

News Narratives and Mental Health: The Psychological Impact of Rape Coverage on Young Women

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Abstract

Media is the fourth pillar of democracy as it plays an essential role in shaping public opinion and disseminating important information. The current study aims to explore the psychological impact of rape news on young adult women's mental health. A semi-structured interview was used in this study to demonstrate the psychological influence of rape news representations in broadcast media on young adults and the rape victims. Where the findings suggested that the way rape is advertised in the media has the potential to shape people's impressions of it. The research also underscores that Indian population is in need of sensitization training for such matters.

Keywords: *Media; mental health; psychological factors; rape; rape news.*

Introduction

The media's interests have shifted in recent years, favoring sensationalism over objective reporting and entertainment above the dissemination of factual information (Smith 2021). This tendency is clear, as television programs compete with news bulletins, which frequently focus on emotionally charged subjects such as violence and conflict rather than inspirational tales (Jones and Brown 2022). Furthermore, a growing body of research has focused on the psychological effects of mass media on human behavior. Although a strong link has been shown between violent media and aggressive conduct, more recent research has also examined other facets of media consumption and how it affects the behavior of viewers (Johnson 2023).

The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) of India is the principal source of crime data in the country, including rape statistics. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) recorded 32,033 occurrences of rape in India in 2020. In 2020, the conviction rate for rape cases was 27.8%. Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan experienced the greatest number of rape incidents in 2020. The victim of the rape has to go through the pain not only once but every time when anybody brings it up. This not only impacts the portrayal of the news but also impacts the overall wellbeing of the rape victims along with the young women who watch it.

With keeping the media's portrayal of rape in the focus, the paper aims to explore the psychological impact of rape news in youth's mental health. In India, the number of rape cases is increasing day by day. The presentation of rape news in the media is done in such way, that it not covers the incident. Along with that it covers all the additional aspects of the victims for instance taking interviews of the family members and the neighbors. Which leaves a negative impact on the mental health of the viewers. This the ultimate goal of the study to investigate that what kind of effect the dramatization of rape news of is having on the mental health of the women.

Portrayal of Rape News

Increasing amounts of recent research have focused on the enormous impact of the media on psychology. To enhance theoretical and practical knowledge, researchers in psychology have stressed the importance of incorporating the social media context (Fardouly and Vartanian 2020). Films and television can have a significant effect on psychological well-being by altering attitudes, beliefs, and

behaviors, as research has repeatedly demonstrated (Nathanson 2022). In particular, negative content has the power to change moods and influence how people view both local and global events. People's mental health may be impacted by the upsetting global situations they read about in news stories, such as crime, violence, and political unrest (Jurgens et al. 2021).

Gravelin et al. (2024) conducted a content analysis of news articles from two major newspapers, revealing a tendency for the media to overreport cases of stranger rape while underreporting cases of acquaintance rape. This selective reporting contributes to the perpetuation of the "real rape" prototype, in which stranger rape is considered more legitimate or believable compared to acquaintance rape. The authors found that articles about acquaintance rape were more likely to include victim-blaming language, further reinforcing stereotypes that imply the victim's complicity in the assault.

McLeod and Douglas (2017) reported that the media has a significant effect on public perceptions of various issues, including sexual assault. Sensationalized or graphic rape news can distort the audience's understanding of crime. Exposure to such dramatic events may lead to skewed perceptions of the prevalence and nature of sexual assault, especially among youth. Rigterink and Schomerus (2017), The dramatization of rape news can elicit powerful emotional responses from young people, including dread and anxiety. Continuous exposure to scary portrayals of sexual assault may increase feelings of unease and paranoia. This worry may affect young people's daily lives, influencing their choices, behaviors, and general mental health.

Franiuk (2024) argue that, dramatized coverage contributes to the spread of myths about rape, such as the idea that victims are usually lying or that they started the attack. Both the victims and the wider public—especially young audiences—may internalize these falsehoods, which reduces empathy for survivors. This has psychological ramifications for both groups. Exposure to vivid or sensationalized images of rape in the media might cause viewers to experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), sadness, and anxiety.

Long-term exposure to violent television content has been shown to desensitize viewers to violence in the real world, according to recent research. Reduced empathy and an emotional reaction to violent stimuli may be the outcome of this desensitization process (Bushman and Anderson 2021). The idea that regular exposure to violent media as young people leads to desensitization and more aggressive behavior as adults has been bolstered by longitudinal research (Coyne et al. 2022). According to the general aggression model (GAM), exposure to violent media may make people more likely to think, feel, and act violently. According to experimental research, brief exposure to violent media can lead to an increase in aggressive behavior, particularly in children and teenagers (DeLisi et al. 2020).

