“THERE WAS NOTHING STOPPING HER FROM LEAVING”: HOW LOCAL PRINT MEDIA PORTRAY RAPE CASES

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Rape myths are concepts about rape that people generally believe to be true and trivialize the gravity of sexual assault or rationalize it to the point that people believe that no crime has occurred. By definition, incorrect beliefs about rape would not be rape myths if they were not held by a majority of people, whether they are held consciously or unconsciously. But where do these rape myths come from? How are they being perpetuated and repeated in society?

The media is a source of information that continually provides the public with information and has a great impact on people’s beliefs about many different issues. The media reports on everything from the economy to politics to crime. This coverage includes reports of sexual assault, but how is sexual assault, and more specifically rape, treated in the media? Although news reporters are supposed to be objective, the newsroom is predominantly composed of males. In a report from 2005, an organization called Media Report to Women found that women only make up one third of journalists, a number that has changed very little since 1982. Similarly, women only make up 34% of the supervisors in newspaper newsrooms in the United States. This gives the media a male bias: males are deciding what constitutes newsworthy events, deciding which angles to take in each story, and which sources are used in each story.

Helen Benedict, author of *Virgin or Vamp* (1992), examined the way victims are treated in media articles covering rape cases. She found discrepancies in the way language was used to talk about men as opposed to talking about women. Men never
had words such as bubbly, hysterical, pretty, prudish, vivacious, or flirtatious used to describe them, but all of these words were used to describe female victims in the stories that Benedict encountered. Benedict also noted that articles tended to describe women as being “beaten” while men were described as being “beaten up,” the difference being that the former connotes punishment while the latter implies that it was pure violence. Women were often described as “bright,” while men were described as “intelligent,” and young men are often referred to as “youths,” whereas young women were often called “girls,” and on occasion, “little girls.” Although these word choices may appear to be subtle, it works to paint different images of men and women in readers’ minds, and it often has a powerful effect.

In “Words that Wound,” Michelle Meloy and Susan Miller note that articles concerning violence against women tend to be written in passive voice in an attempt to achieve journalistic neutrality, however, this creates a problem. Meloy and Miller cite a study that showed that when articles about violence against women written in the passive voice, men attributed less victim harm and less offender responsibility and both men and women were more accepting of the abuse described.

In Lisa Cuklanz’s *Rape on Trial*, she discusses how media’s attempt to remain objective and neutral by reporting verbatim testimony actually creates the portrayal of more rape myths. The testimony in most trials typically focuses on the character of witnesses that is attention-getting, colorful, and shocking. Testimony in rape trials tends to focus on the victim’s credibility because they are the key witnesses in the case, and because of this, accounts in the media are disproportionately focused on the
character of the victim, scrutinizing her actions, rather than focusing on the offender’s, leading to a greater number of rape myths being portrayed. These rape myths mitigate the responsibility of the offender, and place the blame onto the victims and justify the rape.

The problems that this research has outlined point to the larger problem of how rape myths are being perpetuated and repeated in society through the discourse of rape trials, particularly in which the way the media discusses rape trials. Other researchers have examined this issue on a national level, and many of the most prominent researchers’ studies are outlined in the next chapter.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Many researchers have been worried about the role that media takes in reporting on sexual assault, and have conducted studies to see exactly how the media treats sexual assault, specifically rape, in news stories. In the article “The Social Construction of Rape” published in 1983, authors Sylvia Walby, Alex Hay, and Keith Soothill conducted a study of six national newspapers from 1978. From those newspapers, they found 192 stories that concerned court cases involving rape and 138 reports of rape incidents, or stories about rape that were not on-going court trials. Walby, Hay and Soothill wanted to examine news stories about rape to see whether or not rape myths appeared in them. They first categorized rape myths into two different categories: those that demonstrated a “loss of control” by the attacker, and those that explained the rape by saying it was “victim provocation.” The “loss of control” category includes both permanent psychological factors, such as the classification of the rapist as a “beast” or “unbalanced,” as well as temporary psychological factors, such as the rapist who has consumed alcohol and “couldn’t help himself.” The “victim provocation” category includes sexual provocation, which includes blaming the victim for her appearance or previous sexual activities as well as spatial provocation, such as the victim going to the attacker’s house or walking alone on a street at night. The authors also made the distinction between whether the rape myth was treated as a primary causal factor for the rape or merely mentioned in the article.
Out of the 192 reports of court cases, 58% contained a rape myth that was a primary causal factor.\(^1\) In the two major categories of rape myths, 60% of the primary causal factors found demonstrated a loss of control by the attacker, and 39% demonstrated the rape myths that signify victim provocation. The remaining 1% identified the primary causal factor as revenge, stating that the rape never took place.\(^2\)

Even though only one rape myth could be classified as the primary causal factor in each report, the 58% percent of the reports all had several other “mentions” of rape myths that all fit into either the “loss of control” or “victim provocation” categories.

Helen Benedict (1992), a former journalist and rape counselor, began researching on how her colleagues treated reports on rape, noticing that they often perpetuated rape myths rather than debunking them. In her research, Benedict found that portrayals of women fit two main categories: the virgin and the vamp. The virgin image paints the picture of an innocent, true victim of rape attacked by the beastly, sex crazed, stranger rapist, corresponding with Walby, Hay and Soothill’s findings of the portrayal of rape myths depicting the rapist having a “loss of control.” The vamp image portrays the female as provoking the rape by her sexuality, looks, or behavior, again congruent with Walby, Hay and Soothill’s findings of the portrayal of rape myths.

