



## **The Influence of Rape Myth Acceptance and Situational Factors in Defining Sex and Labeling Rape among Female University Students in Nigeria**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Existing literature have posited that the problem of rape aggravates if it is unacknowledged as a result of the influence of rape myth acceptance. Being an understudied phenomenon, the present study sought to explore rape myths and examine situational factors that appear to differentiate women who experience various levels of victimisation. Through mixed-method victimisation surveys that covered four universities in Lagos and Ogun states, involving 206 respondents and 12 in-depth interviewees, the study found that emotions and societal perception of rape are strong factors in determining personal conception and description of rape-like experiences. The study concludes that young women should be enlightened about the health implication of nonconsensual sex, irrespective of their emotional attachment to the offender.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Empirical studies have asserted that a societal belief in rape myths serves to perpetuate sexual victimisation against women (Bohner et al., 2005; Withey, 2007; Hammond, Berry and Rodriguez, 2011). The suggestion of rape myth was first made by Burt (1980:217), describing it as “prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists.” Burt identified some rape myths as “only bad girls get raped,” “women ask for it,” and “rapists are sex-starved, insane, or both” (p.217). He went further to conceptualise rape myth acceptance as the amount of stereotypic ideas that individuals possess in respect of rape such as women often falsely accuse men of rape, rape is not harmful, women want or enjoy rape, or women cause or deserve to be raped

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by their inappropriate or risky behaviour (Burt, 1980 as cited in Frese et al., 2004). There is equally an unfounded but common myth that only “certain women” are raped, which suggests that a particular kind of woman is “safe” and excluded from sexual victimisation (Boeschen, Sales and Koss, 1998). Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994) evaluated the definition of rape myths as offered by Burt and stated that though it is descriptive, it lacks sufficient clarity for research purposes. They submitted that a clearer and more comprehensive definition is required to be developed and used consistently in order to create a measurement tool to assess the validity of this concept. Therefore, Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994:134) defined rape myths 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.”

Though rape myths have no factual basis in reality, however, it is strongly applied in the Nigerian society, as manifested in the social perception of rape, and disposition towards victims of sexual assaults in the country. Rape victims are often perceived as facilitating their victimisation through ‘suggestive attitudes,’ and ‘indecent dressing’; in spite of the fact that there is no law that regulates dressing in the country. Therefore, victims of rape or sexual assault are perceived as people of low moral virtues that must have led their assailants to the crime ‘one way or the other’. Amaka-Okafor (2013) described this social perception of rape by Nigerians as ‘a culture of rape’. She condemned the non-recognition of domestic rape (between husband and wife) by the nation’s constitution as a factor that fuels the culture of rape in the country. This, by extension account for the reason for low reporting of date rape as the victim will be roundly condemned by the public if she comes out to report being raped by her boyfriend. In this case, it has been reported that even the law enforcement agents makes mockery of such reports by victims as they often consider it inconceivable for a girl to report being raped by her boyfriend (Chiedu, 2013).

In the country, women that allege rape are typically looked upon with some degree of scepticism based on rape myths. A case in point is the public reaction that followed the allegation of rape instituted by a National Youth Service Corp member against the King of a town in Osun State (Makinde, 2013). As observed from the responses of readers of the news on social media (Facebook and Twitter), many individuals in the Nigerian society still apply the antiquated fictitious ideas of victims of sexual assault. Comments such as; “what was she doing in the palace if she didn’t want to be raped?” “she must have decided to claim rape because the King reneged on his promise,” “women are fond of accusing men of rape to get what they want” dominated the thread. It is noteworthy that majority of female commentators to the thread also blamed the corps member for “encouraging” sexual relationship with the King and now laying claim to rape just to blackmail him. In general, according to Sawyer, Thompson and Chicorelli (2002:20), those “individuals that subscribe to rape myth tend to believe that aggressors are

not responsible for their actions and/or the victims are to blame for their predicament”

