

# Rape Myths Among University Men and Women in Vietnam: A Qualitative Study

Journal of Interpersonal Violence  
2022, Vol. 37(3-4) NP1401–NP1431

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DOI: 10.1177/0886260520928644

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## Abstract

Sexual violence is a persistent, underreported threat to the well-being of women and girls worldwide. In Vietnam, as elsewhere, myths and misconceptions around rape and other forms of sexual violence present a major barrier to reporting and prevention. Based on qualitative research from a parent study aimed at reducing sexual violence perpetration at universities in Vietnam, we sought to characterize commonly held myths among university students that may contribute to the perpetration and justification of such behaviors. Our analysis drew on focus group discussions with men ( $n = 69$ ) and semi-structured interviews with men ( $n = 12$ ) and women ( $n = 9$ ) recruited from two universities in Hanoi. Conducted in April and May of 2018, interviews covered topics including gender norms, dating relationships, consent, and sexual violence, whereas focus groups

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conducted in October 2018 were designed to assess reactions to an existing sexual violence prevention program. Thematic analysis of interview and focus group transcripts revealed that myths and misconceptions about sexual violence persist among university-aged men and women. Chief among these were that rape results mainly from men's uncontrollable desire, that victims provoke rape by their "reckless" behavior, such as drinking or dressing provocatively, that "real" rape is characterized by physical force from the perpetrator and "fierce resistance" on the part of the victim, and that rape occurs only under a narrow set of circumstances. Although men and women endorsed most myths equally, justification of rape through victim blaming featured much less in women's narratives than in men's. Myths concerning false rape allegations, observed in Western populations, were not considered relevant to Vietnamese students. Findings informed the development of a contextualized rape myths acceptance scale for testing and use in Vietnam. A nuanced understanding of salient rape myths among male and female students may also inform university-based efforts to prevent sexual violence.

### **Keywords**

sexual assault, cultural contexts, dating violence, domestic violence, adolescent victims, date rape, intervention

### **Introduction**

Sexual violence (SV) is a persistent, underreported threat to the well-being of women and girls worldwide (Abrahams et al., 2014; Kelly et al., 2005; Krug et al., 2002). According to the World Health Organization, the Southeast Asia region ranks highest for combined lifetime prevalence of physical and/or sexual partner violence and non-partner SV against women and girls 15 and older, at 40.2% (García-Moreno et al., 2013). A major contributor to SV across contexts, rape myths are defined as "attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women" (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994, p. 133). In the United States, examples of rape myth constructs include, "When women go to parties wearing slutty clothes, they are asking for trouble" (McMahon & Farmer, 2011) and "A rape probably didn't happen if the girl has no bruises or marks" (Payne et al., 1999). Rape myth acceptance (RMA) is associated with a higher likelihood of

perpetrating SV (Bohner et al., 2005), failure to report SV (Oh & Neville, 2004; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010), reduced bystander behavior (McMahon, 2010), and retraumatization of victims who attempt to seek legal and medical assistance (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2004). In Vietnam, endorsement of rape myths among criminal justice personnel is prevalent and a major cause of attrition for rape cases at the reporting, investigation, prosecution, and trial phases (Skinnider, 2017).

Burt's Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (RMAS; Burt, 1980) represents the first validated instrument for measuring rape myth beliefs. The RMAS later was used as the basis for the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance (IRMA) Scale, which demonstrated improved psychometric properties and construct validity (Payne et al., 1999). The IRMA also addressed major criticisms of the RMAS, including ambiguous language and an overemphasis on victim characteristics (Payne et al., 1999). Factor analysis of the IRMA revealed seven subscales: (a) *She asked for it*, (b) *It wasn't really rape*, (c) *He didn't mean to*, (d) *She lied*, (e) *She wanted it*, (f) *Rape is a trivial event*, and (g) *Rape is a deviant event*. These seven factors map along two dimensions, denial/justification of rape and victim/perpetrator focus (Payne et al., 1999). Recent attempts to refine and update the IRMA to capture more subtle rape myths relevant to university students have excluded the *She wanted it*, *Rape is a trivial event*, and *Rape is a deviant event* subscales and included an additional subscale for *He didn't mean to* items related to perpetrator alcohol consumption (McMahon & Farmer, 2011).

Although the construct of rape myths is universal, there is evidence that endorsement of its subconstructs may vary contextually (Sagrillo Scarpati, 2018), even within the same geographical region (Lefley et al., 1993). One comparative study of 637 university students in India, Japan, and the United States showed greater RMA among Indian and Japanese students, but with much larger differences across settings along the dimension of "victims responsible for rape" than that of "disbelief of rape claim" (Stephens et al., 2016). Studies have demonstrated consistently stronger endorsement of rape myths in Asian than non-Asian populations (Kennedy & Gorzalka, 2002; Koo et al., 2012; Mori et al., 1995; Stephens et al., 2016; Yamawaki & Tschanz, 2005). Beliefs in rigid gender roles, negative attitudes toward women, and conservative attitudes toward sex serve as mediating factors in Asian (Uji et al., 2007; Xue et al., 2019; Yamawaki & Tschanz, 2005) and Asian American (Kennedy & Gorzalka, 2002; Koo et al., 2012; Mori et al., 1995) populations. As in other groups, Asian women demonstrate

significantly lower RMA than do Asian men (Kennedy & Gorzalka, 2002; Mori et al., 1995; Xue et al., 2019). Cultural identification, length of residence in the United States, and generation of immigration (second vs. first) have also been shown to moderate RMA among Asian Americans and Asian Canadians (Devdas & Rubin, 2007; Kennedy & Gorzalka, 2002; Koo et al., 2012; Mori et al., 1995). However, key limitations of these studies include convenience sampling and the use of the RMAS or other measures developed and validated in Western contexts. Moreover, little attention has been given to which rape myths are more salient among Asians versus other groups.

