EFFECTIVENESS OF PERSUASIVE ATTACKS 
ON PERCEPTIONS OF BLAME AND OFFENSIVENESS 
FOR A SEXUAL ASSAULT ON A COLLEGE CAMPUS

by

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ABSTRACT

Benoit and Dorries (1996) identified strategies known as *kategoria*, or persuasive attacks, used to initiate attacks against a person or organization that has engaged in wrongdoing, affording researchers a framework for empirical analysis. There are two categories of strategies: increase responsibility and increase offensiveness. Based on a review of previous research, an empirical investigation of persuasive attacks has not yet been undertaken. The present study empirically tests the effects of two types of persuasive messages through an experiment investigating sexual assault allegations on a college campus. The goal is to understand the impact of persuasive attacks against different actors (university, suspect, and victim) present in media articles on perceptions of responsibility and/or offensiveness of a transgression.

The study utilized an experimental design, a 3 (target of attack: university, suspect, victim) x 3 (type of persuasive attack: increase responsibility, increase offensiveness, increase responsibility and offensiveness) x 2 (gender of victim) between-subject factorial design. Findings indicated that presence of persuasive attacks to increase responsibility are effective when the target of the attack was the university or victim, but not when the target was the suspect. Additionally, the presence of persuasive attacks to increase offensiveness were effective against the university, but not against the suspect or the victim. Demographic analysis suggested that respondent gender, income level, education level, and age are all significant predictors of university and suspect responsibility levels; however, age was not a significant predictor of victim responsibility levels. Findings also indicated that the suspect was perceived as having a
high level of responsibility regardless of whether a persuasive attack was present. Findings also suggested there was no statistically significant difference whether the victim was male or female. There was a statistically significant finding that implied a significant interaction between attack type and attack target influencing levels of university responsibility, but only when the target of the attack is the university or victim. Finally, findings suggest that there is a small negative correlation between perceived responsibility of the suspect and the perceived responsibility of the victim; if the victim was viewed as more responsible, the suspect was viewed as less responsible.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is specially dedicated to my father, Walter Larry Whitten, who passed away two weeks after this dissertation was defended. June 28, 1948 – September 30, 2021.
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

ANOVA Analysis of Variance statistical test

\( \alpha \) Cronbach’s Alpha

\( R^2 \) Coefficient of determination

\( M \) Arithmetic Mean

\( SD \) Standard Deviation

\( p \) Probability Value

\( t \) Student’s t ratio

\( F \) Fisher’s F Ratio

\( \beta \) Beta Level

\( r \) Pearson product-moment correlation
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CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

Stakeholders’ opinions are shaped by the framing of the crisis in the media (the exception to this is crises that begin online; in that case, the crisis is framed by individuals) (Coombs, 2007). Because of this, it is important to not only understand how the media frame the crisis type, as Coombs (2007) argued, but also how the media frame the persuasive attacks on which the organization will have to base at least some of the crisis response. Furthermore, it is crucial for public relations researchers and practitioners to understand the effects of those persuasive attack messages. How effective are these attacks on changing perceptions of blame?

Research aimed at understanding persuasive attacks is valuable to public relations research and practitioners because it provides a way to forecast persuasive attacks that may initiate, perpetuate, or exacerbate a crisis. Because apologies and image repair strategies are often in response to persuasive attacks, understanding the effects of persuasive attacks may help people and organizations better prepare crisis response efforts. It is important to note that, although it can be argued that there is a negative connotation to the term persuasive attack, it is inherently neither good nor bad. In fact, persuasive attacks can be very benevolent in uncovering transgressions as well as holding people and organizations responsible for those transgressions. Rather than look at if the media perpetuate persuasive attacks (because, intentional or not, it is clear that it happens), this study looks at the influential power of those persuasive attacks to impact audience perceptions of responsibility of a target and offensiveness of an act. Thus, the purpose of this study is to understand the effects of persuasive attacks presented in the media on
perceived levels of responsibility for a transgression and perceived levels of offensiveness for a transgression. Specifically, the experiment in this study uses the transgression of a fictitious account of a sexual assault on a college campus.

Image is defined by Benoit and Hanczor (1994) as “the perception(s) of a person, group or organization held by the audience, shaped by the words and actions of that person, as well as by the discourse and behavior of other relevant actors” (p. 40). A threat to image can affect credibility and persuasive ability (Benoit, 2015). As social creatures, people (and organizations) take great care to protect their image. Because of this, there have been many studies conducted to understand the tactics and strategies used to repair a tarnished image. However, there have been only a handful of studies undertaken that seek to understand the persuasive attacks that initiate (and necessitate) image-repair efforts (Benoit & Dorries, 1996; Benoit & Harthcock, 1999; Benoit & Stein, 2009; and Benoit & Delbert, 2010). Most of the studies utilize qualitative and/or rhetorical methodologies. One of the benefits of these methodologies is the ability to develop a typology and understand attacks on a case-by-case basis (a la Benoit & Dorries, 1996). Recently, persuasive attacks have been applied in a rhetorical context, such as the text written by Benoit and Glanz on persuasive attacks against Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential primaries (2017).

Benoit’s development of a typology provides the necessary framework to empirically study persuasive attacks and the possible variables that influence these attacks. The typology rests on two categories of persuasive attacks: increasing responsibility and increasing offensiveness. Persuasive attacks are a form of persuasive communication, having a belief component (level of responsibility) and a value component (level of offensiveness). Research shows that attitudinal change occurs through salient belief/value pairings. Regardless of whether
there exists intention, persuasive attacks have the power to change attitudes towards a target transgressor or transgression.

An and Gower (2011) conducted research in order to understand which frames the media use against an organization in crisis and how this might affect the level of responsibility. The study found that 95% of media articles use an “attribution of blame” frame. How the media frame issues can affect public perception toward an individual or organization, which in turn affects the image of that person or group. The media may attempt to increase the responsibility and offensiveness of an act in the form of persuasive attacks (otherwise known as *kategoria*), and this study seeks to understand the effects of those attacks in a sexual assault context.

Sexual assault is a prevalent issue on college campuses. One in every five women and one in every sixteen men is sexually assaulted while in college (Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, & Martin, 2007; Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN), 2017). College women are at an elevated risk of sexual assault, being three times more likely to be sexually assaulted than other women (RAINN, 2017). Much attention has recently been given to this prevalent issue. In 2017, Google searches on this issue spiked, with the keywords “sexual assault” reaching a record high in November of 2017, as indicated by Google Trends (2021) (see Chart 1-A), which could be explained by the accusations of sexual assault against prominent figures, like Harvey Weinstein, Kevin Spacey, and prominent politicians. Analysis of the search term “sexual assault on college campuses” shows recent spikes in search popularity and illustrates that the issue is being researched by people around the world (see Chart 1-B).
Chart 1-A: Google Trends Chart: Google Searches for “sexual assault” from January 1, 2004 to September 18, 2021

*Note: Numbers represent search interest relative to the highest point on the chart for the given region and time. A value of 100 is the peak popularity for the term. A value of 50 means that the term is half as popular. A score of 0 means there was not enough data for this term.

Chart 1-B: Google Trends: Google Searches for “sexual assault on college campuses” from January 1, 2004 to September 18, 2021

*Note: Numbers represent search interest relative to the highest point on the chart for the given region and time. A value of 100 is the peak popularity for the term. A value of 50 means that the term is half as popular. A score of 0 means there was not enough data for this term.

Chart 1-A depicts the popularity of the search term “sexual assault” from January 1, 2004 to September 18, 2021. The spikes at the beginning of the timeline coincide with the initial sexual assault allegations against “America’s Dad” Bill Cosby. The major spikes towards the end of the timeline begin to occur around October 2017, when Ashley Judd publicly accused Harvey Weinstein of sexual assault. On October 15, 2017 actress Alyssa Milano reignited the “Me Too” phrase with a tweet, which quickly turned into the Me Too Movement sparking a series of accusations against prominent figures.

Chart 1-B depicts the popularity of the search term “sexual assault on college campuses” which shows an upward trend in Google searches beginning July of 2014, coinciding with
legislation to curb campus sexual assault being introduced by a bipartisan group of senators. Vox.com published an article with the headline “2014 was the year college sexual assault became impossible to ignore” (Nelson, 2015), citing Congress, the White House, and the media as the driving forces to bring about a higher visibility to the issue of sexual assault on college campuses. In November of 2014, Sabrina Erdely with Rolling Stone magazine published an article titled “A Rape on Campus” that brought a lot of visibility to the issue (although the article was later retracted).

Many campuses have put into place preventative measures to help mitigate the problem of sexual assaults on college campuses. Due to the passing of the Clery Act in 1990, colleges and universities must disclose information about crime on and near their campuses. According to the Clery Center (2019), the purpose of the Clery Act is to protect consumers by providing transparency regarding campus crime statistics and policies. The requirements of the Clery Act include an annual security report that includes statistics of crimes on campus for the preceding three years, as well as any actions taken to increase safety on campus. There are four distinct categories of crimes that must be included in the report: criminal offenses (homicide, sexual assault, robbery, burglary, etc.), violence against women (VAWA) offenses (domestic violence, stalking), hate crimes, and arrests/referrals for disciplinary action (weapons violations, drug abuse, liquor violations) (Clery Center, 2019).

Accounts of a campus sexual assault are a serious matter, and the university’s response is critically important. Oftentimes, the media will initiate persuasive attacks that, intentionally or not, may affect the reputation and image of actors involved in the account, including the suspect, the university, and perhaps even the victim. This could impact the rate at which these crimes are reported. Around 90% of sexual assaults on college campuses go unreported (Fisher, Cullen, &...
Turner, 2000; Ito, 2010). Although motivations differ in every case, media coverage of the event may be a relevant factor regarding the underreporting of sexual assaults. Media coverage could thrust a victim into a public judgment situation. Whether the victim is identified or not, information in the coverage as well as public reactions to the coverage could cause harm to the victim. Victims identified fear of retaliation as a reason for not reporting a sexual assault. Public reporting of the event could elevate this fear of retaliation, thereby exacerbating the problem of underreporting. The manner in which a university handles campus sexual assault can seriously impact its image.

**Purpose of Dissertation**

The overarching purpose of this dissertation is to explore the viability of a quantitative research stream utilizing the rhetorical theory of *kategoria*, or persuasive attacks. Through previous rhetorical studies and analysis, a typology of persuasive attacks has been developed. As noted earlier, this typology creates a framework by which quantitative research can occur. Specifically, this study seeks to understand the effects of persuasive attacks on a reader’s perception of level of responsibility for a transgression, and the level of offensiveness of the transgression. The study utilizes a 3 (target of attack: (1) university, (2) suspect, (3) victim) x 3 (type of persuasive attack: (1) increase responsibility, (2) increase offensiveness, (3) increase responsibility and offensiveness) x 2 (gender of suspect/victim) between-subject factorial design. The transgression is a fictitious news article about a sexual assault on a university campus. After reading the fictitious article, the responsibility level of three different actors is measured: the suspect, the victim, and the university. The offensiveness of the behavior is also measured. Additionally, this study should show that academic image repair merits its own stream of dedicated research differentiated from other contexts in Benoit’s theory of image repair.
Significance of Dissertation

The significance of this study is multifaceted. First, the basis of this study is a rhetorical framework that is studied quantitatively, which has not yet been undertaken to the best of this researcher’s knowledge at the time of this manuscript. This could open a new type of research stream into how researchers come to understand the persuasive attacks that often initiate, perpetuate, or exacerbate a crisis, which could lead to further insight for crisis communication professionals.

Second, this study seeks to set a precedent for the study of image repair in an academic context, offering the beginnings of a research stream dedicated to this context. Currently, the dedicated research contexts for image repair theory include political, corporate, and sports/entertainment. However, as discussed next in the literature review, academia is different enough from all three of these contexts to warrant its own dedicated research niche, including several distinctions that are unique to an institution of higher education. Similarly, this study seeks to understand factors that influence the level of responsibility attributed to the university for a transgression that happened on its campus, and whether perceptions of responsibility can be altered when persuasive attacks are present.

Finally, this study poses important questions about perception of responsibility and offensiveness of a sexual assault for the suspect and victim, if and how those perceptions can be altered, and the implications of this on how media cover a crime. Although this is not a new concept for research studies, it contributes to that body of research while introducing a unique theoretical framework and methodology for studying how perceptions of responsibility and offensiveness are affected by persuasive attacks included in media coverage of a transgression or crisis.
Overview of Dissertation

This dissertation is divided into five chapters: the Introduction, the Literature Review, the Method, the Results, and finally, the Discussion. Chapter 2, the Literature Review, expounds upon research related to the major themes present in this dissertation: image, persuasive attacks, and sexual assault on college campuses. Specifically, the section regarding sexual assault on college campuses is a review of the literature related to perceptions of blame in sexual assault cases. Chapter 3, the Method section, outlines the methods and procedures used in this study, specifically a 3 x 3 x 2 between-subjects experimental design. Chapter 4, the Results section, outlines the statistical analysis results for each hypothesis and research question posed in this study. Finally, Chapter 5, the Discussion section, will focus on the results from those statistical analyses, the theoretical and practical implications of these findings, the limitations of the study, and a final conclusion.
CHAPTER 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW

Review of Literature on Image

Image is vitally important to people and organizations, in some part because it enhances credibility and persuasive ability (Benoit, 2015). As defined by Benoit (1997), image is “the perception of a person, (or group or organization) held by the audience, shaped by the words and actions of that [entity], as well as by the discourse and behavior of other relevant actors” (p. 251). There will come a time when an entity’s image is threatened, especially if that entity is in the public eye. According to Benoit (2015), threats to image are inevitable for four reasons: 1) the world has finite resources available to us; 2) things happen beyond our control and keep us from fulfilling our commitments; 3) people are imperfect and commit wrongdoings; and 4) people have different priorities and goals and this can lead to conflict among those with competing priorities/goals. As Benoit (2015) argued, people wish to be viewed favorably by others, and they seek to protect their image. People will expend great effort to protect and repair a damaged image or reputation (Benoit, 2015; Brinson & Benoit, 1999).

An organization or entity, upon facing an attack to its image, will often employ strategies and engage in discourse to repair this image. The threat must be addressed, and perception-correction attempted. This is often done through *apologia*, or a speech of self-defense. Apologies have long been studied for their effectiveness and rhetorical outcomes. *Apologia* has been studied in numerous different historical and political contexts, including Nixon’s apology during
the Watergate crisis (Benoit, 1982) and Senator Kennedy’s apology for the incident on Chappaquiddick Island (Benoit, 1988).

