

## Sensationalism in Reporting Conflict: The Case of Yazidi Women's Portrayal in the Daily Mail Online After 2014

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### ABSTRACT

This research is an attempt to fathom the sensationalist ways in which the Daily Mail Online framed the narratives of the Yazidi women during the period after the atrocities carried out by the so-called Islamic State in 2014. This paper identifies the predominating victim-based narrative, interwoven with themes of resilience and post-conflict challenges, predominantly emphasizing the motif of sexual violence in eighty articles from the period between 2014 and 2020 within the postcolonial feminist theory framework. The research is enabled by using NVivo 12 in thematic analysis applied through Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step method. The results show how these portrayals build up a victimized identity for Yazidi women, but at the same time, elements of resilience are depicted. This paper provides substantial contributions to the already existing literature on media representation of gender in conflict areas, underscoring the necessity of ethical journalism and reporting sensitive to gender. These understandings underline the critical role that journalism can play in the empowerment and support of women affected by the war.

## **Introduction**

Both the indigenous patriarchal society and so-called ISIS, "the Islamic State of Iraq and Ash-Sham, also known locally as Daesh" (Esfandiari & Heideman, 2015, p. 304), as well as the alien gendered orientalism discourse prevalent in western news media, subject Yazidi women to double oppression. Not only does the constructed identity of victimhood and agentless women harm Yazidi women emotionally and physically (Sarac, 2020; Foster & Minwalla, 2018; Minwalla et al., 2020), but it also precludes them from educational, political, and economic opportunities and empowerment (Alkan, 2018). The survivors of sexual violence "suffer from both the internalized and external consequences of their often already marginalized identities as women and ethnic, national, or racial minorities" (Bartolomei et al. 2003, p. 90).

Additionally, the associated stereotypical representation, which is based on media narratives about Yazidi women's sexual experiences, renovates traumatized memories (Ibrahim et al. 2018). Psychological studies demonstrate that trauma is transmitted to subsequent generations on behavioral, cultural, and biological levels (Sorscher & Cohen, 1997). Similarly, according to Ahmed and Singh (2021), Gedi (2022), Alkan (2018), and Ibrahim et al. (2018), this narrative exaggerates the women's suffering without considering their dignity or the social context of their situation.

Who these women are and how they are treated following a period of vulnerability is highly dependent on their represented identity and how they have been defined, rather than on what they are (Shibutani & Kwan, 1965). The symbolic classification and ranking of Yazidi women according to certain ascribed characteristics ultimately results in stereotypical representations and 'performs' (Butler, 1990) certain identities for them in a highly controlled and constrained manner. The performative identity mediated through discourse not only negatively identifies Yazidi women in the eyes of the audience but also affects Yazidi women's perception of their reality, preventing them from further societal advancements such as educational and political participation.

Ideological and linguistic strategies influencing media representations of Yazidi women remain poorly understood (Ahmed & Singh, 2023; Sarac, 2023a, 2023b; Foster & Minwalla, 2018). Understanding representation (i.e., identity formation) from a postcolonial perspective necessitates a sharp attention to language and text (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012). In the scenario of Yazidi women's news coverage, journalists have consciously or subconsciously authorized power via language to highlight particular aspects of the victim's identity and actions in the retelling of the events. This gap becomes even more apparent when considering how gender, racism, and war fostered these ideas. A thorough evaluation is required beyond just observing sensationalism. It should investigate mechanisms and implications for disadvantaged women in wartime. Such evaluations are critical for considering ethical journalism and the media's coverage of marginalized people.

## **Literature Review**

News sensationalism is often characterized as a way of drawing the attention of the audience to the news story through the use of exaggerated stories and sensational headlines (Arbaoui et al., 2020; Molek-Kozakowska, 2013). Recent research has also made several attempts to explore the different forms that sensationalism takes, including the topics selected, the type of material emphasized, and the language and imagery used (Arbaoui et al., 2020; Molek-Kozakowska, 2013). Generally, sensationalism leads to a partial or distorted view of reality, thereby misleading the public on certain matters (Entman, 1993).

A recent study by Adamopoulos (2021), on COVID-19 news coverage indicated that sensationalism could potentially influence public perception and decision-making in such critical situations. The study underscored the detrimental effects of sensationalism, such as the weakening of scientific credibility and the perpetuation of public misconceptions of health risks. Similarly, other studies focused on the role of sensationalism in the perpetuation of misinformation and

the repercussions for media credibility and public trust (Countering 'Fake News', Misinformation and Sensationalism, 2023; Pelau et al., 2023).

Regarding gender representation in war zones, researchers have examined the sexualization and sensationalization of Kurdish women by Western media (Dirik, 2015, 2017; Shahvisi, 2018; Alkan, 2018; Minwalla & Foster, 2018; Minwalla et al., 2020). Recent research has continued to shed light on the fact that limited studies exist in this area, generally in sociology, literature, and art (Shahvisi, 2018; Toivanen & Baser, 2016). However, there is a lack of studies that are language-oriented and tackle media stories as means to construct social identities. This has been identified in the comprehensive work of Ahmed and Singh (2021) on Yazidi women. However, this also indicates the crucial need for more academic studies in media representation analysis from a linguistic perspective.