In the last two decades, researchers have attempted to expand the conceptualization of rape myths beyond a Western perspective and to develop more culturally informed measures of RMA. Adaptions of the IRMA for use in Asian populations include the Chinese Rape Myth Acceptance (CRMA) Scale (Xue et al., 2019) and the Korean Rape Myth Acceptance (KRMAS) Scale (Oh & Neville, 2004), both of which have been validated in university populations. Although items corresponding to each of the seven IRMA subscales are present in the CRMA and KRMAS, their item pools, item wording, and underlying factor structures differ from the IRMA and from each other. These differences in underlying factor structure suggest that deeper investigation is needed to understand possible nuances in nature and endorsement of rape myths in diverse Asian populations. This study aimed to characterize commonly held rape myths among university students in Vietnam to gain an understanding of the constructs most salient to this population, including any differences by gender, and to use this understanding to inform the adaptation of an existing measure of RMA for use in Vietnam.

## **Methods**

### *Overview and Ethics*

We based our analysis on formative qualitative research from a parent study aimed at reducing SV perpetration among university men (Yount et al., n.d.). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with women ( $n = 9$ ) and men ( $n = 13$ ) students, and 12 focus groups were conducted with men students ( $n = 69$ ) from two universities in Hanoi, Vietnam. Rape myths were extracted and analyzed from English translations of interview and focus group data. The Institutional Review Boards at

Emory University [IRB00099860] and Hanoi University of Public Health [439/2019/YTCC-HD3] approved the parent study.

### *Setting*

The two university research sites have been anonymized and will henceforth be referred to as Universities 1 and 2. University 1 is a public medical school with approximately 7,000 students, 50% to 55% of whom are women. University 2 is a private university offering a range of programs in the sciences, social sciences, medicine, business, and humanities. Approximately 60% of its 1,000 students are women. Due to the public nature of University 1, a larger proportion of its students originate from outside of Hanoi.

### *Eligibility and Recruitment*

Eligible in-depth interview participants were at least 18 years of age, previously or currently in a romantic or dating relationship, able to provide consent to be interviewed, and enrolled at one of two large universities in Hanoi, Vietnam. To recruit a target of 10 men and 10 women, Center for Creative Initiatives in Health and Population (CCIHP) staff worked closely with focal persons in the Student Affairs<sup>1</sup> departments at each university, providing them with written recruitment protocols, including recruitment materials to distribute to students explaining the study purpose, eligibility, and compensation. CCIHP also met with Student Affairs personnel to clarify the research purpose, recruitment protocol, ethics, and retention. Students who responded to recruitment materials then registered with focal persons, who purposively selected students for diversity in the dimensions of sexual/romantic experience, program of study, and place of residence. All students who volunteered were interviewed until the Student Affairs personnel ascertained that the sample was representative of a range of ages, majors, sexual experience, relationship status, and living situation. Focus group participants also were recruited through the same Student Affairs personnel as interview participants; however, sexual/romantic experience was not a criterion for eligibility. Students were invited to register for one of six focus groups at each university on a first come, first served basis until 36 students per university had signed up. Because the focus groups were asked to view and assess a program designed for men, no women were recruited for focus group discussions (FGDs). Those selected for individual interviews were considered ineligible for FGDs.

## Sample

To achieve data saturation, four women and six men from University 1 and five women and seven men from University 2 were recruited and interviewed. One man from University 2 was excluded from this analysis because he was substantially older than the other participants (30 years) and attending university for a second degree. Six focus groups composed of at least five men were conducted at each university for a total of 12 focus groups. Thirty-five men from University 1 and 34 men from University 2 took part.

Most participants were ethnic majority (Kinh), with the remainder being of Tay origin. On average, participants from both samples were between 20 and 21 years of age (standard deviation = 1.1 years) and 2 and 3 years into their studies. All interview participants had dating experience in accordance with eligibility criteria, compared with about three quarters of focus group participants. Similarly, just over a third of focus group participants and just under two thirds of interview participants reported being in a relationship at the time of the study. Table 1 presents a detailed description of the characteristics of the sample by data collection method and gender.

## Measures

Members of the study team developed a semi-structured interview guide covering topics including: (a) societal expectations of men and women, (b) types of relationships common among university students, (c) expectations of romantic or dating relationships, (d) sexual consent behaviors; (e) personal understanding of rape definitions and situations, (f) sources for information on sexual and reproductive health, and (g)

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the Sample.

