**'A Rape was Reported': Construction of Crime in a University Newspaper**

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**Abstract**

Historically, the news media have engaged in high rates victim blaming in their reporting of sexual assaults. However, in recent years, gains in civil rights and renewed attention to Title IX may mean sexual assault victims are receiving less biased news coverage.

Using a content analysis, we examined the tone and message of all crime stories published in one United States university newspaper from academic year 2015-2016 (n = 99). Comparing attributions of responsibility made to both victims and offenders across several major crime categories (rape, murder, sexual assault, robbery, physical assault, sexual misconduct, and sexual abuse), and consistent with historical trends, we found higher levels of victim blaming in stories on rape and sexual assault than any other crime. We identify rhetorical devices commonly used to discredit the victim and/or absolve the perpetrator. Despite perceived gains achieved by Title IX, news coverage continues to buttress victim blaming culture.

Keywords: Sexual assault, sexual offense, media, victim blame, rape myth, suspect mitigation

**Introduction**

The news media have the ability to shape public perception and influence policy (S. Chermak 1995), usually reinforcing narratives that serve the status quo, but sometimes introducing ideas for social change (M. Meyers 1997). In reporting on crime, the media provide important cues that help readers—absent their own personal experiences—to understand who is responsible for crime and how to avoid becoming victims themselves (Chermak 1995; R. Surette 1998). One way to explain why crime occurs is to point the finger at victims. Victim blaming occurs when persons are considered culpable for their own victimization, such as when prior behavior or personal history is called into question during rape cases (K. Johnson 1995). Victim blaming arguably turns attention away from the root of the larger social problem of sexual violence, ultimately creating a barrier to social change (K. Ryan 2011). More pointedly, research has established both that victim blaming is prevalent in news media accounts and that rape and sexual assault victims are blamed more often than other types of victims (S. Bieneck and B. Krahé 2011), even relying on rape myths to contextualize these types of crimes.

Recent events have called attention to the persistent problems of sexual assault on university campuses. In 2011, the United States Department of Education (US DoE)'s Office for Civil Rights issued a "Dear Colleague" letter to universities that transformed how institutions handle student reports of sexual assault under the federal gender equity law known broadly as Title IX (for a comprehensive review of federal and state policies, see T. Richards & K. Kafonek, 2016). In short, the letter called universities to comply with the Title IX mandate to provide equal access to education for both male and female students, including how those schools reported and dealt with sexual assault. Reflecting a shifting climate around campus sexual assault, the US DoE has since investigated over 200 institutions and re-examined its

policies under new leadership, resulting in increased discussions about campus sexual assault..

Given these structural–and possibly cultural–shifts, there is reason to examine whether the

trademarks of the past are still evident on college campuses. Despite these recent developments,

previous research has failed to analyze how print media engages in victim blaming, with a few

notable exceptions (L. Cuklanz 1996; H. Benedict 1992). Further, most comprehensive existing

research on the prevalence of victim blame was conducted more than 20 years ago.

     In this study, we draw on both media and gender studies to examine whether university

print media continues to engage in victim-blaming, or whether heightened awareness of victim

blaming and recent attention on campus sexual assaults has resulted in less biased coverage. To

do so, we examine how media frames attribute responsibility to victims and perpetrators in

relevant news stories. Our findings shed light on how news media accounts of campus sexual

assault continue to propagate rape myths and misrepresent the nature of campus sexual assault.

## Theory & Prior Evidence

### Crime newsworthiness

     Crime events abound, yet news space and resources remain limited. Therefore, reporters

and editors must make daily decisions about which stories to select, amplify, downplay and

ignore (M. Fishman 1980). This process is guided by evaluations of a crime story's

newsworthiness (Surette 1998), such as whether the story has public appeal (e.g., predictability,

risk, sex, violence or conflict). In the past, researchers have found that crime stories, particularly

those involving unpredictable or sensational circumstances, violence or conflict, are considered

especially newsworthy (Chermak 1995). According to Pollak and Kubrin (2007), determining

newsworthiness relies on the "law of opposites," such that stories most frequently reported are

the most statistically rare. For example, most sexual assaults reported by news media focus

narrowly on violence in which assailants are unknown to victims; however, stranger rapes

comprise only 22% of these crimes (S. Sinozich and L. Langton 2014).

**Framing sexual assaults in the news**

Crimes, including sexual assaults, are often multifaceted events involving multiple parties

under varying circumstances. Due to their complexity, reporters use frames, or cognitive

schemas audience members use to process information, to simplify and neatly package the

causes, consequences, and responsibility related to crimes (R. Entman 1992). Crime stories are

often framed using crime scripts that rely on characterizations of "normal" offenders and victims,

and circumstances in which they are expected to interact (F. Gilliam Jr. and S. Iyengar 2000; D.