\(^1\) In coverage of the rape incidents, as opposed to court cases, only 25% of the reports contained a rape myth as the primary causal factor for the rape. This difference most likely reflects that reporters do not have as much information available to them as they do in court hearings, and therefore the details about rapes that typically lead people to question whether or not a rape actually occurred, creating rape myths, does not occur. Because of this, reports on court cases play a much more important role in determining who the responsibility of the rape is attributed to.

\(^2\) Although 58% percent of the reports on court cases involving rape contained rape myths as primary causal factors, no report in any newspaper characterized the rape as an assertion of control over the victim. The tone of the reports that classified the male as “asserting his masculinity” was not one to suggest the real motive of rape, but was an attempt to demonstrate a “loss of control” by the men. Even so, reports concerning the man’s assertion of masculinity only comprised 3% of the cases.
myths of “victim provocation.” Through her research Benedict identified eight factors that lead a woman to be portrayed as the “vamp” in reports about rape:

1) If she knows the assailant. (Victims receive more sympathy if the assailant is a stranger.)
2) If no weapon is used. (Studies show that the public is more inclined to believe a rape happened if a weapon was used.)
3) If she is of the same race as the assailant. (Victims traditionally attract the most sympathy if they are white and their assailants black. Blacks raped by whites tend to receive more press attention that black-on-black crime, which receives the least of all.)
4) If she is of the same class as the assailant. (She will be blamed less if the assailant is of a lower class than she.)
5) If she is of the same ethnic group as the assailant. (If prejudices to do with ethnicity or nationality can be called in to slur the assailant, the victim will benefit.)
6) If she is young. (Older women tend to be seen as less provocative.)
7) If she is “pretty.” (Studies have found that although people tend to be biased against attractive rape victims, they are biased in favor of attractive assailants. The idea is that an attractive man does not need to rape because he can get all the women he wants, a reflection of the “assailants are motivated by lust” myth.)
8) If she in any way deviated from the traditional female sex role of being at home with family or children. (People blame the victim more if she was in a bar, hitchhiking, at a party, or out on her own anywhere “good girls” are not supposed to be preceding the attack), (19).

Benedict found that these “vamp” portrayals led the victim to be blamed for the rape in the press, and therefore blamed by the public.

In Joanne Ardovini-Brooker and Susan Caringella-MacDonald’s article “Media Attributions of Blame and Sympathy in Ten Rape Cases” (2002) they examined coverage of ten rape cases from national magazines between 1980 and 1996, totaling 123 articles collected. The ten cases covered in this analysis were very well known at the time of their occurrence, but may not be now so a summary of them follows:
1) The William Kennedy Smith case: William Kennedy Smith picked up Patricia Bowman, a 29-year-old single mother, at a bar in Palm Beach. Kennedy Smith allegedly raped Bowman while walking along the beach near the Kennedy compound. Bowman ran back to the compound and called a friend to pick her up, while stealing an urn as proof as her presence at the compound. Bowman also sustained multiple injuries, including a broken rib and multiple bruises. The jury found Kennedy Smith not guilty.

2) The Mike Tyson case: Mike Tyson met Desiree Washington at a hotel where Washington was competing in the Black Miss America pageant. She later accompanied Tyson for a ride in his limousine, but went back to Tyson’s hotel room because he had forgotten something. Once in the room, Tyson threw Washington onto the bed and raped her. Tyson was found guilty and sentenced to 6 years in prison.

3) The Central Park Jogger case: A white Wall Street investment banker went jogging in Central Park and was raped and nearly murdered by a group of young Hispanic and African American boys from working class families. The jogger was beaten with bricks, pipes, and rocks, as well as strangled then left for dead. Five of the seven boys charged were found guilty.

4) The New Bedford case: A woman went into a bar to buy a pack of cigarettes, where she saw a friend and stayed to have a drink. When she got up to leave, she was grabbed and thrown onto a pool table and gang raped by between two to fifteen men. The victim was held down and forced to perform oral sex while onlookers cheered. Four men were found guilty and sentenced to nine to twelve years in prison.
5) The Glen Ridge, New Jersey case: A group of male high school athletes lured a young mentally challenged girl to one of their houses and sexually assaulted her, penetrating her with a broomstick and baseball bat. Out of the five that committed the crime, and the eight that stood by and watched, four of the boys were convicted.

6) The Nancy Ziegenmeyer case: Nancy Ziegenmeyer was in her car when a stranger forced his way in and drove her to a secluded area where he forced her to perform oral sex and raped her. Afterward, Ziegenmeyer went to the hospital and filed a police report. The offender was found guilty and given a life sentence.

7) The South Hills case: Frederick Coe was charged with six rapes over a two year time period in South Hills, an upper-middle class community. His modus operandi was the use of a knife, ramming a gloved hand down the victim’s throat, and then raping her. He was convicted and sentenced to life plus 75 years in prison.

8) The Congressman Mel Reynolds case: Congressman Mel Reynolds was accused of raping a 16-year-old student, Beverly Heard, who worked on his campaign. Heard later recanted and claimed the sex was consensual, and spent 12 days in jail for refusing to testify against Reynolds, but eventually came forward providing details of intercourse, phone sex, threesomes, and lesbian voyeurism. The case went to trial and Reynolds was found guilty of 12 counts of criminal sexual assault and solicitation of child pornography.

9) The Krista Absalon case: Krista Absalon was drinking at a bar with some friends when she passed out in the restroom and was then dragged to a booth in the back of the bar. A group of men raped her in the booth while she was unconscious, only
recalling the rape after hearing the men boast about it the following week. Five of the men pled guilty to sexual misconduct and were fined $750.00 each. Two of the defendants were found not guilty.

