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Reasons Behind Blaming Female Victims

After I read the poem, "Girl," by Jamaica Kincaid, I found one interesting saying:

"don't eat fruits on the street ---flies will follow you" (Kincaid 321). It means that girls

should not flirt or seem to be flirtatious; otherwise, they will get themselves in trouble. It's

not hard to see why the mom in the poem would say that to her daughter, because beautiful

girls always get people's attention. Who do you think boys would pay attention to, a nerdy

girl in the science lab or the hottest girl in the bar? In "Girl," the mom wants her daughter to

be aware that who she truly becomes is insignificant compared to what other people think of

her; how she displays herself matters the most. Similarly in our time, only close friends or

family identify the intrinsic characteristics of a girl while the public view her through her

appearance, both social media appearance and physical appearance. People assume a girl to

be sociable when she has thousands of followers on Instagram. People assume a girl to be

kindhearted when she posts pictures of volunteering at a small church. People assume a girl is rich when she carries the limited edition Chanel handbag. People also assume a girl who dresses less covered to be a "tease." We live in a world where people are always concerned about the image.

"Girl" reminds me of a video taken by one subway passenger on Chinese social media. In that video, three men try to hold down to another guy while a young lady with a short skirt is crying. The young lady experienced sexual harassment by the guy who got controlled and three young men stood up for her. At first, I thought this is just a typical video that spread a message about justice. However, as I browsed through the reviews under the video, fury, and sorrow filled my mind. Some people commented that the young lady should not wear a mini skirt if she wants to sit in a public environment. Some people mentioned that she makes herself a target for those wicked people. Some people even said she deserves what had happened to her. An unfortunate victim suddenly becomes a stupid slut. As a result, I'm curious about if the public thinks female victims should be held responsible for sexual harassment because of how they dress or not. I speculate a lot of people would believe female victims take partial responsibility if they wear exposing clothes.

I started my research by getting on the UGA Libraries website. After I clicked the

course name of my English class in the "Course Guides," I got many good databases for

article research. I looked at the description of each database by placing the mouse on it, and I

decided to mainly use three of them, which are *Academic Search Complete*, *JSTOR*, and

GenderWatch to find my sources. In each of these databases, I used the advanced search

function to filter out irrelevant sources with keys words. On the first line, I typed "Sexual

Harassment OR Sexual Assault." Then, I added more details such as "Blaming OR

Responsibility" to better locate articles or research papers. After I finished reading an article,

I scrolled down the page to see more sources that shared a focus suggested by the database.

Taking notes in my working annotated bibliography while reading, I recorded citations and

summaries to assist me in targeting valuable sources. After all, I decided to use four sources

to support my conclusion and analysis.

I began this project expecting the public to think the female victim should be

responsible for sexual assault or sexual harassment due to the way they dressed. I confirmed

this and I found that there are different aspects to see why the public blame the female

victims. One of the reasons why the public criticizes the female victims is the influence of the

culture. In the article, "Blaming the Victims," by Lyndsey Christoffersen, she provides

evidence that even the Christian Church sometimes led people to judge female victims.

Christoffersen introduces a phrase called "rape culture" and this phrase is "not just about rape

itself, but our reaction to all forms of sexual harassment" (Christoffersen 31). The church

expects women to fully cover up their bodies because they think "female bodies are often

called 'a stumbling block' that can cause Christian men to sin" (Christoffersen 31). When

church people are supposed to teach men to control their mind and make the right decisions,

they instead spread the idea that women should protect themselves by dressing less alluring.

What is more, people get the idea that girls can only be seen as good students when they are

in proper dress code early from school. During the research conducted by Muhanguzi at

schools in Uganda, female teachers explained how the dress code of long dresses protects

female students from sexual harassment by male students and male teachers (Muhanguzi

141). These indirect lessons taught by school make people believe that it is the girl's

responsibility to dress up chaste; otherwise, girls would get themselves in trouble. The public

thinks female victims with provocative dressing deserve what they have suffered due to the

vast impact brought by the environment where they live.

Besides the factor of the culture, people's rational logic also plays a huge role when they evaluate female victims. Amy Grubb's research explains the reasoning behind the shaming of victims. Grubb's discussion of attribution theory talks about "how the social perceiver uses the information to arrive at causal explanations for events. It examines what information is gathered and how it is combined to form causal judgment" (Grubb 444). People apply attribution theory in two forms: internal attribution (relates to causing factors working on internal characteristics) and external attribution (relates to causing factors from the outside world) (Grubb 444). For example, the public is less likely to blame female victims when they connect the cause of sexual harassment to the crowded subway that gives the culprit convenience. On the other hand, people would have more judgments when they ascribe the cause to what the victim has done before or during the incident. Irina Anderson states in her research that, "a drunk or sexily dressed woman would be perceived more negatively than a woman who is described as sober or conservatively dressed" (Richardson qtd. in Anderson, Edmonds qtd. in Anderson). Paying attention to the appearance, the public applies the internal attribution and is told by their logical thinking to shame on female victims. Furthermore, the just world theory is also commonly used by people to place blame

on sexual assault victims, "according to this perspective, one has a motivational need to believe that the world is a fair place and that behavioral outcomes are deserved" (Grubb 444). A traditional Chinese proverb shares a similar idea: *Whatever you get is whatever you put*. Thus, people draw a conclusion based merely on a belief that the world treats everyone equally, and those female victims must have broken the balance first. Despite the horrible outcome, the public focuses more on the causation because they evaluate the case through rational thinking or logical theories.

The process of finding an answer for my research question makes me know more information relating to the opinions of the public about female victims and reasons behind the victim shaming culture. Although at first, I only wanted to know whether or not the public think female victims should be held responsible for sexual harassment because of how they dress, I end up not only confirming my hypothesis but I also figured out both culture influence and logical causation lead people to blame. I cannot control the way in which people relate to the cause and effect, because everyone has different thinking style. However, it is possible to make changes and eventually affect the blaming culture. For instance, teachers should emphasize students in both genders respect each other and take responsibility

for your fault rather than checking female student's skirt length. When we stay in an

environment requiring individuals to introspect, I believe there will be less judging towards

female victims.

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