Demographics	Semi-Structured Interviews			Focus Groups ( <i>n</i> = 69)
	Men ( <i>n</i> = 12)	Women ( <i>n</i> = 9)	Overall ( <i>n</i> = 21)	
University 1 (%)	6 (50.0%)	4 (44.4%)	10 (47.6%)	35 (50.7%)
Ethnic majority (%)	12 (100%)	9 (100%)	22 (100%)	63 (91.3%)
Current dating relationship (%)	6 (50.0%)	6 (66.7%)	12 (57.1%)	25 (36.2%)
Previous relationship (%)	12 (100%)	9 (100%)	22 (100%)	50 (72.5%)
Mean year of study ( <i>SD</i> )	2.5 (0.9)	3 (0.0)	2.7 (0.7)	2.7 (0.8)
Mean age ( <i>SD</i> )	20.7 (1.2)	21.1 (0.3)	20.9 (1.0)	20.3 (1.2)

university support for survivors of SV. Because the primary purpose of the FGDs was assessment of an existing SV prevention program, a participant viewing guide rather than a standard focus group discussion guide was used to collect responses. Topics covered in the program included consent, gender norms, rape myths, healthy sexual communication, victim empathy, alcohol use, and bystander intervention. Participants were asked to view the program independently, summarize key messages from each segment, to rate each segment on relatability and ease of understanding, to comment on their ratings, and to indicate where they would change or remove content. Facilitators also probed participants to assess understanding and elicit general impressions about the program.

### *Data Collection and Management*

Semi-structured interviews took place during April and May of 2018 during scheduled field visits to each university. Two female researchers with extensive training and experience in qualitative gender-based violence (GBV) research among adolescents administered the interviews. Interviewers also underwent additional training for conducting research on sensitive topics in line with World Health Organization guidance on GBV research (World Health Organization, 2005). The content of this training included a refresher on qualitative research best practices, reflexivity, and ethical considerations such as providing support to participants who experience distress during research activities. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim into Vietnamese, and translated into English. The same two researchers facilitated 12 focus groups of five to seven students each during October of 2018. Each focus group viewed and discussed two modules of the six-module SV prevention program. Researchers audio-recorded these discussions, transcribed them, and translated them from Vietnamese to English. Identifying information was removed from all transcripts before they were stored on a secure server.

### *Analysis*

Three researchers at Emory University undertook qualitative analysis of de-identified English interview transcripts. The study team developed a draft codebook using a modified grounded theory approach, combining deductive codes based on the interview guides and inductive codes derived from emergent themes (Hennink et al., 2011). The codebook was revised iteratively based on inter-coder debriefs and weekly team

discussions; inter-coder reliability was established at .67 using one man's interview and one woman's interview. All transcripts were coded in MAXQDA 12 and 18 (VERBI Software, 2017). Because the primary focus of the FGDs was program evaluation, these transcripts were not coded; rather, rape myth content was extracted based on a thorough reading of each transcript. Emory researchers presented findings at weekly team meetings to clarify linguistic ambiguities and to confirm interpretations by consensus. For this analysis, two researchers produced thick descriptions of rape myths found in the data and compared findings by gender and by university. Based on these thick descriptions, the team created a conceptual map of four categories of rape myths described by students across denial/justification and victim/perpetrator dimensions originally defined by Payne et al. (1999). A matrix was also created to assess the salience of each theme and any gender differences by mapping their presence by transcript (Supplemental Material).

### *Construction of a RMA Measure*

Two researchers selected items from the original IRMA and updated IRMA that aligned with four rape myth constructs described in interview and focus group data. Some item wording was adapted to incorporate phrasing from the transcripts, to incorporate feedback from the Vietnam team, and to clarify idiomatic English phrases. For example, "women who sleep around" was changed to "women who are promiscuous" for linguistic clarity and "a woman goes home with a man she doesn't know" was changed to "a woman goes to a hotel with a man she doesn't know" to reflect a more common scenario in a Vietnamese university context. Additional items were added by adapting direct quotes from the transcripts, such as "Rape usually happens when a stranger sees a vulnerable woman alone at night."

## **Results**

Rape myths described by Vietnamese university students fell into two major classifications aligned with those articulated by Payne et al. (1999): (a) justification of rape by either excusing the perpetrator or blaming the victim and (b) denial of rape by limiting the circumstances and actions that constituted a rape (Figure 1). Justification myths focused on women's reckless behavior and men's inability to control themselves, particularly under the influence of alcohol. Denial myths



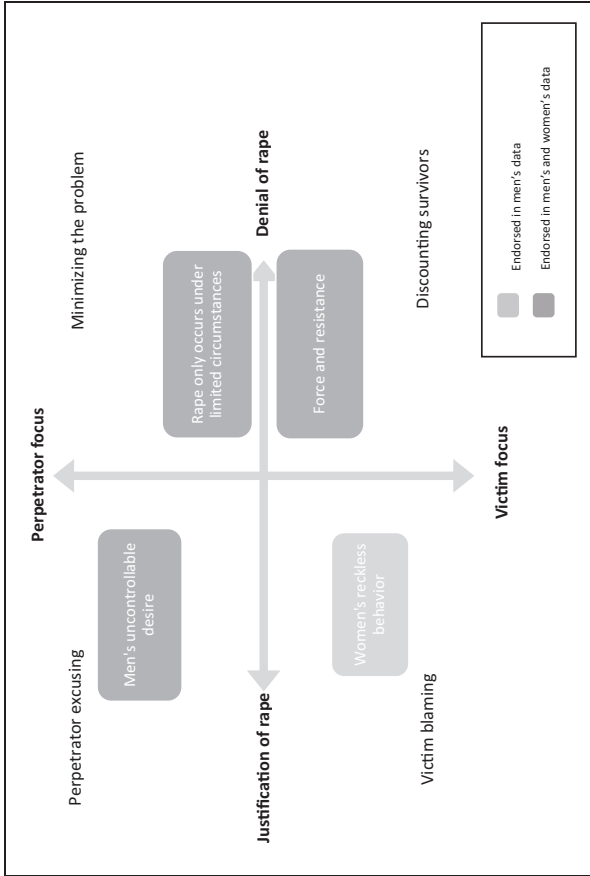


Figure 1. A conceptual framework of rape myth beliefs in Vietnamese university students.