Scholars have asserted that date rape is a violent, degrading phenomenon which pervades college campuses (Rosenthal, Heesacker and Neimeyer 1995; Morry, and Winkler, 2001). Similarly, investigators of sexual assault have found that a substantial number of women who have been raped do not conceptualize their experiences as such (Ullman and Filipas, 2001; Paul and Hayes, 2002). This brings to the fore the issue of whether individuals can be traumatised by the experience of rape if they do not label the experience a victimisation. Research findings have equally asserted that in spite of the unacknowledged status of date rape, it still comes with psychological, physical and emotional consequences on the victims. Therefore, it remains a pervasive social problem with lasting effects on the victims, hence requiring continuous research attention.

As the rape scourge continues to eat deep into the social fabrics of the Nigerian society, the ivory towers are not spared as there are increasing accounts of sexual assaults in several institutions of higher learning in the country. Consequent upon the underreporting of rape cases in the tertiary institutions in the country, this study is focused on examining the factors that contribute to the conceptualisation of sex and rape among university women in the country. The research intends to explore rape myths and examine situational factors that appear to differentiate women who experience various levels of victimisation. The factors to be examined include; “the relationship of the victim and offender,” “the intensity of the violence of the assault,” “the resistance of the victim,” “emotional response of the victim,” and “sexual history of the victim.” Salient questions that will be answered in the research include: to what level do young women in Nigeria accept rape myth based on societal belief? What is the implication of this rape myth acceptance to their understanding and attachment of meaning to sex and rape? How do situational factors impact on the perception of victims of date rape about forcible sex?

## **METHODS AND MATERIALS**

Criminal victimisation studies are a useful research instrument to deal with the problem of inadequate statistics and to more accurately pinpoint problems within society (Van Dijk, van Kesteren and Smit, 2008). This study conducted a mixed-method victimisation survey that covered four universities in Lagos and Ogun states, Nigeria. The universities were purposively selected for the study based on the quick positive responses received from female students to participate in the research. The four (4) universities, located in the South-western part of the country are; Tai Solarin

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University of Education, Olabisi Onabanjo University (both in Ogun State), University of Lagos and Lagos State University.

Fliers advertising the study were posted around the campuses recruiting women to be in a study about their beliefs and sexual history. In order to enhance anonymity and encourage participation, all personal information that could lead to the identification of the respondent was excluded from the questionnaires while telephone interviews were allowed for those that prefer it to face-to-face interview method. Female research assistants were recruited from the four selected schools and trained to provide the participants with brief description of the study and get them to sign consent form to express their willingness to participate in the research. The initial participants of 400 female students of the four schools (100 from each school) were administered several questions to screen for victimisation experiences, especially experience of rape or attempted rape.

There were six items drawn from the Sexual Experiences Survey (Koss and Gidycz, 1985), which sought to find out if participants have experienced such violent sexual any man without their consent. Participants who endorsed having had an experience of rape or attempted rape based on their responses to the SES were then asked to provide several details about the circumstances of the assault on a separate page, adapted from Layman et al. (1996), including information about the force used by the assailant, sexual history of the victim, the relationship of the victim and offender, emotional response of the victim, and the resistance strategies used by the victim. In another section, they were asked to offer responses on their perception of the meaning of sex and rape, the knowledge of the social beliefs on sex and rape between dating partners, the post-rape relationship with the assailant and whether they have had more than one of these experiences. Participants were also given several possible labels for their experience. Rape victims who did not label the assault as a crime (i.e. rape, attempted rape, or another crime) were considered unacknowledged. The same acknowledgment criterion was used for attempted rape victims. From the 400 responses solicited for the study, a total of 322 were returned properly filled, while 206 of these responded in the affirmative of having experienced forcible sex or attempted rape.

