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## **Sexual Objectification and Attitude towards Rape Victims: Mediating Role of Rape Myth Acceptance**

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### **Abstract**

The current research aimed to explore the mediational effect of acceptance level of rape myth in the relationship of sexual objectification and attitudes towards rape victims. Additionally, the study sought to examine the influence of age, educational level and gender on study variables. 400 research participants having age range of 25-60 years ( $M=38.21$ ,  $SD=13.31$ ) were selected through convenient sampling strategy from five Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's cities (Haripur, Abbottabad, Charsada, Mansehra and Mardan,) and two Azad Kashmir region's cities (HatianBala and Muzaffrabad). The Attitude towards Rape Victims scale (Ward, 1988), Updated Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (McMahon & Farmer, 2011), and The Interpersonal Sexual Objectification Scale (Kozee et al., 2007) were administered for data collection. The findings revealed a positive association of attitudes towards rape victims with both sexual objectification and rape myth acceptance. Furthermore, the study demonstrated that rape myth acceptance played a significant mediating role in the relationship between sexual objectification and attitudes towards victims of rape. Moreover, the results indicated that educational level and age of victims did not yield significant differences, while gender showed a significant distinction. Specifically, females exhibited higher levels of sexual objectification, whereas males demonstrated higher tendency to accept rape myth and exhibit more negative attitudes for the victims of rape. In conclusion, this study emphasized the impact of rape myth acceptance as a mediating factor, altering the strength/degree of the association sexual objectification has with



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attitudes towards the victims of rape.

Keywords: Sexual Objectification level, Acceptance level of Rape Myth, and Attitude toward Victims of Rape

### Introduction

Rape myths encompass unfounded beliefs, biases, or stereotypes pertaining to rapists, the act of rape, and its victims (Reling et al., 2018). The acceptance of rape myths contributes to the phenomenon of victim blaming and serves to rationalize and downplay instances of sexual violence. These false beliefs are reinforced by endorsing rape myths, such as the idea that victims can prevent rape or that stranger rape is the only form of rape. They also perpetuate the notion that uncontrolled sexual desires lead to rape, thereby they shift the blame from the offender to the victim (Fisher & Pina, 2013; Smith, 2014). Endorsing rape myths has severe negative consequences for the psychological and physical well-being and development of survivors (Aronowitz et al., 2012).

Several important factors contribute to the acceptance of rape myths, including aggression, gender, and media influence. Men tend to believe in rape myths more than women (Lambert, 2021). Individuals with aggressive tendencies are more likely to hold positive attitudes towards rape, and exposure to aggressive and violent stimuli targeting females can increase the endorsement of rape myths among males (Nunes et al., 2013). Media plays a role in shaping individuals' perceptions of sexual assault and rape, particularly when their understanding of the topic is limited. Media influences society's perception of and response to sexual violence (Katherine, 2020).

In Pakistan, rape, as well as various other forms of violence against women, is widespread (Kamal et al., 2010). Women in Pakistani society are frequently perceived as vulnerable and are expected to confine themselves to their homes. When they deviate from traditional gender roles by venturing outside, engaging in social activities, or pursuing employment, they often face blame in the event of rape. The acceptance of rape myths reinforces the stereotype that women involved in such activities cannot legitimately be considered rape victims (Nisar et al., 2021).

Feminist theory provides insight into the issue of rape and frames it as a problem rooted in male-dominated societies. This theory posits that rape is a violent act driven by political motivations to exert control and degrade others. Feminist theorists argue that rape is a conscious process of intimidation aimed at instilling fear in women, thereby ensuring their dependence on men for protection. This fear of rape reinforces women's reliance on men (Gary, 2010; Jilleian, 2021). In Pakistan, rape myth acceptance among individuals is prevalent. The country frequently reports cases of sexual assault, rape, and other forms of violence against women. Unfortunately, the police in Pakistan often display unwillingness or reluctance to pursue such cases, and some men hold the misguided belief that a woman's character somehow shields her from potential perpetrators. There exists a harmful notion that only young and attractive women can be victims of rape, or



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that women may somehow be willing participants in such acts. Disturbingly, previous studies have shown that society tends to view rape survivors as unfit for marriage to another man. It is noteworthy that the endorsement of rape myths is observed among educated individuals, and gender differences play a role. Men, in particular, tend to hold negative attitudes toward rape victims and engage in victim-blaming behaviors (Kamal et al., 2010). Within the societal context of Pakistan, women are often perceived as weak and expected to remain within the confines of their homes. By venturing outside, participating in social activities, or pursuing employment, women are often unjustly held responsible for any incidents of rape they may experience, thus reinforcing the endorsement of rape myths. This perspective fosters the stereotype that women who engage in such activities cannot legitimately claim to be victims of rape. Furthermore, men tend to endorse rape myths more frequently than women, and young adults exhibit higher levels of sexual double standards compared to adults (Nisar et al., 2021).