included the belief that rape only occurs under limited circumstances and that rape always is characterized by force on the part of the perpetrator and resistance on the part of the victim. Although men and women endorsed denial myths roughly equally, men's narratives showed a much stronger element of victim blaming than did women's narratives.

### ***Myth 1: Rape Is Mainly the Result of Men's Uncontrollable Sexual Desire (Perpetrator-Focused Justification)***

Male and female participants presented men's greater sexual desire as widely known or obvious and a common explanation for why men rape, ascribing male sexual needs a major role in rapes by strangers and within relationships. Participants of both genders often described men as unable to control these strong desires, although their actions might be characterized as "wrong." In the words of one male student,

They think about sex too much but they don't have any sexual partners so they don't know what to do, they might think about possibly raping a girl to satisfy their [sexual] desire . . . Since the thoughts are confined and they are trapped in a box, action (rape) will be done as a result.

A woman participant expressed a similar view, stating that forced intercourse occurs when "he wants it so badly, he wants it immediately, he has to do it to satisfy his desire." In the context of dating relationships, both men's and women's narratives often tended to pair men's sexual desire with the expectation of women's acquiescence. One woman described such sexual entitlement as a catalyst for violent or coercive behavior:

They [women] don't proactively go for it or they don't want to do it yet but their lovers, for example my lover, don't think it can cause any harm for themselves and they only care about their desire, so they can force the girl, for example. Or because they want it so much that the girl has to agree.

A man described a similar situation in which a friend was coerced into sex by an abusive boyfriend, suggesting that some men used their "uncontrollable" desire to justify or to dismiss SV.

. . . the guy was like "auto max on," the need comes on the specific day at the specific time, she has to please him.

A few participants of both genders linked excessive alcohol consumption to a weakening of self-control, which both excused perpetrator behavior and minimized the seriousness of SV. Lack of self-control was linked explicitly with a decrease in responsibility for one's actions. In the words of one man,

Previously I thought if I did it when I was drunk, it would not be considered rape because I couldn't control myself at that time and that those who don't know are not guilty.

This subtheme shares the underlying assumption that men can be excused for being unable to control their actions. One woman acknowledged that friends might perpetrate rape under the influence of alcohol, stating, "Perpetrators could be our friends, who are too drunk and couldn't control themselves at that time." Similarly, a male participant identified men's alcohol consumption as a major cause of SV, stating, "usually it's the guy who gets drunk and loses control."

### *Myth 2: Women's Reckless Behavior Leads to Rape (Victim-Focused Justification)*

When discussing conditions that lead to rape and ascribing fault, a few participants focused on attributes or actions of the victim. Unlike other myths, the myth that women's recklessness precipitated rape was endorsed almost exclusively by men. Culpability was associated with the victim's choice of clothing, decision to go out or to stay out late, intoxicated state, or perceived flirtatious behavior. As one man explained,

If it is a real rape, I think it is the fault of both. The man has the fault. And the woman perhaps often hangs out and has something [to drink]. Firstly, hanging out and then being so drunken that [she] cannot control herself . . . Regarding clothes, sometimes, it is sexy. She should pay attention to how late it is.

Another male participant elaborated on this view, explaining that victim blaming also was a common way of excusing men's behavior:

When people hear about such incidents, our people normally add in their own details to the story for example to add things that blame the girls as she did something wrong and then explain for that man, in such a way

that our people follows the common flow of thinking that if there is no fire, there is no smoke.

As these participants suggested, men in their peer group considered a wide range of women's "reckless" behavior as conditions that may increase the likelihood of rape, and therefore women's culpability. Examples include walking alone at night, being alone with strange men, not taking sufficient safety precautions, or going to locations where drinking was likely to occur. As one man explained when asked who would be responsible if his girlfriend was raped, "It's not really true saying she doesn't have any fault either, she should be more cautious and have some safeguard measures, such as pepper spray."

Participants, including one woman, also mentioned perceived provocative behavior as reflecting a "sexually easygoing" character and increasing women's culpability for their own victimization. The single female participant who endorsed this myth mentioned that men may "get ideas in mind if they see a girl wearing revealing clothing," whereas a male participant explained, "People think when she wears scanty clothes it means she's open about sex, and it's like she wants to arouse someone to get what she wants."

Therefore, women who transgressed norms of femininity, whether by drinking alcohol or by their perceived sexual openness, were seen as sharing blame in their own victimization. Female participants endorsed this view considerably less often, with one woman acknowledging that victim blaming was common but strongly rejecting it as a legitimate explanation for SV:

Usually the girls are to blame, such as "Who told you to pass that street so that he could rape you," "Who told you to come over so that he could rape you," things like that. She is blamed for wearing shorts or tank tops and stir up their desire . . . I think it's not because of the girl, because many people wear and do the same things but it doesn't happen to them; why do people have to blame the way the girls dress or behave, I don't agree.

