

United States, British, and New Zealand Broadsheet Representations of Domestic Violence Before and After the Onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Marek Palace¹ , Brandon May²,
Natacha Harding³, Dhanvi Patel², Aelia Zaidi¹,
and Lorraine Bowman Grieve⁴

Abstract

Domestic violence (DV) continues to be a growing area of concern in the United Kingdom, United States, and New Zealand, with problematic representation in the mainstream newspaper coverage. This article explores how broadsheet newspapers in the United Kingdom, United States, and New Zealand provide media coverage of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders of DV, and how the construct of DV in such coverage has changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Twenty-eight newspaper articles published between 2017 and 2020 were sourced and analysed to provide a representation

¹Liverpool John Moores University, UK

²Florida Institute of Technology, Melbourne, USA

³University of Winchester, UK

⁴South East Technological University, Waterford, Ireland

Corresponding Author:

Marek Palace, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool L3 3AF, UK.

Email: marekpalace@hotmail.com

inclusive of DV before and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings indicate the emergence of three key themes: the defenceless 'ideal victim', excusing men's violence, and the construction of sensationalism. Findings also resonate with previous research that men are likely to be perpetrators and women are likely to fall victim to DV. Stereotypical media continues to overshadow victims' agency and resilience, which are ignored for a more sensationalised narrative. This, in turn, sheds new light on moral panic theory whereby the alleged 'girl nastiness' is indirectly attributed to the victim who allegedly provoked the violence, the implication being that representing DV in ways sensitive to the victim remains a significant challenge to be addressed even by reputable broadsheet newspapers.

Keywords

COVID-19 pandemic, domestic violence, gender

Introduction

Recent statistics suggest that the prevalence of domestic violence (DV) increased significantly during and following the outbreak of COVID-19 (Kourti et al., 2023; McCrary & Sanga, 2021). This was attributed to a range of risk factors which became more salient during this period, including forced confinement, increased psychological distress, economic hardship, and financial insecurity and reduced access to support services, problematic coping behaviours, and pre-existing vulnerabilities (Lausi et al., (2021). Statistical variations persist with regard to prevalence rates of DV as different countries address and define DV differently. For example, domestic abuse in the United Kingdom is described as any threatening behaviour or abuse towards adults who are or have been, intimate partners, and between family members; threatening behaviour includes the use of weapons, physical violence, sexual violence, emotional abuse, threats, and controlling and coercive behaviour (Home Office, 2021).

In comparison, the United States under the Violence Against Women Act and related federal law defines 'domestic violence' as certain crimes committed by a current or former spouse, intimate partner, someone with whom the victim shares a child, someone cohabiting/has cohabited, or other persons similarly situated. In New Zealand, the term used is 'family violence' and is covered under the Family Violence Act 2018 and is defined as harm or control of a family member, or someone they are in a close personal relationship with.¹ The harm or control can be physical, emotional, psychological

financial, sexual, or a combination of these.² For the purpose of this article, the term DV is being utilised to cover the range of interpersonal violence (both physical and psychological) that may be experienced in a domestic setting.

The progression of legislation within the United Kingdom, the United States, and New Zealand highlights the social constructionism and legislative differences between these countries. For instance, while the United Kingdom and New Zealand have moved towards recognising children as direct victims of domestic abuse in family law, the United States definitions often specify intimate partner/spouse/co-parent, etc. and does not specify children. Additionally, police responses to non-violent domestic abuse differ, with U.K. officers showing a slightly better understanding of coercive control compared to their U.S. counterparts (Robinson et al., 2016). What is clear though is that all of these countries view DV as a growing area of concern and acknowledge that their efforts must continue to keep the DV crisis under control.

Research has begun to challenge the myth that all perpetrators are alike, and provides evidence that abusers vary vastly in motivation and control tactics (see Krishnakumar & Verma, 2021). There may be many possible explanations as to why people perpetrate DV and why people fall victim to DV, yet there is a lack of understanding in the media reporting—particularly, broadsheet media (Lloyd, 2020), which are not required to remain impartial (Reeves et al, 2015). As DV is usually committed in the privacy of the victim and/or perpetrators' home, many aspects, and features of it are not known to individuals on the outside (Lloyd & Ramon, 2017). Broadsheets (i.e. large formatted newspapers, regarded as more serious and less sensationalist than tabloids.), therefore, play an important role in discussing and bringing DV to the public's attention to protect the victims and challenge the perpetrators.

When focusing on DV, existing research demonstrates that the media can influence and impact their readers' perceptions and opinions on topics discussed within their articles (Gillespie et al., 2013). This can change society's judgement of the situation, who it affects and how it affects them, and ultimately how to respond to the issue (Robinson et al., 2016). Research shows that DV is a highly complex and prevalent societal issue (Gillespie et al., 2013); yet the media often desensitise and normalise DV, ultimately altering the level of importance it has in society (Kohlman et al., 2014). For instance, newspapers play a role in contributing to what is perceived as the 'ideal' victim, that is, those who possess socially desirable characteristics contributing to a concept of victim legitimacy (Christie, 1986). It is understood that the ideal victim can be '*deserving*', in which they induce sympathy and can be

deemed worthy of the victim status and the services available (Duggan, 2018; Green, 2007; Törnqvist, 2021).

The ‘ideal’ victim is described as vulnerable, respectable, unconnected from the perpetrator, blameless, and victimised by a ‘*bad*’ offender (Green, 2007). Broadsheet portrayals of an ideal victim therefore can have irrevocable consequences. Lloyd and Ramon (2017), for instance, found that those abusing ‘*ideal*’ victims tended to receive harsher representation within newspapers than those that abused ‘non-ideal’ victims. Relatedly, the current study will shed light on moral panic theory (Cohen, 2011), which is utilised here to help explain sensationalist representations of women as alleged indirect instigators of aggression (DeKeseredy, 2010). This is particularly pertinent when examining cross-cultural differences of broadsheet representations of DV across borders.