10) The St. John’s University Lacrosse Team case: A member of the St. John’s University lacrosse team met a Jamaican immigrant student at a club meeting and offered to drive her home, but claimed he had to stop by his house for gas money, where eight other members from the team lived. The offender convinced her to come in and gave her a soda that was laced with vodka and forced her to drink it. He raped her as she went in and out of consciousness from the alcohol. Later he left, leaving her passed out in the house, and other team members took turns raping her. The case went to trial and the first offender pled guilty to sexual misconduct and the other defendants were given probation and community service, while three other defendants were acquitted.

Ardovini-Brooker and Caringella-MacDonald divided the cases into sub-categories based on the race and class of victims and offenders, single vs. multiple offenders, and stranger rape vs. acquaintance victim-offender relationships involved in the rapes. The authors coded for statements that blamed either the attacker or victim, as well as for statements that sympathized with either the offender or the victim. Once the coding was finished, the articles were ranked by which articles had the highest percentage and number of victim blaming statements, as well as the highest percentage and number of offender blaming statements, victim sympathy statements, and offender sympathy statements. In instances where the minority offenders attacked white
victims, the victims were not blamed, but in instances where white offenders attacked minority victims, the victims were heavily blamed.

Of all the blaming statements found in the articles from all of the cases, 55% of the blaming statements blamed the victim while only 45% blamed the offender for the rape. Out of all of the sympathy statements, only 45% of the statements sympathized with the victim, while 55% sympathized with the offender. While these differences may seem minimal, with only a 10% difference for both the blaming statements and the sympathizing statements, this indicates the nature of the media’s coverage of rape in attributing blame to victims while sympathizing with offenders. In terms of victim blaming statements, the cases that contained the highest percentage were cases where the victim was in some way acquainted with the offender. Another factor that led to victim blaming statements was alcohol; the four cases that involved the victim drinking, and more specifically, drinking in bars, the majority of the blaming statements were aimed towards the victim rather than the offender, including the case where the victim was gang raped. Because the victim had been drinking in the bar, the blaming statements were aimed at her despite the multiple offenders. In three cases that contained the smallest percentage of victim blaming statements, neither bars nor drinking were part of the crime, and the offenders were in no way acquainted with the victims. The importance of this work for the present study is that the victim’s actions are more important in determining blame in media accounts. It is therefore perpetuation the ideology that these are not “real” rapes by blaming the victim for drinking and in instances where the victim knows the offender.
In *Virgin or Vamp*, Benedict also studied reports from the Kennedy Smith case, with similar results. Because the victim was of a lower class than the offender, Kennedy Smith, she was presented in the press as attempting to “leap up the social ladder” by making her rape accusation. Not only did articles focus on how she was simply attempting to gain status by claiming that Kennedy Smith raped her, they also constantly discussed the “wild streak” that she had in high school, including stories about her driving fast and refusing to pay her fines, partying at bars and nightclubs, and her illegitimate child, but did not discuss how this had anything to do with the charges that she brought. Benedict also noticed a discrepancy in the words that reporters used for Kennedy Smith and the victim. When referring to Kennedy Smith, reporters used the word “courted,” which connotes respect, rather than “had an affair with,” which was used in regard to the woman’s behavior. Articles also did not discuss Kennedy Smith’s partying, driving habits, or whether or not he ever impregnated a woman out of wedlock, showing the media’s bias. Benedict did note that Kennedy Smith’s drinking was discussed, stating that one article mentioned his heavy drinking, and that he often became more aggressive when drinking, but specifying that this is simply the emergence of another rape myth, blaming the rape on the alcohol rather than the man.

The Greta Rideout case is the case of a woman who sued her husband for allegedly raping and beating her. Greta’s husband, John, allegedly had a history of being abusive, and on October 10, 1978 Greta said that John hit her in the face, almost breaking her jaw, choked her and forced her to submit to sex in front of their daughter.
John, however, admitted to quarrelling, but claimed that after she kneed him in the groin and he slapped her, they made up and had consensual sex. After the incident Greta ran to a neighbor’s house and called a woman’s hotline to report it, and two days later pressed charges. John was found not guilty.

In a study of this case, author Lisa M. Cuklanz found similar results as those in the study above in her book *Rape on Trial* (1996). Throughout the trial, John was depicted as young and vulnerable; a simple, working-class guy who had trouble understanding his own problems. Greta, on the other hand, was portrayed as being much more intelligent and strong, with a complicated sexual past. Not only that, but she was also portrayed as having a desire for fame and fortune, manipulating her husband and lying about the rape in order to achieve it. While John’s character and actions were rarely the focus of the articles concerning the trial, testimony concerning Greta’s character continuously made it into news coverage of the trial, appearing in almost every article studied. Greta’s sexual history, her motivations for bringing the charge, and her behavior were constantly the focus of not only the article, but also the headlines. Some headlines that attacked Greta include: “Witnesses Say Greta Expected Riches and Fame,” and “Two Rape Witnesses Declare Accuser Lied,” and “Wife’s Credibility at Issue in Rape,” (56). Cuklanz also noted that John’s defense attorney was quoted far more frequently than the district attorney throughout coverage of the trial, again, having the focus of the articles remain on Greta rather than John. Greta’s portrayal in the media did not fit in accordance with the image of a “real rape victim,” and John was consistently referred to as sincere and confused about the charges being
brought against him. This not only depicted him as an unlikely rapist, but also portrayed him as a victim—the victim of a false accusation of rape.

Similar to the studies above, authors Renae Franiuk, Jennifer L. Seefelt, Sandy L. Cepress, and Joseph Vandello conducted two studies regarding rape myths and the media in their article “Prevalence and Effects of Rape Myths in Print Journalism: The Kobe Bryant Case” (2008). In the first study the authors collected 156 articles from 76 different newspapers from the time the media first broke the story on July 1, 2003 to the time when the charges were dropped on September 1, 2004. The articles were coded for the endorsement of rape myths, as well as statements suggesting Kobe Bryant was guilty, positive statements about Bryant, and positive statements about the alleged victim.

