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Prevalence of Rape Myths in Headlines and Their Effects on Attitudes Toward Rape

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Abstract The present research investigated the prevalence and effects of rape myths in newspaper headlines. In study 1, a content analysis of online news headlines from US media ($N=555$) surrounding the 2003–2004 Kobe Bryant sexual assault case showed that 10% endorsed a rape myth. In study 2, students at a mid-sized university in the midwestern USA ($N=154$) read headlines endorsing or not endorsing rape myths. Male participants exposed to myth-endorsing headlines were (a) less likely to think Bryant was guilty than those exposed to non-myth headlines, (b) more likely to hold rape-supportive attitudes than those exposed to non-myth headlines, and (c) more likely to hold rape-supportive attitudes than were female participants exposed to myth-endorsing headlines.

Keywords Sexual assault · Rape myths · Media · News headlines · Attitudes towards rape

Introduction

Recent cases of sexual assault have once again garnered national media attention and fueled water-cooler conversation. From July of 2003 until September of 2004, news-

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papers, the nightly news, and talk shows were abuzz with the latest twists and turns in the sexual assault case against NBA basketball player Kobe Bryant. More recently, sexual assault charges against three male lacrosse players at Duke University reignited divisive "he said, she said" conversations. With such media attention before they even go to trial, the public learns many details about these cases—some true and some unsubstantiated. For example, in news coverage of sexual assault cases, the public may be exposed to "rape myths." Rape myths are generalized and false beliefs about sexual assault that trivialize a sexual assault or suggest that a sexual assault did not occur. Although journalists are unlikely perpetuating rape myths for malicious reasons, the use of these myths may be a default reaction to a sexual assault case. Unfortunately, the use of rape myths has severe consequences for sexual assault victims and for maintaining sexual assault in our society. The purposes of the current research were to investigate the prevalence of rape myths in the news media and to investigate the causal effects of exposure to these rape myths. To this end, we conducted two studies: (1) a content analysis of newspaper headlines surrounding a high profile sexual assault case, and (2) an experiment testing the effects of subtle exposure to these newspaper headlines on people's specific attitudes about a sexual assault case and general attitudes about sexual assault and sexual assault victims.

Rape Myths

Brownmiller (1975) and Burt (1980) were the first to identify and discuss rape myths in our culture. Burt (1980) outlined several specific myths that people employ to downplay or dismiss a sexual assault. Rape myths include suggestions that the victim is lying, deserved the sexual assault, or asked for it because of how she was acting or

what she was wearing. Other rape myths excuse the perpetrator by suggesting that he couldn't help himself or that he isn't the type who would commit a sexual assault. Finally, some myths downplay the seriousness of the sexual assault that occurred by suggesting it was a trivial, or even natural, event. Throughout this paper, feminine pronouns are used to refer to general victims and masculine pronouns are used to refer to general perpetrators. Although men are victims and women are perpetrators of sexual assault, the majority of victims are female (~90%) and the majority of perpetrators are male (~98%; BJS 1999; BJS 2006).

The power of rape myths lies in their utility to protect us from uncomfortable truths about the victims and perpetrators of sexual assault. First, suggesting that a woman is lying about her assault or that she "asked for it" provides a controllable attribution that allows people to protect themselves from the suggestion that they or their loved ones could be victims as well. Attributing negative events to controllable causes is part of a larger motivation to believe in a "just world", the idea that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people (Lerner 1980). Consistent with this belief, people defensively use just-world explanations to explain away sexual assaults (Cowan and Curtis 1994; McCaul et al. 1990; Wyer et al. 1985). Endorsing rape myths allows women to believe they have control over being victims of sexual assault by doing the normative "right" and "good" things (Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1995). Second, endorsing rape myths allows men to distance themselves from the "bad" men who are perpetrators of sexual assault. Employing rape myths that stereotype perpetrators of sexual assault as sex-crazed psychotics allows most men to believe they could not possibly commit an assault (Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1995). Further, rape myths allow perpetrators to justify their sexually violent behavior and allow non-perpetrators to express hostile sexism by excusing perpetrators' behavior. Rape myths that blame the victim reinforce men's beliefs that the perpetrator was merely responding to a woman's sexual invitations (from her clothing, flirtatious behavior, sexual reputation, etc.). Therefore, victims and perpetrators, as well as third parties, are motivated to employ rape myths. Ironically, the self-protective intention behind the employment of rape myths can increase a woman's risk of being assaulted and can perpetuate cultural norms that trivialize rape.

If rape myths were rarely used or were immediately discounted when they were used, there would be little cause for alarm when they surfaced. However, rape myths are widely used by men and women (although men consistently endorse rape myths more than women; see Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994, for a review); and using rape myths in response to hearing about, committing, or experiencing a sexual assault has devastating consequences for sexual assault victims. The more a sexual assault fits the "vicious attack by a stranger" script, the more a victim is believed and offered sympathy and the more anger that is generated against the perpetrator. Conversely, the more a sexual assault deviates from the prototypical assault, the more the victim is disparaged and questioned and the more sympathy and benefit of the doubt the perpetrator receives (e.g., Frese et al. 2004; Goodchilds et al. 1988; Linz et al. 1989; Sawyer et al. 1998). In general, endorsement of rape myths is correlated with hostile attitudes toward women, supporting stereotypical roles for men and women, and less sympathy for victims of sexual violence (see Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994, for a review). Muehlenhard and MacNaughton (1988) found that endorsing rape myths makes women more vulnerable to coercive sexual encounters with men, although Koss and Dinero (1989) found that women who do and do not endorse rape myths were equally vulnerable to sexual assault. Further, endorsing rape myths leads people to be less likely to label a sexual assault as such when it meets the legal criteria (Muehlenhard and MacNaughton 1988; Norris and Cubbins 1992). Finally, in mock trials, jurors who endorse rape myths are less likely to convict accused rapists and give shorter sentences to convicted rapists (see Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994, for a review). The more rape myths are used, the harder it is to eliminate sexual assault.