Ryan (1982) added another facet to the study of *apologia* when he suggested that this apology discourse consists of a speech set that includes both *kategoria* and *apologia*. *Kategoria* is defined as an accusation or a charge, or to speak against or accuse. In general terms, *kategoria* is a statement of accusation (Ryan, 1982). Ryan (1982) proposed that the apology and the attack be treated as a speech set and argued that, in order to gain a better understanding of the apology discourse, it was imperative that the attack prompting the apology also be studied. Stein took this position a step further and proposed a three-step process that would include *antapologia* (response to *apologia*) in the speech set, arguing that it “is an important feature of the apologetic situation because the rhetor may choose to construct the initial image repair based on what one perceives to be the likely response by the offended person(s)” (2008, p. 19). Of the three categories of the three-part speech act, the *apologia* distinction has been researched the most extensively, specifically in the form of image repair discourse.

*Image in Context*

Image research has been popular in the study of apology discourse in several contexts. Benoit (2015) lists unique attributions of these different contexts: corporate, political, and sports/entertainment. For example, corporate image repair is unique in that corporations are often susceptible to threats from competitors, have available assets to construct and distribute image repair efforts, can mitigate the threat by firing employees, are in greater danger of being sued, and affect a larger population than individual actors. Political image repair efforts are distinctive because, generally speaking, politicians are newsworthy, but they are especially newsworthy when accused of wrongdoing. Exacerbating the situation, opponents of politicians put great
effort into perpetuating an attack. Also, politicians make decisions on a daily basis that affect their constituents. Transgressions are viewed as a violation of the public’s trust.

In sports and entertainment, athletes and celebrities also face unique circumstances, but unlike corporations and politicians, they are less likely to be attacked by their peers. Athletes and celebrities are viewed as role models; however, they may not be held to the same level of responsibility as a corporation or politician. While corporations can employ a scapegoating response by firing an employee, an athlete or celebrity does not have this alternative.

An institution of higher learning is unique from the aforementioned contexts. Although a handful of studies have analyzed the image repair efforts undertaken by an academy or university (Len-Rios, 2010; Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009; Barnett, 2008), relatively little has been done to understand the unique nuances of the image repair process of institutions of higher education compared to corporations, politicians, and celebrities. There are several distinctions to how an academic institution maintains and repairs its image that merits a look at opening a research stream into academic image repair efforts.

Academia differs from other areas of image research in many ways. First, there is an expectation of ethical behavior of these institutions because of the nature of the university or non-profit institution. Academic integrity at all levels, from students to faculty to administration, is essential in upholding the reputation of an academic institution. Floyd (2000) writes, “Since the inception of higher education, the university has been seen as a place of morality and higher ethical standards” (p.1). High levels of role ambiguity and role autonomy in such critical positions such as president, dean, admissions officers, etc. necessitate a formal code of conduct to provide “parameters for the professional choices of individuals…[and] assist the academy in professional self-regulation” (Braxton & Bray, 2012, p.8). Braxton and Bray (2012) also suggest
that the “public grants professions autonomy in exchange for professional self-regulation” (p.8). Essentially, the public lets the universities conduct its business with the expectation and trust that the university will conduct itself ethically. Violations of the public’s trust in this regard tarnish the image of a university, necessitating the implementation of academic image repair.

Second, due to the high standards of ethical behavior in academia, there is an onus of transparency that is unique to academia. This limits the image repair options available for these institutions. Neyland (2007) claims, “demands are made for organizations to demonstrate recognition of their responsibility for environmental impact, how money is spent, the returns received on money invested and so on” (p.499). The aim of transparency “should be to allow ‘all those who are interested in a decision to understand what is being decided and why’” (Neyland, 2007, p.501). It is clear that academic institutions have a tremendous responsibility of transparency to their constituents.

Third, the academy “function[s] as a client-serving organization” (Baldrige et al., 1978) and is beholden to many different stakeholders, including potential donors, prospective students, the individual colleges, faculty members, administrative staff members, the student body as a whole, and students as individuals (Braxton & Bray, 2012; Braxton, 2010). Additionally, the university acts in loco parentis, or “in the place of the parent” for many young people leaving home for the first time. Because of this, the parents of these students have high expectations of the decisions made by the university and how the university is perceived throughout a crisis. Along with the variety of stakeholders, there is an expectation of cooperation with controlling organizations such as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) or the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA).
Fourth, the entirety of the academic or non-profit institution is often accused of transgressions according to the wrongdoing of only a few individuals associated with the institution. The University of North Carolina tutoring scandal, which could be argued to have the most pervasive corruption among other academic cheating scandals, involved 3,100 students over an 18-year period (Neff and Kane, 2014). However, compared to the enrollment of at least 24,000 students per year since 1995 (University of North Carolina, 2015), this is a small fraction of individual members involved in the scandal that contribute to the overall image of the university through the scandal. Even though the members who committed the act were a small part of the organization, the image of UNC-Chapel Hill has been severely tarnished as a result (Neff and Kane, 2014).

Fifth, compared to private organizations, the academic institution has very limited resources to contribute to its image repair efforts. Goral (2010) claims that “in the current economy, colleges and universities are continually being asked to be more productive and effective with ever-shrinking resources” (p.1). Sometimes, image repair may be a luxury that a university cannot afford. Hence, it must enact image repair efforts within its own limited resources by using language. However, the dissemination of image repair discourse may be affected by the limited resources. For example, the University can email the discourse to each of its students, and perhaps a percentage of alumni, but it would be dependent on the media to accurately disseminate the message on its behalf, unlike private corporations who can utilize campaigns, commercials, and other mass media to enact image repair. This dependence on media portrayal necessitates research into understanding the effects of the media portrayal of the crisis at hand.
Finally, there are many different agents who can speak on behalf of the university and contribute to its image unfettered, including faculty, administrators, alumni, and students. This is a dynamic image repair effort made by different interested parties. For example, during the racial justice protests at the University of Missouri in 2015, the President, Chancellor, and Faculty Council Committee all contributed to image repair efforts.

Notwithstanding the interest of self-preservation, there are currently almost 20 million college students in the United States that are affected by the state of their respective institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). This number does not include college graduates that are impacted by the reputation of their alma mater during the course of their career, nor does it include the 1.5 million faculty members, numerous administrators, and countless other stakeholders that are affected by the reputation of their affiliated institution.

Of the few studies on image repair in academia, one is the case study of Duke University’s lacrosse team crisis, conducted by Len-Rios (2010). This research is unique in that it considers the context that inevitably surrounds a crisis and dictates the crisis response. Len-Rios discovered an image repair strategy not yet identified by scholars in her study of Duke University (2010), finding that the University used a new strategy termed “expression of disappointment”, which serves to acknowledge that a member has participated in bad judgment or behavior, but does not irrevocably sever the member from the unit. It is a form of separation but gives the organization leeway in accepting the member back into the community should proper reparations be made. The fact that, in one study, a unique image repair strategy was identified supports further research into the area of academic image maintenance.

Barnett (2008) also examined the Duke LaCrosse case to understand the public relations efforts by Duke University throughout the crisis utilizing a qualitative textual analysis.
methodology. Specifically, the researcher questioned how the university responded to sexual assault allegations, how the university framed public relations messages about the allegations, and how the university framed the issue of rape and sexual assault. The findings revealed two dominant frames of reason and suffering. The reason frame was constructed through Duke’s messages acknowledging the emotional effects of the allegations while imploring the audience to let logic and reason prevail. Duke constructed the suffering frame by presenting itself as “an institution in anguish over unfair and untrue accusations” (Barnett, 2008), articulating the suffering of the coach that resigned during the crisis, but primarily highlighting the suffering of the falsely accused student-athletes.

Another study on image repair in academia by Holtzhausen and Roberts (2009) analyzed the sexual assault crisis at the Air Force Academy in 2003. The crisis was instigated when female cadets of the academy contacted members of Congress to launch complaints of sexual assault and leadership indifference to the complaints. Holtzhausen and Roberts utilized two theoretical frameworks to study this crisis: image repair theory and contingency theory in public relations, which studies strategic intent and complexity of a crisis. Utilizing a content analysis methodology, the study sought to understand which image repair strategies were utilized by the Air Force Academy and the effect of those strategies. Results from the study indicated that the news released by the Air Force Academy utilized the tactics of corrective action, bolstering, defeasibility, and mortification most of the time. The least used tactics by the Air Force were shifting the blame, provocation denial, and transcendence (Holtzhausen and Roberts, 2009). In the news articles, the study found that the most used strategies were corrective action, defeasibility, bolstering, shifting the blame, and mortification. The least used strategies in the
news articles were transcendence, denial, minimization, attack the accuser, compensation, accident, and differentiation, while neither provocation nor good intentions were present at all.

From the summary of studies above, it is clear that research efforts focus on image repair strategies and outcomes. However, image repair efforts are prompted by persuasive attacks, a phenomenon with far less development in the research devoted to studying it. Effective image repair efforts should address the persuasive attacks present in the initial breaking of a story and attempt to determine the levels of responsibility and offensiveness that the public may place on an organization. However, different kinds of organizations face different challenges from one another based on the context in which they exist. The public places a great deal of trust in an institution of higher learning, and research into understanding this context is warranted.

**Review of the Literature on Persuasive Attacks (Kategoria)**

When wrongdoings occur, a person or organization, especially one in the public eye, may face persuasive attacks from the media or other entities. These persuasive attacks are a grave matter for the person or organization because a damaged image can hamper credibility, an invaluable part of persuasion (Benoit, 2015). As previously discussed, these threats to the image of a person or organization are called persuasive attacks or *kategoria*, defined as an accusation or a charge, or to speak against or accuse; broadly speaking, it is a speech of accusation (Ryan 1982). Benoit’s (1995) Image Repair Theory, which evolved from apologia theory, states that there are two fundamental components of a persuasive attack: (1) an act occurred that is undesirable; and (2) a specific entity is responsible for that action (p. 20). When a persuasive attack occurs, that entity must offer efforts at discourse aiming to repair a tarnished image. Benoit (2015) offered a typology of the strategies used when enacting image repair discourse. This typology has been used by many scholars to analyze various instances of *apologia* discourse.
in several contexts, including sport, entertainment, politics, and business (Benoit, 2015). There is
a plethora of research into the strategies used in image repair efforts along with their
effectiveness. However, little has been done to understand the persuasive attacks that initiate the
image repair process. The purpose of this study is to focus on the first part of the three-stage
speech set – *kategoria* (persuasive attacks).

Used interchangeably, persuasive attacks, or *kategoria*, are “messages that attempt to
create unfavorable attitudes about a target (person or organization)” (Benoit, 2015, p. 2).
Attitudes are important to people and organizations because they influence behavior.
Unfavorable attitudes towards an organization may result in loss of sales, damaged organization-
public relationships, and negative word-of-mouth.

Attitudes rest on salient belief/value pairings, so for attitudinal change to occur, a
persuasive attack must create the perception that a wrongdoing has occurred (a belief), and that
the wrongdoing is bad/offensive (a value) (Benoit, 2015). The audience must believe that the
target is responsible, partially, or wholly, for the act. Furthermore, it can be an act of commission
or omission. However, both components need not be explicitly stated in the attack. In some
situations, it may be assumed that the audience already holds the belief that the accused is
responsible, and the audience may be relied on to supply part of the argument (Benoit, 2015).
Once the audience has the belief that an entity is responsible, there must be a value involved that
provides an evaluation of how good or bad the act is.

Benoit and Dorries (1996) recognized the omission of a typology for this persuasive
attack, and in keeping with the idea that attitudinal change is caused by salient belief/value
pairings, first identified that a persuasive attack contains two elements: “First, this (alleged) act
must be believed by the accused to be perceived negatively by a salient audience...[and] second,
the accused must be perceived to be responsible, wholly or partially, for the wrongful deed” (p.464-65). The accused party must believe that there will be negative repercussions to its image as a result of the attack, and the transgression can be considered an act of commission or omission (Benoit & Dorries, 1996). Second, Benoit and Dorries (1996) developed a typology of *kategoria* strategies that includes *increasing the accused’s responsibility* and *increasing perceived offensiveness*. Hence, the typology uses these two factors as the overall strategies: attribution of responsibility and level of offensiveness. Based on this, Benoit and Dorries (1996) used these as two clusters to sort the typology. Hence, a persuasive attack can increase the level of responsibility or it can increase the level of offensiveness. Each cluster has its own various strategies that are used in an effort to achieve the desired outcome (Table 2.1).

*Table 2.1: Persuasive Attack Typology (Benoit)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall Strategy</th>
<th>Types of <em>kategoria</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increase Responsibility for Act</td>
<td>Accused Committed the Act Before</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accused Planned the Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accused Knew Likely Consequences of the Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accused Benefitted from the Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase Offensiveness of Act</td>
<td>Extent of the Damage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Persistence of Negative Effects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Effects on the Audience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inconsistency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Victims are Innocent/Helpless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Obligation to Protect Victims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Victims are Dignified/Honorable/Noble</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Increasing level of responsibility**

Attribution theory explains how humans attribute blame (Weiner, 1985; Weiner, 1986). When there is an event, especially a negative one, people will seek out the cause of the event (Benoit & Dorries, 1996; Coombs, 2007). They will then attribute blame either internally (the
fault of the actor/transgressor) or externally (the fault of external forces or circumstances). There are three rules of attribution: consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency. **Consensus** seeks to evaluate how different people would act in a similar situation. If other people would act differently in the same situation, then there is a low level of consensus. A low level of consensus will lead to an internal attribution of blame. **Distinctiveness** seeks to evaluate how the same actor (the transgressor) acts in different situations. If there is not much distinction in how the actor carries him/herself, there is a low level of distinction. A low level of distinction will typically lead to an internal attribution of blame. Finally, **consistency** looks at how the actor/transgressor has acted in similar situations. If the actor has acted similarly in similar situations, there is high consistency. If there is high consistency present, coupled with low distinctiveness or low consensus, this can also lead to an internal attribution of blame.

Through the lens of attribution theory, Benoit and Dorries (1996) formulated one of the two types of persuasive attack strategies: increasing the accused’s responsibility for the act. Increasing the accused’s responsibility can be achieved through four rhetorical strategies and showing the accused did one of four things: committed the act before, planned the act, knew the consequences of the act, and/or benefited from the act (Benoit & Dorries, 1996). If an organization or person has *committed the same act before*, pointing this out can serve to increase the level of responsibility for that act (Benoit & Dorries, 1996). Stressing that this is not the first time an act occurred can cause the audience to assign a higher level of blame to the offender.