Out of the 156 articles, 102, or 65.4%, of the articles contained at least one rape myth endorsing statement, while only 13 articles, or 8.3%, contained statements that countered rape myths. The rape myth that appeared most often (in 42.3% of the articles) was the myth that the victim was lying about the assault. The second most common rape myth, appearing in 31.4% of the articles, was the myth that “she wanted it.” In addition to the portrayal of rape myths, the authors found that in 26.3% of the articles there was at least one positive mention of Bryant as either an athlete or person, yet only 5.1% of the articles had positive comments about the victim as a person.

Because the authors found that the victim was more likely to have negative statements appear about her whereas Bryant was more likely to have positive statements about him in the articles, the authors conducted a second study in order to
assess the impact that the rape myths present in the media had on people’s beliefs about this case. The authors wanted to see whether people reading articles that endorsed rape myths were more likely to believe that Bryant was not guilty than before they read the article, as well as see if people would be more likely to believe that Bryant was guilty after reading an article that countered rape myths than before reading the article. The study consisted of 62 undergraduate students at a Midwestern university with ages ranging from 18 to 49 years. Participants were first asked 1) if they knew who Kobe Bryant was, 2) if they knew Bryant was charged with sexual assault, 3) to rate how informed they thought they were about the case in general, 4) to rate how well informed they thought they were about physical evidence that could be used against Bryant, and 5) to rate how informed they thought they were about the victim’s history. Participants were also asked to rate the extent to which they believed Bryant to be guilty of sexual assault. Participants were randomly assigned to either read the rape myth endorsing article or the rape myth countering articles, both articles being written by the authors specifically for this study. After the participants read the article they were assigned, they were again asked to rate the extent to which they believed that Bryant was guilty as well as questions 3, 4, and 5 from above, but now were also asked to rate the extent to which they believed that the alleged victim was lying.

Before reading either of the articles, participants’ ratings of Bryant’s guilt fell in the middle of the scale, with the mean score of 4.09 on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1

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3 The article endorsing rape myths was fashioned after articles that actually appeared in the media regarding the Kobe Bryant case. The article that countered rape myths cautioned readers against using rape myths and explained the myths, such as agreeing to kissing did not mean she agreed to sex.
being definitely not guilty and 7 being definitely guilty. After reading the articles, however, the participants that read the article endorsing rape myths were less likely to believe that Bryant was guilty, with a mean score of 3.25, compared to those who read the rape myth countering articles, who had a mean score of 4.48. The ratings of Bryant’s guilt significantly changed in the predicted directions after reading the articles compared to the ratings from before. Also, participants that read the rape myth endorsing article were significantly more likely to believe that the alleged victim was lying than the participants that read the rape myth countering article.

This study shows that rape myth portrayals in the media do have an impact on readers’ beliefs regarding rape; their presence lead readers to blame the victims or believe that no sexual assault has occurred. The media plays a significant role in perpetuating rape myths. The first study above as well as the findings of Benedict, Cuklanz, Ardovini-Brooker and Caringella-MacDonald, and Walby, Hay and Soothill all showed the evidence of the presence of rape myths in national media, and the second study showed why the presence of these rape myths is important. The rape myths that are present in the media are created by excessively focusing on the victim’s actions rather than the offenders or attempting to explain how the offenders’ behavior is abnormal. This only reinforces the public opinion that the only “real” rapes are those committed by deranged strangers, at night, while the victim was out alone, and the cycle is perpetuated and reinforced in article after article. But each of the studies focused on stories that were known on a national level and the articles studied were all from national sources. We know that the national media’s coverage of rape includes
rape myths, and we know that this affects public opinion regarding rape, but how do the local media cover rape in cases involving “every day” offenders and victims? Are the same types of rape myths appearing on a local level or is the local media providing a more neutral coverage of rape free from myths?
Chapter 3: Methodology

For this study, I focus on how the issue of how rape is treated in the context of local media since the majority of studies focus on national media’s treatment of rape. I chose a case that occurred locally and did not garner any state or national attention, and was therefore arguably free from the influence of state or national articles that could have affected how local reporters reported the case in the local media. I also chose a case that not only was recent, but was heavily covered in all three of the newspapers in Athens: *The Post, The Athens News*, and *The Athens Messenger*. The case provides an opportunity for a unique analysis of local print media because the difference of the town compared to others—Athens is a small city in southeastern Ohio that has no local television news programs. Residents of Athens get their local news solely from the three newspapers mentioned above; *The Post* is the student-run university newspaper primarily intended for students, *The Athens News* is a locally run newspaper that has some full-time reporter positions but also relies on students for reporting that is intended for both permanent residents and students, and *The Athens Messenger*, a locally run paper that is mostly intended to be read by permanent residents. How the local news stories regarding rape are covered as well as what aspects the newspapers choose to focus on are extremely important in Athens because residents cannot get another side of the story from any other sources, causing even greater exposure to rape myths in articles covering rape trials, leading them to have a huge impact on people’s beliefs about rape.
The case that I chose that was covered in all three local newspapers is the Matthew Kulchar case that occurred in 2008 at Ohio University. The background of the case, according to newspaper accounts, is as follows: Kulchar and the woman were both Ohio University students who had been friends. Both disclosed that they had engaged in intercourse in the past, but the woman broke it off, telling Kulchar that she just wanted to be friends. The two continued to communicate on occasion, and on September 28th, the woman texted Kulchar to wish him a happy birthday, inviting him to her dorm room in order to celebrate. The two smoked marijuana, and then they went up to her room. They two began kissing, but when Kulchar took things further, the woman told the police that he refused to stop when asked, and began forcing himself on her, and that Kulchar later left to use the restroom, taking the keys to the woman’s room with him. The woman told police that when he returned he began removing her clothing, and that when she told Kulchar that she was using a tampon, he shoved it in further, and then escorted her to the bathroom so that she could remove it. The woman told police that when they returned, Kulchar raped her for several hours until she passed out and fell asleep, waking up late the next morning, waiting until after Kulchar left to go to the hospital to tell doctors about the assault. Kulchar maintains that they had consensual sex, and that he took her dorm keys upon the woman’s suggestion, and that he accompanied her to the bathroom so that he could get a drink of water, and waited for her in the hallway. Kulchar claims that the woman was upset because he did not invite her to dinner with his family for his birthday, and that they were not in a relationship but had sex.
From the various articles that have done similar studies I compiled a list of common rape myths and used them to guide my coding. I assigned each of the rape myths a number as follows:

1. Women incite men to rape/ask for it by their dress or actions
2. There is a “right way” to respond to a rape situation
3. A rape victim should not dwell on the situation
4. Rapists are non-white and lower class
5. Men can’t be raped
6. Sexual assaults are rare
7. Women make false reports of rape, for a) retaliation/revenge or b) attention
8. Women fantasize about being raped
9. A man can’t rape his wife/someone he is in a relationship with
10. Rape only occurs outside and at night
11. Rape is just unwanted sex and not a violent crime
12. Only “bad” women get raped
13. Rape only occurs between strangers
14. A person could prevent rape if he/she wanted to
15. If a person doesn’t “fight back” then it wasn’t rape
16. Women who are drunk are willing to engage in sexual activity
17. If two people have had consensual sex before, then she can’t be raped
18. It has to be violent in order for it to be rape
After selecting rape myths to look for, I proceeded to read articles concerning the Kulchar case in each of the three newspapers looking for any of these rape myths. Using the coding protocol outlined in Babbie (2007), if a rape myth endorsing statement was identified I coded the myth statement with the newspaper name, date the article ran, and what myth or myths the statement endorsed.

Coding

Some of the statements found fit into several categories and require explanation. For example, with myth #8, “Women fantasize about being raped,” I included statements concerning “rough sex” in this category. This rape myth is one of the only ones that treats rape as sex from a woman’s perspective, creating the suggestion that the victim likes rough sex implies that she therefore has fantasized about rape, because rape is just rough sex. Because of this implication, whenever the woman’s preference for “rough sex” is mentioned, it was coded as myth #8. Such statements included “This was rough sex that she initiated, and that she enjoyed,” (The Athens News, 10/29/2009) a statement made by Kulchar’s defense attorney, Robert Toy. Also, for myth #12, “Only ‘bad’ women get raped,” statements concerning drug or alcohol use, as well as the liking of “rough sex” were coded for this myth. The use of illegal substances, as well as participating in rough sex, which has a bad stigma around it, portray the woman as promiscuous, reckless, and out of control, fitting into a “bad girl” image, and therefore deserving of the rape because she indirectly caused it by being those things. I would also like to distinguish between rape myth #14, “a person could prevent rape if he/she wanted to,” and rape myth #15, “if a person
doesn’t ‘fight back’ then it wasn’t rape.” Rape myth #14 has more to deal with actions that would have prevented the rape from happening, such as calling for help, while rape myth #15 deals with the issue of the victim physically fighting back in order to stop the rape, such as hitting or pushing the offender off.
Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

After coding each of the three newspapers, I tallied how many examples of each rape myth appeared in each newspaper, the total number of times each rape myth appeared across all three newspapers, and how many total rape myths were in each newspaper. These counts are shown in Table 1. *The Post* had a total of 13 articles concerning the rape trial, *The Athens News* had 12, and *The Athens Messenger* had 11. Out of the 36 articles examined, a total of 149 rape myth statements were present in reporting the Kulchar case.

*Prevalence and meanings of myths*

Overall, the most prevalent rape myths that appeared were myths #2 (There is a right way to respond to a rape situation) with 24 statements, myth #7 (Women make false reports of rape) with 20 statements, myth #13 (Rape only occurs between strangers) with 19 statements, myth #14 (A person could prevent rape if she/he wanted to) with 17 statements, and myth #17(If two people have had consensual sex before, then she/he cannot be raped) with 18 statements.

Some examples of statements representing myth #2 (There is a right way to respond to a rape situation) included:

“Though Kulchar left OU the next quarter, the woman continue to call and send him text messages for at least a month after she reported the rape,” *(The Post, 10/27/2009)*

“When he left the room for about three or four minutes at one point, she did not call 911, but instead tried to compose a text message to a friend,” *(The Athens News, 11/2/2009)*
### Table 1
**Rape Myths Appearing in Each Paper**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Myth</th>
<th>The Post</th>
<th>The Athens News</th>
<th>The Athens Messenger</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Women incite men to rape/ask for it by their dress or actions</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. There is a “right way” to respond to a rape situation</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. A rape victim should not dwell on the situation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Rapists are non-white and lower class</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Men cannot be raped</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Sexual assaults are rare</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Women make false reports of rape</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Women fantasize about being raped</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. A man cannot rape his wife/someone he is in a relationship with</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Rape only occurs outside and at night</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Rape is just unwanted sex and not a violent crime</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Only “bad” women get raped</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Rape only occurs between strangers</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. A person could prevent rape if she/he wanted to</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. If a person does not “fight back,” she/he was not raped</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Women who are drunk or under the influence of drugs are willing to engage in sexual activity</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. If two people have had consensual sex before, then she/he cannot be raped</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. It has to be violent in order for it to be rape</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>46</strong></td>
<td><strong>47</strong></td>
<td><strong>56</strong></td>
<td><strong>149</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Kulchar stated that the woman had numerous opportunities to leave the room and the dorm and added, ‘There was nothing stopping her from leaving.’ (The Athens Messenger, 11/5/2009)