Although the above research shows the negative consequences that rape myths can have on attitudes toward victims and the prosecution of perpetrators, it is also important to assess the impact that endorsing rape myths may have on an individual's propensity to commit sexual assault. Several researchers have shown that men's endorsement of rape myths is correlated with their admitted likelihood to commit sexual assault if assured no repercussions (Bohner et al. 2005; Bohner et al. 1998). Other correlational research has shown associations between belief in rape myths and self-reported sexual aggression (e.g., Koss et al. 1985; Locke and Mahalik 2005). Experimental research has shown a causal association between endorsement of rape myths and (non-sexual) aggression toward women (but not men; e.g., Donnerstein and Malamuth 1997). Finally, in a longitudinal study, Lanier (2001) found that rape-myth acceptance predicted sexual aggression and not vice versa. This body of research shows that rape myths support social and criminal justice systems that are inclined to dismiss the victim, protect the perpetrator, and encourage men's assaulting behavior.

Rape Myths in the Media

Given the commonality of rape myths in the general populace, there is reason to believe (and evidence to suggest) that rape myths are prevalent in the mass media.

Researchers have identified rape myths in prime time television, with the "she's lying," "she asked for it," and "she wanted it" myths being the most prevalent (Brinson 1992; Cuklanz 1996, 2000). However, Cuklanz (1996, 2000) found fictional depictions of sexual assault to be less likely to endorse a prototypical view of sexual assault than the news media. Several researchers have noted that newspaper reports of sexual assault often blame the victim and focus on prototypical, thus rarer, cases of sexual assault (Caringella-MacDonald 1998; Gavey and Gow 2001; Korn and Efrat 2004; Los and Chamard 1997). Recent research by Franiuk et al. (2008) on the Kobe Bryant case showed that 65% of newspaper articles perpetuated at least one myth about sexual assault, with "she's lying" being the myth most commonly perpetuated. Further, participants in this study who were exposed to a rape myth-supporting article were less likely to think Bryant was guilty (before the case went to trial) and more likely to think the victim was lying than those exposed to a rape myth-attenuating article.

Although the above research is important for demonstrating some of the effects of exposure to rape myths in the news media, most consumers of print journalism are more likely to read the headlines of articles than the actual articles (Dor 2003; Fry 1993). Because readers will only read a small percentage of articles relative to headlines, newspaper editors and copywriters carefully construct headlines to try to draw readers into the full article (Dor 2003). Further, headlines can be misleading about the articles themselves, biasing a reader's impressions about the content. For example, a *Denver Post* article with the headline "Kobe's accuser admits lies" implies that the victim is the type of person who lies in general and, at worst, is read as "Kobe's accuser admits lies [about the sexual assault]" (although the article is actually about how the alleged victim lied about why she was late to work the day of the alleged assault; Lipsher and Caldwell 2004). Misleading headlines are often the result of copywriters who do not write the actual articles, but misleading headlines can also be purposeful to lure readers (Pfau 1995). Even when headlines are not purposely misleading, readers have been shown to misunderstand the meaning behind a headline (Smith and Fowler 1982). Finally, Pasternak (1987) showed that people who read a defamatory headline were still misled *after* reading the full article that supposedly clarified the headline and was non-defamatory. Rape myths are certainly defamatory to the alleged victim, and, although usually less than ten words (Wesson 1989), headlines may contain rape myths. Bohner (2001) found that participants asked to generate headlines for reports they had written about a videotaped sexual assault had a tendency to write headlines blaming the victim. Because headlines may carry more weight than articles themselves, it is essential that we investigate both the content of sexual assault-related head-

lines and the impact of headlines on readers' attitudes toward sexual assault.

In addition to the rape myths identified above, language used in headlines about a sexual assault case may slant the readers for or against the alleged victim in two additional ways. First, a subtle method for shifting focus to the alleged victim in print journalism is the use of the word "accuser" instead of "alleged victim." Many feminist scholars favor the use of "alleged victim" over "accuser," as the term "accuser" draws attention to the actions of the alleged victim (and away from the alleged perpetrator). As the "accuser," the alleged victim is not the one who has had something done to her; she is now the one who is doing something (to the alleged perpetrator; e.g., Katz 2004). Second, as is the case with most crimes in the United States, the race of the victim and/or perpetrator can be a factor that biases the reader's opinions about a case. Depending on various factors, race can work in favor of or against the defendant. In sexual assault cases, a Black defendant might be susceptible to myths about the frequency with which Black men sexually assault White women (Brownmiller 1975; Epstein and Langenbaum 1994). We were interested in exploring these variables in the present research.