Therefore, it is important to investigate how this issue is portrayed to the public through broadsheet newspapers. The decision to compare the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and the United States’ media representations of DV is based primarily on seeking to include English-speaking countries with legislative variations and varying cultural norms in order to examine what might be universal in terms of DV media representation and that which is culturally or legally specific. Additionally, the United Kingdom and New Zealand are scarcely cross-analysed within academic research surrounding media representations of DV thus contributing to new knowledge in this area. This exploratory research provides an up-to-date and novel understanding of how the United Kingdom, United States, and New Zealand broadsheets represent DV before and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the above literature the following research questions are proposed:

1. How are domestic violence *victims* represented by United Kingdom, United States, and New Zealand broadsheets?
2. How are domestic violence *perpetrators* represented by United Kingdom, United States, and New Zealand broadsheets?
3. Did the construct of domestic violence shift during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Methodology

Drawing upon newspaper representations as data has already proven insightful in exploring masculinity (Ellis, et al., 2013), gender (Seal, 2009), and DV (Gadd et al., 2014), including during the COVID-19 pandemic (Storer et al., 2024). Our novel cross-cultural contribution, however, lies in comparative exploration of DV in culturally varied broadsheet newspaper accounts, before

and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. To this end, *The Guardian* (United Kingdom), *The New York Times* (United States), and *The New Zealand Herald* (New Zealand) were selected as the key sources for this research. The selection of these particular newspapers centred on several criteria including their extensive readership, the distinctiveness of their editorial stances, and the variability in their audiences.

The Guardian, established in 1821, is popular amongst males (37%) who were described as millennials (42%) YouGov, 2020). *The Guardian* is a liberal broadsheet, considered to be progressive, socially liberal, and investigative. Moreover, *The New Zealand Herald* is a popular broadsheet that is the best-selling newspaper in the country with the broadsheet taking a centre-right political stance (Papers Past, 2020). The *New York Times* is generally regarded as a newspaper of record in the United States with a significant readership, its editorial stance is centrists to centre-left, liberal on social issues, and moderate on economic issues. It has a strong investigative legacy. All are considered well respected and popular broadsheets with coverage of events both local and global (albeit the NZ Herald is primarily local in focus). All have a notable readership both in print and online; thus, all are considered suitable for the purpose of this research.

This choice of broadsheets only was also purposeful. Tabloid papers were not included in this research sample due to the increased level of sensationalism often associated with this particular form of media. Additionally internet only sources were discounted in favour of sources with both print and online access which arguably impacts overall readership. The current choice of broadsheets facilitated a comparative analysis across divergent journalistic styles, enabling an examination of the disparities in DV reporting between different types of newspapers, in different cultural and societal contexts. While it is acknowledged that *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, and *The New Zealand Herald* are not exhaustive representations of all UK, US, and NZ broadsheets, they are used as illustrative and exploratory case studies. These specific broadsheets hold the potential for broader application of this type of cross-cultural comparative research in subsequent analyses of other news media within the cultural, societal, and geographic media landscape.

Search Strategy

To retain a sufficient number of articles from the broadsheets, the terms ‘domestic violence’, ‘domestic abuse’, ‘family violence’, ‘battered wife’, and ‘battered husband’ were manually inputted into the broadsheet’s websites, and articles were selected manually to be read and filtered down to a smaller sample size by selecting the articles that addressed the majority of the research

questions. The initial manual search yielded a total of 98 articles from *The Guardian* and *The New Zealand Herald* for time periods, 2017 to 2020. After the initial selection process had taken place, a total of 28 articles were chosen for analysis. These articles consisted of 15 articles from *The Guardian*, 7 articles from *The New York Times*, and 6 articles from *The New Zealand Herald* dated between March 2017 and December 2020 (Table 1). These specific dates were chosen in order to be a representative and inclusive sample of DV media representations before and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, thus aiming for reasonable saturation.

Process of Analysis

Maguire and Delahunt (2017) addressed that ‘data analysis is central to credible qualitative research’ (p. 3351), and analysis is important to ‘understand, describe and interpret experiences and perceptions’ (p. 3351). In accordance with Braun et al. (2022) and Maguire and Delahunt (2017), once the selection process was complete, the next step taken was to code the chosen articles. Coding requires the researcher to identify commonly used words and phrases within the data (Al-Reshaïd et al., 2023) and organise data into ‘small chunks of meaning’ (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). All articles selected were read, re-read, and coded to identify the common patterns and linguistic threads used across the two selected time periods. A combined inductive and deductive approach was utilised in this study, allowing for both guidance from theoretical perspectives as well as also allowing for the discovery on other themes and an open interpretation of the data. Based on the patterns and linguistic threads identified, themes were constructed around the research questions relating to how victims and perpetrators are represented in broadsheet accounts both pre and post-Covid.

On completion of the manual coding (aimed at capturing the different perspectives of our multi-cultural research team), the process of searching for themes began as suggested by Braun et al. (2022). During this step, codes that were similar in nature were grouped together to develop a theme. As highlighted by Maguire and Delahunt (2017) some codes fit several themes (Table 2).

The coding process followed a hybrid thematic approach, combining both deductive and inductive strategies. Initial coding was informed by existing theoretical and empirical literature on DV media reporting, including concepts such as the *ideal victim*, victim-blaming, and sensationalism. This provided a deductive lens through which recurring patterns in the dataset could be identified. At the same time, the analysis remained open to themes that emerged directly from the newspaper articles themselves, such as the specific construction of lockdown impacts and the distinction between

Table 1. Newspaper Sources.