The focus of this study is to define sensationalism as narratives used by the media that are sensational, dramatic, and very often misleading to audiences for the purpose of their attention. The research explores how such media construct sensationalized identities for marginalized groups, particularly Yazidi women, in conflict zones by spotlighting some themes while shadowing others. Sensationalism will then be characterized by dwelling on shocking and emotive themes at the expense of accuracy and depth. For example, it includes the use of vivid language in the depiction of violence and laying emphasis on details that are most sensational to the story, such as sexual violence, in capturing the attention of the readers.

This approach distorts the reality of the events and keeps harmful stereotypes alive, thus threatening the dignity of the people involved. This study examines how sensationalist tactics are deployed by the Daily Mail Online. It, therefore, intends to make a call for more responsible and respectful journalism by revealing the ethical dimensions of such reporting practices. This further includes the analysis of linguistic features, narrative structures, and visual elements utilized in the articles for the manner in which sensationalism works and the effects of such representations on the Yazidi women.

## **Methodology**

The study of sensationalism has primarily depended on content analysis. Content analysis is defined as a strategy for analyzing information in many types of documents, notably textual materials (Mikkelsen & Nucci, 2015). Textual analysis enables the formation of theoretical conclusions (Tavakoli, 2012). This strategy is dependent on content that has the capacity to provoke a response (Ge, 2016). The theoretical examination of media sensationalism is conducted through the use of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), specifically employing Fairclough's (1995) dialectical-relational technique, Postcolonial Feminist Theory (Mohanty, 1991), and Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The primary focus of the study, which will span from 2014 to 2020, will be on the Yazidi women residing in Iraq, particularly in the Kurdistan region.

This study is based on stories in The Daily Mail, a popular British daily with a large online readership and a middle-class focus (Durrani, 2013). Due to its massive daily article output, tendency to sensationalize news (Nilcoletti & Sarva, 2021), and large national and international readership, MailOnline is an excellent dataset for studying Yazidi women's experiences during conflict and crisis.

Purposive sampling has been employed in data collection to mitigate subjectivity and potential bias. Thus, the study selected 80 MailOnline stories to create COYWRONA (COrpus of Yazidi Women's Representation in Online News Articles). Separate representative codes, such as RCDMA01 (Representative Corpus of Daily Mail Articles), are assigned to each document in a sequential numbering system from 01 to 80. The selection criteria, such as "woman," "girl," "lady," and "female," guarantee that only literature regarding Yazidi women's experiences during this period is included (Baker, 2014). Other terms have also been used, such as "gender-based violence," "Yazidi genocide," and "ISIS." This strict procedure prevents any irrelevant reporting on Yazidi women, such as Western women joining Kurdish groups or ISIS.

The current research has employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, which is one of the most acceptable methods to identify, organize, and report on strong patterns within data. The analysis was done in six phases:

familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, theme searching, reviewing themes, theme definition and naming, and report production. Moreover, open, axial, and selective coding techniques have been applied to give depth and rigor to the analysis (Longhofer et al., 2013). Open coding was applied to break down the data into discrete parts and then analyze them in detail for similarities and differences. Then, axial coding linked these codes to form superordinate categories on the basis of relations among these codes. Finally, selective coding combined and refined categories to coherently construct a narrative. This is the systematic process, as shown in Figure 1, which enabled a thorough examination of the data to understand the media representation of Yazidi women.

The researcher's positionality in this study is that of an insider and an outsider at the same time. The researcher is of Kurdish descent and has a cultural and regional connection with the Yazidi women. There is a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics involved in this case. As a result, the insider position is conducive to empathy and a deeper appreciation of the subjects' experiences. Being an outsider in the Yazidi community enables one to maintain objectivity and distance, making the analysis unbiased. This dual position allows for the incorporation of personal cultural insight and critical analysis, thereby enhancing the depth and reliability of the research by combining both empathic and objective analysis.

## **Findings**

Upon conducting a thematic analysis of COYWRONA's depiction of Yazidi women, discernible patterns emerge throughout the media content. Comprised of numerous subthemes that are structured around four primary themes, as illustrated in Figure 1. The proportion of articles and references devoted to each theme is detailed in Table 1, through a matrix coding query to cross-tabulate nodes (themes) against your sources (articles) in Nvivo 12. This methodology underscores the extent and significance attributed to every theme in the narrative (as indicated by the percentage of references), as well as the

concentrated or diverse nature or corpus (as measured by the percentage of articles) of media coverage. This assists in understanding how the narrative is constructed in relation to Yazidi women.

Table 1: Frequency of Themes in COYWRONA

Theme	References	Number of Articles	Percentage of total References	Percentage of total articles
Women as Victims of Violence Theme	1210	79	72.2%	37.6%
Women's Vulnerability Theme	81	44	4.8%	20.9%
Women's Resilience Theme	340	67	20.3%	32%
Women's post-conflict condition Theme	45	20	2.7%	9.5%
Total	1676	210	100	100

