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jaidaataha@aucegypt.edu

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**The American University in Cairo**

**School of Global Affairs and Public Policy**

**The Impact of the Media Coverage of Sexual Violence on Its Victims/Survivors**

**MA Thesis Submitted by  
Jaidaa Taha Arafa**

**To The Department of Journalism and Mass Communication  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Journalism  
and Mass Communication  
(May/2021)**

**Thesis Supervisor: Dr. Rasha Abdulla**

## *Abstract*

As part of their daily routine, journalists are often assigned to cover accidents or traumatic events to keep the public updated. With the high competition and the constant deadline pressure, reporters are usually pressured to talk to the subjects of these traumatic accidents too soon to publish their stories. This in turn leaves limited room for them to think about how this coverage is affecting their interviewees. This study aims to examine the impact of the media's coverage of sexual assault on the subjects of the assault themselves. Media outlets often follow stories of sexual violence, tackling a lot of their details yet, it is unclear whether the interaction with journalists or the frames used in this coverage do more harm or good to the subjects of the assault cases in the Egyptian context. Before answering that, a content analysis on three highly popular Egyptian sexual assault cases is conducted to identify the main frames used in the media while reporting assault. Moreover, interviews with journalists are done to discuss the measures and approaches they take while covering these stories. Afterwards, interviews with survivors of sexual assault and activists working on the cause are conducted to reveal why they seek the media, their feelings after the media exposure, the main issues with the media coverage, and so forth.

## Dedication

I would like to sincerely thank my thesis advisor Dr. Rasha Abdulla for her constant guidance throughout my MA program. Thank you for being a role model I will always look up to both professionally and personally.

Special thanks go to my thesis defense committee Dr. Sarah El-Richani and Dr. Heba Elshahed for their highly thoughtful and detailed feedback. I would also love to thank professor Firas Al-Atraqshi and Dr. Rasha Allam for their constant support and mentorship during my undergraduate and graduate studies.

This work is dedicated to my extraordinary parents Taha Ahmad and Manal El Karem who always go above and beyond just to support me. I can never be articulate enough to describe how grateful I am to be your daughter. Genuine thanks to my support system Hassan El Tawil, Mariam Ramzi, Rana Taha, and Ahmad Taha.

## Table of Contents

Chapter	Page Number
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>2-7</b>
<b>Chapter Three: Literature Review</b>  -Studies on Sexual Violence Representations in the Media -Framing of Egyptian Sexual Violence Cases in the Media -Brief Overview of Highly Publicized Sexual Assault Cases in Egypt -Digital Feminism and Sexual Violence -Why do Victims/Survivors Seek the Media? -Negative Impacts of Trauma Coverage on its Subjects -Positive Impacts of Trauma Coverage on its Subjects -A Two Way Explanation to the Impacts of Media Coverage -The Impact of Dominant Frames in the Coverage on the Victims/Survivors -Studies on Journalists' Feedback on Trauma Coverage and Future Frameworks	<b>8-37</b>
<b>Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework</b> -Framing Theory -Framing and Sexual Violence Coverage -Attribution Theory -Attribution Theory and Sexual Violence Coverage -Stereotypes -Stereotyping and Sexual Violence Coverage -Media and Trauma Theories -Sociocultural Theory	<b>38-61</b>
<b>Chapter Four: Methodology</b>	<b>62-73</b>

<b>Chapter Five: Results</b>	<b>74-105</b>
<b>Chapter Six: Discussion, Conclusions, and Limitations</b>	<b>106-117</b>

## Chapter One Introduction

“There were a lot of reporters in front of the court. Everyone is trying to get me to speak to them by pulling me or telling me they will help and I was psychologically exhausted.” This is how a father of victim/survivor of sexual assault recalls his experience with the media. As part of their daily routine, journalists are often assigned to cover accidents or traumatic events to keep the public updated. With the high competition and the constant deadline pressure, reporters are usually pressured to talk to the subjects of these traumatic accidents too soon to publish their stories. This in turn leaves limited room for them to think about how this coverage is affecting their interviewees. “Death knocks” is the term used to refer to the journalists’ drive to interview vulnerable or sensitive populations and thus increase their chances of doing more harm (Duncan, 2010). Overall, victims/survivors of trauma usually have different reactions to their media exposure. Opinions vary on whether the media’s impact on the victims/survivors of sexual violence is positive or negative. Some arguments proposed that the media can help survivors feel validated and empowered (Kitzinger, 2004), while others suggest that the media can be a risk to survivors owing to the stigma against assault, the threats from the perpetrator, or the possibility of getting fired (Sullivan & Hagen, 2005). Despite the lack of consensus on the issue, the frames used in this coverage are said to have a great role in determining how the victims/survivors feel afterwards (Orchowski, Untied, & Gidycz, 2013). In Egypt, sexual violence is a prominent social phenomenon. In 2017, Thomson Reuters Foundation declared Cairo the most dangerous city for women. According to a study published by UN Women in 2013, 99.3% of girls and women in Egypt stated they experienced some form of assault (UNFPA, 2021). Moreover, 82.6% of women participants in the survey reported they did not feel safe or secure in Egyptian streets (UNFPA, 2021). Another study in 2008 revealed that 83% of Egyptian women respondents and 98% of non-Egyptian women respondents experienced sexual harassment in Egypt (Sadler, 2017). However, it is worth mentioning that a lot of these cases go unreported since victims/survivors fear the stigma after speaking-up.

Hence, this study aims to examine the impact of trauma coverage by focusing on the reporting of sexual violence in Egypt and how it impacts the victims/survivors of the assault themselves. Before determining how the victims/survivors feel about their media experiences, it is essential to examine how sexual violence cases are framed in the media in Egypt first. Therefore, this research follows a triangulation approach through first conducting a content analysis for three major sexual assault cases in Egypt, the Tahrir gang assault, the Ayat rape attempt, and the recent Ahmed Bassam Zaki (ABZ) cases. Given the diversity of the media in Egypt, articles from both the Egyptian local media (Youm 7, Egyptian Streets, Daily News Egypt, Rasd Network, Al Shorouk newspaper) and the international media outlets (Reuters, BBC Arabic, New York Times, and Gulf News) are used. Each case is examined through different media outlets based on the number of articles. To determine whether the media overall helps or harms survivors, the second part of the study is qualitative, conducting interviews with journalists who cover sexual assault cases in Egypt, feminist activists that work closely with survivors of sexual assault, and victim/survivors of sexual assault to discuss their media experiences.

This study is crucial for the context and the timing. Feminists across the globe often encourage survivors to speak up and out their perpetrators, a rhetoric that has also reached Egypt. However, the Egyptian context is overlooked. Egyptian victims/survivors often face backlash after speaking out from victim-blaming, discrediting, and so forth (El-Ashmawy, 2017). Accordingly, it is essential to explore how they feel about their exposure and the factors that contribute to their overall satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the media. It is also important to evaluate the overall role of journalists to professionally respect and represent their sources instead of retriggering and harming them even more. The study can also be a reference for journalistic coverage of sexual assault. For the timing, the research is especially relevant in Egypt today after the recent digital feminist wave, that some named the Egyptian ME Too movement against sexual assault, with the rise of the Ahmed Bassam Zaki (ABZ) case who was legally announced guilty of harassing and assaulting a large number of girls. The movement started with an Instagram page called Assault Police calling on ABZ. The page, which now has 330,000 followers, later took on more cases against sexual predators, igniting a new wave of feminist activism. Afterwards, more platforms and digital applications emerged to shed light on the issue, presenting more cases for the mainstream media to cover.



Before delving into the details of this study, it is important to provide a brief overview of the definitions of sexual violence used in this research and the legal, historical, and social context of sexual violence in Egypt.

### **Sexual Violence Definition**

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines sexual violence as acts that range from verbal harassment to physical penetration (2012). “Any sexual act or an attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments, or advances, acts to traffic or otherwise directed, against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim in any setting,” (Kalra & Bhugra, 2013). The term ‘coercion’ entails any physical force, threats especially intimidation and blackmail, or violating someone who is drunk, drugged, asleep, or mentally challenged, when they are unable to grant consent (Kilpatrick, 2004). The definition includes sexual abuse in all forms, in addition to other acts that are not often labelled as sexual violence such as forced marriage, sexual harassment, obligatory inspections of virginity, and so forth (Kilpatrick, 2004). The term Violence against Women (VAW) refers to violence and abuse that include physical or sexual violence, threat of either types of violence, in addition to stalking and emotional abuse (Saltzman, 2004). In this study, the focus is on two types of assault; rape, attempted rape, and sexual harassment of men to women. The definition of rape stipulates that it is a physically forced violation of an individual’s body using any body part or an object . Attempted rape is the failure to perform rape. Despite the theoretical complexities of defining it, the UN refers to sexual harassment as “any unwelcome sexual advance, request for sexual favor, verbal or physical conduct or gesture of a sexual nature, or any other behavior of a sexual nature that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to cause offence or humiliation to another,” (UN Women, 2013). Nevertheless, it should be noted that defining these crimes is still theoretically arbitrary, prone to subjectivity, and depends on the overall context (Saguy, 2000). Also relevant to this study is how a lot of scholars treat rape and sexual harassment as crimes of the same nature displaying the male aggression towards women (Lonsway et al, 2008). While victims/survivors of sexual assault can be both men and women, sexual assault is more often committed by men than women (Lonsway et al, 2008). Accordingly, this study will focus on the

aggressions from men on women. Both crimes are also linked through the same myths such as “women enjoy it”, “the perpetrator is psychologically troubled”, “she is exaggerating,” and so forth (Lonsway et al, 2008).