Newspaper	Article title	Authors and date
<i>The New York Times</i>	Victims of sexual violence often stay in touch with their abusers. Here's why.	Maya Salam, 7 September 2018
<i>The Guardian</i>	Refugees from domestic violence running out of space	Owen Bowcott & Jamie Grierson, 28 April 2020
<i>The Guardian</i>	Revealed: Surge in domestic violence during COVID-19 crisis	Mark Towsend, 12 April 2020
<i>The New Zealand Herald</i>	Family violence in the supermarket car park: What would you do?	Cherie Howie, 15 November 2019
<i>The New Zealand Herald</i>	COVID-19 coronavirus: Domestic violence is the second, silent epidemic amid lockdown	Kirsty Johnson, 12 April 2020
<i>The New York Times</i>	Domestic violence calls mount as restrictions linger: 'No one can leave'	Julie Bosman, 15 May 2020
<i>The Guardian</i>	Domestic abuse surged in lockdown, Panorama investigation finds	Henry McDonald, 17 August 2020
<i>The Guardian</i>	Fifth of crimes involved domestic abuse in first England and Wales lockdown	Jamie Grierson, 25 November 2020
<i>The New York Times</i>	A new COVID-19 crisis: Domestic abuse rises worldwide	Amanda Taub, 6 April 2020
<i>The Guardian</i>	Female BAME domestic violence victims 'being failed' in Manchester	Maya Wolfe-Robison, 25 June 2019
<i>The Guardian</i>	Domestic abuse bill fails to protect children and migrant women—charities	Jamie Grierson, 3 March 2020
<i>The New Zealand Herald</i>	Māori women with violent partners not seeking help over fears their children will be removed—study	Denise Wilson, 4 December 2019
<i>The New York Times</i>	Murder rates rose in a year of pandemic and protests	Emily Badger & Ben Blatt, 10 August 2020
<i>The Guardian</i>	'Intimate terrorism': how an abusive relationship led a young woman to kill her partner	Sophie Elmhirst, 31 October 2019

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Newspaper	Article title	Authors and date
<i>The Guardian</i>	Domestic violence: still a hidden problem for many migrant women	Mirela Sula, 16 December 2017
<i>The Guardian</i>	'It's a man's problem': Patrick Stewart and the men fighting to end domestic violence	Anna Moore, 4 December 2018
<i>The New Zealand Herald</i>	Getting tough: How New Zealand could stop domestic violence	Kim Griggs, 19 September 2019
<i>The New York Times</i>	Is the legal system an effective solution to domestic violence	Alisha Haridasani Gupta, 19 December 2020
<i>The New York Times</i>	Eric Schneiderman, Consent and Domestic Violence	Niraj Chokshi, 8 May 2018
<i>The Guardian</i>	Man who killed wife 'in act of great violence' jailed for five years	Damien Gayle, 18 February 2021
<i>The Guardian</i>	'I needed to fix myself for my kids': breaking the cycle of domestic abuse	Sarah Johnson, 28 October 2020
<i>The Guardian</i>	I know the trauma of abuse in the home, so I fear for women in lockdown	Anonymous, 12 April, 2020
<i>The Guardian</i>	'Every abuser is more volatile': The truth behind the shocking rise of domestic violence killings	Anna Moore, 22 April, 2020
<i>The New Zealand Herald</i>	COVID-19 coronavirus: Code words at supermarkets possible for victims escaping violence	Kirsty Johnston, 14 April 2020
<i>The New York Times</i>	As coronavirus deepens inequality, inequality worsens its spread	Amanda Taub, 6 April 2020
<i>The New Zealand Herald</i>	Strangled: A tale of two women, domestic violence, terror and survival	Anna Leask B, 27 October 2020
<i>The Guardian</i>	Male survivors and victims of abuse deserve their own support system	Ally Fogg, 12 March, 2019
<i>The Guardian</i>	Domestic murderers are often likable men—that's how they have been able to abuse women	Simon Usborne, 10 October 2019

Table 2. Thematic Analysis Codes.

Theme	Subtheme	Simple codes	Example indicators from articles
Theme 1: Constructing the Ideal Victim (Pre- and Post-COVID)	1.1 The defenceless ideal victim	Vulnerability, fear, entrapment, youth, helplessness, repeated abuse, inability to escape	'Trapped', 'at-risk women', 'frozen', 'scared', 'powerless', 'most vulnerable women', 'women aged 16–19', repeated rape during lockdown
	1.2 Intersectional perspectives of ideal victimisation	Migrant women, race/ethnicity, poverty, minority disadvantage, children, institutional barriers	Migrant women, BAME women, Māori women, Black/Hispanic/Native American women, low income, children overlooked
	1.3 Under- representation of male victims	Male invisibility, token statistical inclusion, marginal victim narratives, exceptional male cases	'61% of male victims . . .', 'one in nine men', isolated articles on male survivors
	2.1 Responsibilisation of victims	Victim-blaming, provocation narratives, behavioural triggers, perpetrator defence, reputational shielding, psychological mitigation	'Came back later than she said', 'without husband's permission', 'misunderstood', 'allegations are not true', 'kind person', 'mental state severely affected'
Theme 2: Excusing Men's Violence	2.2 Construction of lockdown impacts	Confinement, no escape, stress narrative, control loss, crisis escalation, increased lethality	'No one can leave', 'no escape', women killed during lockdown, 'loss of power or control', pandemic stress exacerbation
	3.1 Construction of newsworthiness	Physical violence prioritisation, headline shock value, extreme case selection, murder focus, visible injury bias, exclusion of coercive control	'Strangled', homicide stories, terror/survival framing, focus on killings, visible assault, limited reporting of non-physical abuse
	3.2 Sensationalist language	Emotional intensifiers, dramatic victimhood, violent imagery, crisis framing, fear amplification	'Trapped', 'tragic', 'trigger his rage', 'turbulent', 'traumatic', 'berating', 'silent epidemic'

newsworthiness and sensationalist language. This hybrid approach allowed the analysis to remain theoretically grounded while also being responsive to novel patterns within the data.

Once the initial themes had been identified using the codes, it was then necessary to develop subthemes to break down the data more specifically as suggested by Maguire and Delahunt (2017). Once this process was completed, the themes were then defined and followed by the process of writing up the findings, interpretations and considering these in relation to relevant literature.

Reflexivity

The research team brought diverse perspectives to the analysis, shaped by backgrounds in both qualitative and quantitative research on violence and domestic abuse, as well as training in Psychology. Team members were also at different stages of their academic careers, which supported a balance between established theoretical knowledge and fresh critical perspectives. Importantly, the team represented different gender identities and cultural backgrounds, including American, Central European, British, Irish, and Pakistani perspectives, which informed how issues of victimhood, gender, ethnicity, and minority experiences were interpreted across the dataset. These varied standpoints were particularly valuable when analysing themes relating to migrant women, minority victims, and the under-representation of male survivors. At the same time, we remained aware that our prior expertise and socio-cultural positions may have shaped our sensitivity to patterns of victim-blaming, gendered framing, and sensationalism. Ongoing reflexive discussion throughout coding and theme development helped us critically examine these assumptions and strengthen the credibility of the final thematic analysis.