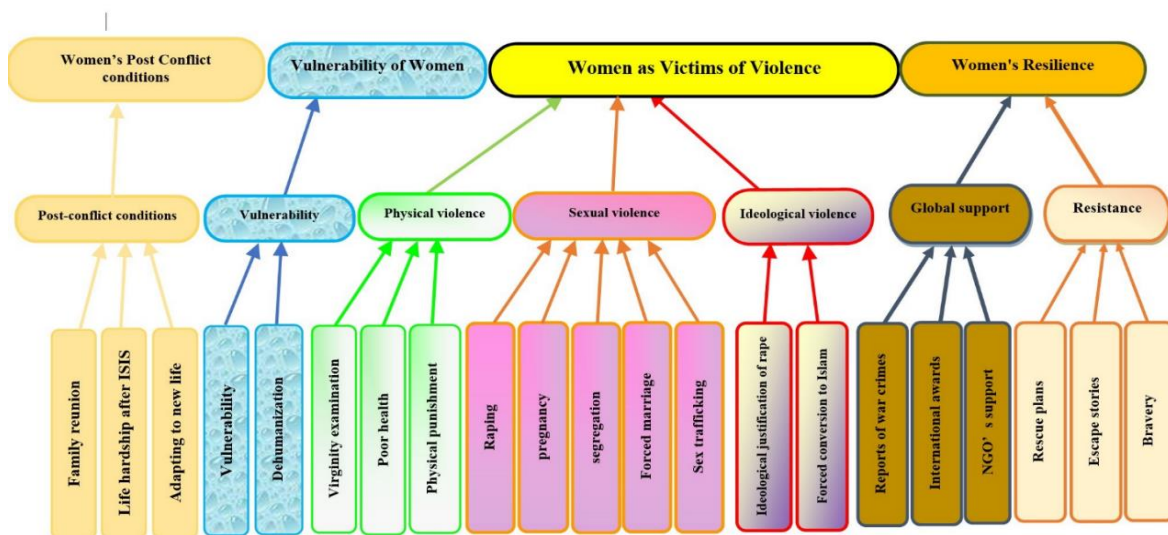


Figure 1: Key Themes and Sub-Themes in COYWRONA

## **Major Themes and Subthemes**

### **1. Women as Victims of Violence**

The thematic analysis reveals that a significant proportion (72.2 percent) of the 79 articles containing 1210 references depict Yazidi women predominantly through narratives of victimization and violence. The substantial quantity of citations indicates that this type of depiction is not only common, but potentially pivotal to the media's narrative, thereby accentuating the sensational nature of their ordeal and victimization. This theme encompasses numerous types of violence, including those of a physical, sexual, mental, and ideological nature:

- **Sexual Violence:** Sexual assault against Yazidi women is the primary focus of COYWRONA, which elevates this form of abuse above all others. This ignores the full scope of their victimisation and diminishes the seriousness of their condition. According to Wood (2006) and Nordås and Cohen (2021), victims of sexual assault during times of war face terrible atrocities such as (a) rape, (b) sexual slavery, (c) forced prostitution, (d) forced pregnancy, (e) forced sterilization/abortion, (f) sexual mutilation, and (g) sexual torture. Accordingly, this study's analysis of this issue reveals a set of interrelated codes that correspond to phenomena including sex trafficking, forced marriage and pregnancy, gender and age-based segregation, and rape/sexual assault. Thus, COYWRONA has gained notoriety for its focus on rape and other types of gender-based violence, leading to it being described as "a dangerously narrative of sex crime" (Soothill & Walby, 1991, p. 147). The discursive tactics used to sensationalise reports of sexual violence in COYWRONA can be summarised as follows:

- I. *Excessive reliance on victim testimonies:* The coverage of COYWRONA was centered on the testimonies of Yazidi women who had experienced sexual violence. The influence of human-centered narratives on news consumption surpasses that of abstract facts (Arbaoui et al. 2020). Human testimony enhances news coverage by adding vividness, emotional depth, and relatability. Examining specific instances, particularly those



involving sexual assault, without a comprehensive understanding or contextual analysis is morally wrong and undermines progress. The excessive visibility and detailed storytelling might sensationalise the experiences of victims, encourage sexual violence, and limit the attention given to rape as a war crime. Incorporating the viewpoints of specialists and activists that specialise in sexual violence would offer a more comprehensive and ethically sound strategy (Marhia, 2008). Journalists have shifted the focus of discussion from rape as a war crime to labelling the accounts of Yazidi women as damaging "soft pornography."

- II. *Classification of Women as sex slaves*: Most of the Yazidi women mentioned by COYWRONA were either victims of or enslaved for sexual purposes by other individuals. Newspapers, particularly tabloids, heavily invest in employing sensationalist language (Marhia, 2008). Thus, within the realm of conflict reporting, the dehumanisation and sexual objectification of women become increasingly evident as they are reduced to mere commodities to be bought, sold, and exploited for labour. A total of 527 hits were obtained in COYWRONA's text analysis when searching for the term "sex slave/s, slave/s". When the media discusses Yazidi women, this word is the most commonly used. Considering this, the phrase "sex slaves" has been employed to describe the abuse of women by ISIS in almost all of the 49 articles that have been reported in the media. COYWRONA unabashedly labels these women as sex slaves, regardless of their status as survivors who no longer conform to the traditional stereotype. Furthermore, COYWRONA has employed the victim's age and the prevalence (highlighted by the author's use of italics) of being sold into slavery to underscore the gravity of the issue:

- A) *"Yazidi sex slave* reveals how she was kidnapped and sold *EIGHT* times to ISIS jihadis who pick out girls like they are on parade in a 'car show room'". (RCDMA60)
- B) *"Yazidi mother-of-four, 24*, who was bought and sold as

an *ISIS sex slave FIVE* times is finally free”. (RCDMA72)

C) “A former *ISIS sex slave* has spoken about how she was passed around *14 times* among different jihadis in the lead up to giving evidence against one of her alleged rapists”. (RCDMA76)

D) “The Yazidi sold as a *sex slave 17 TIMES*: Woman raped and abused by ISIS thugs was forced to eat GRASS to survive before fleeing from Baghouz”. (RCDMA76)