Sudnow 1965). Though useful tools for newsworkers, such scripts are often rooted in gendered

and racialized stereotypes of victims, offenders, and their behaviors. Studies have found, for

instance, that Blacks are disproportionately portrayed in news stories about crime as suspects,

while Whites are more likely to be portrayed as victims or law enforcers (Entman 1992). In

addition, other research has found that White female victims of crime are viewed as vulnerable

and worthy of increased media attention (Chermak 1995), while female victims of color are more

likely to be deemphasized in media coverage (R. Lundman 2003; D. Pritchard and K. Hughes

1997).

When covering stories about violence against women, reporters often draw upon

traditional views of gender roles within a patriarchal society (Meyers 1997). Females who break

with traditional role expectations may be portrayed as less vulnerable or even to blame for their

own victimization. Moreover, mentioning female victims' sexuality or sexual history, especially

in crimes committed by strangers, serves to allow for narratives which depict women as being

overly sexualized in nature (B. Naylor 2001). Although decisions about how to write about

female victims are not necessarily the result of prejudices held by individual news workers, but instead institutionalized social biases shared by society more generally (Meyers 1997; R. Taylor 2009), the result is the same. That is, crime scripts used to explain sexual assaults often reinscribe cultural (mis)understandings of rape that place blame on female victims.

**Portrayal of sexual assault victims**

How news media portray victims depends largely on which information reporters choose to include in crime stories (L. Cuklanz and A. Valdivia 1995; R. Franiuk, J. Seefelt, S. Sepress, J. Vandello, 2008). Based on a textual analysis, Barnett (2012) found that most newspapers reporting on the alleged sexual misconduct of the Duke University lacrosse team concentrated on the morality of the victim. Although initially sympathetic in their portrayals, the newspapers presented the victim as increasingly less sympathetic, effectively morphing from an innocent victim into a "drinking, promiscuous stripper" (Barnett 2012, 19). Demonstrating Pollack and Kubrin's (2007) "law of opposites," the newspapers spent a disproportionate amount of time addressing the falsehood of the allegation, which experts estimate range from only two to eight percent of all reports.

News stories that do not blame the victim directly may still report stories in such a way as to mitigate the perpetrator's responsibility. For example, the use of passive voice, which is relatively common when writing about gendered violence, absolves perpetrators of blame by removing them as agents of the behavior (S. Lamb 1991). If a newspaper reports that "A female student was raped" rather than "A male student raped a female classmate," the sexual assault becomes a behavior that is not committed *by* anyone. Passive voice is not always a neutral, stylistic choice, and its use is contingent on the gender of the offender. Frazer and Miller (2009) found that articles written in the *Boston Globe* used passive voice more frequently when

describing male-perpetrated violence. This subtle change in language reflects a larger framing issue that could increase reader sympathy towards perpetrators (S. Lamb and S. Keon 1995).

## Present Study

The media play an important role in shaping our understanding of crime, its causes, and whom is to blame. The process of creating news can unintentionally rely on rhetorical devices that transmit rape myths and engage in victim blaming, possibly more prevalent for certain types of crime like campus sexual assault. Yet, research has yet to consider the impact of more recent Title IX policy changes and investigations into campus news reporting practices.

To this end, we selected a student newspaper from one large, public university, first, because of its high readership stemming from free and widely available print copies and online availability. Second, we selected this newspaper because it had committed to reporting on its front page every sexual offense logged by the university and local police department to draw student and administrator awareness to crime and reduce future incidents (A. Graham, personal communication, September 23, 2016). We analyzed the content of its crime stories over one academic year (2015-2016) in order to answer three specific research questions: *(1) How frequently, and in what ways, are victims, compared to perpetrators, of sexual offenses framed in news stories?, (2) In comparison to other types of crimes, including physical assault, robbery, and murder, are victims and perpetrators of sexual assault framed differently than those of other crimes in news stories?, and (3) In the discussions of victims and perpetrators, are rhetorical devices used to attribute responsibility for criminal acts and does their use differ between victims and perpetrators?*

## Materials and Methods

### Method of analysis

Our main research goals were to compare news coverage of sexual assault victims to coverage of perpetrators as well as to compare coverage across different crime categories (i.e., physical assault, robbery, and murder). We were interested in how articles were framed in terms of who was responsible for the crime as well as the rhetorical devices that were used to reference victims and perpetrators when attributing blame. We used a combination of qualitative and quantitative content analysis (D. Altheide and C. Schneider 2013) to investigate our research questions.