In respect of the qualitative survey, 12 respondents (four from each university) of the questionnaires that are victims of rape and/or attempted rape, and who consented into providing detailed information about their experience were engaged. The study designed an In-depth Interview Guide (IDI) that consisted of two sections of ten (10) questions which sought to elicit responses about the participants' perceptions and attitudinal beliefs about rape and sexual assault. For both the quantitative and qualitative study, the data collection exercise was conducted between February and June, 2013.

## RESULTS

### **Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents**

As evident in Table 1, the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents were quite diverse. The study shows that the respondents are relatively young with majority within age 21-25 (98, 47.57%). Those that are younger than the majority age category (21-25) are second in frequency with 56 (27.19%) of them participating in the research. The least age category that took part in the study are those that are 30years and above with 13 (6.31%). The age distribution of the study aligns with the age pattern of most of the higher institutions in the country, as postgraduate students usually account for the minority of students in higher institutions. The respondents that are still in the first year of their studies accounts for the majority in this research with 54 (26.21%) participating. This is followed by those in year 3 (44, 21.36%), while 38 (18.45%) of 200 level students that took part made those in that category to come third. The least participated group in terms of their university level is the postgraduate students with 11 (5.34%). Apart from the numerical disadvantage of postgraduate students in most universities, students in their undergraduate studies are usually more favourably disposed to participate in survey research than their postgraduate counterparts. The research had more respondents from Tai Solarin University of Education (72, 34.95%) because that was the initial location of the study before it extended to respondents of other universities largely based on the recruitment of research assistants from other institutions. Finally, this study was limited to the female students who have either suffered rape or survived rape attempt in their sexual history. To this end, those that are victims of rape among the study's respondents are 153 (74.27%) while those that experienced attempted rape are 53 (25.73%). From the foregoing, the socio-demographics of the respondents evidently show that they are capable of adequately informing the study about their experience and opinions, needed to assist the study achieve its objectives.

### **Rape myth acceptance and perception of sex and rape**

Empirical studies have suggested that women can also be susceptible to rape myth acceptance (Peterson and Muehlenhard, 2004). Burkhart and Fromuth (1996) asserted that unchallenged rape myths perpetuate feelings of guilt, shame and self-blaming tendencies for victims. Consequent upon this, the study moved to examine the perception and meaning that victims of sexual violence attach to sex and rape as against the rape myth. Using a Likert scale, a number of rape myths that are common to the Nigeria society are used to examine the meaning of sex and rape to the respondents. Table 2 shows the

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responses of participants to the various statements that bother on the belief that they hold about sex and rape.

**Table 1:** Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents.

<i>Variable</i>		<i>N</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
<b>Age (in years)</b>	16-20	56	27.19
	21-25	98	47.57
	26-30	39	18.93
	30+	13	6.31
	<b>Total</b>	<b>206</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Level in the University</b>	100	54	26.21
	200	38	18.45
	300	44	21.36
	400	33	16.02
	500	26	12.62
	Postgraduate	11	5.34
	<b>Total</b>	<b>206</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Institutional Affiliation</b>	Tai Solarin University of Ibadan	72	34.95
	Olabisi Onabanjo University	66	32.04
	Lagos State University	33	16.02
	University of Lagos	35	16.99
	<b>Total</b>	<b>206</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Type of Sexual Victimization</b>	Rape	153	74.27
	Attempted rape	53	25.73
	<b>Total</b>	<b>206</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Survey 2013.

The pattern of response of the participants of the study suggests that they are mostly in agreement with the rape myth of the Nigerian society. They share the same view with the description of sex/rape by the Nigerian Criminal and Penal Codes with majority of them (136, 66.02%) strongly agreeing with sex being the penetration of the male organ into the female organ, while they equally strongly agree that finger penetration (fingering) and penetration of the mouth by penis are not real sex.

