Finding Sarah Everard: A Critical Discourse Analysis Exploring the First Two Weeks of News Media Coverage Following Her Disappearance and Murder

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On March 3, 2021, Sarah Everard, a 33-year-old marketing executive, was last seen walking around Clapham Common in South London. Through the lens of a content and discourse analysis, this article analyzes a total of 525 news media headlines, covering the first 2 weeks of her disappearance and murder. This analysis unpacks the pedagogic process of the mediated performance of violence against women and girls (VAWG) to principally argue that the British news media construct a narrative arc that invites audiences to follow a curated ideal victim. The utility of this narrative leads Sarah to become a sympathetic narrative citation, to be called on by various interest groups when negotiating social performances of VAWG. Crucially, this article interrogates the power and affect behind news media performances of VAWG that privilege an ideological conception of the ideal victim, a disturbed perpetrator, a period of mourning, and a neoliberal discourse of justice.

Keywords: performance, Sarah Everard, outrage, U.K. news media, violence against women and girls

Since last year on this day, these are the women killed in the United Kingdom where a man has been convicted or charged as the primary perpetrator in the case: Vanita Nowell; Tracey Kidd; Nelly Moustafa; Zahida Bi; Josephine Kaye; Shadika Mohsin Patel; Maureen Kidd; Wendy Morse; Nageeba Alariqy; Elsie Smith; Kelly Stewart; Gwendoline Bound; Ruth Williams; Victoria Woodhall; Kelly Fitzgibbons, who was killed alongside her two daughters; Caroline Walker; Katie Walker; Zobaidah Salangy; Betty Dobbin; Sonia Calvi; Maryan Ismail; Daniela Espirito Santo; Ruth Brown, Denise Keane-Barnett-Simmons; Jadwiga Szczygielska; Emma Jane McParland; Louise Aitchison; Silke Hartshorne-Jones; Hyacinth Morris; Louise Smith; Claire Parry; Aya Hachem; Melissa Belshaw; Yvonne Lawson McCann; Lyndsey Alcock; Aneta Zdun; Nikoleta Zdun; Mandy Houghton; Amy-Leanne Stringfellow; Bibaa Henry; Nicole Smallman; Dawn Bennett; Gemma Marjoram; Karolina Zinkeviciene; Rosemary Hill; Jackie Hoadley; Khloemae Loy; Kerry Woolley; Shelly Clark; Bernadette Walker; Stella Frew; Dawn Fletcher; Deborah Jones; Patrycja Wyrebek; Therasia Gordon; Esther Egbon; Susan Baird; Balvinder Gahir; Lynda Cooper;

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Lorraine Cox; Suzanne Winnister; Maria Howarth; Abida Karim; Saman Mir Sacharvi; Vian Mangrio; Poorna Kaameshwari Sivaraj, who was killed alongside her three-year-old son; Louise Rump; Julie Williams; Rhonda Humphreys; Nicole McGregor; Angela Webber; Carole Wright; Sarah Smith; Ildiko Bettison; Kimberley Deakin; Marie Gladders; Paula Leather; Caroline Kayll; Lauren Mae Bloomer; Hansa Patel; Helen Bannister; Marta Vento; Andreia Rodriguez Guilherme; Joanna Borucka; Azaria Williams; Catherine Granger; Eileen Dean; Sue Addis; Carol Hart; Jacqueline Price; Mary Wells; Tiprat Argatu; Christie Frewin; Souad Bellaha; Ann Turner; N'Taya Elliott-Cleverley; Rose Marie Tinton; Ranjit Gill; Helen Joy; Emma Robertson; Nicole Anderson; Linda Maggs; Carol Smith; Sophie Moss; Christina Rowe; Susan Hannaby; Michelle Lizanec; Wieslawa Mierzejewska; Judith Rhead; Anna Ovsyannikova; Tina Eyre; Katie Simpson; Bennylyn Burke and her two-year-old daughter; Samantha Heap; Geetika Goyal; Imogen Bohajczuk; and Wenjing Xu. There has been much debate over what I would say at the end of the list. Her name rings out across all our media—we have all prayed that the name of Sarah Everard would never be on any list. Let us pray every day and work every day to make sure that nobody's name ends up on this list again. (Jess Phillips, Labour member of Parliament [MP], U.K. Parliament, 2021, 02:36)

I open with this quote from Labor MP Jess Phillips at a parliamentary debate on International Women's Day 2021. Speaking quite passionately, Phillips recounts a total of 128 names and concludes that "killed women are not vanishingly rare; killed women are common" (Parliament TV, 2022, 02:35). In the days leading up to this debate, the name Sarah Everard had run circles around much of the British public news media sphere. As such, the significance of Everard's name at the end of this list is powerful. Amid a global pandemic, her story became our story, her disappearance was our loss, and her death was our tragedy. Against this background, her body became enshrined in British media history. Overlooking questions of whose vulnerability is made obvious and why, Everard's disappearance and death marked a media event, a spectacle, and a display of high drama that enabled the British public to mourn and remember her name.

From its narrative beginning on March 3, 2021, initial media coverage drew attention to the body of this 33-year-old marketing executive who had graduated from the University of Durham. She was last seen walking around Clapham Common in South London after visiting a friend and reported missing by her boyfriend when she failed to meet him the next day (Badshah, 2021a; Cottle, 2021; Dalton, 2021; Dresch, 2021). It was later discovered that on her way home, Everard was apprehended by Wayne Couzens, a serving Metropolitan (Met) Police officer, under the guise of her breaching U.K. COVID-19 guidelines. Couzens drove Everard to Kent, where he ended her ordeal by raping her. Her body was later burned inside a refrigerator, with only dental records identifying her remains on March 10. Shortly after, on March 12, Couzens was officially charged with kidnapping and murder (BBC News, 2021).

