BENEFITS OF WHITENESS? – A CASE STUDY ON MISSING WHITE WOMAN
SYNDROME IN NEWS DISCOURSE

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to uncover if, and how Missing White Woman Syndrome is represented in the language of news coverage of missing persons cases. Missing White Woman Syndrome is an intersectional theory, which describes the gender and racial disparities in the mass media news coverage of missing persons cases. Previous research has shown that missing white women are more likely to receive media attention than men or other ethnic groups, and their cases are more likely scandalized.

The data for the analysis is collected from *CNN* and *ABC News* websites. The focus of the thesis is on the news on disappearances of two white females and two black females. From these cases the most relevant articles were chosen for analysis while articles published after finding the individual were not taken into consideration. As analytical framework, the thesis utilizes critical discourse analysis and feminist social theory while focusing on the language use in news discourse.

The findings of this study showcase that racial disparities can be recognized in the news coverage of the analyzed cases. White women seem to be portrayed as victims more easily and their cases seem to be more scandalized through lexical choices. However, the topic requires more research in order to identify reoccurring patterns of language used to create these gender and racial disparities.

Tiivistelmä

Tämän kandidaatintutkielman tarkoituksena on tutkia, miten kadonneen valkoisen naisen syndrooma ilmetessään esiintyy yhdysvaltalaisten katoamistapausten uutisoinnissa. Kadonneen valkoisen naisen syndrooma on intersektionaalinen teoria, joka kuvaa eroavaisuuksia naisten ja miesten sekä eri etnisten vähemmistöjen edustajien katoamistapausten uutisoinnissa. Valkoisen kadonneen naisen syndrooma tarkoittaa, että tyypillisesti valkoisten naisten katoamiset saavat enemmän mediahuomiota ja tapauksia skandalisoidaan.

Tutkimuksen aineistona käytetään yhdysvaltalaisten *CNN* ja *ABC News* uutistoimistojen verkossa julkaisemia uutisartikkeleita kahden valkoihoisen ja kahden tummaihoisen naisen katoamistapauksista. Uutisartikkeleista analysoitavaksi valittiin vain täysin katoamistapauksia käsittelevät uutisartikkelit. Uutisdiskurssin ja siinä käytetyn kielen analysoinnissa käytetään viitekehyksenä kriittistä diskurssianalyysia ja feminististä yhteiskuntateoriaa.

Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat, että uutisartikkeleista voidaan tunnistaa eroavaisuuksia valkoisten naisten sekä tummaihoisten naisten katoamistapausten uutisoinnissa. Sanallisten valintojen avulla valkoihoiset naiset esitettiin tummaihoisia naisia herkemmin uhreina ja heidän

tapauksissaan oli enemmän merkkejä skandalisoinnista. Aihe vaatii kuitenkin lisätutkimuksia, jotta näiden eroavaisuuksien toistuvia malleja pystytään tunnistamaan.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

In the United States, approximately 90,000 people are missing at any given time. Some are found alive, some dead, and some people's fates will forever be a mystery for those, who miss them. Media is a powerful tool for the loved ones and the police in search for a missing person or justice. It is important that a missing person's case receives the needed coverage in the media in order for the possible clues from the eyewitnesses or people with information to be reported to the police. Thus, it is important to analyze the media representation of missing individuals in addition to the amount of media attention they receive.

In previous research, it has been established that there is an existing racial and gender bias in the mass media news coverage of missing persons cases, called *Missing White Woman Syndrome* (MWWS) (Sommers, 2016). This concept means that in the mainstream media, white women are overrepresented, and their disappearances are typically scandalized while other ethnic groups and men tend to be forgotten. However, it does seem that the research, especially in the field of linguistics, is rather lacking concerning missing persons cases and how different ethnic groups are represented and accepted as victims of crime.

The concept of Missing White Woman Syndrome is typically seen as a quantitative concept, meaning that the previous research has focused on the amount of media attention received by an individual while qualitative research lacks in unveiling how MWWS is manifested in language. Thus, the aim of this thesis is to study if MWWS is represented in the language of news discourse on missing persons cases, and if it is, how do the portrayals of women representing different ethnic groups differ. Furthermore, as MWWS is an intersectional theory concerning both race and gender, this thesis will examine also the representation of gender, even though the emphasis of the study will be on the possible racial bias.

Therefore, this thesis will analyze the mass media news coverage of four missing persons cases on *ABC News and CNN,* which are some of the major news outlets in the United States. I will conduct a schematic analysis based on discourse analyst Van Dijk's (1988) tools of analysis on international news, as well as a lexical analysis based on previous studies on news discourse. Utilizing these results, it will be examined if the concept of MWWS can be seen in the language of mass media news coverage of these four missing persons cases.

2. Missing White Woman Syndrome

Missing White Woman Syndrome is a relatively new term and is considered to have been introduced by PBS news anchor Gwen Ifill in 2004 (Moss, 2019). The term refers to the understanding that most of the missing persons cases that receive attention in mainstream media are disappearances of white women, and more specifically white women, who are young, attractive, and from wealthier backgrounds (Moss, 2019). It is argued that there is "round-the-clock coverage of disappeared young females who qualify as damsels in distress by race, class, and other relevant social variables" (Moss, 2019, p. 741). Thus, this phenomenon is sometimes referred to as *missing pretty girl syndrome* or *damsel in distress syndrome* (Sommers, 2016). Zach Sommers (2016) states that research of MWWS is underdeveloped. According to him, many have claimed that there are systematic race and gender disparities in the amount of media coverage dedicated to missing persons cases, but there is a lack of empirical research conducted about the phenomenon (Sommers, 2016). However, it is argued that even laws and policies are evidently mimicking or causing a lack of mainstream media coverage of missing black persons cases, and that the phenomenon has impacted negatively the outcomes of missing persons cases of black females (Moss, 2019). Therefore, it is important to study this topic. Sommers defines MWWS as an intersectional theory, combining gender and race, while also incorporating issues of class and race. Although there are many dimensions of Missing White Woman Syndrome, in this thesis the focus will be on race and gender. However, it is important to acknowledge that there are many factors that might affect the amount of received news coverage.