Findings

Reflecting upon existing findings on DV within the United Kingdom, United States, and New Zealand, the findings of this study echoed the prevalence and understanding that men were more likely to be perpetrators and women were more likely to be victimised in DV situations (Women's Aid, 2025). In line with the demographics of the United Kingdom, United States, and New Zealand, the articles analysed predominantly featured victims and perpetrators of White ethnic background. However, some articles focussed on those from minority ethnic backgrounds; therefore, it was important to highlight this in the analysis. Coding of the articles led to the identification of three

themes: Constructing the *ideal victim*, excusing men's violence, and construction of sensationalism, which will be analysed in depth below. Each theme includes subthemes.

Theme One: Constructing the Ideal Victim Pre- and Post-COVID

An important and recurring theme that presented throughout the research was the way in which the broadsheets shaped the depiction of victims. The theme of constructing the 'ideal' victim can be further divided into three subthemes; the 'ideal' victim as defenceless, representation of minority women; and underrepresentation of male victims.

Subtheme 1: The Defenceless Ideal Victim. Broadsheets (like *The New York Times*) consistently demonstrated the reality of DV, often placing emphasis on the status of the victim (i.e. a young vulnerable female):

The majority of people who contact the national DV hotline about abuse by a partner are between the ages of 16 and 24 [years]. (Salam, 2018)

Yet, all broadsheets often fell short in addressing the underlying issue of DV. Instead, their reporting seemed to reveal positivistic victimological perspectives (Hope, 2017), where characteristics attributed to the victims seemed to partially shift the blame. However, these methods of reporting can be problematic: (a) it risks falling into the ecological fallacy by making individual assumptions based on group data (Winzar, 2015); (b) the contextual fallacy by failing to measure variables with precision (MacQueen, 2016); and (c) the aggregation fallacy by treating group data as if it accurately captures individual variables (Holt et al., 2010; Hope, 2017). Additionally, this style of reporting presupposes the neutrality of the term '*victim*', defining it either through the lens of criminal law or by the visible signs of suffering, thus neglecting the subjective experiences and self-identifications of those affected. In this regard, the term *victim* can carry negative connotations of weakness and passivity (Fohring, 2018), and may not align with how individuals affected by crime or conflict identify themselves (Fohring, 2018).

For example, *The Guardian* consistently used phrases such as *victim*, *trapped in the horrific cycle of abuse*, *at-risk women* (McDonald, 2020). Additionally, *The New Zealand Herald* consistently used phrases such as *half his size*, *frozen*, *afraid*, *not been brave enough*, *scared*, *powerless*, and *uncommunicative* (Howie, 2019; Johnston, 2020). This characterisation, whilst evocative, risks reinforcing a singular narrative where victims are portrayed

predominantly as passive and defenceless (Green & Pemberton, 2017), overshadowing their agency and the complexities of their victimisation. Furthermore, Kenney (2004) argued that focusing solely on the psychological aftereffects might obscure victims' ability to actively cope with their experiences.

When examined within the context of the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic, the data revealed that the stay-at-home orders disproportionately impacted the most vulnerable divisions of the population, particularly women. For instance, the United States reported that the lockdown policies disproportionately affected the most vulnerable women in society (*The New York Times*):

The stay at home orders have had a severe effect on the most vulnerable women [IPV victims]. (Bosman, 2020)

This perspective reinforced how mandatory isolation during stay-at-home orders amplified the (perceived) defencelessness of victims, thus intensifying their vulnerability and positioning them as potentially more *deserving* of the label of DV victimisation (Kofman & Garfin, 2020). However, this finding was not U.S.-centric: indeed, U.K. and NZ broadsheets reported similar victimisation:

'So the rape started really, really, really bad'. [. . .] Asked if she could recall how many times she was raped during lockdown, Jess said it was 'a hundred easily, if not more'. (*The Guardian*; McDonald, 2020)

Under a positivist framework, stay-at-home orders during the COVID-19 pandemic arguably exacerbated the victimisation of women who were already being victimised by their abusers. Indeed, this increase in DV has been observed globally, with many victims of DV trapped at home with their abusers and unable to access support services safely (Evans et al., 2016). The pandemic exacerbated these existing vulnerabilities, particularly affecting minority women and those with histories of victimisation (Kaukinen, 2020):

Women aged 16 to 19 [years] were more likely to be victims of [IPV]. (*The Guardian*, Grierson, 2020)

Mounting data suggests that domestic abuse is acting like an opportunistic infection, flourishing in the conditions created by the pandemic. (*The New York Times*, Taub, 2020)

The language used here implies that the media adopted a stance that portrayed victims as the *defenceless ideal*. By suggesting that victims were inherently vulnerable, there is a risk of perpetuating the stereotype of the ideal victim—a concept that can lead to an oversimplified understanding of the complexities surrounding DV. These characterisations could inadvertently advocate that these individuals might be more prone to victimisation, overshadowing the fact that DV is a result of the abuser's behaviour, not the vulnerability of the victim.

However, whilst the language illuminates the fact DV is traumatic and damaging for the victim, it is important to consider the nomenclature use to describe victims. For instance, Women Against Abuse (2021) has suggested the word *survivor* should be used to describe those who have endured DV as a way of empowering them. Therefore, the findings suggest that the media are perpetuating defenceless narratives and are not playing a role in aiding the shift from *victim* to *survivor*.

Subtheme 2: Intersectional Perspectives of Ideal Victimisation. A prominent sub-theme to arise during the analysis was the way in which victims of differing race, ethnicity, and culture were represented. For instance, research has suggested that Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people are largely invisible when it comes to media reporting (Jiwani, 2009). However, throughout the analysis, it was evident that there had been a shift in the way intersectional victims were recognised. Specifically, *The Guardian* often highlighted the differences in treatment towards minority women, with the findings suggesting they were drawing the public's attention to the mistreatment of these victims. For example:

But there is now considerable evidence to show that migrant women, women of colour and women with low income are often at higher risk of domestic abuse. (*The Guardian*, Sula, 2017)

Women and children from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds (BAME) are not being adequately protected or getting the specialist help they need after suffering domestic abuse. (*The Guardian*, Wolfe-Robinson, 2019).