We had two goals in this research. First, building on previous research exploring the prevalence of rape myths in news articles about high profile sexual assault cases (Franiuk et al. 2008), we wished to examine the prevalence of rape myths in news headlines concerning one recent high-profile assault case (the Kobe Bryant case). Second, we wanted to assess the causal impact of a brief exposure to these types of rape myths on attitudes about guilt and sexual assault in general.

Overview

Research suggests that the number of sexually assaulted women (perhaps 15% of adult US women) far exceeds the number of men prosecuted for the crime (less than 1% of men who commit sexual assault are successfully prosecuted; Tjaden and Thoennes 2000). We report two studies that examine the role the print news media play in perpetuating rape myths that may serve to bias people's beliefs about specific sexual assault cases and attitudes about sexual assault more generally. Past research has shown that news articles about sexual assault are littered with rape myths, but little is known about the content and impact of headlines, which reach a far wider audience. In the first study, we sought to establish the prevalence of rape myths in headlines by analyzing the content of headlines surrounding the Kobe Bryant sexual assault case. This led to three research questions:

R1 : What is the prevalence of various rape myths in news headlines about a high-profile sexual assault case?

R2 : Are certain rape myths more prevalent than others in news headlines about a high-profile sexual assault case?

R3 : Are there other subtle uses of language in news headlines that bias a reader against the alleged victim or perpetrator of sexual assault?

The second study investigated the causal impact of exposure to headlines that endorse rape myths on beliefs about perpetrator guilt and general attitudes toward sexual assault. We believed that brief exposure to rape myths in headlines would serve as a prime for more deeply held and elaborate rape myths. This led to three predictions:

H1 : Participants exposed to headlines endorsing rape myths were expected to be less likely to attribute blame to an alleged perpetrator than those who did not read rape myth-endorsing headlines.

H1a : The above effect was predicted to be moderated by gender, such that male participants were expected to be less likely than women to attribute blame to an alleged perpetrator.

H2 : Participants exposed to headlines endorsing rape myths were expected to express less sympathy toward sexual assault victims than those who did not read rape myth-endorsing headlines.

H2a : The above effect was predicted to be moderated by gender, such that male participants were expected to be less likely than women to express sympathy toward sexual assault victims after reading myth-endorsing headlines.

Study 1

Method

Sample

Headlines (N=555) about the Kobe Bryant sexual assault case were gathered from three different on-line sources (CNN, ESPN, and *The Denver Post*). Given the growing use of the Internet as people's source for news (Lynch 2005; Noack 1999; Small 2000), an online version of *The Denver Post* and Internet news websites were used to gather headlines for this research. *The Denver Post* was chosen because of its relevance to the location of the alleged crime and subsequent trial. As noted by Franiuk and colleagues (2008), *The Denver Post* had the most articles written about the Kobe Bryant case (in a single source). CNN and ESPN were chosen as relatively well-known news and sports news on-line sources (ranked as #2 among news providers and #1 among sports news providers for web traffic in the US, respectively, by the web traffic monitor Alexa 2007).

Procedure

Collection of headlines started when the media first "broke" the story on July 6, 2003 and stopped when the charges against Bryant were dropped on September 1, 2004. The focus of this study was pre-trial media. The headlines were chosen searching the archives on the CNN, ESPN, and *Denver Post* websites using the keywords "Kobe," "Bryant," "rape," and/or "sexual assault." In all, 555 distinct headlines were found using these three sources.

Two raters coded the headlines for endorsement of seven rape myths: (1) she's lying, (2) she asked for it, (3) she wanted it, (4) rape is trivial, (5) he didn't mean to, (6) he's not the kind of guy who would do this, and (7) it only happens to "certain" women (Burt 1980). We treat the words "endorsement" and "presence" as functionally equivalent when referring to rape myths in newspaper headlines (or articles). When a writer uses a rape myth without challenging that myth, he or she is essentially endorsing that myth for the reader. Alternatively, we would not have counted a myth as endorsed/present if the myth had been contradicted in the headline. However, none of the headlines included statements countering rape myths. The headlines were also coded for description of the "accuser," "victim," or "alleged victim," slant of the headline (pro-Bryant vs pro-alleged victim), and mention of either the alleged victim or the alleged perpetrator's race. The two coders were trained together about the seven myths and common examples of each. They were each given sample headlines to rate before being given the remainder of the headlines. The two coders independently rated the sample headlines and then discussed their ratings until they reached consensus on the myths present in the sample headlines. Each rater coded one half of the headlines, while coding 56 redundant headlines to check for interrater reliability. The intraclass correlation to assess interrater reliability for this sample was high at r_1=.80 (for an explanation of using intraclass correlations see Shrout and Fleiss 1979).

Results

Rape Myths in Headlines

To address research question 1, we first assessed the general frequency of rape myths found in the news headlines. In all, 9.6% of the headlines (N=555) contained rape myths, with 8.7% of the total containing one rape myth and .9% containing two rape myths. To measure the differences between percentages presented here, we used planned contrasts of proportions (Rosenthal and Rosnow 1985). Headlines in *The Denver Post* (13%) were significantly more likely to include rape myths than those on ESPN (9.2%) and CNN (8.4%) (which did not significantly differ

from one another), $z=2.42$, $p<.01$. Addressing research question 2, we compared the relative prevalence of the specific myths. The "she's lying" myth was most common, mentioned in 6% of the headlines, followed by the "she wanted it" myth in 4% of the headlines, $z=5.17$, $p<.001$. The coders noted that one headline each contained the "she asked for it" and "rape is trivial" myths, with no headlines containing the remaining three myths.