**Table 2:** Responses to questions on perception and beliefs about sex and rape.

Item	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)	6 (%)	Total
Sex is when there is penetration of the male organ into the female organ.	12 (5.83)	8 (3.88)	5 (2.43)	7 (3.40)	38 (18.44)	136 (66.02)	206 (100)
Finger penetration (fingering) and penetration of the mouth by penis are not real sex	21 (10.20)	11 (5.34)	13 (6.31)	15 (7.28)	41 (19.90)	105 (50.97)	206 (100)
Sex is normal in relationship between male and female	31 (15.05)	6 (2.91)	18 (8.74)	14 (6.80)	39 (18.93)	98 (47.57)	206 (100)
Sexual intercourse between a boyfriend and girlfriend cannot be seen as rape	11 (5.34)	34 (16.50)	11 (5.34)	21 (10.19)	47 (22.82)	82 (39.81)	206 (100)
Rape is when there is sexual intercourse without the consent.	10 (4.85)	6 (2.91)	21 (10.20)	11 (5.34)	37 (17.96)	121 (58.74)	206 (100)
Rape is when a stranger or mere acquaintance force a lady for sex	26 (12.61)	23 (11.17)	13 (6.31)	25 (12.14)	33 (16.02)	86 (41.75)	206 (100)
Rape is always for the sake of sex	10 (4.85)	19 (9.23)	8 (3.88)	7 (3.40)	21 (10.19)	141 (68.45)	206 (100)
A husband cannot rape his own wife	2 (0.97)	22 (10.68)	15 (7.28)	5 (2.43)	23 (11.16)	139 (67.48)	206 (100)
Women are mostly responsible for being raped	67 (32.52)	14 (6.80)	7 (3.40)	13 (6.31)	33 (16.02)	72 (34.95)	206 (100)
If a woman is raped in a man's house then it is her fault	34 (16.51)	36 (17.48)	12 (5.82)	2 (0.97)	21 (10.19)	101 (49.03)	206 (100)
A woman that wears sexy dress is likely to be raped	71 (34.47)	29 (14.08)	19 (9.23)	10 (4.85)	26 (12.61)	51 (24.76)	206 (100)

**Legend:** 1-Strongly Disagree; 2-Disagree; 3-Somewhat Disagree; 4-Somewhat Agree; 5-Agree; 6-Strongly Agree.

**Source:** Survey 2013.

This is contrary to the conventional definition of sex that acknowledges penetration of the anus by the penis (anal sex), penetration of the mouth by the penis or oral penetration of the vulva or vagina (oral sex), sexual penetration by the fingers (fingering), and sexual penetration by use of a strap-on dildo (Roberts, 2006; Hammer, 2008; Starr and McMillan, 2008).

Majority of the respondents (98, 47.57%) also strongly agree that sex is a normal event in relationship between male and female, while only 31 (15.05) strongly disagree with that. Similarly, 82 (39.81%) respondents, which account for the majority, are not favourably disposed to labelling any form of

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sexual intercourse between a boyfriend and girlfriend as rape, while 47 (22.82%) also agrees. Only 11 (5.34%) of them disagree strongly and 34 (16.50%) disagrees with this position. This may account for the reason that victims of date rape relationship find it difficult to come forward to report. The social perception on male/female relationship is sex-laden, which makes parents and guardians to impede the development of such relationship between their wards and opposite sex if they can. It can hardly be conceived that there would be a dating relationship without the temptation of sexual intercourse. An overwhelming majority of the respondents (121, 58.74) however, strongly agrees, and 37 (17.96%) agreeing with part of the conventional definition of rape and as also contained in the definition provided by the Nigerian Criminal Code, Penal Code and Sha'ria Law which identifies rape as a non-consensual sexual intercourse. The study also tested the acceptance of participants of another common rape myth in Nigeria which often label rape as a stranger crime. Majority of the respondents (86, 41.75%) strongly agrees that rape is a stranger or mere acquaintance crime, while 33 (16.02%) also agrees. Meanwhile, 26 (12.61%) of them strongly disagrees with that and 23 (11.17%) also disagrees. An overwhelming majority of the respondents (141, 68.45%) strongly accept that rape is always for the sake of sex, while only 10 (4.85%) and 19 (9.23%) of them strongly disagree and disagree respectively.