## **The Context of Sexual Violence in Egypt**

### *Brief Historical Background*

Although the 2011 Egyptian revolution directed more focus to sexual violence against women in Egypt, it has been a social ‘epidemic’ before that (McRobie, 2014). According to the Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights, a survey conducted in 2008 revealed that 83% of women stated they experienced sexual harassment, in addition, 46% reported they faced it every day (McRobie, 2014). Moreover, a UN study before the 2011 revolution concluded that 30.3% of Egyptian women were raped, 96.5% were touched without their consent, and 95.5% experienced sexual harassment verbally (Tadros, 2015).

It was not until Black Wednesday that feminist activists started pushing against sexual assault (Abdelmonem, 2015). The Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights (ECWR) then defined sexual harassment as unwelcomed sexual behaviors that include catcalling, ogling, verbal harassment, stalking, phone harassment, indecent exposure and touching (Abdelmonem, 2015). After the 2011 January revolution, the rhetoric against sexual assault heightened especially after the mob sexual attacks against a lot of women in Tahrir Square (Abdelmonem, 2015). Accordingly, a lot of feminist organizations and initiatives were established such as Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment (OpAntish) and Tahrir Bodyguard. Moreover, other already established

organizations started working on ‘taḥarrush’ Arabic for sexual harassment and included it in their programs (Abdelmonem, 2015).

### *Brief Legal Context*

In the 2014 Egyptian constitution, rape, sexual harassment, and sexual assault are criminalized. Before the last couple of decades, the issue of violence against women was not comprehensively tackled in the Egyptian law. Rape was criminalized in Egypt since the 1988 Criminal Code, defined as complete intercourse with a victim without her consent (Sadek, 2016). In 1950, sexual assault was also illegalized but was defined as an attempt of rape by using other objects to forcibly violate a woman’s body. With certain circumstances, the penalty for rape is death. For sexual assault, the penalty ranges from three to fifteen years of imprisonment based on the victim’s age (Kirolos, 2016). It is important to note that before 1999, rapists were given the option to marry their victims and avoid legal repercussions (Sadek, 2016). However, feminist advocates were able to abolish this article in 1999 stating that it encouraged men to rape. On the other hand, sexual harassment was not criminalized until 2014 by interim President Adly Mansour (Kirolos, 2019). For instance, the first ever sexual harassment case to resort to the Egyptian court system was in 2008 by a filmmaker (Abdelmonem, 2015). However, she won the case through Article 306 which prohibited any offensives against other individuals' honor and dignity, but it was not under a sexual harassment law (Abdelmonem, 2015). The 2014 law included both verbal sexual harassment through inappropriate gestures or words and physical sexual harassment through an act by the perpetrator on his body or the victim/survivor’s body. Examples of such acts include kissing without consent or touching the victim. Under the law, perpetrators of sexual assault can face no less than six months of imprisonment or a fine of EGP 5,000. If the same perpetrator repeats the assault, he faces longer punishment that can reach a year and a fine of 5,000 EGP. Moreover, if the assailant is proven to have used force or threats over the victim, the penalty can reach between two and five years, and a fine of EGP 20,000 to 50,000. It is also worth noting that in 2020, after the ABZ case, the Egyptian Parliament issued a statement to seal the identities of victims/survivors of sexual assault in the media for protection as a means of encouraging victims/survivors to speak-up (Sadek, 2020).

Despite criminalizing sexual violence in Egypt, some criticisms were more skeptical of its legal application. For one, a report by Nazra for Feminist Studies referred to the vagueness of the

definitions used to identify crimes of sexual violence in Egypt. Moreover, the report stipulated that there is an issue with holding perpetrators accountable (The Relationship between Feminism and State Policies for the Elimination of Violence against Women: The National Strategy for the Elimination of Violence against Women as an Example, 2015). Others were skeptical about specific articles, especially article number 267 of the penal code that only considers complete intercourse as rape, and thus neglecting other forms (Ezzelarab, 2014). Another issue that both reports tackle is article 17 of the penal code, that allows juries to use ‘clemency’ to minimize the punishment on the guilty. According to Ezzelarab, this article has been frequently used to acquit defendants of sexual violence cases without any justification (2014). Not only this, but also scholar Rizzo referred to the fact that some neopatriarchal states are usually unable to punish harassers owing to their cultural tolerance to male dominance in general (Rizzo et al, 2012). Despite the presence of laws and feminist organizations’ work, it was reported that legal definitions of sexual violence are unclear and rarely enforced (Rizzo et al, 2012).

Based on both the aforementioned Egyptian context and the relevance of sexual violence in the current climate of online movement. It is essential to examine how the traditional media portrays the issue and how that in turn impacts the victims/survivors.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Review of Literature**

This chapter provides a brief overview of the literature related to trauma and sexual violence in the media. The first section starts by examining studies on the media representations of sexual violence and the dominant frames found in the coverage. Afterwards, the framing of sexual assault in the Egyptian news media is discussed by reviewing the main studies conducted in Egypt. The following section discusses the rise of digital movements against sexual violence globally and domestically to alter the mainstream media's narratives. The second half of the chapter tackles the experiences of survivors in talking to the media both positively and negatively. The chapter concludes with studies on journalists' feedback to trauma coverage.

### **Sexual Assault Representations in the Media**

#### *Studies on Media Representations of Sexual Assault*

In a content analysis study examining 195 articles covering the Harvey Weinstein, Bill Cosby, and Brock Turner sexual assault cases, findings showed that reports displayed stereotypical images of survivors and euphemism, sided with the assailants, sensationalized the assaults, and questioned the stories (Aroustamian, 2020). The article provided four main frames in the media coverage: the initiator frame which normalized the assault and focused on the perpetrator instead, the legal frame that focused on legal facts and policies, the social science frame which looked at the cases in an objective, abstract and generic way, and finally the victim frame that highlighted a victim's pain with graphic details. (Aroustamian, 2020). However, the study showed that starting from 2014, the media started focusing more on thematic and social science frames to tackle the issue holistically (Aroustamian, 2020). Adding to the frames that journalists impose on coverage, a study on media coverage of sexual assault in university campuses highlighted the role of emotionally charged rhetoric (Siefkes-Andrew & Alexopoulos, 2018). According to the study, 40% of the articles doubted the victim's statements, in addition, details on the background of the assailant were provided (Siefkes-Andrew & Alexopoulos, 2018). Yet, journalists were able to distinguish between 'sexual assault' and 'consensual sexual conduct', stressing the urgency of the issue (Siefkes-Andrew & Alexopoulos, 2018). Another study on journalistic frames in 145 stories of a South African newspaper revealed the spread of rape, the dominance

of men, and injustice (Worthington, 2011). However, an outlet's reputation and gender-sensitive content could affect how the cases were framed and combat anti-progressive rape myths (Worthington, 2011).

Analyzing British and American coverage of sexual violence against women, O'Hara concluded that most of the articles emphasized rape myths through victim blaming and referring to a 'psychologically troubled' rapist (2012). Moreover, the media mostly neglected the impacts of such crimes on the survivors themselves, normalizing the event (O'Hara, 2012). According to O'Hara, this coverage implied that sexual violence is a separate random event and not a systematic patriarchal issue that needs holistic solutions (2012). Other dominant frames reported in the media were the emotional frames (Lee & Chen, 2020). This approach relied on emotionally driven words to transfer intended sentiments to the audiences (Lee & Chen, 2020). A study on emotional frames in news coverage stated that conservative media outlets used more emotions such as anger, sex, and anxiety than more liberal news outlets (Lee & Chen, 2020). Adding to the theorized rape frames and stereotypes in the media, a research on the coverage of a rape crime in Ohio identified two main themes: regarding silence as consent and the question of consciousness and agency (Brian, 2018). Along with efforts to victimize perpetrators by stressing male pleasure, the issue with considering silence as consent hinders the victim's right to agency and hence alters the rape narrative as something 'experienced' by men and 'done' to women (Brian, 2018). Accordingly, the question of consent is deemed irrelevant (Brian, 2018). Relating to the victim's agency, another content analysis on the portrayal of women's resistance to the assault in the news coverage suggested that the majority of articles neglected mentioning women's resistance and only mention its failure (Hollander & Rodgers, 2014). A minority of articles only described women in a stronger and more competent light (Hollander & Rodgers, 2014).