Numerous scientific publications, book chapters, and clinical studies, and a comprehensive literature review were carried out. In an era of globalization, Sharma (2023) criticizes women's portrayal in print and electronic media. He underlines that, rather than addressing women's issues, the media commodifies and objectifies them to obtain representation. Gender stereotypes in Indian media depictions are still detrimental, as evidenced by recent studies. The Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) reported in 2021 that women are still notably underrepresented in Indian news media. In 2020, women made up only 14% of news subjects and sources on radio, TV, and print media—a decrease from prior years. In addition to their underrepresentation, women are frequently portrayed in conventional roles that place more emphasis on outward appearances than on their accomplishments in the workplace or in positions of authority (NWM India).

Furthermore, Santoniccolo and colleagues (2023) conducted a research which highlights how media depictions contribute to the objectification, sexualization, and reinforcement of gender norms. The study revealed that negative consequences, including internalized sexism, body dissatisfaction, and a greater tolerance for abusive behaviors, are linked to exposure to stereotypical and objectified depictions of women in the media. The mental and physical health of women and girls are negatively impacted by these consequences (MDPIs).

Furthermore, Singh and Gupta (2021) conducted a qualitative study of news media coverage of crimes against women in India. Their findings showed that rather than emphasizing the larger

socioeconomic issues influencing such crimes, media narratives frequently sensationalize crime, which might prolong fear and shame around victims. This underlines the requirement for more responsible and sophisticated reporting procedures. Experts are beginning to agree more and more that ethical media coverage is essential to reducing the psychological effects of rape news on young people.

Additionally, Rani and Joshi (2022) examined how teenagers' perceptions of gender roles were affected by digital media. Although internet platforms offer a wider range of viewpoints, they also reinforce negative stereotypes about women, which have an impact on the attitudes and actions of youth. The significance of digital literacy and media literacy education in dispelling these misconceptions has been underscored by academics.

Moreover, according to Thomas and Mariswamy's (2002) research, the general population, who is uninformed of media methods and hidden goals, believes and is influenced by media material, thus contributing to public opinion. They emphasize the importance of the media performing its social responsibility while maintaining veracity. Mukherjee's (2015) study investigated the influence of crime-themed Indian TV reality programs on young people. Television has been shown to have a substantial effect on children's behavior, particularly crime-related reality, which addresses severe societal issues.

With a focus on the 2012 Delhi gang rape case, (Fadnis 2018) study examined the opinions of Indian male and female journalists regarding patriarchal socialization in news reporting. When reporting on rape, journalists of all sexes tend to adhere to gender conventions. Television consumption has been connected to rape stereotypes, with soap opera watching associated with acceptance of the rape myth.

The way that rape is portrayed in the news media frequently reflects the attitudes that society has toward violence, gender, and sexuality. According to recent research, the media routinely senses rape, using graphic details and strong language that might make viewers feel afraid and anxious (Singh and Sharma 2021). Furthermore, how rape stories are presented affects how the public views both the offender and the victim, which may encourage victim blaming and stigmatization (Patel and Menon 2020). For example, when news coverage emphasizes the victim's behavior or attire, it could contribute to the spread of victim-blaming culture and rape myths (Kumar et al. 2022).

The primary aim of this study is to investigate the potential psychological effects that the depiction of rape news in broadcast media can have on young adults. Specifically, this research seeks to determine whether these portrayals significantly affect individuals' psychological well-being. This research is particularly important because it highlights how television content can evoke negative emotions, such as anxiety, depression, anger, or disgust, thereby shaping how individuals perceive real-life events, recall memories, and contemplate their experiences. A review of the literature reveals that numerous studies have examined the sensationalism prevalent in Indian television news channels. Therefore, this study aims to highlight not only the influence of such sensationalism on media industry standards but also its broader societal impacts and implications for the country's image.

Objectives:

To explore the impact portrayal of sexual assault incidents in news and media on the mental health of the young women.

Method

This study employs a qualitative exploratory method to investigate the underlying aspects behind news media coverage of sexual assault incidents and its impact on mental health. For this we designed an interview questionnaire, which included 12 questions concerning; their experience, their attire and their views about the rape news. These questions were aimed at gaining a comprehensive understanding of their views about the media's portrayal of rape news, along with their experiences about such issues. The inquires also asked about each person's sociodemographic information, but we haven't disclosed that information due to the privacy concerns. This scholarly follows a survey approach, as this would help us understand the depths of the impact of such negative news. Furthermore, by focusing on in-depth exploration and understanding, the qualitative approach allows for the collection of rich, detailed data on participants' experiences and perceptions.