There is also an overwhelming acceptance of another common rape myth which implies that husbands have absolute sexual right over their wives as majority of the respondents (139, 67.48%) strongly agrees that a husband cannot rape his own wife, while only 2 (0.97%) of them strongly disagree. In support of another popularly held rape myth in the Nigerian society, 72 (34.95%) respondents opted for 'strongly agree' with the motion that women are mostly responsible for being raped. However, those that strongly disagree with the motion came a close second with (67, 32.52%). However, while a total of 105 (50.97%) respondents chose strongly agree or agree, a distant 81 (39.32%) of them strongly disagree and disagree. This shows their strong acceptance of the societal rape myth that women have to be blamed one way or the other for falling victim of rape. Then on the social perception that a lady should not have any course to be in a man's house except she is comfortable with anything that happens. The respondents also align with that as majority (101, 49.03%) of them strongly agrees that if a woman gets raped in the house of a man, then it is her fault. There is a common rape myth statement of "what was she doing there in the first place?" anytime there is a report of rape of a woman in the house of a man in whatever guise. Out of the 12 common rape myth included in the questionnaire, the only one in which majority strongly disagree (71, 34.47%) with is the motion that wearing sexy dresses makes a woman invite being raped. Fifty-one (24.76%) of them strongly agree with that position and 26 (12.61) agree as well.



**Impact of situational factors on victims' perception of forcible sex**

Prior research has shown that various situational factors and behaviours can affect one's perception of whether a rape has occurred (Vandiver and Dupalo, 2012). The belief of scholars that the nature of the rape event would be largely influenced by the personality of the offender, the amount of force exerted, the use or unused of weapon, the venue of the rape event, the emotional attachment of the victim to the offender, the condition of the mind of the victim or offender (whether under the influence of drugs) and the postassault relationship between the victim and offender (Abarbanel, 1986; Brecklin and Ullman, 2005; Gidycz et al., 2006). The study moved to examine varying situational factors that could influence the perception of the respondents on the sexual violence that they experienced. First they were requested to indicate the relationship with the man (rapist) at the time of the experience. Table 3 shows their response.

**Table 3:** Relationship between the respondents and their Sexual Assailant.

Relationship with the assaulter	N	Percentage (%)
Stranger	57	27.67
Just Met	33	16.02
Acquaintance (Classmate, neighbour etc.)	28	13.59
Friend	49	23.79
Dating Casually (early stage of dating)	25	12.14
Steady date (Romantic partner)	6	2.91
Relative	8	3.88
Total	206	100

**Source:** Survey 2013.

Evident from the table above, majority of the sexual violence that the respondents of the study suffered were in the hands of strangers (57, 27.67%), closely followed by their friends (49, 23.79%), those they just met (33, 16.02%), their acquaintances (28, 13.59%) and those that they were still in early dating relationship with (25, 12.14%). Interestingly, only 6 (2.91%) acknowledges the sexual violence they suffered from their romantic partner. Consequently, it is imperative for the study to examine closely the romantic relationship of the respondents as previous studies have indicated that most rape cases or sexual violence between romantic partners are hidden or conceived differently by the victim (Layman, Gidycz and Lynn, 1996; Morry and Winkler, 2001; Hammond, Berry and Rodriguez, 2011). Though, only 6 (2.91%) of the respondents had earlier identified their assailant as their romantic partner, the study moved to examine if they have had similar experience of being assaulted with their dating partner which was not categorised as rape or attempted rape in table 3. Therefore, they were asked

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to respond to a question- have you ever had sexual encounter with your boyfriend (romantic partner) that you didn't consent to?