Normalization of sexual assault was yet another dominant frame in the news where public figures treated women as victims who need protection and men as perpetrators who could not be held responsible for their actions following the 'boys will be boys' and 'men just cannot control themselves' narratives (Edmunds & Gupta, 2016). Edmunds and Gupta's interviews with 25 public figures in India also referred to the gender norms frames and stereotypes through which

women are expected to stay at home to avoid being sexually assaulted by a stranger (Edmunds & Gupta, 2016). Interestingly, the literature distinguished between types and ages of victims that determine the public and the media's sympathy (DiBennardo, 2018). A content analysis on 323 Los Angeles Times articles, the study *Ideal Victims and Monstrous Offenders: How the News Media Represent Sexual Predators*, concluded that stories on women often framed the victim as being responsible for the crime and deemed them as less important than child victims (DiBennardo, 2018). Confirming the media's negative representations of survivors of sexual assault, a study on the case of the Associate Justice of the Supreme Court Brett Kavanaugh's trail on sexually assaulting Psychology Professor Christine Blasey, indicated that gendered stereotypes of holding the victim accountable and enforcing oppressive rhetoric were prominent (Pollino, 2019). Also addressing rape myths, a research on their dominance in news headlines showed that 10% of 555 articles in US media on the Basketball Player Kobe Bryant sexual assault case reinforced rape myths (Franiuk et al, 2008).

Even without sensationalizing content, court reporting often puts the prosecution and defense in a more innocent light than the complainants themselves who were portrayed as guilty. By looking at the case of Australian footballer Brett Stewart's rape trial to examine the ethicality of journalists' court reporting, the study concluded that even when articles met some required ethical standards, they still enforced rape myths and stereotypes such as mentioning the probable mental illness of the assailant or questioning the victim's truthfulness by referring to the lack of a DNA evidence (Waterhouse-Watson, 2016). In an article examining rape culture on Twitter, it was concluded that users often use three main themes while referring to sexual assault including, the just world frame which stipulated that bad things happen to bad people, justifying assault (Richardson, Rader & Cosby, 2018). The second frame was how Twitter users reported cases with their stances and hence influenced how people view the incident, helping them combat rape culture (Richardson, Rader & Cosby, 2018). The third frame was the rape myth debunking through which users support victims to come forward and challenge the rape myths (Richardson, Rader & Cosby, 2018).

Exploring a different framework for sexual violence coverage in the news, Pollock et al compare how different communities tackle sexual violence in their news by looking at access to health

care, percentage of hate crimes, and levels of women empowerment at a communal level (2018). According to their findings, a community that suffered from lack of health care, increasing crime rates, and high percentage of women in the workplace was connected to more policy-oriented media coverage on rape stories (Pollock, 2018). Accordingly, the media shifts the issue of rape from merely a women's issue to a deeper community problem, placing blame on authoritative figures (Pollock, 2018).

#### *Social Media: a New Frame in News Analysis*

Social media and evolving technologies currently play a huge role in breaking sexual assault stories. Scholars now look at social media as an added frame in news media coverage. In the article, *When new media make news: Framing technology and sexual assault in the Steubenville rape case*, a textual analysis on the 2013 Ohio rape case pointed out that technology was framed as witness, mobilizer, and a threat for the assault case and its subjects (Pennington & Birthisel, 2015). Videos recorded of an assault do not just prove its existence, but also galvanizes the public to stand by the victim (Pennington & Birthisel, 2015). According to the study, the fact that the video was widely shared, not the news of the rape itself, was the reason why the case was picked up by media outlets (Pennington & Birthisel, 2015). In addition, after hackers posted videos threatening the assailants and their families online, news articles started focusing on the hackers' danger even more than the assault itself (Pennington & Birthisel, 2015). Confirming the threat, witness, and galvanizer frames, a study analyzing 146 articles on three sexual assault cases added that this focus on the technology frames often happens at the expense of highlighting the rape crimes themselves (Gjika, 2019). Thus, instead of tackling sexual violence, its triggers, and how to combat it, the media turns the articles to mere stories about youth and their usage of social media (Gjika, 2019).

Related to the social media frames is the recent MeToo hashtag, an online collective action approach using a campaign for survivors to out their assailants and ignite social activism (McDonald, 2019). The highly popular frame is easily recognizable and relatable for its credibility and accessibility (McDonald, 2019). Traditional media tends to cite social media stories and vice-versa, creating an endless loop (McDonald, 2019). A study on the framing of the Me Too movement in the media identified four main frames: a digital campaign linking people, a



part of the movement for gender equality, an unimportant movement incited by exaggerated political correctness, and a ‘witch hunt’ aiming to smear men’s reputations (Hartley & Askanius, 2020). Another study on the framing of the Me Too campaign revealed four other frames including the brave victims who broke the silence, the victims of injustice, the survivors, or the ‘hysterical sluts’ (Starkey et al, 2019).

### *Survivors or Victims in the Media Coverage?*

Rape “victims” or ‘survivors’? A rhetoric based-debate on how to best refer to the women/men who went through crimes of sexual violence. One of the ongoing debates in feminist literature is the victim vs survivor rhetoric based on the agency vs victimization arguments. The term ‘victim’ in the English language refers to someone who has gone through a serious injury, a violent crime, with the possibility of dying (Papendick & Bohner, 2017). “Survivor” refers to living on after surviving a stressful and serious event (Papendick & Bohner, 2017). In the late sixties and seventies, leaders of the second feminism wave promoted the ‘victim’ rhetoric when referring to women who have been sexually assaulted to stress on the oppressive unjust system that victimizes them (Mardorossian, 2014). According to them, the path that will bring about social change to the system has to acknowledge that the system is the party responsible for this victimization (Mardorossian, 2014). Today, some feminists affiliate the phrase ‘victim’ with a sense of helplessness, being stuck in an unwanted situation, and inability to change the narrative (Mardorossian, 2014). Hence, anti-victim feminism encourages women to stop focusing on their oppression and work on empowering themselves (Mardorossian, 2014). The negative implications of the victimhood rhetoric is highly related to the 1900s political correctness debates that called for supporting minorities and avoiding limiting them to their disadvantage (Mardorossian, 2014). Hence, over the last decades, reference to the term victim implies negative connotations to the extent that even those who decide to label themselves as victims are faced with distrust and disapproval (Mardorossian, 2014). Citing, Kelly, Burton, and Regan, the issue with victimization is that it shapes and defines a person’s identity as if that is the only title they can achieve (1996). Victimization then strips women of their will and ignores their existence as evolving human beings capable of altering the narrative (Kelly, Burton, & Regan, 1996). On the other hand, with the rise of ‘power feminism’, the label ‘survivor’ is advocated for as it respects their agency and implies strength and ability to change their situation (Kelly, Burton, and Regan,

1996). Confirming this view, Thomson and McCarthy stated that victimization entails having the incident control the subject's life and impact her self-esteem, whereas the survivor label shows her agency in recovering and moving on (Schwark & Bohner, 2019). In a study to determine the attitudes towards 'the victim-survivor' rhetoric on 179 participants, the term survivor was perceived in an overall more positive light, respecting the subject's agency whereas the term victim was affiliated with more negativity and passiveness (Papendick & Bohner, 2017). Another study on people's reactions to the terms survivor and victim also suggested that the survivor frame is viewed in a more positive light (Schwark & Bohner, 2019).

Despite the popularity of using the 'survivor' label for the aforementioned reasons, some gender theorists criticized this shift for various reasons. For one, the objection to the victimization language neglects the contextual aspect of earlier feminists' work in galvanizing their power against oppression (Mardorossian, 2014). The whole idea was to shed light on the injustice and share the common struggles of the victims of this injustice (Mardorossian, 2014). Another issue with the survivor term is that it pressures victims to restore their agency that they sometimes lack (Mardorossian, 2014). Hence, it indirectly places blame on those who are still incapable to recover and move forward (Mardorossian, 2014). Besides, the rhetoric conforms to the patriarchal system that often looks for ways for women to change their attitude rather than work on eradicating assault altogether (Mardorossian, 2014). In addition, the either/or mentality in using the terms survivor or victim denies one stage of the assault where the subject was a victim to an unjust situation before choosing to survive it (Kelly, Burton, and Regan, 1996). Moreover, it excludes the fact that some victims do not survive these kinds of crimes not just mentally, but some get killed (Kelly, Burton, and Regan, 1996).