2.1. Previous research

In his study on race and gender disparities in online news coverage of missing persons, Sommers (2016) studies local and national news coverage of the calendar year 2013 and compares it to the FBI missing persons database to see if the theory of MWWS is real. For his empirical analysis of the nationwide news coverage he uses data from *Cable News Network* (*CNN*) and the data for local news coverage is from *The Chicago Tribune, The Minneapolis Star Tribune,* and *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.* Additionally, he does not only focus on the amount of coverage received by an individual, but also on the differing levels of the coverage intensity. Sommers employs four race categories in his study: Black, Hispanic, White, and Other. However, as this thesis will focus on the news coverage of black and white women, only those ethnic groups will be taken into consideration.

Sommers finds that when considering the race, and not excluding the gender of the missing

individual, the coverage of missing persons cases in the media outlets mentioned above consists of 22.97% missing black people while 32.25% of the people on the FBI missing person database are black. In contrast, white people represent 60.32% of the FBI database and receive 60.54% of the media attention (p. 298). Thus, one can notice that white people have overrepresentation in the news coverage of missing persons cases. When looking at the gender composition, the results support the idea that there is a gender disparity when it comes to news coverage of missing people. Women receive 56.11% of the media attention, when 48.48% of the people on FBI database are women. 51.52% of the FBI database population are men, who receive only 43.89% of the media coverage (p.299). Sommers states that the FBI data are not divided into race and gender combinations, and thus it does not allow it to be tested for specific race by gender groups. However, Sommers does examine the race by gender composition of individuals in media data, which in addition to the previously discussed results provide some information on the overrepresentation of white women considering the news coverage of missing persons cases. Sommers finds that black females receive 14.32% and white women 32,97% of the media attention (p. 300).

Furthermore, when studying the relation of race and coverage intensity, meaning that articles rather than individuals will be used as a unit, it can be seen that this also indicates that the race and gender disparities are real. The results of Sommers' (2016) study show that 12.73% of the articles are of black people, not excluding any genders, thus the media coverage sample dropping from 22.97% to 12.73%, when 67.73% of the articles are about white people, thus increasing the percentage (p. 301). Additionally, the gender disparity is highlighted when Sommers finds that the 73.36% of the media articles are about women and 26.64% about men (p. 303). When looking at the media representation of race by gender, 9.03% of the articles are of black females and 49.74% of white females (p. 304). Although Sommers identifies some discrepancies in the findings, he states that the results do, however, support the idea of gender and racial biases in the news coverage of missing persons cases: missing blacks and missing men are less likely to garner media coverage and their stories are less likely to be picked up by news outlets.

2.2. Possible explanations for the phenomenon

According to Moss (2019), it is seemingly common knowledge in the United States that there are many forms of racial disparity in the media. However, it still must be studied and discussed, where and how does this type of intersectional disparity emerge.

Moss (2019) notes that "the prevalence of images of minorities as criminals in crime data is

permeated throughout mainstream media" and minorities are typically over-associated with crime and overrepresented as criminal offenders (p. 743). She adds that 22.7% of victimizations in the United States is composed by Black Americans but are often depicted as criminals in the media. Sommers also discusses this in his study by stating that some scholars seek to explain the racial disparity pattern and the media's focus on non-white perpetrators and white victims by ethnic blame discourse. This means that "an in-group (whites) blames an out-group (non-whites) for its problems" (Sommers, 2016, p 286). Furthermore, Sommers discusses Professor Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's explanation for the racial disparity, which is the concept of *racial grammar*. Racial grammar means the prevailing implicit social structures through which it is established that whites are still indirectly seen as having more authority, power, or status, and are viewed as universal beings, allowing other people to identify with them more easily and therefore care more about their disappearances (Sommers, 2016).

It is hard to identify a definite cause for MWWS, but it can be argued that possibly all of the explanations mentioned above are factors for the phenomenon. However, none of them explain the gender disparity. An explanation for this is offered by Sommers (2016), who refers to the concept of *damsel in distress* after which the phenomenon is often called. This means the understanding that a helpless woman needs saving from man. According to Sommers (2016), this concept is so rooted in Western culture that women and girls are more easily accepted as victims, thus working as an advantage for women. However, there still is a clear social hierarchy based on which people are valued and damsel in distress theory does not explain the gender disparity alone. As Sommers states, the phenomenon of MWWS requires more theoretical framework to fully understand from where it emerges.

3. News discourse

In order to analyze and understand if and how Missing White Woman Syndrome is represented in the news coverage of missing persons cases, one must define the standard characteristics of news discourse. In this section, I will discuss news discourse; its producers and audiences, language in the news, and news values, i.e. what makes something 'newsworthy' or how it is made to appear as such.

3.1. Discourse in the news

I will discuss the term 'discourse' more broadly in section 3.2., where discourse is defined "as an abstract noun denoting language in use as a social practice" (Locke, 2004, p. 13). This means that discourse is any type of language, spoken or written and it reflects the social structures and patterns. Bednarek and Caple (2012) define the concept of 'news' as "discourse that reports on newsworthy events, happenings and issues" (p. 2).

When studying news discourse, it is important to understand the 'communicative context' of it, which according to Bednarek and Caple (2012), means the relation between news discourse, its producers and its audiences. These relations between the producer(s) and audience(s) are mediated and constructed in the discourse, and they might be rather complex. Before a story is published in a news outlet, it goes through many stages of editing, and there are many external factors, such as company's hierarchies and meetings, news cycles, as well as corresponding, which have an effect on the final product (Bednarek & Caple, 2012). Thus, one can see that the process is complex, as there are many factors that play into what kind of news are produced, and therefore nothing can be regarded as a product of just one journalist. Furthermore, when analyzing news discourse, it must be taken into consideration that the information in news discourse is usually always from a third party; the news producer is passing on information it has collected from someone else (Bednarek & Caple, 2012).

