

# Criminological Insights into Social Media Influence and Newsworthiness: Analyzing the Missing White Woman Syndrome

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*Missing White Woman Syndrome has been widely acknowledged within traditional mainstream media, resulting in a heavy focus on missing white women and a simultaneous under-representation of missing women from minority ethnic communities. However, less is known about whether this has carried through to social media, wherein users play a key role in determining what becomes widespread news. This review seeks to examine this issue with reference to existing research. It begins by exploring the concept of newsworthiness and the ways in which social media influences the distribution of news. It will then review the concept of the 'ideal victim', and its continued association with ethnicity. Finally, the review will examine Missing White Woman Syndrome and the ways in which it has historically manifested within traditional media and continues to manifest on social media. The review will conclude with a discussion on findings and avenues for future research in Ireland and internationally.*

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**Keywords:** Missing White Woman Syndrome; Racialised Minorities; White Female Victim Effect; Victimology; Racism; Feminism; Social Media

## INTRODUCTION

In 2022, 187,474 adults were recorded as missing by the National Crime Information Center in the United States (National Crime Information Center 2023). Of these, 40.3 per cent were women, 27.7 per cent of whom were Black. As just 12.4 per cent of the total population in the United States identifies as Black or African American, this figure points to a significant overrepresentation of Black or African American women among those missing (United States Census Bureau 2020). A similar overrepresentation of Indigenous women among missing persons has raised concerns in both the United States and Canada, with a stretch of Highway 16 in British Columbia (Canada) known as the 'Highway of Tears', for the substantial, though uncertain, number of Indigenous women who have

gone missing along it (Hawes et al. 2023; National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls 2019; Morton 2016). In Canada, Indigenous communities (First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities) account for just 5 per cent of the population, but in 2022, they made up 13 per cent of missing adults (Government of Canada 2023; Statistics Canada 2022). Further, 62 per cent of all missing Indigenous adults were female (Government of Canada 2023). In the United States, issues with data have made it difficult to determine the exact number of missing Indigenous women. The National Crime Information Center noted that in 2016, there were 5712 reports of missing American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls, but the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) only logged 116 of those cases (U.S. Department of the Interior Indian Affairs n.d.). Notwithstanding the gaps in data, the severity of this issue has been acknowledged. Within the first 100 days of the Biden–Harris administration, Secretary Deb Haaland, United States Secretary of the Interior, created a new Missing and Murdered Unit within the Bureau of Indian Affairs Office of Justice Services (BIA-OJS) (U.S. Department of the Interior n.d.).

In stark contrast to their overrepresentation among missing persons data, there is a noticeable underrepresentation of missing women from minority ethnic groups in the mainstream media (Moody et al. 2008). This is also despite longstanding Indigenous activism countering violence against women (Saramo 2016). This has led researchers to hypothesise that missing persons with certain characteristics are more likely to garner media attention than others—specifically, white women (Slakoff and Fradella 2019; Slakoff and Brennan 2017; Sommers 2016). This review sought to examine this issue with reference to extant research. It will begin by examining the concept of newsworthiness, and how the creation of newsworthiness has shifted with the rise in social media. It will then review the construct of the ‘ideal victim’, and how this may impact the media coverage received by missing women from minority ethnic communities across the United States and Canada. Finally, it will examine the concept of Missing White Woman Syndrome and the ways in which it manifests in both traditional media and social media. The review will conclude with a discussion on findings and avenues for future research.

## **MANUFACTURING NEWSWORTHINESS**

Before specifically examining disparities in the media treatment of missing women, it is necessary to first look at the way in which the news has been traditionally created. Tuchman (1976) described the news as being a constructed reality, in which newsmakers engage in highly selective and subjective processes, reflecting social and cultural criteria (Jewkes 2015) to produce news. While Galtung and Ruge (1965) proposed twelve overarching news values, such as

reference to something negative and reference to persons, the interpretation of these values can vary by individual journalist, media organisation, and country (Henry et al. 2010). Decisions as to what should be reported are often based on perceptions about which victims of crime will be of most interest to audiences (Chermak 1995 as cited by Gilchrist 2010). To that end, Meyers (1997) proposed that there is a hierarchy in crimes reported by the media. While severe violence and homicides are seen, perhaps justifiably, as the most newsworthy offences, young, elderly, and white female victims receive disproportionate levels of attention (Dowler 2004).