While these statements could be construed as simply facts from the case, they leave the reader with a sense that what occurred was not really rape because the woman did not respond in the way that she should have. However, who is to say what the “right way” to respond is? Everyone responds differently to different situations, and that includes rape situations. None of the woman’s subsequent actions have any bearing on what did or did not occur, but by including statements such as these in the article, readers begin to question whether or not the rape actually happened because the woman’s actions did not seem “normal” for a woman who was just raped. Some women do not feel comfortable going to the hospital or police station after a rape, and often turn to family members or friends for comfort after the event. Some women never report their rapes, but this does not mean that a rape did not occur.

Something that complicates the situation is that the two of them were friends prior to the alleged rape. The woman cared for Kulchar, and even though he allegedly raped her, her feelings for him did not simply vanish overnight as a result. After the incident, the woman sent Kulchar a number of text messages telling him that she wanted to talk to him as well as expressing concerns about how he was doing, evidence that the defense used to “prove” that no rape occurred and it was the woman’s remorse for making it up showing. The woman testified, however, that “he was a friend of mine before any of this happened, and it was difficult for me to deal with the pain and anger and the disappointment, but also have to remember the friendship we had and all the good times. I knew it
could not have been easy for him, and I didn’t want him to think I was just
laughing at him,” (The Post, 10/29/2009).

This quote shows the complexity of the feelings that rape victims can feel after an
assault committed by someone that she/he knows, and that even though the woman did
in fact text Kulchar after the alleged rape, it does not mean that no rape occurred.

Myth #7 (Women make false reports of rape) was represented in statements
such as:

“Though Toy said he does not know why the woman concocted the tale,
he added it could be because Kulchar didn’t invite her to a family party
later that day even though they were close friends. ‘Hell hath no fury like
a woman scorned,’ he said,” (The Post, 10/28/2009)

“This woman is making up a story and you have to figure out why she’s doing
it,” (The Athens News, 10/29/2009)

“The defense attorney repeatedly called the woman a liar,” (The Athens
Messenger, 10/28/2009)

According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s 1996 Uniform Crime Report, the
false reporting rate for sexual assault is around 8%, not much higher than the false
reporting rates of all other felony offenses, yet public opinion, and media portrayal, as
shown by these statements, is that women lie about rape to get attention or revenge,
among other reasons. But the evidence is clear: women who report rape are not only
victimized because of the rape, but are victimized throughout the coverage of the
media. With treatment regarding the case with statements like the above, repeatedly
calling the woman a liar, women are subject to more scrutiny than the offenders and
often receive little sympathy, leaving them little reason to falsely report a rape, and
giving them even more reasons to not report a sexual assault at all.
Statements portraying rape myth #13 (Rape only occurs between strangers) were:

“The pair had an ongoing relationship before the reported rape,” (The Post, 10/30/2009)

“Kulchar ‘is known to the victim,’ the document added,” (The Athens News, 2/16/2009)

“Warren said Kulchar and the alleged victim are acquaintances, but were not dating,” (The Athens Messenger, 11/7/2008)

The statements concerning this myth are closely related to myth #2 (There is a “right way” to respond to a rape situation) because they both myths deal with the fact that Kulchar and the woman were friends prior to the incident, and this often leads people to question the woman’s story concerning the event. Although the previous statements are facts that each newspaper is reporting— Kulchar and the woman did know each other before the alleged rape— this information often was separate from the rest of the story which explained the circumstances of the alleged rape. By specifically including these statements in the story, even though they are not necessary for the overall understanding, they subtly imply that because the woman and Kulchar were known to each other, this is not a “real” rape, which can only occur between strangers. Therefore while these statements are not opinions, they are still reinforcing myth #13.

The next most frequent myth, myth #17 (If two people have had consensual sex before, then she/he cannot be raped), included statements such as:

“Toy has said he will use the woman’s sexual history with Kulchar to prove the encounter was an intimate, consensual part of their relationship,” (The Post, 10/27/2009)
“Toy had implied that the woman— who has acknowledged having at least one previous sexual encounter with Kulchar— may have accused him of rape because she felt betrayed,” (The Athens News, 11/4/2009)

“‘They’d had sex before. He admits he had consensual sex with her and only (the woman) says otherwise,’ Toy said,” (The Athens Messenger, 10/28/2009)

Although it is true that the woman and Kulchar did in fact have sex before the alleged rape that does not mean that the woman consented to sex this time. There are different levels of consent, and one can consent to kissing but dissent to anything further—consent needs to be asked for at each step and can be revoked at any time. These statements are harmful because they imply that because the woman and Kulchar previously had sex, there is no way that Kulchar could have raped her. Even though they did have sex before, if the woman refused to engage in sex with Kulchar, and he proceeded anyway, it would still be rape.

The last of the most commonly portrayed myths, #14 (A person could prevent rape if she/he wanted to), was found by the usage of such statements as:

“The woman had numerous chances to call for help, Toy said,” (The Post, 10/28/2009)

“(Toy) stressed that there’s no evidence the woman ever tried to flee, seek help from anyone in the dorm, or lock Kulchar out after he briefly left the room,” (The Athens News, 10/29/2009)

“At another point, Toy said, the two left the room together, and she did not call out for help, despite being in a hallway full of dorm rooms,” (The Athens Messenger, 10/28/2009)

These statements are damaging because it places the blame on the victim for not stopping the rape, instead of blaming the offender for committing the rape. Similar to myth #2 (There is a right way to respond to a rape situation), this myth also expects all
victims of rape to act in the same “right way” in order to prevent the rape from happening. Women are often socialized to be quiet and passive, and these are traits that are not conducive to preventing someone from raping them by means of calling for help or fighting back, and often cause the women to remain immobilized, yet it is the same society, and media, that then blame the victims for these actions.