Sexual objectification refers to the phenomenon where women are dehumanized, reduced to mere objects, and evaluated solely based on their sexual body parts, disconnected from their individuality. Women commonly experience higher levels of sexual objectification, wherein their bodies are treated as instruments to fulfill the sexual desires of men (Harris, 2016; Volpato & Andrighetto, 2015). Instances of sexual objectification encompass various situations, such as making sexual comments about women's bodies, engaging in leering or gazing behavior, perpetrating sexual harassment, and committing acts of rape. This objectification takes place within two distinct domains: real-life interpersonal encounters, involving interactions with acquaintances, and media encounters, which occur in digital spaces, sports, commercials, music videos, and other forms of media.

In Pakistan, women face sexual objectification, fueled by media portrayals that promote the false notion that a woman's success hinges solely on her physical attractiveness. Standards such as having long hair, fair complexion, and flawless skin are presented as the ideal, promising women enhanced desirability, particularly in the eyes of men and boys (Ullah & Khan, 2014). These images introduce new ideals of femininity that do not align with Pakistani culture, yet women are expected to conform to these objectifying standards in all aspects of life (Afaque & Shah, 2018).

The Sexual Objectification theory lays the foundation to understand objectified individuals. It is a common occurrence in daily life that women experience frequently in media and interpersonal encounters. Women experience being gazed at by others in social interactions, and in media, they are portrayed with more emphasis on their bodies or sexual body parts (Xiao et al., 2019).

When women are subjected to sexual objectification, they are dehumanized and treated as mere objects, disregarding their inherent humanity and diminishing moral considerations. As a result, women are often perceived as less competent, lacking agency, and stripped of their dignity. This devaluation can contribute to negative attitudes and behaviors, including sexual aggression towards females (Loughnan et al., 2013; Samji et al., 2019). Furthermore, objectification assigns



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responsibility and blame to the victims of rape, exacerbating the stigmatization and mistreatment they face (Bevens et al., 2018).

Victim blaming refers to the societal tendency to hold victims responsible for incidents of rape. This phenomenon is present across various societies and is deeply rooted in cultural factors. The stigmatization of rape victims, coupled with social and legal inequalities, as well as the lack of supportive and effective systems, further exacerbate the victimization experienced by rape survivors (Khaliq, 2012). In the context of Pakistan, rape victims often encounter a lack of familial support and, in many cases, face the horrifying consequence of being killed under the guise of preserving the so-called "honor" of the family within society (Jamshed & Kamal, 2019).

The acceptance of rape myths contributes to the perpetuation of a rape culture, wherein blame is shifted onto victims and women are held accountable for their own victimization (Samji et al., 2019). Rape myths serve as mechanisms to deny the reality of sexual assaults, fostering an environment that encourages victims to internalize blame and discourages them from reporting the crime (Clippert-Treadwell, 2014; Egan & Wilson, 2012). Survivors of sexual assault already face numerous challenges alongside the trauma itself, and victim-blaming is a prevalent outcome of rape incidents. This attribution of blame places the burden of victimization on the individual, a sentiment that is unfortunately widespread in rape cases. Various individuals, including judges, police officers, lawyers, and particularly the relatives and friends of victims, tend to assign blame to the victims themselves (Cripes, 2015).

In general, victim blaming pertains to the inclination to assign some degree of responsibility to victims for negative outcomes. Early scholars proposed a continuum of victim responsibility, which encompassed varying levels of innocence or guilt in relation to the crime, abuse, or misfortune experienced. Victims who bear no contribution to the incident, such as victims of natural disasters, should not be held responsible for their victimization. However, victims who are perceived as engaging in provocation or precipitating actions, such as dressing in a certain manner or inciting perpetrators, as well as victims considered highly culpable, for instance, a robber who is killed, often face significant attribution of responsibility. However, it is rare to encounter completely blameless victims, and even when the role of the victim in the victimization is ambiguous, there tends to be a predisposition towards assigning blame (Lee, 2019).