The article *A systematic literature review of "rape victims" versus "rape survivors"*: *Implications for theory, research, and practice*, traced literature on the issue and concluded that the two frames were different and their usage mattered (Hockett & Saucier, 2015). Through examining literature, the study suggested that the term victim was usually associated with stereotypical images of the woman raped and focused on more negative outcomes (Hockett & Saucier, 2015). In case the woman was viewed as more realistic, multidimensional, and empowered, the survivor language was installed (Hockett & Saucier, 2015).

### *Privileged and Unprivileged Victims in the Media*

Interestingly, the literature drew a distinction between covering cases of privileged vs less-privileged victims/survivors. According to an article researching the dominant media frames in the coverage of Miss World Linor Abargil's rape case in 1998, the coverage portrayed her positively given that she was beautiful and privileged and hence was able to garner support (Shoham, 2012). On the other hand, every day rape stories of less-privileged women often neglect the victims. "Most raped women are ordinary women whose voices are silenced by the legal narrative of the court, their suffering denied and in many cases they are deemed responsible for the rape their experiences," Koren stated (Shoham, 2012). Agreeing on the victim-hierarchy, Greer stated that victims do not all acquire equal media attention (2007). The media focuses more on the 'ideal victim' viewed as helpless, innocent, vulnerable, and hence deserves legitimate compassion. This category includes elderly women and young children, but excludes the homeless, people with drug problems, marginalized groups (Greer, 2007).

Madlingozi coined the terms 'good victims' and 'bad victims' based on their past and transitional attitudes where violence is justified against the latter (McEvoy and McConnachie, 2012). Studies also show that women of ethnic minorities contemplated reporting sexual violence as they usually face bias and negativity (Brubaker et al, 2017). Questions about their behavior choices, sexual history, and sexual response to the assault are more likely to be asked to African American women (Brubaker et al, 2017). About 90% of victims of sexual assault stated they felt disappointed, violated, depressed, and unlikely to seek any assistance given their experience with medical professionals (Brubaker et al, 2017). Another factor that can contribute to the existence of privilege hierarchy between victims is social media (Easteal et al, 2015). Access to social media is granted to feminists who are capable of self-representation and telling their own story, but this agency is not transferred to traditional media outlets who cover the stories with their own backgrounds and biases (Easteal et al, 2015).

### *Anonymous vs Public Victims/Survivors*

Sealing the identity of the sources in sensitive issues has always been a practical journalistic dilemma as reporters are obliged to inform the public and gain its credibility, and at the same time protect their sources. Supporters of using anonymous sources for news stories often refer to the Watergate Scandal that impeached Former US President Nixon that only came to light by an anonymous whistleblower at the time (Boeyink, 1990). Accordingly, Boeyink identified the main circumstances and justifications for resorting to anonymous sources. First, the editor must know the source. Secondly, the story has to be of crucial importance and for a just cause. Thirdly, using anonymity should be the last resort. Fourthly, writers should explain the reasons for keeping the sources anonymous in the story (Boeyink, 1990). In the context of sexual violence, reporters only use initials to keep the victims/survivors' identities hidden and protect them. Providing the option for anonymity is put forward to encourage the victims/survivors to speak up without repercussions (Oldfield & McDonald, 2021). The article, *I Am That Girl': Media reportage, anonymous victims and symbolic annihilation in the aftermath of sexual assault*, examined the media coverage of an Australian rape victim/survivor from being an anonymous sources to later speaking up publicly to the media (Oldfield & McDonald, 2021). When her identity was still anonymous, the coverage mainly focused on her assailant and assault itself, rather than the victim and her background (Oldfield & McDonald, 2021). The anonymous narrative only revealed her youth, virginity, and innocence and hence framed her as 'the ideal victim' (Oldfield & McDonald, 2021). Accordingly, there was no reference to her clothes, her behavior or any victim blaming narratives (Oldfield & McDonald, 2021). This case suggested that anonymous reporting in specific cases might be beneficial to focus more on the cause than destroying the victim (Oldfield & McDonald, 2021).

On the other hand, some feminists argued that identifying the victim/survivor publicly helps people resonate and empathize with her and hence gain credibility (Oldfield & McDonald, 2021). In addition, having a face to the story is said to inspire other girls to follow her lead and report their assaults as well (Oldfield & McDonald, 2021). Moreover, the study *Expectancy violation and perceptions of rape victim credibility*, revealed that while there was no significant effect of showing emotions on credibility, participants with strong emotional expectations viewed the survivors who expressed heavier emotions as more credible than survivors who were not as emotionally expressive (Hackett et al, 2008).

## **Framing of Egyptian Sexual Assault Cases in the Media**

### *Common frames in the Egyptian Coverage of Sexual Violence*

Studies on Egyptian media framing of gender-based violence are still very limited, however, Sadler applied Burt's aforementioned rape myths to the Egyptian context, implying that it entailed victim blaming, trivialization, stigmatization, skepticism to the victim's stories as well (Sadler, 2019). After reviewing three interview Egyptian studies on sexual violence, Sadler divided Egypt's main rape myths to: justification and excuses. Justification occurs when the assault is acknowledged but justified in the context of its occurrence. Excuses happen when the assault is also acknowledged, but other issues are mentioned to excuse the assailants (2019). Women's clothing, claims about enjoying unsolicited attention from strangers, youth's repressed sexual desire, economic conditions, moral and religious principles are all aspects that people perceive as factors leading to sexual violence in the Egyptian streets (Sadler, 2019).

Confirming Sadler's analysis of Egyptian rape myths, a content analysis thesis study on the media representations of gender-based violence concluded that the Egyptian media strengthened societal patriarchal norms (Soliman, 2020). The main narrative present in Egyptian media, Soliman reported, was the victim-blaming through which victims were blamed for their attire or actions that provoked the assault (Soliman, 2020). Soliman referred to a news website's coverage of a sexual harassment incident in Cairo University, Egypt. Throughout the article, the authors used phrases such as 'she was wearing tight clothes, heavy makeup, and she masters the art of seduction.' (Soliman, 2020). Sensationalizing content was yet another frame reported in Egyptian media coverage of sexual violence. This happened through treating the stories as soft pornography, sexualizing the assault (Soliman, 2020). For instance, the headline "Watch Full Sexual Harassment Clip on public bus in Cairo" is used in reporting sexual harassment stories on the popular Egyptian news outlet Youm 7 (Soliman, 2020). While this study analyzed the dominant frames in the media coverage of gender-based violence, it did not assess how these frames impact the victims/survivors or evaluate the journalistic measures to tackle sexual violence stories. In a study analyzing gender-based violence in Egyptian media, it was reported that 23% of women news covers violence against women, 5.3% covered cases of street violence,

and 40% of the articles highlighted women as criminals in cases of gender-based violence (Abu Youssef et al, 2016). Another Egyptian study on media coverage reported that although there is a hike in reporting sexual harassment cases, the media still only focuses on the most popular incidents and ignore the rest with less public attention (El-Ibiary, 2017). Besides, their coverage of the cases they choose is still problematic and biased against the survivors (El-Ibiary, 2017).

Assessing the sexual harassment discourse in Egypt, Abdelmonem identified the main themes in online public forums and blogs (2015). Sexual harassment of women was on top of the agenda that it contributed for half of the posts regionally, and two-thirds of the posts from Egypt (Abdelmonem, 2015). The focus was more on public physical sexual harassment, alongside sexual verbal harassment (Abdelmonem, 2015). A lot of people blamed the victims for not wearing the appropriate attire, especially not wearing hijab, while others refuted it (Abdelmonem, 2015). In the context of employed women, people referred to the nature of power dynamics at work that places women under the control of her boss and hence forced to leave to avoid further harassment (Abdelmonem, 2015). The mention of psychological disorders and linking them to the sexual harassment epidemic was also one the prevalent themes reported (Abdelmonem, 2015). In addition, other talking points included the patriarchal authoritarian system, social inferiority of women, social blame, and fear of being fired (Abdelmonem, 2015). Expanding on the sociolinguistic analysis of sexual harassment in Egypt, Anderson identified two dominant linguistic tools used in sexual harassment public speech: legitimacy and empathy (Anderson, 2012). Given that tackling the issue of sexual assault publicly prompts people to discredit and question the victim/survivor, enforcing legitimacy in the rhetoric is needed (Anderson, 2012). Empathy is often linked to colloquial language to make the public relate to the content and personalizing the assault to shift the attention and sympathy from the harasser to the victim (Anderson, 2012). Anderson's findings located four broad themes in the survivors' speech: defining sexual harassment (triggering legitimacy), narrating the assault (triggering empathy), acknowledging sexual assault as a social phenomenon (triggering legitimacy), appealing to the audience to ignite change (a balance between both legitimacy and empathy) (Anderson, 2012).

