

News Media and Violence Against Women: Understanding Framings of Stigma

Anonymized for Blind Review

Abstract

Discussions of Violence Against Women (VAW) in publicly accessible forums like online news media can influence the perceptions of people and organizations. Language reinforcing stigma around VAW can result in negative consequences such as unethical representation of survivors and trivialization of the act of violence. In this work, we study the presence of stigmatized framings in news media and how it differs based on media attributes like regionality, political leaning, veracity, and latent communities of news sources. We also investigate the interactions between VAW-based stigma and 14 issue-generic policies used to describe political communications. We found that articles from national, right-leaning, and conspiratorial news sources contain more stigma compared to their counterparts. Furthermore, alignment of articles to the issue-generic policies offers the highest explanation for the presence of stigma in news articles. We discuss implications for institutions to improve safe reporting guidelines on VAW.

Introduction

Violence Against Women (VAW) is defined by the United Nations (UN) as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (United Nations 1993). It is recognized as a global problem that can have adverse effects on the health, safety, productivity, and overall well-being of women. Despite designated efforts by associations such as World Health Organization (WHO) and UN Women to prevent and eliminate all forms of VAW, its prevalence remains high – “globally 1 in 3 women experience physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime” (United Nations 1993). In fact, a 2021 UN report revealed that VAW increased alarmingly across the globe, following the lockdown imposed by COVID-19 (UN Women 2021).

Media, including mass and print, is considered a “key entry point for preventing VAW in the long-term because of their unique reach to broad sections of the population” (UN Women 2019). In addition, media has the ability to influence and shape public opinion about what is considered socially acceptable – Bandura (2001) identified media to “serve as socializing agents that aid in construction and perpetuation

of perceptions and learned behaviors.” News media, in particular, can potentially raise public awareness to bring justice to survivors and shine light upon the extent, causes, and repercussions of VAW (Owusu-Addo et al. 2018). At the same time, through harmful or stigmatized representations, news media may reinforce problematic norms that promote gender inequality, trivialize the issue, or encourage reproduction of violent acts (“copycat effect” (Lira and Toledo 2014)). A contributing factor to explain these depictions of VAW stems from Entman’s sociological notion of “framing” (Entman 1993) – news media may “select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.”

Given the significant impact of news media portrayals on personal, political, and social justice responses, researchers have studied representations of VAW in mainstream news media. For instance, a body of work shows that journalists often use “episodic framing” (Lindsay-Brisbin, DePrince, and Welton-Mitchell 2014), eliciting individualistic details instead of posing VAW as a systemic societal problem to their audience. Research has also discovered that, unfortunately, news stories depict sexual assault in a “sensationalist” manner (Sacks, Ackerman, and Shlosberg 2018), reinforcing cultural stereotypes, stigma, and rape myths (Meyers 1996). In addition, journalistic reports can intensify stigma around VAW through “victim-blaming” – “an act of blaming victims for criminal acts committed against them” (Berns 2001) – such as attributing VAW incidents to physical appearances and descriptions. Usage of such stigmatizing language not only impacts public opinion, as highlighted earlier, but it also trivializes the act of violence, and discourages (*silences*) the survivors from reporting the crime (Easteal, Holland, and Judd 2015), emphasizing the need to understand (and eliminate) VAW-based stigma in news.

To the best of our knowledge, existing works uncovering stigma of VAW in news only examine articles from a few publishers. However, to inform change, it is essential to recognize and contextualize stigma around VAW in the larger news media landscape, factoring in the diversity of today’s media. In this work, we do so by looking at articles from 396 national, local, and conspiratorial news sources, within the United States. Furthermore, there is a gap in understanding the factors that may drive journalists’ usage of specific linguistic framings, in the context of VAW. For instance, Ele-

jalde, Ferres, and Schifanella (2019) observed that news media coverage is highly influenced by the geographic reach and the political leaning of outlets. Moreover, with mis- and dis-information threatening the American news ecosystem in recent years, it is imperative to also consider news quality as we seek to better understand framings of VAW. In this context, misinformation on VAW can contribute to harmful attitudes, making it more difficult to prevent and address gender-based violence. This misinformation may gain perceived credibility through inauthentic coordination amongst fringe media outlets (Horne, Nørregaard, and Adalı 2019). Consequently, we make the first attempt to study and explain stigma around VAW in news using outlet attributes such as *regionality*, *partisanship*, *veracity*, and *media community membership* (captured via content sharing networks) as well as article attributes, such as *issue-generic policies* to study political issues highlighted in news (Boydston et al. 2013). Our research pursues the following two research questions:

RQ1: How is stigma around VAW perpetuated across U.S. news media and how does it differ based on (a) regionality, (b) political leaning, (c) veracity of news sources, (d) media communities, and (e) issue-generic policies?

RQ2: What are the relative roles of the above mentioned factors in explaining stigma in VAW news reports?

To answer these two research questions, we filtered two publicly available news datasets – NELA-GT and NELA-Local – using relevant key phrases, identified by domain experts, to only contain VAW-specific articles in the United States. In total, we looked at 98,107 articles in NELA-GT and 68,892 articles in NELA-Local – published from April 2020 to March 2023. To explore the presence of stigmatized VAW framings in this data, we adopted a BERT-based (Devlin et al. 2019) representation learning framework proposed by Mittal and De Choudhury (2023). We then looked at differences in stigma-based framings, along the five factors mentioned in RQ1. Our analysis revealed that national, right-leaning, and low-veracity outlets tend to use more stigma compared to their counterparts. Our analysis of media communities supported these findings, showing that outlets in the fringe, right-leaning community used stigmatized framings more than the average outlet, but also added nuance to the findings. In particular, we found that small clusters of progressive outlets used stigmatized framings more than the average outlet despite left-leaning outlets more generally using less. Our article level analysis indicated that articles with mentions of certain issue-generic policies such as those highlighting (in)equality of penalty or rewards, policy outcomes across organizations, and effectiveness of existing systems contain more stigma. On the other hand, articles highlighting overall well-being, social responsibility, and existing social norms contain less stigma. Lastly, an article's alignment (or lack thereof) with issue-generic policies was the most informative in determining whether an article uses stigmatized VAW framings or not.