### ***Myth 3: Rape Is Characterized by Physical Force and "Fierce Resistance" (Victim-Focused Denial)***

The majority of male and female participants defined rape as involving "violent actions" or force. Therefore, in cases of "real" rape, men and

women in the sample expected the victim to resist “fiercely” by screaming, kicking, or hitting, often identifying situations of rape by the degree of physical force and resistance. For example, when asked how she would define rape, one woman participant responded,

Rape is when one side doesn't give consent but the other has very high needs, then it will happen, and there will be strong resistance such as fighting, punching, kicking so that the other can't do anything.

Conversely, participants of both genders were unlikely to describe a situation as rape when there was a lack of overt physical force or strong resistance. Recounting an incident between a couple at his university, one man explained,

It didn't look like she couldn't resist because that place is a public area, so she could have shouted out to let other people know . . . So 100% she wasn't so comfortable but wasn't completely forced . . . she let it happen without fierce resistance.

The expectation of force and resistance also was reflected in the way in which participants evaluated coercion in dating relationships. Male and female participants expressed doubt that SV could occur in this way. According to one man,

As long as girls don't want to have sex, no one can persuade them to do that. For example, our birth parents persuade us to learn English or ask us “eat this chili and I will give you 1 million dong [approximately \$50]” but we don't like it, the persuasion will definitely fail. That principle is also applied to persuasion for sex.

Female participants expressed similar views about SV through coercion, judging it to be less severe than physical assault and placing responsibility on women to resist coercive behaviors. As one woman explained,

It depends on how the guys treat the girls. Some are violent. If it happens on the street, it's probably the guy's faults. But if he is not physically violent, then we have to confront it directly, and be determined to say “No.” If we're soft, we will still be forced to do it.

This belief that women should strongly resist both physical force and psychological pressure was reflected in the ways that participants of

both genders described women's expressions of non-consent in dating relationships. Three women and two men described women slapping or pushing male partners as a standard way for women to communicate non-consent to physical touching. One man explained, "If she's a good girl, she must right away hit my hands out." One man also stated that a verbal "no" would be taken as consent if not expressed in a sufficiently assertive manner:

[Girls] always say "no" even when they actually mean yes . . . She might say "I don't want it" but she says it very softly, and if we keep doing it she won't say anything, or say it very softly. Then it means she agrees.

Thus, for men and women in our sample, rape was characterized by men's strong physical force and women's fierce resistance. Non-physical forms of coercion were not considered rape, and women's weak, verbal resistance was considered an inadequate signal of non-consent. In situations where women did not resist fiercely, they were assumed to have consented, thereby precluding the possibility that a man had perpetrated SV.

#### *Myth 4: Rape Occurs Only Under Limited Circumstances (Perpetrator-Focused Denial)*

When asked under which situations rape occurs, men's and women's responses typically focused on a narrow set of characteristics of the environment and the perpetrator. Common, interrelated elements of rape situations included dark, isolated settings and perpetrators who were unknown to the victim.

The majority of participants of both genders agreed that rape always or usually occurs in isolated, generally outdoor, public locations. "Empty streets" and "remote areas" were common to several narratives. When asked under which circumstances rape is likely to occur, "girls go out late at night alone and are seen by a guy or a passerby and it happens" and "a girl passes by a space where there're only a few people, a field or an empty street, where the boys usually gather" represent typical responses. These narratives present rape as a crime of opportunity that unknown men typically perpetrate against vulnerable women in deserted, public spaces.

Similarly, male and female participants described perpetrators as always or usually unknown to their victims. Participants of both genders used this criterion to distinguish rape from what they considered to

be less severe “forced sex,” suggesting that although intimate partners or other known persons could perpetrate acts of SV, such acts did not constitute rape. As one woman explained,

For rape we don’t know the perpetrator, like a stranger suddenly forces us to have sex with him . . . “forced sex” is like at a lower level, for example, when we know who did it, the one who forced us.

Participants of both genders also characterized sexual offenders as outside the norm. One focus group member identified socioeconomic status as an indicator of rape proclivity, stating,

First thinking that would come to my mind is about the background, something about a background with less education, with poor living condition.

However, the idea that rapists have psychological problems appeared exclusively in women’s narratives. These women defined rape as a deviant, abnormal act that most men would never commit. As one woman explained,

They must have some problems with their mind to do such things. A normal person will not do it no matter what.

### *A Contextualized RMA Measure*

The aforementioned qualitative analysis informed the development of a contextualized measure of RMA (Table 2). Twenty-one items from the original IRMA, six items from the updated IRMA, and 23 novel items adapted directly from the qualitative transcripts comprise this scale. Of the items derived from existing scales, 10 were reworded for linguistic clarity, contextual appropriateness, or greater fidelity to phrasing found in the qualitative data.