As many people have little direct experience of crime, the media often provides a solitary insight into the issue (Black 2016; Moody et al. 2008). Slakoff and Brennan (2017) reported that the average US citizen cited the media as their primary source of information for most topics, including crime. Thus, the ways in which events and issues pertaining to crime are discussed may have a significant influence on media consumers' perceptions (Black 2016; Slakoff and Brennan 2017). 'Media framing' is defined as "the process by which a communication source constructs and defines a social or political issue for its audience" (Nelson et al. 1997, p. 221). Media framing is closely linked with agenda-setting, with agenda-setting theorists proposing that the media influences the topics that consumers think about, and the feelings that they have on these topics (Furey et al. 2023; Slakoff and Brennan 2017; Gross and Aday 2003). Thus, agenda-setting theory allows us to understand the directional flow of issue visibility and perceived importance by audiences (Furey et al. 2023). Cripps (2021) posited that the mainstream media acts to reinforce dominant hegemonies, both producing and legitimising the lens through which issues are viewed. This echoes Hall's (1973) assertion that news values are part of an ideologically constructed way of perceiving the world that favours and reinforces the perspectives of the powerful. Building on this, the cultivation theory proposes that media consumption impacts individuals' perceptions, such that their opinions about the world will come to match what is most frequently portrayed in the media (Weitzer and Kubrin 2004). As such, inaccurate or misleading depictions or discussions of crime may have real-life consequences, in particular regarding criminal justice outcomes (Slakoff and Brennan 2017). For example, Butler (2007; Butler and Moran 2007) observed that those who are eligible to sit on capital case juries are also more likely to believe pre-trial media, and Welch (2007, p. 276) noted that "the stereotyping of Blacks as criminals is so pervasive that 'criminal predator' is used as a euphemism for 'young Black male'. This common stereotype has erroneously served as a subtle rationale for the unofficial policy and practice of racial profiling by criminal justice practitioners". Nelson et al. (1997) concluded that the mainstream media and other institutions of mass political communication could have profound influences on public opinion, even without overt attempts at persuasion or manipulation.

Over the last decade, social media has become an increasingly important source for learning about ongoing news stories (Zubiaga 2019). Attention to news on social media also acts as a key indicator of the perceived newsworthiness of a topic, with the volume of shares and comments often linked to the public interest in the case. As such, social media now grants news consumers opportunities to exert influence in the production and proliferation of news stories, and simultaneously, news organisations have, in ways, relinquished control over the distribution of news content (Peterson-Salahuddin and Diakopoulos 2020). This is referred to as network gatekeeping theory, wherein every user on social media acts as a gatekeeper with the discretion to share or not share a news story with their audience. To that end, each user can utilise their own criteria for what warrants sharing and becomes ‘news’ (Diakopoulos and Zubiaga 2014; Peterson-Salahuddin and Diakopoulos 2020). Social media also allows journalists to see what types of stories generate the greatest interest among readers (Harcup and O’Neill 2017). Building on the news values set forth by Galtung and Ruge (1965), Harcup and O’Neill (2017) advised that the following should now be included as news values: exclusivity; bad news; conflict; surprise; audio–visuals (inclusion of photographs, videos, etc.); shareability (stories that are likely to generate comments and sharing on social media); entertainment; drama; follow-up; the power elite; relevance; magnitude; celebrity; good news; and the news organisation’s agenda. As coverage of missing persons is no longer only limited to print media and news reporting, it is important to explore whether social media has increased the visibility and representation of minority ethnic women among missing persons.

### **THE IDEAL VICTIM**

Lam et al. (2023) asserted that not all victims of crime are treated equally. In 1986, Nils Christie proposed the theoretical framework of the ‘ideal victim’—somebody who is worthy and deserving of sympathy because they possess specific characteristics including being weak, being blameless, carrying out a noble task at the time of victimisation, and being harmed by a malign actor or actors (Christie 1986). Consequently, a hierarchy of victimhood exists, wherein some victims are seen to have been undeserving of (blameless for) their victimisation and in contrast, other victims are deemed deserving of (to blame for) their victimisation. This is, in part, perpetrated by the news media, which often uses simplistic binary categories of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ when depicting victims. While ‘good’ women are portrayed as wholesome, innocent, and worth saving or avenging, ‘bad’ women are viewed as unworthy of society’s time and being beyond help (Jiwani 2008; Stillman 2007). These dichotomies are relational and mutually dependent on each other (Gilchrist 2010), producing and reproducing

assumptions about who is a ‘deserving’ or ‘undeserving’ victim (Cripps 2021). Within this construct, the concept of appropriate femininity is often to the fore, encompassing traits that include dependence, vulnerability, and innocence (Madriz 1997). In contrast, characteristics like independence, autonomy, and self-determination are deemed to be inappropriate (Madriz 1997). Jiwani (2014) asserted that media narratives—and consequently social narratives—imply that women will be safe from victimisation if they maintain appropriate femininity by complying with the dominant perspectives on what is ‘good’, and in the event that they are victimised, they will be ‘blameless’.

