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Beware the truth effect: Why efforts to debunk rape myths may backfire

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ABSTRACT

Rape myths, defined as statements about sexual assault that trivialize sexual assault and denigrate victims, have been identified as risk factors for primary and secondary victimization and obstacles to the fair processing of sexual assault cases in the criminal justice system. To dispel rape myths, a widely used strategy in public information campaigns as well as jury instructions is the "myths vs. facts" (MvsF) approach in which rape myths are first presented and then contradicted by alternative factual information. This approach has high face validity, but it has not been subjected to systematic evaluation. This paper reviews evidence from social cognition and communication science on the "truth effect" which indicates that presenting myths prior to refuting them may be counterproductive because they may be misremembered as facts and used to evaluate sexual assault cases, thereby strengthening rather than reducing the acceptance of rape myths. Both motivational and cognitive processes explaining the truth effect are presented. Strategies for avoiding the truth effect and alternative approaches for dispelling rape myths as well as directions for future research are discussed.

Across the world, sexual assault shows high prevalence rates, and the experience of sexual assault has strong adverse effects on victims' psychological and physical wellbeing (Krahé, 2023). However, sexual assault is a vastly underreported experience, not only in the criminal justice system but also in victims' social environment. As the #MeToo movement has highlighted, the sexual assault of women by men remains embedded in persistent myths and stereotypes that hamper the recognition of sexual assault as a form of aggressive and often criminal behavior and are difficult to dispel. The present paper examines one particular strategy for dispelling rape myths through persuasive communication that is widely used in the public domain, including jury instructions in sexual assault trials: the "myths vs. facts" (MvsF) approach. In this approach, different statements representing rape myths are first described and then confronted by alternative factual statements. Despite its high face validity, empirical evaluations of the approach are lacking. Evidence from the fields of social cognition and persuasive communication will be reviewed that raise doubts on the efficacy of the MvsF approach. Research on the "truth effect" suggests that repeating myths may be counterproductive because false statements that are encountered more frequently are more likely to be misremembered as facts.

The present discussion seeks to advance evidence-based knowledge about strategies for dispelling rape myths in the general population from which jurors are drawn and in professional groups, such as police officers and lawyers, who are involved in the legal processing of rape complaints. Knowing what works or does not work to debunk rape myths requires a solid understanding of the processes by which information about rape myths is processed and their acceptance can be reduced. Such understanding will not only improve the quality of handling sexual assault cases in the criminal justice system but will also increase victims' willingness to report and help to avoid the secondary victimization of victims within their social networks. The MvsF approach is singled out as the object for this analysis due to its combination of widespread use and high face validity on the one hand and lack of theoretical foundation and systematic evaluation on the other.

In seeking to clarify the conceptual underpinnings of the MvsF approach, the focus of the current analysis is on basic research using laboratory experiments as the main methodological tool. Experiments are the method of choice to demonstrate the causal impact of presenting myths before refuting them by facts because of their high internal validity, such as being able to randomly assign participants to different information conditions. Although experiments conducted in the lab create artificial conditions that may often compromise their external validity, that is the generalizability of their findings to real-life contexts, this drawback is less of a problem in studies on the truth effect because they can simulate conditions of exposure and processing of information that come close to everyday life, such as being asked to read newspaper articles or health-promotion messages. Such rigorous designs are needed

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to arrive at a sound evaluation of the potential risks involved in the MvsF approach and develop alternative strategies for debunking rape myths in the context of sexual assault trials and in society at large.

1. What are rape myths?

Rape myths are defined as "descriptive or prescriptive beliefs about rape (i.e., about its causes, context, consequences, perpetrators, victims, and their interaction) that serve to deny, downplay or justify sexual violence that men commit against women" (Gerger et al., 2007, p. 423). Specifically, rape myths include the belief that victims deserve to be blamed for being raped, that many rape claims are false, that only certain women are raped, and that perpetrators can be exonerated by extenuating circumstances (Bohner et al., 2009). Rape myths are social constructions that are widely shared in different cultures and inform people's understanding of sexual assault, as captured in the "real rape" stereotype. The "real rape" stereotype restricts the definition of rape to a circumscribed set of scenarios, notably attacks by a stranger on an unsuspecting victim who shows strong physical resistance (Krahé, 2016). This narrow definition is a stereotype because it is an undue generalization as most rapes do not happen between strangers but between individuals who know each other, and victims are often unable to put up resistance because they are taken by surprise or frozen by fear (Chen et al., 2023; Office for National Statistics, 2023).