Other Coded Variables

To address research question 3, we analyzed the headlines for other subtle forms of bias against the alleged victim or perpetrator: their use of the word "accuser," "alleged victim," or "victim;" their general slant towards the alleged victim or perpetrator; and their mention of the alleged victim or perpetrator's race. Overall, headlines were significantly more likely to use the word "accuser" (23.1%) than "alleged victim" (1.1%) or "victim" (1.3%; $z=12.04$, $p<.001$). Of the 141 (25.4%) headlines to use the term "alleged victim," "victim," or "accuser," 90.8% of these articles used "accuser."

Headlines were also coded for the general slant of the headline (pro-Bryant or pro-alleged victim). Any headline that contained a rape myth was coded as a "pro-Bryant" headline, but this category also included headlines that did not contain a specific rape myth but were generally positive about Bryant. Similarly, any headlines that was overtly against Bryant or in favor of the alleged victim were coded as "pro-alleged victim." We found that 11.0% of the headlines had a pro-Bryant slant and 5.2% of the headlines had a pro-alleged victim slant. Pro-Bryant headlines were significantly more likely than pro-alleged victim headlines, $z=3.54$, $p<.001$.

Finally, headlines were coded for their mention of race. In the present research, we found that the alleged victim or perpetrator's race was only mentioned in 1.3% of headlines about this case. This is not to say that race was not a factor in this case, but suggests that headlines did not overtly reinforce the stereotype about Black men and White women.

Discussion

Despite the verbal limitations imposed on headlines, nearly 10% of headlines contained rape myths. Study 1 further showed that headlines include language that might bias readers by being significantly more likely to use the word "accuser" than "alleged victim" (or "victim"). (As was ruled in the Kobe Bryant case, the word "victim" implies that a crime was committed before the defendant has been found guilty. Therefore, we did not expect high frequency of the word "victim" in headlines.) Given research that shows people are more likely to read headlines than

articles, that people often misinterpret headlines, that headlines are often purposely misleading, and that headlines can bias readers even when the article itself "corrects" the headline, it is important to investigate the impact that headlines containing rape myths might have on a reader. We turn to the causal impact of headlines in our next study.

Study 2

Articles about sexual assault are wrought with rape myths that can bias an audience against the alleged victim (e.g., Franiuk et al. 2008; Los and Chamard 1997). However, given that people are more likely to read headlines than articles and that headlines also contain rape myths (at least in the Bryant case), it is important to investigate the impact of headlines containing rape myths. In the present study, we experimentally manipulated people's exposure to headlines about sexual assault and assessed the impact on people's perceptions of Bryant's guilt in this case, as well as their attitudes toward sexual assault victims more generally.

Method

Participants

Participants were 154 undergraduate students (76 male; 78 female) at a Midwestern university. Their ages ranged from 18 to 49 years with a mean age of 19.9 years ($SD=4.5$) and a median age of 18.5 years. Ninety-four percent of the sample was white, 3% Asian, 1% Black, and 2% other or missing.

Procedure

This study was conducted after charges had been dropped against Kobe Bryant. Participants were told that they were participating in a web design study and were randomly assigned to one of four groups: (1) actual Bryant case headlines from study 1 that endorsed rape myths (e.g., "Bryant lawyers portray accuser as troubled, attention-seeking woman," "Kobe defense: Accuser had motive to lie"; $N=18$ men; $N=22$ women), (2) myth-endorsing headlines as in condition one but removing Bryant-identifying information (e.g., "In sexual assault trial, lawyers portray accuser as troubled, attention-seeking woman," "Defense attorneys in sexual assault case say accuser had a motive to lie"; $N=18$ men; $N=20$ women), (3) headlines about sexual assault that did not include rape myths (e.g., "Possible witnesses sought in 2001 sexual assault case," "Hearing set for man accused of sexual assault"; $N=20$ men; $N=18$ women), and (4) headlines unrelated to sexual assault (control; e.g., "Possible witnesses sought in 2001 racketeering

case," "Hearing set for man accused of double homicide"; $N=20$ men; $N=18$ women). Each participant saw a series of five different web pages that were similar in design to common news websites. Each of the non-control web pages had one stimulus headline and 14–24 filler headlines.

Participants were given four minutes to view the first web page, then they were asked five filler questions about the design of the web page (e.g., "The website was easy to read," "The ads were distracting."), and then they were shown six headlines and asked to indicate whether or not the headline appeared on the web page they just viewed. After answering the web design questions and the memory questions for the first web page, participants viewed the second through fifth web pages following the same procedure of answering web design and memory questions after each page. The memory questions served as a test of their attention to the headlines and to further prime one target headline. Non-control participants saw six total stimulus headlines (one on each of five web pages and one among the subsequent memory tasks). After answering the filler and memory questions following the fifth web page, participants filled out a questionnaire asking them various questions about men and women, including a measure assessing their attitudes about sexual assault. Participants then filled out a questionnaire asking them to rate their familiarity with and opinions about five recent high-profile criminal cases. Finally, participants filled out a short demographics form including questions about gender, year in school, age, ethnicity, religiosity, and relationship status. Participants were thanked, debriefed, and given a list of community and campus resources for sexual assault support.