*Cultural Context of Sexual Assault in Egypt*

Through the article *Sexual Harassment in Egypt*, El-Ashmawy linked repression, poverty, and high unemployment rate to the increasing sexual harassment rates in Egypt (2017).

According to her, the Egyptian culture reproduces rape culture due to the enforced silence on the victims (El-Ashmawy, 2017). For instance, the concept of ‘preserving the family honor’ often derives families to forbid their own daughters from speaking up about their assault (El-Ashmawy, 2017). Especially with unmarried victims/survivors, speaking of assault can ruin their reputation and their chances for marriage (El-Ashmawy, 2017). Other factors that contribute to the prominence of the phenomenon in Egypt is the culture of victim-blaming and the social justifications of sexual assault (El-Ashmawy, 2017). Victims are often scrutinized based on their attire or just presence in the assault scene (El-Ashmawy, 2017). Another study discussing the myths attributed to sexual harassment in Egypt included women’s clothing, women enjoying the assault, the way girls walk, and so forth (Sadler, 2017). Not only this, other explanations discussed arguments such as how economic conditions harden the situation for men to be regarded as credible husbands which leads to sexual repression (Sadler, 2017). Although these attributions were not labelled as myths in the literature, Sadler argued that they in a way minimize men’s responsibility for their violence against women and place the blame on the context instead. Sadler also explained that the way people tell stories generally relies on already existing master plots. For instance, in Egypt, the notion that women’s provocative behavior incites sexual violence (2017). Accordingly, this automatically pushes people to look for signs of this unacceptable behavior to make sense of the assault and blame the victim (Sadler, 2017). For example, Sadler referenced a mass sexual assault case in Cairo University where its president stated the victim’s choice of clothes was ‘a mistake’ (Sadler, 2017).

Given the conservative nature of the Egyptian culture, the topic of sexual harassment is considered a taboo and hence women are not encouraged to speak up about. Families of victims/survivors sometimes force them to stay silent to maintain the family’s honor and the girl’s reputation (El-Ashmawy, 2017). Families fear that openly narrating their daughter’s assault will make society view them negatively and hinder the girl’s chances of getting married (El-Ashmawy, 2017). However, it is important to note that this is often more applicable with the less-privileged classes than the more privileged classes who can talk more freely (El-Ashmawy, 2017). A report by the anti-sexual harassment non-governmental organization HarassMap



pointed out to the concealed nature and social acceptance of sexual harassment (Bernardi, 2017). The report mentioned that only a small percentage of victims sought assistance out of fear and avoidance of blame (Bernardi, 2017). The literature also discusses the stigma of sexual harassment amongst Egyptian women whose culture obliges them to be ‘shy’ and ‘moderate’ (Jalal, 2017). Accordingly, they face post-traumatic stress fearing losing their chastity (Jalal, 2017).

Adding to the culture of silence, the media as well is often censored when publishing sexual encounters apart from the family context in what is characterized as “probing impressionistic portraits of a sexually-repressed society targeted to a sexually-repressed audience” (El-Ashmawy, 2017). Accordingly, sexual assault is often dismissed in the media to maintain ‘public order, public morals, and the interests of the state’ (El-Ashmawy, 2017).

Despite this problematic nature of covering gender-based violence in the Egyptian media, some scholars pointed out that after the establishment of more feminist organizations in the last decades such HarassMap, Operation Anti-Harassment, and others have started changing the narrative (El-Ashmawy, 2017). Instead of dismissing sexual assault and minimizing it as usual, these organizations pressure the media to tackle the issues with seriousness and concern, otherwise they will face backlash and risk tarnishing their reputation (El-Ashmawy, 2017). Moreover, the media coverage of gender-based violence and attacks raises awareness of the issue and encourages more victims/survivors to come forward (Peoples, 2008).

## **Digital Movements and Sexual Violence**

### *Digital Movements against Sexual Violence Globally*

In the previous section, digital movements against sexual violence are discussed as a frame in the traditional mainstream media’s coverage and how they cover sexual assault stories from the internet. In this section, we discuss the role of digital movements in breaking stories about sexual violence cases and challenging the mainstream media’s rape frames. Cyber-activism is defined as a tool to inform, reach, and mobilize the public for a specific cause (Ibrahim, 2019). Social media activism is considered a bottom-up approach to push for policy change due to its



involvement of new partnerships and stakeholders (Peuchaud, 2014). Besides, social media and mobile technology help activism reach populations that are usually hard to reach (Peuchaud, 2014). Owing to the stigma around reporting assault and its negative consequences, the issue remains under-reported, implicating the victim/survivor's mental health (Li et al, 2020). With the rise of social media, victims/survivors are able to share their own stories online without relying on traditional means of reporting (Li et al, 2020). Labelled as 'cyber activism', tackling issues online transfers them globally faster than usual offline activism (Li et al, 2020). Websites such as "Hollaback", "Yes we Speak", "These are not My Secrets", and campaigns like Me Too, #WhyIDidntReport, and #BeenRapedNeverReported are online tools that flourished in the last decade to combat sexual violence. According to the blog "Hollaback's" founder and Executive Director Emily May, the founders of the blog have not initially created it to use technology as a strategic alternative, but it was rather their only resort to tackle gender-based street violence when all else failed (Keller et al, 2016).

Reporting through social media has both positive and negative effects. For instance, victims/survivors who share their stories online are able to garner online support, share their fears with others, and build a sense of community (Li et al, 2020). Besides, studies showed that victims/survivors who share their stories on social media reported feelings they did not find elsewhere, such as being secured, supported, and surrounded by people who share their trauma (Li et al, 2020). Another benefit of online activism is that it gives survivors/victims the chance to control and articulate their own narratives and become their own witnesses and theorists instead of the dominant legal and therapeutic scripts that they are expected to pursue (Loney-Howes, 2018). Accordingly, online platforms offer a victim-centric and informal justice mechanism through which sociologically acknowledged rape scripts are defied (Loney-Howes, 2018). The study, *Speaking 'unspeakable things': documenting digital feminist responses to rape culture*, also stated that the mere existence of online domains for victims/survivors to out their perpetrators challenges the long established rape culture that enforces silence (Keller et al, 2016). Hence, speaking up even anonymously, sheds light on issues that are often intentionally silenced (Keller et al, 2016). Moreover, online platforms are viewed as less risky and a safer zone for survivors to share their experience and engage in online discussions that are usually dismissed offline (Mendes et al, 2018).

On a more negative note, the online community still cannot escape the mainstream media's rape myths and culture. Online users can be hostile, blame the victims, and criticize them (Li et al, 2020). In a study analyzing replies to tweet from a rape victim/survivor, 5% of the comments were disrespectful (Li et al, 2020). In addition, some online campaigns regulated and censored the victims' own scripts to reach more people and avoid terrorizing the public (Loney-Howes, 2018). Not only this, but also a relatively large number of feminist scholars labelled Twitter as a toxic environment for women (Mendes et al, 2018). For instance, a lot of survivors felt their public feminist ideology will trigger people to bully them (Mendes et al, 2018).

#### *Online Movements against Sexual Violence in Egypt*

After the Arab spring and the flourishing of civil society, feminist movements started being more widely established (Al-Rawi, 2014 ). These movements in turn resorted to social media platforms to push for advocacy and changing perceptions (Al-Rawi, 2014). In Egypt, social media activism is used to connect online and offline efforts (Ibrahim, 2019). A lot of advocacy forms often start as ideas discussed online and then later move to on ground (Ibrahim, 2019). Online advocacy groups in Egypt aim to educate, mobilize, and push for change collectively (Ibrahim, 2019). Analyzing the major themes in anti-sexual harassment online campaigns such as “#EndSH”, Ibrahim identified five main themes dominating the digital activism discourse in Egypt. Firstly, placing blame in the right place, not on the victims of sexual assault, but on the sociocultural context enforced by the patriarchal norms (Ibrahim, 2019). Secondly, combating the culture of silence and shame by encouraging women to speak up and express their emotions (Ibrahim, 2019). Thirdly, enforcing the accurate rhetoric in reporting assault such as saying ‘sexual harassment’ instead of just ‘muaksa’, Arabic for ‘flirtation’ Fourthly, creating content addressing men to include them in the dialogue. Lastly, feminists use online platforms to demand legal and social reforms (Ibrahim, 2019). Adding to the role of digital activism in featuring sexual assault, the article *Digital activism for women's rights in the Arab World*, concluded that online platforms provided a safe space for women to discuss taboo subjects freely and easily, with relative protection (Sara, 2015). While it is difficult to measure digital-based change, the impact digital feminism has on shedding awareness is undeniable (Sara, 2015). A thesis study

analyzing the role of the non-governmental organization HarassMap's social media platforms concluded that digital media puts forward social change (Saleh, 2017). For instance, the study suggested that digital campaigns can inspire victims/survivors to take actions against sexual violence, influence bystanders to intervene when witnessing an act of sexual violence, and push for policy change through different stakeholders (Saleh, 2017).