E) “*The sex slave* forced to marry *TWENTY* ISIS fighters... and undergo painful surgery to 'restore her virginity' each time: UN reveal horrifying details of bazaars where Islamists trade rape victims”. (RCDMA57)

III. *Playing religion card in depicting sexual violence*: In the course of reporting on sexual assault, journalists frequently discuss the concept of forced marriage. The media predominantly examines Islamic theological traditions in their depictions of compelled marriage. COYWRONA disregards the historical and cultural factors that contribute to forced marriage, such as patriarchal cultural norms, religious customs (Klug, 2019), or instances of brutality during warfare, particularly among Yazidi women. The practice of forced marriage in any form is strongly denounced and condemned by Islam (Gusau, 2021). This particular group, in their eagerness to create sensational stories, risks disregarding harmful behaviors, particularly instances of physical violence against women. According to the observations made in COYWRONA, the following are certain ways in which Islamic philosophy provides justification for the practice of forced marriage:

A) “Children forced to convert to Islam, marry fighters who then 'own' them”. (RCDMA48)

B) “You'll become Muslim, then I will marry you. But I refused to become a Muslim and that's why I fled”. (RCDMA03)

C) “They said that if I did not convert to Islam he should give me away or sell me, and get a Muslim wife instead”.

(RCDMA03)

- D) "He told me that I must marry him to become Muslim. He asked me to wash myself and then marry him".

(RCDMA65)

IV. *Overemphasis on age and rape rates:* Journalists have employed inaccurate classifications of Yazidi women and exaggerated the portrayal of sensitive attributes such as age, frequency of rape, and too minute details about the incidents, in their sensationalized reporting of women's experiences. Reporters often repeated narrow and specific facts on the frequency of rape, the average age of victims, and the fact that it is an intimate sexual act that does not involve consent, even though there were other depictions of this crime. This worsened the already precarious situation experienced by Yazidi women. The author underscores this point by using italics:

- A) "Living Hell of Yazidi sex slaves: Support group reveals ISIS raped *eight-year-old HUNDREDS* of times... and one girl burned her face off, so she was 'too ugly' to be assaulted again". (RCDMA63)
- B) "According to aid workers, she was '*sexually abused by no fewer than ten men*', while in captivity inside the self-proclaimed caliphate". (RCDMA08)
- C) "I was forced to have *sex up to six times per night*. They always *fastened my legs and arms when they raped*". (RCDMA65)
- D) "He raped me about *five times a day*. My sister was *barely 14* when they raped her." (RCDMA32)
- E) "I can't forget the first time I was raped,' she said. '*I was traded 14 times among the jihadists*.'" (RCDMA76)
- F) "Yazidi women and girls, *some as young as five*, taken from their homes earlier in the year were also *regularly raped and abused by fighters*, survivors said". (RCDMA57)

Incidents of violence against adult women are often not recorded, while the COYWRONA tends to exaggerate the number of reported cases

involving assaults on underage females (see table 2). Table 2 indicates that those under the age of 16 have a likelihood of being mentioned in the news that is somewhat more than double (69 percent) compared to those who are above the age of 16. Yasmin (2021) identifies three incentives for portraying women based on their age: eliciting sympathy, adopting a negative perspective, and avoiding potential legal consequences. The reporter's claim that these methods will amplify the effect seems to be an effort to sensationalize the topic, a common strategy in tabloid journalism (Kothari, 2008), even though newspapers occasionally emphasise the age of the victim to evoke readers' sympathy. MailOnline raises this idea in various situations:

- A) "She reveals that a majority of the girls she meets who have escaped after being held as sex slaves are *under 16-year-old, with a few over 25*, and less than a handful over 40." (RCDMA09)
- B) "During the time I was with them *the 15- to 16-year-old*- maybe about 50 and the older ones, [I raped] over 200." (RCDMA75)
- C) "Not when she hears how they were casually traded between fighters for just a cigarette, nor how they were raped by six men - and not when she hears of *a nine-year-old girl* bleeding to death after being sexually assaulted by Daesh militants". (RCDMA26)
- D) "She also verified a disturbing ISIS document which suggested the extremists sell the Yazidi and Christian women and children they have abducted, with girls aged just one to *nine-year-old* fetching the most money" (RCDMA53)

Table 2: The COYWRONA Female victims' average age (over 16, under 16 and under 13)

Victim age	NO.	Percentage
Under 13	65	42%
13-16	41	27%
Over 16	48	31%
Total	154	100%

- **Ideological Violence:** The narrative often framed violence against Yazidi women within distorted religious ideologies, emphasizing ideological justifications for such acts:
  - A) "Rape victim, 12, reveals attacker said what he was doing was not sinful. He said *it was because Yazidi girl practised a religion other than Islam.*" (RCDMA54)
  - B) "Every time that he came to rape me, he would pray. *'He said that raping me is his prayer to God.* I said to him, "What you're doing to me is wrong, and it will not bring you closer to God." And he said, *"No, it's allowed. It's halal."*" (RCDMA54)
  - C) "Speaking to a mobile phone camera, she described *her interpretation of the Quran as a justification for the rape and murder of Yazidi women* taken prisoner as sex slaves, saying because the Muslim holy book defines prisoners of war as 'property' they can be treated as objects." (RCDMA39)
  - D) "When Victim One, who spoke to the British government last year, asked about why they were doing this to her, Islamic State fighters replied *that they were implementing the Prophet Muhammad's law.*" (RCDMA28)

The individuals who have suffered from the brutal acts committed by ISIS, regardless of their affiliation with Muslim or non-Muslim populations, are frequently omitted from news reports (Bor, 2019). According to Abadi (2018), the news discourse worsens the process of othering the Orient by associating ISIS with Islam. This causes distress among Muslims due to

the hijacking of their faith by groups like Daesh and the increase in Islamophobia. Although ISIS has received extensive media coverage, a search specifically for the term "extremist" in relation to the group yields only fifteen results. However, there appears to be a discrepancy in the depiction of ISIS's ideology in COYWRONA, as the group is referenced 785 times.