The role of the audience has changed dramatically due to the development of the internet. Before, in mass media communication, the audience was seen as a large heterogeneous group and the communication used to be one-directional. However, nowadays, the audience sees the popular stories that are most viewed by others, to share and comment and interact with other audience members. Although there has been this kind of change relating to news discourse, it is argued that the producers of news language arguably still have a stereotyped image of the audience (Bednarek & Caple, 2012). Additionally, news are directed to different types of target audiences, which are classified based on numerous social factors, such as age, gender, political views, and education (Bednarek & Caple, 2012).

3.2. News values

News values have a considerable impact on the process of news editing and reporting. According to Bednarek and Caple (2017), news values answer to the question of "how do semiotic… devices justify the newsworthiness of reported events or issues" (pp. 1-2). In other words, how do news corporations 'sell' a story to us and what increases its value as news. Bednarek and Caple (2017) list the means which are considered to add news value to a story: proximity, i.e. how close is the target audience to the place where the event of news happens, negativity of the event, superlativeness, i.e. how large scale or scope of the event is, timeliness, e.g. how recently the event has occurred or its newness, and unexpectedness. They list others in their other book (2012), such as continuity of a story, impact of a story or its personalization. Bednarek and Caple (2012) also connect news values to the previously discussed communicative concept of news discourse: the producers produce news based on their beliefs of what audiences find valuable and these beliefs are based on the audience's consumption of news. Therefore, both the producers and audiences construe news value (Bednarek and Caple, 2012). As one can see, it is an infinite cycle in the communicative context of news discourse, determining which events are 'newsworthy'.

Furthermore, the producers of news use language and linguistic devices to construe news value and the editing of the material is usually designed to maximize it (Bednarek & Caple, 2012). To achieve the maximum newsworthiness, the producers use, for example, evaluative language, which means "using linguistic expressions that realize opinion" such as importance or unimportance, assessments of positivity or negativity, and expectedness or unexpectedness (Bednarek & Caple, 2012, p. 46). The producers also use devices such as intensification and quantification, negative vocabulary, metaphors and similes, references to emotion, to time and place, or nation or community, as well as references and quotes from ordinary individuals (Bednarek & Caple, 2012).

3.3. Language in the news

In addition to understanding what news discourse is, how it is produced and for whom, and how news value is constructed, it is also important to define the standard language used in news. As noticed in the previous section, language construes newsworthiness, but according to Bednarek and Caple (2012), language is "involved in all stages of the news process: from the input materials that are gathered, used and incorporated… to the conceptualization, construction and subsequent assessment of the news story" (p. 84).

According to Bednarek and Caple (2012), corpus linguistic analysis has determined several lexical

and syntactic features common for newspaper writing, which, for the purpose for this thesis, will be also understood as applying to online news. These features distinguish newspaper writing from academic writing and conversation. It has been found that nouns and noun phrases are common in newspaper writing and they act frequently as premodifiers of other nouns. They are especially present in the headlines and the beginning of a story. They commonly indicate time or function to label news actors and sources allowing the producers to add various kinds of information, as well as permits them to construe news value through the means discussed in the previous section (Bednarek & Caple, 2012). In addition to noun phrases, personalization is commonly used in newspaper writing, for example by quoting people, also adding to the news value of a story.

As one can see, there are multiple factors, such as the communicative context of news discourse, news values, and how newsworthiness is construed, that affect the published news story and its language. Based on the theory of critical discourse analysis in which language as a social practice reflects our society, we can define social structures from news discourse, because everything in the news process reflect these social processes and patterns.

4. Analytical framework

The analytical framework of this thesis will be based on critical discourse analysis. It will support the aim of this thesis, as it aids the process of analyzing a text critically to uncover the underlying social and cultural structures in the text. I will also apply feminist social theory, which extends feminism into a theoretical context. Feminist social theory will help to examine the representation of gender and how it affects the news discourse about missing persons cases.

4.1. Critical discourse analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA), which is also often understood to be interchangeable with the term critical linguistics (CL), is considered to have emerged in the beginning of the 1990s. Since then, more research in CDA has been conducted and it has developed to what it is considered to be today (Wodak & Meyer, 2001). When critically analyzing a text, one must ask oneself *what does it mean* and *why*. According to Terry Locke (2004), this is what critical discourse analysis aims to do; to uncover the social and cultural patterns. Norman Fairclough, one of the founders of CDA describes its aim:

> "to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power" (Fairclough, 2010, p. 93).

Additionally, Wodak and Meyer (2001) state that CDA is fundamentally concerned with studying "opaque and transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language" (p. 2). Thus, it differs from other paradigms in discourse analysis and text linguistics as it does not focus only on spoken and written texts as objects of inquiry, but "requires a theorization and description of both the social processes and structures which give rise to the production of a text" (Wodak & Meyer, p. 2). Therefore, when critically analyzing a text according to the theory of CDA, one must consider the social and historical context in which a text has been created and how it affects the understanding and meaning derived from it. This explains the word *critical* in CDA.

The definition of the term *discourse* is considered to be broader in discourse analysis compared to its dictionary definition. In discourse analysis, the term is applied in two categories of use. Discourse can be understood "as an abstract noun denoting language in use as a social practice with particular emphasis on larger units" (Locke, 2004, p. 13). These larger units can be, for example,

paragraphs, utterances or whole texts. This means that discourse is considered to reflect society and culture and they define how a piece of discourse is composed. Additionally, discourse can be seen as a countable noun "denoting a practice not just of representing the world, but signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning" (Locke, 2004, pp. 13-14). This implies that discourse defines and constructs world by giving it meaning. Even when aiming to be subjective, discourse is usually shaped through ideologies and affected by prevailing social order of the time, in which a text is situated. When reading a text, one might not notice the underlying social and cultural patterns in a text, unless it is investigated more closely. In this thesis, discourse as a term will be understood as reflecting the society and culture.