In the Arab world and the Egyptian context, digital feminism is more complicated (Ibrahim, 2019). While it delivers the experiences of women in the local sphere and mobilizes people for the cause online, it resonates more with Western women (Newsom & Lengel, 2012). For one, access to these online campaigns is exclusive to the more privileged group of feminists, while the rest of the population suffer from low internet penetration in the region (Lengel, 2012).

According to the World Bank's most recent statistic, Egypt's internet penetration rate was at 57% in 2019 (World Bank, 2019). In addition, these online spaces isolate feminists and their struggles from the mainstream media where the public discourse is produced and enforced (Newsom & Lengel, 2012). Accordingly, although social media offers some sort of empowerment, it is still contained empowerment (Newsom & Lengel, 2012). Other challenges facing Egyptian digital feminism is the influence of the Western agenda on the topics they tackle and ignore such as marital rape (Sara, 2015). Linked to the limited internet penetration, poverty and illiteracy still hinder the impact of the online social movements (Sara, 2015). In addition, the difficulty of sustaining funds and the lack of coordination within the team are also issues that negatively impact the digital feminism sphere (Sara, 2015). Therefore, Egyptian digital feminist organizations still need some time and effort to perfectly utilize their online resources (Sara, 2015).

### **Why do Survivors Speak to the Media?**

Before tackling the outcomes of speaking to the media on the survivors themselves, it is essential to tackle why they decide to speak to the media in the first place and what they expect to achieve through that. The study *Between Healing and Revictimization: The Experience of Public*

*Self-Disclosure of Sexual Assault and Its Perceived Effect on Recover*, illustrated that survivors of sexual assault sought the media to push for social change and find a purpose to the experience (Gueta et al, 2020). Confirming that, a research study on the survivors' experiences with speaking-up identified four main motivations behind their disclosure (Zaleski & Gundersen, 2016). For one, survivors felt the urge of not wanting to stay silent anymore (Zaleski & Gundersen, 2016). They reported wanting people to understand that any person can be a victim of rape and that there is no denying it happens (Zaleski & Gundersen, 2016). Secondly, victims/survivors spoke up to identify themselves as a source to help others who go through the same trauma (Zaleski & Gundersen, 2016). The third reason why they disclosed their experiences was to feel heard, get an objective response to their trauma, and hence develop their understanding of their experience and themselves (Zaleski & Gundersen, 2016). Lastly, survivors reported that they spoke-up to regain control over their physical, mental, and emotional health (Zaleski & Gundersen, 2016).

### **Negative Impacts of Trauma Coverage on Victims/Survivors**

#### *Studies on the Experience of victims/survivors' of Trauma with the Media*

Although the literature mentioned the lack of research on subjects of trauma (Kay et al, 2010), the existing studies reported different reactions from trauma subjects to media coverage. For instance, the study *Help or Harm Symbolic violence, secondary trauma and the impact of press coverage on a community*, looked at the effect of press coverage of a teenage murder case in a small community (Kay et al, 2010). According to interviews with residents, town officials, local police, community organizations, and a journalist, five broad themes were made. For one, interviewees felt isolated from the community due to the media presence, hindering their day-to-day activities. In addition, they felt angry at the media's portrayal of their community, framing it in a way that they described as stereotypical and unobjective. The interviewees also complained about the media intruding in their community life and private processing of grief. Besides, they reported feeling renewed emotions of loss and grief (Kay et al, 2010).

Confirming the subjects' struggle with media coverage, the study *The impact of grief journalism on its subjects: lessons from the Pike River mining disaster*, interviewed family members of 29

killed men in a New Zealand mining accident (Moreham & Tinsley, 2018). According to the interviews, five main impacts are tackled; the subjects' fear and loss of physical security because of media monitoring; stress and loss of emotional balance as a result of constant concentration with the media to avoid being displayed in an unpreferred light; being treated as a means for journalists to get their desired information without empathy; intrusion and leaving no room for subjects' privacy, taking photos of them in harsh situations without their consent; loss of control over one's life; hindering emotional recovery for limiting subjects from talking to other support circles (Moreham & Tinsley, 2018).

The paper *When Morality Matters Most: Interviewing children at the scene of a school shooting*, also examined the experiences of parents, children, and news personnel during the coverage of a school shooting. Through its interviews, the study suggested that subjects were confused and lost trust in the media's accuracy. Hence, the study stressed the need for improving relations between the media and the coverage (Kennan, 2017). Adding to these insights from the subjects of trauma, the study *The Thredbo landslide: Was it only media ethics that came tumbling down?* suggested that the media coverage was problematic for the involved parties (Bilboe, 1997). For one, journalists were criticized for obtaining information in an unethical manner (Bilboe, 1997). Other issues with reporters included asking inappropriate questions, using an inconsiderate tone while asking questions, and pointing fingers for blame in an inconsiderate manner. Therefore, these practices were said to hinder the healing storytelling process (Bilboe, 1997).

Another study that also concluded with media coverage's negative impacts on trauma subjects is *What if a Victim Read a Newspaper Report About Their Victimization? A Study on the Relationship to PTSD Symptoms in Crime Victims* (Maercker & Mehr, 2014). The study follows a longitudinal design to examine the status of trauma victims/survivors a while after media coverage. Of the 47% that checked their case after being published, about two thirds said the reports were almost accurate. Yet, their overall reaction to the reports was negative with 66% sad and 48% frightened (Maercker & Mehr, 2014). The study also deduced a moderate correlation between the subject's negative reactions to the published reports and the development of post-traumatic stress (Maercker & Mehr, 2014).

From the other problems that face subjects of trauma with the media is the fact that some cases of accidents are reported as hard news without referring to the subjects as human beings affected by the incident, and not just news sources (Embelton, Richards, & Hippocrates, 2003). Solely depending on police reports sometimes also lead to false and inaccurate information (Embelton, Richards, & Hippocrates, 2003). In addition, the victims can know about the news for the first time from the media, leading to the victims' frustration. Besides, it can also be stressful for victims to read police reports that they thought were private, published (Embelton, Richards, & Hippocrates, 2003). Another problem is exactly following the police cases which sometimes contain radical accusations made by lawyers to discredit the other party. If journalists follow these accusations and it later turns inaccurate, the media then contributes to traumatizing the latter party (Embelton, Richards, & Hippocrates, 2003).

#### *The Negative Impacts of Reporting Sexual Assault to the Media on the Victims/Survivors*

Owing to the sensitive nature of sexual assault, some victims/survivors avoid reporting their trauma legally, medically, psychologically, or to the media. Through the study, *Survivors' Opinions About Mandatory Reporting of Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault by Medical Professionals*, 61 survivors of domestic and sexual violence participated in a focus group about mandatory reporting (Sullivan & Hagen, 2005). Some of the survivors stated that they avoided reporting assault medically for fear of leaking the information to the media (Sullivan & Hagen, 2005). After speaking with the media, some survivors reported feeling threatened, ashamed, guilty about the assault itself (Sullivan & Hagen, 2005). In addition, repeating the story for the media enforced these negative perceptions they had of themselves (Sullivan & Hagen, 2005). Another issue with speaking up to the media is that even if reports are covered anonymously, some people, including the assailant, may identify the victim and hence risk the survivors' safety (Sullivan & Hagen, 2005). Besides, some families are not aware of their daughters' assault and the media may change that. Even worse, the media can alert the survivors' employer who in turn may fire her and further blame, name, and shame her (Sullivan & Hagen, 2005). Confirming this notion, a study on reporting sexual assault in work environments concluded that women who reported their sexual assault faced bias and were viewed as immoral, warm, and socially skilled (Hart, 2019). Hence, women hesitate to report harassment at work to avoid bias and discrimination (Hart, 2019).

Other issues with the media that scare survivors away from reporting are laid out in a study examining 600 tweets under the hashtag #WhyIDidntReport (Whiting et al, 2020). The survivors stated they avoid reporting for various reasons including feelings of helplessness, fearing negative consequences, being questioned, disbelieved, and blamed (Whiting et al, 2020). Another issue with the media revolves around their inability to recount trauma with a need to move on (Whiting et al, 2020). Moreover, survivors often avoid reporting because they are unaware the action is constituted as assault, blame themselves for the assault, feel ashamed, or face threats to harm their families by the assailant (Whiting et al, 2020). Interestingly, survivors feel more comfortable reporting their experience using the anonymous option (Oldfield & McDonald, 2021). However, with the story of activist Saxon Mullins’s assault, the media treated her as a secondary source of information when she was still anonymous, giving more space to the assailant (Oldfield & McDonald, 2021).