In spite of them not acknowledging it earlier, majority of the respondents (117, 56.80%) have encountered sexual experience that qualifies as rape in the conventional definition of the word. However, they may not have perceived it as "rape" based on the personality of the assailant. One of the qualitative respondents provided reasons for this:

...how can I take the forced sex that I had with my boyfriend as rape. That was not the first time that we had sex. It was just that sometimes when you are not in the mood, your man (partner) may refuse to show understanding and insist in his own way...on one occasion, he went as far as hitting me vigorously on my chest and my face because I put up a strong resistance against him. I wanted to call it quit but he begged me...I forgave me, what can I do?, I love him...

(Cynthia, 24, LASU)

Another respondents state her experience:

...not once, not twice, quite a number of times...on one occasion, he wrongly accused me of dating somebody, I was really angry, so when he requested for sex, I refused. He got very mad, accusing me that I was denying him sex because I enjoy it better with the other guy. He pounced on me and tore off my dress, he was very rough with me all through, I got injured...

(Tina, 27, LASU)

In order to further understand the nature of the violent sexual experience that the victims (117, 56.80%) suffered in the hands of their romantic partners, they were asked to identify the methods of force that the man used during the incident (selecting all that applies to them). Table 4 shows their response:

**Table 4:** Methods of force used by romantic partners on the victims.

Method of force	N	Percentage (%)
Verbal threats to harm you or others	11	9.40
Using his superior body weight	91	77.78
Twisting your arm or holding you down	78	66.67
Hitting or slapping you	61	52.14
Choking or beating you	21	17.95
Showing or using a weapon	4	3.42

**Source:** Survey 2013.

The use of superior body weight accounts for the most predominant method (91, 77.78%) that was used to subdue the resistance of the victims by their romantic partners. The twisting of the arm and being held down is second most used method (78, 66.67), while hitting and slapping is another commonly used method (61, 52.14%). This implies that there were

reasonable use of force by the date partners that could effectively make the experience fall into the category of violent date rape, particularly if the victims didn't consent to being treated that way. Hence, the study made attempt to enquire about the resistance put up by the victims in order to determine if they were at home with the way they were treated during the incident. Table 5 shows their response to the question; what did you do during the incident to show that you did not want to engage in that activity (mark all that applies)?

**Table 5:** Responses of the victims to the express their non-consensual to the activity.

Method of victims' response	N	Percentage (%)
Turned cold	21	17.95
Pleaded with him	101	86.32
Cried	81	69.23
Screamed for help	77	65.81
Ran away	16	13.68
Physically struggled	96	82.05
Hit him with an object	43	36.75
I laid back and enjoyed it	3	2.56

**Source:** Survey 2013.

The responses shown in table 5 is indicative that the respondents were mainly victims of unsolicited violent date rape as evidence from the table shows that they didn't consent to being treated the way they were on such occasion. Only 3 (2.56%) of the respondents wanted such experience while the main response was to plead with him (101, 86.32%) to stop the violence. The second most frequent defence put up by the respondents was to cry (81, 69.23%) while those that screamed for help was equally significant (77, 65.81%). Meanwhile, 43 (36.75%) fought back with some measure of violence.

To this end, the study moved to find out if they continued having romantic relationship with the man (assailant) after experiencing such violent sex. Majority of the respondents (63, 53.85%) stated that they continued having romantic relationship with the man after experiencing the violent sexual intercourse the first time, while 54 (46.15%) quitted the relationship. This further adds currency to the trend of their responses that imply that the respondents have failed to acknowledge their experience as violent rape. Finally, they were asked to describe the experience that they went through with the man. Table 6 shows their responses to the question- What term do you think best describes your experience?

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**Table 6:** Responses on what they think best describe their experience.