Consistent with qualitative document analysis, we began with our broader research topic, surveyed the research literature, and gathered a small sample of news stories (approximately 10) from the focus newspaper. In this sample of articles we found that various crimes, rhetorical devices, and strategies for attributing blame were present. We then drafted a protocol for collecting a larger sample of crime stories as later described in the data collection section. Following the collection of news stories, data were coded by two coders who compared and contrasted story elements to identify themes, create and revise a preliminary codebook, and establish intercoder reliability. Frequency tables and mean comparisons were used to test and verify hypotheses about whether findings were consistent with those of previous research.

**Data collection**

Student newspaper articles were collected from Midwestern University's (MU) *Midwest Daily Student (MDS)*[1]. MU has a student population of approximately 40,000 undergraduate and graduate students. Their student-run newspaper (MDS) was founded in the late 1800s and continues to be published daily both in print and online (Monday-Friday) throughout the school year. Using an online search engine located on the MDS website, coders independently collected

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[1] Pseudonyms used for university and newspaper

articles published between August 2015 and May 2016 that included one or more of the following keywords: "rape," "sexual assault," "assault," "robbery," "murder," "sexual abuse," "sexual misconduct." The coders compared their lists of compiled stories to ensure no stories were missed and no duplicates were included. Although several types of articles were found, including original news pieces (n = 233), opinion articles (n = 97), blog posts (n = 1), and monthly news briefs (n = 6), we limited the study to original news pieces (n = 233) that described recent crime events.

Next, following Iyengar (1991), we categorized the 233 original news pieces as either: episodic (n = 99), thematic (n = 140), or other (n = 131). We defined episodic stories as those in which more than 75% of the article related to a specific crime incident. Thematic stories, on the other hand, focused on broader issues of crime, such as educational programs or events on campus. Stories were classified as 'other' if the article failed to meet either criteria for episodic or thematic (e.g., an MDS story was not actually related to a relevant crime). Because the focus of our study is related to how specific crimes are portrayed in the university newspaper, we included only original news pieces classified as episodic in our analysis (n = 99).

**Data analysis**

We used the qualitative data analytical software NVivo 10 to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of coding and theme discovery (P. Bazeley and K. Jackson 2013). As recommended by Creswell (2016), coders began the iterative process of establishing intercoder reliability, using percent agreement to ensure that codes were developed and applied in a reasonable manner. Across all sections (i.e., crime type, crime victim(s), crime perpetrator(s), blame attributed to whom, and rhetorical devices), percent agreement was calculated according

to a recommendation by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) suggesting that coders should achieve at least 85-90%; our values ranged between 92% and 100% agreement.

**Crime details.** Crimes were coded as murder, physical assault, robbery, sexual assault, rape, sexual abuse, and sexual misconduct. When an article referenced multiple crimes, crimes were coded at each crime type. Crimes were also coded to capture details about victims (female, male, unknown gender, establishment, multiple victims) and perpetrators (male, female, unknown gender, multiple perpetrators).

**Responsibility, discrediting information, and suspect mitigation.** Within each crime category, articles were first coded based on how (and to whom) responsibility was framed. Claims of responsibility for any part of preventing or causing the criminal behavior were systematically captured. Specifically, coders noted to whom the responsibility was attributed or mitigated: victim, perpetrator, or no one. For all cases in which *victims* were labeled as responsible, coders determined what type of information was provided, resulting in the emergence of six broad themes: victim used alcohol, declined treatment/rape kit, delayed reporting/treatment, did not seek assistance, walked alone, questioned credibility. Collectively, we labeled these as 'discrediting information.' In cases where *perpetrators* were assigned responsibility, this was evidenced in only one way - through the use of language directly attributing blame or harm to the suspects. Coders also noted cases in which there was no evidence of language attributing responsibility or mitigation to anyone and assigned the code '*no one responsible.*' Finally, for all cases in which *suspects were mitigated*, the coders read to see what themes emerged, finding: (1) the use of passive voice (e.g. "a crime was committed") and (2) noting the perpetrator's use of alcohol in a way that absolves the suspect of responsibility.