The misrepresentation of Islam and the promotion of a violent caricature of Muslims can occur when the so-called ISIS is portrayed as an Islamic group to non-Muslim audiences. Hence, the media's depiction of Islam concealed the true nature of "the extremist ideology propagated by ISIS, which lacks any foundation in Islamic teachings" (Harper, 2018, p. 8). Radical groups such as ISIS lack knowledge about the historical origins of Islamic rituals. Sabi-El-Rayess (2019) asserts that Islamic scholars emphasizes the use of reason rather than idealized, privileged ways of being that support particular ideas. COYWRONA's violent mistreatment of women in Islam contributes to the demonization of the religion. This, in turn, fuels the ongoing post-colonial discourse and creates a global divide. The discourse portrays the West as a savior to oppressed women in the East without considering the cultural and historical distinctions between the two sides (Mohanty, 1991).

- **Physical and Psychological Violence:** Coverage included detailed descriptions of physical abuse and the psychological impact on Yazidi women, focusing on the brutality of their experiences. Within the context of COYWRONA, women frequently appear as recipients of physical violence as a result of the country's patriarchal culture, which asserts that women are subservient to men and should acquiesce to their dominance. The patriarchal monarchy of COYWRONA has objectified Yazidi women, treating them as sexual objects and submissive beings while also promoting religion. Journalists have exploited ISIS's use of lashing, burning, mutilation, and starvation against Yazidi women to portray them as ideal victims. According to a report on July 18, 2017, an Iraqi legislator

alleged that a Yazidi sex slave unknowingly consumed her one-year-old son after ISIS extremists prepared and served the infant with rice following a period of starvation. The condemnation of ISIS atrocities and the vulnerability of a mother in search of safety have fostered a self-centered global connection aimed at assisting others in the East through humanitarian efforts (Minwalla et al. 2020). The subsequent COYWRONA scenes vividly portray acts of physical violence:

- A) "He burned me with cigarettes, on my shoulders, my stomach and legs. I didn't even have the strength to speak after that." (RCDMA10)
- B) "The couple also forced her mother to walk barefoot on the scorching ground outside, inflicting severe burns". (RCDMA40)
- C) "The man beat me hard and whipped me with an electrical cable." (RCDMA65)
- D) "She was so badly beaten that her skull was broken in three places, she temporarily lost her eyesight and was so desperate she tried to kill herself several times to escape her tormentors." (RCDMA70)

## **2. Women's Resilience and Resistance**

This theme, in contrast to the dominant narratives of victimization and susceptibility, is substantiated by 340 references across 67 papers. It emphasizes the resilience of Yazidi women who have confronted oppression and surmounted challenges in the years following the conflict. The motif's comparatively high frequency provides a more nuanced depiction of the experiences of Yazidi women, suggesting the introduction of a fresh narrative strand that recognizes their agency and strength. The term "resistance" is used to denote the steadfast pledge of Yazidi women to safeguard their dignity, as well as the lives of their families and children, amidst the atrocities perpetrated by ISIS. They were prepared to sacrifice their lives in support of the resistance. In order to construct a tragic narrative and elicit viewers' sympathy, COYWRONA has implemented this tactic by embellishing their experiences and imbuing

news stories with a sense of gloom and doom. A significant proportion of women who have demonstrated resilience have recounted personal experiences characterized by suicidal ideation and despair. The instances of COYWRONA that are defined below are examples:

- A) "I had found some poison in the house, and took it with me to the bathroom. I knew it was toxic because of its smell. I distributed it to the rest of the girls and we each mixed some with water in the bathroom and drank it. None of us died but we all got sick." (RCDMA48)
- B) "A 19-year-old named Jilan killed herself while being held captive in Mosul because she feared she would be raped, according to the Amnesty report." (RCDMA49)
- C) "Her friend, who managed to escape, told Amnesty: 'One day we were given clothes that looked like dance costumes and were told to bathe and wear those clothes... Jilan killed herself in the bathroom. She cut her wrists and hanged herself.'" (RCDMA49)
- D) "Khalida tried to kill herself many times, in an attempt to free herself from the terrible abuse she was suffering. She tattooed her father's name on her arm so her body could identify her body after her death". (RCDMA60)

One more way women have resisted is by sharing accounts of how they poisoned or shot their captors in order to escape imprisonment. Some Yazidi women in COYWRONA manage to escape their captors, while others refuse to give up to their fate.