Various individual and structural factors can influence the acceptance of rape myths, sexual objectification, and attitudes towards rape victims. Research indicates that these variables may also vary based on factors such as education, gender, and age. Notably, comprehensive sex education programs have been found to be ineffective in addressing important aspects such as consent, leading to no significant impact on rape myth acceptance, sexual objectification, and attitudes towards rape victims (Willis et al., 2019). The current study reveals a non-significant association between education and these factors, suggesting that multiple reasons may contribute to this outcome. In our society, conversations



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about sexual education are discouraged, and there is a lack of comprehensive sexual education in various settings including homes, schools, colleges, and universities. Additionally, deeply ingrained traditional gender norms discourage questioning, and adherence to these norms is expected across generations. Similarly, findings indicate that age is non-significantly related with rape myth acceptance, sexual objectification, and attitudes towards the victims of rape in Pakistan (Kellie et al., 2019). There is a dearth of theoretical findings regarding the impact of age on the level of sexual objectification, acceptance level of rape myths, and attitudes towards victims of rape in Pakistan. Moreover, discussions surrounding incidents of rape and related topics are considered taboo for both males and females in our society. A comprehensive review of the literature confirms that men tend to endorse more rape myths compared to women (Barnett et al., 2017; Carrol et al., 2016; Lambert, 2021;), while women experience higher levels of sexual objectification (Gervais et al., 2015; Harris, 2016). The literature also supports the observation that men often hold negative attitudes towards rape victims and believe that women fabricate harassment claims (Bongiorn et al., 2020).

### ***Rationale of the Study***

The researcher conducted a comprehensive literature review to gather information on sexual objectification, the acceptance level of rape myths and people's attitudes towards the victims of rape across different cultures, samples, and variables. However, the literature review did not sufficiently address the specific relationship between acceptance level of rape myth, sexual objectification, and attitudes towards victims of rape, more specifically in case of lawyers and police officers. Previous studies have primarily focused either on the impact of acceptance level of rape myths solely (Crall & Goodfriend, 2016) or the impact rape myth acceptance has in making attitudes towards the victims of rape, such as victim blaming (Bowie, 2018).

Rape myths and their acceptance play a significant role in fostering disbelief concerning potential rape victims, irrespective of their personal history. These myths reinforce erroneous beliefs about the definition of rape, the characteristics of rape victims, and the prevention of rape, ultimately shifting blame from the perpetrator to the victim (Crall & Goodfriend, 2016).

In Asia, specifically in Pakistan, there is a notable scarcity of research on topics such as rape myths and sexual objectification, resulting in stigmatized attitudes towards victims. The general population often holds more negative views about victims compared to the individuals who commit the assault, and these attitudes are often justified by accepting rape myths. Such taboos persist within society.

### **Objectives**

1. To measure how the relationship between sexual objectification and attitude towards the victims of rape is mediated by rape myth acceptance.





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2. To examine the role of respondents' age, their educational level and gender on sexual objectification, acceptance level of rape and their attitude towards the victims of rape.

### Hypotheses

1. People's attitude toward the victims of rape, their acceptance level of rape myth and sexual objectification are positively related with each other.
2. The association of sexual objectification level and attitude towards the victims of rape will significantly mediated by rape myth acceptance.
3. Attitude toward rape victims becomes stronger with incensement in age while acceptance level of rape myths and sexual objectification level becomes weak with age.
4. Males will show higher level of sexual objectification, negative attitudes towards the victims of rape and have higher acceptance level of rape myths than female.
5. Highly educated individuals have less negative attitude towards the victims of rape, less accepting rape myths and have lower level of sexual objectification.

### Methodology

#### Sample

400 respondents were selected as sample by using convenient sampling strategy who's age range was from 25 to 60 years ( $M=39.21$ ,  $SD=14.31$ ). The whole sample was selected from was selected from lawyers ( $n=200$ ) and police officers ( $n=200$ ). On the basis of respondents' gender this sample was categorized into two sections (male  $n= 200$ , female  $n=200$ ). The respondents were selected from five Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's cities (Haripur, Abbottabad, Charsada, Mansehra and Mardan,) and two Azad Kashmir region's cities (HatianBala and Muzaffrabad).