## **Discussion**

Among Vietnamese university students, as in other contexts, rape myths serve the social function of (a) denying and (b) justifying SV (Figure 1). First, such beliefs impose a narrow definition of rape that largely excludes acts of coercion and limits the range of acts that may be

**Table 2.** A Proposed Measure of Rape Myth Acceptance for Cognitive Testing Among Vietnamese University Students.

Item	Source	Original Wording	Reason for Change
Myth 1: men's sexual desire Rapists are usually sexually frustrated individuals	IRMA (He didn't mean to)	Exact	
Rape happens when a man's strong sexual desire gets out of control	IRMA (He didn't mean to)	Rape happens when a man's sex drive gets out of control	Linguistic clarity
Men do not usually intend to force sex on a woman, but sometimes they need to do so to satisfy their sexual needs	IRMA (He didn't mean to)	Men don't usually intend to force sex on a woman, but sometimes they get too sexually carried away	Closer to data
When a man is very sexually aroused, he may not even realize that the woman is resisting	IRMA (He didn't mean to)	Exact	
When men rape, it is because of their strong desire for sex	IRMA (He didn't mean to)	Exact	
If a man cannot get sex, he may rape as a result of sexual frustration	Men's data		
It shouldn't be considered rape if a man is drunk and	Updated IRMA (He didn't mean to)	Exact	

(continued)



**Table 2.** Continued

Item	Source	Original Wording	Reason for Change
didn't realize what he was doing			
If a man is drunk, he might rape someone unintentionally	Updated IRMA (He didn't mean to)	Exact	
If both people are drunk, it can't be rape	Updated IRMA (He didn't mean to)	Exact	
Myth 2: women's reckless behavior			
If a woman is raped while she is drunk, she is at least somewhat responsible for letting things get out of control	IRMA (She asked for it)	Exact	
A woman who flirts with men deserves anything that might happen	IRMA (She asked for it)	A woman who "teases" men deserves anything that might happen	Linguistic clarity
When women go to bars wearing scanty clothes, they are asking for trouble	IRMA (She asked for it)	When girls go to parties wearing slutty clothes, they are asking for trouble	Linguistic clarity/contextual appropriateness
If a woman goes to a hotel with a man she doesn't know, it is her own fault if she is raped	IRMA (She asked for it)	If a woman goes home with a man she doesn't know, it is her own fault if she is raped	Contextual appropriateness

(continued)

**Table 2.** Continued

Item	Source	Original Wording	Reason for Change
If a woman initiates kissing, she should not be surprised if a man assumes she wants to have sex	Updated IRMA (She asked for it)	If a girl initiates kissing or hooking up, she should not be surprised if a guy assumes she wants to have sex	Linguistic clarity
If a woman leads a man on with flirtatious behavior, eventually she is going to get into trouble	Updated IRMA (She asked for it)	If a girl acts like a slut, eventually she is going to get into trouble	Linguistic clarity
It is usually only women who wear sexy or revealing clothes that are raped	IRMA (Rape is a deviant event)	It is usually only women who dress suggestively that are raped	Linguistic clarity
Usually, it is women who hang out in bars and are promiscuous that are raped	IRMA (Rape is a deviant event)	Usually, it is only women who do things like hang out in bars and sleep around that are raped	Linguistic clarity
If a woman appears sexually easygoing, she is partially to blame if someone tries to rape her	Men's data		
When women drink alcohol with strangers, they are asking for trouble	Men's data		

(continued)

**Table 2.** Continued

Item	Source	Original Wording	Reason for Change
When a man rapes a woman, it is usually the fault of both people	Men's data		
When women get raped, it is usually due to their own reckless behavior	Qualitative data		
Myth 3: physical force and fierce resistance			
If a woman doesn't physically resist sex—even if protesting verbally—it can't be considered rape	Updated IRMA (It wasn't really rape)		Exact
If the rapist doesn't have a weapon, you really can't call it a rape	IRMA (It wasn't really rape)		Exact
A rape probably didn't happen if the woman has no bruises or marks	IRMA (It wasn't really rape)		Exact
If a woman claims to have been raped but has no bruises or scrapes, she probably shouldn't be taken too seriously	IRMA (It wasn't really rape)		Exact

(continued)

Table 2. Continued

Item	Source	Original Wording	Reason for Change
If a woman doesn't physically fight back, you can't really say that it was rape	IRMA (It wasn't really rape)	Exact	
When women are raped, it's often because they did not say "no" clearly or strongly enough	IRMA (She asked for it)	When women are raped, it's often because the way they said "no" was ambiguous	Closer to data
Women are responsible for taking measures to avoid being raped	Men's and women's data		
A woman who does not say "no" in a strong or definitive manner wants to have sex	Men's data		
If a woman says "no" to sex in a soft manner, she really agrees	Men's data		
In cases of real rape, the woman offers fierce resistance	Men's and women's data		
If a woman doesn't want sex, she needs to say "no" clearly and definitively or the man is not at fault	Men's and women's data		

(continued)

**Table 2.** Continued

Item	Source	Original Wording	Reason for Change
It isn't rape unless the rapist used violence or physical force	Men's and women's data		
If a woman lets a man coerce her into sex, she only has herself to blame	Men's and women's data		
A man who verbally pressures a woman into having sex has done nothing wrong	Men's and women's data		
If the woman didn't yell for help, it probably wasn't rape	Men's data		
Myth 4: rape only occurs under limited circumstances			
Men from nice middle-class homes almost never rape	IRMA (Rape is a deviant event)		Exact
In reality, women are almost never raped by their boyfriends	IRMA (Rape is a deviant event)		Exact
Rape almost never happens in the woman's own home	IRMA (Rape is a deviant event)		Exact
Rape is unlikely to happen in a woman's own familiar neighborhood	IRMA (Rape is a deviant event)		Exact