After the most prevalent myths listed above, myth #15 (If a person does not “fight back,” then she/he was not raped) was evidenced by 11 statements portraying this myth throughout the three newspapers. The next most commonly seen myths were #16 (Women who are drunk or under the influence of drugs are willing to engage in sexual activity) and #1 (Women incite men to rape/ask for it by their dress or actions) with eight and seven statements, respectively.

Statements portraying myth #15 (If a person does not “fight back,” then she/he was not raped) included:

“Kulchar couldn’t have overpowered the woman because she outweighs him by 30 pounds,” (*The Post*, 10/28/2009)

“(Toy) also pointed out that the woman apparently fell asleep with Kulchar after the sex,” (*The Athens News*, 10/29/2009)

This myth is closely tied to myth #14 (A person could prevent rape if she/he wanted to) mentioned previously in that it shifts the focus on the woman’s actions rather than the offender’s actions. These statements perpetuate the ideology that if the victim does not “fight back” in order to stop the rape from occurring, even though women are not socialized to do this, the woman must have wanted to have sex or she would have done something to stop it.
Examples of statements representing myth #16 (Women who are drunk or under the influence of drugs are willing to engage in sexual activity) included:


“Kulchar claimed the two left the dorm to go outside to smoke marijuana and when they returned to the room, they began talking, kissing, and eventually having sex,” (*The Athens Messenger*, 11/5/2009)

As the statement from *The Athens Messenger* shows, these portrayals of the woman and Kulchar smoking marijuana were usually followed by explaining that the woman invited him back up to her dorm room afterwards, which therein perpetuates this rape myth. Statements like this typically have the connotation that through the use of drugs or alcohol, the woman is more promiscuous, and therefore willing to engage in sexual activity, making what happens consensual, and not rape.

Myth #1 included statements such as “Toy said the woman contacted Kulchar on Sept. 28, 2008, which was his birthday, to wish him a happy birthday,” (*The Athens Messenger*, 10/28/2009). Such statements focused on the fact that she called him and invited him over to her dorm room to celebrate his birthday and are important because these statements shift the focus from the offender to the victim, and readers start to scrutinize her actions instead. Although the woman did in fact do these things, that does not mean that she intended on having sex with Kulchar, which is what these statements imply, especially when paired with statements concerning their past sexual history. By stating that the woman invited Kulchar over to celebrate his birthday, readers begin to question whether it was rape or if she wanted to have sex, and even if they believe that she did not want to have sex after inviting him over, it leaves the
readers with the feeling that she led Kulchar on, which could lead to excusing the rape and blaming the woman rather than the offender.

Another pattern that emerged across the three newspapers was that statements portraying certain rape myths often appeared together, not only in the same article, but often in the same sentence. One of the pairings of myths were myth #12 (Only “bad” women get raped) and myth #16 (Women who are drunk or under the influence of drugs are willing to engage in sexual activity). Because myth #16 often has the connotation that the women who drink or use drugs are “bad” for doing so, implying myth #12, therefore those myths would often appear together. An example of a statement that portrayed both of these myths is “Kulchar claimed that she invited him to her dorm in Boyd Hall to smoke a bowl of marijuana for his birthday,” *(The Athens Messenger, 11/5/2009).* Myth #13 (Rape only occurs between strangers) and myth #17 (If two people have had consensual sex before, then she/he cannot be raped) also commonly appeared together. These myths both imply that there is only one form of “real” rape, and that is rape when a woman is “jumped” and raped by a stranger, so if the offender was known to her, then it was not really rape, rather a miscommunication or a lie on the part of the woman, therefore it is not strange that these myths would appear together. An example of a statement that invokes both of these myths is “The defendant and his accuser have had a past sexual relationship together, and this will be very pertinent to the issue of consent and the lack of force in the incident alleged,” *(The Athens News, 2/2/2009).* The last pair of myths that commonly appeared together were myth #2 (There is a “right way” to respond to a rape situation) and myth #14 (A
person could prevent rape if she/he wanted to). Although these myths appear to differ, with one dealing with what a victim does before a rape and the other focusing on the victim’s actions after the rape, they both focus on the victim’s actions rather than the offenders, which works to excuse the rape as having not actually occurred because the victim did not act in the “right way.” For this particular case, a sentence would mention how the woman did not try to flee the dorm room when she had the chance while also mentioning that she did not try to call 911 after the rape occurred. An example of a statement that depicts this is

“The woman testified that though Kulchar was coercing her into having sex against her will, when he left the room for about three or four minutes at one point, she did not call 911, but instead composed a text message to a female friend … Toy questioned why, after Kulchar allegedly accompanied the women to the women’s bathroom in the dorm and she went inside alone, she did not lock herself into the toilet stall,” (The Athens News, 11/2/2009).

Although it was not something that I looked for in my coding, I noticed another pattern among the rape myths: certain myths were common among particular papers. Myth #1 (Women incite men to rape/ask for it by their actions) appeared more in The Athens Messenger (with six statements) than in The Post and The Athens News (with one and zero, respectively). The Athens News had fewer statements portraying rape myth #7 (Women make false reports of rape) with only four statements compared to the seven in The Post and nine in The Athens Messenger, but had almost double (with eleven myth statements) portraying myth #2 (There is a “right way” to respond to a rape situation) compared to the seven in The Post and the six in The Athens Messenger. It is impossible to determine exactly why this pattern emerged and it
would certainly be a question worth pursuing in the future. That said, it is clear that
the papers are read by and aimed at different audiences. While there is probably not
any sort of official policy that drives the way each paper covers rape trials, it is also
likely that the different audiences may get different pictures of the case and therefore
form very diverse opinions. Although these patterns may seem insignificant, their
influence on audience opinions could be important in terms of whether readers accept
rape myths or not.