4.2. Feminist social theory

Jason Powell (2013) suggests that feminist theories can be divided into three broad perspectives. The first perspective can be characterized by the works of such as Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797). These works are advised by liberalism and individualism, and thus, women's nature was seen as rational and gender-neutral. In this perspective, femininity is seen as a condition which is artificially constructed, which subjects and defines women within a patriarchal culture. Within the second perspective, feminist theorists focus on investigating the basis of society and its social practices. When applying this approach, it is necessary to examine the history of social theory critically, considering how it has been shaped by masculine perspectives and experiences, thus, the patriarchal practices being the cause of exclusion. Therefore, the examination within this perspective focuses on the social process of gender construction, which means how social relations affect the manifestation of sexual differences. Third perspective is the perspective of postmodern feminism. It does not seek to replace the masculine bias with a feminine one but argues that there cannot be one essential category of woman, but "multiple experiences, identities and truths" (Powell, 2013, pp. 1-2).

This thesis will employ the second approach, feminist social theory, to support the critical discourse analysis to uncover how gender is represented in the missing persons cases. According to Powell (2013), in the feminist social theory agency, structure, society and social relations are theorized in terms of deconstruction and reconstruction. Deconstruction is considered to be a study of how masculine perspectives affect the dominant modes of thought in philosophy and social and natural sciences. In contrary, reconstruction seeks to identify the feminine perspective in these processes.

5. Data

As my data for analysis, I will use news articles collected from *ABC News* and *CNN* online news sites. *ABC News* is a news division of *American Broadcasting Company*, which is owned by the *Walt Disney Company,* and is one of the major news outlets in the United States of America (Erickson, 2019a). *CNN, Cable News Network, Inc*., is an American news-based television channel that also produces online news. It is the most trafficked online news outlet in the Unites States (Sommers, 2016). It was the first company to provide a "24-hour all-news service" and it is owned by the Warner media (Erickson, 2019b). The criteria for selecting the missing persons cases for analysis was firstly to find recent cases that have occurred around the same time. Secondly, two of the cases should be of black females and two of white females. When collecting the data, it already became apparent that it was more difficult to find recent missing persons cases of black women than white women, as well as cases that are covered on a national level before finding the individual or their body. Additionally, due to the limitations that this type of study sets, it proved difficult to discover cases that would have received the same amount of media attention and would provide the same amount of analyzed discourse. Therefore, two to three articles per case and in total nine articles have been chosen for analysis.

The first analyzed case is a disappearance of Savannah Spurlock. She is white, 22-year-old female, who disappeared on 4th of January 2019. Spurlock was seen on surveillance video footage after leaving a bar with three men. Her last confirmed location was an "undisclosed home in rural Garrard County, Kentucky" (Shapiro, 2019, February 9, 3). On July 11th, 2019, *ABC News* published an online article informing that Spurlock's body has been located and a man was arrested as a suspect in Spurlock's case (Osborne & Shapiro, 2019, July 11). *CNN* covered the case of Savannah Spurlock only after her body was found and it became a murder investigation. However, only the articles published before the location of her body will be taken into consideration (see Table 1.).

Table 1. *Analyzed articles in the case of Savannah Spurlock*

Article	Date of publication	News outlet	Journalist
1st	28 January 2019	ABC News	E. Shapiro & A. McMahon
2nd	5 February 2019	ABC News	Shapiro

The second case is the disappearance of a black female, Kierra Coles. She disappeared on 2nd of October 2018 and was last seen outside of her apartment in Chicago on surveillance footage after calling out of work due to being sick (Osborne, 2018, October 17). At the beginning, the police did treat the disappearance as non-suspicious. However, on October 19th, 2018 *ABC News* published an article "Foul play suspected in disappearance of pregnant postal worker Kierra Coles". There are five articles on *ABC News* covering the disappearance of Coles, however, this study will focus on the articles published around the time of her disappearance (see Table 2.).

Table 2. *Analyzed articles in the case of Kierra Coles*

Article	Date of publication	News outlet	Journalist
1st	17 October 2018	ABC News	M. Osborne
2nd	19 October 2018	CNN	D. Simon & S. Jones
3rd	19 October 2018	ABC news	E. Shapiro

The third case is the disappearance of 50-year-old Jennifer Dulos. She was a white female from Connecticut and had five children. Although her body has not been found, there is evidence against her estranged husband, who has been charged with her murder. Her case has gotten the most publicity on both *ABC News* and *CNN*. There are numerous articles discussing her case, especially the court proceedings and the accusations against her husband. Due to the limitations of this study, not all of the articles can be analyzed and the most relevant two regarding her disappearance have been chosen (see Table 3.).

Table 3. *Analyzed articles in the case of Jennifer Dulos*

Article	Date of publication	News outlet	Journalist
1st	30 May 2019	ABC news	J. Jacobo
2nd	31 May 2019	CNN	C. Hassan & E. Levenson

The fourth case is the disappearance of a 21-year-old black female, Alexis Crawford. She was a student at Clark Atlanta University and was last seen on October 30th, 2019 by her family and allegedly later the same night by her roommate in her off-campus apartment (Burnside, 2019, Nov 6). Her family reported her missing two days later on 2nd of November. It was reported on November 9th on *CNN* that her body was found, and few days later her roommate and the roommates boyfriend confessed killing Crawford (Toropin & Almasy, 2019, Nov 13). As mentioned before, only articles published before the location of her body will be taken into consideration (see Table 4.).