When examining what ‘good’ encompasses within the appropriate femininity framework and associated societal narratives, links to ethnicity are apparent. Heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class, conventionally attractive white women are typically portrayed as the ultimate symbol of ‘innocence’ (Gilchrist 2010; Jewkes 2015), whereas women from minority ethnic communities are frequently depicted through the lens of negative stereotypes and social problems (Liebler 2010; Mukhopadhyay 2008). For example, Slakoff and Brennan (2017) found that Black and Latina women were more likely to have their victimisation normalised, and to be blamed for their victimisation due to risk-taking behaviour. As Spohn et al. (2001) reported that perceived risk-taking behaviour by a victim can impact decisions to prosecute in sexual assault cases, the impact of these associations can be significant. Similarly, Kulig and Cullen (2016) found that the violent victimisation of Black women was often depicted as too commonplace to merit significant attention, and those who could not be labelled with a note on their own criminal activity were often portrayed as collateral damage caused by the criminality of their wider community. An acceptance and normalisation of violence can also be seen in relation to Indigenous communities in the United States and Canada. Tucker (2016, p. 6) stated that Indigenous women are portrayed as “disposable outsiders. . . as sexual deviants or prostitutes”. Razack (2002, p. 130) noted that alongside the “conflation of [Indigenous] woman and prostitute”, there is “an accompanying belief that when they encountered violence, [Indigenous] women simply got what they deserved”. Following an analysis of both print and online media related to the murder of an Indigenous woman in Canada and in Australia, Cripps (2021) concluded that elements of racism, sexism, and colonialism were prevalent in the news reporting, and that the victims were characterised as unworthy of public sympathy.

Many of these research findings reflect the concept of minority devaluation wherein the victimisation of women from minority ethnic groups is seen to represent less harm or loss to the community at large than the victimisation of white women (Bjornstrom et al. 2010). Several theoretical frameworks have been proposed to explain this devaluation and the associated disparities in media attention, including critical race theory (CRT) and critical race feminism, which is also referred to as Black feminist thought or theory. Critical race theory explores

the ways in which ethnicity intersects with other forms of cultural subordination, including gender, to influence ethnic stereotypes. A central tenet of CRT is the belief that ‘whiteness’ is a privileged state in American society, with the interests and perspectives of the white group remaining dominant. Building on CRT, critical race feminism focuses on the intersection between ethnicity and gender and proposes that women from minority ethnic groups may never be considered equal to white women because of the additional restrictions and pressures that they experience because of their ethnicity. Critical race feminism considers that the intersection between racism and sexism may explain the disparities in missing women’s treatment by the media (Slakoff and Brennan 2017), supporting Cripps’ (2021) assertions that racism, sexism, and colonialism are prevalent in media reports related to Indigenous women. Meyers (2004) also applied the lens of Black feminist theory when analysing news coverage of violence against Black women and asserted that “the convergence of gender, race and class oppressions minimises the seriousness of the violence and portrays its victims primarily as stereotypic Jezebels” (Meyers 2004, p. 96). Consequently, the victimisation of minority ethnic groups is delegitimised and rendered unimportant. Squires (2007, as cited by Moody et al. 2008) considered that the media portrays minority ethnic groups as outsiders who must earn their way into the majority-group space, and Allen and Bruce (2017) stated that media representations, constructed from the perspectives of the white-majority group, both influence beliefs and can reinforce and widen power imbalances. Similarly, Liebler (2004) concluded that media coverage of missing women acts to reinforce existing societal hierarchies, and Jiwani and Young (2006, p. 912) stated that “society demarcates those who deserve our attention, and thus our sympathy and intervention, and those who remain marginalized, outside the pale of the civilized, normative order”. As such, Black feminist scholars disagree with the oft-stated media narrative “if it bleeds, it leads [because] it really depends on who is bleeding” (Dowler et al. 2006, p. 841).