Persuasive attacks may increase the responsibility of the accused by claiming that the accused *planned the act*. If it is proven that an act was not an accident, or that there was intentionality, an audience may perceive the act to be much more serious (Benoit & Dorries, 1996). An egregious example can be found in the sexual assault crisis involving Jerry Sandusky.
at Penn State in 2011. Some administrators at Penn State decided not to pursue allegations of child abuse against Sandusky, resulting in more victims. Highlighting this decision can show intentionality on the part of Penn State, giving merit to the claim that this was a planned cover-up, which in turn increases the responsibility of the accused.

In certain cases, persuasive attacks can claim that the *accused knew the likely consequences* of the act. Stressing that the offender knew what might happen as a result of the actions can maximize responsibility for the transgression (Benoit & Dorries, 1996). This may happen in the form of knowing that a product may be harmful and still selling it or ignoring information that shows potential harm. In the fall of 2016, leadership at Samsung knew that some of the Note 7 phones had exploded in South Korea; however, even with this information, a shipment of Note 7 phones was shipped to China causing a crisis of exploding devices. The next day, Samsung was forced to recall the 2.5 million phones sent to China (Samsung, 2016).

A persuasive attack can also claim that the *accused benefited from the act.* If it is shown that an offender would reap benefits or advantages from a transgression, then an audience may be more likely to assign a higher level of blame (Benoit & Dorries, 1996). For example, in 2016, Bobby Petrino, the head football coach of the University of Louisville, was accused of receiving information about Wake Forest’s plays ahead of the game. Clearly, this benefits Louisville’s football program at the disadvantage of Wake Forest’s, especially when it was found that the leak came from an in-house mole at Wake Forest (Solomon, 2016).

**Increasing level of offensiveness**

As noted above, the other strategy of persuasive attacks is to increase the offensiveness of an act. Increasing perceived offensiveness is effective because illustrating how much good or bad that an act produces will shape how the public will evaluate the act (Benoit & Dorries, 1996).
Jeremy Bentham’s Utilitarian Theory (Bentham, 1996) explains how we evaluate the level of offensiveness of an act. Bentham explained that people will evaluate pain (level of offensiveness) based on its: intensity, duration, propinquity/remoteness, and certainty/uncertainty. Bentham also argued that one will evaluate offensiveness based on the sum of damages, coupled with the summation of damages of all of those affected by the transgression/crisis. Therefore, Benoit and Dorries (1996) formulated the second type of kategoria strategies: increasing the offensiveness of the act. An increase in offensiveness can be achieved six ways: highlighting the extent of the damage, outlining the persistence of negative effects, delineating the effects on the audience, charging them with inconsistency, claiming that the victims were innocent/helpless, and/or claiming that the actor/transgressor had an obligation to protect the victims.

The *extent of the damage* attack normally focuses on the magnitude of the damage that has been caused by the offensive act (Benoit & Dorries, 1996). Stressing the severity of the effects of an act can be effective in increasing the perceived offensiveness of an act. As an example, when news was breaking about the Penn State/Sandusky sexual assault crisis, some news articles speculated on how many more victims there may be due to Sandusky’s access to children through his foundation to help young, troubled boys, Second Mile.

The strategy of *persistence of negative effects* seeks to increase offensiveness by stressing the long-term effects of the act. The point of this strategy is to “maximize the duration of harmful effects” that the act will cause (Benoit & Dorries, 1996, p.467). For example, the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico could easily face charges that the negative effects of the oil spill would persist for an extended period of time, affecting the Gulf Coast’s ecosystem, tourism industry, and fishing industry.
The strategy of effects on the audience focuses on the direct damage that has been done as a result of the act. A recent example can be made of the Mylan EpiPen controversy. The EpiPen is a life-saving device for people who suffer from severe, life-threatening allergic reactions. Heather Bresch, the CEO of Mylan, was called upon to explain the 500% price increase of the EpiPen and whether that kept the medicine from being accessible to all those who needed it (CBS News, 2017).

Charges of inconsistency state that a person or organization acted in a way that was inconsistent with expectations, perhaps because of their occupation or the nature of the organization. One example would be a police officer being charged with engaging in a criminal act. Police are expected to uphold and protect the law, so breaking the law is inconsistent with the nature of a police officer’s occupation. Another instance when a charge of inconsistency might be used would be the academic cheating scandal at Harvard. Cheating is clearly inconsistent with any university, especially so at an Ivy League school such as Harvard. The university acts in loco parentis, or “in the place of a parent” for young people leaving home for the first time and is expected to behave in a highly ethical manner.

Using the attack that the victims are innocent/helpless is a way to reinforce the notion that the victims did not deserve what happened to them. Benoit and Dorries (1996) state that “when victims are young, old, in some way disabled, or otherwise innocent and/or vulnerable, the offensiveness of an act is magnified” (p. 468). In the case of Penn State, the victims of this severe crime were all young children at the time of the assaults. This population is seen as both helpless and innocent, especially when it is taken into consideration that Jerry Sandusky had high levels of both access and influence that allowed him to perpetrate the sexual assaults with impunity.
Another way to increase the offensiveness of an act is to claim that the organization or person had a distinct **obligation to protect the victims**. One prominent example is the abuse of young boys by Catholic priests, who are trusted in communities as religious leaders and mentors. The Jerry Sandusky sexual assault case at Penn State was compared to the Catholic Church abuse scandal several times in the media (e.g., Kain, 2011; Hruby 2011). As the founder of a charitable foundation to help troubled, young boys, Sandusky had a special obligation to protect these children. His actions unquestionably violated that obligation.

**Kategoria-based studies**

In Benoit and Dorries (1996) study of *Dateline*’s persuasive attack against Wal-Mart, they identified charges of inconsistency due to the retail store using “Made in the USA” signage on goods that were actually produced in other countries. It was also found that child labor was used to fabricate some of the goods being sold, and *Dateline* charged Wal-Mart with the exploitation of innocent/helpless victims. Overall, the persuasive attacks were evaluated by the authors as being effective, as Wal-Mart admitted to charges, apologized, and engaged in corrective action.

Benoit and Harthcock (1999) used this typology to study the *kategoria* against the tobacco industry in print advertisements produced by the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, evaluating the ads as effective due to the Campaign’s strong emphasis on the offensive nature of the ads. An ad campaign was launched to attack the tobacco industry for promoting smoking to children. Three charges to increase responsibility were found, and three charges to increase offensiveness were found. The campaign claimed that the tobacco industry planned the act (get ‘em young and we’ll have customers for life), knew the consequences of promoting to children, and they benefited from targeting children. However, the level of offensiveness was strengthened
by claiming that the victims are innocent. Children are an especially vulnerable and protected population.

Hearit and Hearit (2011) studied the *kategoria*-based *apologia* of Juan Williams, a long-time NPR columnist and correspondent for FOX News. *Kategoria*-based *apologia* are unique in that they: “contest the authenticity of the charges by reframing said charges, level new accusations against the accuser, and/or call into question the journalistic ethics of the one who levels the accusation” (Hearit & Hearit, 2011, p.71). In this case, the *kategori* prompted the alleged wrongdoer (Williams) to attack his accuser (NPR) based on what he perceived was an unfair termination in direct reaction to comments he made as a FOX News correspondent. Because apologies are often based on *kategori* (Hearit & Hearit, 2011; Benoit, 2015), understanding these persuasive attacks can prove extremely useful for organizations and public relations practitioners. Empirical studies present an opportunity to determine the effectiveness of these persuasive attacks for increasing perceived levels of a target’s responsibility for an act or perceived levels of offensiveness of an act.

**Review of the Literature on Sexual Assault on College Campuses**

As this study seeks to understand perceptions of blame and offensiveness of a sexual assault on campus, a brief outline of the problem is warranted, as well as a review of literature that seeks to understand perceptions of blame in sexual assault cases. In a large study funded by the U.S. Department of Justice, Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, and Martin (2007) found that one in five women is sexually assaulted during her college years. Of the 5,446 women surveyed, 28.5% reported that they had experience either an attempted or completed sexual assault, with 19% reporting that they experienced completed or attempted sexual assault since starting college.
13.7% of the women surveyed had experienced completed sexual assault since entering college (Krebs, et al, 2007).

Research on sexual assault on college campuses dates back to the 1950s. In one of the first published studies on sexual assault, Kirkpatrick and Kanin (1957) analyzed sex aggression by males in dating-courtship relationships on a university campus. This study surveyed 291 females at a university and found that 55.7% of themselves reported that they were “offended at least once during the academic year at some level of erotic intimacy” (p. 53). When these “offended” women were asked what they did in response to the sexual offense, 5.5% said that they reported it to authorities, while 34% reported that they chose selective avoidance of the perpetrator. Especially troubling is the finding that the more violent attacks would result in a withdrawal from institutional protection (counseling services, reporting to authorities) and instead the offended victim would resort to keeping the offense a secret.

In 2000, a comprehensive study on the sexual victimization of college women was published. The study was funded by the National Institute of Justice and attempted to “build on, and surmount the limitations of, existing research on the sexual victimization of college students: (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000). Four factors were found to increase the likelihood of sexual assault: 1) frequently drinking to the point of intoxication, 2) being unmarried, 3) having previously been a victim of sexual assault, and 4) living on campus (Fisher, Cullen, and Turner, 2000). Additionally, more than half of sexual assaults on a college campus happened during the fall semester from August to November (Kimble, 2007; Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN), 2017).

President Obama recognized the pervasive problem of sexual assault on college campuses and in January of 2014, he established the White House Task Force to Protect Students
from Sexual Assault. The purpose of the task force was to provide a support system for victims of sexual assault and to help schools fulfill their duty to students from sexual assault. Later that year, the task force published their first report, “Not Alone.” Through campus climate surveys, this report identifies the problem, outlines prevention strategies for schools, offers effective responses that a school can use, and discusses the next steps of the task force.

**Perceptions of blame in sexual assault cases**

This study seeks to understand how persuasive attacks in the media about sexual assault allegations can impact perceptions of blame. Understanding perceptions of sexual assault and attribution of blame for an offense is important because these perceptions may impact whether a victim reports an attack. Fear of reprisal is one of several reasons that sexual assault victims gave for not reporting an incident (RAINN, 2017).

Cann, Calhoun, and Selby (1979) analyzed how a victim’s past sexual experience might affect the attribution of responsibility for a rape to the victim. In this study based around fictitious court testimony, information about the victim’s sexual past was explicitly presented as either active or inactive. Three other conditions were presented that gave no information about the victim’s sexual past, but the reasons varied: the judge refused to allow it, the victim refused to give it, or no mention of it was made at all. Findings included that the victim who refused to testify about her sexual experience was perceived as more sexually active and, as a result, more responsible for the rape than in the other conditions.

Cramer, Gorter, Rodriguez, Clark, Rice, and Nobles (2013) analyzed perceptions of perpetrator blame in regard to courtroom sentencing procedures. This study utilized a 2x3 factorial design to understand how victim sexual orientation and crime type/severity may impact blame attribution. The results indicated a significant and positive correlation between perceptions
of blame and sentencing recommendations in years. This provides evidence that perceptions of blame have serious real-world implications.

Stromwall, Alfredsson, & Landstrom (2013) conducted an experiment measuring the influence of victim gender and age on perceptions of blame in a sexual assault scenario. Moderating variables included the gender of the participant and level of belief in a just world. In the experiment stimuli, the gender and age of the victim were manipulated as either: male or female, and young (20s) or middle-aged (46 years of age). Generally, considerable blame was placed on the perpetrator, while little blame was attributed to the victim. Results indicate that the female received more blame when described as middle-aged, and the male victim was perceived as having more blame when described as young.

Capezza and Arriaga (2008) wanted to understand why people place blame on victims of abuse. Specifically, their research focused on the role that stereotypes of women play in perceptions of blame. In this experiment, the victim’s gender role (traditional housewife vs. nontraditional career woman) and reaction to her husband’s psychological and emotional abuse (passive, mildly aggressive, throwing something, and critical). Findings indicate that a traditional woman was perceived as warmer, less negative, less competent, and less blameworthy than a non-traditional counterpart.

A summary of the literature has revealed that perceptions of blame are influenced by a number of variables. However, to date, most of the variables being tested have had to do with the demographics of a victim of a perpetrator. As mass media is a primary source of information for the public, it is worthwhile to understand how a media outlet covering a story may impact perceptions of blame. The present study is an attempt to measure the change in perceptions of blame after reading various versions of the same news story. To date, much research has been
conducted to understand perceptions of blame in the realm of image repair; however, there is very little research in understanding the persuasive attacks that prompt image repair. As the image repair strategies will need to take into account media stories and public perception, it is important to understand the public’s reaction to various types of persuasive attacks in the initial breaking of a crisis.

**Hypotheses and Research Questions**

Attribution of responsibility, along with perceived level of offensiveness, have been discussed above in regard to persuasive attacks. Level of offensiveness (value) and responsibility (belief) are both necessary for the persuasive attack to be effective. Whether the intentions of the author of the news article are to persuade or not, if these two concepts are present, attitudinal change can occur. This informed the hypotheses and research questions that were examined and tested by the current study.

*H1a: If a news article includes persuasive attacks that attempt to increase responsibility of the university, the perceived responsibility of the university will increase.*

*H1b: If a news article includes persuasive attacks that attempt to increase responsibility of the suspect, the perceived responsibility of the suspect will increase.*

*H1c: If a news article includes persuasive attacks that attempt to increase responsibility of the victim, the perceived responsibility of the victim will increase.*

*H2a: If a news article includes persuasive attacks that attempt to increase offensiveness of the behavior of the university, the perceived offensiveness of the university’s behavior will increase.*
H2b: If a news article includes persuasive attacks that attempt to increase offensiveness of the behavior of the suspect, the perceived offensiveness of the suspect’s behavior will increase.

H2c: If a news article includes persuasive attacks that attempt to increase offensiveness of the behavior of the victim, the perceived offensiveness of the victim’s behavior will increase.

In addition, this study sought to understand the effect of the respondent demographics on these perceptions and/or attitudinal change and the following research questions for addressed:

RQ1a: Do demographics of the respondent affect perceived responsibility of the university’s behavior?
RQ1b: Do demographics of the respondent affect perceived responsibility of the suspect?
RQ1c: Do demographics of the respondent affect perceived responsibility of the victim?