Table 4. *Analyzed articles in the case of Alexis Crawford*

Article	Date of publication	News outlet	Journalist
1st	6 November 2019	ABC News	K. Allen
2nd	6 November 2019	CNN	T. Burnside

6. Analysis

In this section, I will conduct lexical and schematic analysis on the news articles mentioned above. In order to conduct the analysis, I will apply Van Dijk's (1988) tool of schematic analysis by dividing the paragraphs of the articles into schematic categories to uncover which topics are emphasized in the news coverage. One paragraph can be divided into different categories. The schematic categories, according to Van Dijk (1988), are: *main event* – which in all of the cases is the disappearance, *previous events*, *background*, and *verbal reactions*. In order for some categories be more suitable for the news coverage of missing persons cases, the category *evaluation* will be called *speculation* and a category *description* will be added. Additionally, I will conduct a lexical analysis based on section 3. to identify what kind of language is used in the articles chosen for data.

Table 5. *Results of schematic analysis*

Article	Overall	Verbal reactions	Previous events	Post-events	Speculation	Description	Background	Main Event
1. Spurlock	20	18	4	3	4	3	0	0
2. Spurlock	19	14	5	2	4	3	0	1
1. Coles	11	8	1	4	3	1	1	0
2. Coles	15	9	4	3	3	2	0	0
3. Coles	14	8	3	3	4	3	2	0
1. Dulos	10	6	2	3	0	1	3	0
2. Dulos	11	9	2	3	0	1	1	0
1. Crawford	13	8	2	4	0	3	1	0
2. Crawford	13	4	2	6	1	1	1	0

6.1. Savannah Spurlock

The paragraphs in the articles discussing Spurlock's disappearance are short, as they are only one or two sentences long, which might be due to the article being more effortless to read with simple sentence structure and short paragraphs. Overall, there are 20 paragraphs in the article and the biggest schematic category is verbal reactions from which 11 are comments from Savannah Spurlock's mother and seven from Richmond Assistant Chief Police Rodney Richardson or authorities. Five paragraphs are categorized as speculation and four as previous events, which are mainly information about Spurlock's actions and interactions with other people before the disappearance (see Table 5.). Thus, it can be determined that the article is focusing mostly on what might have happened after Spurlock's disappearance and what were her actions prior to her going missing. Three paragraphs are categorized as post-events, consisting of information of events regarding the investigation, such as identifying three of the men with whom Spurlock was seen leaving the bar. The main event, which is the disappearance, was not discussed directly in the body paragraphs of the article, which is the case in all of the four cases, as not a lot about the actual disappearance is known at the time when the articles have been published.

Second article on *ABC News* about Spurlock's disappearance is 19 paragraphs long. 14 of these paragraphs are verbal reactions (see Table 5.). From the verbal reactions, nine comments are from the police and more specifically from Richardson and five from Spurlock's mother. Similarity to the first article, this article is also focused on speculation, discussed in four paragraphs, and previous events, discussed in five paragraphs.

From the schematic categories, it can be defined that the news story is heavily based on the polices statements from Richmond police, more specifically from Rodney Richardson. This could be in order for the news outlet to construct authority of the information, and thus constructing news value. When information is coming from an official, such as the police, it legitimatizes the said information and it seems that the police is the source of factual information. Additionally, there were many verbal reactions from Spurlock's mother, which also had a major role in narrating the story. The statements given from her are more emotionally appealing and they discuss Spurlock's character and state of being prior to her disappearance. Emotionally appealing language can be seen both in the headlines and in the body paragraphs, thus construing news value of the article, as discussed in earlier sections. The headline of the first article states that the disappearance is a "'nightmare' for worried mom" and it includes the mother's statement "your babies need you" (Shapiro & McMahon, 2019, Jan 28). Spurlock's status as a mother is also emphasized in the headline of the later published article, which states "Missing mom vanished" (Shapiro, 2019, Feb 5). As said in the previous section about news

discourse, the news organizations add news value to the articles by using noun phrases, which is seen in these articles, as Spurlock is often called 'missing mom' or '22-year-old'. Therefore, the headline already reveals more information to the reader about Spurlock than only her name would.

Additionally, the mother describes her as a "very responsible individual", "who hardly ever went anywhere", presumably trying to convince the reader that Spurlock has not left on her own accord (Shapiro & McMahon, 2019, Jan 28, 14). The mother also stresses Spurlock's devotion to her children and to her family by saying that "her kids were her priority" and that the disappearance is "just a big shock to her family and friends" (Shapiro & McMahon, 2019, Jan 28, 15). The theory that Spurlock did not leave willingly on her own, is also supported by the police. Richardson states that Spurlock did not have belongings with her and "authorities do not believe she ran away", as well as stating "it troubles us that it's been so long" (Shapiro, 2019, Feb 5, 7-8). Additionally, it can be argued that the news article portrays Spurlock as a victim, as it states that "three men took her to an undisclosed home in rural Garrard County" (Shapiro, 2019, Feb 5, 3). 'Took' as a verb can imply that Spurlock did not leave on her own, even though the articles do state that Spurlock's mother did speak to her via Facetime while she was presumably in the car with the three men and that it is not known what happened to her after. However, as said, the language and statements included in the article do implicate that she was a victim in the situation, even though they could not say yet how.

6.2. Kierra Coles

As mentioned before, Kierra Coles went missing on October 2nd, 2018, when she was last seen outside of her apartment in Chicago. In the first article, the paragraphs are short and mostly of one or two sentences long. The article consists of eleven paragraphs, and as in Spurlock's case, the story is told through verbal reactions (see Table 5.). Eight paragraphs were categorized as verbal reactions from which four where the police, three Coles' family members, and one the Letter Carrier's Union, as Coles worked for the U.S. Postal Service. Next biggest schematic category was post-events with four paragraphs in which the article discussed some aspects of the investigation, such as Coles' car being found, as well as the U.S. Postal Inspection Service announcing the reward of $25,000 for the help in her safe return. Three paragraphs were categorized as speculation, which consisted mostly of the mother saying that Coles' might have been overwhelmed due to her pregnancy and move into a new aparment, as well as the police stating that they are treating Coles' case as non-suspicious missing person case.