Certainly, there is a great deal to say about the case of Sarah Everard, but at its core, her death gripped the nation's media for more than two weeks and prompted an outpour of mediated moral outrage. Intuitively, however, and prior research can confirm, we know that there are several problems with how violence against women and girls (VAWG) has been mediated (see also Abu-Lughod, 2013; Gill, 2007;

Mohanty, Russo, & Torres, 1991). Consequently, through a critical discourse analysis of headlines covering the period from March 3, 2021, to March 17, 2021, and with particular attention to performance theory as both a theoretical frame and method, this article makes three main points. First, I argue that the news media performance enacted during the first two weeks of coverage following Everard's disappearance and murder fulfills a simplistic narrative arc encompassing an ideal victim, a distanced perpetrator, and a period of mourning before concluding with a neoliberal solution–based discourse. Under this reasoning, the performance of news is seen as a system of power. This system presents us with frames to depict sexual violence, which is critical in influencing attitudes, beliefs, and attributions of blame and responsibility. My second argument contributes to this understanding and builds on the reasoning to assert that in creating the ideal victim, Everard's body and victimhood no longer belong to her. Rather, I use the term narrative artifact to describe how Everard's body is used in social performances when negotiating discourses of VAWG. Finally, I will briefly examine the neoliberal rhetorical devices used in the discourse of solutions. Crucially, this discussion highlights the contradictory and serious implications of mediated performances of VAWG and the continuous questions we must ask of ourselves and the news media.

Performing VAWG in the News Media

Richard Schechner (1985), in his book *Between Theater and Anthropology*, distinguishes two main realms of performance theory, both of which interact at a personal and social level: The first considers human behavior as a type of performance, while the second considers more "typical art 'forms" that include performances within the theater or dance. Extending this argument, Schechner (1985) reorients his discussion toward the TV news media, describing it as a performance and space for liminality, whereby the use of a ritual (the use of an essentialist format relying on character repetition, including that of the storyteller, event, hero, victim, and villain) asserts that "life is theater and this is it" (Schechner, 1985, p. 312). In other words, each ritual depends on the repetition of certain ideas or images (in other words, stereotypes). This definition of ritual can be extended to news media as an institution in and of itself. Framed within a given time and space, these performances in the coverage of violence are similar because "the ritual is in the format, in the programming, not in the content as such" (Schechner, 1985, p. 315). Indeed, in this article, I will rely heavily on this understanding of performance and repetition when discussing the news media's construction of VAWG, most of which relies heavily on specific embodiments of victimhood.

While VAWG may be considered endemic across the globe, the concept of violence presents us with what some may refer to as a continuum that involves what Gill Hague refers to as physical, sexual, verbal, and emotional abuses of power at the individual, group, and social levels (Hague, 2021). This, unfortunately, encompasses a broad range of domains that include rape, coercive control, domestic abuse, honor killings, sexual harassment, and female genital mutilation (to name a few). Typical media performances of this continuum tend to spotlight isolated events rather than social phenomena that sit across this spectrum of violence. Predominantly, within this performance, there is an implicit understanding of who the "ideal victim" of sexual violence is within Western news media coverage: Usually depicted as White, middle-class, well-educated, young, and normatively attractive (Benedict, 1993).

Against this definition, the mediated performance of Everard's body by the news media should come as no surprise. Specifically, it is important in the British media landscape to comment on class status,

which invariably plays a notable role in framing news narratives. This is particularly salient when you consider that British journalists are more likely to have been raised in households where a parent has worked or is working in a higher-level occupation. This is but one measure that can be used to capture key determinants of social class. While reemphasizing the general need to avoid the essentialism that, in this case, would reduce all media performances to class relations, class is neither the only frame for analysis nor the only identity marker being performed. As Judith Butler's (1990) writings on performativity reassert, identity is something that is created through acts of performance that presuppose exterior pressure and scripts. As such, the repeated mediated performance of the "ideal victim" is bound to markers where class plays a significant role that enables care for certain bodies to appear normal: A care that sustains notions of hegemonic cultural capital that extends specific regimes of representation to regimes of believability (Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2022; Hall, 1997).

Related findings by media scholars include how the focus on the event-ness of the phenomenon decontextualizes abuse, challenges notions of respectability, and simultaneously promotes the language of empowerment (Mendes, 2012; Soothill & Walby, 1991; Walter, 2010). As oppositional movements demand alternative coverage, journalists and news media may change how they perceive their audiences (Clark, 2016; Hart & Hart, 2018). This can result in an adjustment of the news media's performances of violence, with new considerations made for what is newsworthy and interesting and how it is produced and discussed. However, a great deal of care should be taken over the degree to which news media performances of violence can shift. As Todd Gitlin (1972) discusses, audiences must believe that the narratives they are viewing are not only interesting but true. In general, then, the repetition of performances of VAWG through stereotypes offers journalists a frame within which they can easily connect broad social audiences to an individualized victim, promoting the idea of a social center of belonging and a means to perform and work through emotions collectively. Therefore, even when counter-hegemonic discourses seek to shift narrative visibility of understanding abuse and violence, the vulnerability of news media changes is ultimately still conducive to a news media's political economy, wider societal and ideological boundaries, and personal experiences (both in and outside the newsroom).