- A) "After repeated rape, torture and abuse, she said she had slipped pills into her captors' food to escape in the middle of the night, walking for 14 hours to Mount Sinjar where other Yazidis had found safety". (RCDMA38)
- B) "12-year-old slipped ISIS captors sleeping pills to knock them out. She managed to escape them in Mosul with her 17-year-old aunt." (RCDMA21)



- C) “A 15-year-old girl has revealed how she escaped ISIS militants by drugging and shooting two husbands who bought her as a slave.” (RCDMA03)

While a portion of the women succumbed to the influence of intimidation and threats, there were some who persevered, often enduring significant personal hardships. RCDMA24 recounts the account of Lamiya Aji Bashar, a woman who successfully fled but sustained injuries when a landmine detonated, resulting in the deaths of two other girls who were also attempting to flee. As a consequence of the explosion, her face sustained significant damage, and she experienced complete vision loss in one eye. COYWRONA challenges the notion that war is predominantly a male domain by showcasing female characters engaged in conflict. It presents these female characters as catalysts for change, actively combating detrimental gender stereotypes rather than being portrayed as passive victims. The traditional perception of women is questioned and altered by the extensive coverage that MailOnline and similar media platforms provide for narratives of women who overcome challenges during times of crisis. Refer to the examples below for insights into this strategy in two papers about COYWRONA from 2016 (RCDMA18) and 2017 (RCDMA73):

- A) “The former ISIS sex slaves waging war on their abusers: Hundreds of Yazidi women form an all-female battalion called the 'Sun Ladies' to launch massive assault on Mosul”. (RCDMA18)
- B) “Now, driven by a collective desire for vengeance, the battalion is preparing for an offensive on the ISIS stronghold of Mosul where many were exchanged by militants to serve as their sex slaves.” (RCDMA18)
- C) “Heza underwent intensive weapons training, and when the SDF announced its fight for Raqqa in November 2016, she and other YPS fighters were ready.” (RCDMA73)

Aid from international organizations and charities helped women be resilient. They have provided direct relief to survivors and raised awareness of the Yazidi tragedy, which revealed war crimes such as

organized rape and sexual assault, sexual enslavement, and forced marriage. Yazidi refugee Nadia Murad was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for her “uncommon courage in recounting her own sufferings and speaking up on behalf of other victims” (RCDMA 32). She hopes to represent Yazidi women worldwide and speak for their often-silenced voices.

At the same time, by implementing strategies that garner attention on a global scale, COYWRONA has taken advantage of the helplessness of these women. "The international community must help us" (RCDMA13) and "Maybe if they don't help us, we will be finished in ten years" (RCDMA13) are reports that emphasize the importance of this assistance. Reports indicate that COYWRONA's call for international action frames the horrific systematic slavery and sexual abuse against Yazidi women as war crimes and, potentially, crimes against humanity, evoking the same “colonial gaze” (Whiteside, 2020, p. 54):

- A) “Human Rights Watch report reveals suffering of Yazidi women and children. ISIS fighters have carried out 'systematic rape' of females from Iraq region. Children forced to convert to Islam, marry fighters who then 'own' them. Survivors left feeling suicidal and in need of psychological support.” (RCDMA48)
- B) “Rape and other forms of sexual violence, sexual slavery, cruel treatment, and other abuses committed during an armed conflict violate the laws of war, the report by Human Rights Watch says - and better support is needed for children and women who survive such attacks.” (RCDMA48)
- C) “ISIS is not a local threat, it's a global threat,' Clooney said. 'So, my message to the UN was, this is a global threat. It needs a global response.” (RCDMA69)

Reporters quote a lot of other people's speeches to make their news more persuasive, show their neutrality in reflecting events, and exclude their personal opinions, as in direct speeches, which carry authoritative values and are easier to believe (Bin, 2005). In the last case (c), the

journalist tacitly reinforced the victimization frame in post-colonial discourse by making ISIS a threat to everyone's human rights and exploiting women's frailty by diverting the audience to Clooney's quote. The COYWRONA has presented the Yazidi's predicament to the world by presenting Yazidi women's attempts to end their lives and glorifying their existence in war, which is driven by emotions, or by emphasizing women's demand for worldwide attention. In the women's resilience theme, COYWRONA has helped establish postcolonial feminist vocabulary that moulds Westerners' perspective of the Yazidi tragedy and supports politically defensible action.

### **3. Women's Vulnerability Theme**

Yazidi women's psychological and social vulnerabilities, as well as their susceptibility when faced with violence, are highlighted in the subject matter, which is examined in 44 pieces on 81 occasions. Journalists often dehumanize women to highlight their fragility. Several stories have surfaced claiming that ISIS has brutalized and dehumanized females:

- A) "A Yazidi teenager has told how Islamic State fighters stormed her town with shocking brutality, dragging girls as young as ten by their hair and carting them off like cattle to become sex slaves". (RCDMA52)
- B) "They bought us as if we were sheep. Exactly like sheep... I refused to show them my body. We had to show our hands. White was considered nice. And they'd look to see if our hair was beautiful and long" (RCDMA77).
- C) "The buyers would inspect the women like 'livestock', Jinan wrote in her book". (RCDMA56)
- D) "They took us like sheep. They chased us and humiliated us in these very streets,' Heza tells AFP, gesturing to a row of heavily damaged homes in Al-Meshleb". (RCDMA73)

In the context of the trade of women, there have been cases where girls have been objectified based on their age and physical features, such as the size of their breasts: "that one has big breasts. But I want a Yazidi with blue eyes and

pale skin. I am willing to pay the price": an escaped girl, 18, tells of the day she was sold as a sex slave" (RCDMA 56). Similarly, the narratives of Yazidi women have reflected their lack of agency in other cases:

- A) "He could crush me with his bare hands. No matter what he did, and no matter how much I resisted, I would never be able to fight him off. He smelled of rotten eggs and cologne." (RCDMA32)
- B) "The next girl chosen was a 19-year-old who was known in the village for her beauty. 'She looked like snow white, she had skin like milk and beautiful long black hair,' Shirin said. 'She left to go with the men with her head bowed'. (RCDMA72)

#### **4. Women post conflict condition Theme**

The circumstances and difficulties that Yazidi women encounter following their escape from conflict or captivity are the subject of this theme, which receives the fewest mentions (45 references in 20 articles). Although it does not receive as much attention as other topics, it is essential for comprehending how women are affected by conflict in the long run and the challenges they face when trying to heal and rejoin society. COYWRONA has also used the difficulties women encounter after leaving as a means of framing their victimization. The reported difficulties these women encounter upon reintegration into society are rooted in patriarchal values, such as the shame associated with rape and the prohibition of marriage and sexual relationships outside of one's own community. Captors have taken pregnant women back to their native countries, putting them at risk of social exclusion in a culture that frowns upon sexual relations between a man and a woman before marriage (RCDMA57). In order to avoid rejection, religiously rigid societies often erase the physical signs of captives. Subjecting women to a "post-rape assessment" could degrade their self-esteem. This paints a picture of Yazidi women as helpless.

- A) "Yazidi women and girls who escaped ISIS still face enormous challenges and continuing trauma from their experience, Liesl Gerntholtz, the women's rights director at Human Rights Watch said. 'They need urgent help and support to recover their health and move on with their lives". (RCDMA48)
- B) "Horrible tale: This 15-year-old Yazidi girl is one of hundreds of former ISIS sex slaves who have managed to escape the Islamic State and now face the difficult task of re-entering the strict religious community". (RCDMA16)
- C) "She also said women are being pressured to give up their children fathered by IS men and was alarmed that one of the women arrived without her kids". (RCDMA34)

Following the abolition of slavery and the aftermath of war, COYWRONA women have been vulnerable and subjected to victimization. Although they possess independence, their adaptability and resilience are overlooked in the image. On the contrary, COYWRONA highlights a patriarchal and religious society in the East that gives importance to ensuring women's protection. This image reinforces a cultural perspective that views women as disadvantaged and dependent on external assistance, in contrast to media portrayals of victimization outside the specific community being examined. Additionally, it curtails their cultural expression and limits their personal liberties. Hence, COYWRONA reinforces discriminatory norms that restrict women's self-governance and entitlements (Rorintulus et al., 2022).

COYWRONA's post-conflict narratives portray women as stereotypical and vulnerable victims. Rorintulus et al. (2022) argue that a society characterized by patriarchal and religious ideals fosters a deep aversion towards women. According to Kreft (2018), these depictions neglect to acknowledge women's role in organizing and defending against conflict-related assaults. Determined women have the ability to initiate positive changes in society. The story disregards the varied experiences and resilience of women after captivity and conflict, while excessively

emphasizing their vulnerability. Moreno and Shaw (2018) examine disaster-induced empowerment and gender dynamics; Batton and Wright (2019) examine the systemic influence of patriarchy on women's opportunities; and both works should be included in any thorough evaluation. By giving more weight to these factors, we can move the narrative around women's experiences in post-conflict settings from one of hopelessness to one of empowerment, and from marginalisation to social change.

## **Discussion**

An analysis of the COYWRONA reveals a sensationalist and reductionist depiction of the lives of Yazidi women, which is heavily influenced by Orientalist perspectives, as highlighted by Said (1979). He argues that such portrayals often tend to exotify, stereotype, and dehumanize the Eastern people for the affirmation of their superiority and the justification of colonialist agendas. This collection has a dual purpose as it contains accounts of violence in various forms, including physical, sexual, and ideological. This study builds upon Molek-Kozakowska's (2013) analysis of media sensationalism by pinpointing the specific linguistic techniques used by the Daily Mail, with a special focus on sexual assault, to depict Yazidi women as victims within a unified storyline. The biased depiction of these women, as highlighted by Sarac (2020), perpetuates a simplified representation that caters to Western perceptions of the victimized "other." This selective prioritization also disregards their intricate encounters and ability to recover from adversity.

The story reinforces the victimization of these women (Minwalla et al., 2020), resembling the colonial portrayals of the "oppressed Eastern woman" (Mohanty, 1991), although claiming to bring attention to their difficult circumstances. This portrayal carries the risk of commercializing their suffering by excessively focusing on sexual assault and simplifying their complex existence into a narrative of constant victimization. According to Sutherland et al. (2016), this strategy treats individuals as objects using a colonial perspective and weakens

their ability to act by prioritizing sensationalized portrayals over nuanced ones.

Furthermore, the corpus inaccurately associates the crimes done by ISIS with Islam, perpetuating an Orientalist conflation that distorts the true nature of Islam and unjustly stereotypes Muslims worldwide as inherently violent. The promotion of a "us versus them" dynamic by this reductionist framing exacerbates the isolation of Muslims by suppressing the voices of their numerous critics of extremism (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Although attempts have been made to bring attention to the extent of the trauma experienced, the emphasis on psychological and physical violence ironically amplifies its sensationalism. In her work, Mohanty (1991) advocated for acknowledging the power and autonomy of women in postcolonial settings. She critiqued narratives that portray women solely as passive recipients of violence. The focus on the suffering of Yazidi women undermines the recognition of their multifaceted identities, which encompass qualities such as resilience, optimism, and aspirations.