**Results & Discussion**

**Coverage of sexual assault stories**

The crime-focused episodic newspaper articles (n = 99) contained seven different types of crimes (see Table 1), while a total of 122 crime types were referenced. The most frequently referenced crime type was rape (30%), followed by murder (20%), sexual assault (18%), robbery (16%), physical assault (12%), sexual misconduct (3%), and sexual abuse (2%). Over half (52%) of all news stories referencing a crime incident related to some type of sexual offense. These offenses generally receive higher levels of coverage likely due to their sensational nature or the severity of the offense (Chermak 1995; Y. Jewkes 2015; Meyers 1997). However, the higher levels of coverage in this particular newspaper could also be due to the University newspaper's policy to publish all stories on sexual assaults on their front page.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

**Sexual offenses: References to and framing of victims and perpetrators**

Our first research question investigates the *frequency of references* made to victims, compared to perpetrators, of sexual offenses in news stories. Victims and perpetrators of any type of sexual offense (rape, sexual assault, sexual misconduct) were referenced in almost equal numbers; victims were referenced 78 times and perpetrators were referenced 74 times (see Table 1). The second part of the first research question relates to the *framing* of victims and perpetrators limited to only sexual offense stories – specifically the ways in which responsibility or blame was attributed or mitigated. Shown in Table 2, victims were most often framed as being responsible for the crime in rape cases (39%), followed by sexual assault (14%). For example, in the following account, the victims' behavior is detailed but the perpetrator is largely absent:

> On April 11, 2015, one of the victims attended a party at the [Name of] fraternity house. She was drinking prior to the incident, according to a [County] Court probable cause affidavit. After hanging out with friends in the courtyard of the fraternity, she entered the

house looking for a bathroom. The next thing she remembered was being in a private
room with an unknown man who was trying to have sex with her.

Thus, victims of sexual offenses were held responsible in initial reports of sexual offense stories,

which is consistent with prior literature (Bieneck and Krahé 2011). One notable exception is that

victims were not held responsible in stories relating to sexual misconduct or sexual abuse,

however, these crimes involved a minor. Perpetrators were attributed some form of responsibility

in 100% of these cases.

Conversely, perpetrators were found responsible in only 45% of sexual assaults and 22%

of rapes. These numbers were higher than expected based on Lamb and Keon's (1995) prior

research that found perpetrators were less responsible than victims in stories of rape (22% versus

39%). An example of a perpetrator being attributed responsibility is, "[Suspect name], a former

tutor at [Elementary] School, pleaded guilty to one charge of child molestation... He also pleaded

guilty to rape and sexual misconduct with a minor." In this story, the very first sentence names a

perpetrator and explains his behavior using action verbs. Because the suspect had pleaded guilty,

it makes sense that he is attributed responsibility. In newly reported crimes, which most of the

*MDS* stories covered, it is plausible that police reports and student writers would want to initially

avoid attributing blame to perpetrators, given our system is based on the mandate of 'innocent

until proven guilty.'

[Insert Table 2 about here]

A third category framed no one as responsible for the event. In 32% of sexual assault

cases, 8% of rapes, and 0% of sexual misconduct or abuse cases, neither a victim or perpetrator

was assigned responsibility. For example, "An incident of rape was reported late Friday morning,

according to an [MU] Police Department daily log. The incident took place in [dorm] between

4:30 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. Tuesday. The report was filed with MUPD Friday at about 11 a.m.,

according to the MUPD crime log…" In this example, details are provided but no action is attributed to either suspects or victims. This framing of a story makes sense given practical constraints, such as an ongoing investigation in which few details are known. Such a scenario successfully avoids suspect mitigation or victim blame.

Looking specifically at sexual offenses, it is clear that victims and perpetrators are referenced at similar rates and are framed as having fairly high levels of responsibility. Consistent with prior literature, victims were framed as being responsible for criminal incidents at higher rates for sexual offenses than perpetrators, unless the victims were minors (R. Muller, R. Caldwell, and J. Hunter 1994). The findings related to our first research question suggest that the school newspaper's attempt to draw positive attention to sexual assault, and to end it, does not avoid the common pitfalls of blaming the victim.

**All crime types: References to and framing of victims and perpetrators**

Turning to our second research question, we investigate both the *frequency of references* made to victims, compared to perpetrators, of sexual offenses compared to other crime types and the ways in which the framing of responsibility might vary across these crime types. Based on previous literature, we expected that victims of sexual offenses would be attributed responsibility more frequently than victims of other crimes, such as murder, robbery, or physical assault (P. Easteal, K. Holland, and K. Judd 2015).