Morality, Victimhood, and the Missing White Woman

Mediated performances of victimhood are affected by conditions of race alongside aforementioned intersectional identities that refer to class, age, and sexuality. Drawing on the extensive literature within critical race theory, a key and emerging phenomenon within this discourse relates to the missing White woman syndrome, a term first attributed to American news anchor Gwen Ifill (Bonilla-Silva, 2012; Collins, 2002; Stefancic & Delgado, 1995). In its most popular usage, the term missing White woman has often been attributed to excessive news media reporting of missing female bodies that are White. Prominent critical race scholar Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2012) categorized this racial component of missing White women as a form of racial grammar through which we produce and reproduce racial order, belonging, and the notion of the universal. In the United Kingdom, the discourse surrounding Whiteness and White privilege operates within a larger framework that prioritizes class-based analyses over considerations of racial identity. This perspective is shaped by conceptions of the post-racial, which emphasizes the diminishing significance of racial factors relative to socioeconomic class distinctions. Nevertheless, it remains imperative to acknowledge the enduring impact of historical legacies and the ongoing systemic process of racialization in

Britain as well as the subsequent effect of this on the lived experiences of racialized communities. While class-based disparities indeed hold a disproportionate weight, an understanding of inequity in the visibility of media coverage requires the concurrent exploration of White privilege and the persistent racial disparities.

In other words, one may consider the following list of prominent cases involving missing White women such as Madeleine McCann, Jessica Lunsford, Hannah Graham, Grace Millane, and most recently, Sarah Everard and Gabby Petito. Their stories may not be exactly identical, but these women are well known to the public because of news media coverage that ignited the moment they disappeared. We know these women; we care about their victimhood. Our identification with these women bestows on them a lifetime of celebrity, where their bodies become artifacts that connect us to structures of violence. These victims are persons worthy of not only our but also our future publics, respect, humanity, and care. Thus, this subtle privileging of White bodies maintains a socially constructed Western racial hierarchy where the White body is the universal template worthy of an ethics of care. Fundamentally, however, the goal is not to replace one sensational missing female case with another: A White girl with a brown girl, a university student with a sex worker but to consider why and how our understanding of morality, victim, and victimhood alongside news media rituals affect the framing and broader understanding of VAWG.

Methodology

From the initial coverage to the narrative end, the news media follows Everard, listens to her loved ones, and critically investigates her villain until we see her justice. To explore this news performance, I ran a search of news media articles on LexisNexis, using the search term "Sarah Everard" between March 3 and March 17, 2021. This period captures the initial moments of her disappearance on March 3, 2021, the first nine days of initial coverage before her body was found in Kent on March 12, and the early moments of outrage that include the arrest of Wayne Couzens and the vigils held in her honor.

For this study, I ran a search that only included the U.K. press. To ensure a manageable sample for data analysis, I limited my scope to only six major U.K. news media organizations: The *Independent,* the *Guardian* (London), the *Metro, Daily Mail* (*Mail on Sunday, Mail online),* the *Mirror* and the *Telegraph* (*Telegraph Sunday,* the *Daily Telegraph* [London]). These news media outlets are among the most highly circulated and read online in the United Kingdom and thus likely predictors of having an expansive reach across the broader British public. These outlets are categorized into two principal types: Broadsheets and tabloids. While broadsheet journalism is usually known for its in-depth reporting style, tabloids are frequently associated with their sensationalism, shorter articles, and attention-grabbing headlines. For my sample, I connected the reporting of the *Independent*, the *Guardian*, and the *Telegraph* with the traditional broadsheet. In contrast, the *Metro*, the *Daily Mail*, and the *Mirror* were grouped as tabloids. While these newspapers cater to a wide range of audiences with varying political preferences, and their headlines, tone, and content reflect these differences, it is beyond the scope of this article to capture all the nuances in individual reporting. Instead, the principal aim is to connect to performances of mediated news coverage of Everard's disappearance and murder that inform the process of meaning making of VAWG among news outlets that broadly share an ideological, social position.

In total, my search produced 581 news articles, but after cleaning, my total sample stood at 525. Given the size and scale of my sample, I decided to focus on news media headline analysis rather than the articles in their completeness. Headlines fulfill many crucial cultural and performative functions for the news media because they engage and orient the reader's attention as well as draw attention to important news elements that may be contained within the article itself. Indeed, the linguistic construction of headlines offers a glimpse into news media's framing and ideological understandings of issues. As such, news headlines, as a form of media discourse, are not just formulated without any recourse to society or social structures. Rather, the narrative and immediacy built through news media headlines produce an important network of social relationships and issues that must be explored as they form the foundations for media articles and, as such, are critical and sociological sites for discourse analysis.

The headlines were coded through NVivo and produced six coding frames: Morality, policing, solutions, victim, villain, and spectacle (see Table 1). These coding categories were necessary to narrow down the sample and identify the frequency of subject matter designations, the characteristics within certain frames, and how these characterizations are performed. Separately, the computer software package R was used to count the frequency of keywords within each theme (see Table 1).

Table 1. Narrative Frames in Newspaper Headline Depictions of Sarah Everard's Murder and Disappearance.