Children and migrant women are being overlooked by new laws designed to protect victims and punish perpetrators of domestic violence. (*The Guardian*, Grierson, 2020)

However, although it appeared *The Guardian* was drawing attention to the oppression of BAME and migrant women it could be argued, there was a lack

of representation in U.K. media for these women as only three (25%) of the selected *The Guardian* articles focussed solely on minority women. However, it is noted that this may be attributable in some part to limitations of the study sample and is worthy of further consideration in future research. To the contrary, *The New Zealand Herald* appeared to have an increased focus on minority groups:

Māori women felt judged and guilty when accessing help from the very agencies that were supposed to be helping them. (Nielson, 2019)

Interestingly, the analysis identified that articles speaking of Māori women specifically, focussed on their experiences in general terms, risking a reductionist portrayal that may fail to capture the nuanced and individualised experiences of these women. Historical colonial constructions may have contributed to this, as the misrepresentation of Māori women's roles and status have necessitated the development of Mana Wahine theory to affirm Māori feminism and explore women's intersectional experiences within Māori society (Pihama, 2020).

Furthermore, whilst generalisations can draw attention to systemic issues, they often do not convey the complexity of culture, and personal circumstances that might contribute to the lived reality of their victimisation (Warrier, 2008). In this regard, research has emphasised the importance of recognising how structural systems of social inequality interact with cultural factors in shaping experiences of violence against marginalised women (Sokoloff, 2004). However, the process of 'culturalisation' in addressing specific forms of violence, such as honour-based violence, can lead to policy responses that may not adequately serve victims (Gill & Walker, 2020). Thus, it is arguable that the language used in these articles might have homogenised the experiences of minority women, potentially reducing their unique voices and obscuring the specific societal and cultural changes needed to address their particular vulnerabilities to DV.

From a U.S. perspective, the scope of reporting on how minority groups were represented appeared narrow, with limited attention to the intersectionality of race and DV. For example, only one article explicitly addressed racial disparities:

The [. . .] C.D.C. report found that Black, Hispanic, and Native American women faced a higher rate of [IPV] than white women. (*The New York Times*, Taub, 2020)

Interestingly, this article does little to reveal the disadvantage and systemic issues that disproportionately affect minority communities. However,

when the conversation was expanded to consider intersectional perspectives more holistically, a clearer picture of the systemic roots of victimisation began to take shape. For example:

Higher levels of community disadvantage predictably generated higher levels of violence. (*The New York Times*, Taub, 2020)

This statement introduces the complexity and intersectionality between socio-economic factors and DV rates, suggesting that minority focussed DV cannot be fully understood without considering the broader societal and economic structures that contribute to it (Stockman et al., 2014). Such a discussion implicates not just individual or relational dynamics but broader patterns of inequality and systemic oppression that create violence. The term '*predictably*' in this context is particularly important: here, the article implies that higher levels of violence are not aberrant or unexpected but rather are consistent with a pattern of established inequalities that render certain groups more vulnerable to DV.

To enhance the discourse, it would require the media to engage in more in-depth analysis and presentation of the factors that foster community disadvantage, such as historical disenfranchisement (Copp et al., 2015), ongoing discrimination (Krishnadas & Taha, 2020), and unequal access to resources (Coker, 2000; Kasturirangan, 2008). It would also benefit from a more explicit discussion of how these structural factors translate to the personal experiences of DV among minority women, moving beyond the presentation of statistics to the stories behind them. Thus, this finding suggested that whilst the U.K. broadsheets were increasing awareness of the treatment of minority victims, it can be argued that the media risk reinforcing the idea that minority women do not fit the *ideal victim* narrative due to a lack of representation and depth in their reporting on these groups.

Subtheme 3: Under-Representation of Male Victims. Recent research has highlighted more men are falling victim to DV (White & Dutton, 2013). However, there was a lack of representation for male victims within broadsheets, pre-COVID and no representation post-COVID. For instance, only two explicitly addressed male victims:

61% of male victims were killed by other men. (*The Guardian*, Usborne, 2019)

One in nine men are the victims of [IPV] in their lifetime. (*The New York Times*, Chokshi, 2018)

The disparity in representation could point to an underlying bias in public discussions about DV—a bias that aligns with traditional gender roles and assumptions about victimhood (Stanziani et al., 2020). The implication that male victims often face violence from other men can perpetuate a narrative that distances male victimhood from DV, suggesting a form of violence that is more about general male-on-male aggression than about domestic abuse. Indeed, whilst some studies suggest women may perpetrate more physical aggression in relationships than men (Bates et al., 2017), others find clear gender asymmetry with males committing more physical and sexual violence (Hamby, 2014). Thus, the link between DV and general male aggression is supported by findings that men involved in male-to-male violence are more likely to perpetrate DV (Kiss et al., 2015). On the other hand, the statistic from *The New York Times* indicated a prevalence of DV against men that may not be reflected in public perception or policy.

Furthermore, the lack of attention on male victims not only obscures the reality of their experiences but may also contribute to a societal stigma that prevents men from coming forward to report abuse. For instance, prevalence rates of male sexual victimisation can be as high as 65%, yet male victims receive less recognition and inadequate support services compared to women (Depraetere et al., 2023). It is clear that the underrepresentation of male victims is rooted in prevailing gender roles, rape myths, and stereotypical perceptions of masculinity, which prevent men from self-identifying as victims and seeking help (Depraetere et al., 2023). Therefore, without adequate representation in the media, the support systems for male victims will likely remain underdeveloped, and the societal understanding of DV will remain incomplete. This finding suggests the need for a more inclusive approach to DV that recognises and addresses the experiences of all victims, regardless of gender.

Theme Two: Excusing Men's Violence

An important theme to arise from the analysis was the way in which broadsheets explained the conditions that caused a domestic violent incident to occur. We know from existing research that the media often induce mutual responsibility of the act, inferring both the perpetrator and victim have equal responsibility (Easteal et al., 2019) and the findings of this analysis reinforced that fact. Throughout the process of analysis, it became evident that the media still, between the years of 2017 to 2019 and March 2020 onwards, reproduced the notion of mutual responsibility between the victim and the perpetrator. However, there has been a shift in line with the current global climate as to *what is to blame*. The theme of excusing men's violence is

therefore further split into two subthemes: responsibilisation of the victim and the construction of lockdown impacts.