**Frequency of references.** Of the 122 references to crime, 119 identified victims in the story. Looking at the gender of victims (see Table 3), 91 stories had female victims, 12 stories had male victims, 28 stories featured multiple victims, 17 stories had victims with no gender provided, and seven stories had establishments as victims (e.g., a burglary occurred at a business). Stories could reference crimes that had both a female victim and multiple victims and

would be coded under both categories, thus the number of victims was greater than the 122 total references to crimes.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

For those cases where the gender of the perpetrator was included (i.e., 114 of the 122 references), 110 were male, five were female, 25 had multiple perpetrators, and 10 perpetrators were mentioned but no gender was given. Thus, the majority of crime stories in the sample feature female victims (58.7%) and male perpetrators (73%). If you remove 'multiple perpetrators' from the denominators, 88% of references are to male perpetrators and 72% of victims are female (see Table 1). However, we continue to use gender-neutral language when referring to victims and perpetrators throughout the study.

**Framing of victims and perpetrators.** Consistent with previous research, our results (shown in Table 2) indicate that victims were framed as being responsible for sexual offense crimes more than any other types of crime: only 4% (1 of 25) of victims were framed as responsible in stories about murder, and 14% (1 of 19) of robbery stories. Among rape victims, 39% were blamed (14 of 36); and among victims of sexual assault, 14% (3 of 22) were blamed. The other categories of sexual offense – sexual abuse and sexual misconduct – involved victims who were minors and were never blamed; we excluded these categories from statistical analysis and discussion but continue to show their prevalence in tables.

To test whether the framing of responsibility was significantly different between victims of sexual assault, rape, and victims of other types of crime in news stories, we used a chi-square test performed using Fisher's Exact test to account for small cell sizes. The results of the chi-square test ($X^2 = 21.031$, df = 4, p <. 000) suggest there is a statistically significant relationship between at least one of the five crime types and victim responsibility frames in news stories. The

number of news stories in which responsibility frames were present was higher for victims of rape and sexual assault (39% and 14%) than for victims of murder, physical assault, or robbery (0 to 14%). Thus, we are reasonably confident that, compared to other crime types, crime stories involving victims of rape and sexual assault are statistically more likely to attribute responsibility to victims.

Looking at the framing of responsibility to perpetrators across crime types, perpetrators of murder, physical assault, and robbery were blamed at a much higher rate (68-84%) than for sexual offenses (22-45%), excluding crimes against minors (see Table 2). Thus, suspects were twice as likely to be attributed blame for murder, physical assault, or robbery than for rape or sexual assault. However, suspects' responsibility was also mitigated in 27% (4 of 15) of physical assault stories, 22% (8 of 36) of rapes, 9% (2 of 22) of sexual assaults, and 4% (1 of 25) of stories involving murder. Interestingly, in stories of rape, suspects are just as likely to be attributed responsibility (22%) as they are to be mitigated (22%). Such differential blame attribution, especially with respect to male perpetrators, is in line with previous research (Bieneck and Krahé 2011; Frazer and Miller 2009).

Although less common, sometimes blame was not attributed to anyone (24% of murder stories, 8% of rape, and 32% of sexual assault). For example, "MU spokesperson…said individuals, not commercial businesses, were robbed. He said in Tuesday afternoon's robbery, cash and a cell phone were stolen." Clear patterns did not emerge around attributions of responsibility to no one.

Patterns were much clearer when responsibility was assigned to victims or perpetrators. Victims of murder, physical assault, robbery, and sexual crimes against minors were rarely framed as being responsible (less than 5% of the time). However, victims of rape or sexual

assault were assigned responsibility at much higher rates, consistent with prior literature on

victim blaming (Bieneck and Krahé 2011). Perpetrators received high levels of responsibility

across crime types but much lower for rape and sexual assault. Consistent with prior literature,

our findings suggest that victim blaming occurs in the student newspaper and is specific to rape

and sexual assault, therefore, hindering the newspapers ability to meet its stated goals of drawing

student and administrator awareness to crime and reducing future incidents.

**Attributions of responsibility & rhetorical devices**

Our third research question investigated whether rhetorical devices are used to attribute

or mitigate responsibility for criminal acts and to see whether their use differs between victims

and perpetrators. Our analysis indicated that attributions of responsibility and mitigation were

not used similarly between victims and perpetrators. We found two main themes in cases

involving suspect mitigation (i.e., perpetrator used alcohol and passive voice). We also found six

themes regarding cases where victims were attributed responsibility (i.e., victim was walking

alone, victim used alcohol, victim declined rape kit, victim delayed reporting the incident, victim

did not seek outside assistance, or victim's credibility was questioned).