Frame	Brief Description	Framing Example
Morality	The headline should involve the public use of language that makes a distinction between good and evil and right and wrong and justifies individual or collective action	"Sarah Everard's Disappearance Should Shock Us Into Overturning Centuries of Inequality" (*The Independent*, 2021)
Policing	Explicit reference to police, policing, police work, or the criminal justice system; excludes reference to vigils	"Met Police Ramp up Search for Missing Woman in South London" (Badshah, 2021a)
Solutions	Solutions must follow the murder of Sarah Everard	"Men Must Challenge Other Men on Women's Safety, Campaigner Says" (Campbell, 2021)
Victim	Descriptions of Sarah Everard from her friends, family, or other public figures	"Sarah Everards Family Statement: 'Our Bright and Beautiful Daughter was a Shining Example to us all'" (Davies, 2021)
Villain	Descriptions or reactions concerning Wayne Couzens	"Police Officer Arrested Wasn't on Duty When She Vanished" (Kitching, 2021)
Spectacle	Presence of the words: Clash, clashes, arrests, detained, protest, vigil, crowds, reclaim.	"Police Seeking to Block Reclaim These Streets Vigils Says Organisers" (Badshah, 2021b)

Choice of Method
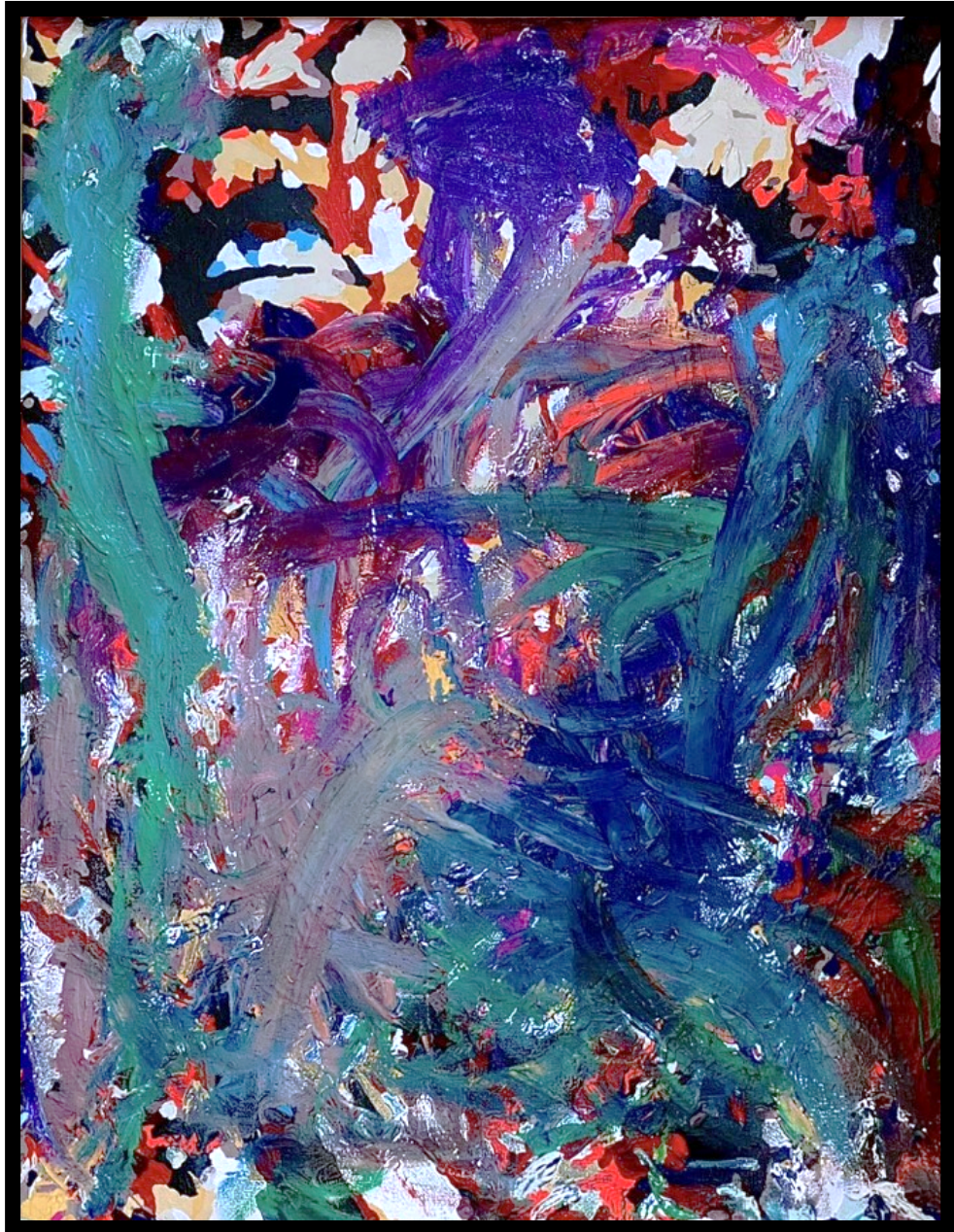
Figure 1. "The Lost Woman," painted during the week of Sarah Everard's disappearance (Gill, 2021).

Figure 2. "Innocens," painted during the analysis phase of this article (Gill, 2022).

I would like to draw attention to the work of Østern, Jusslin, Knudsen, Maapalo, and Bjørkøy (2021), who contribute to scholarship concerning the performative research paradigm. Principally, this alternative epistemological and ontological approach to research, in part, emphasizes the role of diffractive methodology. In its most general usage, diffractive methodology responds to the fact that researchers and methods are intertwined with politics and social norms, a point that I must acknowledge, given my location and positionality at the time of Everard's disappearance. I embrace the performance research paradigm and share Figures 1 and 2, which reflect an affective process of epistemology detailing how I have changed as a consequence of the research. Embracing Østern et al. (2021) research space whereby "learning/be(com)ing/knowing is always in-becoming," my combined approach of discourse analysis and the performance research paradigm embraces the diversity of ethical dimensions and analysis amongst an evolving frame of understanding (p. 1).