The literature indicates that victims are, indeed, blamed to some extent and are targets of persuasive attacks in the media. The present study analyzes whether persuasive attacks in the media can amplify perceived levels of responsibility for a sexual assault and perceived offensiveness of an act, as well as understanding if the gender of the victim affects responsibility and offensiveness. Hence, the follow research questions were formulated:

RQ2a: Does the gender of the victim affect perceived responsibility of the university?
RQ2b: Does the gender of the victim affect perceived responsibility of the suspect?
RQ2c: Does the gender of the victim affect perceived responsibility of the victim?
RQ2d: Does the gender of the victim affect perceived offensiveness of the university?
RQ2e: Does the gender of the victim affect perceived offensiveness of the suspect?
RQ2f: Does the gender of the victim affect perceived offensiveness of the victim?
Ultimately, this dissertation seeks to understand the general effectiveness of the persuasive attack strategies. Thus, RQ3 was formed:

*RQ3a*: What are the effects between type of attack and target of attack on perceived levels of university responsibility?

*RQ3b*: What are the effects between type of attack and target of attack on perceived levels of suspect responsibility?

*RQ3c*: What are the effects between type of attack and target of attack on perceived levels of victim responsibility?

*RQ3d*: What are the effects between type of attack and target of attack on perceived levels of university offensiveness?

*RQ3e*: What are the effects between type of attack and target of attack on perceived levels of suspect offensiveness?

*RQ3f*: What are the effects between type of attack and target of attack on perceived levels of victim offensiveness?

This research also seeks to understand the interactions among perceived responsibility and offensiveness of the three attack targets. Thus, RQ4 was developed:

*RQ4*: Is there a relationship between the perceived responsibility of the suspect and the perceived responsibility of the victim?
CHAPTER 3 - METHOD

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine how persuasive attacks initiated by the media affect perceptions of the level of offensiveness of a transgression as well as the level of responsibility for a transgression. An experiment was conducted in an effort to test the hypotheses and answer the research questions. The overarching question that guides this research study is: How do these persuasive attacks impact audience perceptions of responsibility for and offensiveness of the transgression? Based on a review of relevant literature, the following hypotheses and research questions were formulated:

- **H1a:** If a news article includes persuasive attacks that attempt to increase responsibility of the university, the perceived responsibility of the university will increase.
- **H1b:** If a news article includes persuasive attacks that attempt to increase responsibility of the suspect, the perceived responsibility of the suspect will increase.
- **H1c:** If a news article includes persuasive attacks that attempt to increase responsibility of the victim, the perceived responsibility of the victim will increase.
- **H2a:** If a news article includes persuasive attacks that attempt to increase offensiveness of the behavior of the university, the perceived offensiveness of the university’s behavior will increase.
- **H2b:** If a news article includes persuasive attacks that attempt to increase offensiveness of the behavior of the suspect, the perceived offensiveness of the suspect’s behavior will increase.
H2c: If a news article includes persuasive attacks that attempt to increase offensiveness of the behavior of the victim, the perceived offensiveness of the victim’s behavior will increase.

RQ1a: Do demographics of the respondent affect perceived responsibility of the university’s behavior?

RQ1b: Do demographics of the respondent affect perceived responsibility of the suspect?

RQ1c: Do demographics of the respondent affect perceived responsibility of the victim?

RQ2a: Does the gender of the victim affect perceived responsibility of the university?

RQ2b: Does the gender of the victim affect perceived responsibility of the suspect?

RQ2c: Does the gender of the victim affect perceived responsibility of the victim?

RQ2d: Does the gender of the victim affect perceived offensiveness of the university?

RQ2e: Does the gender of the victim affect perceived offensiveness of the suspect?

RQ2f: Does the gender of the victim affect perceived offensiveness of the victim?

RQ3a: What are the effects between type of attack and target of attack on perceived levels of university responsibility?

RQ3b: What are the effects between type of attack and target of attack on perceived levels of suspect responsibility?

RQ3c: What are the effects between type of attack and target of attack on perceived levels of victim responsibility?

RQ3d: What are the effects between type of attack and target of attack on perceived levels of university offensiveness?

RQ3e: What are the effects between type of attack and target of attack on perceived levels of suspect offensiveness?
**RQ3f:** What are the effects between type of attack and target of attack on perceived levels of victim offensiveness?

**RQ4:** Is there a relationship between the perceived responsibility of the suspect and the perceived responsibility of the victim?

**Experimental Design**

In an effort to answer the guiding question and test the hypotheses, the researcher used an experimental design, in which the experiment is embedded into a survey. The experiment received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) on February 13, 2019. The questionnaire had six elements: informed consent, stimulus, ratings of actor responsibility, ratings of act offensiveness by target, a demographic block, and a debriefing section. The experiment had a 3 (target of attack: university, suspect, victim) x 3 (type of persuasive attack: increase responsibility, increase offensiveness, increase responsibility and offensiveness) x 2 (gender of victim) between-subject factorial design, for a total of eighteen manipulations involved in this experiment, as well as a control group. The experimental survey was created in Qualtrics and disseminated via Amazon Mechanical Turk. In an attempt to eliminate the possibility of bias, fictitious accounts of a sexual assault at an unknown university were used and fictitious names redacted. Because reading an account of a sexual assault, fictitious or not, may trigger a stressful response for some participants, a disclaimer was provided in the informed consent module at the beginning of the instrument. At the end of the experiment, answers to demographic questions were collected and debriefing details were provided.

**Independent Variables**

Independent variables included: target of attack, presence of persuasive attacks attempting to increase level of responsibility, presence of persuasive attacks attempting to
increase level of offensiveness, and the gender of the victim. Persuasive attack is operationally defined as “messages (or components of messages) that are intended to, or have the effect of, discrediting the target” (Benoit, 2017, p. 1). For this experiment, the target of the persuasive attack was manipulated as the university, the suspect, or the victim. The fictitious news articles were manipulated to include persuasive attacks attempting to increase level of responsibility, persuasive attacks attempting to increase level of offensiveness, or to include both. The gender of the victim was manipulated as either male or female. Appendix A includes the articles/manipulations used in this experiment.

**Dependent variables**

Dependent variables included: perceived level of responsibility and perceived level of offensiveness of target behavior. Perceived level of responsibility was measured by a blame scale. Six items were included, an example being “The <target> had the capability to stop the event from occurring.” Other items assessed perceived blame, fault, and accountability. Perceived level of offensiveness was measured by an offensiveness scale. Eight items were included, an example being, “The <target>’s behavior is normal.”

Target responsibility is operationally defined as the degree to which an audience attributes blame for the target of a persuasive attack. A six-item, seven-point Likert scale adapted from Brown and Ki’s (2011) organizational crisis responsibility scale provided measurement of target responsibility. Target is repeated for each manipulation: victim, suspect, and university, resulting in 18 total Likert-scale items for each manipulation to measure target blame. See Table 3-1 and substitute the three possible targets of attacks.
Table 3-1

*Items Measuring Target Responsible (Brown & Ki, 2011)*

1) The [target] had the capability to stop the event from occurring.
2) The incident could have been prevented by the [target].
3) The [target] had the resources to prevent the incident from occurring.
4) The [target] could have avoided the incident.
5) The [target] should be held accountable for the incident.
6) The [target] should not be blamed for the incident.

Perceived offensiveness is operationally defined as the degree to which an audience finds an act to be bad or wrong. The offensiveness scale used in this experiment was an eight-item, seven-point Likert scale adapted from O’Dea, Miller, Andres, Ray, Till, and Saucier’s (2015) perceived offensiveness scale relating to language. The word “behavior” was substituted for the word “language” in the scale items. See Table 3-2.

Table 3-2


1) The [target]’s behavior is normal.
2) The [target]’s behavior is offensive.
3) I support the [target]’s behavior in this situation.
4) It is okay to behave the way the [target] did in this situation.
5) It is surprising to read about the [target]’s behavior.
6) The [target]’s behavior is justified.
7) The [target]’s behavior should be punished.
8) The [target]’s behavior is not socially acceptable.

*Participants*

The sample for the experiment was obtained using Amazon Mechanical Turk (n=559). Upon receiving IRB approval, the survey was posted to Amazon Mechanical Turk offering
respondents $1.00 for completing the survey. To ensure an adequate effect size, it is recommended to recruit at least 25 participants per level of each independent variable (Reinard, 2006). The number of participants for each manipulation ranged from 27 to 31.

Participants were randomly assigned to either the control group or one of the 18 manipulations via Qualtrics’ survey flow randomizer. The landing page included informed consent, in which participants were informed that the study would include the account of a sexual assault on a college campus and were told that the project may cause stress and/or anxiety. With IRB approval, the true purpose of the study was concealed in order to mitigate bias should the respondent know ahead of time that perceptions of media attacks were being measured. Instead, the purpose of the study was broadly stated as gaining a deeper understanding of media relations. A debriefing statement was provided explaining the true purpose of the study and the reason for concealment. The participant was then given an opportunity to withdraw their data from the study without penalty.

**Procedure**

A fictitious news article detailing a sexual assault on a university campus against a student by another student was created. The article was fabricated in order to exclude the possibility of prior knowledge of the university. Although fictitious in nature, some material from the account was inspired by real accounts of sexual assault. Although females are the victims of sexual assault more often than men (Stromwall, Alfredsson, & Landstrom, 2013), women are not the only victims of sexual assault. Similarly, the account is of a heterosexual nature. The control account left out any mention of the gender of the suspect or the victim.

Informed consent was gathered at the start of the experiment. The informed consent detailed the sensitive nature of the stimuli and warned the respondent that she or he would be
reading an account of a sexual assault on a college campus. With IRB approval, the purpose of the study was concealed in order to mitigate bias that may result from a detailed explanation of the study. After giving informed consent, the participants were randomly assigned to one of the experiment groups. There is a total of 19 groups (1 control and 18 manipulations) involved in this experiment. The fictitious account included a short (about 500 words) account written in the style of a newspaper article. The formatting of the article mimicked real online news articles for believability purposes. A pretest content analysis indicated that persuasive attacks were often present in the form of source quotes. Because of this, the persuasive attacks used in this experiment were in the form of source quotes, with the source of the quote being an unidentified student at the university. A reading check question was presented for each manipulation to ensure that participants read the stimulus. After the participant read the stimulus, they ranked their perceived levels of responsibility of all three actors (the university, the suspect, or the victim) via the six-item, seven-point Likert scale. They also ranked the perceived levels of offensiveness of the target’s behavior on an eight-item, seven-point Likert scale. A unique code was assigned to each participant at the end of the survey that was then submitted by the respondent in the Amazon Mechanical Turk portal. This unique code was used as a quality check to prevent bots or spammers from completing the survey. The unique code is set up in a separate Qualtrics block to show the unique identification code for the respondent, with the field name linked into the survey flow by adding in a Web Service element into a customized end-of-survey message (for more information, see Rodriguez, 2018). In the Amazon MTurk portal, the respondent then submits that unique code. Because the true nature of the study was concealed, a debriefing statement was provided at the end of the study. The debriefing statement detailed the
true purpose of the study and provided the participant with an option to withdraw his/her data with no penalty, so the participant would be compensated no matter which option was chosen.

**Manipulations**

Due to the experimental nature of this study, the manipulations are included in Appendix B to convey a sense of the various scenarios to which respondents were exposed. The researcher based these manipulations on framework provided by persuasive attack theory. The control was an account of a fictitious sexual assault that included facts only with no persuasive attacks, written similarly to a police report. The first variable manipulated was the type of attack, namely whether the attack served to increase responsibility, increase offensiveness, or increase responsibility and increase offensiveness. The other variable manipulated was the target of the attack; in this particular study, that was either the university, the suspect, or the victim.

With scarce previous research based on persuasive attack theory, the researcher conducted an informal review of examples of persuasive attacks included in news articles related to universities in crisis. Typically, the attacks were present as quotes from sources for the article, so the manipulations were also presented as source quotes from members of the university community. It was outside the scope of this present study to individually test all tactics of persuasive attack strategies. Instead, the researcher used the same tactics across the three different attack types. For attacks that attempted to increase responsibility, the researcher chose to use the tactics of *accused committed the act before* and *accused planned the act*. For attacks that attempted to increase offensiveness, the tactics of *extent of the damage* and *inconsistency* were used. For attacks that attempted to increase both responsibility and offensiveness, the researcher combined the manipulations from the other articles.
Pretest

Before the instrument was finalized and sent for approval, it was pretested using a sample of 40 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk. The purpose of the pretest was to test the instrument for any flaws or errors and to adjust manipulations if warranted.

Statistical analyses

Table 3-3
Hypotheses and Research Questions, Variables, and Statistical Procedures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question/Hypothesis</th>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Statistics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| H1a                          | If a news article includes persuasive attacks that attempt to increase responsibility of the university, the perceived responsibility of the university will increase. | IV: Presence of persuasive attack  
                               | DV: Perceived responsibility               | Independent samples t-test |
| H1b                          | If a news article includes persuasive attacks that attempt to increase responsibility of the suspect, the perceived responsibility of the suspect will increase. | IV: Presence of persuasive attack  
                               | DV: Perceived responsibility               | Independent samples t-test |
| H1c                          | If a news article includes persuasive attacks that attempt to increase responsibility of the victim, the perceived responsibility of the victim will increase. | IV: Presence of persuasive attack  
                               | DV: Perceived responsibility               | Independent samples t-test |
| H2a                          | If a news article includes persuasive attacks that attempt to increase offensiveness of the behavior of the university, the perceived offensiveness of the university’s behavior will increase. | IV: Presence of persuasive attack  
                               | DV: Perceived offensiveness                | Independent samples t-test |
| H2b                          | If a news article includes persuasive attacks that attempt to increase offensiveness of the behavior of the suspect, the perceived offensiveness of the suspect’s behavior will increase. | IV: Presence of persuasive attack  
                               | DV: Perceived offensiveness                | Independent samples t-test |
| H2c                          | If a news article includes persuasive attacks that attempt to increase offensiveness of the behavior of the | IV: Presence of persuasive attack  
                               | DV: Perceived offensiveness                | Independent samples t-test |
victim, the perceived offensiveness of the victim’s behavior will increase.