**Rhetorical devices for suspect mitigation.** When responsibility was assigned to

perpetrators, typically two other things happened: no victim was named and no discrediting

information was provided about the perpetrator. The statements were typically short, sterile, and

robotic. For example, a rather violent sequence of events is reported; the account does not infer

anything about the perpetrator – motivation, intoxication, emotion- and does not provide

discrediting information.

> After interviewing [victim] and witnesses, detectives concluded that [perpetrator] had
> been "disputing with [victim] over a female acquaintance and that [perpetrator] had made
> threats to kill [victim]" according to the release. Witnesses said [perpetrator] struck
> [victim] in head with an ax handle before fleeing the scene on a motorcycle.

However, when alcohol use by perpetrators was included, our analysis revealed that it was often used as a form of suspect mitigation meant to absolve male perpetrators of responsibility. For example, when responsibility was attributed to the perpetrators of rape (22% of stories), alcohol was used to suggest that the perpetrator could not possibly be responsible for the crime. This occurred in 25% of relevant articles. Similarly, perpetrators' use of alcohol was mentioned in articles featuring physical assault (75%) and murder (100%). For example, "[The perpetrator] had been drunk with a blood alcohol content of .195." No similar or comparable absolution was found in accounts in which victims were assigned responsibility.

Another form of suspect mitigation used by reporters was the use of passive voice, or sentence structure that allows for crimes to occur, seemingly by no one, allowing for suspect responsibility to be substantially lessened. Suspect mitigation in the form of passive voice was much more common in stories of rape and sexual assault (75 - 100%; see Table 2) compared to other crime types (0 - 25%). The use of passive voice in stories of rape and sexual assault may be a tool that newspaper editors use to ward off libel claims; but this type of language serves to implicitly mitigate the suspect of any wrongdoing by removing them as an agent of the crime.

**Rhetorical devices for discrediting victims.** When victims were framed as responsible, which was more common in rape (39%) than incidences of sexual assault (14%), robbery (14%), or murder (4%), (see Table 2), we identified six uses of what we call 'discrediting information' provided about the victim. Across all crime types, even less common forms of crime, discrediting information was common. For the 4% of stories involving murder in which a victim was found responsible, all of these cases used victim-blaming language by explaining that the victim never sought outside assistance from law enforcement. Recall in most murder stories, the suspect was held responsible (68%). Similarly, in robbery stories that discredited the victim

(14%), it was reported that there was a delay on part of the victim in either reporting the crime or seeking treatment after the fact. For the more common crimes in which victims were held responsible, such as rape and sexual assault, almost all six types of discrediting information were found.

***Victim delayed reporting or treatment.*** For rape, one of the most commonly occurring devices used to discredit the victim was describing the victim's delay in reporting or seeking treatment (57%); for sexual assault it was mentioned in 66% of cases. For example, reporters would indicate:

- "A rape was reported to the MU Police Department on March 22. The victim is an MU student. Though the rape occurred more than six months ago, the incident has just been reported, MUPD Captain [Name omitted] said."

- "The rape was not reported until more than two hours after the rape occurred, [Law enforcement personnel] said."

Including information that suggests victims acted inappropriately (i.e., 'they delayed') can have the effect of suggesting victims are somehow complicit in the crime; that their behavior is also at fault for not following socially acceptable protocol. Or, it could suggest to the reader that the victim may not have been sure about whether a crime had actually occurred.

***Alcohol use by victims.*** A second common rhetorical device for victim discreditation was the mention of victim alcohol consumption in stories about rape (57%) or sexual assault (66%) incidents. For example:

- "At about 5:30 p.m., the victim and friends began drinking Fireball whiskey…The group returned to the [sorority house], where [perpetrator] and the victim, along with friends, went to the victim's room to continue drinking. The victim doesn't remember anything between 6:30 and 7:30 p.m."

- "The 25-year-old woman told officials that [the perpetrator] came to her house with a bottle of Jim Beam at about 8 or 9 p.m. They had decided to drink together and hang out, City Police Department [Personnel] said. After heavy drinking, the woman blacked out."

Alcohol use is frequently invoked when the topic of sexual assault is raised. On the one hand, this information serves to show that victims are to blame for their drinking behavior. On the other hand, inclusion of information about alcohol use *should* serve to cast blame on perpetrators; individuals who are intoxicated are not about to legally consent to sexual activity. Thus, inclusion of this information should serve to vindicate victims – or at least to ensure they cannot be blamed. Yet, these excerpts indicate that the "extremely drunk" woman or the woman who was "heavily drinking" was irresponsible for not remembering or not "immediately objecting." Conspicuously absent is the reminder for readers that intoxicated individuals are (legally) incapable of providing consent.