(continued)

**Table 2.** Continued

Item	Source	Original Wording	Reason for Change
Rape usually happens on the "bad" side of town	IRMA (Rape is a deviant event)	Exact	
Rape most often happens in isolated areas	Men's and women's data		
Normal men would never force a woman to have sex	Women's data		
Rape usually happens when a stranger sees a vulnerable woman alone at night	Men's and women's data		
Rape cannot happen at my university because it is too crowded	Men's data		
Rapists usually have some sort of psychological problems	Women's data		
Rapists usually come from poor backgrounds	Men's data		
Real rape occurs between strangers	Men's and women's data		
Being raped by a stranger is worse than being raped by a boyfriend/partner	Men's and women's data		
Women cannot be raped by their husbands or boyfriends	Men's and women's data		

IRMA = Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale.

considered rape based on the relationship between victim and perpetrator, the characteristics of the perpetrator, the physical environment, and the actions of the victim. Second, rape myths grant immunity for men, who are not held responsible for their behavior, especially under the influence of alcohol. Finally, rape myths reinforce the culpability of women, particularly those who transgress prevailing feminine norms of modesty and discretion. These beliefs enable men to dismiss their own sexually violent behavior and allow women to cope with the risk of rape by dismissing their personal vulnerability.

### *Justification*

The belief that men's sexual desire is the primary cause of rape may be viewed through the lens of Confucianism, which characterizes men as "hot," or active, and women as "cold," or passive (Horton & Rydstrom, 2011). Thus, men's greater sexual desire is viewed as innate and universal (Horton & Rydstrom, 2011). This myth is directly analogous to the *He didn't mean to IRMA* subscale, with items such as "Guys don't usually intend to force sex on a girl, but sometimes they get too sexually carried away." This theme is consistently the most highly endorsed rape myth construct among American, Korean, and Chinese populations (Oh & Neville, 2004; Payne et al., 1999; Xue et al., 2019) and was similarly salient among men and women in our sample. A subtheme linking absence of responsibility to perpetrator alcohol use supports work by McMahon and Farmer, who designated *He didn't mean to* items relating to alcohol use as a distinct factor (Payne et al., 1999). Alcohol use as a justification for violence also has been documented in the narratives of married Vietnamese men who perpetrate physical intimate partner violence (IPV) against their wives, and is closely linked with normative masculinities that excuse male violence and alcohol use as the natural consequence of a "hot" temperament (James-Hawkins et al., 2019). Similarly, among college students in the United States, alcohol use by the perpetrator in a sexual assault scenario resulted in lowered perceptions of perpetrator responsibility (Untied et al., 2012).

Myths blaming the victims of SV for their own victimization combined elements of *She asked for it* and the victim-related *Rape is a deviant event* items from the IRMA. Unlike other myths observed in our data, which men and women similarly endorsed, this theme was endorsed almost exclusively by men. Although men's use of alcohol served to absolve their responsibility for acts of SV, women's alcohol use and other perceived reckless behaviors were used to justify the SV

committed against them. This differential allocation of blame echoes quantitative findings victim alcohol use increases perceptions of victim responsibility (Untied et al., 2012) and is often interpreted as a signal of sexual intent (Abbey & Harnish, 1995) among U.S. college populations. Victim alcohol use is also a common element of perpetrator narratives justifying sexual aggression (Wegner et al., 2015). Moreover, alcohol consumption in Vietnam remains a gendered social activity; while obligatory for men in many social situations, drinking remains much less acceptable for women (Horton & Rydstrom, 2011). Consequently, women who consume alcohol, particularly in bars or clubs may be perceived to be transgressing norms of femininity and therefore partially responsible for their own victimization. Similarly, men (and to a lesser degree, women) considered women who dressed in revealing clothing to be sexually open and, therefore, violating norms governing women's sexuality. Prior research in the United States and Asia has shown that the RMA is associated with gender role traditionalism (King & Roberts, 2011; Yamawaki & Tschanz, 2005) and that higher victim blaming occurs in scenarios where a female victim is perceived to have violated prevailing gender norms (Acock & Ireland, 1983; Viki & Abrams, 2002). This myth construct tends to be the least strongly endorsed by women across contexts (Kennedy & Gorzalka, 2002; Xue et al., 2019).

### *Denial*

The myth that women always resist fiercely in cases of “real rape” is based on the underlying assumption that rape always involves physical force, excluding cases of rape by intoxication, threat, or coercion. This construct has been described in depth in Susan Estrich's book *Real Rape* (Estrich, 1987) as a means of discounting victim's accounts of SV and is directly analogous to the *It wasn't really rape* subscale of the IRMA, which contains items such as “If a woman doesn't physically resist sex—even when protesting verbally—it really can't be considered rape.” This belief has been shown to be a highly salient facet of the rape myth construct in China and Korea, societies that, like Vietnam, remain strongly influenced by Confucian ideology (Lee et al., 2010; Oh & Neville, 2004; Xue et al., 2019). Both the legal definition and social consequences of rape remain tightly bound with the Confucian ideal of female chastity, which must be defended at all costs (Lee et al., 2010; Xue et al., 2019). Therefore, women who experience SV must either defend their purity even at the risk of personal harm or risk compromising their honor and that of their relatives (Xue et al., 2019). These



myths are related to those of women's recklessness (*She asked for it*), serving to discount the experiences of women who are unable or who ostensibly "choose" not to resist their rapist, as well as to hold them responsible for their own victimization.