What best describe the experience	N	Percentage (%)
Rape	3	2.56
Attempted rape	1	0.86
Some other type of crime	22	18.80
Miscommunication or misunderstanding	17	14.54
Seduction	3	2.56
Weird or crazy sex	19	16.24
Not sure	52	44.44
Total	117	100

**Source:** Survey 2013.

Majority of the respondents (52, 44.44%) are unable to describe their sexual violent experience with their romantic partner as they indicated that they were “not sure” of what to term it as. This is followed by those that termed it “some others type of crime” (22, 18.80%) as they understand it wasn’t right but still cannot term it as ‘rape’. Interestingly, 19 (16.24%) of them see it as a ‘weird or crazy form of sex’ and 17 (14.54%) prefers to see it as miscommunication. This implies that the respondents still do not consider their experience as rape even though they realise it was wrong to be treated in that manner, especially without their consent.

## **DISCUSSION**

Researchers have made conscious attempts to determine what leads some victims to acknowledge rape experience while other victims do not (Layman, Gidycz and Lynn, 1996; Morry and Winkler, 2001; Hammond, Berry and Rodriguez, 2011). Some of these studies have focused on attempting to identify personality or attitudinal differences between acknowledged and unacknowledged victims. This present study aligns with those studies, as it sought to examine the personality and attitudinal differences in the conceptualising of rape and sex of young women in Nigerian colleges who are more vulnerable to witness such experiences. The findings of the study suggests that there is a wide gulf between the meaning ascribed to forcible sex or rape by students of Nigerian Universities and conventional definition of rape. This finding indicates that emotions and societal perception of rape are strong factors in determining personal conception and description of rape-like experiences. This gives credence to the postulation of Peterson and Muehlenhard (2004) that women can also be susceptible to rape myth acceptance. Of the 11 common rape myths within the Nigerian society that the study used to test the level of acceptance of the respondents, it was found that majority strongly align with 10 of them. This implies that there is a high

level of acceptance of rape myth by young women in the country. The strength of the rape myth acceptance is made manifest in the definition and meanings that the respondents of the study attached to their own experience. Though, Boesch et al., (1998) posited that women alleging rape are typically looked upon with some degree of scepticism based on rape myths, this study found that victims of rape themselves are susceptible to such rape myths as the respondents of the study subjected themselves to feelings of guilt, shame and self-blaming for their sexual violent experience.

The results of the study suggest that not acknowledging a rape is primarily a response to suffering an assault that is not consistent with societal definitions of rape, supporting script theory. The respondents do not believe that finger penetration (fingering) and penetration of the mouth by penis are real sex as against conventional definitions, the clamouring of various women's right, nongovernmental organisations and the feminists theorists (Roberts, 2006; Hammer, 2008; Starr and McMillan, 2008). The understanding they showed to what sex was, aligns however with the description provided by the Nigerian Criminal and Penal Code as well as the Sharia law. This indicates that there is a strong influence of the meanings ascribed to sex and rape by constituted authorities on the perception of sex and rape by young Nigerian women. The study also found that some of the strongly held rape myth among young female university students include; non-recognition of rape incidence between dating partners, non-recognition of domestic rape between husband and wife, rape is always for the sake of sex, rape is only perpetrated by stranger or acquaintances, women are mostly responsible for their rape victimisation and if the location of rape or sexual assault is the rapist's house, then the woman is at fault. The acceptance of these myths by the respondents of the study is indicative of the influence that the myths would have on rape reporting in the country. Since the conception of what rape is significantly excuse sexual violence between dating partners, there is tendency that the non-acknowledgement and reporting of date rape will continue to be prevalent in the Nigerian social environment. Sawyer et al. (2002) stated that existing rape myths contribute to the meaning victims attach to their sexual victimisation.