The second article is 14 paragraphs long, from which eight are verbal reactions; two from the police and two from Coles' mother and four from her sister (see Table 5.). Three of the paragraphs were categorized as speculation, which is the police stating that they suspect foul play in Coles'

disappearance and her sister's comments on what might have happened to Coles. At the end of the both articles published on *ABC News*, they have a request that anyone with information should call the Chicago police with their contact information.

The third article published on *CNN* on October 19, 2018, consists of 15 paragraphs overall (see Table 5.). Nine of these paragraphs were verbal reactions, from which three were from the police, five from Coles' family members, and one from Mack Julion, president of the union's Chicago branch. Previous events were discussed in four paragraphs, thus being the second biggest category after verbal reactions. This indicates that the focus of the article is on the events prior to her disappearance.

When the articles about Coles' disappearance are analyzed, it can be noted that there are not as many factual statements from the police about the investigation. When compared to the articles about Spurlock's disappearance, it can be noticed that there are considerably less comments from the police, and most of the verbal reactions are from Coles' family. The comments from the police specify mostly just that the case is treated first as non-suspicious and later as suspicious. However, there are numerous reasons why this might be, such as the police protecting the investigation and not wanting to jeopardize it.

When compared to Spurlock's case, it can be noticed that the lexical choices are not perhaps as dramatic in Coles' case, especially in the headlines. However, there are some dramatic and emotionally appealing aspects in the used language. In the headlines of the articles published on *ABC News*, Kierra Coles is called 'pregnant postal worker'. As discussed in the previous section, the adding of noun phrases increases the information that can be included in the headline. Additionally, Coles' pregnancy makes her disappearance more dramatic. However, especially in the first article there are not many emotionally appealing statements from the family members, which can be due to the police's suspicion that her disappearance did not involve foul play. This idea is supported by the comments made by her mother speculating that it is "possible that she became overwhelmed by everything going on in her life" and that "maybe something did happen where she was overcome with a lot, you know when you are pregnant you are emotional" (Osborne, 2018, Oct 17, 7, 6). The more emotionally appealing comments in the article come from Coles' father, who lives in Wisconsin and stated that he "would not leave before finding her" and Julion from the Letter Carrier's Union, who stated that they would not "sit idly by an we're not going to rest until we find our sister" (Osborne, 2018, Oct 17, 9, 10).

After the police announce that Coles' disappearance is treated as a suspicious disappearance and

foul play might be involved, the language of the articles becomes more dramatic and emotionally appealing, for example "I miss the smile on her face. If anybody knows anything, please, call in. Let us know" (Simon & Jones, 2018, October 19, 5). Now it was said that Coles' 'vanished', and the family members' comments were stating that it was unlike her to disappear like this and Coles' mother commented that they "talk all the time. If we miss one day, it's just one day" and "never, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine days. Never" (Simon & Jones, 2018, October 19, 9). Thus, as in Spurlock's case, it seems that they are now trying to convince the reader that she did not leave on her own accord. However, it can be argued that the language is still not quite as dramatic as in Spurlock's case, where the situation was described, for example as a 'nightmare'.

Additionally, it must be noted that in Coles' case the $25,000 reward from USPIS is mentioned several times and Coles' position as a United States Postal Service worker is emphasized. For example, in an article published by *ABC News,* the reward is mentioned already in the headline: "USPS offers $25k reward" and the article begins with the words "the U.S. Postal service is now getting involved in the search effort for one of their own". It could be that the case receives more attention, as Coles' is employed by an independent agency of the executive branch of the United States federal government. Nevertheless, based on the frequency it is mentioned in the articles, it must be considered as something that construes news value.

6.3. Jennifer Dulos

As in the previously discussed cases and articles, the articles discussing Dulos' disappearance consist of short paragraphs with short sentences and simple sentence structures. The first article discussing the disappearance of Dulos has ten paragraphs from which six are verbal reactions; 3 from the police and 3 from the family's spokesperson Carrie Luft (see Table 5.). As in the news coverage of previous cases, the telling of the story is highly based on the comments of family and the police. Differing from the previously discussed cases, the background of the situation was discussed more broadly in three paragraphs, as Dulos was in the middle of a custody battle with her estranged husband. This situation is emphasized in the article. The second article discussing her disappearance consists of 11 paragraphs. Nine of the paragraphs are verbal reactions; four from the police and six from Luft and Dulos' family. In contrast to the first article, the situation with her estranged husband is not mentioned at all.

The language in the *CNN* article is rather neutral and factual. In contrast to the previous cases, there are no dramatic lexical choices such as 'vanished'. However, the article is heavily based on Dulos' status as a mother, which increases its news value. In the headline, instead of her name, a noun

phrase 'a mother of 5' is used and in the first paragraph '50-year-old mother', which, as mentioned before, is typical for language in news discourse. Emotionally appealing language is used in the article, when family spokesman Luft describes Jennifer as a "devoted mother; an extremely thoughtful, reliable, an organized woman" and states that "Jennifer, we love you and we miss you" (Hassan & Levenson, 2019, May 31, 4, 9). As in the previous cases, it is stated and stressed that she would not leave on her own by stating that "she would never, ever, disappear when she is responsible for the lives of five loving and energetic children" and "Jennifer is gentle, kind, intelligent, and funny, and above all she prioritizes the health and happiness of her children" (Hassan & Levenson, 2019, May 31, 9, 10). The article also emphasizes how well-liked Dulos and her children were in their community.

The article on *ABC News* uses more dramatic language, as it highlights the custody battle between Dulos and her estranged husband, and the situation is mentioned already in the headline. The article also discusses the family's situation between Dulos and the husband from 2017, when Dulos "filed for an emergency order for full custody of the children" (Jacobo, 2019, May 31, 8). The article also uses emotionally appealing language and convincing that Dulos did not leave willingly, as she is again described as "devoted mother", who "is the most reliable and conscientious person I know" and that "she would never disappear voluntarily" (Jacobo, 2019, May 31, 7). Furthermore, the situation is described as "devastating" and "heartbreaking" (Jacobo, 2019, May 31, 4).