*Deviant event* myths that limit the circumstances under which rape can occur, such as "women are almost never raped by their boyfriends," serve to exclude and minimize cases that do not meet a narrowly defined set of criteria. These myths may also allow women to deny personal vulnerability to rape (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994), explaining its salience among women in our sample. Most participants, regardless of gender, believed that stranger rape in dark, isolated areas constituted a typical rape, when in fact 86% of documented rapes in Vietnam are perpetrated by someone the victim knows, and the majority occur in private spaces such as homes or hotels (Skinnider, 2017). The belief that only stranger rape is "real" rape supports similar qualitative research among Thai university students, who hesitated to label scenarios as "rape" and elected to use less severe language in cases where there was a prior relationship between victim and perpetrator (Chinlumprasert, 2000).

Three IRMA subscales were not represented in our data: *Rape is a trivial event*, *She lied*, and *She wanted it*. McMahon and Farmer (2011) have argued that the *She wanted it* subscale, which includes items such as "Many women secretly desire to be raped" has become less relevant to university students as overtly sexist attitudes and rape myths become less socially acceptable. Consequently, these items have been dropped from updated IRMA measures. Myths relating to the other two subscales may have been absent from the data due to the persistent stigma that victims of SV still face in Vietnam, which extends even to the victim's family members. Due to Confucian ideals of female chastity and its relationship with family honor, rape is seen as a serious and life-changing event by men and women, a finding supported by rape myths research in Korea (Oh & Neville, 2004). This stigma also may explain why the *She lied* construct did not appear in participant narratives—leveling false rape accusations is not perceived to be worth the loss of social status that an accuser would face. Vietnamese university men in focus group discussions expressed this viewpoint, with one stating, "Rape is something like very big humiliation and in our culture, many people would avoid talking about it and thus many people would hide because of fear of being stigmatized." Despite this, SV reporting in Vietnam is increasing slowly (Skinnider, 2017), suggesting that the *She lied* construct may become more salient as more women choose to file formal accusations.

### *Limitations*

Although the use of convenience sampling may have led to self-selection of participants who did not reflect the full range of student perspectives on SV, research staff attempted to select participants with a diversity of demographic characteristics and experience to mitigate this risk. The final pooled sample of interview and focus group participants contained relatively few women, resulting in men's voices appearing more prominently in the data. Moreover, inter-coder reliability was below the recommended threshold of .80. To ensure this did not impact the analysis, two researchers performed an additional thorough reading of all transcripts to identify relevant excerpts that may have been missed in the original coding. Finally, data collection for this study was conducted in Vietnamese, whereas analysis was conducted mainly in English, with the risk that linguistic nuance and social context was lost. To reduce potential loss of meaning, findings were discussed with the Vietnam team at weekly meetings, and where needed, the original Vietnamese was retained or retranslated.

### *Implications*

Our findings have implications for improving measurement of RMA, as well as for public health initiatives to reduce SV in Vietnam. The development of a contextually appropriate RMA measure is a key step toward understanding the complex factors that contribute to this problem and designing interventions to combat it. Future studies will cover cognitive pretesting and refinement, pilot testing of the revised RMA scale presented here, and formal psychometric validation in probability samples of university students in Vietnam.

Social behavior change communication (SBCC) interventions aimed at changing harmful health behaviors have harnessed the power of mass media to maximize the reach of their messaging (Wakefield et al., 2010). Media campaigns focused on norms and attitudes that underpin harmful behaviors have demonstrated some success in reducing harmful behaviors, such as binge drinking in university populations (Moreira et al., 2009). Although there is less evidence on the impact of similar interventions on violence prevention, interactive, web-based educational entertainment programming has proven effective at addressing the mediators of SV, including RMA, among university men in the United States and shows promise in other contexts (Salazar et al., 2019; Schuster et al., 2019). Differential acceptance of rape myths among men and women may inform the development of gender-sensitive

SBCC programming aimed at reducing SV perpetration among men and increasing agency among women. For example, programs and media designed for men should address all areas of the rape myth construct, whereas programming for women may need to place more focus on the minimization of experiences of SV that women survivors may use as a coping strategy (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2004). Moreover, social and behavioral change communication strategies that are designed for university students in Vietnam can be tailored to reflect the rape myths that young men and women most strongly endorse.

## **Conclusion**

In Vietnam, university men, and in different ways, university women endorse rape myths that serve to minimize men's violent behavior, elevate women's culpability, and uphold narrow definitions of rape and the circumstances under which it occurs. Efforts to reduce the risk of SV against women in this setting will need to address rape myths that are rooted in more general, contextualized ideas about male privilege and power.

## **Acknowledgment**

The authors are grateful for comments from Dang Hong Linh of Center for Creative Initiatives in Health and Population (CCIHP) and Ilyssa Tamler of Emory University and to the study participants, without whom this research would not have been possible.

## **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## **Funding**

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This study is supported by a research grant from an anonymous funder (PI Yount).

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## **Supplemental Material**

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

## Note

1. Student Affairs personnel are administrative staff whose responsibilities include overseeing academic and extracurricular activities for students at the universities where the study took place.

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