Subtheme 1: Responsibilisation of Victims. When considering already existing discourses surrounding DV, it was apparent there was a notion of the victim being at fault for the incident. It can be seen throughout the data that there was an element of making the victim responsible for the incident and ultimately excusing men's violence. For instance, articles in *The Guardian* used phrases which appeared to justify the behaviour of the perpetrator:

She'd gone out with some friends and come back to Kyle's house later than she said she would. (Elmhirst, 2019)

One woman who came without her husband's permission. (Sula, 2017)

This happened days after Charlotte and Claire had left the family home in Lincolnshire in a bid for freedom. (Moore, 2018)

Articles in *The New Zealand Herald* also demonstrated use of similar phrases, whereby, men's violence was justified by behaviours of the female victims:

She had gone out to check the mail, but she thinks her husband must have misunderstood what she was doing, and thought she was leaving. (Griggs, 2019).

In the United States, *The New York Times* featured defences from men accused of violence which arguably shaped public perception:

Mr. LeBeouf told The New York Times that 'many of these allegations are not true'. (Gupta, 2020)

'In the privacy of intimate relationships, I have engaged in role-playing and other consensual sexual activity', [Mr.Schneiderman] wrote. 'I have not assaulted anyone. I have never engaged in nonconsensual sex, which is a line I would not cross'. (Chokshi, 2018).

Collectively, this points to a media trend where such statements provide a platform for the accused to deny wrongdoing without a counter-narrative that upholds the victims' accounts (Pollino, 2023), contributing to a culture of scepticism surrounding DV claims. Furthermore, the limited responsibilisation tendency in reporting not only shapes public perception but can have tangible impacts on the experiences of victims. For instance, it can deter individuals from coming forward due to fear that their experiences will be

scrutinised or discredited (Jordan & Pritchard, 2021) as the *New York Times* portrays perpetrators as appearing kind, and being high achievers:

Abusers may be great as presenting a front as a kind person. (Salam, 2018)

This highlights the way in which broadsheets inherently shift some of the blame onto the victim rather than placing all the blame onto the offender. Implicationally, this finding may suggest that the media are partially to blame for the public's misunderstanding surrounding DV (Lloyd & Ramon, 2017). In other words, the media reiterate existing beliefs of DV and contribute to the already existing notion that DV is a women's issue and not a men's issue. Nevertheless, the dialogue that persists points to a pattern of underlying factors that may predispose individuals to DV perpetration. Interestingly, several articles discussed how mental health challenges and traumatic pasts, including adverse childhood experiences and exposure to family-related abuse or addictions, may have contributed to a desensitisation to violence (*The Guardian*):

[The perpetrators] mental state was 'severely affected at the time [of IPV perpetration]'. (Gayle, 2021)

Many [perpetrators] have had complicated lives, with high rates of mental illness and adverse childhood experiences, such as domestic abuse and addictions in the family. (Johnson, 2020)

These narratives, contextualising the perpetrator's actions within their mental health and past experiences, may evoke a complex societal response. On one hand, such insights are essential to understanding the full scope of factors that contribute to DV. On the other, without careful framing, this information could lead to a form of rationalisation or inadvertent sympathy for the perpetrator, potentially detracting from the accountability for their actions.

The ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic add another layer to this subtheme. The mental health impact of prolonged isolation due to stay-at-home orders cannot be underestimated and may have exacerbated pre-existing conditions that contributed to DV (*The Guardian*):

[the perpetrators] mental state was severely affected at the time [of IPV perpetration]. (Gayle, 2021)

Such environmental stressors could, in principle, increase the likelihood of DV incidents. However, drawing direct causation from these circumstances to acts of violence risks absolving individuals of their agency and

responsibility and overlooks the multitude of individuals who, despite similar challenges, did not resort to violence. Notably, across all broadsheets, there was a lack of analysis of female perpetrators, which maintains the gendered narrative of DV and fails to address the heterogeneity of perpetrator demographics. This omission might perpetuate the stereotype that DV is exclusively a male-on-female issue, thus marginalising the experiences of those outside this binary.

Subtheme 2: The Construction of Lockdown Impacts. It became evident that *The Guardian* and *The New Zealand Herald* had both adopted a nuanced approach when it came to describing the impacts of the COVID-19 lockdowns on DV. These findings were evidenced in the majority of the 2020 articles from *The Guardian*, such as:

Ten women were killed by men* (five of the victims were within married couples) in the UK between 23 March, when government lockdown restrictions began, and 6 April. (Anonymous, 2020)

In the first four weeks of lockdown in the UK, 13 women and four children are believed to have been killed by men. (Moore, 2020)

And *The New Zealand Herald*:

Being at home with an abuser makes victims more vulnerable because there is no escape. (Johnston, 2020)

Although *The Guardian* and *The New Zealand Herald* did not directly blame the victim for their suffering, it could be argued that they reduce the culpability of the perpetrator by discussing conditions in which the crime occurred. However, Women's Aid (2020) have argued that it in these contexts, the abuser's actions were likely the root cause of DV, not the lockdown per se. This position serves as a reminder that structural and situational factors, while influential, do not excuse or justify the perpetration of violence. The responsibility for abuse unequivocally rests with the abuser, a point that was arguably unclear in the discussion of DV, irrespective of the external circumstances. Therefore, it can be seen both the U.K. and NZ broadsheets reinforced negative discourses surrounding DV and alleviated responsibility of perpetrators. However, the U.S. media's representation of DV during the COVID-19 pandemic was notably more detailed, highlighting the complex of power, control, and stress. For instance (*The New York Times*):

We know that any time an abusive partner may be feeling a loss of power or control—and everybody's feeling a loss of power and control right now—it could greatly impact how victims and survivors are being treated in their homes. (Taub, 2020)

Abuse is exacerbated in times of extreme stress—following the Sept. 11 attacks, Hurricane Katrina, and, of course, during the coronavirus pandemic. (Taub, 2020)

The suggestion that while external stressors, such as a pandemic or natural disasters, are significant, they should not exonerate the perpetrator's actions. By focusing on the abuser's loss of power and control as a contributing factor, the U.S. media narratives potentially risk equating the universality of pandemic-induced stress with the choice to perpetrate violence. Nonetheless, it is apparent that *The New York Times* did not evade from attributing the ultimate responsibility for DV to the abuser, which aligns with the position of advocacy groups like Women's Aid.