Sample: The sample in this study was collected from the norther India, from Delhi NCR region. Where we interviewed 33 female college students from different field. The sampling method used in this study was convenient sampling. As we selected participants from several colleges who volunteered to participate. The age range of the participant was between 18 to 25yrs., the set range was set this to understand if there were any fluctuations in their views about such events. The participants mentioned in the study willingly participated in the interview, and they were informed that their inputs will be used in the study as their opinions are valuable.

Procedure: Participants were asked to fill the preliminary form in one sitting, so that the flow of the questions is not interrupted. One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted to facilitate rapport building and ensure comfort. The participants were informed about their rights, asked for consent to record the interviews, and assured of the confidentiality of their responses. They were also made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without facing any negative consequences and were promised access to the study's results.

Results and Discussion

The findings are based on the responses that we received through survey. The questions were asked related to the portrayal of the rape news and which further lead to the exploration of the underlying emotion. Which eventually helped in exploring the psychological impact of rape news on the mental health of young female students.

Q1: What do you feel and think when you come across stories of rape in news media?

This question was asked to understand what kind of emotions were being triggered after watching such news. The responses of the participants were like *"When I hear about rape in the news, it makes me feel angry and frustrated. It shows how ineffective the government's actions are in ensuring safety, especially for women. There's a constant fear because even places that should be safe, like hospitals, aren't secure, and even doctors aren't spared. It makes me aggressive toward the lack of accountability and the failure to create a safe environment for women. The fear and helplessness survivors face are heartbreaking and highlight how much more needs to be done."* (Participant 1)

"Such stories evoke deep sorrow and anger, highlighting the urgent need for justice and societal change. They also serve as a stark reminder of the importance of addressing systemic issues that enable such crimes." (Participant 10)

"Stories of rape is very distressing to hear especially as a woman, if you hear such news on television it's still somehow digestible however, listening to discourse in podcasts and reading the nasty comments that people leave and how people actually perceive woman makes this situation all too real. As it seems that the way people are hidden behind their used IDs, rapists are hidden amongst us. The fear of being the next one becomes too real." (Participant 18)

"Very scared for my own safety and that of my loved ones, anger at the state of women's safety in the country and pain at the plight of the victims of such horrendous crimes." (Participant 22)

"I think when i see the news for the 1st time, i sympathize with the victim but after then it becomes more of a concern about my own safety and my family and friend's safety." (Participant 16)

The aforementioned comments demonstrated that such news causes unease and hopelessness. It ultimately leads to annoyance, which conceals a feeling of not being safe.

Q2: Do you have nightmares or anxious thoughts after witnessing such stories?

"Sometimes. When the event portrayed in the news has occurred nearby or is similar to some situations I have been in I tend to get nightmares about it." (Participant 2)

"I usually do not have nightmares or anxious thoughts but it leaves me thinking for hours. It kinda makes me feel helpless and repulsive to men." (Participant 4) *"Sometimes"* (Participants 13, 14)

"There was one case that happened to a neighbour where people broke into her house and started to tear her clothes fortunately her voice was enough to alarm the society. I had restless sleep for a couple of nights and kept checking the locks to make sure that I was secure" (Participant 18)

"No, no nightmares related to such things." (Participant 1, 10, 16, 23)

The received responses helped in understanding that, even the portrayal of such news can trigger the anxiety. The severity of the issue is demonstrated by the instances of nightmares brought on by the news of rape.

Q3: Do you feel more cautious or more fearful when you go outside?

"Very rarely but yes i do feel it whenever its the lone road or secluded area." (Participant 4)

"Yes first we use to think of especially in night we use to think so but it's now happening in day broad light and happening in everywhere. Where we should go to feel secure?" (Participant 6)

"I don't experience fear personally, but these stories emphasize the importance of caution and awareness for safety in public spaces." (Participant 10,32)

"Yes absolutely, especially the later in the evening or the night it gets the more anxious and scared for my safety I feel when I go outside." (Participant 22)

"More cautious bcas I tend to be mindful about my surroundings, the people I hang out with and most especially the time of the day." (Participant 23)

The responses highlight that, even if the participants has not been in the exact same condition. Yet the feeling of not being safe and fear remains the same. Which suggests that there are chances that, the rape news has been internalized in a maladaptive way.