#### Instruments

**Updated Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale: uIRMA.** uIRMA is a 22 items (McMahon & Farmer, 2011) in which individuals use 5-point Likert scale (from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree) to score on items of scale. This scale yield score ranges from 19 to 95 which indicated that higher the scores higher will be rejection of accepting rape myths and vice versa.

**Attitude towards rape victim scale (ARVS).** ARVS is a 25 items scale (Ward, 1988) and its items are scored on 5 point Likert scale. Its score range is 0-100. Its scores indicated that higher scorers show more strong negative attitudes for the victims of rape and vice versa.

**Interpersonal sexual objectification scale (ISOS).** Kozee et al. (2007) had develop this scale which has 21 items with scoring on 5-point Likert scale (i.e., 1 = never, to 5 = almost always). This scale yield score which ranges from 42 to 210. Higher the scores on scale higher will be the level of sexual objectification.



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### Procedure

Before starting the data collection from respondents' proper formal written permission was taken from all concerned authorities of respective departments. During data collection at first the researcher gave informed consent form to be signed by all respondents for assuring their willingness to participate in research. The researcher approaches all participants in the premises of their departments personally. After getting the signed informed consent form from all participants the researcher distributed all questionnaires along with demographic sheet on participants. It was instructed to all respondents to carefully complete all the items of each questionnaire and do not skip any item of any questionnaire. After data collection the researcher thanks to all respondents in response to their participation in the study.

### Results

Table 1: Reliability analysis on Interpersonal Sexual Objectification Scale, Updated Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale and Attitude toward Rape Victim Scale (N=400).

Scales	$\alpha$	M	SD	Range
ISOS	.96	3.36	14.23	22-75
uIRMA	.87	66.86	14.13	39-103
ATVR	.71	71.35	10.49	38-95

*Note.* ISOS= Interpersonal Sexual Objectification Scale; uIRMA= Updated Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale; ATVVR = Attitude toward Rape Victim Scale.

The results of Table 1 showed that all scales have good internal consistency level as the value of alpha coefficients for Attitude toward Rape Victim Scale (ATVR) was .71, for Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (uIRMA) was .87, and for Interpersonal Sexual Objectification Scale (ISOS) was .96.

Table 2: Correlation matrix among Rape Myth Acceptance, Age, Attitude toward Rape Victim, and Interpersonal Sexual Objectification.

S.No	Variables	n	I	II	III	IV	M	SD
I	Atti. Tow. rape victim	400	-	.272**	.493**	.028	32.87	7.07
II	Rape Myth Accep.	400	-	-	.232**	.072	70.36	10.50
III	Inter. Sexual Object.	400	-	-	-	.015	67.85	14.19
IV	Age	400	-	-	-	-	38.21	13.31

*Note.* Atti. Tow. rape victim = Attitude Toward Rape Victim; Rape Myth Accep.= Rape Myth Acceptance Scale; Inter. Sexual Object.= Interpersonal Sexual Objectification.

Table 2 shows that respondents' age is non-significantly associated with respondents' attitude toward the victims of rape, their acceptance level of rape



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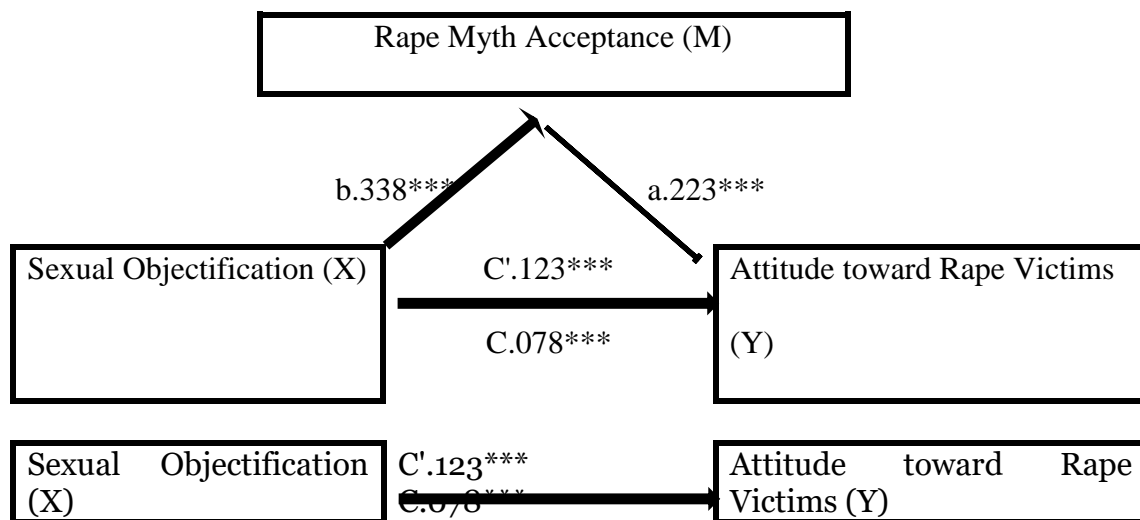
myths and interpersonal sexual objectification. This table also showed that attitude towards rape victim; interpersonal sexual objectification and rape myth acceptance are significantly associated with each other in positive direction.