*Victim credibility questioned.* Another rhetorical device used to discredit victims is questioning the victim's credibility; this was used in 36% of rape incidents and 66% of sexual assault incidents. Reporters would include information that made the victims look culpable. For example, by saying, "the victim had engaged in flirtatious activity" prior to the incident or sharing that "[The perpetrator] and the woman had previously been in a brief relationship in the early summer of 2015."

*Other rhetorical devices for discrediting the victims.* Reports also cast blame on victims by noting that a victim declined treatment or a rape kits (21% of rape incidents and 33% of sexual assaults) or did not seek outside assistance (7%). In 14% of cases, victims were blamed for walking alone at the time of the rape. Examples include the following:

- "The crime occurred near [Street name] after the student left a house party and was walking alone. The victim reported she was approached by three men she didn't know and then raped in the street…"

- "When the concert ended, she became separated from her friends, and her phone was dying, so she decided to walk home alone, according to the report."

Behaviors such as walking alone, drinking, and failing to charge one's phone indicate the victim shares responsibility in the incident. Research by Lamb and Keon (1995) that involved subjects who were asked to read newspaper articles in which active voice, passive voice, and shared responsibility were used, found that shared responsibility narratives result in more lenience toward male violence. Thus, the language selected by authors as well as the types of information authors chose to include impacts and shapes readers' views of responsibility for crimes.

Because language used in episodic stories likely comes from police reports, the young writers' use of rhetorical devices could be heavily shaped by them. The inclusion of details of crimes in information released to the public (i.e., whether a rape kit was completed) suggests that police officers writing the reports may require training on what information they include in public releases of information, what types of information they include in reports, and what types of information they solicit from victims and care providers. For example, what message does it send perpetrators to read about a sexual assault they know they committed and learn that their victim refused treatment or declined a rape kit? How does this information impact police ability to secure a confession should the prosecutor decide to pursue charges? Future research should investigate to what extent the attributions of responsibility are due to newspaper writers or due to police officers' views expressed in their report writing, or even to victims' views/understandings of who is to blame for sexual assault. The extent to which socialization and rape myths have influenced the views of these actors likely collides to produce the narratives we analyzed.

The inclusion of this information and the language used are not employed when writing about other types of crimes – crimes that similarly had only been reported and had not had investigations conducted. Thus, the culpability of female sexual assault victims is assumed and

reinforced by reporting that includes these behaviors – it suggests to readers that old rape scripts should be followed – victims must be responsible for their own safety at all times.

## Conclusion

We analyzed 99 student newspaper crime stories from one academic year to investigate how often victims and perpetrators of crimes, compared to one another, were framed as responsible across various criminal incidents. Our findings were consistent with historical trends in newspaper reporting and did not reflect anticipated trends of less biased news coverage.

Taken together, female victims of sexual offenses are frequently held responsible, both directly and indirectly, in ways that are uncommon for victims of other crime types (Bohner 2001). Victims of sexual offenses are held responsible more often than perpetrators (Lamb and Keon 1995). For example, they are blamed because of their alcohol consumption, despite the fact that most sexual assaults involve alcohol consumption by both the victim and perpetrator (A. Grubb and E. Turner 2012). Articles depict delayed reporting by victims as a possible indicators of falsehood (Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994). The analysis also reveals few such inferences regarding perpetrators' behavior.

These findings are specific to sexual assault and rape and were not present across other crime types, consistent with previous literature. Thus, our hypothesis that the well-intentioned media goal of forefronting sexual assault to end its occurrence, as a new post-title IX trend, would be characterized with less biased coverage was not supported in our data. To the contrary, we found strong evidence of reversion to traditional ways of covering sexual assaults that uniquely blame victims, which may create greater harm.

It would be easy to dismiss these findings as just a continuation of historical practices. However, these findings underscore that social climates and news practices have not responded

to perceived gains in social equality for women and victims. Specifically, the goal of *MDS* newspaper staff was well intentioned. However, the manner in which the crime stories were constructed and broadcast undermined their laudible goals. In their attempt to do justice to the victims of sexual assault, they inadvertantly engaged in victim blaming and suspect mitigation, perpetuating the very attitudes they were seeking to eliminate. These findings are troubling because even well-intentioned actors are unaware of their having been trained, and continued training of others, to adopt these frames of blame attitribution that are expeditious for news media producers but consequential for members of society. By ignoring the broader cultural and contextual causes of sexual assault, these stories imply that each attack is an anomaly, not part of a trend (P. McDonald and S. Charlesworth 2013); thus, eliding the fact that specific crimes are part of a larger social problem.