Measure

Attitudes Toward Rape

Participants' endorsement of rape myths was assessed with Hinck and Thomas' (1999) Attitudes Toward Rape (ATR) scale. This 27-item measure included items like "Some women asked to be raped" and "Women frequently cry rape falsely" answered on a Likert scale anchored from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 6 (*agree strongly*). The scale was internally reliable, $\alpha=.81$, $M=2.11$, SD=.44.

Ratings of Bryant's Guilt

Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they believed five high-profile figures (Michael Jackson, O. J. Simpson, Scott Peterson, Kobe Bryant, and Martha Stewart) were guilty of the crimes they allegedly committed, regardless of the outcome of their respective trials. They were also asked to rate their familiarity with each of the cases. Items were rated

on a seven-point Likert scale with higher numbers indicating more guilt (1=*definitely not guilty*; 7=*definitely guilty*) and more case familiarity (1=*not at all familiar*; 7=*extremely familiar*). Guilt: Michael Jackson, $M=5.33$, SD=1.36; O. J. Simpson, $M=5.77$, SD=1.26; Scott Peterson, $M=5.60$, SD=1.24; Kobe Bryant, $M=4.17$, SD=1.57; Martha Stewart, $M=5.93$, SD=1.17. Familiarity: Michael Jackson, $M=4.16$, SD=1.25; O. J. Simpson, $M=4.34$, SD=1.68; Scott Peterson, $M=4.03$, SD=2.09; Kobe Bryant, $M=3.97$, SD=1.86; Martha Stewart, $M=4.44$, SD=1.68.

Results

Memory Check

Following each web page, participants were asked five questions about the design of the web page to go along with the cover story. There were no significant differences on these questions across the four conditions (F's<1). Participants found the web pages to be equally easy to read, fun to read, easy to navigate, (non)distracting, and likeable.

Participants' memory for the headlines they read was tested following exposure to each web page. Participants were given six headlines and were asked to simply indicate whether they believed each headline was on the web page they previously viewed. Participants showed a high rate of success in this memory task, indicating that they were paying attention to the headlines and they were not exposed to an overwhelming amount of information. Across all conditions, on average, participants correctly identified headlines that were present and not present 81.8% of the time (range=48.1 to 98.7%). Although the memory questions were primarily used to assess participants' attention to the headlines in general, one target headline from the three experimental conditions was included as an additional prime and a check of the participants' attention to the target headlines. Participants correctly identified that the target headline was present (asked after viewing the fourth web page in the series) 87.0% of the time. Finally, there was no association between the number of headlines on a web page and the participants' memory for presence or absence of headlines.

Ratings of Bryant's Guilt

H1 : Participants exposed to headlines endorsing rape myths were expected to be less likely to attribute blame to an alleged perpetrator than those who did not read rape myth-endorsing headlines.

We submitted ratings of Bryant's guilt in the sexual assault case to a 2 (gender) × 4 (headline condition) ANOVA. Overall, there was no significant gender effect, $F(1, 143)=.28$,

ns. There were also no significant differences among headline conditions, $F(3, 143)=.91$, ns; however, means were in the predicted direction. Participants were marginally more likely to think that Bryant was not guilty after reading the headlines containing rape myths (conditions 1 and 2) than those not containing rape myths (conditions 3 and 4), $t(149)= 1.69$, $p<.10$, $d=.28$. There was also no gender × condition interaction, $F(3, 143)=1.87$, ns. Looking at the simple effects, while the condition manipulation had no effect on female participants' judgments of guilt, $F(3, 143)=.23$, consistent with Hypothesis 1a, males were affected by the manipulation, $F(3, 143)=2.55$, $p=.058$ (see Table 1). Men were less likely to think that Bryant was guilty after being exposed to the headlines with general rape myths than the non-myth assault condition, $t(71)=2.01$, $p<.05$, $d=.71$, and marginally less likely to think that Bryant was guilty after being exposed to the headlines with rape myths from the Bryant case than the non-myth assault condition, $t(71)=1.91$, $p<.10$, $d=.60$. Therefore, collapsing across these conditions, male participants were less likely to rate Bryant as guilty after reading headlines containing rape myths than those not containing rape myths, $t(73)=2.31$, $p<.05$, $d=.54$. For female participants, none of these differences was significant, $t's(72)<.94$.

Within each of the four conditions, simple effects tests showed that one gender difference reached significance (Hypothesis 1a). First, although in the expected direction of male participants being less likely than female participants to think that Bryant was guilty, the gender differences for the two myth-endorsing conditions did not reach significance, $F's<.71$, $p's>.40$. Findings were in the reverse direction for the non-myth and control conditions. Male participants were *more* likely than female participants to think that Bryant was guilty after being exposed to non-myth sexual assault headlines, $F(1, 143)=4.35$, $p<.05$, $d=-.74$. Gender differences in the control condition did not reach significance, although male participants again were more likely to think Bryant was guilty, $F(1, 143)=.26$. Collapsing across myth-endorsing and non-myth-endorsing headline conditions, the 2 (gender) × 2 (condition) ANOVA revealed a significant interaction, $F(1, 147)=4.47$, $p<.05$, with men being less likely to rate Bryant as guilty when

exposed to myth-endorsing headlines and more likely to rate Bryant as guilty when exposed to non-myth-endorsing headlines. The latter findings were unexpected and will be addressed further in the general discussion.