As in Spurlock's case, it was not stated that the missing person is known to be a victim, but the article does imply that. In the article published by *CNN*, the police state that they are treating the case as a missing person case but are conducting a criminal investigation at the same time in order to determine if Jennifer was the victim a victim of a crime (Hassan & Levenson, 2019, May 31, 6). However, in the articles Luft's and family's statements stress that she would never leave on her own accord. Additionally, the *ABC News* article stresses the situation with her estranged husband and mentions that a silver alert was issued for Dulos, it gives the reader an impression that the situation is connected to the custody battle, and that Dulos is a victim, who did not disappear on her own.

6.4. Alexis Crawford

The first article discussing the disappearance is 13 paragraphs long from which eight are verbal reactions (see Table 5.). The verbal reactions are mostly from Clarks family members, with six paragraphs and comments from the police are discussed in one paragraph. In contrary to previous cases, there is not a lot of speculation in the article, as none of the paragraphs were categorized as

such. This was also seen in the case of Dulos, but the articles about her case indicate to the reader that she was a victim or some short, while there is no underlying speculation in Crawford's case.

The second article also consists of 13 paragraphs, from which verbal reactions were four; one from the police, one from Crawford's sister, and one from her brother (see Table 5.). In contrast to the previous articles, this one does not concentrate on comments from the police and people, who associate with Crawford. The biggest schematic category was post-events, which are discussed in six paragraphs, and as in the previous cases, mainly concentrate on the investigation. Many of the topics categorized as post-events are family's statements to the police, but they are not as clearly stated as verbal reactions as other paragraphs categorized as such, because they are not presented as direct comments from the person.

As in Dulos' case, the *CNN* article uses considerably neutral language and the situation is not described with dramatic language. This theme can be seen already in the title "Police are searching for a missing Clark Atlanta Student", as it is factual and states the situation without any emotionally or dramatically appealing language. Additionally, in the headline Crawford is not called by her name, but with a noun phrase as well as in the beginning of the article: "21-year-old Clark Atlanta Student" (Burnside, 2019, Nov 6, 1). Similarly, Crawford is also called 'Clark Atlanta University Student' in the *ABC News* article. Contrary to the *CNN* article, the *ABC News* article is overall more dramatically and emotionally appealing, as in Dulos' case. Again, the word 'vanished' is used in the headline, and there are more emotional comments from the family included in the article. Crawford's brother appeals Atlanta residents "can you just please help me find my baby sister? And Alexis, we love you" (Burnside, 2019, Nov 6, 11). Additionally, Crawford's sister sends a message to Crawford that she wants her "to come home and be safe" and that she hopes that "God is walking with you and please prevent any evil that comes her way – and we're here for you" (Allen, 2019, Nov 6, 9). As in the previous cases, there are comments suggesting that Crawford would not disappear willingly, or that it is not normal of her to not talk to her family for a while, as the Crawford's mother says that Crawford "seemed to be in good spirits and was laughing" before her disappearance and that it was "rare for her to go more than a day without speaking to her parents or at least one of her siblings" (Allen, 2019, Nov 6, 5, 8).

7. Discussion

This section discusses how possible racial disparities are represented in the news coverage of the four cases, as well as how gender is represented in the language and the lexical choices of the articles. As one can see from the analysis, the schematic categories did not differ significantly between the articles (see Table 5.). The news outlets mainly narrated the news story through comments from the police and individuals, who associate with the missing individual, such as family members and friends. According to Bednarek and Caple (2012), news outlets often obscure agency by using passive voice. Thus, in this case, the news outlet hiding its own voice by quoting people creates an illusion of objectivity, even though it is the news outlet deciding how something is portrayed to the recipient. Additionally, using quotes increases news value by personalization (Bednarek & Caple, 2012). Therefore, adding comments from the loved ones increases the emotional appeal of a news story in addition to the emotionally appealing language.

However, there is a disparity between the amount of police statements. In the news coverage of Spurlock's and Dulos' cases, the verbal reactions were divided in a balanced way between the statements from the police, providing more of a factual base for the news coverage, and comments from the family, which discuss the missing person's characteristics, and provide more emotional base for the articles. In contrary, in the cases of Coles and Crawford, there were considerably less statements from the police and information regarding the investigation. In Cole's case, there were 25 verbal reactions overall and only nine were from the authorities. Similarly, from 12 verbal reactions in Crawford's case, two were from the authorities. In contrast, in the case of Spurlock, 16 out of 32 verbal reactions were from the police. According to Bednarek and Caple (2012), one of the aspects construing news value is evidentiality. Thus, as the police as a factual authority is not evenly represented in all of the cases, it seems that there is a racial disparity present. It can reflect the argument that Missing White Woman Syndrome is present in the current laws and in customs how missing persons cases are investigated by the police (Moss, 2019). However, the reason for the lack of police statements for these specific cases cannot be determined here, as there are possibilities that information is omitted in order to protect the investigation. Nonetheless, when analyzing these cases, it can be interpreted that the cases of Coles and Crawford are not seen as important as the cases of Spurlock and Dulos.

In previous research of representation of race in crime discourse, it has been determined that white women are more easily accepted as victims (Sommers, 2016). It can be argued that this aspect is also seen in the news coverage of these four cases. Especially in the case of Spurlock, the police statements do imply that she is in some type of danger, even though it is not known that she is in any more danger

than the other three women. Nonetheless, the chosen statements from the police do imply that Spurlock is most likely a victim, as the articles state that "Spurlock did not have belongings with her and authorities do not believe she ran away" and that it troubles us that it's been so long" (Shapiro, 2019, Feb 5, 7, 8). This type of statement is also more sentimental than what is seen from the police in the other cases. Thus, it implies that even the police is more emotionally invested in this case.