**RQ1a** Do demographics of the respondent affect perceived responsibility of the university’s behavior?

**IV:** Demographics of Respondent  
**DV:** Perceived responsibility of university  
**Method:** Linear Regression

**RQ1b** Do demographics of the respondent affect perceived responsibility of the suspect?

**IV:** Demographics of Respondent  
**DV:** Perceived responsibility of suspect  
**Method:** Linear Regression

**RQ1c** Do demographics of the respondent affect perceived responsibility of the victim?

**IV:** Demographics of Respondent  
**DV:** Perceived responsibility of victim  
**Method:** Linear Regression

**RQ2a** Does the gender of the victim affect perceived responsibility of the university?

**IV:** Gender of Victim  
**DV:** Perceived responsibility of university  
**Method:** t-test

**RQ2b** Does the gender of the victim affect perceived responsibility of the suspect?

**IV:** Gender of Victim  
**DV:** Perceived responsibility of suspect  
**Method:** t-test

**RQ2c** Does the gender of the victim affect perceived responsibility of the victim?

**IV:** Gender of Victim  
**DV:** Perceived responsibility of victim  
**Method:** t-test

**RQ2d** Does the gender of the victim affect perceived offensiveness of the university?

**IV:** Gender of Victim  
**DV:** Perceived offensiveness of university  
**Method:** t-test

**RQ2e** Does the gender of the victim affect perceived offensiveness of the suspect?

**IV:** Gender of Victim  
**DV:** Perceived offensiveness of suspect  
**Method:** t-test

**RQ2f** Does the gender of the victim affect perceived offensiveness of the victim?

**IV:** Gender of Victim  
**DV:** Perceived offensiveness of victim  
**Method:** t-test

**RQ3a** What are the effects between type of attack and target of attack on perceived levels of university responsibility?

**IV:** Type of Attack, Target of Attack  
**DV:** Levels of responsibility of university  
**Method:** Factorial ANOVA
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RQ</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>IV</th>
<th>DV</th>
<th>Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>RQ3b</strong></td>
<td>What are the effects between type of attack and target of attack on perceived levels of suspect responsibility?</td>
<td>IV: Type of Attack, Target of Attack</td>
<td>DV: Levels of responsibility of suspect</td>
<td>Factorial ANOVA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RQ3c</strong></td>
<td>What are the effects between type of attack and target of attack on perceived levels of victim responsibility?</td>
<td>IV: Type of Attack, Target of Attack</td>
<td>DV: Level of responsibility of victim</td>
<td>Factorial ANOVA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RQ3d</strong></td>
<td>What are the effects between type of attack and target of attack on perceived levels of university offensiveness?</td>
<td>IV: Type of Attack, Target of Attack</td>
<td>DV: Levels of offensiveness of university</td>
<td>Factorial ANOVA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RQ3e</strong></td>
<td>What are the effects between type of attack and target of attack on perceived levels of suspect offensiveness?</td>
<td>IV: Type of Attack, Target of Attack</td>
<td>DV: Levels of offensiveness of suspect</td>
<td>Factorial ANOVA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RQ3f</strong></td>
<td>What are the effects between type of attack and target of attack on perceived levels of victim offensiveness?</td>
<td>IV: Type of Attack, Target of Attack</td>
<td>DV: Level of offensiveness of victim</td>
<td>Factorial ANOVA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RQ4</strong></td>
<td>Is there a relationship between the perceived responsibility of the suspect and the perceived responsibility of the victim?</td>
<td>IV: Perceived responsibility of suspect</td>
<td>DV: Perceived responsibility of victim</td>
<td>Pearson’s Correlation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 4 – RESULTS

This chapter is divided into four sections: manipulations and participant distribution, demographic profile of participants, scale reliability analysis, and an analysis of each hypothesis and research question with the appropriate statistical analysis. The first section is a description of the manipulations and the distribution of participants for each group. The demographic profile presents the breakdown of the gender, age, race, income level, and education level of the participants. The scale reliability analysis section details the test results for reliability measurements of the scales used to measure the dependent variables in this study. Finally, the hypotheses and research questions presented in this study are analyzed with the appropriate statistical tests.

Manipulations and Participant Distribution

Table 4-1 displays the total distribution breakdown of participants per manipulation, with a description of each manipulation, the gender of the suspect and victim in each manipulation, the intended target of the attack in the manipulation, and the attack type (IR = Increase Responsibility, IO = Increase Offensiveness, and IR+IO = Increase Responsibility and Offensiveness) present in the manipulation.

Demographic Profile

A total of 559 respondents participated in the experiment. A total of 341 males and 217 females participated in the survey. The mean age of participants was 36.55 years of age (SD = 10.41 years) with a minimum age of 20 and a maximum age of 75, with most respondents being
between 20 and 49 years of age. Respondents were predominantly White (70.8%) with yearly income less than $90,000, and over half had a bachelor’s degree. See Table 4-2 for a complete demographic breakdown of participants.

Table 4-1
Description of Manipulations and Participant Distribution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group ID</th>
<th>Victim Gender</th>
<th>Suspect Gender</th>
<th>Target of Attack</th>
<th>Attack Type</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>IR</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>IO</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>IR+IO</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>IR</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>IO</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>IR+IO</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Suspect</td>
<td>IR</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Suspect</td>
<td>IO</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Suspect</td>
<td>IR+IO</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Suspect</td>
<td>IR</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Suspect</td>
<td>IO</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Suspect</td>
<td>IR+IO</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Victim</td>
<td>IR</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Victim</td>
<td>IO</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Victim</td>
<td>IR+IO</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Victim</td>
<td>IR</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Victim</td>
<td>IO</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Victim</td>
<td>IR+IO</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>559</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4-2
Demographic Breakdown of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>61.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>38.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>23.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>45.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>70+</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Race
White 396 70.8%
Black 126 22.5%
American Indian/Alaska Native 4 0.7%
Asian 29 5.2%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander 2 0.4%
Other 11 2.0%

Income
Low ($0 to $39,999) 218 39.0%
Medium ($40,000 to $89,999) 247 44.2%
High ($90,000 to $150,000+) 94 16.8%

Education Level
Less than High School 3 0.5%
High School Graduate/GED 36 6.4%
Some College but no Degree 81 14.5%
Associate degree 59 10.6%
Bachelor's Degree 282 50.4%
Master's Degree 84 15.0%
Doctorate 6 1.1%
Professional Degree 8 1.4%

Scale Reliability Analysis

Using Cronbach’s Alpha, all scales used to measure the dependent variables (responsibility of university, suspect, and victim; and offensiveness of university behavior, suspect behavior, and victim behavior) were tested for reliability. An alpha score of .7 or greater is considered acceptable (George and Mallery, 2003). The closer a score is to 1.0, the greater the internal consistency of the items. Six scales were used to measure dependent variables and all six were considered reliable (see Table 4-3). Based on the reliability statistics, it was recommended to exclude item six from each of the three scales measuring responsibility in order to increase reliability.
Table 4-3
Scale Reliability Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>$\alpha$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>Perceived Responsibility of University</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perceived Responsibility of Suspect</td>
<td>0.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perceived Responsibility of Victim</td>
<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offensiveness</td>
<td>Perceived Offensiveness of University</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perceived Offensiveness of Suspect</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perceived Offensiveness of Victim</td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Statistical Analyses of Hypotheses and Research Questions

**H1a: Responsibility Attack Target - University**

Hypothesis 1a stated, “If a news article includes persuasive attacks that attempt to increase responsibility of the university, the perceived responsibility of the university will increase.” An independent samples $t$-test was used to test the effects of the presence of a responsibility attack on ratings of perceived responsibility. The independent variable was the presence of a responsibility attack on the university, and the dependent variable was the mean score for perceived responsibility of that target.

The independent groups $t$-test revealed that respondents attributed a higher level of responsibility when there was a responsibility attack present ($M=4.34$, $SD=1.61$) versus when there was no attack present ($M=3.87$, $SD=1.81$), a statistically significant difference, $M = .47$, $t(557) = -2.54$, $p = .011$. Therefore, H1 was supported when the target of the attack was the university. This result suggests that persuasive attacks meant to increase the responsibility of the university are effective.

**H1b: Responsibility Attack Target - Suspect**

Hypothesis 1b stated, “If a news article includes persuasive attacks that attempt to increase responsibility of the suspect, the perceived responsibility of the suspect will increase.” The independent groups $t$-test revealed that respondents attributed a higher
level of responsibility when there was a responsibility attack present \((M=6.18, SD=.91)\) versus when there was no attack present \((M=6.01, SD=1.08)\), but this was not a statistically significant difference, \(M = .17, t(557) = -1.54, p = .12\). Therefore, H1 was not supported when the target of the attack was the suspect. This suggests that persuasive attacks meant to increase the responsibility of a suspect are not effective; however, the suspect is perceived as being highly responsible in either case.

**H1c: Responsibility Attack Target - Victim**

Hypothesis 1c stated, “If a news article includes persuasive attacks that attempt to increase responsibility of the victim, the perceived responsibility of the victim will increase.” The independent groups \(t\)-test revealed that respondents attributed a higher level of responsibility when there was a responsibility attack present \((M=4.45, SD=1.55)\) versus when there was no attack present \((M=3.92, SD=1.82)\), and this was a statistically significant difference, \(M = .52, t(557) = -2.83, p = .005\). Therefore, H1 was supported when the target of the attack was the victim. This finding suggests that persuasive attacks meant to increase the perceived responsibility of the victim are effective. As discussed in the next chapter, this has important implications for how an article frames sexual assault and the quotes selected to be included in these articles.

**H2a: Offensiveness Attack Target - University**

Hypothesis 2a stated, “If a news article includes persuasive attacks that attempt to increase offensiveness of the behavior of the university, the perceived offensiveness of the university’s behavior will increase.” The independent groups \(t\)-test revealed that respondents attributed a higher level of offensiveness when there was an offensiveness attack present \((M=4.72, SD=1.48)\) versus when there was no attack present \((M=4.01, \)
Therefore, H2a was supported. This finding suggests that persuasive attacks meant to increase the offensiveness of an act were effective if the target of the attack was the university, indicating that the university can be made to be perceived as both more responsible for the act and that the act is more offensive.

**H2b: Offensiveness Attack Target - Suspect**

Hypothesis 2b stated, “If a news article includes persuasive attacks that attempt to increase offensiveness of the behavior of the suspect, the perceived offensiveness of the suspect’s behavior will increase.” The independent groups *t*-test revealed that respondents attributed about the same level of offensiveness when there was an offensiveness attack present (*M*=5.67, *SD*=1.037) versus when there was no attack present (*M*=5.65, *SD*=.99), but this was not a statistically significant difference, *M* = .026, *t*(557) = .25, *p* = .81. Therefore, H2b was not supported. However, this finding suggests that the act is seen as highly offensive in either case.

**H2c: Offensiveness Attack Target - Victim**

Hypothesis 2c stated, “If a news article includes persuasive attacks that attempt to increase offensiveness of the behavior of the victim, the perceived offensiveness of the victim’s behavior will increase.” The independent groups *t*-test revealed that respondents attributed a higher level of offensiveness when there was an offensiveness attack present (*M*=3.62, *SD*=1.85) versus when there was no attack present (*M*=3.34, *SD*=1.83), but this was not a statistically significant difference, *M* = .27, *t*(557) = -1.38, *p* = .17. Therefore, H2c was not supported. This finding indicates that persuasive attacks intending to
increase offensiveness of a victim’s behavior result in slightly higher perceptions of offensiveness, but not in a statistically meaningful way.

**RQ1a-c: Demographics as Predictors of Perceived Responsibility of Attack Targets**

A simple linear regression analysis with the perceived responsibility of the university as the dependent variable indicated that each demographic variable significantly influenced perception of university responsibility \((F(4, 549) = 38.41, p < .0005)\). \(R^2\) for the model was .22, and adjusted \(R^2\) was .21, indicating a medium size effect. The individual independent variables that were statistically significant predictors of perception of university responsibility included education level \((\beta = .321, p < .001)\), age \((\beta = -.25, p < .001)\), income level \((\beta = -.21, p < .001)\), and gender \((\beta = -.08, p = .05)\). Education level was the strongest predictor of perceived responsibility of the university. For each incremental increase in education level, the perception of university responsibility was associated with an increase by .46 points on the Likert scale. An increase in age by 1 year is associated with a drop in perceived responsibility of the university by .04. An increase in income level bracket was associated with a lower perceived responsibility of the university by .14. A female respondent was associated with a decrease in perceived level of responsibility of the university than a male respondent by .28.

To understand whether respondent demographics are a predictor of perceived responsibility of the suspect, a simple linear regression was performed. Results indicated that demographics were a significant predictor of perceived suspect responsibility \((F(4, 549) = 15.61, p < .0005)\). \(R^2\) for the model was .10, with an adjusted \(R^2\) of .10, indicating a small effect size. The individual independent variables that were statistically significant
predictors of perception of suspect responsibility included education level ($\beta = -0.24, p < 0.005$), age ($\beta = 0.10, p < 0.05$), income level ($\beta = 0.13, p < 0.005$), and gender ($\beta = 0.12, p < 0.005$). Education level is the strongest predictor of perceived levels of suspect responsibility, associated with a .20 decrease in perceived responsibility per increase in education level. Respondent gender is associated with a .26 increase in perceived responsibility when the respondent is female. Income level is associated with a .05 increase in perceived responsibility per income bracket. For increase in age by 1 year, there is a .009 increase in perceived responsibility level.

In order to understand whether respondent demographics are a predictor of perceived responsibility of victim, a simple linear regression was conducted. The results indicated that respondent demographics of education level, age, income level, and gender significantly influenced perception of victim responsibility ($R^2 = 12.4\%, F(4, 549) = 19.47, p < .0005$). $R^2$ for the model was .12, and adjusted $R^2$ was .12. The four independent variables accounted for 12.4% of the variation in perceptions of victim responsibility with adjusted $R^2 = 11.4\%$, a medium size effect (Cohen, 1988). The individual independent variables that were statistically significant predictors of perception of victim responsibility included respondent gender ($\beta = -0.20, p < .001$), income level ($\beta = -2.62, p = .009$), and education level ($\beta = 0.26, p < .001$). Respondent age was not a significant predictor of victim responsibility ($\beta = -0.01, p = .755$). The strongest predictor of perceived levels of victim responsibility was education level, associated with a .38 increase of responsibility per increase in education level. Income level was associated with a .07 decrease of perceived responsibility per increase in income level.
RQ2a-f: Effects of Victim Gender on Perceived Responsibility of Attack Targets

To understand if the gender of a victim has an effect on perceived responsibility and offensiveness levels of attack targets, a $t$-test was conducted, indicating no statistically significant effects. Though previous research has found that male victims are attributed a higher responsibility than are female victims (Whatley & Riggio, 1993), significant cultural changes have occurred over the thirty years between that research and this current study, which may have resulted in changed perceptions that the victim is a victim no matter the gender. This researcher sees this finding as positive progress in how readers assign blame/responsibility to the victim for a sexual assault. See Table 4-4.

**Table 4-4**

$t$-Test to Determine Effect of Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Victim Gender</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Level of University Responsibility</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>559</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Level of Suspect Responsibility</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6.10</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>6.05</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6.05</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>559</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Level of Victim Responsibility</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>559</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Level of University Offensiveness</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>559</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Level of Suspect Offensiveness</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5.76</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>5.63</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5.67</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>559</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Level of Victim Offensiveness</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>559</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RQ3a-f: Influence of Attack Target and Attack Type on Other Actors

RQ3a asked “What are the effects between type of attack and target of attack on perceived levels of university responsibility?” A factorial ANOVA was performed with the type of attack (increase responsibility vs. increase offensiveness vs. increase responsibility and increase offensiveness) and target of attack (university vs. suspect vs. victim) as the independent variables, and perceptions of responsibility of the university as the dependent variable. The ANOVA indicated a significant interaction of the attack target on perceptions of university responsibility ($F(1) = 4.93$, $p = .008$), with the respondents ranking the university more highly responsible. There was no significant interaction of either the attack type or both attack target and attack type on perceptions of university responsibility. See Table 4-5. Furthermore, post hoc analysis suggests that the interaction is significant between the university and the victim, indicating that the suspect as the target of the attack has no bearing on these effects. This finding indicates when the target of the attack is the victim, the university is perceived as more responsible. This supports the suggestion that a university can be viewed as responsible for the actions of its constituents.

Table 4-5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attack Type – Target</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attack Target</td>
<td>31.12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15.56</td>
<td>4.93</td>
<td>.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attack Type</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attack Target * Attack Type</td>
<td>7.08</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>.69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RQ3b asked, “What are the effects between types of attack and target of attack on perceived levels of suspect responsibility?” A factorial ANOVA was performed with the attack target and attack type as the independent variables, and the perceived responsibility of the
suspect as the dependent variable. The ANOVA indicated no significant effects of these independent variables on the perceived responsibility of the suspect. Therefore, neither attack type, attack target, nor a combination of the two influences levels of perceived suspect responsibility. See Table 4-6.

Table 4-6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attack Type – Target</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attack Target</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attack Type</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attack Target * Attack Type</td>
<td>6.97</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RQ3c asked, “What are the effects between type of attack and target of attack on perceived levels of victim responsibility?” A factorial ANOVA was performed with the attack target and attack type as the independent variables, and the perceived responsibility of the victim as the dependent variable. The ANOVA indicated a significant interaction between attack target and perceptions of victim responsibility ($F(1) = 5.54, p = .004$), and a significant interaction between attack target and attack type on perceptions of victim responsibility ($F(1) = 2.73, p = .028$). Furthermore, post hoc analysis indicated that the interaction between attack targets was significant between the suspect and the victim. See Table 4-7.

Table 4-7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attack Type – Target</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attack Target</td>
<td>34.29</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17.14</td>
<td>5.54</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attack Type</td>
<td>7.13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>.317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attack Target * Attack Type</td>
<td>33.84</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8.46</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>.028</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RQ3d asked “What are the effects between type of attack and target of attack on perceived levels of university offensiveness?” A factorial ANOVA was performed with the type of attack and target of attack as the independent variables, and perceptions of
offensiveness of the university as the dependent variable. The ANOVA indicated a significant interaction of the attack target on perceptions of university offensiveness \((F(1) = 18.97, p < .001)\), but no significant interaction of either the attack type or both attack target and attack type on perceptions of university offensiveness. See Table 4-8.

Furthermore, post hoc analysis suggests that the interaction is significant when the target of the attack is the university versus the victim or the university versus the suspect, but not when the target of the attack is the suspect versus the victim.

### Table 4-8

*Factorial ANOVA for Perceptions of University Offensiveness Based on Attack Target and Attack Type*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attack Type – Target</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attack Target</td>
<td>96.11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>48.06</td>
<td>18.97</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attack Type</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>.655</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attack Target * Attack Type</td>
<td>14.94</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>.209</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RQ3e asked, “What are the effects between types of attack and target of attack on perceived levels of suspect offensiveness?” A factorial ANOVA was performed with the attack target and attack type as the independent variables, and the perceived offensiveness of the suspect as the dependent variable. The ANOVA indicated no significant effects of these independent variables on the perceived offensiveness of the suspect. Therefore, neither attack type, attack target, nor a combination of the two influences levels of perceived suspect offensiveness. See Table 4-9.

### Table 4-9

*Factorial ANOVA for Perceptions of Suspect Offensiveness Based on Attack Target and Attack Type*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attack Type – Target</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attack Target</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attack Type</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>.399</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attack Target * Attack Type</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>.304</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RQ3f asked, “What are the effects between type of attack and target of attack on perceived levels of victim offensiveness?” A factorial ANOVA was performed with the attack target and attack type as the independent variables, and the perceived offensiveness of the victim as the dependent variable. The ANOVA indicated no significant interaction between these independent variables and perceptions of victim offensiveness. See Table 4-10.

Table 4-10
Factorial ANOVA for Perceptions of Victim Offensiveness Based on Attack Target and Attack Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attack Type – Target</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attack Target</td>
<td>11.40</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.70</td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td>.191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attack Type</td>
<td>6.30</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>.400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attack Target * Attack Type</td>
<td>13.10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>.432</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RQ4: Relationship of Suspect Responsibility to Victim Responsibility

Research question 4 asked, “Is there a relationship between the perceived responsibility of the suspect and the perceived responsibility of the victim?” Pearson’s correlation was conducted comparing the level of suspect responsibility to the level of victim responsibility, and results indicated a significant, negative, low degree of correlation between perceived responsibility of the suspect and perceived responsibility of the victim among all groups, \( r(557) = -.25, p < .000 \). At least on some level, if the victim is viewed as being more responsible for the crime, the suspect is perceived as being less responsible.

Finally, a breakdown of the means by attack type is provided below (see Table 4-11).

Table 4-11
Breakdown of Means by Attack Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception</th>
<th>Attack Type</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Level of University</td>
<td>Increase Responsibility</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>3.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>Increase Offensiveness</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>3.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Level of Suspect Responsibility</td>
<td>Increase Responsibility</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>6.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Level of Victim Responsibility</td>
<td>Increase Offensiveness</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>6.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Level of University Offensiveness</td>
<td>Increase Responsibility and Increase Offensiveness</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>6.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>529</td>
<td>6.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Level of Suspect Offensiveness</td>
<td>Increase Responsibility</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>5.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Level of Victim Offensiveness</td>
<td>Increase Offensiveness</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>5.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Level of University Offensiveness</td>
<td>Increase Responsibility and Increase Offensiveness</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>5.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>529</td>
<td>5.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Level of Victim Offensiveness</td>
<td>Increase Responsibility</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>3.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increase Offensiveness</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>3.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increase Responsibility and Increase Offensiveness</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>3.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>529</td>
<td>3.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 5 – DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to analyze the impact of persuasive attacks present in media articles on reader perceptions of responsibility and/or offensiveness of a transgression. The approach to this study presented a different way of analyzing the rhetorical strategies of persuasive attacks articulated by Benoit (1995), an empirical investigation of which had not yet been undertaken at the time of this manuscript. The findings support the rhetorical strategies and impacts of persuasive attacks while also highlighting the importance of empirical testing of the outcomes of these persuasive attacks, justifying the need for future quantitative research in this area. The findings also suggest that persuasive attacks are effective in changing public opinion regarding responsibility for and offensiveness of a transgression.

This final chapter is divided into four subsections. The first subsection contains a summary of the findings, a discussion of respondent demographics, and a review and discussion of the statistical analysis. Second, the theoretical and practical implications of these results are discussed. Third, the limitations – both general and methodological - of the current study and possible future research opportunities are presented. Finally, a conclusion subsection offers a final summary and discussion.

Summary of Findings

In this study, an experimental design was used in which the experiment is embedded into a survey format. This survey was conducted using participants from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk that were offered $1.00 as compensation for completion of the survey. A unique code was
assigned to each participant at the end of the survey that was then submitted in the Amazon Mechanical Turk portal. This unique code was used as a quality check to prevent bots or spammers from completing the survey. The scales that measured the dependent variables were all tested for reliability using Cronbach’s alpha and all scored at or above .78.

**Discussion of respondent demographics**

Because the sample was taken from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk with a geographical limitation to the United States, the respondents were fairly representative of the American population when compared with U.S. Census Bureau data; however, there were some exceptions that are detailed in the following paragraph. The demographics of the 559 respondents for the study varied, with respondents’ ages ranging from 20 – 75, with a mean age of 36 years of age. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2020), the median age in the United States is 38. However, persons 65 years and over were underrepresented in comparison to their makeup of the U.S. population, perhaps due to the lack of access to an online survey or a lack of presence on Amazon Mechanical Turk. A large percentage of respondents, roughly 70%, were between the ages of 20 and 39. Almost all respondents (90%) were younger than 50 years old.

There was also a stark difference in the percentage of female respondents (39%) compared to the percent of females in the American population (51%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Respondents predominantly reported White as their race (70.8%), which is comparable to the U.S. Census data reporting 72.2% of the population as White. There was a higher percentage of respondents reporting as Black (22.5%) compared to the U.S. population of 12.7%. The survey respondents also had a higher education level when compared to U.S. Census data. 32.6% of the U.S. population holds a bachelor’s or graduate degree, while 68% of the survey respondents reported holding a bachelor’s degree or graduate degree. Income levels also differed
from the general U.S. population in that higher-income levels were not represented, with 30% of the U.S. population reporting an income level of over $100,000, while 16% of survey respondents reported making over $90,000. Nearly all of the survey respondents (84%) reported making less than $90,000 per year. This may indicate that Amazon Mechanical Turk respondents are using the system as a supplementary income stream.

**Review of statistical analyses of hypotheses and research questions**

Hypotheses 1a, 1b, and 1c predicted that if a persuasive attack attempts to increase responsibility of a target, the perceived responsibility of that target will increase. The H1 group was supported when the target of the attack was either the university or the victim; however, H1 was not supported when the target of the attack was the suspect. In-depth discussion regarding these findings will be addressed further on; in either case, the level of responsibility attributed to the suspect was quite high, $M=6.18$ when a persuasive attack was present and $M=6.01$ when there was no persuasive attack present, which indicates that a suspect is assigned a high level of responsibility regardless of whether a persuasive attack is present in an account of a crime.

Hypotheses 2a, 2b, and 2c predicted that if a persuasive attack attempts to increase offensiveness of the behavior of a target, the perceived offensiveness of that behavior will increase. However, attacks to increase offensiveness were only supported when the target of that attack was the university. Attacks were not statistically significant when attempting to increase offensiveness of the behavior of the suspect or victim.

Research question 1 sought to understand whether respondent demographics are a predictor of perceived responsibility of the various targets. The RQ1 analysis suggests that demographics do have a predictive quality in the assignment of responsibility for a transgression. Respondent gender, income level, education level, and age are all significant predictors of
university and suspect responsibility. Respondent gender, income level, and education level were all statistically significant predictors of victim responsibility levels. However, respondent age was not a significant predictor of victim responsibility levels. This finding is helpful to practitioners because an understanding of the demographics of the target audience of the media coverage may indicate the likelihood of the reader assigning blame.

Research question 2a-f sought to understand if the gender of the victim represented in the article had an effect on perceived responsibility and offensiveness levels. A female victim was perceived as having a marginally lower responsibility level when compared to a male victim; however, the findings suggest that there are no statistically significant effects based on victim gender. This is interesting because a 1993 study by Whatley and Riggio found a statistically significant difference in the blame levels of a female rape victim versus a male rape victim. According to this study, male victims were attributed a higher level of blame than the female counterparts. As the Whatley and Riggio study is nearly three decades old, there has been a significant time gap between research studies, during which many cultural changes and movements have occurred. This could show evidence of a social paradigm shift towards a more empathetic view of all rape victims, which may be related to the Me-Too Movement that sparked heightened visibility and awareness of sexual assault cases. The heightened visibility of sexual assault cases brought forth into the general social consciousness a lowered tolerance of suspects in a sexual assault case.

Research questions 3a-f explored the effects between type of attack and target of attack on perceived levels of actor responsibility. Findings imply a significant interaction between attack type and attack target to influence university responsibility, but only when the target of the attack is the university or the victim. This finding supports the suggestion that a university is
often viewed as responsible for the actions of its constituents – when the target of the attack is the victim, the university is perceived as more responsible for the act. Of course, targeting a victim – victim-blaming – shouldn’t happen.

Research question 4 explores whether there is a relationship between the perceived responsibility of the suspect and the perceived responsibility of the victim. It was speculated that perhaps if the victim was viewed as more responsible, then the suspect would be viewed as less responsible. The results indicated a small negative correlation between the perceived responsibility of the suspect and the perceived responsibility of the victim, supporting that speculation. This suggests that if a persuasive attack is successful in that the victim is viewed as being more responsible for the crime, the suspect is viewed as less responsible to some degree.

**Theoretical and Practical Implications**

As stated in the introduction section, the general purpose of this research was to explore the viability of studying persuasive attacks utilizing a quantitative methodology, a methodology which, at the time of this study, had yet to be employed within the present theoretical framework. Also previously stated were the three specific objectives of this research: 1) to study a rhetorical framework using a quantitative methodology; 2) set a precedent for dedicating research to studying image repair in an academic context; and 3) to understand what factors and variables affect the level of responsibility and offensiveness when a persuasive attack is present in media coverage. The main objective of this research study was substantiated in that persuasive attacks are effective at increasing perceived levels of blame and offensiveness of a transgression. This finding has major implications for future research studies to utilize an empirical framework when studying persuasive attacks.
The first objective of this study was to utilize a quantitative methodology within a rhetorical theoretical framework. The success of the present study reflects that this is not only possible, but also reveals the viability of empirical study of persuasive attacks. Originating as a rhetorical theory, *kategoria* has a practicable path forward in the quantitative realm of research. The ability to study this theory quantitatively means that this theory can be studied by a wider pool of contributing scholars, thus broadening the possibilities of providing a robust body of research on persuasive attacks. Studying this theory quantitatively will also help to broadly understand the effects of these persuasive attacks, due to the capabilities of quantitative studies to include more study participants and generalize the findings and results. The research can also be replicated, tested, and retested, allowing researchers to check the consistency of findings. Although some of the findings in the present study suggested that there were no differences based on attack type and/or target, some of the findings suggested that there were differences.

The second objective of this study was to provide a strong argument that academic image repair is worthy of its own dedicated research stream. Academia is a unique entity among other institutions, meriting a line of image repair research that seeks to understand the nuances that are specific to an institution of higher education. There are several distinctions that separate higher education from other entities that have dedicated research streams in the context of image repair. One of these distinctions is that the institution of higher education is held to a higher expectation of ethical behavior. Because of this, a university may be more vulnerable to a tarnished image or reputation as a result of a crisis. The results of this study support this statement in that persuasive attacks were effective against the university.

Another distinction made in the review of the literature is that universities are often held accountable for the actions of individuals associated with the institution – students, faculty, staff,
trustees, etc. The findings of this study (specifically the RQ3 set) support this idea in that the university was seen as more culpable when persuasive attacks intending to increase responsibility attacks of the victim were present. However, this is an interesting finding as one would expect the university to be seen as more culpable based on the actions of the “bad” actor -- the suspect in this context -- especially as the fictional suspect was also a member of the university community. What is it about targeting the victim that causes a university to be seen as more responsible? Should the university have somehow prevented the transgression if a victim is perceived to be at fault? Future research could explore this further to better understand the implications of other actors’ behavior and how it affects perceptions of the university’s level of responsibility for the actions of its community members.

The high standards of ethical decisions and behavior that the public places on a university, in conjunction with the academy functioning as a client-serving organization, subject a university to an expectation of transparency to which other entities are not subjected, limiting the options available to repair image during a crisis. Additionally, because the university is seen to act *in loco parentis* (or “in the place of a parent”) to students that attend the institution, how strongly the public feels about the university’s responsibility of a crisis may be acutely affected when a crisis involves one of the university’s students. How susceptible the university is to persuasive attacks may be strongly affected by the parental role that the university adopts for the students that attend its campus. This could explain the findings in the present study that persuasive attacks were particularly effective when the target of the attack was the university. However, it’s worth mentioning that the university is an organization and the other two targets in this experiment -- the victim and the suspect -- are both individuals. Perhaps persuasive attacks are simply more effective against organizations rather than individuals. Future research could
examine whether the effectiveness of attacks changes based on whether the target is an organization or an individual.

The results suggest that persuasive attacks waged against universities are effective in increasing perceived levels of responsibility for a transgression. Both the university and the victim can be made to be perceived as more responsible for a transgression if those attacks are present. If these attacks are present, image repair responses aimed at lessening responsibility for the transgression might be effective. Strategic communications and public relations teams at higher institutions of learning should be aware of these attacks with the understanding that they may be effective at changing public perception. These teams should be especially attuned to whether these attacks that aim to increase responsibility are present in media coverage throughout a crisis.

When analyzing attacks that increase offensiveness, this study found that they were effective only when the target of the attack was the university, again providing important implications for strategic communications and public relations teams of universities. Not only can the university be made to be perceived as more responsible, but the offensiveness of the act can be intensified. Universities seem to be especially vulnerable to persuasive attacks (at least in the context of this study), and this finding magnifies the crucial nature of the university’s response to a crisis when persuasive attacks are leveraged against it.

Specifically, what factors and variables affect the level of responsibility and offensiveness when a persuasive attack is present in media coverage? The findings suggest that respondent demographics of gender, income level, and education level were all significant influencers of the perception of responsibility when the attacks were targeting the victim. When
the target was the suspect or the university, in addition to the previously listed variables, age of
the reader was also a predictor.

Before the following discussion, this researcher feels compelled to preamble the
discussion with a few thoughts. As mentioned in the first chapter, persuasive attacks are not
necessarily negative or positive. Often, they are well-deserved, a force for good and public
service that expose the wrongdoings of individuals and institutions. In the following case, they
are used as a way to shine a light on terrible sexual assaults committed by a prominent, powerful,
and beloved football coaching staff member at Penn State. Reporting on these allegations was a
monumental undertaking that the public was initially angry about (more on this below). It’s also
important to mention that the persuasive attacks are typically in the form of source quotes rather
than as an expression by the writer, the exception being that this researcher has noticed them
occurring in headlines as well.

Additionally, the following discussion is not meant to be a systematic analysis of
persuasive attacks (although that is an excellent focus for future research); rather, it is meant to
serve as a discussion case with examples of persuasive attacks and the consequences an
institution faced from the effects of the coverage. This is to understand why the effectiveness of
persuasive attacks matters -- there are real-world consequences to being tried in the court of
public opinion. The legal ramifications are mentioned to provide context, but not emphasized as
results of the news articles; they would (or should) happen regardless of media coverage. Instead,
the focus is on the consequences that occur as a result of media coverage of the crisis, such as
financial losses, social backlash and public abasement. Finally, an egregious case of sexual
assault at a university was examined not for shock value or gratuitous material, but because it
aligns closely with the purpose of this dissertation and, due to the high volume of media coverage, instances of persuasive attacks were readily available for examination.

In March of 2011, the *Patriot-News*, a local news outlet serving the Harrisburg, Pennsylvania area, broke the story that Jerry Sandusky (a football legend at Penn State) was the subject of a grand jury investigation into allegations of sexual assault. The article was largely factual but did mention rumors of misconduct on internet comment threads and message boards (Ganim, 2011). Additionally, quotes made by John DiNunzio, the school district’s superintendent at the time, are included in which he mentions that it’s been a “hush-hush situation” and that he “called [the school] -- they’ve said they heard nothing about it” (Ganim, 2011). The article also states, “the boy told Children and Youth Services that Sandusky had indecent contact with him several times over four years,” which could be deemed *kategoria* that could increase perceived responsibility (accused committed act before) and offensiveness (victims are innocent/helpless) of the act. Some readers expressed appreciation for the coverage; other readers were quick to attack the *Patriot-News*, with comments like “It truly is troubling to me to see a ‘reputable’ newspaper such as the Patriot-News carrying this type of sensationalist story” and “Shame on those who have tried to defile the legacy that Jerry Sandusky has worked too hard to build” (Newhouse, 2011). However, the newspaper kept to its reporting of the investigation into allegations of sexual abuse against Sandusky while national media outlets largely ignored it.

On November 5, 2011, the *Patriot-News* was the first to report that Sandusky had been indicted on charges of sexual assault against underage boys (Ganim, 2011). The mother of one of the victims was quoted in the article, stating “I just lived with this for so long, and it killed me when people talked about him like he was a God, and I knew he was a monster” (Ganim, 2011)
which highlights the persistence of negative effects that serve to increase offensiveness of the crime.

National news outlets now picked up the story and also began to cover the scandal. Mike Wise with *The Washington Post* wrote an article with the headline, “If Jerry Sandusky allegations are true, Penn State and Joe Paterno deserve part of the blame” (2011) and Matt Hayes penned an article in *Sporting News* titled, "University culture protected Paterno, buried Penn State deeper in scandal" (2011). Both of these headlines are direct persuasive attacks that increase the level of responsibility to be placed on Penn State’s shoulders, one blaming the blind-eye approach and the other blaming the culture. An article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* blamed the university’s “reverence for football...for a series of missteps by top Pennsylvania State University administrators” and quoted Michael D. Giardina who stated, “The university completely abdicated its role as an educational institution committed to the public good in order to protect its corporate brand, image, and market value. ...We shouldn’t overlook or forget that the corporate university of today makes ethically suspect decisions all the time” (Wolverton, 2012). This is a charge of inconsistency to increase offensiveness, as universities have some of the highest expectations of ethical behavior compared to other institutions in functional society (Floyd, 2000; Braxton and Bray, 2012).

As more information came to light, media coverage began to further examine and criticize Penn State’s culture of secrecy and silence as complicit in Sandusky’s crimes. *CBS News* published an article titled “Penn State’s insular culture shielded Sandusky” and blamed top administrators at the university, alleging they “kept allowing, even encouraging, Sandusky to invite...boys into campus sports building” where he sexually assaulted them (2011). This is a persuasive attack to increase offensiveness by highlighting the inconsistency between the
university’s expected behavior vs. how it actually behaved. It also hints at an obligation to protect the victims, which should also increase the perceived offensiveness of the transgression.

The media waged an effective persuasive campaign against the university’s response (or lack thereof) and culture as major factors that allowed Sandusky’s abuse to go on for as long as it did. This analysis of media coverage during the major sexual assault crisis at Penn State reveals very real consequences of the scandal. As a direct result of the scandal, Penn State suffered the loss of sponsorships, a drop in enrollment, damage to its merchandise sales, and tarnishment of its brand. *Inside Higher Ed* and *The Associated Press* reported that the Sandusky scandal cost Penn State $237 million, citing settlements with victims, legal costs, and fines (Jaschik, 2017). Advertisers pulled their ads from televised coverage of upcoming Penn State games (Carpenter, 2011; Frankel, 2011). Retailers and analysts reported a forty percent drop in Penn State merchandise compared to the previous year as the scandal unfolded (Loviglio, 2011). The scandal was characterized as a “public relations disaster” that would affect the university for years (Carpenter, 2011).

The third objective of this dissertation was to pose important questions about perceptions of responsibility and offensiveness of a suspect, victim, and university for a sexual assault occurring on campus, how those perceptions can be altered, and what that means for media coverage of crimes. The findings of the H1 analysis are clearly impactful for universities, but they also have important implications for individuals cast as suspects or victims. The H1 groups constitute the core purpose and findings of this study -- are persuasive attacks effective at influencing public opinion of how responsible a university or person is for a transgression? The overarching result evidenced in the analysis of H1 provides our answer: yes. Yes, the media have the power to influence the public’s opinion when evaluating who is responsible for a crime.
Wielding this power must come with tremendous responsibility, accountability, and neutrality. Media contributors have the onus of understanding what constitutes these persuasive attacks, accepting that they are effective in shifting attitudes, and avoiding the inclusion of these types of messages, especially when the livelihoods and reputations of individuals could be jeopardized.

The burden falls not solely on the media and its members; the reader is responsible for critically evaluating the information presented and identifying the presence and purpose of persuasive attacks. In a country that holds sacrosanct the idea that its citizens are innocent until proven guilty, the reader should place great importance on withholding judgment and assignment of blame against an individual until proof of guilt exists. This great burden exists and is made necessary because the livelihoods and reputations of real people could be adversely affected. Cases exist in which accusations were found to be false and unfounded, and the suspects became the victims. The National Registry of Exonerations (NRE) reports 2,809 exonerations since 1989, 343 (12%) of which are for false allegations of sexual assaults. According to the NRE, the false allegations disproportionately affect males (99.9%), specifically Black males (59%) and White males (33%). Twelve years is the average number of years lost (i.e., years spent incarcerated for a crime they didn’t commit) for these men. Hail-Jares, K., Lowrey-Kinberg, B., Dunn, K., & Gould, J. B. (2020) found that false allegations of rape existed in approximately 15% of indictments involving an innocent person. Of these cases, 4% resulted in wrongful convictions and 45% were deemed “near misses,” which are defined as cases in which a person was indicted for a crime but was subsequently not convicted (Hail-Jares, et al, 2020).

Although H1 was not statistically supported when the target of the attack was the suspect, examining the level of responsibility attributed to the suspect returned a finding that the attribution of responsibility was quite high whether an attack was present or not. On a Likert
scale of 1-7, with 1 being the least responsible and 7 being the most responsible, the suspect in this study was perceived to have a responsibility level of 6.181 and 6.013 with and without attacks present, respectively. This finding has several important implications for media coverage of a crime. A person who is named a suspect in the news coverage is attributed a high level of responsibility for the crime, even when that suspect has not yet been tried or convicted for that crime. This again highlights the great burden of accountability on the media to be cautious in identifying a suspect when little information is known.

High profile cases against innocent persons that also relate to a university include the *Rolling Stone* article about a rape at University of Virginia (the article was later retracted), and the Duke Lacrosse players that were found to be innocent in a court of law after a year of accusations and legal proceedings. Both of these cases had real consequences. The *Rolling Stone* article broke a story titled “A Rape on Campus” that detailed a brutal rape of a student called “Jackie” which allegedly occurred at a fraternity party at the University of Virginia. The article spurred a national debate centered around the issue of how a college responds to (or should respond to) sexual assaults on campus. However, inconsistencies in the story were noticed shortly after publication and *Rolling Stone* retracted the story roughly six months later. In an effort to rectify and understand the reasons for the major mistake in their reporting, and to their credit, the *Rolling Stone* asked the Columbia School of Journalism to conduct an independent investigation into any lapses in their reporting, editing and fact-checking. The journalistic failure was deemed avoidable by the investigation, which found issues in several reporting processes, including editing, reporting, editorial supervision, and fact-checking. Charlottesville, VA police conducted a months-long investigation and concluded there was no evidence to substantiate the allegations put forth in the story and by Jackie. University of Virginia filed suit against *Rolling
Stone, and a jury found that the magazine and the reporter were liable for damages in the defamation lawsuit.

In the case of the Duke lacrosse players, three players were accused of a seriously brutal sexual assault at a party and as a result the coach was made to resign. 60 Minutes producer Michael Radutzky recalls that it was like “going against the grain” to independently investigate the Duke lacrosse case: “It seemed like most of the media and the public and government leaders had already made up their minds that the players were guilty” (Salomon, 2015). The state’s attorney general characterized the case as a “miscarriage of justice” once the men were found innocent and the charges dropped. The prosecutor in the case was disbarred. One of the accused men expressed to 60 Minutes reporters how the incident had affected him: "I don't think it really will ever be over. No matter what, you can try to move on, but 'rape' will always be associated with my name. 'Innocent' might be a part of that, but when I die, they'll say, 'One of the three Duke lacrosse rape suspects died today. He led a life and did this, but he was one of the three Duke lacrosse rape suspects.'" (Salomon, 2015). Although charges were dropped and the individuals were deemed innocent in the court of law, the accused man clearly felt that he would be unable to move past the court of public opinion, in which media outlets are judge, jury and executioner.

This discussion on false allegations and their real effects on individuals and institutions is not meant to discredit, silence, or otherwise dismiss the very real allegations of sexual assault that occur. Rumney (2006) conducted a review of research that identifies the percentage of cases that are false allegations, with eleven of twenty studies falling under 12%, which means that 88% of the cases involve true allegations of sexual assault, which doesn’t include the many cases that go unreported. The literature review in this study details the amount of sexual assault cases that
go unreported and the reasons for that, and it is important that this researcher states unequivocally that this discussion is in no way a damnation of sexual assault allegations; rather, the purpose is to shine a light on the small percentage of cases in which false allegations were presented, the media’s role in perpetuating those false allegations, and the very real consequences resulting from those false statements. False allegations affect individuals and institutions by causing irreparable damage to reputation. Also, false allegations affect the public at large through wasted resources such as time and money spent by police and the justice system investigating the crime.

The findings from this study don’t only affect individuals named as suspects in the articles. When persuasive attacks against the victim were present, the victim was perceived as being more responsible for the sexual assault. The consequences of victim-blaming in a sexual assault case are illustrated through the tragic case of Megan Rondini. A student at The University of Alabama, in 2015 Megan Rondini reported that she was raped; however, the accused reported that the sex was consensual. Prosecutors took the case to a grand jury in February of 2016, but the grand jury did not issue an indictment. Unfortunately, a few days before the deliberations, Rondini committed suicide. In Rondini’s case, the media was not a participant in exacerbating her culpability; however, the police were: investigators had threatened to charge Rondini rather than the suspect.

Unfortunately, Megan Rondini’s experience isn’t an isolated one. Ten days after reporting an attack to the police accusing a Notre Dame football player of raping her, 19-year-old freshman from a nearby college Lizzy Seeberg committed suicide. A swimmer named Sasha Menu Courey at the University of Missouri also committed suicide after alleging she was raped
by football players. News articles suggest that the university knew about the alleged assault and never launched an investigation (Howell and Vercammen, 2014).

A most egregious example of media engaging in victim-blaming took place in a 2011 article by *The New York Times* that detailed an attack on an 11-year-old girl (McKinley, 2011). Eighteen young men and teenage boys were charged with participating in a gang-rape of the girl. The article contains a section on the neighbors’ sentiments, which reads, “Residents in the neighborhood where the abandoned trailer stands — known as the Quarters — said the victim had been visiting various friends there for months. They said she dressed older than her age, wearing makeup and fashions more appropriate to a woman in her 20s. She would hang out with teenage boys at a playground, some said.” Essentially, through the thoughts of the neighbor, the article blames the young girl for the sexual assault because she wore makeup and certain clothes. A neighbor quoted in the article blamed the girl’s mother. The article, written by James C. McKinley, Jr., was so provocative that a petition was started demanding an apology from the newspaper (it eventually got almost 50,000 signatures). The *New York Times* did not apologize and instead, a spokesperson was compelled to defend their coverage of the case, saying that “neighbors’ comments about the girl...seemed to reflect concern about what they saw as a lack of supervision that may have left her at risk” (Young, 2011). Letters to the editor were quick to point out the victim-blaming in the article, especially when contrasted with what some characterized as “innocuous terms” used to describe the assailants (Pompeo, 2011). Persuasive attacks against victims (especially in a sexual assault case) clearly have consequences on the victim, the media outlet, and public perception.
Limitations and Future Research

There are limitations to the current study, contextually and methodologically. For one, this study specifically examined persuasive attacks in the context of a sexual assault. Future research could focus on other types of transgressions. This study also focused specifically on a transgression that occurred on a university campus. Future research could focus on other locations, or different transgressions on a university campus or perpetuated by the university. This study was limited insofar as a news article was the medium. Future research could examine the effectiveness of persuasive attacks in other mediums, including television news and social media.

Methodological limitations include the format of the experiment. Though an online survey is convenient and efficient, it has some disadvantages. Reading checks and unique codes can be used to mitigate survey fraud, but the challenge of exploitation is still present. Additionally, in an online environment the researcher is absent from the respondents and has no way of knowing who is responding and if the respondent is fully engaged in the survey. Data is self-reported in an online questionnaire and may be inaccurate. The current study accounted for 18 manipulations; however, future research could account for more variables and study the impacts these other variables may have on assignation of blame and offensiveness resulting from persuasive attacks.

There is the obvious future research stream of evaluating persuasive attacks in the context of different transgressions. This study focused on the transgression of sexual assault, which may be more provocative than other transgressions. It would be interesting to study less inflammatory transgressions to ascertain whether persuasive attacks and compare magnitudes of effectiveness. It may be that persuasive attacks are only effective when there is a serious crisis at hand. Specific
to the academic context, future research could focus on persuasive attacks regarding transgressions such as academic cheating scandals, the COVID-19 pandemic response, athletic scandals, ethical or criminal transgressions committed by leadership, and racial/social injustice protest responses.

Although sexual assault is a prevalent problem on college campuses, this experiment involves a fictitious story and university. Even though the fictitious account was created based on real news articles, in reality biases may exist that further serve to impact the effectiveness of persuasive attacks. These biases could extend to many different variables, including the university (and its history), a student organization, occupations of the suspect and/or victim, race of victim and/or suspect, or even the respondent’s level of affinity towards the institution. Future research could include these university demographics, e.g., its age, reputation, status (public vs. private) to test whether these factors have any bearing on the perceptions of university responsibility.

It would be remiss not to mention social media and the opportunity to study how the general public contributes to and drives the conversation around a crisis or scandal. Future research could follow a crisis on social media (Twitter, Facebook, etc.) and collect posts and comments about that crisis. It would be valuable to then conduct a content analysis of those posts and comments to test for presence of persuasive attacks, what types of attacks are being used, and who the attacks are waged against.

The focus of the present study was to examine the effects of attacks when reporting on single-suspect, single-victim heterosexual assaults. Future research could examine the perceptions of blame and offensiveness regarding the suspect and victim in same-sex sexual assaults, similar to the study by Davies, Pollard and Archer (2006) analyzing blame towards
male victims of sexual assault. Their study found that male respondents were more negative towards a victim that was portrayed as homosexual. Would victims portrayed as homosexual be assigned more responsibility or a higher level of offensiveness for a sexual assault by readers?

Sacks, Ackerman and Shlosberg (2018) analyzed rape myths in the media via content analysis. Their findings suggest that local newspapers rarely perpetuate rape myths. This provides opportunities for future research studies to analyze the difference in coverage in local media versus coverage in national media and determine whether local media include fewer or greater numbers of persuasive attacks than the national media.

The present study was limited to respondents in the geographical location of the United States. In a global economy with global news coverage, it is invaluable and imperative to examine issues in a global context. After all, a university’s student population often includes international students. Future research could compare global and international attitudes of blame and offensiveness towards a university in crisis. Cultural differences in attitudes could account for a variety of differences in assignment of responsibility and how offensive a transgression is deemed to be. There are other demographic variables to consider, such as political affiliation, geopolitical location/region, and a rural-based respondent versus urban-based respondent. Additionally, further research could be done to understand if there is a difference in assigning responsibility and offensiveness to an individual versus an organization.

Future research could bring in other theories related to the three-stage speech set, i.e., image repair theory and antapologia. For instance, future studies could quantitatively analyze which image repair strategies are most effective at combating the various persuasive attacks. A study of antapologia could analyze which persuasive attacks are most used in the follow-up coverage of the response to image-repair efforts. Future research opportunities could examine
how readers assign veracity/truthfulness/credibility based on whether persuasive attacks are present or what type of persuasive attacks are used.

**Conclusion**

This study adds to the body of research regarding persuasive attacks by contributing a quantitative research study to the literature, setting a precedent to study this particular rhetorical theory through empirical methodology. Utilizing quantitative methods to study persuasive attacks and their effects could prove to be extremely valuable for public relations professionals as well as journalists and other professionals interested in understanding the apologia speech set. Qualitative research is useful for gaining a deep understanding into particular phenomena, while quantitative research is valuable in understanding how the population is broadly affected by a phenomenon. With a plethora of qualitative research conducted on the present theory, a stream of quantitative research on persuasive attacks can reveal broader attitudes of the population and the effect that these attacks have on those attitudes, helping inform the crisis response strategies employed by institutional leaders and crisis communicators when these persuasive attacks are inevitably waged against the institution.

This research also has strong implications for the study of image repair in an academic or higher education context, adding to the research stream by filling a gap on research related to academic image repair and why it is justified that this context be given a dedicated research stream. This study highlights how important it is for a university to fully understand the persuasive attacks leveraged against it in times of crisis and engage in appropriate image repair efforts. As the current study found, an institution of higher learning is regarded as responsible for transgressions on its campus and/or against its students. This creates a crisis of public perception for the institution, which can affect reputation and enrollment, among other things. It is
imperative that universities and institutions of higher learning understand how their reputations may be affected by campus crises that are reported in the media.
REFERENCES


Megan Whitten, Principal Investigator, is conducting a study at The University of Alabama. The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understand of media relations to the public.

Taking part in this study involves completing a web survey that will take about 10-15 minutes. This survey contains questions about levels of blame and offensiveness of an account of a sexual assault on a college campus.

We will protect your confidentiality by not gathering any identifying information from you. Only the investigators will have access to the data. The data are password protected. Only summarized data will be presented at meetings or in publications.

You will be compensated as an Amazon Mechanical Turk respondent. The findings will be useful in gaining a deeper understanding of media relations to the public.

The chief risk is that some of the questions may make you uncomfortable. There may be a risk of triggering stressful feelings if you or someone you know has been a victim of sexual violence. You may skip any questions you do not want to answer.
If you have questions about this study, please contact Megan Whitten at (205) 348-6539 or by email. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about your rights as a research participant, contact Ms. Tanta Myles, the Research Compliance Officer, at (205) 348-8461 or toll-free at 1-877-820-3066. If you have complaints or concerns about this study, file them through the UA IRB outreach website at http://ovpred.ua.edu/research-compliance/prco/. Also, if you participate, you are encouraged to complete the short Survey for Research Participants online at this website. This helps UA improve its protection of human research participants.

YOUR PARTICIPATION IS COMPLETELY VOLUNTARY. You are free not to participate or stop participating any time before you submit your answers.

If you understand the statements above, are at least 18 years old, and freely consent to be in this study, click on the I AGREE button to begin.
APPENDIX B: EXPERIMENT STIMULI

*The experimental stimuli begin on the following page due to margin constraints.
University Student Arrested on Charges of Sexual Assault

by Steve A. Merrill, October 31, 2017 5:32 PM

A student at the University of [redacted] is being investigated on felony charges of sexual assault. The suspect is a 22-year-old senior majoring in exercise science.

On October 30, 2017 at approximately 1:47 pm a sexual assault was reported to the University Police. The victim is also a student at the university. It was reported the assault occurred on 10/30/2017 at approximately 3:15 am. The police report states the victim was walking in the southeast area of campus when the suspect approached in a black SUV. The victim reported that the suspect was a previous acquaintance. The suspect stopped and offered the victim a ride home. Initially, the victim refused the ride, but ultimately accepted the ride from the suspect.

After a short while, the victim reports that the suspect drove into an isolated parking lot and restricted the victim from exiting the vehicle. The victim then states that the suspect proceeded to commit a forcible sexual act. After the suspect completed the act, the victim was able to exit the vehicle and flee the scene.

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The university has a checkered past in regards to sexual assaults on its campus. A statement on behalf of the victim claims that this isn’t the first time something like this has happened on campus, and every time, the university fails to act to protect its students. The statement also pointed out the lack of resources offered to students. “The university doesn’t offer resources to students who have been victims of sexual assault. If you do come forward, you aren’t treated like a victim, but instead feel like you’re the one that did something wrong.”

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by Steve A. Merrill, October 31, 2017 5:32 PM

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The victim didn’t immediately report the incident due to the fear of backlash, but ultimately a friend convinced him to come forward.

The victim also felt like the university could have done more when he reported the sexual assault, saying in an interview that “The university has an obligation to protect its students from assaults like this. When the university doesn’t do anything, it sends a message to other potential predators that this is okay and sends a message to victims that they won’t get help or protection.”

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Reports from other witnesses suggest that the suspect may have done similar things before. “One of my friends told me she passed out at the suspect’s house once and woke up to him touching her inappropriately,” said another student at the university.

Others say that the suspect’s actions were predatory. James Hall, another student at the university, told WKRG, “From the story, it sounds like the suspect stalked the victim and targeted her specifically. I mean, he planned this. That’s scary.”

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A friend of the victim commented, “The suspect took advantage of someone who had been drinking and didn’t have the ability to give consent. Ironically, the fraternity that the suspect is involved in has a motto that says ‘Honor Above All.’ Guess he forgot about that.”

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According to the police report, the victim admitted to consuming alcohol the night of the incident, even though she is underage. One student, who says she saw the victim out at a club that night, said, “She was drinking heavily that night. Nobody forced her to. She shouldn’t have put herself in that situation. She definitely shouldn’t have accepted a ride, especially from someone she didn’t know all that well.”

The incident happened on Halloween night. Another student commented, “Walking home at 3am in the morning by yourself isn’t the safest or smartest thing to do. I’m sure she knew this was a possibility. People have to be smarter and keep themselves out of this kind of situation.”

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Some question the truth of the victim’s account of what happened that night. A student at the university commented, “The victim’s story doesn’t really make sense. She admitted she was drinking that night, so who’s to say she remembers what actually happened? I mean, she waited until the next day to report the incident to police. There’s just really no way to know what happened for sure. She could really ruin someone’s entire life over this.”

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APPENDIX C: DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

Thank you for your help with today’s study.

I would like to share more information with you about the study, including my goals in conducting this research. I had to omit some information from you earlier, because knowledge of this information might have guided your responses and interfered with the study.

As you know, the research project is about a news article regarding a sexual assault on a college campus. Benoit and Dorries (1996) identified strategies, known as kategoria or persuasive attacks, used to initiate attacks against a person or organization that has engaged in wrongdoing. The information I omitted from you is that the accounts are fictitious in nature and do not represent actual, real-life events.

With this survey, I was trying to determine whether different targets of media attacks will be attributed a higher level of blame or responsibility for a transgression. I tested three different targets: the victim, the suspect, and the university.

If you have any questions or concerns related to research, please contact the lead investigator, Megan Whitten, at lmwhitten@crimson.ua.edu or (205) 348-6539. Also, if you are troubled by this instrument’s concealment of its purpose, you have the opportunity to withdraw your data. If you wish to withdraw your data, please select “Withdraw my Data” below. Thank you.
APPENDIX D: IRB APPROVAL LETTER
January 11, 2021

Lindsay Whitten, MA
Department of Graduate Studies
College of communication & Information Sciences
The University of Alabama
Box 870172

Re: IRB # 19-OR-054-R2 “Perceived Effectiveness of Persuasive Attacks in the Media”

Dear Ms. Whitten:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research. Your renewal application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. You have also been granted the requested waiver of documentation of informed consent. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

The approval for your application will lapse on January 10, 2022. If your research will continue beyond this date, please submit a continuing review to the IRB as required by University policy before the lapse. Please note, any modifications made in research design, methodology, or procedures must be submitted to and approved by the IRB before implementation. Please submit a final report form when the study is complete.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Carpantato T. Myles, MSM, CIM, CIP
Director & Research Compliance Officer