Finally, to make sure that the headline manipulation did not just lead to general conviction (or leniency) biases, we also checked participants' ratings of other celebrities' perceived guilt. Four other individuals were involved in highly publicized criminal trials around the same time as Kobe Bryant. Unlike participants' responses to the question about Bryant's guilt, participants were not more likely to rate the others as guilty (or not guilty) after being exposed to headlines containing rape myths (vs those not containing rape myths), $t's<1.4$, $p's>.15$. Therefore, the headline manipulation seemed to uniquely affect participants' ratings of the Bryant case compared to other highly publicized cases. Across all conditions, participants were more likely to find Bryant not guilty than each of the other celebrities ($t's>7.83$, $p's<.001$). This could have been due to Bryant's case being the only among the five that did not go to trial [although two of the other high-profile defendants (Simpson and Jackson) were acquitted], or this could be due to our culture's general defendant bias in sexual assault cases.

Attitudes Toward Rape

H2 : Participants exposed to headlines endorsing rape myths were expected to express less sympathy toward sexual assault victims than those who did not read rape myth-endorsing headlines.

We submitted participants' scores on the attitudes toward rape scale to the same 2 (gender) × 4 (headline condition) ANOVA. Overall, male participants were more likely than females to express supportive attitudes toward rape, $F(1, 146)=3.71$, $p=.056$ (see Table 2). There were no significant differences among the headline conditions, $F(3, 146)=.13$, ns. The interaction between participant gender and experimental condition was also not significant, $F(3, 146)=1.51$, ns. Investigating differences within each gender, however, simple effects tests showed that male participants were significantly more likely to express supportive attitudes

Table 1 Ratings of Bryant's guilt by gender and experimental condition.

Experimental condition	Men		Women	
	M	SD	*M*	SD
Bryant headlines with myths	3.76	2.02	4.14	1.17
Non-Bryant headlines with myths	3.72	1.53	4.15	1.35
Non-myth sexual assault headlines	4.90	1.80	3.82	.88
Control headlines	4.50	1.85	4.24	1.64

Items were answered on a 1–7 Likert scale with higher numbers indicating greater likelihood of believing Bryant was guilty.

Table 2 Attitudes toward rape by gender and experimental condition.

Experimental Condition	Men		Women	
	M	SD	M	SD
Bryant headlines w/ rape myths	2.33	.43	1.97	.37
Non-Bryant headlines w/ rape myths	2.19	.36	2.05	.56
Sexual assault headlines w/out rape myths	2.04	.52	2.11	.41
Control headlines	2.18	.34	2.07	.49

Items were answered on a 1–7 Likert scale with higher numbers indicating greater endorsement of rape myths.

toward rape after being exposed to the Kobe Bryant myth headlines than the sexual assault headlines without myths, $t(72)=2.09$, $p<.05$, $d=.60$, consistent with Hypothesis 2a. Male participants were not significantly more likely to express rape-supportive attitudes after being exposed to the Bryant myth headlines than the non-Bryant myth headlines or the control headlines, although means were in the predicted direction (see Table 2). There were no differences among the four conditions for female participants, $F(3, 146)=.36$.

Within each of the four conditions, simple effects tests showed that one gender difference reached significance (Hypothesis 2a). Male participants expressed significantly more supportive attitudes toward sexual assault than did female participants after being exposed to myth-endorsing headlines about the Kobe Bryant case, $F(1, 146)=6.55$, $p<.05$, $d=.90$. The gender differences for the two other experimental conditions and control condition did not reach significance, F's$<.96$, p's$>.33$. In other words, the overall gender difference in attitudes toward sexual assault was driven primarily by the Bryant rape-myth endorsing headlines.

Discussion

First, given the results from the memory test, we can be reasonably confident that the participants were paying attention to the headlines and paid sufficient attention to the target headlines in each condition. Second, as predicted, results in this study were driven by participant gender. Male participants were more likely to think that Bryant was not guilty after being exposed to the headlines containing rape myths than after being exposed to headlines not containing rape myths. Also, male participants reported attitudes more supportive of sexual assault (compared to women and compared to men in a non-myth-endorsing control group) after being exposed to newspaper headlines containing rape myths about the Kobe Bryant case. In contrast, women appeared largely unaffected by the headline manipulation. Further, exposure to headlines containing rape myths did not merely create a leniency bias as participants were not more likely to rate the other celebrities "not guilty" after being exposed to headlines containing rape myths.

General Discussion

The present research addresses a void in the rape myth literature—the experimental examination of the effects of exposure to rape myths in the media. Although past research has demonstrated an association between rape myth endorsement and attitudes about sexual assault, few studies have investigated the causal impact of rape myths in the media on attitudes toward sexual assault. Given people's reliance on the media for entertainment and news, various media outlets are no doubt a major source of reinforcement for people's rape myths. In the present research, we investigated one of these media outlets—print journalism.