The narrative also adopts a "white savior" perspective, implying that Western intervention is indispensable, which inadvertently undermines the innate strength and determination of Yazidi women. The depiction of their fortitude and defiance, as well as their capacity to adjust to life after being held captive, is sometimes eclipsed by an undue focus on sorrow rather than autonomy. This supports Coulter's (2008) research on the widespread occurrence of a "victim narrative" in areas of conflict.

In the end, the COYWRONA corpus, which aimed to reveal the suffering of Yazidi women, provides an exaggerated and biased narrative. Despite the current widespread focus on this conversation, it fails to acknowledge the intricate nature of the resilience and independence demonstrated by Yazidi women.

## **Conclusion and Further Research Directions**

The linguistic analysis of the material by COYWRONA shows the complex ethical challenges that modern journalists face in balancing sensationalizing stories of victims and raising awareness. Based on critical discourse analysis, social identity theory, and postcolonial feminist theory, our study calls for a change in the media depiction of Yazidi women to respect their complex stories without adding to their misery. It calls for an all-round approach to ethical journalism and gender-sensitive reporting in conflict zones (Entman, 1993; Whiteside, 2020). Reporters have to use victim-sensitive terminology, such as "survivors" instead of "victims," protect the identity of vulnerable individuals, and contextualize stories in social, political, and cultural frameworks. Engaging with the affected communities and using culturally sensitive and ethical images furthers the need to maintain dignity. Practical support information and the promotion of media literacy empower readers to critically engage with the content. By providing continuous training on ethical reporting, media organizations develop strong, regularly updated ethical guidelines that enhance journalism quality and support the empowerment of individuals and communities affected by conflict (Marhia, 2008).

Our results underline the importance of media professionals using language to honour the dignity and experiences of Yazidi women. It encourages collaborative storytelling to give Yazidi women a stronger voice and more agency. This research draws attention to the fact that there is a lack of current media coverage and lays the groundwork for further research into these narrative tactics. The findings insist that the media take a greater ethical responsibility, avoid the "soft pornography"-type stories that further victimization, and produce respectful yet in-depth accounts of the situation of Yazidi women. Our theoretical framework dictates that journalists be more ethically responsible and open to the voices of survivors and portray them as empowered, not as victimized.

It is in line with the theory of social identity that our work underlines the need to raise the voices of Yazidi women by turning them into protagonists of their own stories. Also, the media literacy of viewers needs to be improved so that



they can understand and sympathize with underrepresented group experiences in a better way. This advanced linguistic analysis based on thorough theoretical frameworks calls for a morally responsible and reflective journalism practice regarding Yazidi women's complex realities. It calls for further research into the narrative frameworks that represent their strength and resilience, with the goal of sowing a dialogue that would help survivors heal and gain agency. We have to move forward in a media environment that celebrates the diversity of human experience and upholds the dignity and worth of each human being.

## **Limitations**

Though this study focused on highlighted themes in the representation of Yazidi women in the media, it has several limitations. First, the study is based on an analysis of published articles and does not include the direct stories of Yazidi women through interviews, which could provide a better insight into the community's experience and perceptions. Second, the thematic analysis did not thoroughly test more detailed linguistic features like the social actor analysis and the transitivity system, which could have provided a more nuanced understanding of the construction of agency and identity. Third, there was no multimodal analysis, which would be an analysis of images and other non-textual elements accompanying the articles. Such an analysis could bring about an even more complete understanding of the way in which visual elements help to create an image and perception of Yazidi women in media. The establishment of such limitations in future research will improve the findings and offer a better nuanced understanding of the media representation of groups marginalized in areas of conflict.

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## ههستیاری له راپۆرتکردنی ململانیدا: کهیسی ویناگردنی ژنانی ئیزیدی له رۆژنامه‌ی دهیلی مهیلی ئۆنلاین له دوا‌ی سا‌لی ٢٠١٤

**پوخته:**

له دوا‌ی درنده‌یه‌کانی ده‌وله‌تی ئیسلامی له سا‌لی ٢٠١٤، ئەم توێژینه‌وه‌یه به‌دوادا‌چوون بۆ ئەو ستراتیژییه ههستیاریانه ده‌کات که ده‌یلی مه‌یل ئۆنلاین بۆ نوێنه‌رایه‌تیکردنی ژنانی ئیزیدی به‌کاری ده‌هێنێت. له‌م لیکۆلینه‌وه‌یه‌دا هه‌شتا باب‌ه‌ت که له‌ ئیوان سا‌لانی ٢٠١٤ بۆ ٢٠٢٠ ب‌لاوکراوه‌ته‌وه به‌ قوول‌ی به‌ که‌لک وه‌رگرتن له‌ شیکاری گوتاری په‌خنه‌یی له‌ چوارچۆیه‌ی تیۆری فی‌مینیستی دوا‌ی کۆلۆنیالیزمدا لیکۆلینه‌وه‌یان له‌سه‌ر کراوه. شیکارییه‌که گ‌یرانه‌وه‌یه‌کی ب‌الاده‌ستی قوربانی-سه‌نته‌ری ئاشکرا ده‌کات که له‌گه‌ڵ توخمه‌کانی خۆپا‌گری و ته‌حه‌ددیاته‌کانی سه‌رده‌می دوا‌ی ململانیدا تیکه‌ل‌کراوه که به‌ شیوه‌یه‌کی گوتارییه‌یه ناسنامه‌ی قوربانی‌کراوی ژنانی



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