Student newspapers have an opportunity to help (or harm) the effort to eliminate sexual assault. One solution, as Worthington (2008) explains, is to train writers to tell stories from a victims' point of view, which can avoid suspect mitigation and other framing problems found in our analysis. Such education is especially important if these students eventually become professional journalists. Another promising solution is to provide similar training to police officers, whose written incident reports are the foundation for student journalists' writing. Further, because student newspapers, written by and for students, are engaging in victim blaming and perpetuating rape myths, it could indicate a pervasive misunderstanding of sexual offenses throughout campus culture. Thus, sexual offense prevention campaigns may be appropriate to address the cultural climate.

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**Table 1. References to Crimes, Victims, and Perpetrators in Episodic Articles (n = 99), by Crime Type**

| | Murder | Physical Assault | Robbery | Rape | Sexual Assault | Sexual Misconduct | Sexual Abuse | Combined Sexual Offenses |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Reference to Crime (n = 122) | 20% | 12% | 16% | 30% | 18% | 3% | 2% | 52% |
| **Victims** | | | | | | | | |
| Male | 3 (10%) | 3 (18%) | 4 (13%) | 0 (0%) | 1 (4%) | 0 (0%) | 1 (25%) | 2 (3%) |
| Female | 21 (70%) | 12 (71%) | 8 (27%) | 29 (62%) | 19 (83%) | 2 (50%) | 0 (0%) | 50 (64%) |
| Unknown | 1 (3%) | 1 (6%) | 2 (7%) | 9 (19%) | 2 (9%) | 1 (25%) | 1 (25%) | 13 (17%) |
| Establishment | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 7 (23%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) |
| Multiple | 5 (17%) | 1 (6%) | 9 (30%) | 9 (19%) | 1 (4%) | 1 (25%) | 2 (50%) | 13 (17%) |
| **Perpetrators** | | | | | | | | |
| Male | 25 (83%) | 14 (83%) | 16 (55%) | 31 (67%) | 20 (87%) | 3 (100%) | 1 (50%) | 55 (74%) |
| Female | 0 (0%) | 2 (12%) | 2 (7%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 1 (50%) | 1 (1%) |
| Unknown | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 2 (7%) | 6 (13%) | 2 (9%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 8 (11%) |
| Multiple | 5 (17%) | 1 (6%) | 9 (31%) | 9 (20%) | 1 (4%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 10 (14%) |

*Note*: Sexual Misconduct and Sexual Abuse crimes involved victims who were minors

**Table 2. Types of Rhetorical Devices, by Crime Type**

|  | Murder | Phys. Assault | Robbery | Rape | Sexual Assault |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Victim Responsible | 4% | 0% | 14% | 39% | 14% |
|    Victim Used Alcohol | 0% | -- | 0% | 57% | 66% |
|    Victim Declined Treatment or Rape Kit | 0% | -- | 0% | 21% | 33% |
|    Victim Delayed Reporting or Seeking Treatment | 0% | -- | 100% | 57% | 66% |
|    Victim Did Not Seek Outside Assistance | 100% | -- | 0% | 7% | 0% |
|    Victim Walked Alone | 0% | -- | 0% | 14% | 0% |
|    Victim's Credibility Questioned | 0% | -- | 0% | 36% | 66% |
| Suspect Mitigation | 4% | 27% | 0% | 22% | 9% |
|    Perpetrator Used Alcohol | 100% | 75% | -- | 25% | 50% |
|    Passive Voice Used | 0% | 25% | -- | 75% | 100% |
| Suspect Responsible | 68% | 73% | 84% | 22% | 45% |
| No One Responsible | 24% | 0% | 0% | 8% | 32% |

**Table 3. Frequency of Types of Victims and Perpetrators in Episodic Articles (n = 122)**

| | References within Episodic Articles N (%) |
|---|---|
| **Victim Type** | |
| Female | 91 (58.7) |
| Male | 12 (7.7) |
| Multiple Victims | 28 (18.1) |
| Victim of Unknown Gender | 17 (10.9) |
| Establishment | 7 (4.5) |
| No Victim Mentioned | 3 (1.9) |
|    Total References to Victims | 155 |
| **Perpetrator Type** | |
| Female | 5 (3.3) |
| Male | 110 (73.3) |
| Multiple Perpetrator | 25 (16.7) |
| Perpetrator of Unknown Gender | 10 (6.7) |
| No Perpetrator Mentioned | 8 (6.7) |
|    Total References to Perpetrators | 150 |