Study 1 demonstrated that rape myths are found in headlines about sexual assault cases. We found that almost 10% of headlines surrounding the Kobe Bryant sexual assault case contained rape myths, with the "she's lying" and "she wanted it" myths most commonly endorsed. Understandably, headlines are much less likely than the articles themselves to contain rape myths, but this is still alarming given the relative brevity of headlines and the relative frequency with which people read headlines. Further, we found that headlines were much more likely to use "accuser" than "alleged victim." Bohner and colleagues (2001) have noted how language choices in writings about sexual assault often shift responsibility from the perpetrator to the victim. Therefore, through the use of rape myths and subtle language choices, even brief headlines may reinforce readers' thoughts of shifting blame to the sexual assault victim and excusing the perpetrator.

Study 2 demonstrated the effects of such language in newspaper headlines on participants' attitudes about a high-profile sexual assault case and toward sexual assault victims. Consistent with past research on rape myths, men were more likely to be affected (negatively) by exposure to rape myths than women. Male participants were less likely to think Bryant was guilty of sexual assault after being exposed to myth-endorsing headlines (from the Bryant case and in general) than non-myth-endorsing headlines. In addition, exposure to myth-endorsing headlines also affected men's attitudes beyond the Bryant case itself, as they

expressed general attitudes more condoning of sexual assault after exposure to myth-endorsing headlines from the Bryant case than non-myth-endorsing headlines. Female participants' attitudes did not seem to be strongly affected by the different headlines they read (with one exception noted below). It is important to note that participants were only exposed to six stimulus headlines in this study. We speculate that the effects reported here are a conservative representation of the effects from real-life exposure to a significantly greater number of headlines surrounding high-profile sexual assault cases. Taken together, these studies show that people are being exposed to rape myths in headlines (which research shows are much more likely to be read than the corresponding articles), and that these headlines can elicit negative attitudes about sexual assault victims and less perpetrator blame, at least among men.

Impact of Rape Myths in the Media

Past researchers have investigated the frequency of rape myth endorsement in different mediums (e.g., Cuklanz 2000; Los and Chamard 1997). Adding to past research that has shown that media consumers are regularly exposed to rape myths on television and in newspaper articles, the current research demonstrated that people are also exposed to rape myths in newspaper headlines. The current and past research are also consistent in showing that the most frequently endorsed rape myths are those implying that the victim is lying or that the victim is somehow responsible for the assault committed against her. The rape myths perpetuated in the media are a reflection of women's inferior status in our culture and our culture's defensive reaction to a heinous crime. Moreover, rape myths in the media teach rape myths to those who do not already hold them, strengthen rape myths in those who already do, and trigger rape myths in those who are ready to use them.

Although the media are not the only source of rape myths, any exposure to rape myths can have devastating effects for victims of sexual assault. First, exposure to rape myths reinforces men's and women's prototypical notion of "real rape" (described by Estrich (1987)). Reinforcement of this prototype leads people to be dismissive of future claims of sexual assault that deviate from the prototype (see Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994, for a review). Victims who subscribe to this prototypical notion of "real rape" are less likely to label their sexual assaults as such (Kahn et al. 2003). Therefore, victims are less likely to report their own assaults because of fear (of judgment), self-blame, and mis-labeling due to rape myths (Peterson and Muehlenhard 2004; Pitts and Schwartz 1997); and perpetrators are less likely to acknowledge their violent behavior as an assault (Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1995; Sinclair and Bourne 1998). When people are dismissive of claims of sexual assault,

they increase the likelihood of sexual assaults occurring in the future. The less victims report sexual assaults and the less perpetrator behavior is identified, the less a society recognizes the magnitude of this crime and the less that is done to eliminate perpetuating factors like rape myths.

Any discussion employing rape myths suppresses authentic discussion of the factors that cause and heighten vulnerability to sexual assault. Although a discussion of patriarchy and inferior status of women as the underlying explanations of most sexual assaults is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to point out the ironic function of rape myths to explain away assaults in cases where the factors present actually make the sexual assault *more* likely to have occurred. In the sexual assault case against Kobe Bryant, discussion of the alleged victim's number of sex partners and history of treatment for mental illness fueled rape myths (e.g., "Bryant's defense" 2003; "Kobe's accuser" 2003). However, as noted by Franiuk and colleagues (2008), these factors should have been discussed for their role in heightening the alleged victim's risk of sexual assault instead of lessening it as rape myths imply. Suggesting that a woman "wanted" the sex (that she is claiming is an assault) because of a history of multiple sex partners, quells discussion of how sex with multiple partners actually increases a woman's vulnerability to sexual assault (e.g., Kaltman et al. 2005; Koss and Dinero 1989). Additionally, past research has shown that poorer mental health is a risk factor for sexual victimization as it likely prevents the victim from recognizing threats and also draws attention to her as an easier target to predators (Acierno et al. 1997; Vicary et al. 1995).

Most discussions of sexual assault focus on the victim, but myths surrounding the perpetrator also prevent discussion of factors that predict sexual aggression in men. Myths about how any given perpetrator is "not the type" usually prevent discussion of perpetrator characteristics that may make him more likely to have committed the assault. For example, Franiuk and colleagues (2008) found that nearly 20% of articles written about Kobe Bryant employed the "he's not the type" myth, usually by presenting fellow NBA players' and fans' character assessments. Only one article, of the more than one hundred and fifty evaluated in their research, addressed the possibility that the athletic culture of privilege and masculinity may make Kobe Bryant more likely to commit a sexual assault. However, the fact that past researchers have noted a correlation between athletic affiliation and perpetration of sexual violence (see Benedict 1998, for a review) is stymied once the "he's not the type" myth is triggered.