Rape myths and stereotypes are highly problematic because they impose restrictive definitions on what counts as sexual assault and how "real victims" behave, shift blame from the perpetrator to the victim and trivialize sexual assault. As discussed below, several detrimental effects of rape myths and stereotypes have been documented. Therefore, finding effective ways of challenging rape myths and reducing their impact on evaluations and reactions to sexual assault charges is a pressing task.

In line with the definition of the construct, research on rape myths has largely focused on women as victims, as reflected in the items of established rape myth acceptance scales, such as the "Acceptance of Modern Myths about Sexual Aggression" scale (AMMSA; Bohner et al., 2022) or the "Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale" (IRMA; Payne et al., 1999; Thelan & Meadows, 2022). This focus is warranted given the much higher prevalence rates of female sexual victimization (Krahé, 2023). However, men's sexual victimization is increasingly recognized as a problem (Depraetere et al., 2020; Thomas & Kopel, 2023), and measures of rape myth acceptance referring to men's sexual victimization by women and/or by other men have been developed, such as the "Male Rape Myths Scale-Revised" (MRMS-R; Hogge & Wang, 2022) or the "Forced-To-Penetrate Myth Acceptance Scale" (FTP-MAS; Weare & Willmott, 2025). The current analysis of the mechanisms underlying the processing of persuasive messages designed to dispel rape myths based on the MvsF approach applies in the same fashion to rape myths about female and male victimization.

2. Detrimental effects of rape myths

There is conclusive evidence on the problematic nature of rape myths as societal constructions. Table 1 summarizes several negative outcomes of the acceptance of rape myths that highlight the need for effective strategies for rape myth debunking.

Table 1
Detrimental Effects of Rape Myth Acceptance.

Rape myths …
• increase the risk of sexual assault perpetration
• impair victims' acknowledgement of sexual assault
• elicit negative social reactions to victims' disclosure ("second assault")
• undermine decisions to report
• reduce the likelihood that a case will proceed through the criminal justice system
• affect juror verdicts/conviction rates

Rape myth acceptance has been identified in a large body of research as a risk factor for sexual assault perpetration, as summarized in a recent meta-analysis (Trottier et al., 2021). Rape myths also affect victims' acknowledgement of their experience as a sexual assault, especially if their victimization experience deviates from the "real rape" stereotype (Sall et al., 2024). Because many rape myths shift blame from the perpetrator to the victim (e.g., "She asked for it."), acceptance of rape myths is a contributory factor to self-blame in victims of sexual assault, and self-blame is known to be linked to severe consequences for victims' physical and mental health (Bernstein et al., 2024). In addition to shaping victims' evaluation of their experience, rape myths also play a role in negative social reactions to the disclosure of a victimization experience. These reactions, often experienced as a "second assault", may be found both in victims' social networks and in interactions with professionals after the assault (Ullman, 2023, 2024). Victims' own endorsement of rape myths as well as their anticipation of others' acceptance of rape stereotypes is a major factor for their decision not to disclose a sexual victimization experience, especially if their experience was a non-stranger assault or differed in other ways from the "real rape" stereotype (Wieberneit et al., 2024). This means that of the small number of sexual assaults that are reported to the police, stranger assaults are disproportionally represented, which in itself contributes to the perpetuation of rape myths and stereotypes.

In the criminal justice system, rape myths were found to operate at the level of police investigations, prosecuting decisions, jury deliberations, and conviction rates, with cases deviating from the "real rape" stereotype more likely to be eliminated at each stage (Law Commission, 2023; Parratt & Pina, 2017; Temkin & Krahé, 2008). Studies using the mock jury paradigm in which participants are presented with vignettes that describe sexual assault trials found that greater acceptance of rape myths is linked to lower likelihood of guilty verdicts (see Dinos et al., 2015; Willmott et al., 2021, for reviews). Studies observing actual trials confirm the endorsement of rape myths by jurors in sexual assault trials and their impact on jury decisions (Smith & Skinner, 2017; Temkin et al., 2018).

3. The "myths vs. facts" approach for dispelling rape myths

Given the conclusive evidence on the detrimental function of rape myths as risk factors for sexual assault, the secondary victimization of sexual assault survivors, and the justice gap in processing sexual assault cases, effective strategies for dispelling rape myths are clearly needed. This need has been recognized widely by policy makers, rape counselling agencies, and other agents seeking to reduce sexual violence and support victims of sexual assault. However, as noted by Malamuth et al. (2018), the risk of producing boomerang effects by interventions designed to reduce sexual assault has received insufficient attention.

A widely used strategy for dispelling rape myths in public campaigns and rape education efforts is the "myths vs. facts" (MvsF) approach. In the MvsF approach, different myths are first presented and then contrasted with facts that contradict the myths, for example in health communication to dispel misconceptions about the side effects of vaccinations or other medical issues (Schwarz et al., 2007). In the UK, this approach is exemplified by the material presented on the website of Rape Crisis England & Wales (RCEW; https://rapecrisis.org.uk/get-informed/about-sexual-violence/myths-vs-realities/). In New Zealand, the Ministry of Justice uses the same approach (https://sexualviolence.victimsinfo.govt.nz/en/all-myths/). A Google search for the term "rape myths" yields a large number of websites contrasting myths and facts from police forces (e.g., https://www.police.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-01/FINAL-factsheet-for-web-Challenging-Misconceptions.pdf), rape crisis centers (e.g., https://clevelandrapecrisis.org/resources/resource-library-2/featured/rape-myths/), and universities (e.g., https://rsvpcenter.washu.edu/get-informed/rape-myths-facts/) in different countries. Many websites even flag the myths visually by highlighting

them in font size and/or color relative to the factual statements, as illustrated by the examples in Fig. 1.

In addition to public information campaigns, the aim of dispelling rape myths is also an integral part of sexual assault trials, especially in legal systems involving juries (Gillen, 2019; Willmott & Hudspith, 2024). There is no standardized content or procedure for judicial directions in sexual assault cases, but given the widespread use of the MvsF approach in general, it is likely that it also plays a role in educating jurors in rape trials. For example, the National Judicial Institute in Canada has issued model jury instructions for sexual offences which address misconceptions about indigenous women that juries should recognize as unwarranted when approaching the evidence of a case. Specifically, the text states:

> The trial judge might also dispel a number of troubling stereotypical assumptions about Indigenous women who perform sex work, including that such persons: - are not entitled to the same protections the criminal justice system promises other Canadians;- are not deserving of respect, humanity, and dignity; – are sexual objects for male gratification; –need not give consent to sexual activity and are "available for the taking"; – assume the risk of any harm that befalls them because they engage in a dangerous form of work; and -are less credible than other people. (National Judicial Institute, 2019).

Although the model instructions may not be used verbatim in actual trials, it is noteworthy that they are framed in terms of highlighting the myths.

The MvsF approach has high face validity, which may explain its widespread use and lack of systematic evaluations because its effectiveness is not questioned. However, there is compelling evidence from several branches of psychology which suggests a critical look at the suitability of the MvsF approach for dispelling rape myths. This research, summarized in the next section, clearly shows that the repetition of myths or false statements, which is an inherent feature of the MvsF approach, may be counterproductive for changing the acceptance of rape myths and entail the risk of producing a boomerang effect.

4. The truth effect

Research showing that people are more likely to perceive information as true if they have seen it before than if they see it for the first time has a long tradition in social cognition and communication research. Several terms have been proposed to describe this phenomenon, such as "truth effect", "illusionary truth effect", or "truth by repetition effect" (see Udry & Barber, 2024; Unkelbach et al., 2019, for concise reviews). Accepting information that is blatantly wrong but encountered repeatedly as true is a robust effect largely unaffected by personal characteristics, such as personality traits or age (de Keersmaecker et al., 2020; Fazio & Sherry, 2020), or external factors such as distraction, time available for making truth judgments, or monetary incentives for correctly identifying true vs. false statements (Nadarevic et al., 2021; Pantazi et al., 2018; Speckmann & Unkelbach, 2022). It occurs even when individuals are warned about the erroneous character or possess factual knowledge that should enable them to recognize the information as false. The truth effect is operationalized by the tendency to misremember false statements as true or find them more accurate with repeated presentation.

Research on the truth effect has gained special momentum since the arrival of modern communication technologies reaching wide audiences in short periods of time, as reflected in a large body of knowledge on the topic of "fake news". Even though it has not specifically addressed the presentation of rape myths, this literature is directly relevant to evaluating the MvsF approach for dispelling rape myths. In particular,

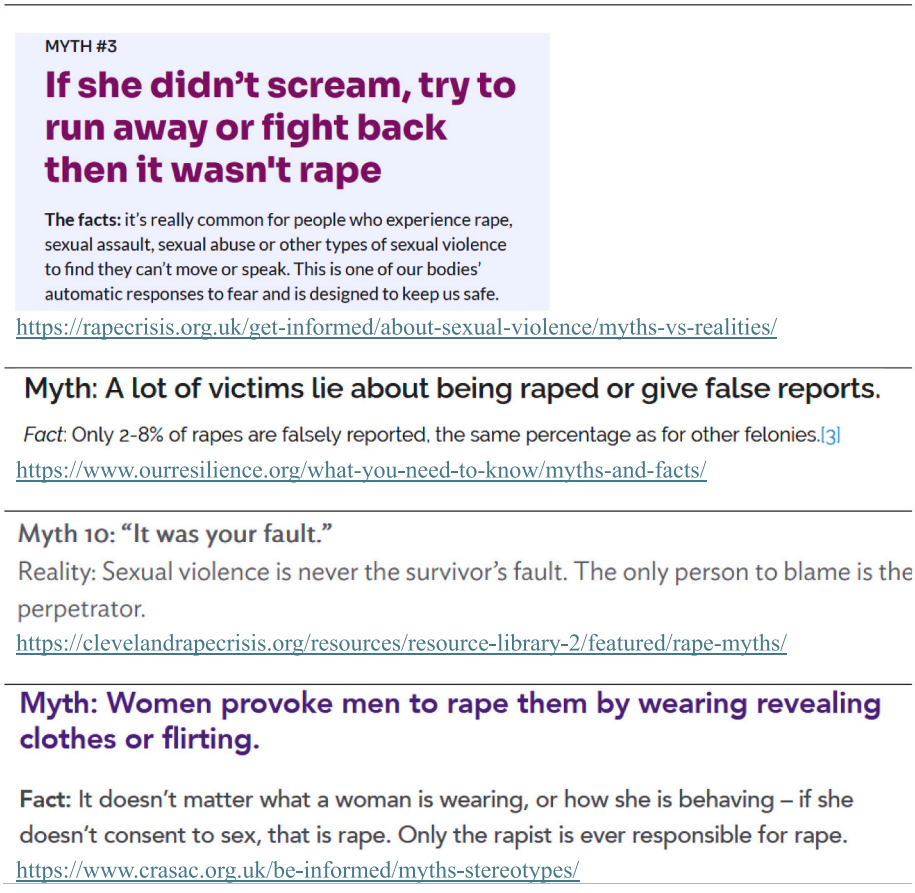

Fig. 1. Examples of the "Myths vs. Facts" Approach.

research on the truth effect from the field of health communication may inform the evaluation of the MvsF strategy used to dispel rape myths. For example, a study by Morgan and Cappella (2023) showed that statements about the effects of tobacco were rated as more believable the more often they were repeated, and the effect was larger for incorrect than for correct statements. A study evaluating a flyer issued by the Centers for Disease Control contrasting myths and facts about flu vaccinations found that only 30 min after reading the flyer, a substantial number of participants misremembered the myths as facts, and attitudes and behavioral intentions regarding flu vaccinations were more negative in the MvsF group than in the group that had received a version created for the experiment in which only the facts were presented (Schwarz et al., 2007).

In a study testing the impact of a rape-debunking video designed in the format of the MvsF approach, Reddy et al. (2022) observed lower levels of rape myth acceptance in the intervention group compared to a control condition where a video unrelated to rape myths was shown. However, the effect was measured immediately after the video presentation, so there was no chance to detect the truth effect established to occur, for example in the study by Schwarz et al. (2007), after only a short delay or distraction period.

Evidence for the truth effect has also been found in the context of legal decision making. In two experiments with mock jurors and judges, participants were presented descriptions of criminal charges containing false information that either aggravated or attenuated the charge against the defendant (Pantazi et al., 2020). In both experiments, participants assigned a more severe punishment to the defendant after seeing the aggravating as opposed to the attenuating information despite having been told in both conditions that the evidence was inaccurate. In a memory task, they were significantly more likely to misremember false information as true than to remember true information as false.

Several underlying mechanisms have been proposed to explain the truth effect. Focusing on the affective route, research on the "mere exposure" effect has shown that stimuli that appear more familiar elicit more positive evaluations. In a classic study by Zajonc (1968), participants were asked to pronounce nonsense syllables alleged representing Turkish words and guess the evaluative meaning of the words on a scale ranging from "bad" to "good". The frequency with which the syllables were presented was systematically varied. As predicted, syllables presented more often received more positive ratings. The findings were explained by the greater familiarity of the more frequently presented words which is associated with positive feelings. A second account addressing the affective or motivational basis of the truth effect is provided by the theory of psychological reactance (Brehm & Brehm, 1981). When people's freedom of thinking and acting is restricted, they seek to restore that freedom by sticking even more strongly to their original position. This was shown, for example, in a study on responses to messages telling participants they should eat less meat (Sprengholz et al., 2023). Several studies on the effects of jury instructions to disregard inadmissible evidence found that jurors used evidence declared as inadmissible to a greater extent after having been instructed to ignore it than if no such instruction was given (Lieberman & Arndt, 2000). The effect was shown to increase the stronger the admonition was to disregard the inadmissible evidence, reflecting an increasing restriction of freedom, which is consistent with psychological reactance theory (Wolf & Montgomery, 1977). Similarly, Malamuth et al. (2018) refer to reactance theory to explain why sexual assault interventions may backfire especially in men with a high risk of perpetration.

Directly relevant to the debunking of rape myths, a study compared tweets challenging rape myths with tweets describing the severity of a sexual assault experience and found that the myth-challenging tweets were associated with higher psychological reactance, which in turn predicted higher rape myth acceptance and greater likelihood of engaging in sexual aggression compared with exposure to tweets describing the severity of sexual assault (Nicolla & Lazard, 2023). Another study used a simulated jury deliberation in which participants were led to believe that they were deliberating a sexual assault case together with two other jurors who contributed false information that favored the case of the prosecution, the case of the defense, or was contradictory (half of the misinformation items favored the prosecution and half the defense) (Cullen et al., 2024). Afterwards, participants were asked to indicate, for each piece of information, whether it had been presented at the trial or not. Participants exposed to the pro-prosecution misinformation made more recall errors misremembering false pro-prosecution information as correct, and participants in the pro-defense condition misremembered more false pro-defense items as correct than participants exposed to contradictory misinformation. In a follow-up study in which half the participants received a judicial instruction warning them about the possibility of erroneous memory of information from the trial had no effect in reducing these memory errors (Cullen et al., 2024, Study 2).

Also focusing on motivational processes, a third account explains the truth effect by the desire to defend one's position on an issue against challenge and disconfirmation. For example, it was shown that the effect of correcting misinformation (that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction that warranted the U.S. invasion in 2005) differed between recipients: It was successful in reducing subscription to the misinformation among participants with a liberal political position, but increased endorsement of the misinformation in participants describing their political position as right of the center (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). Applied to the MvsF approach, these findings suggest that challenging rape myths by confronting them with facts may be effective in individuals with low rape myth acceptance but likely to backfire in those who strongly believe in rape myths.

A second group of explanations focusses on the cognitive processing of information. A key role is assigned to the concept of "fluency". More familiar information is subjectively perceived to be easier to activate and process, and this perceived ease serves as a meta-cognitive heuristic cue to the veridicality (and likeability) of the information. In the same vein, trying to process new information that challenges familiar beliefs is perceived as more difficult and hence deemed less likely to be correct. In their review of the evidence, Schwarz et al. (2007) specifically addressed the MvsF approach, which is a special case of the strategy of "considering the opposite". They discuss an extensive body of evidence showing that the more people try to consider the opposite, the more they come to think that their initial (erroneous) beliefs were correct. The ease-of-processing account is also supported by evidence that generating more arguments in support of a particular attitude leads to less confidence than generating fewer arguments to support it, as the search for a larger number of supporting arguments is experienced as more difficult. Thinking about alternatives will only reduce the acceptance of false statements if the alternatives come to mind easily. This suggests that the more engrained rape myths are in a person's belief system, the harder they will be to change by alternative information. Ease-of-processing effects were also observed as a function of the visual presentation of erroneous information independent of content. For example, a factually incorrect statement was more likely to be accepted as true if printed in a dark vs. light color, which made it easier to read against a white background (Reber & Schwarz, 1999). This finding suggests that visually highlighting myths rather than facts, as in the examples shown in Fig. 1, may further promote the truth effect over and above familiarity effects.

Another cognitive explanation of the truth effect refers to errors in source monitoring as the underlying mechanism. According to this approach, which focusses on the retrieval of information from memory, people may remember the content of statements they have seen before, but they do not accurately remember the source of the statements. The term "source" is used in a broad sense and includes the conditions under which a memory was acquired (Johnson et al., 1993). In the present context, "source" would represent the designation of statements as myths vs. facts. In two experiments using general knowledge statements and manipulating the perceived reliability of the source from which the information was taken, Henkel and Mattson (2011) found that around

70 % of participants were unable to correctly report whether a source had been designated as reliable or unreliable after two weeks, and more than 80 % were unable to do so four weeks after the initial presentation. Moreover, the perceived validity of the statements increased with the number of repetitions regardless of source credibility. These findings suggest that highlighting differences in the accuracy of a statement as reflected in the MvsF approach may be ineffective because recipients are unable to correctly remember this information after a relatively short period of time.

An important question with regard to the MvsF approach is whether the number of repetitions is a critical factor in the truth effect. In the typical MvsF approach, each myth is presented only once, but a list of several myths is presented. In a study varying the number of repetitions of a statement from 1 to 27, the largest increase in perceived truthfulness was found from new statements (no repetition) to statements repeated once. Additional repetitions did not add substantially to the perceived truthfulness of the statements (Hassan & Barber, 2021). Applied to the MvsF approach, these findings suggest that a single presentation of a list of myths that participants are assumed to have heard before may be sufficient to elicit the truth effect, and that increasing the number of times a retraction is presented does little to eliminate it (Ecker et al., 2011).

Furthermore, research on the correction of misinformation also suggests a critical look at the MvsF approach. As captured in the "continued influence effect", it has been shown that individuals may hold on to false information even after it has been retracted or declared as false. In their review of the evidence, Lewandowsky et al. (2012) concluded that "retractions rarely, if ever, have the intended effect of eliminating reliance on misinformation, even when people believe, understand, and later remember the retraction." (p. 114). One explanation for the continued influence of misinformation despite correction are errors in source monitoring, as discussed above, whereby people misremember the false information as having been provided in the correction. In combination, the explanations of the motivational and cognitive mechanisms underlying the truth effect converge on the conclusion that presenting false information to then refute it is a counterproductive strategy (Unkelbach et al., 2019).

5. Alternatives to the "myths vs. facts" approach

Given the conclusive evidence that repeating false statements may lead to the erroneous perception and memory of the statements as true, the search for effective strategies for debunking rape myths remains a challenge. One avenue for improvement is suggested by research on how to counteract the truth effect, which may be derived from the theoretical explanations discussed above. A summary of potential safeguards to counteract the effects of misinformation by providing alternative facts by Lewandowsky et al. (2012) is presented in Table 2. However, the strategies require careful consideration, as their efficacy is qualified by limiting conditions discussed in the authors' analysis.

Following the idea of "inoculation" against misinformation, this body of research alerts participants to the risk of receiving false information and provides them with strategies to counteract it. In a series of experiments, instructing people to evaluate the truth of false or correct general knowledge statements when they were first presented eliminated the truth effect in terms of evaluating false statements as correct, but only in people who "know better", that is those who had sufficient knowledge to correctly identify the false statements (Brashier et al., 2020). The idea behind the fact-finding instruction was to enable participants to activate their personal knowledge, which should protect them against misperceiving false statements as true based on repeated exposure. In another study, participants were warned explicitly about the truth effect prior to rating a set of trivia statements as true or false (Calio et al., 2020). They were less likely to rate repeated statements are true relative to new statements than participants in the control condition without a warning, especially for false statements that were easy to identify (i.e. for which they were likely to know the correct answer). However, warning people that they will receive misinformation was found to be ineffective in reducing the impact of false information unless accompanied by an explanation of how the "continued influence effect" would affect their information processing (Ecker et al., 2010).

In a similar vein, accountability instructions aimed at promoting more careful scrutiny of the presented information have been examined as a way of reducing the impact of false information, but evidence on the efficacy of accountability instructions is mixed. In the study by Pantazi et al. (2020), mock jurors who were told prior to seeing the evidence that they would be held accountable for their decision were more susceptible to the truth effect than a control group without accountability instruction. However, another study found that an accountability instruction did reduce the tendency to assign more blame to a rape victim in acquaintance and partner rapes than in stranger rapes in participants with high rape myth acceptance (Krahé et al., 2007).