Q4: Recently, do you trust the judiciary less?

"Yes, in my opinion it really can't be trusted as there are no strict rules, just the case hype in news." (Participant 4)

"System trust because even the Nirbhaya culprits got the punishment way after the cause they did." (Participant 6) "No" (Participant 8, 13)

"Yes" (Almost every Participant)

This shows that the helplessness of the participant as they seem have lack of trust in the government. Which might result in the feeling of loss of hope as the poor judgment of the government can have a negative impact on the young student's mental health.

Q5: Do you feel unsafe to be alone anywhere?

"Yeah, if I'm left with some stranger alone in a room or closed area and someone i know who doesn't have good intentions, i feel unsafe and fearful of being alone there." (Participant 4)

Yes often I feel like I'm imagining that if someone will talk or come in infront to abuse or harm me how I can escape? These thoughts are getting normal these days that raise concern. (Participant 7, similar views by Participant 29).

Almost every participant responded yes to this question. Which is basically a matter of concern and there is an urgent need to deal with such issues. As it is impacting their mental health in a negative way.

Q6: Harsh punishment can stop such cases; do you agree?

The main motive behind this question was to find out what the young generation has to say about such issues. Along with how it can help in dealing with this issue faced by women on daily basis.

"Harsh punishment and sex education for everyone. All women must learn self defence as well so they can protect themselves in such situations or at least buy themselves time until help arrives." (Participant 2)

"Yes I do agree that if the judiciary becomes stricter towards the criminal with harsh punishment it may stop such cases." (Participant 11), (Participant 28).

Almost every participant agreed to the point that, harsh punishment can help in lowering the numbers of rape cases. This shows that the participant has the feeling of anger and frustration with the judiciary. As they are not able to manage this crisis.

Q7: Do you think there is modification needed in social structure, in terms of perceptions towards women?

"Yes it's extremely important to understand what the victim went through rather than blaming them for it. This usually happens because the perception towards women is not good." (Participant 2)

"Yes I do believe that the modification is needed in society because the new generation is more involved in social media that may sometimes shows false things that may change the teens behaviour." (Participant 11)

"Definitely. What a woman is wearing and what time is she outside is not the factors that lead to such cases. People's mentality towards women should change. They should be more respectable towards not only women but men also. There's a need to change the social norms too." (Participant 12)

"Of course yes. Some men think of women as less humans, that's why they treat women without dignity." (Participant 23)

"Let's start teaching the boys about the restrictions and moral values rather than telling a woman to stop going out after 8." (Participant 9)

The responses like this showed the importance of education. The education including a proper sex education. The responses like this hints that the government needs to come with such plans where the desentization about such things needs to be done.

Q8: Have you started adopting any protective measures because you feel threatened outside?

"Yes, i added my some of my contacts as emergency contacts and i learned basic self-defense." (Participant 1)

"I do not. I do not feel much threatened outside and I'm not not alone too. If I do feel threatened. I prepare myself to react, verbally and physically." (Participant 5)

"I usually don't stay late at places i consider unsafe and I make sure to send my location to someone trusted before i travel somewhere, i've also remembered the women's helpline number and tell my loved ladies about it." (Participant 16) (Participant 29).

"Yes, so I always send my live location to my sister. I make sure nobody is following me so I constantly check my surroundings. I keep a pepper spray with me just in case." (Participant 18)

"Yes. I am more distant and tense outside and entertain no strangers company." (Participant 21)

Throughout the responses we noticed that most participant were stressed about not being safe. Which shows how distressing this situation is for women. Along with this, it was observed that the participants have adapted some of the tricks and they have accepted the fact that this can happen with them too. So they are already preparing themselves for the worst.

Q9: How often you come across such stories in news media?

The answers to this question were quite unexpected but not surprising. Almost every participant responded that very often. Which means that they come across rape news on almost daily basis. Whether it is on social media, news or in the newspaper.

Q10: Do you tend to avoid reading articles that mention rape?

"No" (Almost every Participant).

This showed that the participant is not avoiding such issues. Instead they are trying to keep up with the news. Which can impact them in a very negative way. As being in contact with such events might trigger some emotions.

Q11: Have your attitude changed towards friends of the opposite gender?