It is also interesting to note that when coding, another theme emerged across
the papers: the use of the term “innocent” as opposed to “not guilty.” There is a
distinct legal difference between the two terms, and therefore they each have a
different implication; not guilty means that a jury did not find the defendant guilty
beyond a reasonable doubt, whereas innocent means that the defendant did not commit
the crime. Since the focus of this thesis was only on the Kulchar case, it would be a
different analysis to examine other articles on different crimes to see if the same theme
was present. However, the fact that this term is employed in a rape trial gives rise to
more problematic outcomes than if it were used for other crimes. Because the term
innocent is used to mean that Kulchar did not rape the woman, as opposed to saying
that he was not guilty, which would mean he could have raped her, but there was not
enough evidence to support this, it means that the woman was therefore lying about
the rape. This could have a silencing effect on other victims who see that after all the
woman has been through, the offender is being described as innocent as opposed to
not guilty, because it serves to further negatively focus on the victim by implying that
she was lying, and other women who have been victims of rape might not want to subject themselves to such treatment.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

To summarize, the major findings of this study is that the most common myths that appeared in the three local newspapers in Athens are myth #2 (There is a right way to respond to a rape situation), myth #7 (Women make false reports of rape), myth #13 (Rape only occurs between strangers), myth #14 (A person could prevent rape if she/he wanted to), and myth #17 (If two people have had consensual sex before, then she/he cannot be raped). Each of these myths works to blame the victim by focusing on her actions or denying the rape altogether. This is problematic because people are reading news stories expecting to be getting objective information from credible sources, yet they are being exposed to rape myths. As shown by the statements portraying myths in the previous chapter, most of the myths are subtle implications and not explicitly saying “the victim is to blame,” but that makes these myths even more dangerous because they are subtly reinforcing people’s belief in rape myths.

This study fits in with the existing research in this field. In a case that concerned a woman who knew Kulchar, was of the same race, class and ethnicity as him, was young and smoking marijuana, and Kulchar used no weapon in the alleged rape, the woman from the Kulchar case exhibits seven of the eight qualifications that Benedict (1992) outlined to label her as a “vamp.” As Benedict found in her study, these categorizations lead the woman to be blamed for the rape, which is what

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4 The only characterization that the woman from the Kulchar case did not explicitly demonstrate is that the victim is portrayed as “pretty.” The woman’s appearance was never discussed in any of the articles from the three newspapers, and therefore played no role in the attribution of blame towards the alleged victim or offender.
happened with the Kulchar case in the media: the woman was repeatedly blamed for the alleged rape, fitting in perfectly with Benedict’s past findings.

Unlike the past research outlined in the literature review, the articles from all three stories used fewer qualifier words when referring to the alleged victim and offender. Both were described as students at Ohio University, and often Kulchar’s class rank and city of permanent residency were mentioned, but little beyond that was used to describe either of them in the articles, an improvement in media reporting from the past years. The elimination of descriptive words qualifying the accused and the woman is only one step that helps in combating the perpetuation of words that bias the reader, but much more still needs to be done in order to eliminate the bias and rape myth statements that lead the reader to blame the victim more than the offender. In order for coverage to be more balanced, reporters need to stop relying so much on statements made by the attorneys, which are inherently going to be one-sided, and when used, attribution of the statements and quotes of the attorneys need to be placed immediately before or after the statement, especially in leads which are used to catch a reader’s attention. This is important so that the reader is more likely to associate the statement or quote as biased, rather than fact. An example of a lead in which the attribution is problematic is “A former student did not brutally rape and kidnap a classmate last fall, but did illegally dispose of evidence related to the case, a local jury ruled Friday after nearly six hours of deliberation,” (The Post, 11/9/2009). This statement is dangerous for a number of reasons, the first of which being that the statement implies that he definitely did not commit the crime, rather than not guilty
beyond a reasonable doubt, a problem that was addressed in the previous chapter. The second problem with this statement is that the jury was not introduced as the verdict-giver, again, making it sound more definitive rather than the jury’s finding of not guilty beyond a reasonable doubt, misleading the reader.

Although the findings of this thesis were consistent with the present literature conducted on the national level, a study that analyzed more articles covered throughout the three different local newspapers would have enhanced the analysis of this thesis, however, no other rape trial was covered by all three local newspapers. Also, several other Ohio college towns with similar settings to Athens were examined to see if similar results concerning rape trials appeared, however, other college student newspapers did not cover on-going rape trials, and thus did not yield any data.

The strength of this study is that it builds upon existing research on how the media reports on rape trials by extending the knowledge of what is present in local media. This thesis also extends the knowledge of how rape myths are presented at large, by discussing how some myths seem to group together as well as how the three newspapers, with distinctly different audiences, also seem to perpetuate different rape myths. To continue this research into the sphere of local media reporting of rape trials and perpetuation of rape myths, the next step would be to examine how the myths present actually influence people’s beliefs, similar to the Kobe Bryant study discussed in the literature review. A study examining how people attribute blame before and after reading articles from the three different local media as well as employ rape myths would be beneficial to this discussion. It would also be interesting to create three
different groups and give each group articles from one of the local newspapers concerning the Kulchar case, and see whether or not the groups reading articles by different newspapers has any impact on the readers’ attribution of blame in the rape case, as well as see if certain rape myths are more likely to be employed.
References:


