How Self Relevance and Disclaimers Against Blame Affect Victim Blaming of Sexual Assault Survivors

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

HOW SELF RELEVANCE AND DISCLAIMERS AGAINST BLAME AFFECT VICTIM BLAMING OF SEXUAL ASSAULT SURVIVORS

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

PROGRAM IN APPLIED SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

BY

LINA M. FLORES WOLF

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Dedicated to SA advocates.
May you get the support and resources that you need to take care of yourself as you care for others.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS iii

LIST OF FIGURES vii

ABSTRACT viii

INTRODUCTION 1

Victim Blame and Just World Belief 2
Victim Blame and Sexual Assault 4
Self-relevance and Victim Blame 5
How do we blame the victim? 6
Effects of Victim Blame on Survivors 8
Can people be directed not to blame the victim? 9
Pilot Data 11
The Current Research 11

METHODS 13

Study Design 13
Participants 13
Procedure 14

Self-relevance 14
New Article Stimulus 15
Victim Blame Disclaimer 16
Dependent Measures 17

RESULTS 20

Manipulation Checks 20
Dependent Measures 20

DISCUSSION 27

Conclusion 29

APPENDIX A: CONSENT FORM 30

APPENDIX B: NEWS ARTICLES 33

APPENDIX C: MATERIALS FOR SURVEY 36

APPENDIX D: DEBRIEFING FORM 40

REFERENCE LIST 42

VITA 46
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Effects of self-relevance and disclaimer on participant victim blame. 22

Figure 2. Effects of self-relevance and disclaimer on perpetrator blame. 24

Figure 3. Three way interaction predicting perpetrator blame from rape myth acceptance, disclaimer condition, and self-relevance, when a) relevance is low and b) relevance is high. 25
ABSTRACT

Victim blame can have negative impacts on survivors of sexual assault, leading to increased rates of neurological disorders, like PTSD, depression, and anxiety (Orchowski et al., 2013). As such, it is important that psychologists focus on implementing and understanding the effects of interventions that seek to decrease victim blame. This study seeks to explore the effects of a potential intervention aimed at decreasing victim blame by introducing, together with information about an assault, an explicit disclaimer stating that victims are not to blame. I explore the relationship between self-relevance and blame, as well as whether an explicit disclaimer against victim blame can prove effective. Results suggest that increased self-relevance of a victim to the perceiver leads to decreased blame, consistent with the Defensive Attribution Hypothesis (Grubb & Harrower, 2008). However, when self-relevance is low the introduction of a disclaimer significantly reduced victim blame compared to when respondents did not receive this caveat. These findings suggest that introducing a disclaimer against victim blame in situations where relevance to the victim is not high, which is often the case with news articles or crime alerts victims one does not know personally, can be an effective, low-cost strategy to decrease victim blame of survivors of sexual assault.
INTRODUCTION

In 2015 Brock Turner was arrested for sexually assaulting an unconscious woman behind a dumpster at a college fraternity party. His arrest and subsequent trial in 2016 brought attention to the epidemic of sexual assault on American college campuses (Forbes, 2017). It also provided a notable demonstration of people’s tendency to blame the victim in cases of sexual assault. Throughout the trial, the victim was known only as Emily Doe, and not many details about the assault were public. Despite this, a prominent topic of conversation was Doe’s responsibility for what had happened to her. Many people stated she was “partly to blame for the assault because she had too much to drink,” and some people even went as far as to blame and criticize her for ruining a young man’s future prospects, including Turner’s father, who stated that harsh punishment of Turner would be “a steep price to pay for 20 minutes of action out of his 20-plus years of life” (Guardian, 2019). Though the trial gained national attention, it was Doe’s victim impact statement that led consideration surrounding victim blame of sexual assault survivors. In this statement, Emily Doe – now known as Chanel Miller – called out the role that victim blaming played throughout her legal process, stating that the questions asked throughout the trial were not conducive to healing but instead they lead to re-traumatization, revictimization, and to questioning her own worth and understanding of her story (BuzzFeed, 2016). In hindsight, the trial and Miller’s victim impact statement were catalysts for national conversations around gender-based violence and sexual assault advocacy that sought to understand victim blame and rape culture on college campuses.
The trial and the media attention raised the question of the purpose of victim blame, and it sparked an interest in seeking to address the consequences that victim blame has on survivors of sexual assault. In Miller’s case, victim blame was utilized by the defense to discredit her statement and instill reasonable doubt in favor of Turner, but derogation and victim blame faced by survivors of sexual assault goes beyond tools utilized in trials or court proceedings. Victim blame and prejudice against survivors is present in their everyday life and can oftentimes have increasingly negative effects on their health and well-being (Orchowski et al., 2013). But despite the negative effects that victim blame has on survivors, and the seemingly counterintuitive nature of blaming people for things that others did to them, victim blaming is a common response to misfortune and unjust harm. As such, psychologists researching victim blame have focused on providing theoretical explanations for such blame.

**Victim Blame and Just World Belief**

One of the most commonly accepted hypotheses underlying psychological understanding of victim blame is belief in a just world. Just-world theory suggests that people feel the need to believe in a world that is fair and just; they seek to maintain a perceived sense of justice and diminish the perception of threat that comes from witnessing an unfair event (Lerner, 1980; Lerner & Simmons, 1996). In other words, people believe that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. Yet, as reality is not as simple as that. When something bad happens to a seemingly good person (i.e., an innocent victim), research suggests that people have a hard time accepting this and need to find ways to address this discomfort. As such, just world theory posits that the greater degree of belief in a just world people have, the
more threatening they find victimization to their belief system, and therefore the more likely they are to blame victims (Lerner, 1998).

To explain this, Lerner (1980) proposed different strategies that people may utilize in order to preserve their belief that the world is fair and just, divided into rational and irrational strategies. The rational strategies, so called because they seemingly accept the presence of injustice, are prevention and restitution. Prevention seeks to prevent an unjust action before it occurs, in order to avoid discomfort altogether. While restitution seeks to address this discomfort by “restoring” justice to the victim, either through compensation or by providing help to the victim – in a sense, seeking to make things better for a “good person”. Yet, these avenues are often difficult or unavailable in situations of victimization.

The other set of strategies are considered irrational because they are based on the refusal to acknowledge injustice, but they also happen to be less physically and cognitively taxing for people. These strategies include denial, withdrawal, and reinterpretation strategies. Denial and withdrawal involve avoiding unjust actions altogether, either by disavowing them or withdrawing (physically or mentally) from potential threats or actions that may cause discomfort or threaten the belief in a just world. Reinterpretation strategies consist of three potential actions: justifying the unjust outcome by blaming the victim for their victimization, reinterpreting their character by derogating or harming their image, and reinterpreting the outcome, for example, by stating that the outcome was “not that bad" or that they somehow misconstrued the situation. These strategies are particularly relevant to the way that we understand victim blame in the case of sexual assault.
Victim Blame and Sexual Assault

Are just-world belief and victim blaming inherently different when it comes to sexual assault? Researchers suggest that we blame victims in order to maintain a sense of perceived control, or as a strategy to reduce the perceived threat of victimization. That is, people have a tendency to blame victims for crimes that are committed against them because they want to reduce the perceived possibility that the same negative outcome could also befall them (Lerner & Miller, 1978). When these concepts are explored in the case of sexual assault, research suggests that there are many different factors that can complicate the responses of the perceiver. As Pollard’s (1992) review of literature on experimental research on sexual assault and victim blame noted, there are many factors and circumstances that can drastically affect the way that people attribute blame in situations of sexual assault, such as physical characteristics of the victim, and subjects’ perception of the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator.

Gender differences in blaming victims of sexual assault suggest that, in most cases, women tend to be less likely to blame victims and more likely to punish perpetrators (Pollard, 1992). However, these differences seem to be directly related to sex-role attitudes and rape myth acceptance, and research indicates that when controlling for sex-role attitudes, women are more likely to assign responsibility to a female victim than are men (Shotland & Goodstein, 1983), suggesting that the gendered nature of sexual assault has implications for victim blame and attributions of responsibility. Additionally, Kleinke and Meyer (1990) found an interaction of gender just-world belief (BJW), such that men with a high BJW tend to evaluate the victim more negatively than men with a low BJW. However, women with a high BJW seem to evaluate the victim more favorably than women with a low BJW, which is rather contradictory to what BJW
theory would posit (Lerner, 1998). This strongly suggests that belief in a just world can have unusual effects on victim blame of rape and sexual assault victims, particularly as a function of perceiver gender, which cements the importance of understanding the mechanisms that drive victim blame of sexual assault survivors.

**Self-relevance and Victim Blame**

How does a victim’s connection or relevance to the self affect blame? Research on the *Defensive Attribution Hypothesis* suggests that people should blame victims that are similar to themselves less than dissimilar victims, because observers that are more similar (e.g., female observers of a female victim) have an increased sense of self-victimization—putting oneself in the role of a victim—and they may fear that assigning blame to a survivor would be indirectly assigning blame to themselves if they were in a similar situation (Grubb & Harrower, 2008). However, this research is based in primarily untested hypotheses and speculations that limit the generalizability of the theory (Grubb & Harrower, 2008; van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). Alternative research has found the opposite effect: participants who viewed themselves as more similar to the victim were more likely to blame them and have more negative attitudes toward them (Muller, Caldwell, & Hunter, 1994). As such, the influence of a victim’s connection to the self on blame needs to be further experimentally explored.

Furthermore, research by Lerner and Miller (1978) suggests that, in comparison to men, women often attribute greater responsibility to female victims of sexual assault or rape when their sense of control is threatened and they feel the need to protect it (Lerner & Miller, 1978). Similarly, Correia, Vala and Aguiar (2007) examined the role of group membership, and its effects on blaming a victimized member of one’s ingroup. Although intergroup relations
research, and general intuition, would suggest that we would be more sympathetic to members of our ingroup if they were victims of a terrible accident, Correia et al.’s (2007) research found that the victimization of a member of one’s ingroup particularly threatens BJW, leading to increased victim blaming of members of our ingroup, relative to members of an outgroup.

Additionally, self-relevance may lead observers to think more about what “they would have done” in a given situation, leading to counterfactual thinking, and establishing a hindsight bias, leading observers to blame the victim out of a belief that the outcome was foreseeable, and potentially preventable (Janoff-Bulman, Timko, & Carli, 1985). This suggests that self-relevance of the victim and their attack can lead women to blame a victim more, in order to separate themselves from this situation, and decrease their perception of potential victimization. When women feel that a situation is increasingly relevant to them, or when they believe that this is something that could happen to them, they experience an increase in self-threat, and blame the victim in order to appease this sense of threat.

How do we blame the victim?

Research has varied in the ways that it seeks to empirically capture victim blame. Situational factors can affect the way that we blame victims, such that when the victim is intoxicated (in comparison to sober), observers blame the victim similarly but they assign more responsibility to an intoxicated victim (Richardson & Campbell, 1982). As such, although they may not directly blame the victim they believe that she is responsible for her victimization. This may be because social desirability concerns reduce people’s willingness to assign blame, but not other similar measures. With this in mind, it is important to seek to find ways in which to measure victim blame indirectly, by raising questions about fault-finding in a number of ways,
such as asking observers to assign blame and responsibility to the victim, as well as the perpetrator.

Additionally, blame may be broken down into difference component parts. Janoff-Bulman’s (1982) research on blame has looked at the different ways in which people go about blaming the victim, such as focusing on attribution of blame or fault to the victim versus their actions and behaviors. This research focuses primarily on understanding self-blame as an adaptive strategy to maintain self-esteem and decrease the perception of potential revictimization—which is also relevant to our understanding of self-relevance. In further research, Janoff-Bulman divides blame into two categories, the first one being characterological blame, which relates to an individual’s personality traits and unchanging characteristics; and the second being behavioral blame, which focuses on an individuals’ behavior in the situation of victimization.

Through her research, Janoff-Bulman found that behavioral self-blame (i.e., blaming one’s own behavior) can be adaptive as a form of maintaining self-esteem and reducing the perception of revictimization. Alternatively, she found that victim blame (i.e., blaming others) manifests as strategy in both characterological and behavioral blame, suggesting that when people engage in victim blame, they tend to blame both the victim’s behavior, as well as their personality traits and characteristics, in order to minimize their own perceived vulnerability (Janoff-Bulman, 1982). This differentiation is important, not only because it reinforces victim blame as an adaptive strategy, but because it suggests multiple components to victim blame, that might differ depending on the observers perceived relationship to the victim.
Effects of victim blame on survivors

Although Janoff-Bulman’s (1982) research suggests that self-blame and victim blame can be adaptive strategies for coping with trauma, cognitive and behavioral research on victim blame has shown that victim blame can have negative, long-lasting effects on survivors. Research focused on social reactions to disclosure of sexual victimization found that victim blame and reactions that attempt to control the survivor’s decisions can lead to increased rates of post-traumatic stress, depression, and anxiety (Orchowski et al., 2013). Additionally, fear of backlash, stigmatization, and victim blame are some of the main reasons why survivors do not report assault to authorities, ranging from police officers and legal aid, as well as university officials and staff (RAINN, 2012). Because of this, sexual assault advocacy research emphasizes the importance of both reducing victim blame via improved social support while simultaneously increasing survivor agency. This underpins the importance of and need for interventions that seek to reduce victim blame.

However, it is much easier said than done. For example, research has shown that increased agency can allow survivors to heal from trauma (Orchowski et al., 2013), suggesting that it is increasingly important to introduce interventions that give survivors agency. However, research also suggests that victims who are perceived as more agentic, thereby defying stereotypes of a helpless victim, are more likely to be blamed for their sexual assault and to receive less compensation than those who are not seen as agentic (Mueller, 2015). This presents a paradox in which interventions that empower survivors may also put them at risk of increased victim blame and potential backlash. This emphasizes the importance of researching the impact
of interventions on victim blame, in order to ensure that they are not causing unintended backlash.

**Can people be directed not to blame the victim?**

News and media might inadvertently foster victim blame when reporting on sexual assault victimization. Because of the nature of journalism and news reporting, there is only a limited amount of information that can be presented to the public at any one time, and oftentimes these reports may lead to victim blame because they present the behaviors and actions of victims in an effort to explain the situation, and readers may interpret these behaviors as reasons why the victim is to blame. Thus, one route that authors of news and media articles could take would be to make a disclaimer that victims are not to blame for their assault. However, even though the author may hope this disclaimer will reduce victim blame or eliminate the propensity of their readers to blame the victim, these disclaimers could have unintended consequences on blame. While no one has yet explicitly published research on such an intervention, the introduction of a statement that explicitly seeks to caution against victim blame could potentially have both negative and positive effects on people’s tendency to blame the victim of an assault.

One of the potential cognitive biases that people reading a disclaimer may fall into is an anchoring bias. Anchoring effects are the tendency to focalize on the first available information that is provided, and subsequently base one’s decisions and judgment based on this (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). In this case, it may occur when people are presented with words highlighting *victim blame*; thus even suggesting people *not* engage in blame might lead people to implicitly focus on this phrase or word and subsequently blame the victim more. Another bias that could impact the way people react to a disclaimer is psychological reactance (Brehm, 1989). This
phenomenon can result when people feel that their freedom is being threatened when they are told not to blame the victim, subsequently leading them to “double down” on this behavior. Finally, backlash effects could impact the way that we react to a disclaimer. In particular, backlash against women who are perceived to be agentic because they are being given a voice and power, by virtue of the media explicitly supporting the victim through its disclaimer. Backlash may occur if people perceive that the female victim has violated her norms of subordination and therefore does not deserve ‘pity’ (Rudman & Glick, 2001), leading the observer to have increasingly negative attitudes toward the victim and to blame her more (Mueller, 2015).

A final possibility is that a disclaimer could have exactly the opposite effect – the one that is actually intended. A disclaimer could introduce a social norm that leads to a reduction in victim blame. For example, a news editor acknowledging or recognizing that the victim is not to blame, and explicitly stating this, may lead people to follow this advice and be motivated to reduce their own victim blaming behavior, as is the case with other norm setting behavior, such as introducing a normative message to promote energy conservation by describing energy consumption of the average household in a given neighborhood (Schultz et al., 2007). However, as Schultz and colleagues point out, differing conditions, such as whether households are already conserving energy, can impact how people react to these normative messages. Thus, people may respond differently to a disclaimer against victim blame if they feel like this event is particularly relevant to them, suggesting that self-relevance of the incident could differentially impact the extent to which a disclaimer impacts blame the victim.
Pilot Data

A pilot study was conducted looking at the effect that an explicit disclaimer can have on victim blame, in the context of Campus Alert emails that inform university communities about potential dangers around campus. This research built on previous work suggesting that Safety Tips (i.e., indicating what the reader could do to avoid similar victimizations) tend to increase victim blame (Cowan & Granot, 2020), potentially because they increase the saliency of one’s vulnerability to a similar attack. The pilot study followed a 2 (safety tips: tips v. no tips) x 2 (victim blame disclaimer: caveat v. no caveat) between-subjects design, in which participants were presented with a Campus Alert email about a victim of a robbery near campus and were asked to determine the extent to which the robbed student was to blame. The results of this study suggested that an explicit disclaimer increased victim blame, but only when coupled with tips for your safety, and when the participants imagined the victim to be a woman (Cowan & Granot, 2020). There was too small a sample to search for moderation by participant gender, but these data suggest that perceived self-relevance of an event could moderate the impact of disclaimers against victim blame. As such, I sought to further explore the interactive relationship between self-relevance of a victimization and the effects of an explicit disclaimer against blame.

The Current Research

This research explores the potential effects of an explicit intervention to address victim blame by introducing a disclaimer that directly states that a victim is not to blame for what happened to them. The purpose of the study is to understand the potential effects of this victim blame disclaimer, and to understand whether it can reduce victim blame or create a backlash effect that exacerbates victim blame. Further, this research will seek explore the effects that
participant self-relevance to an assault can have on victim blame, and whether this relationship moderates the impact of disclaimers on blaming survivors of sexual assault.
METHODS

Study Design

This study followed a 2 (self-relevance: high v. low) x 2 (victim blame disclaimer: caveat v. no caveat) between-subjects design. Participants were told that the purpose of the study was to evaluate the way that we understand and react to news stories. Participants were asked to carefully read an ostensibly real news article reporting the sexual assault of a female college student. Participants were then asked to respond to a series of questions about their impressions of the student, including their blame of her, as well as questions about their personal beliefs.

Participants

Participants (n = 201) were recruited from Amazon’s CloudResearch participant pool. I utilized the MTurk Toolkit to restrict participants to women, ages 18-25. The final sample consisted of 96% (n = 199) women, and 4% (n = 8) participants who identified as transgender, non-binary or gender non-conforming. Preliminary analyses suggested that there were no significant differences when participants who did not identify as women were removed from the sample, so no participants were excluded based on gender identity. Age range was restricted from 18 to 25 to ensure that the scenario was relevant to participants (M\text{age} = 22.34, SD = 1.8). The sample consisted of predominantly White participants (61.3%, n = 122). Of the remaining participants, 11% were Black or African American (n = 22), 9.4% were Asian or Southeast Asian (n = 19), 6.3% were Latinx or Hispanic (n = 12), and 12% of participants indicated multiple or other racial and ethnic identities (n = 24). Participants completed the 15-minute survey in
exchange for $0.75.

Additionally, because of the content of the study, I wanted to minimize the potential harm and re-victimization that may come from reading about sexual assault. As such, I included a content warning (see Appendix A) for participants to self-select whether they were able and willing to participate in a study that discusses sexual assault. Finally, an attention check was utilized to ensure that participants carefully read the article and survey questions. Participants were asked the following question: “People vary in the amount they pay attention to these kinds of surveys. Some take them seriously and read each question, whereas others go very quickly and barely read the questions at all. If you have read this question carefully, please write the word “yes” in the blank box labeled “Other.” A 7-point scale indicated a rating (1 = rarely, 7 = very frequently), and an additional free-response point labeled “Other” was presented. Two participants, who failed to write “yes” in the box as directed, were excluded, leaving a final sample of 199 participants in the analyses below.

Procedure

Self-relevance

To manipulate participant self-relevance, I adapted a measure from Batson and colleagues (1997) aimed at shifting perspectives and coupled these instructions with the news article participants would read. Participants in the high self-relevance condition (n = 98) were prompted with the following instructions:

While you are reading this news article, try to imagine how you yourself would feel if what happened to the student happened to you, and how this experience would affect your life. Just concentrate on trying to imagine how you yourself would feel.
Participants in the low self-relevance condition (n = 101) were prompted:

While you are reading this news article, try to be as objective as possible about what has happened to the student, and how it has affected her life. Just try to remain objective and detached.

In the original research (Batson et al., 1997), the high self-relevance manipulation additionally asked participants to “Try not to concern yourself with attending to all of the information.” Given that this might create a confound — in relation to asymmetry in asking only those participants in the high self-relevance condition to ignore potentially relevant information about the message — that sentence was removed from the manipulation, along with the corresponding sentence in the low self-relevance condition (“do not let yourself get caught up in imagining what she has been through and how she feels as a result”).

Participants instructed to consider the story from a first-person perspective were expected to experience greater self-relevance relative to control participants not instructed to take a first-person perspective. As a manipulation check, participants were later asked to respond to questions about their connection to the victim: “How relevant is this event to you?” (1 = not at all relevant, 7 = extremely relevant), “How close do you feel to the student?” (1 = not close at all, 7 = very close). These two items were highly related (r = .580, p < .001) and were thus aggregated into a composite measure of self-relevance.

News Article Stimulus

Participants received a purported news article that depicted the sexual assault of a female college student (see Appendix B). The message followed a similar design as previous research on victim blame, in that the words rape, victim, and rapist were not included in the message, so
as not to overtly assign labels to the victim and the perpetrator in a way that might bias participants. The content of this article was adapted from vignettes and examples taken from previous studies on victim blame (Janoff-Bulman et al., 1985; Van Prooijen & Van Den Bos, 2009). Additionally, the message included “tips for going to a party” purportedly stated by an investigator at the scene. This included statements such as “Be aware of your surroundings when walking at night” and “Avoid taking rides from strangers.” These statements were included because, according to past research, safety tips such as these tend to elicit victim blame (Granot, 2016). This was intended to elevate perceived victim blame as much as possible across conditions in order to best test whether a disclaimer could be effective at reducing it.

**Victim Blame Disclaimer**

Participants were randomly assigned to receive an explicit disclaimer against victim blame or not. Those who received a disclaimer, known as the *caveat* condition \( (n = 100) \), read, “A message from the editors: We recognize that survivors are not at fault for any crime.” Those in the control or *no caveat* condition \( (n = 99) \) instead read, “A message from the editors: This article was updated to correct the time of the crime.”

I wanted to ensure that participants would notice this disclaimer. As an attention check for the disclaimer, participants were then asked, “To what extent do you think that the writer of this story believes that victims hold some responsibility and blame for the sexual assault?” (1 = *does not blame victims at all*; 4 = *moderate amount of blame toward victims*; 7 = *does blame victims to a great extent*).
Dependent Measures

Victim blame. Participants were asked to answer two general victim blame questions (“To what extent is the student to blame for what happened in the article you read?”, 1 = not at all to blame, 7 = extremely to blame; “How responsible is the student for what happened to her in the article you read?”, 1 = not at all responsible, 7 = extremely responsible). These measures were highly related, ($r = .756$, $p < .001$), and so were collapsed into one general victim blame measure. Additionally, participants were asked to explain their blame rating, in an open-ended question (“In thinking about the questions you just answered, please explain your rating on the extent to which the student is to blame for what happened to her.”). These qualitative responses were thematically coded during data analysis.

Behavioral vs. characterological blame. To further parse participants’ broader ratings of blame and following Janoff-Bulman’s (1982) research distinguishing characterological and behavioral components of blame, participants were asked to express the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with twelve statements (1 = completely disagree, 6 = completely agree). Although these items were originally designed to measure self-blame, they have been used to measure victim blame from an observer perspective. Six of these statements were designed to measure characterological blame (CSB), and six were designed to measure behavioral blame (BSB) and highlight behaviors in the given vignettes. Behavioral blame questions were adapted from Janoff-Bulman’s research; these questions were written in the past tense (i.e., “She should not have taken a ride from him”) and were modified to fit behaviors specific to the sexual assault scenario. Characterological blame questions were in the present tense and addressed potential personality or character traits that can lead to victimization (i.e., “She’s the kind of person who..."
seems to attract trouble”). Behavioral and characterological questions were mixed, but all participants received these questions in the same order.

**Perpetrator Blame.** Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they believed that the perpetrator was to blame, or responsible, on a 7-point scale: “To what extent is the man to blame for what happened in the article you read?” (1 = not at all to blame, 7 = extremely to blame); “How responsible is the man for what happened in the article you read?” (1 = not at all responsible, 7 = extremely responsible). As with the victim blame measures, these items were highly correlated ($r = .679$, $p < .001$), and collapsed into a general perpetrator blame measure.

**Rape Myth Acceptance.** I measured Rape Myth Acceptance utilizing the shortened Acceptance of Modern Myths About Sexual Aggression scale (AMMSA; Gerger et al., 2007, Sussenbach & Bohner, 2011). Using a 5-point scale (1 = fully disagree, 2 = disagree somewhat, 3 = agree somewhat, 4 = fully agree, 5 = don’t know), participants responded to 9 items that measured acceptance of myths about sexual aggression. Sample items include: “Many women tend to misinterpret a well-meant gesture as ‘sexual assault,’” and “Women like to play coy. This does not mean that they do not want sex.” This scale is significantly correlated with other common Rape Myth Acceptance scales (e.g., Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMA), sex-role stereotyping (SRS), etc.; Gerger et al., 2007). Given the demographics of participants (i.e., predominantly women), I expected that RMA would be relatively low for the sample, given that men tend to accept rape myths more than women (Johnson, Kuck, & Schander, 1997), but it is important to re-emphasize that research finds conflicting evidence about gender and victim blame, particularly when accounting for RMA (see Pollard, 1992; Shotland & Goodstein, 1983). As such, the purpose of this scale was to look at the potential of variations in RMA among
women, and explore if these differences moderate the effects of the primary independent variables.
RESULTS

Manipulation Checks

*Self-Relevance.* I tested whether the perspective taking manipulation successfully shifted the degree to which participants felt the scenario was relevant to them. I found that participants in the high self-relevance condition ($M = 4.94, SD = 1.64$) were more likely to feel close to the victim and that the victimization was relevant to them as compared to participants in the low self-relevance condition ($M = 4.43, SD = 1.65$), $t(197) = 2.22, p = .028$.

*Victim Disclaimer.* To test whether participants actively noticed the disclaimer, which was expected to shift their own ratings of blame, I asked them to indicate the degree to which they believed the article editors engaged in victim blame. Participants who read the disclaimer ($M = 2.63, SD = 1.54$) were significantly less likely to believe that the editors blamed the victim as compared with participants who did not read the disclaimer ($M = 3.18, SD = 1.64$), $t(197) = 2.44, p = .015$. This suggests that they actively noticed the message against victim blame on the part of the article editors.

Dependent Measures

*Victim Blame.* I conducted a 2 (self-relevance: high vs. low) x 2 (victim blame disclaimer: caveat vs. no caveat) ANOVA predicting victim blame. Results indicated that there was a main effect of the victim blame disclaimer, such that participants who received a caveat blamed the victim less than participants who did not receive this message $F(1,195) = 4.747, p = .031$. There was no significant main effect of self-relevance, $F(1,195) = 2.97, p = .086$. 
However, there was a significant interaction between relevance and victim blame disclaimer, $F(1,195) = 4.381$, $p = .038$ (See Figure 1).

Simple effects tests were conducted to further explore this interaction. In situations in which self-relevance was low, there was a significant difference such that participants who received the caveat blamed the victim significantly less than those who did not, $t(195) = 3.05$, $p = .003$. However, when self-relevance was high, there was no difference between the caveat and no caveat conditions, $t(195) = 0.04$, $p = .97$. Further, when comparing participants in the low self-relevance condition who received a caveat to both groups where self-relevance was high, simple effects tests suggested that victim blame did not significantly differ from situations in which there is high self-relevance and a caveat, $t(195) = 0.28$, $p = .78$, nor high self-relevance and no caveat, $t(195) = 0.32$, $p = .75$. This suggests that high self-relevance trends toward reducing the degree to which people blame victims, but this effect is marginal ($p = .086$). However, in the case of low self-relevance, an explicit disclaimer seems to effectively reduce victim blame.
Figure 1: Effects of self-relevance and disclaimer on participant victim blame.

**Behavioral and Characterological Blame.** Additionally, I conducted two 2 (self-relevance: high vs. low) x 2 (victim blame disclaimer: caveat vs. no caveat) ANOVAs predicting both characterological blame and behavioral blame, but no significant main effects, $p$’s > .06, or interactions, $p$’s > .10, emerged.

**Perpetrator Blame.** I conducted a 2 (self-relevance: high vs. low) x 2 (victim blame disclaimer: caveat vs. no caveat) ANOVA predicting perpetrator blame. There was no significant main effect of disclaimer, $F(1,195) = 0.431$, $p = .512$, but there was a significant main effect of relevance, such that participants in the high self-relevance condition blamed the perpetrator more than participants in the low self-relevance condition, $F(1,195) = 7.86$, $p = .006$. Additionally, there was a significant interaction between self-relevance and the disclaimer, $F(1,195) = 4.518$, $p = .035$ (See Figure 2).
Once again, simple effects tests were conducted to further explore this interaction. Similarly, but inverse to victim blame, in situations in which self-relevance was low, there was a significant difference such that participants who received the caveat blamed the perpetrator significantly more than those who did not, $t(195) = 1.91, p = .028$. However, when self-relevance was high, there was no significant difference in perpetrator blame between the caveat and no caveat conditions, $t(195) = 1.052, p = .147$. Further, when comparing participants in the low self-relevance condition who received a caveat to both groups where self-relevance was high, simple effects tests suggested that perpetrator blame did not significantly differ from situations in which there is high self-relevance and a caveat, $t(195) = 0.46, p = .325$, nor high self-relevance and no caveat, $t(195) = 1.53, p = .064$. This suggests that high self-relevance increases the degree to which people blame the perpetrator. And in the case of low self-relevance, an explicit disclaimer seems to increase perpetrator blame, suggesting that the presence of the caveat may redirect blame from the victim toward the perpetrator. However, further research is needed to confirm this hypothesis.
Figure 2: Effects of self-relevance and disclaimer on perpetrator blame.

*Rape Myth Acceptance*. To determine if individual differences in Rape Myth Acceptance moderated these interaction effects of disclaimer and relevance on blame, I conducted 3-way linear regression analyses, predicting these same blame outcomes (i.e., victim blame, behavioral blame, characterological blame, perpetrator blame) from effects coded relevance condition (-1 = low relevance, 1 = high relevance), effects coded disclaimer condition (-1 = no caveat, 1 = caveat), and mean-centered rape myth acceptance. For victim blame as well as characterological and behavioral blame, consistently strong main effects of rape myth acceptance emerged, *p’s* <.001, such that the more that participants held rape myths the more they blamed the victim. However, no significant three way interactions emerged, *p’s*>.17.

Finally, I conducted the same three-way regression analyses predicting perpetrator blame. For perpetrator blame a significant three-way interaction between rape myth acceptance, disclaimer condition, and relevance condition emerged, $\beta = -.287, t(191) = 5.08, p < .001$. The pattern of results (see Figure 3) suggest when relevance was low, rape myth acceptance was most
influential among those who received no disclaimer, such that high RMA was associated with less perpetrator blame. But when relevance was high, RMA was most influential among those who received a caveat, such that greater RMA was associated with increased perpetrator blame.

![Figure 3: Three way interaction predicting perpetrator blame from rape myth acceptance, disclaimer condition, and self-relevance, when a) relevance is low and b) relevance is high.](image)

**Qualitative data.** Participant responses to the qualitative question justifying their rationale for their blame ratings were thematically coded. There were 4 non-exclusive themes that participants expressed in their responses. These themes can be categorized as (1) the victim is not to blame, (2) indirect victim blame, (3) perpetrator blame, and (4) direct victim blame.

Sixty-five percent ($n = 124$) of all respondents specifically stated that the victim was not to blame (e.g., “The student is a victim in this situation and is not to blame.”). However, 20% of those participants ($n = 25$) followed up with a statement about her behavior (e.g., “She is not to blame for his actions. However, she should not ride home with a stranger.”). Twenty-eight percent of all participants highlighted some type of behavior or “preventative measure” that they believed the victim should or should not have done (i.e., she should’ve been more cautious, she shouldn’t have gotten in the car, etc.), which was coded as “indirect blame.”
Additionally, 21.5% of participants \((n = 41)\) explicitly indicated that the blame was on the perpetrator (e.g., “She is not to blame for someone else taking advantage of her. Her assailant is 100% to blame.”). And only one participant explicitly stated that the student was to blame (“This student, and no other person, is responsible for a man sexually assaulting them.”). There were some statements \((n = 23)\) that did not fall into these categories, as they were factual statements about the scenario which could not necessarily be inferred to be blaming behavior (e.g., “The student was impaired”) or miscellaneous remarks that did not specifically fall into any of these “blame” categories (e.g., “It is not her fault that men are trash.”). These analyses were largely exploratory and provide preliminary insight into how participants explicitly explained their blame decisions.
DISCUSSION

This study found that high self-relevance reduces the degree to which people blame a victim of sexual assault. Though these results are contrary to my initial hypothesis, they are consistent with Grubb and Harrower’s (2008) Defensive Attribution Hypothesis, which suggests that increased similarity to victims can reduce victim blame because of a heightened sense of potentially experiencing similar victimization. Thus, people do not blame the victim because they do not want to inadvertently blame themselves if they were to be in a comparable situation. As such, victim blaming is reduced for people who feel that they could potentially experience a similar assault, such as participants for whom the self-relevance of the victim is amplified.

Another mechanism by which these effects of self-relevance might be explained is that the manipulation of self-relevance indirectly impacted empathy for the victim of the assault. As Batson and colleagues (1997) highlight, asking participants to “imagine how they themselves would feel” increases empathy, which can lead to altruistic motivations. This might suggest that participants in the high self-relevance condition were blaming less than those in the low self-relevance condition because they experienced increased empathy. However, these results cannot distinguish whether the reduced blame in high self-relevance conditions is due to (1) the Defensive Attribution Hypothesis, or (2) empathy. Thus, further research is needed to disentangle the two constructs.

It is also important to highlight that I specifically sought to recruit participants for whom the article would already be relevant. That is, I recruited college-aged female participants to
ensure that the scenario would already be quite relevant to participants in the study. As such, levels of self-relevance may have already been relatively higher than the average population. Thus, it is important to consider that the low self-relevance condition still holds some degree of relevance for participants, but over and above this, there was a heightened sense of relevance from the manipulation which not only increased participants’ sense of closeness and relevance to the victim, but also had a clear impact on victim blaming.

Though there were no significant interaction effects between self-relevance and disclaimer on behavioral and characterological blame, the qualitative data strongly suggested that behavioral blame is often utilized, suggesting that participants may believe that the victim is not to blame, but still think that the victims’ behavior should have been different. Further work is needed to understand the connection between participants’ explicit rationale for blame and potentially separate unconscious influences over blame.

Additionally, given that participants had already answered a victim blaming rating, and had been asked to explain this rating, they may have “satiated” their need to blame the victim, which could explain why there were no significant interactions predicting characterological and behavioral blame. Further research could address this by presenting the different ratings of blame in a randomized, counterbalanced order, to ensure that participants are able to answer behavioral and characterological blame items prior to other blame items.

Finally, while my test of the effects of a victim blame disclaimer were relatively exploratory, I wanted to examine potential backlash effects and ensure that an intervention of this nature was not inadvertently harming survivors of sexual assault. Fortunately, this research suggests that the disclaimer seemed to have its intended effect of reducing victim blame when
self-relevance was low. However, when self-relevance was high, the disclaimer did not seem to have an impact on victim blame. This is potentially due to the fact that victim blame is already so low across conditions and, particularly when self-relevance has high, there seemed to be a floor effect in participants ratings of blame. Overall, the disclaimer does not seem to be causing unintentional backlash effects that increase blame toward the victim.

**Conclusion**

These results suggest that, especially when self-relevance is low which is often the case for victims presented in the news or other media, introducing an explicit disclaimer against victim blame can be an effective, low-cost strategy to reduce or mitigate victim blame. Ideally, news sources reporting cases of sexual assault will consider introducing such a disclaimer in order to potentially deter readers from blaming the victim. However, it is important to consider that these effects are largely exploratory, and more research is needed to ensure that there is not a potential backlash to these interventions under different conditions.
APPENDIX A

CONSENT FORM
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Introduction: You are invited to take part in a brief online survey. The study is designed to learn more about people's perceptions and opinions about news stories and articles. It is being conducted by Lina Flores Wolf, for her master’s thesis under the supervision of Yael Granot, Ph.D., in the Loyola University Chicago Psychology department. You must be 18 years or older and female to participate in this study. Please read this page carefully before deciding to proceed with the study. After you complete the study, a thorough written explanation of it will be provided.

CONTENT WARNING: This survey may contain sexual or potentially upsetting content about possibly sexually harassing behaviors. Please only proceed if you are comfortable reading about this topic.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to learn more about people’s opinions on news stories and articles.

Procedures: If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to complete a survey that will take 15 minutes. In this survey, you will:
- Read a news article.
- Respond to several questions about the article and your beliefs.
- Complete basic demographic questions.

Risks/Benefits: Confidentiality will be maintained to the degree permitted by the technology used. Your participation in this online survey involves risks similar to a person’s everyday use of the Internet and consumption of news media. There are no direct benefits to you from participation, but this study may benefit society by providing more information about how people react differently to different situations.

Compensation: If you complete the study, you will receive $0.75 to compensate you for your participation. At the end of the survey you will be given a short code, which you will enter into the MTurk page. This will ensure you are correctly identified as having completed the study and so you can receive payment. If you chose to end participation before completing the study, you will not be compensated. Payments are made via Amazon’s payment system.

Confidentiality: No identifying information will be collected for this study. All data will be associated with a unique identification number (e.g. 101, 102, 103…). The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications, but data will be presented only in the aggregated form. The data will be stored only on secured, private computers belonging to the researchers (due to COVID we no longer have access to secure university computers in our laboratory space), as well as on Qualtrics’ secure servers—see Qualtrics’ privacy policy. For purposes of open science, we may post aggregate anonymized raw data to the open science framework (OSF) or similar portals.
**Voluntary Participation:** Participation in this study is voluntary. If you do not want to be in this study, you do not have to participate. Even if you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or to withdraw from participation at any time without penalty. If you wish to exit the survey, you may do so by closing the browser window. If you complete the anonymous survey and then submit it to the researcher, the researcher will be unable to extract anonymous data from the database should you wish it to be withdrawn. Your decision to participate or not will have no effect on your relationship with Loyola University Chicago.

**Contacts and Questions:** If there is anything about the study or taking part in it that is unclear or that you do not understand, and if you have questions or wish to report a research-related problem, you may contact the faculty sponsor, Dr. Yael Granot, by email at ygranot@luc.edu. For questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Loyola University Office of Research Services at (773) 508-2689.

**Statement of Consent:**
By clicking “I consent”, I affirm that I am at least 18 years of age, which is the minimum age to participate in this study. I also affirm that the purpose and nature of this research have been sufficiently explained, that I have read this consent form, and I agree to participate in this research study.
APPENDIX B

NEWS ARTICLES
Female college student assaulted after a party

CHICAGO, IL. — A female college student was sexually assaulted on Friday in the early morning. According to investigators, the student — who requested to remain anonymous — reported that she went to a party around campus, where she met a man.
The student stated that they had a few drinks together and she was flirting with him, so he offered to drive her home and she accepted.
The student told the investigators that, on the way to her apartment, the man stopped the car as they were driving through a nearby park. Despite the fact that she tried to resist him, he began to have sex with her. The student stated that she was not fully conscious throughout the encounter but told the officer that she had been sexually assaulted. After this incident at the park, he drove her home and left her outside her apartment at around 3 a.m. Afterward, the student went into her apartment and called the authorities to report the incident.
The primary investigator on site suggested that students follow these tips if going to a party:

- Make sure to set up a buddy system to keep in contact with friends
- Be aware of your surroundings when walking at night
- Avoid taking rides from strangers
- If you see something you believe to be suspicious, immediately contact local police or campus security

A message from the editors: We recognize that survivors are not at fault for any crime.
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- Be aware of your surroundings when walking at night
- Avoid taking rides from strangers
- If you see something you believe to be suspicious, immediately contact local police or campus security

A message from the editors: This article was updated to correct the time of the crime.
APPENDIX C

MATERIALS FOR SURVEY
Victim blame measures
1. To what extent is the student to blame for what happened to her in the message you read? [1 = not at all to blame, 7 = extremely to blame]
2. How responsible is the student for what happened to her in the message you read? [1 = not at all responsible, 7 = extremely responsible]
3. In thinking about the questions you just answered, please explain your rating on the extent to which the student is to blame for what happened to her. [open ended]
4. To what extent do you think that the writer of this story believes that victims hold some responsibility and blame for the sexual assault? [1 = does not blame victims at all; 4 = moderate amount of blame toward victims; 7 = does blame victims to a great extent]

Behavioral vs. Characterological Blame measures
Behavioral [1 = completely disagree, 6 = completely agree]:
1. She should not have gone to the party
2. She should not have been drinking
3. She should not have taken a ride home from him
4. She should have been paying attention
5. She should not have flirted with the man
6. This happened because of something she did

Characterological [1 = completely disagree, 6 = completely agree]:
7. She is the kind of person who seems to attract trouble
8. She does not seem to be fully aware of what is going on around her
9. She does not seem like someone who pays attention to her surroundings
10. She is the kind of person that does not think things through
11. She is a weak person
12. This happened because of the kind of person she is

Self-relevance and perceived victimization
1. When reading about the student, to what extent did you think about your own safety? [1 = not at all, 7 = a great deal]
2. How relevant is this attack to you? [1 = not at all relevant, 7 = extremely relevant]
3. To what extent do you feel pity for the student? [1 = no pity at all; 7 = complete pity for her]
4. How close do you feel to the student? [1 = not close at all; 7 = very close]
5. How likely is it that you could face a similar kind of assault? [1 = not at all likely, 7 = extremely likely]
6. If you found yourself in a similar scenario, how likely is it that you would have a few drinks at the party? [1 = not at all likely, 7 = extremely likely]
7. If you found yourself in a similar scenario, how likely is it that you would take a car ride from the man? [1 = not at all likely, 7 = extremely likely]
8. If you found yourself in a similar scenario, how likely is it that you would allow the man to stop the car? [1 = not at all likely, 7 = extremely likely]
9. If you found yourself in a similar scenario, how likely is it that you would have taken other actions to prevent an assault? [1 = not at all likely; 7 = extremely likely]
10. How well do you believe she knew the man? [1 = not at all well; 7 = extremely well]
11. To what extent was it foreseeable that the man would sexually assault her? [1 = not at all foreseeable; 7 = extremely foreseeable]

**Perpetrator Blame**
1. To what extent is the man to blame for what happened in the article you read? [1 = not at all to blame, 7 = extremely to blame]
2. How responsible is the man for what happened in the article you read? [1 = not at all responsible, 7 = extremely responsible]
3. To what extent do you agree or disagree that his actions constitute sexual assault? [1 = not at all, 7 = a great deal]

**Acceptance of Modern Myths About Sexual Aggression (AMMSA) scale** [1 = fully disagree, 2 = disagree somewhat, 3 = agree somewhat, 4 = fully agree, 5 = don’t know]
1. Many women tend to misinterpret a well-meant gesture as a “sexual assault”.
2. It is a biological necessity for men to release sexual pressure from time to time.
3. A lot of women strongly complain about sexual infringements for no real reason, just to appear emancipated.
4. Any woman who is careless enough to walk through “dark alleys” at night is partly to be blamed if she is raped.
5. When a woman starts a relationship with a man, she must be aware that the man will assert his right to have sex.
6. Women often accuse their husbands of marital rape just to retaliate for a failed relationship.
7. Interpreting harmless gestures as “sexual harassment” is a popular weapon in the battle of the sexes.
8. If a woman invites a man to her home for a cup of coffee after a night out this means that she wants to have sex.
9. Women like to play coy. This does not mean that they do not want sex.

**Belief in a Just World** [1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree]

**Personal BJW**
1. I believe that by and large, I deserve what happens to me.
2. I am usually treated fairly.
3. I believe that I usually get what I deserve.
4. Overall, events in my life are just.
5. In my life, injustice is the exception rather than the rule.
6. I believe that most of the things that happen in my life are fair.
7. I think that important decisions that are made concerning me are usually just.

**Global BJW**
8. I think basically the world is a just place.
9. I believe that, by and large, people get what they deserve.
10. I am confident that justice always prevails over injustice.
11. I am convinced that in the long run people will be compensated for injustices.
12. I firmly believe that injustices in all areas of life (e.g., professional, family, politics) are the exception rather than the rule.
13. I think people try to be fair when making important decisions.

Attention Check
- People vary in the amount they pay attention to these kinds of surveys. Some take them seriously and read each question, whereas others go very quickly and barely read the questions at all. If you have read this question carefully, please select ‘very frequently’.

Demographics
1. Please indicate your age [open ended]
2. Please indicate your gender [select all that apply]
   1. Male
   2. Female
   3. Non-binary/gender non-conforming
   4. Transgender
   5. Prefer not to say
3. Please specify your race/ethnicity [select all that apply]
   1. Black or African American
   2. White
   3. Latinx or Hispanic
   4. Asian
   5. Southeast Asian
   6. Native American
   7. Pacific Islander
   8. Other [open ended]
4. Please indicate the U.S. region where you currently live:
   1. Northeast
   2. Midwest
   3. South
   4. West
   5. Other [open ended]
5. Overall, on the following scale of political orientation, from extremely liberal to extremely conservative, where would you place yourself? [9-point scale, 1: extremely liberal, 9: extremely conservative]
6. Have you ever personally experienced something like the event described in the scenario? [Y/N/Prefer not to say]
7. Has anyone close to you (e.g., friend or family) ever experienced something like the event described in the scenario? [Y/N/Prefer not to say]
8. Has someone you know (e.g., acquaintance) ever experienced something like the event described in the scenario? [Y/N/Prefer not to say]
APPENDIX D

DEBRIEFING FORM
Thank you for participating in our study!

The purpose of this study was to determine if a disclaimer against victim blame can affect whether people blame survivors of assault. We wanted to test whether the inclusion of a disclaimer changes victim blame. We also wanted to find out if an increased sense of self-relevance of the survivor and of the crime have an impact on victim blame. This news article was not real and it was adapted from a vignette from a previous study looking at victim blame of survivors of sexual assault (van Prooijen & van den Bos, 2009).

If you or someone you know has been the target of sexual harassment or assault, or you were upset by the content of this study, please make use of the following resources to talk to someone about your experience:
24/7 National Sexual Assault Hotline: 1-800-656-4673 or live chat at https://hotline.rainn.org/online?_ga=2.7254005.632298422.1569343361-910794702.1569343361
24/7 Equal Rights Advocates: 415-621-0505 and https://www.equalrights.org
Equal Employment Opportunity Commission: 1-800-669-4000
To learn more about sexual harassment research, feel free to consult the researchers at lfloreswolf@luc.edu or ygranot@luc.edu.

Lastly, we ask that you not discuss this experiment with other people that may also participate in this study, as that may bias individuals who may become participants in this study at a later time. If you have any questions regarding this particular research project or psychological research in general, please feel free to contact the people below.

Please click the 'next' button below to submit your responses.

Yael Granot, Ph.D.
Coffey Hall, 234
Loyola University Chicago
ygranot@luc.edu

For information or questions regarding research ethics and guidelines, please contact:

Office of Research Services
6525 N. Sheridan Road
Granada Center, Suite 400
(773) 508-2689
ORS@luc.edu
REFERENCE LIST


Cowan, K. P. & Granot, Y. (2020). *Victim Blame Loyola Alert Study (Fall 2020)*. Unpublished manuscript, Department of Psychology, Loyola University Chicago, Chicago, United States.


VITA

Lina Flores Wolf was born and raised in Toluca, Mexico State, Mexico. Ms. Flores Wolf attended Loyola University Chicago, where she earned a Bachelor of Science in Psychology and a Bachelor of Arts in Women’s Studies and Gender Studies, with High Honors, in 2021, and Master of Arts in Applied Social Psychology in 2022.

While at Loyola, Lina was a member of various organizations seeking to address gender-based violence on college campuses, including CHANGE, a Wellness Center Sponsored Student Organization. This led Ms. Flores Wolf to focus her research on sexual assault advocacy, and efforts to reduce victim blame and support survivors. In addition, Ms. Flores Wolf volunteers for The Line, a confidential help line for students/faculty/staff and members of the Loyola community who are seeking resources regarding gender-based violence. Flores Wolf also received the Thomas M. Kennedy Memorial Award for Outstanding Service from the Psychology Department in 2020, the Women & Children First Book Award for Outstanding Major in Women’s Studies and Gender Studies, and the Undergraduate Women's Leadership Award for the Gannon Center for Women in Leadership in 2021.

Currently, Flores Wolf lives in Chicago, Illinois, and is looking forward to continuing her post-academic career in the city.