Theme Three: Construction of Sensationalism

A further key theme to emerge from the research is the way in which broadsheets sensationalise stories regarding DV. There were two dimensions to the theme: construction of newsworthiness, and sensationalist language.

Subtheme 1: Construction of Newsworthiness. Newsworthiness was an important dimension of sensationalism as it highlighted the way in which broadsheets focussed their articles on stories that would draw in readers. Sims (2008) emphasised that the media '*often exclude forms of violence that are not blatantly physical*' (p. 375). Throughout the analysis, it became clear both *The Guardian* and *The New Zealand Herald* inherently focussed their articles on cases of DV that were deliberately *physical* to draw in the reader. This could first be seen in headlines such as (The New Zealand Herald):

Strangled: A tale of two women, DV, terror, and survival. (Leask, 2020)

Thus, it was evidenced that broadsheets often failed to report on cases of DV that are less physical that are equally as traumatic and damaging to the victim such as coercive control. It can be argued broadsheets do not view DV cases with no physicality as worthy of reporting on and therefore, further contribute to the warped perception that DV is not important if it is not physical.

Subtheme 2: Sensationalist Language. Furthermore, an important aspect of media sensationalism to consider is the language used to describe a

domestically violent incident. Throughout the process of analysis, it was apparent both *The Guardian* and *The New Zealand Herald* used sensational language within their articles. For example, in *The New Zealand Herald* article written by Leask (2016), there was common use of the words/phrases *attack*, *horrifying ordeal*, *berating*, and *he sprang on me*. Additionally, in *The Guardian* article written by Fogg (2019), there was common use of the words and phrases *tortured*, *game-changing*, and *immense*.

When comparing articles from *The Guardian* and *The New Zealand Herald* before and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is evident both *The Guardian* and *The New Zealand Herald* continued to use sensational language and did not alter their approach. For example, in *The Guardian* article written by Anonymous (2020) and *The New Zealand Herald* article written by Otago Daily Times (2020), there was common use of words and phrases such as *trapped*, *tragic*, *alienating*, *trigger his rage*, *turbulent*, *traumatic*, and *berating*. Sensationalist language can titillate, shock, fascinate, amuse, and entertain (Sutherland et al., 2021), and from the above findings, it is evident that both *The Guardian* and *The New Zealand Herald* utilise sensational language throughout their articles to appear more shocking and fascinating to the readers.

General Discussion

The examination of broadsheet newspaper representations of DV across the United Kingdom, United States, and New Zealand revealed important insights into how the construction of victimhood and the portrayal of violent incidents can shape public perception and influence societal understanding of these issues. One of the most pervasive themes was the construction of ‘the ideal victim’. The current study highlighted how the broadsheets frequently depicted DV victims as predominantly young and vulnerable women. This is unsurprising, as research has consistently shown that media outlets in the United Kingdom, United States, and New Zealand often depict DV victims as young, vulnerable women, potentially skewing public perceptions of risk (Carlyle et al., 2014). For instance, U.K. newspapers have shown a tendency to blame and sexualise female victims, categorising them as *deserving* or *undeserving* (Lloyd & Ramon, 2017). This, in turn, sheds new light on moral panic theory whereby the alleged ‘girl nastiness’ (Barron & Lacombe, 2005) is indirectly attributed to the victim who allegedly provoked the violence.

This gendered representation of DV has been a persistent concern, with some outlets denigrating victims’ characters with impunity (Lloyd, 2020). Furthermore, media portrayals often contest women’s status as *ideal victims*, drawing gendered assumptions about ‘good’ and ‘bad’ women (Gilmour,

2022). This portrayal is not only pervasive but also highly selective, focusing on a narrow demographic while ignoring the broader and more systemic realities of DV (Carlyle et al., 2014). This narrow depiction is particularly problematic because it reinforces harmful stereotypes (Sutherland et al., 2021). By consistently portraying DV victims as passive and defenceless, the media risk overshadowing their agency and resilience (Hollander & Rodgers, 2014).

An important consideration in interpreting these findings relates to issues of diversity and the extent to which the results may generalise across different populations. Although this study examined broadsheet reporting across three English-speaking countries—the United Kingdom, the United States, and New Zealand—the media narratives analysed largely reflected dominant representations of DV that centre on heterosexual male perpetrators and female victims. Within the analysed articles, there was limited representation of diverse victim groups, including men, LGBTQ+ individuals, older victims, and individuals with disabilities. Similarly, while some attention was given to minority women, including BAME women in the United Kingdom and Māori women in New Zealand, these representations were relatively limited and often framed in generalised or statistical terms rather than through detailed accounts of lived experiences.

These patterns highlight how media representations may obscure the diversity of DV experiences and reinforce dominant narratives of victimhood. As such, the findings of this study should not be interpreted as reflecting the full range of DV experiences across different social groups. Instead, they reflect how mainstream broadsheet media construct and prioritise certain narratives of victimisation. The limited representation of minority and marginalised groups also raises questions regarding the broader applicability of these findings to populations whose experiences are less visible in mainstream media discourse.

Victims and survivors of DV often demonstrate significant strength and resourcefulness, but these qualities were frequently ignored by the broadsheets in favour of a more sensationalised narrative. As such, this can potentially lead to a public perception that victims are inherently powerless, which can diminish the recognition of their efforts to resist or escape abusive situations. Moreover, these media stereotypes can contribute to a narrow understanding of DV. When only certain types of victim experiences are deemed *newsworthy* or *deserving* of public sympathy, it marginalises those who do not fit the *ideal victim* mould. This can result in a lack of awareness and support for a wide range of victims, including men, minority groups, women from low socio-economic backgrounds (Nicolle et al., 2021), older women, LGBTQ+ individuals (Estes & Webber, 2021), and others whose experiences are often underreported. The focus on a specific victim profile not only skews public perception but also

influences policy and resource allocation, potentially leading to inadequate support systems for those who do not fit the media's narrow portrayal of a DV victim.