Table 3: Mediation Analysis for predicting Sexual Objectification from Attitude towards Rape Victims and Rape Myth Acceptance (N=400)

DV	M	Effect of IV on M	Effect of M on DV	Direct effects	Indirect effect	Total effects
Attit. Tow.Ra.Vic.	Ra.My. Accep.	.230***	.338***	.123***	.078**	0.201***

Note. Attit. Tow.Ra.Vic.=Attitude towards rape victim, Ra.My. Accep.= Rape myth acceptance, DV = dependent variable; IV = independent variable (narcissism); M = mediating variable. \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

The results of mediation analysis revealed that there is indirect association between level of sexual objectification and their attitude towards the victims of rape through acceptance level of rape myths. It also revealed that acceptance level of rape myths partially mediates the association sexual objectification has with negative attitude towards the victims of rape.



In figure 1, Path a revealed that sexual objectification is significantly linked with acceptance level of rape myths ( $a = .230^{***}$ ,  $p = .001$ ). In figure 1, Path b revealed significant association of attitude toward rape victims with rape myth acceptance ( $b = .338^{***}$ ,  $p = .001$ ). Path c of figure, also showed that both sexual objectification and attitude toward rape victim are significantly positively associated with each other ( $c = .123^{***}$ ,  $p = .001$ ). The indicated effect between sexual objectification and attitude towards rape victim ( $ab = .078$ ) was totally above zero.





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Table 4: T-test Analysis to Compare means of Interpersonal Sexual Objectification, Attitude toward Victim of Rape and Acceptance level of Rape Myth (N=400).

Variables	Male <i>n</i> =202		Female <i>n</i> = 198		<i>t</i> (398)	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Ra. My. Acce.	63.27	13.16	70.50	12.11	5.715	.001	0.57
Inter. Sex. Objec.	34.87	12.31	43.76	13.19	6.970	.001	0.70
Atti.Tow.Ra.Vic	72.71	7.81	65.96	10.11	7.481	.001	0.75

*Note.* Atti.Tow.Ra.Vic = Attitude Toward Rape Victim Scale; Ra. My. Acce.= Rape Myth Acceptance Scale; Inter. Sex. Objec.= Interpersonal Sexual Objectification. Table 4 demonstrates significant gender differences appeared on attitude toward rape victim; interpersonal sexual objectification and rape myth acceptance. These significant results indicated that male have more negative attitude toward the victim of rape while female have higher tendency to accept rape myth and interpersonal sexual objectification.

Table 5: T-test Analysis to Compare means of Interpersonal Sexual Objectification, Acceptance level of Rape Myth and Attitude toward the Victim of Rape (N=400).

Variables	Under Graduation		Post Graduate		<i>t</i> (398)	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
	<i>n</i> =161		<i>n</i> =239				
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Ra. My. Acce.	68.08	16.43	69.38	12.47	0.898	.370	0.089
Inter. Sex. Objec.	39.46	12.02	38.82	14.11	-	0.637	0.048
Atti.Tow.Ra.Vic	71.49	8.18	71.29	10.32	-	0.837	0.021
						0.206	

*Note.* Atti.Tow.Ra.Vic = Attitude Toward Rape Victim Scale; Ra. My. Acce.= Rape Myth Acceptance Scale; Inter. Sex. Objec.= Interpersonal Sexual Objectification. Table 5 presents that educational level do not create any differences in forming negative attitude toward victims of rape, acceptance level of rape myths and their interpersonal sexual objectification level.