The study also tested and discovered some important situational factors that impacts on the conceptualisation and understanding that women attach to forcible sex, especially with their romantic partners. From the findings of the study, there is a mutual relationship between rape myth acceptance and situational factors in shaping the perception of women who experience various levels of victimisation. The study found that rape myth acceptance strongly impacts on the perceptions of women when confronted with some level of sexual violence. The important situational factors that influence the perception of Nigerian young women to sexual violence include; relationship of the victim with the offender, the amount of force exerted, the use or unused of weapon, the venue of the rape event, the emotional attachment of the victim to the offender and the post-assault relationship between the victim

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and offender. The study found that the level of emotional involvement of the victim with the offender is the strongest factor that impact on the meanings that victims attach to sexual violence. The findings of the study in this regard align with the position of Boeschen et al. (1998), Schneider (2005), and Withey (2007). There are more studies that have focused and established the mismatch between a victim's rape experience and her conceptualization of rape. Individuals studying unacknowledged rape from the perspective of definitions and personal rape script have focused on both the mismatch with societal definitions of rape (Layman et al., 1996) and with the victim's personal rape script (Kahn et al., 1994; Bondurant, 2001). The study found that the situational factors of the date rape are different from that of stranger and other types of rape which may accounts for the differences in the way the victims conceptualise their experience in both cases. The study also found that the respondents does not perceive the sexual violent experience they had with their romantic partner as rape even though the attributes of the incidents fits perfectly to that of forced sexual intercourse or rape. The respondents firmly indicated that their experience of such sexual violence was unpleasant and unsolicited, yet, they would not conceptualise it as rape due to emotional attachment with their partners.

From the foregoing, it could be argued that the influence of rape myth acceptance in the conception of sexual violence among Nigerian young women is strong enough to impact on their understanding of sex and rape outside the conventional definition. Also, the less violent nature of date rape and the romantic involvement of the victim with the offender are factors that equally impacts on the perception that victims have about the term to use to describe their experience. This position implies that there must be specific approaches that would be used to effect a reorientation of the women in the country in order to assist them in assigning their own meaning to the experience instead of society's stereotypical ideas regarding rape.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

It appears that the crime of rape is one which is extremely difficult for women to overcome, regardless of whether it is acknowledged. However, studies have established that the problem of rape aggravates if it is unacknowledged as a result of the influence of rape myth acceptance. In this case, the victim will be susceptible to psychological distress and lowered self-esteem among other negative effects. This study concludes that the unacknowledged status of date rape by victims in the Nigerian society is mainly a factor of the acceptance of rape myth which impacted on the understanding of the women about what sex and rape is actually about. The

rape myth combines with situational factors to shape the perception of the women and shield them from acknowledging or interpreting sexual violence from their romantic partners as rape. It is the submission of this study that appropriate measures need to be taken by the government, women rights organisations and other stakeholders to enlighten the women to understand not only real meaning of rape and sexual assault, but also the health implication as well as the need to seek for counselling and medical interventions when they fall victim. This is particularly imperative given that unacknowledged rape victims are more likely to continue to associate with the man who raped them, as the results of the study suggested. Therefore, they may be at elevated risk of further victimisation.

The study further suggests that higher institutions in the country should establish anti-sexual assault units within the campuses to educate and counsel students about sexual victimisation and safe sex. This could be organised with specialised women's right organisations that could provide capacity building support and logistics services. This will help the country to tackle the increasing rate of unacknowledged rape among young women in the country who are largely affected by the societal perception of rape. It is the responsibility of these institutions to ensure that through intensive education, rape myth is reduced in the minds of the younger women in order for the women to be better equipped to confront the problem of rape and sexual assault.

The outcome of this research suggests a number of directions for future research into the phenomena of rape myth acceptance, situational factors and the impact that they have in the conception of sex and rape by women in Nigeria. This is in order to further address the paucity of knowledge on unacknowledged rape and sexual assault in the country. This study has focused mainly on how the victims of unacknowledged rape conceptualise their experience, however, further studies can look at victims' acknowledgment status changes over time, and what factors lead to this change. Future research should also study the long-term effects of suffering an unacknowledged rape on victim functioning. These studies if conducted within the Nigerian social environment will drive more understanding of sexual victimisation and proffer effective intervention measures in the country.

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