Contributing to this, Figure 1 highlights my personal reaction to the initial coverage of Everard's disappearance. At a time of COVID-19 restrictions, innocent activities like visiting friends or exercising were placed under heightened scrutiny due to lockdown rules. However, amid this, the concept of Everard's innocence stood out all the more, as echoed by Priti Patel, the home secretary at the time of Everard's disappearance, in the headline: "My Heartache and That of Others Can Be Summed Up in Just Five Words, She Was Just Walking Home" (Owen, 2021).

Therefore, this recognition of worthiness or ascription of a victim to victimhood serves as a reference point for acquiring moral value. This value produces a body that is granted mediated emotional responses of both empathy and outrage. Furthermore, Figure 2 embraces contradictory feelings encountered during my analysis phase. The main implication overshadows my previous conceptualizations of victimhood and signaled instead how mediated news performances produce a structure of affective communication against which we and the news media maneuver public discourse to consider whose suffering and communities are deserving (read: worthy) of our attention and moral recourse. As my analysis will discuss, this shaping sustains a body politics that privileges an embodiment of victimhood that renders victims with an impossible ideal within which they must be seen as both morally pure and passive in instigating their misfortune.

News Media Coverage of Sarah Everard Over Time

The analysis showed that from March 3 to March 17, 2021, a total of 525 articles were written related to the disappearance and murder of Sarah Everard. Differentiation of these articles by outlet showed that almost a third of them came from the *Mirror*. Almost a quarter of articles were from the British online newspaper, the *Independent*, followed sequentially by the *Daily Mail*, *Telegraph*, the *Guardian*, and the *Metro*. The largest frame within this coverage is the spectacle frame (~31%) of the sample, followed, respectively, by the policing frame (~29%), morality frame (~23%), victim frame (~14%), solutions frame (~14%), and the villain frame (~12%).

As a quick overview of events during the very beginning of this data collection period shows, Everard was reported as last seen walking around Clapham Common in South London after visiting a friend and was confirmed as missing by her boyfriend when she failed to meet him the next day (Dalton, 2021). It was later discovered that on her way home, Everard was apprehended by Wayne Couzens, a serving Met Police officer, under the guise of her breaching COVID-19 guidelines. Couzens drove Everard to Kent, where he ended her ordeal by raping her. Her body was later burned inside a refrigerator, with only dental records identifying her remains on March 10. Shortly after, on March 12, Couzens was officially charged with kidnapping and murder (BBC News, 2021).

Referencing back to these key points, the frames identified in the analysis reiterate how the two-week period follows a detailed narrative performance that locates an ideal victim, a disturbed perpetrator, and a period of mourning before arriving at justice by evoking a neoliberal solution–based dialogue. Certainly, the victim frame fixes characteristics of innocence and beauty that reflect current literature on the missing White woman syndrome. This is further compounded through both the morality and villain frame. Within the morality frame, there are explicit details within all headlines that lean on Everard's

innocence as a means to evoke greater prominence into the conversation for the protection of certain women from violence. Drawing on phrases in the headlines such as "We are All Feeling the Emotional Toll of Cases Like Sarah Everard's" (Richards, 2021) and "Every Woman Can Relate to Fear on the Streets Says Patel Home Secretary" (Stewart, 2021), the British audience is collectively invited to recognize Everard's body as a signifier for shared societal duty to combat violence against women. Crucially, then, unlike the 128 names on Philips's list, the name Sarah Everard is unique for its mediated focus that gives her depth and complexity, inviting our wider sympathy and care.

Relatedly, captured within the villain frame is the body of Wayne Couzens, which is associated with terms such as "sick" or "mentally ill." In particular, the use of words such as shock or unprecedented within headlines indicates that Couzens' family found his behavior surprising despite previous accounts of being inappropriate and aggressive. This sentiment is particularly reflected by many of Couzens' former colleagues who state, "As a Serving Police Officer, I'm Horrified That the Sarah Everard Suspect is One of Our Own" (*The Independent*, 2021) as well as authoritative figure Cressida Dick, who states in a headline that she "Is Utterly Appalled After Policeman Arrested in Missing Sarah Everard Case" (Shadwell, 2021). In all instances in this frame, Couzens is depicted as a disturbed man; he is an exception and testament to the phrase: Not all men and not all police. His actions are described as rare and unexpected; he acts as an individual and not a product of a society of complex power relations, misogyny, and capitalism. In short, he is a bad man whose incarceration is enough to conclude this part of the mediated perpetrator's performance.

Furthermore, much of the initial coverage from my sample is focused on the Met's response to the disappearance and regular police work during this period. However, the greater significance and controversy that follows the Met is found within the spectacle frame, which predominantly captures the aftermath of the vigils held in Everard's name. Therefore, it is of considerable interest that most news articles peaked after March 11, centering around March 15 (Figure 3). An exception to this trend was the *Metro*. However, this period captured by the spectacle frame remains significant for our mediated performance. Specifically, within this time frame, the activist group Reclaim These Streets formed in South London. This formerly small group of women was set up principally to find a forum for publicly grieving the loss of Everard and foster a sense of solidarity against a growing undercurrent of precarity regarding women's safety. This sentiment was observed considerably between March 10 and March 11.