## Discussion

The results of the study demonstrated a significant positive correlation among acceptance level of rape myths, sexual objectification level, and their negative attitude toward victims of rape, which support the first hypothesis. These findings align with previous research that has shown how sexual objectification contributes to victim blaming and reduces empathy for victims (Loughnan et al., 2013; See, 2017). The objectification of women devalues their humanity and fosters negative attitudes and behaviors towards them (Fox et al., 2019). Furthermore, the



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acceptance of rape myths emerged as a significant factor influencing negative attitudes towards rape victims (Rimmer & Birch, 2019).

Regarding age, the study found no significant relationship between age and rape myth acceptance, sexual objectification, and attitude toward rape victims. Previous research suggests that a woman's perceived juvenility does not affect the degree of objectification she experiences (Kellie et al., 2019). Rape myths are deeply ingrained in society, and individuals receive them throughout their lives, contributing to victim blaming. Attitudes are formed through learning and observation, and older individuals tend to have more stable attitudes compared to younger individuals (Tyler & Schuller, 1991; Cherry, 2021).

The present study found evidence supporting the mediating role of rape myth acceptance in the relationship between sexual objectification and attitude toward rape victims. This finding aligns with prior research that has demonstrated a positive link between endorsement of rape myths, negative attitudes toward women, and sexual objectification (Sriwattanakomen, 2017; Poerwandari et al., 2019). The process of sexual objectification diminishes moral concerns, which subsequently affects the treatment of rape victims. Rape myths serve to rationalize acts of rape and contribute to unfavorable attitudes toward victims (Poerwandari et al., 2019; Clippert-Treadwell, 2014).

The study revealed noteworthy disparities between genders in terms of rape myth acceptance, sexual objectification, and attitude toward rape victims. Males demonstrated higher levels of rape myth acceptance and negative attitudes toward victims, whereas females exhibited higher levels of sexual objectification. This difference can be attributed to the fact that most perpetrators of rape are men, leading to contrasting attitudes between genders. Identification with victims may lead females to engage in victim blaming less frequently than males (Crall & Goodfriend, 2016; Ahmad & Kamal, 2000; Martini & Piccoli, 2020). Traditional sexual scripts and societal power dynamics also contribute to gender differences in attitudes (Emmers-Sommer, 2014; Carroll et al., 2016;).

There was no significant association observed between education and rape myth acceptance, sexual objectification, and attitude toward rape victims. Previous research suggests that sexual education or assault workshops may not effectively reduce endorsement of rape myths, possibly due to a floor effect or individuals needing more comprehensive interventions (Crall & Goodfriend, 2016; Griffin, 2021). Challenging traditional gender norms and cultural narratives is not easily achieved, and sex education alone may not be sufficient to change attitudes and behaviors related to rape victims (Griffin, 2021).

## Conclusion

To summarize, the present study found that rape myth acceptance serves as a mediator between sexual objectification and attitudes toward rape victims. These myths contribute to the perpetuation of a rape culture that justifies sexual violence and shifts blame onto victims. Sexual objectification diminishes moral sensitivity, empathy, and the recognition of suffering, which ultimately leads to victim



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blaming. The study further determined that age and education do not significantly influence the endorsement of rape myths, sexual objectification, and attitudes toward rape victims in Pakistan. However, gender does play a role, as females experience higher levels of sexual objectification, while males exhibit greater endorsement of rape myths and more negative attitudes toward rape victims compared to females.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

This study has few limitations. The data for this study was collected from a limited number of cities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Azad Kashmir, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Including participants from a wider range of cities in Pakistan would enhance the external validity of future studies. A potential limitation is the presence of response bias, as participants may provide socially acceptable responses. Using projective techniques to assess scale validity and reliability could address this issue. The present study examined the impact of specific demographic variables, including age, gender, and education, on rape myth acceptance, sexual objectification, and attitudes toward rape victims. However, future research should consider the influence of additional demographic factors, such as profession, race, socioeconomic status, and cultural background, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of these phenomena.

### **Implications**

The findings of this study hold significance for multiple domains, including psychology, law enforcement, judicial departments, and society at large. By establishing explicit connections between rape myth acceptance, sexual objectification, and attitudes toward rape victims, this study addresses a gap in the existing literature. Moreover, it raises awareness among professionals who have direct involvement with rape victims, such as police officers and lawyers. The findings can inform decision-making processes and bolster confidence in implementing existing policies. By changing attitudes toward victims and holding perpetrators accountable through the judicial system, the study has the potential to reduce the prevalence of rape cases.

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