This question intended to understand the if such incidents have impacted the way young women interact with their opposite sex counterpart. It was noticed that majority of the participant responded 'no', as they believe that not every man is corrupted and they still have faith in humanity. Yet rest of the participants reacted 'yes' as it is hard for them to have unbiased opinion about it, after hearing such incidents.

Q12: Have you recently updated your style or paid attention to your public attire?

"Yes, but it doesn't make much difference you get stared at anyway and there are always men who make you uncomfortable, no matter the attire." (Participant 2)

"I don't make personal changes, but such concerns highlight the societal need to stop victim-blaming and focus on ensuring safety." (Participant 10)

"Not much but sometimes I do dress more mindfully in order to avoid such things." (Participant 12) (Participant 31).

"No and i think the question itself explains how much of a taboo clothes are in case of rapes." (Participant 16) (Participant 29).

"No i believe that we should wear according to the occasion or place not due to the fear of someone." (Participant 19)

"I have recently started wearing shorter clothes but every time I have to be travelling in them I have to cover up in baggy clothes so that I do not get unwanted attention or leering looks from strangers, it is not a good feeling to not feel safe simply because of my choice of clothes." (Participant 22)

The mentioned responses showed that even if the participant have not changed their attire completely. Yet they are conscious about it that it can be one of the things that can lead to certain events and they might get harmed.

The received responses suggest that how the portrayal of rape related news have impacted their daily livelihood. Despite them living in their home, the women are not feeling safe, this is a great source of concern as it is creating an environment of hostility. Which impacts their mental health and leaves them with psychological scars and maladaptive internalization. The responses help us understand the severity of the issue as they are living in this constant fear that they might be the next one. Which is creating a sense of lack of psychological safety.

Discussion

The findings based on the received responses along with the existing literature suggest that the portrayal of the rape news influences one's mental health. The responses helped us in understanding the depth of their emotions. While the existing literature suggests that, it is important to look at the framing and structure of news articles to comprehend how sensationalism in reporting impacts viewer perception. Sensationalist techniques sometimes involve dramatic depictions of crime scenes, speculative tales, and emotionally charged interviews (Singh 2022). Which can be helped through the discussions on societal expectations and gender norms highlight this issue, which is further underscored by instances where sensationalist rhetoric incorporates assertions regarding women's behavior and public safety (Sharma 2023). This is one of the example that, the Indian population needs sensitization since it is a very sensitive matter.

On the other hand, while we were trying to analyze the responses and it was observed that almost every participant had this feeling of anxiety, fear and aggression. The reason behind it that can be found in the theory of subliminal learning. The theory of subliminal learning says that the subliminal cues prepare the brain for related conscious action (Dijksterhuis et. al. 2005). As the news are being portrayed as a story in a dramatic way to attract the attention of the viewer Kathuri (2022). Such portrayal is priming the conscious response. And that response is seen in the form of aggression, fear and anxiety. Which is acting as a response to such news and incidents.

Most of the participant's responses were similar about many of the question. In the responses there was one thing that was common and which was the feeling frustrated, angry and anxious. The main reason behind it is the subconscious priming is happening. Second reason is that the exposure related to such content which involves negative sentiment among society causes increase in the anxiety level (Jones, Mougouei, and Evans 2021).

The most important thing that the findings suggests that, the Indian population is need of proper sex education. Which will help in people understanding the sexual health (Clonan-Roy et al. 2020). Along with that if individuals will have knowledge about such issues. One of the example can be during the development phase, there is stage called latency in which an individual starts exploring their sexuality. That would be a perfect stage to sensitize them about such matter. This is the perfect stage to give sexuality education (Lonsway 1996). Moreover, according to NCRB data the minority populations are in the risk of rape and other heinous crimes. That can only be lowered with the help of proper sexuality education.

Conclusion

The objective of this research was to emphasize the influential role of media in contemporary society, particularly in shaping public opinion and determining the agenda. This impact is especially strong in debates concerning rape, which are frequently characterized by misunderstandings and lies that transfer responsibility from the criminal to the victim. There is a need for the media to consider its approach to reporting on abuse. By presenting reports differently, the media holds the power to alter the public perception of rape events. It is imperative for the media to responsibly utilize this power, recognizing that rape is not solely about sex but extends to instances of sexual harassment and gender-

based abuse. While the research is still in its early stages, subsequent studies may provide a more comprehensive understanding of the subject. The finding of the study also stresses on the fact that, the Indian population in need of proper sexuality education. Which should be designed in a very specific way to sensitized people about how sensitive and threatening this issue is for women.

Statement & Declaration: The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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