The attention to the words *reclaims* and *safe* within these headlines reiterates the additional labor of safety work that most women perform, sometimes unconsciously, in response to the possibility of violence or harassment from men in public spaces. Implicit within this coverage was the underlying moral violation of Everard's death that alerted us (read: the British public) to the need to take back control of a fundamental human right of feeling safe when walking down the street. Key British figures such as the Duchess of Cambridge, Kate Middleton, strengthened this moral imperative, with the headlines stating, "Maskless Kate Middleton Lays Daffodils From Kensington Palace as She Pays Emotional Visit to Sarah Everard Memorial 'Because She Remembers What it Felt Like to Walk Around London at Night'" (Jewers, 2021). In this sense, Everard's body was once more moved from a singular performance of victimhood to a performance of safety work that all participants could experience.
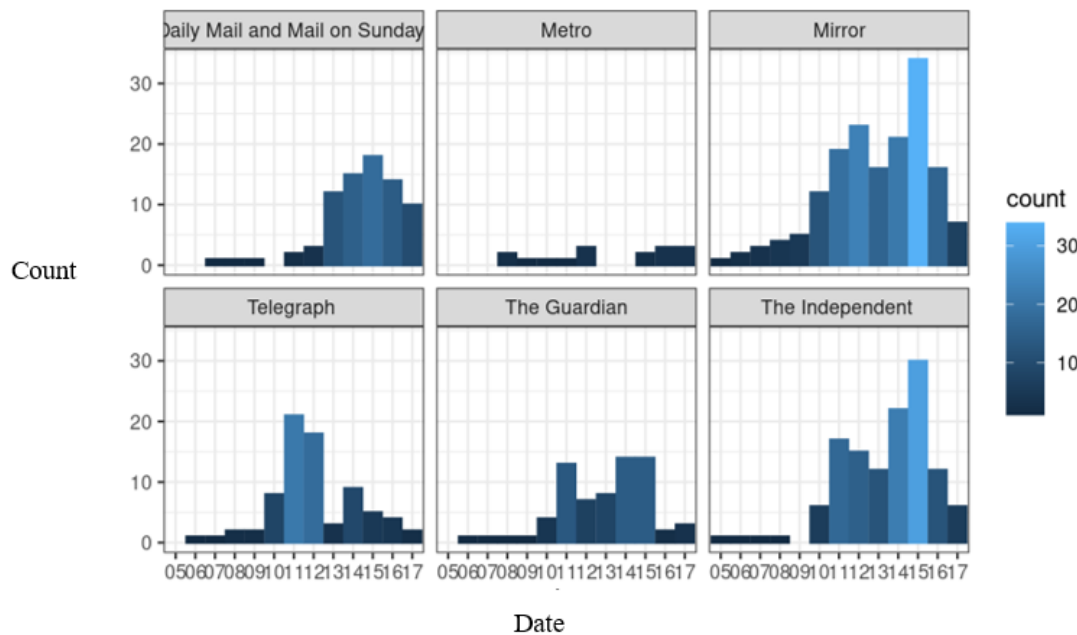
Figure 3. Frequency of news media headlines over time by outlet.

However, this sentiment of solidarity was caught against a complex terrain of COVID-19 restrictions. The then prime minister, Boris Johnson, had outlined on March 8, 2021, a roadmap to phase out lockdown restrictions through a four-step plan. At the time of the vigils, social contact was limited to recreation or exercise and only with individuals within households or support bubbles (GOV.UK, 2021). As a result of ambiguity around protests during this period, on March 12, the Met police and vigil organizers presented their legal arguments at a hearing at the High Court in London to decide whether such events were permissible under current lockdown rules. Almost all the headlines (count 16) on March 12 discussed the vigils and trial in some capacity.

In the days that followed, the language used in headlines to describe the vigils became noticeably more aggressive, with frequent use of terms to describe protestors such as "chaos," "anger," and "pinned to the floor" (Jones, 2021; Martin, 2021). This turmoil in police behavior toward activists was followed by solid calls in news media headlines for the then-active commissioner of the Met, Cressida Dick, to resign. What started as an attempted cathartic and peaceful articulation of demonstrations within news media headlines turned into a media event, with widely circulated photographs and video footage of scenes highlighting vicious clashes between police officers and civilians. This depiction of this discourse began to wane in headlines over March 16 and March 17, where it was replaced by more conciliation of events through references to official and political figures repeating the word hijacked when describing the vigil. This counternarrative of events was further supported by Everard's loved ones, who claimed in one headline: "'This is not What She Would Have Wanted': Sarah Everard's Friend Says She Avoided Clapham Common Vigil Because Her 'Tragic Death Has Been Hijacked by People Blaming Men or Police for the Actions of One Individual'" (Tingle, 2021).

What becomes quite evident through this discussion is that the unequal media interest in the vigils and policing exemplify Everard's body as a symbol of power and political pressure that can be used in social performances by groups to negotiate and legitimize certain discourses on women's safety. Put another way, Everard's victimhood is no longer her narrative; instead, she becomes a citation that promotes our narrative.

The final frame explored within this coverage is the solution frame. From the initial coverage to the narrative end, the news media follow Everard, listen to her loved ones, and critically investigate her villains until we see justice for her. Thus, the denouement of this news media ritual relies on the solutions proposed to ensure that what happened to Everard does not happen again. The solution frame in my analysis comprised around 14% of the sample (75 items) and peaked around March 15. Within this frame, there were 299 words, of which "men" was the most frequent (17 items or ~6%), followed by "government" (7 items or ~2%), "protect" (6 items or ~2%), "safer" (5 items or ~2%), "abuse" (5 items or ~2%), and "misogyny" (5 items or ~2%). Consequently, the key points of interest within this frame sit under three main categories: Men's behavior, women's behavior, and government. As a focal part of my argument in this article, in the next sections, I will discuss in further detail how reliance on neoliberal discourse enacts solutions for VAWG that is incapable of contextualizing and fundamentally results in a continuation that leaves some bodies in the peripheries of justice.