Ultimately, we can only speculate about the direct impact of rape myths in the news media on these high-profile sexual assault cases. During jury selection, Kobe Bryant's alleged victim decided not to testify in the trial,

leading prosecutors to drop the charges against Bryant. Although most pretrial publicity typically biases jurors against the defendant, research has shown that the opposite bias occurs in sexual assault cases (Hoiberg and Stires 1973; Mullin et al. 1996). Franiuk and colleagues (2008) suggested that exposure to rape myths in articles surrounding sexual assault cases may be one explanation of this pro-defendant bias. Similarly, exposure to rape myths in headlines may contribute to this bias unique to sexual assault cases. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to suggest that Bryant's alleged victim decided not to testify largely based on the pretrial publicity surrounding the case. Any time charges are dropped in a sexual assault case or a defendant is acquitted, the rape myths used in that case are validated and it becomes that much more difficult for future sexual assault victims to come forward with their claims.

It is not our contention that perpetuation of rape myths in different mediums is done with intentional malice toward the victim. For example, journalists likely believe that they are giving unbiased information when they are reporting on sexual assault cases. Further, they may even believe that it's as important to doubt the alleged victim's story as it is to doubt the alleged perpetrator's story. Franiuk and colleagues (2008), however, found that journalists were much more likely to provide doubt for the victim's story than for the perpetrator's (and this finding was corroborated by the current research). Journalists are not immune to cultural influences; and a culture that supports rape myths is going to be reflected in most journalists' reporting.

Limitations

Although we were able to address an important limitation of previous research by comparing men's and women's reactions to rape myths in the news media, we were unable to make racial comparisons. Most past research has shown that non-White participants are more likely to endorse rape myths than White participants (e.g., Jimenez and Abreu 2003; Varelas and Foley 1998), although Carmody and Washington (2001) did not find a difference in rape myth endorsement between black and white women. Contradictory findings and the general neglect of non-white participants in research underscore the need to investigate the impact of participant race in future studies.

Another limitation of the present research is the dependent measure. We attempted to measure attitudes approving of sexual assault by situating the target questions among other questions not related to sexual assault, but it is likely that some participants were influenced by social desirability effects. Although our manipulation was successful in showing differences between those exposed to rape myths in headlines and those not exposed to rape myths, it's possible that a more subtle measure of attitudes toward

sexual assault would have yielded stronger results. This may be especially true for female participants who may react more strongly against overt attempts to place blame on a female victim. The current research is an important first step in demonstrating the causal impact of exposure to rape myths in the news media, but more subtle and indirect consequences of such exposure are worthy of future investigation.

Finally, past research is consistent in showing that men are more likely to endorse rape myths than women (see Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994, for a review) and that men engage in more victim blame and assign less perpetrator guilt than women in high-profile sexual assault trials (Cowan and Curtis 1994). Although general findings from study 2 are consistent with past research, there were some gender differences in study 2 that were unexpected. With regards to ratings of Bryant's guilt, men were affected by the headlines in the expected direction, while there were no significant differences between women's ratings of Bryant's guilt. Further, there were no significant differences between men's and women's ratings of Bryant's guilt after exposure to headlines with rape myths, although they were in the predicted direction of men being less likely to rate Bryant as guilty. Most surprisingly, though, the only significant difference between men's and women's ratings of Bryant's guilt was that men were *more* likely than women to rate Bryant as guilty when exposed to headlines without rape myths. That men were significantly more likely to rate Bryant as guilty in the non-myth endorsing conditions may be explained by men wanting to distance themselves from the perpetrator. Past research has shown that participants are less likely to convict defendants similar to themselves when they perceive the evidence to be weak but more likely to convict similar defendants when they perceive the evidence to be strong (Kerr et al. 1995). In the present research, when rape myths were triggered by myth-endorsing headlines, male participants may have felt that the evidence against Bryant was weak and may have been less likely to accept his guilt; however, when rape myths were not triggered by the control headlines, male participants may have wanted to distance themselves from a seemingly guilty perpetrator. Admittedly, we are speculating and this gender difference warrants further investigation.

Some past research has investigated the prevalence of rape myths on television shows and in print journalism, but very little research has investigated the impact of these rape myths. The present research investigates the impact of exposure to rape myths in one medium—print journalism. However, this research only scratches the surface of exposure to rape myths and their impact on viewers/readers. The media undoubtedly play a key role in perpetuating and strengthening rape myths. Future research should investigate the prevalence and impact of rape myths in various media—television journalism, television shows, and mov-

ies. It would also be interesting to compare the relative impact of exposure to rape myths presented in television shows and movies (fiction) to those presented in the news media (non-fiction). We contend that the news media may have a greater impact on the perpetuation of rape myths as consumers may engage in less critical thinking when consuming information presented as news.

Conclusion

Taken together with previous research that demonstrates the prevalence of rape myths in various media, the current research shows the impact of these myths and, more importantly, the impact of these myths after only brief exposure. If exposure to a few headlines (among dozens of others) is sufficient to temporarily trigger negative thoughts toward sexual assault victims and heightened thoughts of victim-blame, the implications for the impact of repeated exposure to rape myths in the media are clear.

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