It is important to recognise, the construction of an *ideal victim* in DV cases can also lead to harmful consequences. For instance, discursive narratives within the media might undermine policies like the Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme, which may inadvertently increase harm to applicants by reinforcing victim-blaming discourses (Duggan, 2018). Furthermore, the concept can also create barriers for marginalised groups, such as queer men, who struggle to recognise their experiences as abuse due to gendered stereotypes and narrow public perceptions of intimate partner violence (McAulay, 2024). More worryingly, however, the broadsheets tended to promote a feminised, infantilised, and racialised stereotype, which might potentially reinforce extreme narratives (Schwöbel-Patel, 2018). This aligns with the *Savages, Victims, and Saviours* model, which simplifies complex phenomena into culturally designated frames (Cockerill et al., 2024).

For instance, media coverage of child abuse in New Zealand has been shown to construct it predominantly as a 'Māori issue', reinforcing ethnic stereotypes (Maydell, 2018). Similarly, representations of DV and abuse in U.K. media have historically involved victim-blaming and sexualisation of violence against women (Lloyd, 2020). Comparably, United States has been lenient in their treatment of male perpetrators of interpersonal violence compared to women in terms of media coverage and legal repercussions implying that men are justified in their actions (Carll, 2003). Additionally, researchers have identified that media tend to diminish the responsibility on men by rationalising their behaviour to factors like stress, anger issues, mental illness, and financial burdens (Carll, 2003; Katou & Kataoka, 2023). These narratives, shaped by the attention economy's demand for extreme and spectacular contents, risk desensitising audiences to victimisation and perpetuating harmful racial and gender stereotypes (Schwöbel-Patel, 2018; Lloyd, 2020).

The broadsheets' emphasis on vulnerability also appeared to inadvertently shift some blame onto the victims, suggesting that their vulnerability makes them more prone to victimisation. This approach risks falling into several fallacies, such as ecological, contextual, and aggregation fallacies, which can distort public understanding of DV, and obscure the individual experiences of victims. Importantly, the portrayal of victims as inherently vulnerable has been further exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this regard, the media often highlighted how lockdown measures disproportionately affected vulnerable women, reinforcing their perceived defencelessness. While it is true that the pandemic created conditions that intensified the risks for DV

victims, the narrative that victims are inherently vulnerable can overshadow the fact that such violence is primarily a result of the abuser's behaviour, not the victim's vulnerability.

The exacerbated vulnerability is reflective of long-held prevalent social attitudes to DV victims, particularly female victims. In Davidge's (2022) study of social attitudes in the United Kingdom towards DV, it was found that a significant proportion of respondents showed signs of victim blaming attitudes, the message being that a female's behaviour can be partly responsible for the abusive behaviour towards themselves and a general attitude of not wanting to get involved in other people's relationships (Davidge, 2022). Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, there were schemes put in place to address the additional vulnerability experienced by those in abusive environments who were subject to stay-at-home orders. This included schemes such as the Travel to Refuge programme, launched in 2021 by Women's Aid, offering free train travel to those fleeing unsafe homes. Such schemes were seen to address the increased challenges in leaving such homes and the social reactions that focus on victim blaming and asking the victims why they didn't leave (Duggan, 2018). The increased risk to those affected by DV, particularly children, and the associated vulnerability led to sufficient social calls to support those in need. However, in all three countries, this was in a climate of significant funding cuts to DV support services. The heightened media coverage of vulnerability did push some governments to take some action to fill those gaps, within the prevailing legislation concerning COVID-19 restrictions. There has, subsequently, been further reductions in funding and services provided by central governments agencies in the United Kingdom, United States, and New Zealand.

Several articles in the dataset can be viewed as investigative or quasi-investigative journalism, particularly pandemic-era pieces from *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* that moved beyond routine reporting to expose wider patterns of domestic abuse during COVID-19. These articles supported the newsworthiness subtheme by prioritising highly visible forms of violence, such as homicide and strangulation, over less visible abuse like coercive control. A key risk factor highlighted was lockdown, which increased victim isolation, constant exposure to perpetrators, reduced access to support, and wider economic and psychological stress. While this reporting was valuable in exposing heightened risk, it may also have reinforced the media tendency to treat physical violence as the most newsworthy form of domestic abuse.

The fleeting social and political attention paid to DV victims and survivors in the heat of the challenges faced within the COVID-19 faded as communities returned to 'normal', in a post-COVID world. The significant challenge, facing those who are harmed through domestic abuse or are active

in supporting those individuals, is to continue to target the overly sensation-alistic media reporting, the prevalence of social and cultural misunderstandings of the experience and characterisation of DV offending; and to maintain political pressure to improve services and sustainability of funding for support. While representations of DV victims and survivors are predicated on 'ideal victim' stereotyping, novel ways of challenging such stereotyping through alternative victim-sensitive representations remain to be explored.

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ORCID iD

Marek Palace  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3016-2118>

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Notes

1. https://www.law.cornell.edu/cfr/text/45/1370.2?utm_source (accessed on 4th June 2026).
2. <https://www.justice.govt.nz/family/family-violence/what-is-family-violence/understand-family-violence/?utm> (accessed on 4th June 2026).

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Author Biographies

Marek Palace, PhD is an associate professor at Liverpool John Moores University. He has published article on violence and terrorism.

Brandon May, PhD is an assistant professor at Florida Institute of Technology. He specialises in forensic research and AI.

Natacha Harding, PhD is the academic head of Department of Policing, Criminology and Forensics University of Winchester. She specialises in research on victim experience.

Dhanvi Patel, MSc is a doctoral student doing research in Clinical Psychology at Florida Institute of Technology.

Aelia Zaidi, MSc is a PhD student at Liverpool John Moores University. Her PhD research explores intimate partner violence and bystander behaviour.

Lorraine Bowman Grieve, PhD is a lecturer at South East Technological University. She specialises in research on crime, criminality, and terrorism.