The article also implies that Spurlock was a victim of a crime by using more dramatic language, such as describing the situation as a 'nightmare', and by stating that Spurlock was 'taken' by three men (Shapiro, 2019, Feb 5). However, it seems that she left willingly with them, as she had a normal conversation with her mother via FaceTime while she was in the car with the men. In addition to Spurlock, it seems that Dulos is also accepted as a victim more easily than Coles or Crawford, especially by the article published on *ABC News,* which highlights the custody battle between Dulos and her estranged husband, and indirectly indicates that the custody battle and Dulos' disappearance are connected, as family members statements convince the recipient that Dulos would not leave on her own accord.

This contrast is especially highlighted in Coles' disappearance. First article published about her disappearance does indicate that there is a high chance that she disappeared willingly. This is due to the police stating that they treat the case as non-suspicious and her mother stating that she might have been overwhelmed due to the changes in her life and being pregnant. It is understandable that while the police treat a case as non-suspicious it is also treated as such by the news outlet. However, it must be noted that two days after, an article was published where the mother did not think it was a possibility that she would leave on her own. Furthermore, in the disappearance of Crawford, there is no indication of her being victim of a crime, only her family's statements of them not believing she would leave on her own. As mentioned previously, it cannot be determined what is causing the lack of police statements, information, and victimization of Crawford and Coles. However, it is studied that minorities, especially black females are underrepresented as victims in the mainstream media (Moss, 2019). In addition, as mentioned in the analysis, one occurring and highlighted topic discussed in the articles of Coles' disappearance was her employment at United States Postal service, as well as the $25,000 reward for her safe return, makes one wonder if her disappearance is recognized as 'newsworthy' due to these elements.

Furthermore, as stated previously, there is prior studies suggesting that the disappearances of white women are scandalized in the media. This seems to be the case of Spurlock and Dulos due to the dramatization of lexical choices and the choice of themes, such as Dulos' custody battle, as well as the amount of media attention they have received, especially after the cases have been solved, or at least a suspect has been found.

As the study did not include any analysis on news coverage of missing males, the gender disparity in linguistic means of the articles cannot be determined. However, I will discuss the representation of gender. As it has been established before, there are multiple ways news outlets increase news value of a situation and that before publication, a news story undergoes many stages of editing, thus it is most likely not something that has been quickly put together. Bednarek and Caple (2012) have argued that noun phrases are used to construe news value and allow the producers to add various kinds of important information in the story, especially in the headline and the beginning of the news story. As mentioned in the analysis, this is seen in the articles as the missing people are not often called by their names, but by noun phrases describing them, especially in the headlines, such as "mother of five", "pregnant postal worker", "missing mom". Thus, it can be seen that the status as a mother increases news value.

In earlier sections, Sommers (2016) theory of damsel in distress was mentioned. It can be argued that Spurlock is portrayed as a damsel in distress, as the articles highlight that she was 'taken' by the three men and portray her as a victim. This is emphasized in the police statements, as they are clearly also emotionally invested in finding Spurlock, for example as Richardson sates that their "ultimate goal is to find Savannah" and that it "troubles us that it's been so long" (Shapiro, 2019, Feb 5, 7, 16).

Additionally, another interesting detail is that when stating that Coles is three months pregnant, both of the articles published by *ABC News* specify that Coles has a boyfriend, which might in closer analysis seem to be an irrelevant statement, as the boyfriend is not mentioned in any other aspect in the article. In contrary, the father of Savannah Spurlock's children is not mentioned at all. Thus, as in critical discourse analysis discourse is considered to be a reflection of society and its values, this raises a question, if Coles being a single mother would have somehow diminished the news value of her disappearance. However, this question cannot be answered in this thesis, and as well as many aspects of the study, leaves more room for research in the future.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, the aim of this thesis was to study if MWWS is manifested in language; how the portrayals of women representing different ethnic groups possibly vary from each other, as well as how gender is represented in the news coverage of missing persons cases on *ABC News and CNN.*

The results show that it cannot be determined for certain if MWWS is represented in the language and the topics covered in the analyzed news coverage, due to the unknown circumstances and stages of investigation when the articles have been published. In order to determine if Missing White Woman Syndrome is also present in the language of the news coverage, more research of the topic would be required. However, the results of this study show that there is reason for further research, as there are some disparities that can be identified in the news coverage. The analysis does suggest that the cases of Spurlock and Dulos, who are both white females, are more scandalized by using more dramatic language and highlighting certain topics, thus creating an illusion of them being in more danger than Coles and Crawford, who are both black females.

These disparities are especially present in the case of Spurlock, as the articles imply that she was taken somewhere by three men, even though it seems that she left willingly. However, she is still portrayed as a victim through the comments from the police, emotional appeals from her mother, and through dramatic and sentimental lexical choices. Furthermore, in the case of Dulos, the article published by *ABC News* emphasizes her situation of being in the middle of a custody battle with her husband, even though at the time it was not publicly known, if the situation had anything to do with her disappearance. However, with the emphasis on Dulos' domestic situation and the comments from her family and friends that she would never disappear willingly, she is also portrayed as a victim of a crime. In contrary, the cases of Coles' and Crawford were not as scandalized by linguistic means, and they were not as readily portrayed and accepted as victims.

In addition, the representation of gender in the language of news coverage of disappearances requires more research, as the findings developed more questions than answers, such as how the gender disparity manifests in the language when comparing news coverage of missing men and women. However, this analysis does suggest that the gender of the missing individual does affect the way news value is construed. For example, in three of the cases, the women's status as a mom was highlighted. Additionally, when mentioning Coles' pregnancy, it was stated that she had a boyfriend, which in closer analysis seemed to be an irrelevant statement, as the boyfriend was not discussed in any other part of the article. In contrast, the father of Spurlock's children was not mentioned. This raises a question if Coles being a single mother would have somehow diminished the news value of her disappearance. However, as previously mentioned, these questions cannot be answered in this

thesis. In the future, the representation of Missing White Woman Syndrome in the language and topics of disappearances that have been accepted as newsworthy should be researched further in order to understand and recognize reoccurring disparities, because we all deserve to be found.

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