Broader Perspectives, Ethics, and Competing Interests: Our findings bear implications for survivor-centered reporting guidelines that avoid perpetuation of political biases and conspiracy theories, provide contextual information highlighting the underlying systemic issues, and use trauma-informed language instead of sensationalist and victim-

blaming framings. In this paper, we utilize publicly available news articles. As an observational study of retrospectively gathered data and without any interaction with the authors of these content, our research did not qualify as “human subjects research,” per our Institutional Review Board guidelines. Nevertheless, we followed best practices in our analysis (Chancellor, Baumer, and De Choudhury 2019), such as working with deidentified data, and refraining from sharing raw or personally identifiable data in any form. All quotes are paraphrased to reduce traceability and potential harm to those referenced in the news articles. *The paper contains descriptions of VAW, which may be triggering to some readers.*

Background and Related Work

Stigma, Stereotypes, and Violence Against Women

Stigma and stereotypes have a documented influence on incidence and prevalence of VAW. “This can take the form of promoting stereotypes and myths about ‘real’ and ‘deserving’ victims and ‘provoked’ or ‘tragic’ perpetrators and failing to convey the true scale of violence against women and girls” (Eaves and Equality Now 2012). But how research comes to identify presentations of stigma relating to VAW, and the resulting implications for individual help-seeking behaviors, are varied by contexts. As it relates to intimate partner violence, research suggests disparities for women of color are best understood when accounting for cultural messaging that communities of color are not victims of abuse (Plough 2000). This stigma is perpetuated through public messaging of intimate partner violence awareness and prevention that excludes women of color – reinforcing cultural stigma and stereotypes of victimhood (Bent-Goodley 2007). However, in the context of sex work, VAW research offers that stigma is structural, and barriers to prevention are shaped by social stigmatization and criminalization of sex work – enabling violence against sex workers to persist. Increased risk of violence of sex workers is correlated with both lawful and unlawful policing practices and sex worker targeting policy (Deering et al. 2014).

Given the variations in existing understanding of stigma related to VAW, we operationalize a holistic understanding of stigma in contrast to a single manifestation of stigma (e.g. victim-blaming) in our examination of news and VAW.

News and Violence Against Women

Framing, defined as the “portray[al] of an issue from one perspective to the necessary exclusion of alternative perspectives of issues,” (Schaffner and Sellers 2010) of VAW may be correlated with harmful cultural and structural stigma perpetuated in mass communication. Yet, a review of work analyzing news and the journalistic techniques that shape framing of VAW (Easteal, Holland, and Judd 2015) points to limited or non-standardized dimensions of framing. Studies attribute problematic portrayals of VAW to media’s proclivity toward three frames (Bullock 2007) of objectivity (Meyers 2004), concealing broader social context (Bullock 2007), and directing the responsibility of prevention onto victims (Carline and Easteal 2014). Research has also identified media’s occasional use of “social problem frame” in reports of VAW (Berns 2004). These explorations of

framing VAW have been situated in both domestic feminism (Easteal, Holland, and Judd 2015) and transnational feminist perspectives such as Orientalism (Chagnon 2020). A quantitative examination of VAW and news, one of few, investigates changes in journalistic framing of, specifically, sexual violence in news following the #MeToo movement (Noetzel et al. 2022). While all of these works contribute to the understanding of problematic framing of VAW, they each assess a narrow manifestation of VAW and varied conceptualizations of the framing task in media.

In this paper, we extend our understanding of VAW in news through 14 issue-generic policies (Boydston et al. 2013) derived from political communication theory. Prior work has employed them to study framing of immigration (Mendelsohn, Budak, and Jurgens 2021), tobacco use, and same-sex marriage (Card et al. 2015). In the context of VAW, the 14 policies provide a systematic way to understand political discourse on distribution of rewards/punishments, capacity of existing judicial systems and public well-being, and the potential stigma they may attract (UNICEF and UN Women 2020). Additionally, existing studies exploring framing of VAW examine media in a limited locale (Bullock 2007), number of outlets (Chagnon 2020), and types of violence (Nettleton 2011). This paper contributes to research on news reporting of VAW through expansion of the number and type of news outlets reporting on VAW.

Media Attributes: Regionality, Partisanship, Veracity, and Communities

Given the power of framing as a political tool (Boydston et al. 2013) in agenda setting (Zaller 1992) and its influence on public attitudes, this work considers several media attributes in understanding stigma in news reports of VAW.

First, we understand from work by Elejalde, Ferres, and Schifanella (2019) that audience reach and targeting efforts of news are influenced by geographical factors and differ for local and national news outlets. In tandem, the political bias of a news outlet is correlated with audience targeting efforts intended to appeal to those they reach and maximize revenue (Bahamonde et al. 2018). Hence, both the *regionality* of a news outlet and the *partisanship* of a news outlet may influence coverage of VAW. Existing relationships between individual political positioning and attitudes of VAW illustrate a need to investigate problematic and politicized portrayals of VAW in news. For example, Barnett and Hilz (2018) found that individuals with politically conservative beliefs are more likely to hold rape supportive attitudes. In addition, republican men reported the highest levels of sexual assault myth acceptance, lowest levels of concern for sexual assault and were least likely to perceive the #MeToo movement as having a positive impact (Ortiz and Smith 2022).

To make matters more complex, today's media exists in a high-choice environment (Hameleers and Van der Meer 2020). This environment means that the news consumed is not always reliable or written by a professional journalist. Instead, information may be filtered through fringe, alternative media outlets, where sensationalist framing and moral-emotional language are used to gain reader engagement (Brady et al. 2017). In the context of VAW, fringe media that blames victims of violence for their own victimization, or suggests that women should be more vigilant to

avoid being assaulted, can contribute to victim-blaming and shift the focus away from holding perpetrators accountable for their actions. This can discourage victims from coming forward to report incidents of violence and can lead to a culture where violence against women is normalized and minimized. Hence, we also consider the *veracity* of a news outlet.

Lastly, there are various sub-groups of media that impact VAW coverage, but those groups may be opaque to the information consumer and can be hard to define. For example, fringe media may coordinate to make certain narratives seem more widely reported (Horne, Nørregaard, and Adalı 2019), or the ownership of outlets may impact story framing and therefore the public's view of events (Levendusky 2022). Given that latent sub-groups like these can be difficult to directly capture in data, we estimate them through what we call "media communities" – leveraging prior work (Horne, Nørregaard, and Adalı 2019; Starbird et al. 2018).

We contribute to the literature by studying the relationship between stigmatized VAW coverage and four outlet factors: regionality, partisanship, veracity, and latent communities.

Data

We used articles published by U.S. national, local, and fringe news media outlets, present within the publicly available NELA-GT (Nørregaard, Horne, and Adalı 2019) and NELA-Local (Horne et al. 2022) datasets. To have an up-to-date news coverage, we used an extended version of both NELA-GT and NELA-Local, collected from April 2020 to March 2023. Table 1 provides an overview of the datasets.