Another case study on Yazidi women’s experience with reporting sexual violence in ISIS shows that women felt pressured by the journalists reporting their stories (Foster & Minwalla, 2018). The survivors also reported fearing risks based on some journalistic practices and feeling psychologically drained from repeating their assault stories again (Foster & Minwalla, 2018). Moreover, the survivors were disappointed to see that the stories they shared did not incite global action to end the ongoing violence against them (Foster & Minwalla, 2018). In Egypt, survivors who report their sexual violence encounters often lack support from their families (Arafa et al, 2021). Although social support networks help survivors move forward, the Egyptian culture tends to blame the victim and excuse the harassers (Arafa et al, 2021). Accordingly, they do not receive the needed support and thus feel no urge to report their stories (Arafa et al, 2021).

### **Positive Impact of Trauma Coverage on Victims/Survivors**

#### *Studies on the Experience of Victims/Survivors of Trauma with the Media*

As mentioned earlier, “death knocks” and “intrusive interviews’ are both terms that often describe interviews with the media after or during a traumatic experience. However, some scholars argued against this mentality as interactions with journalists should be a positive



encounter. Referencing French Philosopher Michel Foucault's notion of one's need to confess the truth about oneself, Birkhead applied this perception on journalists who feel compelled to bring stories to the light to hold the public accountable for society's wrongdoings (Joseph, 2011). Through examining six main traumatic stories on sexuality, the study *Recounting Traumatic Secrets*, revealed how the survivors were eager to share their stories publicly as a form of advocacy and part of their healing process (Joseph, 2011). If appropriately reported by the media, victims could benefit from talking about their experiences in the right time and the right way to turn their suffering into a purpose. (Joseph, 2011). In essence, the issue with reporting to the media becomes about 'how to deliver the information' and not 'what to deliver' (Choi, 2011). Moreover, covering traumatic stories can garner empathy for the victims and thus can trigger collective action to tackle the issue (Joseph, 2011). Confirming this notion, the article, *Between A Rock and A Hard Place, The Challenges of Reporting about Trauma, and the value of reflective Practice for Journalists*, suggested that accurate and sensitive media coverage of traumatic events, can leave room for survivors to reconnect and communicate, and accordingly validate their feelings about the event (Kay et al, 2010).

Storytelling was linked to therapeutic responses to trauma (Carey, 2006). Pouring out their emotions in writing helps subjects of trauma make sense of the event, construct purpose, and understand more about themselves (Badger, Royse, & Moore, 2011). In addition, storytelling reportedly encouraged resilience in survivors who share their stories in a peer-care setting (Badger, Royse, & Moore, 2011). The study *What's in a Story? A Text Analysis of Burn Survivors' Web-Posted Narratives*, examined web-based storytelling, suggesting that survivors sought the web to report their stories and make people resonate with it (Badger, Royse, & Moore, 2011). However, the study pointed out that having a social worker to supervise the writing process and guide the survivors lead to more efficient results (Badger, Royse, & Moore, 2011). Storytelling is also important to build resilience in trauma survivors through unpacking their experiences, reaching catharsis, receiving empathy, and planning the future beyond the trauma (Wimberly, 2011). Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that storytelling in private differs from the public media context. To reach catharsis, survivors need an empathetic audience (Wimberly, 2011), but this is not always the case with journalists and the public discourse. The public effort to create success stories out of trauma in the media has flourished in the last decades (Delker,



Salton, & McLean, 2019). The advantages of sharing personal stories of trauma include enhancing one's psychological wellbeing, empowering one's self and others, inciting meaning-making, encouraging societal solidarity, and pushing for communal change (Delker, Salton, & McLean, 2019). However, the success of public storytelling can be hindered by oppressive cultures and marginalization of the survivors' communities (Delker, Salton, & McLean, 2019).

As mentioned previously, trauma exists within a culture of silence from both its subjects and the communities where it resides. Survivors often stay silent about their trauma due to feelings of shame, threat, guilt, disappointment in others, in addition to their defense mechanism to ignore the trauma as if it never happened (Lister, 1982). Accordingly, telling one's story helps them achieve psychological freedom through understanding the situation holistically (Lister, 1982). Not only does breaking the silence cycle help the survivors psychologically, but it also encourages other survivors to speak-up and demand action (Lister, 1982). A research on survivors of child abuse concluded that survivors speaking up collectively are harder to silence together and hence motivate more survivors to speak publicly (Lister, 1982).

#### *The Positive Impacts of Reporting Sexual Assault to the Media on the Victims/Survivors*

The media has a role in creating awareness about sexual assault, not just to the general community and survivors who were incapable of making sense of their own abuse yet, but also to the survivors who resorted to the media themselves (Kitzinger, 2004). According to interviews and focus groups with survivors of sexual assault from the 1980s to the 1990s, the media's coverage of sexual assault helped survivors communicate their experiences, discuss them openly, and rebel against the abuse and the abuser themselves (Kitzinger, 2004). Talking to the media also helped survivors recollect and reassess their situations. In addition, it helped legitimize and validate their experiences, and made the public resonate with their stories, turning them into influential and strong figures (Kitzinger, 2004). Accordingly, the study stressed the media's role in combating rape culture and sexual abuse (Kitzinger, 2004).

In a qualitative study with 18 adult sexual assault survivors who shared their stories publicly and pushed for activism, positive impacts of speaking-up were identified (Straus Swanson & Szymanski, 2020). Firstly, speaking up helped them make sense of their trauma and get to know

themselves more (Straus Swanson & Szymanski, 2020). Secondly, communicating their trauma was considered one form of coping (Straus Swanson & Szymanski, 2020). Moreover, their experiences helped them gain more self-confidence and gave them the courage to oppose the rape culture (Straus Swanson & Szymanski, 2020). They also reported that speaking up enabled them to provide care, support, and validation to others, which essentially gave their life more purpose and meaning (Straus Swanson & Szymanski, 2020). On the other hand, they also pointed out to the risks of speaking up like being triggered, a subject of the public rape narrative which led to feelings of frustration and burn out (Straus Swanson & Szymanski, 2020).

Writing about one's trauma was also considered one way of confronting it through immersing in traumatic memories (Kopec, 2015). By creating their own narrative, rape survivors are able to regain control over their own stories that they still do not understand (Kopec, 2015). Thus, there is a power in re-identifying themselves through articulating their own trauma (Kopec, 2015).

### **Studies Reporting Neutral Effect of the Media on the Victims/Survivors**

A study conducted on the experience of survivors of a terrorist attack at Utøya Island, and their parents with the media, showed that most participants had negative experiences with the way reporters approached them for coverage, describing it as intrusive or insensitive (Glad, Hafstad, Dyb, 2018). On the contrary, their reports on interview experiences were mostly positive, while their perception of the final coverage itself varied between positive and negative (Glad, Hafstad, Dyb, 2018). Participants' approval of the final coverage depended on the angle that journalists used to cover the story, such as being too dramatic, or accurately covering the story (Glad, Hafstad, Dyb, 2018).

Confirming these findings, research on survivors of two train crashes in Sweden also reported both negative and positive experiences with the media (Englund, Forberg, Saveman, 2014). Yet, interestingly, some participants explained that their feelings towards media coverage changed. When they interacted with reporters at first, they thought the interaction was harmful and intruding. Yet, when they read the content later, they realized it was a necessity to get the story out (Englund, Forberg, Saveman, 2014).

Accordingly, speaking out about traumatic experiences can have either positive or negative impact on the victims based on their psychological or sociological status (Delker, Salton, McLean, 2019). For instance, as mentioned in other studies, telling the story of one's trauma can be considered part of the healing process, moving not just from victim to survivor, but from survivor to advocate (Delker, Salton, McLean, p.3). According to the interviews, Dekler, Salton, and McLean conducted, victims speak out as a way to regain control and agency after they have been violated (Delker, Salton, McLean, 2019). Besides, it was also considered a form of resistance against silencing oppressions (Delker, Salton, McLean, 2019. "The biggest hurdle (and most rewarding triumph) was when I 'came out' as a survivor ...I no longer have to hold my secrets and let them distill into shame," the authors quoted a woman describing her experience with becoming more confident and losing the feelings of shame (Delker, Salton, McLean, 2019). Yet, not all trauma subjects felt that they have learned something out of their experience to share, and in that case, talking about it may be more harmful and traumatizing (Delker, Salton, McLean, 2019). For victims who already suffer from racial, systematic, or institutional violence, it becomes riskier to speak out about their experiences and hence might be more traumatizing. (Delker, Salton, McLean, 2019). Victims with layers of oppression face troubling issues in their day to day lives and affiliate healing with access to resources (Delker, Salton, McLean, 2019). In addition, when the victims' experiences are unwelcomed, speaking out can bring more violence than heal it (Delker, Salton, McLean, 2019).