Everything considered, the performance constructed by the news media depictions of VAWG provides a discursive space where power is enacted constantly. This performance reasserts the boundaries of the ideal victim, the disturbed perpetrator, a period of mourning, and neoliberal solutions for justice. Thus, in following the performance to its narrative end, we see how the news media conceptualize subjectivity, agency, and victimhood. Certainly, VAWG is life-diminishing and life-altering and has a lasting impact on victims and their families. How the news media depict these narratives and direct solidarity and outrage is thus important to scrutinize, not simply by asking what the performance is but by asking what work it is doing, when, and for whom. Rather, this performance privileges Everard's body as a narrative artifact that is symbolic of our understanding of VAWG. The task then is not whether to repeat or stop the performance but to ask how we choose to repeat it and to what end.

Who is Sarah Everard: The Performance of The Missing Women

To address these questions further, I want to focus on two particular frames: First, the victim frame. It is within this frame that Everard becomes a narrative artifact for us to call on. Roughly 14% (71 items) of the sample supported the positioning of the victim frame. This frame saw a peak on March 12 and encompassed a total of 259 words: "Missing" and "woman" were most frequent (~7%), followed by "home" (~4%), the number "33" (~3%), "London" (~3%), "beautiful" (~2%), and "daughter" (~2%). Other notable words in this frame included "bright," "shining," "friend," and "vanished." An illustration of this can be seen in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Word cloud of victim frame found in newspaper coverage of Sarah Everard.

It is crucial to reflect on both what we see and what we do not within these performances. Specifically, a key point of interest concerns the notion of innocence. The linguistic use of the term innocence is commonly associated with purity, honesty, virtue, children, and the color White. We arrive at this understanding of innocence through repetitions of similar ideas in our news media, education, and daily experiences. Quite aptly, philosopher Gilles Deleuze (2004) in *Difference and Repetition* states, "To repeat is to behave in a certain manner, but in relation to something unique or singular which has no equal or equivalent" (p. 1). In this sense, repetition names a behavior that shares similar relationships with the original but is uniquely differentiated. Building on this, three critical phrases within the early coverage of Everard's disappearance lend themselves to our commonsensical understanding of innocence. First, the repetition of how she "Vanishes Into Thin Air" (Burke, 2021) is important. The phrasing of this sudden disappearance directs attention to a mystery unfolding before us. Leaning into this, she disappears on a walk home. The regular use of this phrase, in addition to vanishing, removes traces of blame, whereby her actions before her disappearance are perceived as normal. She was "just walking home" (Gayle, 2021), and she just happened to disappear. By all accounts, there is nothing suspicious about Everard's body in these headlines. Likewise, this early coverage is supported by distressed concerns from Everard's friends and family, reiterating their desperation: "Uncle Pleads 'If Someone is Holding Her be Human and Let Her Go'" (Bazaraa, 2021) or statements emphasizing how she was "An Incredibly Kind Friend" (Evans, 2021). In this

case, grief is commoditized by an economy of visibility by the news media to draw attention to Everard's disappearance and encourage readers to become invested in the actors within this narrative performance.

Taken together, the news media rework and repeat common characteristics of innocence to construct personal and intimate moments of sympathy for Everard. She is, by all means, a typical middle-class marketing executive whose future was promising and hopeful; she was beautiful with family and friends who loved her, and above all, she did not do anything to provoke her disappearance: She was innocent. This innocence is crucial for readers and audiences to engage with the performance. Through this, the news media have created not just a victim but the "ideal victim" for the nation to care for and unite (). Put another way, her body upholds a news performance of the "ideal victim," with her death a violation of an agreed-on moral standard, which is necessary for the performance to be widely accepted and used across a broad public.

The Face of Solutions

This performance of the ideal victim, then, provides a vocabulary and an impetus for directing an agency that provides solutions for our current endemic concerning VAWG in the United Kingdom. However, contrary to other findings in the literature, the two-week sample showed references to men's behavior change were more frequently considered than women's. Specifically, many headlines echoed notions of male allyship and "How Men Must Make our Streets Safe—Or Hang Their Heads in Shame" (Woods, 2021). The direct targets of such headlines are men, with the use of the word "shame," in this instance, evoking a visceral feeling of guilt and rejection. This affective communication responds to what I term "a politics of feeling bad." This politics relies on an economy that can be successfully organized to discourage certain norms and behaviors from arising through the encouragement of shame. Building on the work of scholar Cathy O'Neil (2022) and her descriptions of the shame machine, the act of shaming can produce a form of cognitive dissonance, especially for those who consider themselves good. Rather, calls such as the one above invite many to doubt their sense of self and beg the response: What about men's rights?

Certainly, masculinity and manhood are not synonymous. However, in promoting a feeling of collective *badness,* this universalizing is not just a personal preference or an individual pursuit; it is deeply intertwined with politics and power, particularly male masculine politics and power. Masculine culture is influenced by race, class, and sexuality, among other factors, making it an equally complex and intersectional issue. Neoliberalism fuels the constant monitoring of one's masculinity through reflection of what sociologist Robert Connell (1998) terms hegemonic masculinity. Here, hegemonic masculinity can be read as relational and reactive to popular notions of feminism, whereby hegemonic masculinity is a constantly (re) negotiated identity that has most often persisted in a pattern of practice that enables the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. It embodies the spatial and temporal performance of the most honored way of being a man but is not a unitary term, nor can it be embodied by every male in the same way. Indeed, acceptable standards of masculinity vary across cultures and contexts and are deeply connected to frames of self-worth that can shed light on power dynamics, autonomy, and the personal turmoil of political economies (both at a micro and macro level). Therefore, the social anxieties

from this politics of feeling bad cannot be simply dismissed. They provide an important discourse for identity construction that underpins our desires to understand gender.

