ level.

Paired Samples Test

	t	df	Significance level
Rape Myth Acceptance, men versus women	3.335	144	P<.001

Exposure to Sexual Materials, men versus women	-4.67	144	P<.001

Correlation analyses indicate that there is not a significant positive correlation between rape myth acceptance and exposure to pornography. However, there was a medium, positive statistically significant correlation between exposure to pornography and sexual orientation, with lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals having higher exposure to pornography. Further, there is a correlation between gender and exposure to pornography, and gender and rape myth acceptance. There is a small correlation between rape myth acceptance and gender, with higher rape myth acceptance among men. There is a small statistically significant difference between levels of rape myth acceptance among men and women in this sample, with higher scores indicating greater rejection of rape myths (t 3.335, df 144, $p < .001$). A medium sized correlation was detected between exposure to sexual materials among men and women in this sample. There was a medium statistically significant difference between exposure to sexual materials among men and women in this sample (t -4.67, df 144, $p < .001$).

Discussion

This study did not find a correlation between pornography exposure and rape myth acceptance. Compared with most men, rapists consume less porn; one study from 2000 found that sex criminals recalled consuming less pornography (Malamuth, Addison, & Koss, 2000). Some studies have suggested that pornography use may only add to risk of sexual aggression for men already predisposed to be sexually aggressive due to other causes (Malmuth, 2018). Malamuth (2018) concluded that pornography by itself is not likely to cause people to commit sexual aggression, but in combination with other risk factors, exposure to some types of pornography (non-consenting adult or child pornography) may increase the risk of aggressive

outcomes. In some cases, Malamuth says that pornography can actually function as a "tipping point" that leads a person at risk who might not act aggressively to actually commit a sexually aggressive offense. However, overall, men who are not already predisposed to be sexually aggressive have not shown increased risk for sexual aggression as a result of exposure to pornography.

Additionally, in some countries, pornography has been illegal and then subsequently made legal, which allows for a natural experiment to determine if there is a relationship between pornography and certain sex crimes. In one instance in the Czech Republic, this relationship was studied over a period of about 30 years (Diamond, Jozifkova, & Weiss, 2011). Between the years of 1989 and 2007, there was a period of time where pornography was illegal as well as a period where it was widely available. Once pornography became widely available to citizens of the Czech Republic, rape and other sex crimes did not increase. This finding is similar to those of other countries like Denmark and Japan, where there were prolonged periods of time where pornography was illegal and then became legal, and there were actually significant decreases in the incidence of certain crimes, such as child sex abuse.

Another finding from the current study is that the undergraduate student men in this sample had higher rape myth acceptance than individuals of other genders. This is as expected: males in the general population accept rape myths at a higher rate than females. In a meta-analysis by Suarez and Gadalla (2010) looking at 37 studies, found that men displayed a significantly higher endorsement of rape myths than women, suggesting that sexism perpetuates rape myth acceptance. This has implications for education program efforts, as programs should incorporate ideas not just about decreasing rape myth acceptance but also decreasing sexist ideas.

Men in the current study's sample also had higher exposure to pornography. This is in line with a study about pornography exposure and youth by Sabina, Wolak, and Finkelhor (2008), which found that 93% of college men had been exposed to online pornography during their adolescence. When compared to females in the sample, they were more likely to be exposed at an earlier age, to see more images, to see more extreme images (such as rape and child pornography) and to view pornography more often (Sabina et al., 2008). Females in the study reported more involuntary exposure (Sabina et al.). More research must be done to determine if this exposure to pornography during adolescence has an effect on men.

Finally, lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) participants indicated higher exposure to pornography. LGB individuals are more socially active on social media than their heterosexual counterparts, according to the Pew Research Center (2018). Because research suggests that LGB individuals use digital media more than their peers, it is possible that this translates to pornographic media as well.

Limitations

As with all studies, this study has several limitations. One factor limiting generalizability is the nature of the participants surveyed. Because respondents were primarily female (77% of the participants), it is likely that the participants have lower rape myth acceptance already. Additionally, most of the responses came from a course about Human Sexuality, so the participants already had some kind of interest in the subject and were possibly exposed to sex positive content through the course. The demographic makeup of this sample is also not similar to that of the university overall, with this sample being primarily female upperclassmen. While this limits the study to being widely generalizable, it is likely representative of young college-aged women attending a mid-Atlantic university.

Another limitation is that of the measure used to determine exposure to pornographic materials. Some of the items on the Exposure to Sexual Materials Questionnaire (Frabel, Johnson & Kellman, 1997) is dated (e.g., asking participants whether not they have ever watched the movie "Debbie Does Dallas") and because of this, it may not accurately assess how individuals are accessing pornography today. A more updated measure of exposure to pornography (including online access to pornography) is necessary in order to further investigate the relationship between rape myth acceptance and pornography, or more importantly, sexual violence perpetration and pornography.

Conclusion

In this sample, there was no correlation between rape myth acceptance and exposure to pornography. While the study findings may not be generalizable to the entire target population, college students generally, there are still implications for future research. In order to better understand the relationships tested in this sample, it could be replicated and administered to a random sample of college students to better understand the relationships in the general undergraduate student population. It would also be useful to administer this survey to a random group of college men and determine if in fact pornography, in combination with other risk factors, increases risk of sexual aggression. However, within this sample, exposure to pornography was not correlated with increased rape myth acceptance.

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