### **MISSING WHITE WOMAN SYNDROME**

The term ‘Missing White Woman Syndrome’ has been attributed to news anchor, Gwen Ifill (Moody et al. 2008). It is used to describe the mainstream media’s focus on missing women who are white, young, conventionally attractive, and often from ‘respectable’ middle- or upper-middle-class backgrounds (Liebler 2010; Jewkes 2015; Slakoff and Fradella 2019), and the media’s simultaneous apparent disinterest in, and in some cases, mistreatment of, women who do not fit this description (Moody et al. 2008). By highlighting the aforementioned traits associated with Missing White Woman Syndrome in missing women, in addition to the extensive use of adjectives such as ‘warm-hearted’, ‘beautiful’, ‘hardworking’, and ‘kind’, the media cultivates a damsel-in-

distress narrative, which elicits both sympathy and outrage among news consumers (Furey et al. 2023). Sommers (2016) observed that Missing White Woman Syndrome manifests in two distinct ways: (i) differences in whether the missing woman receives any media attention at all, and (ii) differences in the amount of attention that they receive if they do appear in the news. Gilchrist (2010) reported that these disparities existed even when missing women were matched to fit the ‘ideal victim’ characteristics. Following the analysis of media coverage of six cases involving the disappearance and murder of three Indigenous women and three white women, Gilchrist (2010) observed that the white women received six times more media coverage than the Indigenous women. This was despite all the women being arguably ‘ideal victims’ in terms of lifestyle and behaviour.

The impact of this low or high media coverage cannot be overstated. For example, Lam et al. (2023) noted that extensive media coverage—often resulting in ‘mega-cases’ that dominate the news—ensures wider awareness of the missing woman and subsequently, a greater likelihood of spontaneous searches by citizens. The use of imagery plays a key role in this. Entman and Rojecki (2001) found that stories about missing white women more frequently appeared on the front pages of newspapers, with articles relating to missing Indigenous women often hidden among advertisements and soft news. These placements can convey, both explicitly and implicitly, the urgency and social importance of the issue (Entman and Rojecki 2001), and Gilchrist (2010, p. 10) opined that this placement put Indigenous women “to the periphery. . . of reader’s consciousness”. Additionally, disparities in the description and the depth of the description of the victim were observed. Headlines about missing Indigenous women were largely impersonal, rarely referring to them by name. Personal information about missing Indigenous women was sparse, and photographs, if included at all, were smaller and rarely included the missing woman’s family (Gilchrist 2010). This echoed findings by Moody et al. (2008), which observed that the coverage of missing Black women of ten focused on negative experiences within their life, whereas coverage of missing white women emphasised their physical appearance and feminine traits—again, reflecting ideas of appropriate femininity and the ‘ideal victim’. In their research, Gilchrist (2010) concluded that there was a distinct tone of ‘us versus them’ throughout the media reports. In support of this claim, they noted that while articles regarding missing white victims described the perpetrators as being on “our streets, fracturing our communities, and harming our daughters”, articles about Indigenous women emphasised the role of their community in grieving for their missing daughters (Gilchrist 2010, p. 12). These findings support Liebler’s (2010) assertion that Missing White Woman Syndrome is symptomatic of traditional news media practices that construct minority ethnic communities as ‘the other’.

As a result of the fixation on the victimisation of white women, there have been waves of moral panic regarding their safety—again, heavily linked to the ‘good white’ and ‘bad minority’ narrative. Cohen (2002, p. 1) stated that a moral panic occurs when “a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media”. Moral panics often relegate an ‘outgroup’ to the enemy camp, and result in what DeVault et al. (2016) called a crime control theatre—the creation of legal actions that appear to address crime but are often ineffective and can yield unintended negative consequences. Accordingly, research has linked the emphasis on missing white women with changes in crime control policies. To that end, Simon (2007, p. 76) observed that “it is not all victims, but primarily white, suburban, middle-class victims, whose exposure has driven waves of crime legislation”. Between 1990 and 2016, 44 of the 51 named laws passed in the United States were in honour of only white victims; of over 100 named victims state-level laws in the United States, one honoured a Black victim (Kulig and Cullen 2016). Reflecting minority devaluation, Kulig and Cullen (2016) asserted that the invisibility of Black victims in named laws reflects an unstated assumption that white lives are inherently more valuable. Further, the ongoing exclusion, trivialisation, and marginalisation of missing and murdered Indigenous women across Canada and the United States has been described as symbolic annihilation (Tuchman 1978).

## THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

While social media users now have opportunities to elevate stories regarding missing women from minority ethnic groups, the limited available research has suggested that Missing White Woman Syndrome may be as pervasive on social media as in traditional media. On 22 September 2021, following the discovery of Gabby Petito’s remains, the New York Times noted that the hashtag #gabbypetito had received more than 794 million views on the social media platform TikTok (Robertson 2021). In contrast, as of 3 November 2023, the authors found that the hashtag #rosalitalongee, an 18-year-old Indigenous woman who has been missing since 2015, has received just 16.4 thousand views. The hashtag #MMIW (Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women), commonly used within posts discussing missing Indigenous women, has received 559.8 million views.

Jeanis et al. (2021) found that ethnicity and age were strongly related to engagement with missing person appeals on Facebook. In addition to sharing news media items, social media users can share information posted by the police online. However, again, it appears that the ethnicity of the missing woman is linked with sharing trends. Solymosi et al. (2021) analysed Tweets made by the Greater Manchester Police (England) between the period of 2011 and 2018 in



relation to missing women and found that posts about missing white women had the highest average retweets. Social media creators can also play a role in increasing attention for missing women from minority ethnic communities; however, Slakoff and Duran (2023) reported that their analysis of podcast titles and descriptions revealed that white women and girls were overrepresented in episodes about missing women and girls, compared to missing women and girls from minority ethnic groups. Though not the focus of this review, similar differences in engagement have been observed in relation to missing children—of 375 videos featured on Facebook by The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children in the United States, the average views on posts about white girls was more than 63,000, while for Black girls, it was 38,300 (Caruso et al. 2022).

## DISCUSSION

This review sought to examine Missing White Woman Syndrome in the media, and further, whether it has been impacted by the use of social media, in which users can control the distribution of news and the cultivation of ‘newsworthiness’. Although there is limited research available on the role of social media in this context, that which is available indicates that Missing White Woman Syndrome has shifted into social media undeterred. This is despite repeated calls from minority rights activists to increase the attention given to missing women from minority ethnic communities. The impact of this disparity in the quantity and quality of media coverage cannot be overstated, with potentially far-reaching negative effects. Dukes and Gaither (2017) argued that this repeated and skewed narrative may alter media consumers’ perceptions of reality, further delegitimising minority ethnic groups as victims while reinforcing whites as the quintessential victim. When this is paired with negative stereotypes in media coverage of missing women from minority ethnic groups, and their wider communities, erroneous perceptions that whites are in some way at risk of harm from minority ethnic groups may fester. This serves to further amplify attitudes of the ‘good white’ versus ‘bad minority’, decreasing empathy for victims from minority ethnic communities and significantly impacting criminal justice outcomes for both victims and the accused (Jiwani and Young 2006; The Sentencing Project 2014).

While this review does not offer new data on this issue, it has identified gaps for further research, not least of all regarding the use of social media as a means of sharing news items and information about missing persons. However, there are limitations to the current review that should be addressed in future research. First and foremost, this review focused solely on the United States and Canada, due in part to the volume of literature available from these jurisdictions; however, it must be noted that Missing White Woman Syndrome has been internationally observed,

for example in the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand. Notably, the authors found no related research in an Irish context and recommend that this is an issue that warrants prompt examination. While research has observed that the Irish Travelling community are often negatively portrayed in the media (e.g., Cihan Koca-Helvaci 2016), it has not examined how missing people are treated by the media, nor the impact of social media. Further, in an increasingly diversifying population, it is imperative that any issues of disparate treatment for victims be explored and addressed as soon as possible. The authors chose not to include research discussing missing children in this article; however, it is apparent that similar themes may apply, as noted by Caruso et al. (2022) and Slakoff and Fradella (2019). Additionally, this article did not explicitly discuss missing transgender women, although they may have been included in the previous research discussed and not specifically identified. As Black transgender women are the most common group of transgender homicide victim in the United States (Momen and Dilks 2020), the inclusion of transgender women in research of this nature is imperative.

## CONCLUSIONS

Recent cases of missing and murdered women have spurred discussions about the underrepresentation of missing minority-ethnic women in the news; however, it seems that little is changing. Social media now allows the public to hold media organisations accountable for biased reporting, and to influence the news that receives the most attention. However, a review of the available research indicates that Missing White Woman Syndrome remains as pervasive on social media as it has been in traditional media. Further, as journalists and news organisations draw information as to what is ‘newsworthy’ from social media trends, shares and comments, the continued underrepresentation of missing minority-ethnic women on social media discussions may perpetuate their invisibility within the news. As social media plays a growing role in the distribution of news, it is vital that further research examines the ways in which Missing White Woman Syndrome manifests on social media and more importantly, the ways in which disparities in the treatment of missing women can be addressed.

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