Taking this one step further, it could be said that a politics of feeling bad is in many ways informed by our collective social understanding of moral masculinity. Yet this implies a singular morality, or as Wendy Brown (2001) provocatively articulates in chapter two of her book *Politics Out of History*, morality and moralism are no longer equivalent, but rather, moralism descends into a tendency to judge and moderate another morality. Adopting this framework, arguments of morality decay into disputes about "abstract rights versus identity-bound claims but also by configuring political injustice and political righteousness as a problem of remarks, attitude, and speech rather than as a matter of historical, political-economic, and cultural formation of power" (Brown, 2001, p. 35). Within the present context of Everard's case, this politics of feeling bad is further supported by authoritative and institutional male voices such as MP Steve Reed, Labor leader Keir Starmer, and footballer Marcus Rashford. These men significantly influence the British male demographic and, as such, can help shape conversations about good behavior and respect toward women and girls. However, as discussed, this form of speaking out, representation, and role-modeling discourse privileges an essentialism of gender. Indeed, differences in gendered experiences between two individuals positioned within the same-gender community may be as significant as or even more significant than the differences between two individuals positioned within a different-gender community due to our overlapping and multiple sources of identity formations. Therefore, invoking shame as our principal solution for performances of VAWG not only inadvertently evokes a totalizing politics of feeling bad but also sustains mediation of traditional performative gender roles. Consequently, this politics of feeling bad or shaming perversely awards the neoliberal (read: arbitrary) dichotomy of gender as well as what is to be considered good or bad norms. All of this does little to challenge incentive structures, misogyny, and intersections of dominant discourses of masculinity that sustain violent behavior against women.

Briefly, I must admit that I do agree that statistically, it is more likely that a male perpetrator will be named in the vast majority of cases of VAWG. Therefore, changes in men's perceptions and attitudes are an essential step forward. In particular, the most recent data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2021) show that of the women killed in England or Wales between April 2020 and March 2021, 60% knew their suspected killers. Instead of following the ideal victim trope, the data suggest that around 33% of the suspected killers were current or former partners (ONS, 2021). Therefore, headlines actioning repeated calls on men certainly signify a welcome shift in discourse that has historically addressed women. However, I emphasize the notion of double jeopardy to insist that debates around structural reform are obscured by this form of affect communication and our impulse to react immediately.

Unlike the frequency of headlines concerning men's behavioral change, there are some references to women's behavior although not with the same intensity. Instead, the most common occurrences referring to women's behavior were found in relation to the app WalkSafe. This London-based app encourages women to feel empowered by raising personal safety awareness with detailed databases containing official police crime statistics, community-reported data, and unique live maps. The headline "Personal Safety App for Women That 'Shouldn't Have to Exist' sees a Surge in Downloads Following the Murder of Sarah Everard in London" (Morrison, 2021), highlights the effect Everard's body has had on the wider female public. Mirroring the logic of neoliberalism, such headlines also reference an iPhone safety feature that discretely alerts

emergency services if needed. Secret hand signals and references to the six-word text, "Text me when you get home," are also prominent features. Thus, instead of promoting feelings associated with guilt or cancellation, the neoliberal feminist lens evoked in these headlines promotes changes in women's behavior that are intended to make women feel good, empowered, and in control of their safety (Zeisler, 2017). Drawing on a form of marketization that builds on narratives of women's safety, this form of empowerment reinforces a false sense of power that does little to reflect the characterization of violent crime statistics for women adequately.

Crucially, the use of neoliberalism under both examples of behavior changes obscures the heterogeneity between and within the binaries of men and women. This obfuscation is important for visibility as a functioning of power: It is a means to access politics. Rather, when we balance this politics of feeling bad with the politics of feeling good, we are ultimately left with what I would note as a "politics of good enough." This affect of good enough acknowledges the inherent complexity and imperfections of our real-world policy making. Underneath this, we follow a hollow conception of solutions that reinforces a need to study how we position the term justice (at both an individual and a societal level) within performances of VAWG and what, if any, implications this discursive framing has for future theorizing for mediating gendered abuse.

Conclusion

This article has examined the mediated performance of VAWG in news media through the case study of Sarah Everard to argue two main points. First, I have expressed that the news media's coverage of Everard's disappearance and murder follows a simplistic narrative performance featuring an ideal victim, a disturbed perpetrator, a period of mourning, and a discourse centered around neoliberal solutions. Within this arc, the news media privilege Everard's body as a symbolic representation of VAWG in the United Kingdom. Against this, the news media enact a site of power where they legitimize our understanding of a specific type of violence (most often rape) and present us with a (White) body that is worthy of a specific type of remembrance.

This, I have then argued, permits Everard's body and victimhood to become detached from her and be used by different interest groups in negotiating discussions about VAWG. A key dimension of this body politics is the role it plays in encouraging solutions for addressing the endemic nature of VAWG. Fundamentally, by considering questions of misogyny, visibility, and masculinity, Everard's case can help us develop further critical questions that challenge the ethical dimensions of news-mediated performances of VAWG. All of this will help develop more effective strategies for achieving justice and addressing our past and ongoing injustices.

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