We chose these datasets as they contain nearly every news article published within the specified timeline. Additionally, apart from the textual content of news articles, the datasets provide information on attributes such as source of publication, date of publication, estimates of political leaning, estimates of veracity (for NELA-GT), and the state and the county the news outlet is headquartered in (for NELA-Local). In NELA-GT, political leaning and veracity labels are extracted from a resource called MBFC¹ – a fact checking platform that rates websites based on ideological bias and credibility of reporting, while in NELA-Local political leaning labels are estimated via Presidential voting odds in the headquartered county of the outlet.

Filtering and Data Cleaning

We filtered news articles, which were relevant to study discourse on VAW, in both the NELA-GT and NELA-Local datasets. To do so, we used key phrases identified by UNFPA domain experts (Purohit et al. 2016), and further fine-tuned by ElSherief, Belding, and Nguyen (2017), to define three categories of Gender Based Violence (GBV): (1) Physical Violence (e.g., '*intimate partner violence*', '*woman attacked*', and '*domestic violence*'), (2) Sexual Violence (e.g., '*sexual assault*', '*rape victim*', and '*stalking woman*'), and (3) Harmful Practices (e.g., '*woman trafficking*', '*sex slave*', and '*woman abuse*'). We carefully selected a subset of these GBV key phrases such that they were applicable to VAW. For instance, we dropped gender neutral phrases like '*child abuse*' and '*physical violence*' from the original list. After this processing and filtering out sources not headquartered

¹<https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/>

Dataset	#Articles	#N	Mean (#words)	SD	Example Sources
NELA-GT	7,246,352	361	3702.47	108.33	CNBC, Washington Post, The New York Times, The Duran, US News, The Blaze
NELA-Local	2,089,785	313	4440.32	773.01	Daily News, The Daily Gazette, Philadelphia Weekly, Daily Herald, The Republic

Table 1: Overview of the news datasets, before filtering. $N = \#$ sources. Mean, SD (Std dev) represent article-length statistics.

in the U.S., we were able to get 115,197 VAW-specific news articles in NELA-GT and 68,892 in NELA-Local.

Lastly, following P. Aires, G. Nakamura, and F. Nakamura (2019) and Nakov and Da San Martino (2021), we used source-level veracity labels – already available in the NELA-GT dataset, obtained through the MBFC resource, to remove articles originating from low-veracity conspiracy-pseudoscience, and questionable sources. Finally, we were left with 98,107 articles in NELA-GT and 68,892 in NELA-Local. We grouped the filtered out 17,090 low-veracity articles, to form a separate dataset containing articles from conspiratorial news sources, to answer RQ1 (c).

Data Validation

To validate our filtered VAW-specific NELA-GT and NELA-Local datasets, we randomly sampled 50 news articles each from the two data sources. The first two authors hand annotated them as relevant or irrelevant (to VAW) based on their prior experience and expertise with studying news related content. Throughout this process, the annotations were discussed amongst the two authors to resolve conflicts, and reach agreement. The subsets contained a high percentage of relevant articles (84% for NELA-GT and 92% for NELA-Local). The annotations were reliable in terms of a high inter-rater agreement or Cohen’s Kappa of 0.89 for NELA-GT and 0.91 for NELA-Local.

Methods

Measuring Stigma

In this study, our goal was to understand how news media describes VAW, through a stigma lens. Hence we adopted the Approval/Stigma frame characterization, proposed by Mittal and De Choudhury (2023), to quantify levels of stigma in news media reports. In particular, these authors curated well-validated dictionaries – referring to existing literature on conceptualization of stigma (Link and Phelan 2001; Goffman 2014) – to represent *approval* and *stigma*. Some exemplar terms present in the Approval/Stigma dictionaries are ‘support’, ‘accept’, ‘regard’ for approval and ‘disgrace’, ‘exclusion’, ‘flaw’ for stigma. Using these dictionaries the authors then generated vector representations for *approval* and *stigma* dimensions via BERT (Devlin et al. 2019), a pre-trained large language model. They averaged the word embeddings, extracted using BERT, for all the keywords present in the two dictionaries, to create the representations for *approval* and *stigma*. Finally, following the *semantic axes* approach (An, Kwak, and Ahn 2018), a single linguistic representation for Approval/Stigma was obtained by subtracting the embedding for stigma from approval.

Next, to quantify stigmatized framings of VAW in news media, we extracted sentence-level BERT embeddings to get a linguistic representation of the news article content similar to Mittal and De Choudhury (2023). Lastly, following prior

work (Kwak et al. 2021), we compared the vectors representing the news article and the Approval/Stigma frame using the cosine similarity metric. This comparison resulted in scores ranging from -1 to 1 such that a score closer to -1 (alternatively, 1) indicates an alignment to stigma (alternatively, approval). Following Mittal and De Choudhury (2023) we then set a threshold on 0 cosine similarity to say that news articles with a score lesser (greater) than 0 align more with the stigma (approval) dimension.

Media Communities

Next, we generated broad, latent sub-groups of news outlets, extending beyond categories based only on regionality, political leaning, and veracity of sources captured in the NELA datasets – our motivation was that this fine-grained grouping could provide valuable insights into different communities of VAW framings. To capture these groups, we constructed a content sharing network (CSN) of news outlets, where nodes represent news outlets and edges represent the proportion of articles copied between outlets (directed as information flow, A → B means B copies from A). As has been demonstrated by prior studies (Gruppi et al. 2022; Horne, Nørregaard, and Adalı 2019; Starbird et al. 2018), this structural conceptualization of news networks consistently yields clusters of outlets that represent meaningful and distinct parts of the news landscape. These clusters may capture inauthentic coordination, ownership, partisanship, and regionality.

This network was constructed using the algorithm described by Horne, Nørregaard, and Adalı (2019). Specifically, we constructed a Term Frequency Inverse Document Frequency (TF-IDF) matrix for each 5 day window of the dataset and created article pairs by keeping articles that had a greater than 0.85 cosine similarity (near verbatim copies of each other). We then ordered these edges by time and aggregated individual articles into outlets. Importantly, to ensure we were appropriately representing the news landscape, we constructed this network using all of the outlets and articles in NELA-GT and NELA-Local (9,336,137 articles from 674 outlets) rather than only using those in our final filtered VAW dataset (184,089 articles from 396 outlets).

A visualization of this network is given in Figure 2. The community membership (computed using modularity) of a news outlet is used in our subsequent analyses for RQs 1, 2.

Operationalizing Issue-generic Policies

Issue-generic policies (refer to Table 2) – proposed by Boyd-stun et al. (2013) – summarize aspects that provide high-level insights into publicly available political communications and their influence on public attitudes.

To answer RQ1 (e), i.e. to explore differences in stigmatized VAW framings across mentions of issue-generic policies, we first identified presence of the 14 issue-generic policy dimensions, as listed in Table 2, in our news datasets. We used two publicly available datasets, manually annotated for

Issue-generic Policy Dimension	Description
Economic	Costs, benefits, and other monetary implications
Capacity and resources	Availability of physical, human, or financial resources, and capacity of existing systems
Morality	Religious, ethical, or social implications
Fairness and equality	Equality or inequality with which laws, punishments, or rewards are distributed
Constitutionality and jurisprudence	Rights, freedoms and authority of individuals, government, and corporations
Policy prescription and evaluation	Discussion of policies proposed for addressing an identified problem
Crime and punishment	Effectiveness and implications of existing laws and their reinforcement
Security and defense	Security or threats to security of an individual, group or nation
Health and safety	Healthcare access and effectiveness, public safety
Quality of life	Effects of policy on individuals' wealth, well-being, and happiness
Cultural identity	Social norms, values, and customs constituting culture(s), in relevance to a policy issue
Public opinion	Attitudes and opinions of the general public
Political	Considerations related to politics and politicians including elections and lobbyists
External regulation and reputation	Comparison of policy outcomes across nations, states, and groups

Table 2: Issue-generic policy dimensions devised by Boydston et al. (2013).

the presence of the 14 policy dimensions, to extract mentions of issue-generic policies within our news articles:

1. **Media Frames Corpus** (Card et al. 2015): This consists of annotated news articles on three political issues: (1) immigration (5, 549 articles), (2) smoking (4, 077 articles), and (3) same-sex marriage (6, 298 articles).
2. **Immigration Discourse on Social Media** (Mendelsohn, Budak, and Jurgens 2021): This consists of 4, 497 immigration-related annotated tweets.

We used a BERT-based representation learning framework (Devlin et al. 2019) to get linguistic representations of the 14 policy dimensions. For this, we used all the news article excerpts and tweets – contained in the two datasets mentioned above – annotated for the presence of each issue-generic policy. For each policy, the corresponding annotated article excerpts and tweets were then transformed into vector representations using sentence-level BERT. Finally, we averaged the sentence-level embeddings of all the articles and tweets annotated for an issue-generic policy to get its linguistic representation. This process resulted in 14 embeddings representing the 14 issue-generic policies.

Similar to measuring stigma, to identify the presence of the 14 policy dimensions in our news datasets we represented the news articles using sentence-level BERT embeddings. Again, per Kwak et al. (2021), we compared embeddings representing the news article and the 14 policy dimensions using cosine similarity. This generated a 14-length vector for each news article, enumerating the presence of the 14 issue-generic policies within the news article.

Explanatory Models

In response to RQ2, we developed a series of logistic regression models to understand the relative roles of different factors, namely, (a) regionality, (b) political leaning, (c) veracity of news sources, (d) media communities, and (e) issue-generic policies, in explaining stigmatized VAW framings in news media. We trained six different regression models – one corresponding to each of the five factors considered as separate independent variables (regionality, pol-leaning, veracity, media-comm, and issue-gen-policies) and one with a combination of all (all-factors), to understand

their explanatory power to determine whether an article uses stigma-based framings or not (dependent variable).

Results

Difference in Stigma: Regionality of News Sources

Corresponding to RQ1 (a), to analyze differences in stigmatized VAW framings based on regionality of news sources, we compared cosine similarity score distributions (indicating articles' alignment to Approval/Stigma frame) for two clusters of news articles : (1) published by *national* media outlets, i.e., articles within NELA-GT and (2) published by *local* media outlets, i.e., articles within NELA-Local.

We found that 82, 986 (15, 121) news articles published by national news outlets skewed towards the stigma (approval) dimension of the Approval/Stigma frame. This shows that a larger proportion of articles by national sources aligned more with the stigma dimension compared to the approval dimension, indicating their VAW discourse to use more stigmatizing linguistic cues than approving or accepting framings. Along similar lines we observed that 51, 471 (17, 421) articles published by local outlets aligned with the stigma (approval) dimension. Articles from national outlets ‘US News’, ‘CNN’ and local outlets ‘Atlanta Daily World’, ‘The Daily Republic’ contained VAW-based stigma.

On comparing prevalence of the Approval/Stigma frame across the national and local outlets we found that the average cosine similarity score was -0.0428 (-0.0332) for articles within the national (local) clusters, indicating that local media sources contain less stigmatizing VAW framings compared to national sources. This finding is also captured in the cosine similarity distribution plot shown in Figure 1a. The histogram plot for local media outlets is skewed towards the right, compared to that of national outlets, suggesting that local outlets use more approval-based framings than national. Mann-Whitney U-tests revealed significant differences in score distributions of articles from national and local sources, with U-stat: 29.903; $p < 0.01$.

Elucidating these quantitative observations further, in the paraphrased excerpts below, we observe the presence of supportive, positive, and progressive language (e.g., “communicate priorities as one voice”, “make the experience comfortable”) around survivors and structures for both national and local articles falling towards the approval dimension:

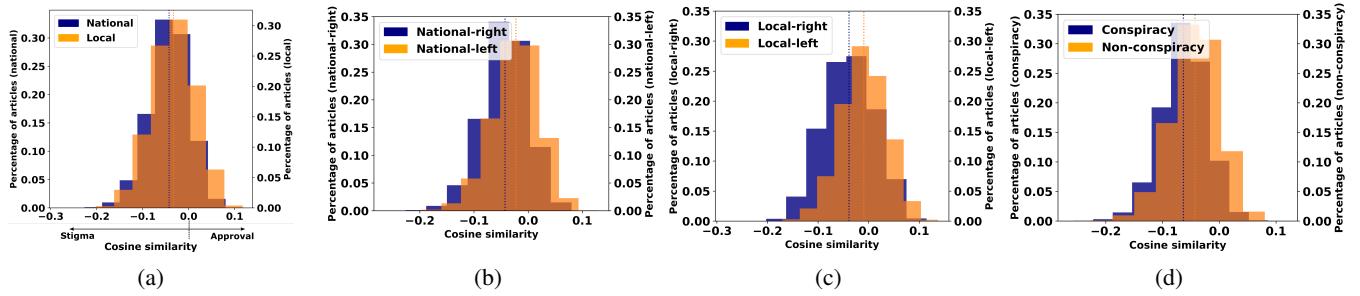


Figure 1: (a) Histogram of cosine similarity scores for articles published by national outlets (left Y-axis) and local outlets (right Y-axis). (b-c) Histogram of cosine similarity scores for articles published by national-right leaning (left Y-axis) and -left leaning (right Y-axis) media outlets and local-right leaning (left Y-axis) and -left leaning (right Y-axis) media outlets. (d) Histogram of cosine similarity scores for articles published by conspiracy (left Y-axis) and non-conspiracy outlets (right Y-axis). (All) Dotted lines represent the average cosine similarity for articles from corresponding groups of news sources.

“WRAP, Women’s Resource and Rape Assistance Program, [...] helps victims of rape and domestic violence to bounce back emotionally, physically and mentally. ‘We want to make the experience as comfortable and relaxing as possible [...] the conversation you are having is going to be one of the most difficult of your life as you open up about the experience,’ [...] said.” (*National (CBS)*: approval)

“It was a different approach for [...] county. [...] this year’s legislative session brought a more broad and organized effort to communicate specific priorities as one voice. [...] also filed HB 1906, dubbed ‘Athena’s Law,’ which would give judges the authority to delay the release of those accused of sexual assault.” (*Local (Kennebec Journal)*: approval)

In contrast, we observe critical and condemning language directed at social processes and inequities (“conviction rate in trials is very low”, “engage in behaviors, such as bedwetting”) for articles aligned with the stigma dimension:

“When survivors file a complaint for sexual assault in [country name] prosecution is very rare, and the conviction rate in trials that do go to court is very low. A survey conducted by the UN found that, among men who admitted to committing rape, 88% of respondents said they faced no legal consequences.” (*National (US News)*: stigma)

“Sexual violence has plagued the black community. While sexual violence occurs across all racial groups, black bodies have encountered a staggering amount. [...] signs of sexual assault can look different. A few common signs can include: changes in self-care, such as paying less attention to hygiene, appearance, or fashion than they usually do [...] may engage in behaviors, such as thumbsucking or bedwetting.” (*Local (Atlanta Daily World)*: stigma)

Difference in Stigma: Political Leaning of News

In response to RQ1 (b), i.e., to study differences in stigmatized VAW framings based on political leaning of news sources, we looked at cosine similarity distributions for articles grouped by political leaning of outlets analyzed separately within the national (NELA-GT) and local (NELA-Local) source clusters. Again, > 0 cosine similarity indicates alignment to approval, while < 0 to stigma.

National-left and -right leaning sources On segregating articles based on political leaning of sources within NELA-GT, i.e., articles published by left/right leaning

sources, we observed that 32,123 (14,371) articles published by national-left leaning outlets aligned with the stigma (approval) dimension (Figure 1b). In addition, 43,874 (7,739) articles published by national-right leaning outlets aligned with stigma (approval). These raw statistics suggest that for both left and right leaning sources within NELA-GT, more articles tended to use a stigmatizing framing compared to an approval-based framing. However, the ratio of number of articles leaning more towards approval than to stigma is higher, 0.447, for national-left leaning outlets in comparison to that for national-right outlets (0.176), indicating that national-left sources use lesser stigmatizing linguistic framings than national-right. This is also summarized in the cosine similarity distribution plots shown in Figure 1b where the histogram distribution for national-left sources is shifted towards the right to that of national-right sources. Mann-Whitney U-tests revealed significant differences in the scores distributions for national-left and -right leaning news sources, with U-stat: 15.196; $p < 0.05$. In the quotes below from national-left and national-right articles, there are comparable degrees of stigma – that of the left portrays structural systems with stigma while the right portrays survivors and supporters with stigma:

“The news sparked outrage in [...], where allegations of sexual assault often go under reported due to a notoriously slow legal system. [...] brutal cases of rape and assault are often dealt with poorly under the country’s justice system.” (*National-left (CNN)*: stigma)

“Politicians have lately been beating a new drum on the health risk to women [...]. Dispensing medical misinformation together can have dangerous side-effects that threaten women’s health and safety. In a bout of hypocrisy, supporters falsely claim that survivors of sexual assault will be denied care [...] advocating for procedures that put women at risk.” (*National-right (RealClearPolitics)*: stigma)

Local-left and -right leaning sources Next, looking at cosine similarity scores for articles published by left and right leaning sources present in NELA-Local (Figure 1c), we found that 24,197 (17,439) articles released by local-left leaning sources aligned with the stigma (approval) dimension of the Approval/Stigma frame. Furthermore, 19,995 (6,176) articles published by local-right sources skewed towards the stigma (approval) dimension. Again, similar to what was observed for NELA-GT, for both left and

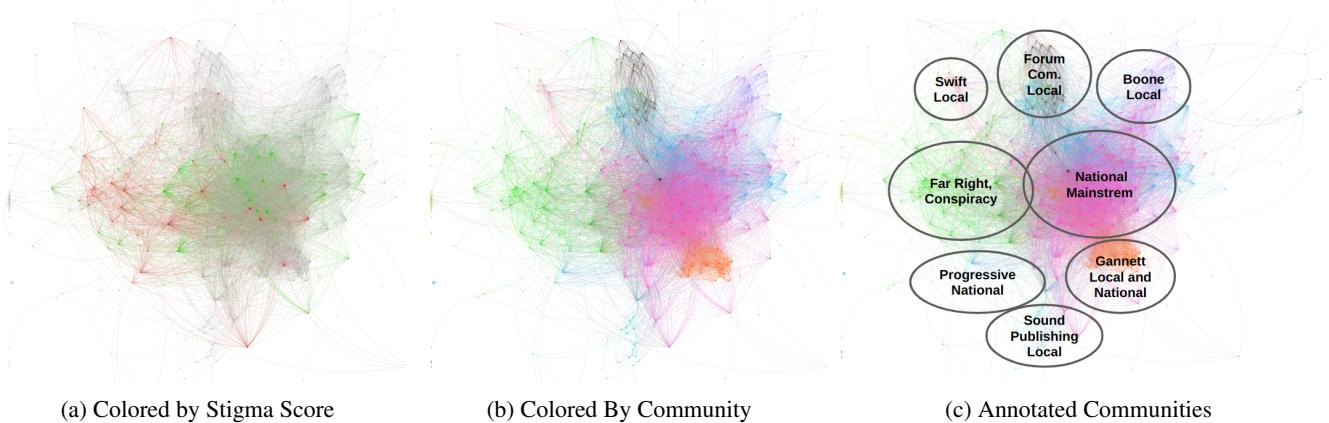


Figure 2: Content sharing networks, where nodes are outlets and edges represent the proportion of articles copied between outlets (directed as information flow, A → B means B copies from A). In (a), outlets are colored green if they use less stigma framing than the average outlet, red if they use more stigma framing than the average outlet, and grey if they are not included in our VAW sample. In (b), outlets are colored by community membership, determined by modularity. In (c), to better explain the types of media communities captured in the network, we provide high-level annotations of the largest communities.

right leaning sources within NELA-Local, a larger proportion of articles used stigmatizing language than positive approval-based framings. On comparing the ratio of number of articles aligning with approval to those with stigma, we observed that local-left sources achieve a higher value (0.721) compared to local-right (0.309), suggesting that left-leaning sources use more approval-based framings than right-leaning sources within NELA-Local. This finding is also featured in the score distribution plots shown in Figure 1c such that the histogram for local-left sources appears towards the right to that of local-right sources. Mann-Whitney U-tests revealed significant differences in the scores distributions for local-left and -right leaning news sources, with U-stat: 72.48; $p < 0.01$.

To summarize, within both NELA-GT and NELA-Local datasets, left-leaning sources use more approval-based framings compared to right. This is also indicated by a higher average similarity score for articles from national-left (-0.0228) and local-left (-0.0097) when compared to those from national-right (-0.0427) and local-right (-0.0390).

Difference in Stigma: Veracity of News Sources

Next, for RQ1 (c), i.e., to study differences in stigmatized VAW framings based on veracity of news sources, we looked at cosine similarity distributions across two clusters of news articles published by: (1) low-veracity or conspiracy outlets and (2) high-veracity or non-conspiracy outlets (NELA-GT).

From Figure 1d, we observed that 14,760 (2,330) articles from conspiracy news sources (e.g., Breitbart, Infowars, The Gateway Pundit) skewed towards the stigma (approval) dimension, showing that conspiracy sources use more negative stigma-based language than approval-based framings. Along similar lines, for non-conspiracy news outlets, such as NPR, PBS, ABC News, 82,986 (15,121) articles aligned with the stigma (approval) dimension of the Approval/Stigma frame. However, on comparing the usage of stigmatized framings across conspiracy and non-conspiracy outlets, we found that non-conspiracy sources use more approval-based framings than conspiratorial sources. For instance, non-conspiracy

outlets achieved a higher average cosine similarity score, -0.0428 , as compared to conspiracy outlets (-0.0632). In addition, the ratio of number of news articles aligning with approval to those with stigma is higher for non-conspiracy (0.182) than for conspiracy outlets (0.053). This finding is also supported by the cosine similarity score distributions shown in Figure 1d, where the histogram plot for non-conspiracy outlets is shifted towards the right to that of conspiracy outlets. Mann-Whitney U-tests revealed significant differences in the scores for mainstream and conspiratorial news sources, with U-stat: 26.891; $p < 0.05$.

Difference in Stigma: Media Communities

Media communities captured by the CSN supported the above findings. As shown in Figure 2a, news outlets with above average usage of stigmatized framings (nodes colored in red) are clustered together. In particular, the community of far-right and conspiracy-peddling sources (labeled *Far Right, Conspiracy* in Figure 2c, e.g., Breitbart, Zero Hedge) used stigmatized framings more than the average outlet, while the U.S. mainstream news community (labeled *National Mainstream* in Figure 2c) used stigmatized framings less than the average outlet.

There are some nuances to this general finding. For example, despite left-leaning outlets, both nationally (e.g., The New York Times) and locally (e.g., The Columbus Dispatch), producing more articles leaning towards the approval dimension rather than the stigma dimension, a small community of progressive outlets (labeled *Progressive National* in Figure 2c) used stigmatized framings more than the average. This community included outlets such as Mother Jones, The Raw Story, and Crooks and Liars. In other communities, we found specific, central sources that used stigmatized framings more than the average. For example, USA Today, the central hub of the Gannett ownership community (comprising outlets like The Indianapolis Star), used stigmatized framings more than the average. Outlets of high centrality in the mainstream community, such as CBS and ABC News, also used stigmatized framings more than the average.

Difference in Stigma: Issue-generic Policies

As elaborated in Section “*Operationalizing Issue-generic Policies*”, for RQ1(e), we generated a 14-length vector representation for each news article to quantify the presence of the 14 dimensions, listed in Table 2.

Articles published by national, local, and conspiracy sources were then separately clustered into 14 groups – representing the 14 issue-generic policies. We performed this clustering by assigning an article to the issue-generic policy cluster with which the article aligned the most, i.e., for which it attained the highest numerical value in the 14-length vector. After obtaining these 14 clusters, for each of the three types of news sources (national, local, and conspiracy), we averaged the cosine similarity to the Approval/Stigma frame for all articles in a cluster. This analysis generated the heatmap distribution shown in Figure 3, representing average Approval/Stigma alignment of articles with pronounced presence of an issue-generic policy.

From Figure 3 we see that articles mentioning issue-generic policies ‘Fairness and equality’, ‘External regulation and reputation’, ‘Health and safety’, and ‘Capacity and resources’ use stigmatizing language across all three categories of news sources, with conspiratorial news sources demonstrating 26.19% more stigma compared to national for these 4 issue-generic policies, and national outlets with 43.73% more stigma than local ones, also for the same policies. Table 3 lists top uni-, bi-, and tri-grams, based on TF-IDF, in articles belonging to the policy clusters, across the 3 source types. Phrases such as ‘justice system’, ‘cancel culture’, and ‘war crimes’ indicate themes that attract VAW-based stigma. Consider the following two paraphrased excerpts. In the first, instead of providing references to support services or ways to combat the issue, the article sensationalizes the judicial system of the mentioned country. In addition, the following excerpt not only exaggerates the act of violence unnecessarily but uses a visual representation (“forced her”) to reinforce stereotypes around female subordination.

“Sexual crimes against women are widespread in [...], brutal cases of rape are often dealt with poorly under the country’s justice system.” (*Capacity and resources: stigma*)

“[...] forced her into the apartment, where he assaulted her. [...] Though the perpetrator had a prior record on property crimes, the judge ruled against punishment using a ‘benefit of the doubt’ argument.” (*Fairness and equality: stigma*)

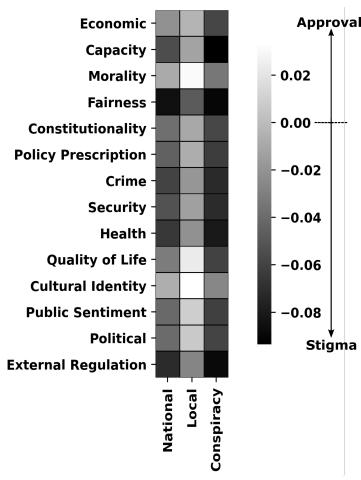


Figure 3: Heatmap representing alignment to the Approval/Stigma frame, for articles containing an issue-generic policy (Y-axis) and published by national, local or conspiracy outlets (X-axis).

Lastly, corresponding to RQ2, in this section we present our evaluation of the logistic regression models used to explore the relative roles of the five factors in explaining stigma around VAW in news media. Table 4 summarizes the goodness of fit of the six models, in comparison to the Null, intercept-only, model. Amongst the five factors, the *issue-gen-policies* model, which considers article alignment to the 14 issue-generic dimensions as independent variables, offers the best fit with statistically significant explanatory power – *issue-gen-policies* achieved the highest adjusted R^2 statistic (0.523), thereby offering the highest explanation for variance in our dependent variable (presence/absence of stigma). In addition, models solely based on regionality, political leaning, and veracity of news sources do not individually offer a lot

On the other hand, articles containing issue-generic policies such as ‘Morality’, ‘Cultural identity’, and ‘Quality of life’ tend to use approval-based framings, again, across all three types of news sources, with local outlets having the most approval by 31.14% compared to national and conspiratorial outlets. This finding is evident through the following two exemplars. The first paraphrased article excerpt raises awareness about the increased domestic and child abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic (Piquero et al. 2021), acknowledges its impact on the youth’s well-being, and advocates for appropriate support. Terms in Table 3 like ‘better life’, ‘health care’ also indicate this approval-based usage. The excerpt follows existing media guidelines to responsibly report and represent VAW, without exacerbating stigma, such as by using a “survivor-centered approach” and highlighting that “situations (like COVID-19) can lead to an increase in VAW, but should not be used as an excuse for violence” (UNICEF and UN Women 2020). Similarly, the second paraphrased excerpt not only normalizes the impact of domestic violence across different identities and demographics but also affirms the need for the audience to collectively (and responsibly) care for the survivors (“all of us should care”).

“Research from the [...] on adolescents’ mental health during the pandemic suggests that for many teenagers, home was not always a safe place. [...] having therapists in schools provides a way of supporting youth, particularly female students, who may be experiencing physical abuse in the home.” (*Quality of life: approval*)

“Domestic Violence is a crime that affects more than 4 million Americans each year, both women and men, of every race, religion, culture, status and income level. [...] all of us should care, and should understand the resources available to those in danger.” (*Cultural identity, Morality: approval*)

Importance of Factors that Explain VAW Stigma

Lastly, corresponding to RQ2, in this section we present our evaluation of the logistic regression models used to explore the relative roles of the five factors in explaining stigma around VAW in news media. Table 4 summarizes the goodness of fit of the six models, in comparison to the Null, intercept-only, model.

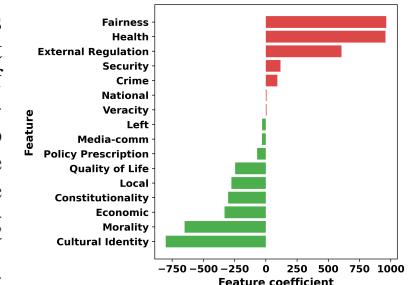


Figure 4: Regression coefficients (β) with the highest positive and negative values ($p < 0.01$) in the combined all-factors model.

Amongst the five factors, the *issue-gen-policies* model, which considers article alignment to the 14 issue-generic dimensions as independent variables, offers the best fit with statistically significant explanatory power – *issue-gen-policies* achieved the highest adjusted R^2 statistic (0.523), thereby offering the highest explanation for variance in our dependent variable (presence/absence of stigma). In addition, models solely based on regionality, political leaning, and veracity of news sources do not individually offer a lot

Issue-generic Policy Dimension	Top uni-, bi-, tri-grams based on TF-IDF
Economic	fsa, layoffs, 19 million, lifetime warranty, labor, money allocated, abortion money, compensation pay
Capacity and resources	justice system, reserve court, school staff, abortion resource access, hospital admin, white house
Morality	fair, civil rights, taking care, acted unethically, responsible activists, sexual morality, social ethics
Fairness and equality	against punishment, black lives matter, cancel culture, right wing, resource allocation, racism
Constitutionality and jurisprudence	us citizen, green card, voter id, reform, forbidden, joe biden, 2021 vawa passed, district attorney
Policy prescription and evaluation	abortion ban, we need, president trump, the bill, anti abortion, reauthorizing vawa, 14th amendment
Crime and punishment	violence, sex trafficking, law enforcement, los angeles, johnston county, police said, sheriff office
Security and defense	president trump, brief survey, security upgrade, defense department, prison camps, amendment needs
Health and safety	make sure, health experts, emergency, safety guidelines, precaution, public health, volunteer
Quality of life	mental health, health care, public health, better life, live work, hostile environment, feel like, covid 19
Cultural identity	country built, black lives, citizen, white women, culture wars, meanwhile indians, high school, racism
Public opinion	petition, please sign, public health, rights, pro life, liberal media scream, abortion rights, lives matter
Political	far right, crisis, united states, president trump, right wing, hearing, joe biden, attorney general
External regulation and reputation	united nations, biden administration, human rights, white house, war crimes, human rights, rape incest

Table 3: Top uni-, bi-, and tri-grams based on TF-IDF for articles contained in the 14 issue-generic policy clusters.

Model	R^2_{adj}	χ^2 stat	p
Null			
regionality	0.013	27,867	1.21e-02
pol-leaning	0.162	4,377	2.93e-03
veracity	0.058	11,934	0.47e-02
media-comm	0.352	2,433	2.85e-03
issue-gen-policies	0.523	1,941	1.91e-05
all-factors	0.625	991	0.08e-06

Table 4: Logistic regression fit of the six models. Null model represents the intercept-only model. Comparisons with the Null model were significant based on a χ^2 test. R^2_{adj} represents the adjusted R^2 statistic.

of explanation into whether an article uses stigma-based framings or not (R^2_{adj} statistic ranges from 0.013 to 0.162).

We also present the top positive and negative β or coefficients of the most salient independent variables in Figure 4; this is based on the all-factors model. Larger positive (negative) β values of a particular independent variable represents its greater ability in explaining the likelihood of an article containing stigma-based framings (or not). The variables with the most explanatory power include issue-generic policies like ‘Fairness and equality’, ‘Health and safety’, and ‘External regulation and reputation’, which were also shown to contain pronounced stigmatized framings in response to RQ1 (e). In contrast, independent variables with the most explanatory power associated with an article containing an approval-based framing include ‘Left (political leaning)’, ‘Local (regionality)’, and issue-generic policies like ‘Morality’ and ‘Cultural identity’, which could be attributed to some level of adherence to media guidelines.

Discussion

Why News Sources Differ in their VAW Framings

Journalists are usually supported by a set of comprehensive guidelines that they are recommended to follow while reporting accounts of VAW (UNICEF and UN Women 2020; UNDP 2022). Most of these resources expand on steps that journalists can take to ensure their reporting is part of the solution to VAW and does not cause additional harm to the survivors reinforcing stigmatizing attitudes and behaviors.

Still, our findings for RQ1 (a-c) revealed pronounced presence of stigma in articles from national, right-leaning, and conspiratorial news outlets. There could be many factors at play behind these observations and we highlight them below.

First, news outlets tend to tailor and optimize their content using audience targeting techniques (Elejalde, Ferres, and Schifanella 2019), because they intend to set or advance specific sociopolitical agendas (Zaller 1992). Right-leaning news media may be more likely to hold conservative or traditional views on gender roles and sexuality. This can lead to stigmatizing attitudes, such as victim-blaming or minimizing the severity of VAW. The implications of this are particularly acute in local media systems, where communities may only receive local VAW related news from one particular angle. As our analysis indicated, the largest difference in the usage of stigmatized framings was between local outlets embedded in right-leaning counties versus those embedded in left-leaning counties (Figure 1c). Further, conspiratorial outlets, often driven by covert or overt political agendas, may attempt to downplay the incidents of VAW if they conflict with their beliefs or priorities. In fact, such outlets are known to promote conspiracy theories that are not based on facts or evidence, which may result in sharing beliefs that VAW is a hoax. Since they also tend to use fear-mongering tactics to attract viewers or readers, these outlets may portray women as vulnerable and helpless, and in need of protection from a perceived threat, such as a shadowy cabal or a government conspiracy. Importantly, conspiratorial news outlets may not be held accountable to the same standards of accuracy or fairness as mainstream news, resulting in reporting that contains sensationalist language or imagery, biased, exploitative, or lacking in context. Such framings can preclude victimized women from reporting incidents for fear of shame, judgment, and minimization.

Next, despite the differences between local left- and right-leaning outlets, local news as a whole used stigmatizing frames less than national news. Distance from the local community may drive national outlets’ stigmatizing VAW frames – these outlets may be less connected to the communities where the violence occurred. As a result, they may not have access to local resources or community perspectives that can provide context and nuance to the reporting. Given their scope, they may also tend to focus on high-profile cases

of VAW, overlooking or under reporting on the prevalence of VAW in everyday life, which can perpetuate the belief that these incidents are rare or exceptional. In contrast, local news sources may be more likely to report on VAW in a way that is sensitive to the survivors involved. They may have closer relationships with local resources and organizations that provide support and advocacy for survivors, and they may be more attuned to the nuances of the local context.

Our study also found that news articles adopting certain issue-generic policies displayed different levels of stigma towards victims of VAW. Specifically, policy dimensions related to fair and equal treatment and health and safety were found to perpetuate stigma in different ways. News media focusing on the ‘Fairness and equality’ policy dimension may demonize women who have experienced violence by framing them as liars and manipulators; thus exploit their trauma for political gain. Meanwhile, media focusing on the ‘Health and safety’ dimension may perpetuate the stereotype that women are most at risk from unknown men and ignore the fact that women are more likely to experience violence from someone they know. This narrative may blame victims for not taking steps to protect themselves or engage in risky behavior. Additionally, when news media frames VAW as a policy issue of capacity and resource allocation, it may portray survivors as burdens on the system and ignore the root causes of VAW, such as systemic sexism and gender inequality. This framing perpetuates stigma by suggesting that VAW is solely a problem of resource allocation rather than a societal issue requiring systemic change.

Finally, our RQ2 findings suggest that media attributes such as regionality, political leaning, and veracity alone are not enough to identify stigma in news articles about VAW. The relationship between these attributes and stigma is more complex and context-dependent. For instance, left-leaning articles showed stigma when criticizing policies or actions that contribute to VAW, while right-leaning articles stigmatized survivors, advocates, and political rivals. Thus, these attributes alone are not enough to capture the underlying context. In contrast, systematically categorizing news outlets based on media communities and aligning articles to issue-generic policy dimensions offered a better explanation for the presence/absence of stigma, as they can capture contextualized information on the outlet’s position in the news media landscape and the political themes used in the articles.

Survivor-Centered Safe Reporting Guidelines

Absence of a survivor-centric framing could potentially prompt readers to have a negative perception of the women affected by VAW (UNICEF and UN Women 2020). Based on our findings noting the presence of stigma in VAW news reporting in different types of outlets, we suggest the following considerations for VAW safe reporting guidelines.

Use trauma-informed language and avoid victim-blaming: News outlets should avoid language that suggests survivors are a burden on society or that downplays the severity of the problem. Aside from prioritizing survivors’ voices and experiences, trauma-informed language should be used when reporting on VAW, which means avoiding language and narratives that suggest survivors are responsible for their own victimization or that minimizes the severity of the harm they have experienced. *Hold perpetrators ac-*

countable: News outlets should avoid using language that excuses or justifies perpetrators’ behavior and instead focus on the harm caused to survivors and the consequences of their actions. This includes providing information on legal consequences, such as arrests, charges, and convictions. *Provide context and educate readers:* News outlets should provide context for incidents of VAW and educate readers on the broader societal issues that contribute to the problem. This can include information on systemic sexism, gender inequality, the impact of cultural norms and beliefs on VAW, and local/community information where a particular VAW incident may have occurred. *Avoid perpetuating conspiracy theories:* News outlets should adopt evidence-based reporting and thus avoid perpetuating false mis- and disinformation that undermine the credibility of survivor accounts, that suggest VAW is not a real problem, or that survivors could have prevented VAW by simply taking different actions. *Avoid perpetuating political biases:* News outlets should avoid using VAW as a way to advance their underlying political agendas and biases that undermine the credibility of survivor accounts or that suggest VAW as a strategy to exploit existing institutions for personal advantage.

Conclusion, Limitations, and Future Work

In this paper, we sought to understand the presence of stigmatized framings in news media reports of VAW. Using a BERT-based framework, we quantified approval- and stigma-based language in news articles from 396 national, local, and conspiratorial news outlets within the U.S., covering a broad news media landscape. Articles from local, left-leaning, and high-veracity sources adopted more acceptable and approval-based framings, in comparison to their counterparts. In addition, articles with mentions of specific issue-generic policies such as those around the distribution of laws and rewards, those speaking to the capacity of existing societal infrastructures, and those with references to the public safety threats of VAW had pronounced stigma, and this factor also demonstrated the best ability to explain the presence of VAW-based stigma. Our study contributes to improving the media reporting guidelines on VAW.

We note some limitations which provide excellent directions for future research. We did not examine how specific stigmatized VAW framings in news influence consumers. Next, VAW saw an increase in reported incidents during the COVID-19 pandemic (UN Women 2021). Researchers could study temporal trends of stigma to quantify the impact of unforeseen crises. Finally, this work was executed under the premise that framing is a journalistic strategy influencing partisan action. Future work might consider comparisons of stigma in proximity to the implementation of national VAW policy, e.g., the lapse of and re-authorization of the Violence Against Women Act (The White House 2022).

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