Another strategy for increasing the cognitive engagement with the debunking of rape myths builds on cognitive dissonance theory and the effect of counter-attitudinal advocacy. Cognitive dissonance theory stipulates that when people argue for a position that contradicts their existing attitude, the resulting tension between their original beliefs and the arguments they present will be experienced as aversive and reduced by moving their attitude towards the advocated position (Festinger, 1957). In the study by Steinmetz et al. (2019), participants first completed the IRMA scale to measure their rape myth acceptance. Next, they were presented with the two rape myth items from the scale that they had endorsed most strongly and were asked to provide a free-response text for a public service announcement designed to dispel the two myths, followed by another presentation of the IRMA scale. A control group generated a public service statement on a topic unrelated to sexual assault. As predicted, participants in the rape myth debunking group endorsed the IRMA items to a lesser degree than those in the control group, both immediately after the writing exercise and at a follow-up 14 days later. Moreover, they were faster to identify a nonconsensual sexual encounter as an assault than participants in the control group. These finding show that presenting rape myths may be used as a starting point for dispelling them if people can be made to engage extensively with counterarguments. However, this precondition

Table 2
Practical Recommendations for Debunking Misinformation.

- Use repeated retractions to reduce the influence of misinformation, but note that the risk of a backfire effect increases when the original misinformation is repeated in retractions and thereby rendered more familiar.
- To avoid making people more familiar with misinformation (and thus risking a familiarity backfire effect), emphasize the facts you wish to communicate rather than the myth.
- Provide an explicit warning before mentioning a myth, to ensure that people are cognitively on guard and less likely to be influenced by the misinformation.
- Ensure that your material is simple and brief. Use clear language and graphs where appropriate. If the myth is simpler and more compelling than your debunking, it will be cognitively more attractive, and you will risk an overkill backfire effect.
- Consider whether your content may be threatening to the worldview and values of your audience. If so, you risk a worldview backfire effect, which is strongest among those with firmly held beliefs. The most receptive people will be those who are not strongly fixed in their views.
- If you must present evidence that is threatening to the audience's worldview, you may be able to reduce the worldview backfire effect by presenting your content in a worldview-affirming manner (e.g., by focusing on opportunities and potential benefits rather than risks and threats) and/or by encouraging self-affirmation.

(Selected from Lewandowsky et al., 2012, p. 123).

is not met in the standard use of the MvsF approach, which limits its feasibility.

Building on the effect of repetitions, which are at the core of the truth effect, three experiments by Schapansky, Roets, Keersmaecker, & Vandeviver (2025) tested whether the repetition of anti-rape-myth statements would lead to increased agreement with them. Participants were presented with items from the Anti-Rape Attitudes (ARA) scale developed by the authors which measures endorsement of, and belief in, factual knowledge about rape and attitudes towards (non)consensual sex (Schapansky, Roets, de Caluwé and Vandeviver, 2025). Importantly, unlike the MvsF approach, the scale items only present facts without repeating myths. After reading the anti-rape-myth statements and a distraction phase, participants received the items again interspersed with new anti-rape-myth items not presented previously and were asked to indicate their agreement with each item. In two of the three experiments, participants indicated significantly greater agreement with the statements they had seen before than with the new statements. The pooled effect size across the three experiments was also significant.

Whereas the evidence discussed so far was specifically directed at examining the effects of attenuating the truth effect in processing information consistent with, or contradicting, rape myths, other studies have examined a wider range of strategies for dispelling rape myths, including lectures, group discussions, or educational videos. A review of this broader body of rape myth education efforts in naturalistic settings was conducted by Hudspith et al. (2023). They identified a total of 20 intervention studies that included a rape myth education component and evaluated them in a control-group design. Although most of the studies showed a reduction of rape myth acceptance after the intervention, the exact components and mechanisms responsible for the effect could not be discerned. The authors noted: "As most programs have taken a 'shotgun' or package approach, containing a multitude of components, it is not possible to determine which factors are responsible for observed changes in RMA, with regards to content, format and duration." (Hudspith et al., 2023, p. 995). They also concluded that programs with longer duration were more effective, which argues against expecting substantial reductions of rape myth acceptance through material based on the MvsF approach in stand-alone mode, for example in public service announcements such as those presented in Fig. 1.

In a second review, Hudspith et al. (2024) summarized the evidence on the efficacy of rape myth education from experimental studies comparing the effects of specific instructions and information about rape myths. A total of eight publications presenting 11 experiments were included in the review. Expert testimony and judicial instructions were the main methods employed in the set of studies to convey anti-rape-myth information. Overall, the findings do not provide strong evidence that challenging rape myths was successful. For example, in the study by Gray (2006), participants who received an anti-rape-myth instruction which presented several rape myth statements as unfounded were more likely to find the perpetrator in a rape vignette guilty than participants who received a pro-rape-myth instruction which presented the rape myths as sometimes true. However, the anti-rape-myth condition did not differ in the rate of guilty verdicts from a control condition without a rape myth instruction. It is worth noting that the anti-rape-myth condition was designed in line with the MvsF approach. Hudspith et al. (2024) also identified a number of methodological weaknesses of the studies, such as lack of power analyses and failure to consider differences in rape myth acceptance prior to the intervention.

6. Directions for future research and policy implications

As misconceptions about sexual assault, rape myths work to the disadvantage of victims and undermine the delivery of justice. They hamper victims' the acknowledgement of their experience as a sexual assault and their willingness to report, they elicit negative reactions to the disclosure of the assault from victims' social environment, and they reduce the likelihood of cases proceeding through the criminal justice system and resulting in the conviction of perpetrators. Despite a broad recognition of the problem and a consensus that effective ways of dispelling rape myths are essential, surprisingly little research has been devoted to developing theory-based strategies for rape myth debunking and subjecting them to state-of-the-art evaluations. In the field of sexual assault prevention generally, awareness that well-intentioned campaigns may not only be ineffective, but may even produce the opposite effect appears to be underdeveloped, although research has shown it to be a genuine problem (Malamuth et al., 2018; Temkin & Krahé, 2008, Study 3).

The present analysis zoomed in on the Myth versus Facts approach as a widely used but rarely evaluated strategy for dispelling rape myths. Repeating false information as a first step to debunking it seems an intuitively plausible approach, but both theoretical knowledge and empirical evidence on the truth effect indicate that repeating myths may reinforce rather than dispel rape myths despite subsequent contradiction. The truth effect has been firmly established in relation to a range of content domains, but studying it specifically with respect to the debunking of rape myths is an important task for future research. The research designs can be transferred directly from existing research on the truth effect, and there is no reason to believe that the processes underlying the truth effect will be different in processing rape myth statements compared to those established for other content domains.

Despite a substantial literature on rape myth debunking through judicial instructions, the wording of instructions is rarely addressed as a central element of designing instructions (Ellison, 2019). Similarly, the exact way in which rape myth information is incorporated into rape education packages directed at college students or a general audience is typically not reflected in descriptions of these programs (Anderson & Whiston, 2005; Hudspith et al., 2023). Greater transparency and more attention to the exact way in which persuasive messages challenging rape myths are phrased is clearly needed to move the field of jury instructions forward.

Moreover, the problems with the MvsF approach lie in general principles of social information processing. Therefore, the same problems are likely to affect the use of the MvsF approach in other sexuality-related domains surrounded by myths. For example, a study by Mojtahedi et al. (2024) identified negative attitudes about victims of sex trafficking, linked to right-wing beliefs, as an obstacle to supporting legal and policy measures that would protect victims. Myths included the belief that victims could easily leave exploitative contexts, low empathy for victims, limited knowledge about forms of sex trafficking, and endorsement of paternalistic decisions on how to support victims, all of which call for refutation by factual information. Effective approaches for dispelling myths about sex trafficking are therefore urgently needed, but the present discussion speaks against considering the MvsF approach for this purpose.

With regard to designing public information material, information about the reasoning and processes by which messages such as the examples shown in Fig. 1 came to be devised is typically not available. Studies based on theoretical knowledge and evidence of effective, but also counterproductive ways of challenging rape myths by public information campaigns are missing altogether. To overcome this problem, a better exchange between researchers and practitioners working on the debunking of rape myths is clearly needed. There is every reason to assume that the same motivational and cognitive processes, such as reactance and fluency, shown to explain the truth effect in other content domains operate in the same way in the processing of information referring to rape myths. However, studies supporting this hypothesis are required, not least because the literature on the truth effect in other domains is unlikely to be accessible to designers of rape myth debunking campaigns.

By way of a take-home message, the current analysis has shown that challenging rape myths in the general public and in dealing with sexual assault in the criminal justice system is indeed a challenging task in

which every word matters. Repeating misinformation before presenting contradicting messages may seem like an obvious approach, but analyzing the mechanisms involved in the processing of misinformation suggests caution. Presenting and repeating the facts without flagging the myths is proposed as an alternative to the MvsF approach, but sound evidence on the conditions under which it may achieve high efficacy remains to be provided.

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