Acknowledging both these positive and negative impacts of journalists interacting with trauma survivors, the study *The Dangers of Dealing with Journalists*, pushed for a more mindful approach for the victims (Sykes & Green, 2003). According to the study, interacting with the media during trauma was important as it motivates the community to sympathize with its less-privileged members (Sykes & Green, 2003). Not only that, but also reporting to the media helped survivors fit their trauma into their lives and make sense of it (Sykes & Green, 2003). Yet, given the power-dynamics between the ordinary survivor who just got under the spotlight and the experienced media, journalists often take control of the narrative over the survivors and hence hinder their healing process (Sykes & Green, 2003). To navigate that, Sykes and Green advocated for more and better communication between journalists and sources to avoid doing

harm (Sykes & Green, 2003). Moreover, a study featuring 14 women who shared their assault stories with the media concluded that speaking up helped them develop a more resilient and activist identity, change their victimization narrative, and improve their social relationships (Gueta et al, 2020). However, the way the public reframe the issue can victimize them by hindering their sense of security and defining their identities as just victims (Gueta et al, 2020).

### **The Impact of Dominant Frames in the Coverage on the Victims/Survivors**

Relating to the previous section, it is important to note that the way a survivor's story is framed and narrated in turn impacts how she/he perceives their victimization process. The audience's reactions to the survivor's story have serious implications on his/her psychological well-being (Orchowski, Untied, &, Gidycz, 2013). After examining a sample of 374 women, survivors reported that media narratives that aimed to control their stories triggered them to be anxious, depressed, and suffering from PTSD (Orchowski, Untied, &, Gidycz, 2013). In addition, blaming the survivors for the assault also negatively impacted their self-esteem (Orchowski, Untied, &, Gidycz, 2013). On the other hand, reactions that were more emotionally supportive helped survivors gain higher self-esteem (Orchowski, Untied, &, Gidycz, 2013). The study, *Who has to tell their trauma story and how hard will it be? Influence of cultural stigma and narrative redemption on the storying of sexual violence*, looked at how the frame through which the story was covered impacted the survivors' feedback as well (Delker, Salton, & McLean, 2019). The research identified two types of frames: redemptive frames (where sexual assault trauma is transferred to an inspiring success story) and negative frames (with negative endings) (Delker, Salton, & McLean, 2019). However, the study concluded that sexual assault is not a topic that is welcomed by the audience and both redemptive and non-redemptive frames will not ignite the public interest in assault (Delker, Salton, & McLean, 2019). Therefore, survivors of sexual assault, unlike other survivors of trauma, do not personally gain much from the media's coverage to their stories (Delker, Salton, & McLean, 2019). On that note, the study *What's in a Label? The Impact of Media and Sexual Assault Characteristics on Survivor Rape Acknowledgment*, revealed that the characteristics of the assault featured in the media impacts the way survivors understand and acknowledge their experiences (Newins, Wilson, & Kanefsky, 2021).

Social and cultural reactions to the survivors' disclosure of their sexual assault reportedly impacts their psychological well-being. A survey measuring survivors' feelings about the social reactions they received revealed that some negative reactions trigger negative emotions, while others lead to mixed feelings (Relyea & Ullman, 2013). Moreover, 94% of the study's sample reported that failure to grant support hinders their coping strategies even more than the blaming and stigmatization narrative (Relyea & Ullman, 2013). Another study with 1863 sexual assault survivors confirmed that positive reactions to the survivors' stories encouraged more coping and adaptation, while negative reactions prompted harsher PTSD symptoms and hindered their control over their recovery (Ullman & Peter-Hagene, 2014). Not just that, but also negative reactions often lead survivors to stay silent and stop talking about their assault (Ahrens, 2006). These negative reactions pressure them to question whether they should speak about their assault again, blame themselves, and even question whether their experiences qualify as assault (Ahrens, 2006). While these studies tackled general reactions to assault and not through the media in specific, they are still relevant for giving a sense of how a link between the reactions to disclosure and the psychological well-being of the survivor exists.

### **Studies on Journalists' Feedback on Trauma Coverage and Future Frameworks**

Since some of the aforementioned studies reported that some trauma victims had a positive experience with media coverage, especially in the interviewing and writing stage, it became evident that there should be a framework through which journalists can cover these stories to help the victims heal and not vice-versa. For instance, a research done with journalists on their coverage of disasters in Australia showed that journalists are suddenly required to cover disasters without being prepared, and accordingly, their improvisation and lack of knowledge sometimes leads to ethical breaches (Ewart, 2014). Thus, the paper concluded by calling on journalists to install a framework for covering trauma (Ewart, 2014). Through a focus group with Canadian journalists about their experiences in covering trauma, four primary themes were revealed (Amend et al, 2012). Firstly, with the journalistic deadlines and editorial pressures, reporters were often conflicted between how to get stories in an ethical way, relying on their subjective moral compass (Amend et al, 2012). Accordingly, the way they navigated ethical dilemmas in trauma scenes highly depended on the way journalists perceived their roles (Amend et al, 2012).

Moreover, journalists agreed that ‘permissible harm’ is inevitable while interacting with subjects of trauma, yet a line must be drawn between permissible and impermissible harms (Amend et al, 2012). Another recurring theme that journalists mentioned is the lack of training for journalists on how to cover trauma (Amend et al, 2012).

The article, *Fostering Trauma Literacy: From the Classroom to the Newsroom*, took this a step further and examines university programs’ inclusivity to studying trauma coverage. According to their findings, more than 53% of the participants stated they have never been taught how to report trauma professionally (Seely, 2019). Besides, those who received education on trauma coverage showed more knowledge and literacy on how to cover traumatic incidents professionally (Seely, 2019). Accordingly, the study suggested incorporating trauma coverage theoretically in classrooms (Seely, 2019).

The literature also focuses on how journalists covering trauma often feel traumatized themselves and can develop PTSD as well. From covering war, car accidents, fires, sexual assault stories, and more, journalists deal with trauma on a daily basis (Dworznic, 2007). A study on journalists development of secondary trauma after covering a traumatic event concluded that journalists who encountered trauma victims professionally developed the same level trauma that the victims themselves go through (McMahon M, 2001). Other studies confirm that journalists develop symptoms of PTSD, feel guilt, and suffer psychologically after covering trauma (Seely, 2019; Browne et al, 2012). Accordingly, in the study *Journalism and Trauma*, journalists shared how they manage to get through these events by finding their purpose, justifying their actions to get a good story, being able to make a difference, and feeling a sense of self-worth (Dworznic, 2007).

However, recent studies on journalists’ experience with covering trauma revealed that there is now more awareness amongst journalists about their roles and the ethical dilemmas presented in the scenes of trauma, which possibly suggests more mindful and considerate coverage (Kay et al, 2011). Not only that, but also after conducting a content analysis on a sexual assault case and interviewing the key journalist, the study *Progress and Persistent Problems*, shows that feminist journalists are making more progressive changes in framing sexual assault stories with a more mindful approach away from the rape myths and victim blaming narratives (Worthington, 2008).

Moreover, the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma conducted extensive research on the coverage of trauma and published tips for journalists to improve their performance including treating victims with respect, accurate self-identification, not overwhelming the victims, and filling them in with the journalists' purpose of the story (Kenan, 2017).

### **Brief Overview of Highly Publicized Cases of Sexual Assault in Egypt**

During the last couple of decades, the media covered a number of sexual assault cases that gained a lot of public attention and scrutiny. However, research is limited on how this coverage impacted the survivors, the legal course of the case, or the community as a whole. The list included the Maadi Girl case in 1985 when six men reportedly kidnapped a woman from a car with her fiancé, raped her, and then threw her in the street (ElKholy, 2020), Ataba Girl in 1992 when a man ripped a girl's clothes off and sexually assaulted her in broad daylight when she was out with her mother and sister (ElKholy, 2020), and Downtown Girls in 2006 when a group of men harassed a group of girls in Downtown Cairo. This incident stirred controversy as it introduced a new form of gender-based violence in Egypt (ElKholy, 2020). During the 25th of January revolution, Egyptian women protestors and reporters were gang harassed in the middle of Tahrir square through what they called 'circles of hell'. This led to the formation of the volunteer-based initiatives Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment (OpAntish) and Tahrir Bodyguard (Kingsley, 2013). Another well-known case is the Mall Girl case of 2017 when a woman reported she was sexually harassed in a mall in Egypt and when she got into a fight with her assailant, he slapped her. The mall security interfered but they did not arrest him. Accordingly, the girl took to social media and posted the video then later appeared in TV shows to push for his arrest. This case in particular is well-known in Egyptian media because of her episode with Egyptian TV Presenter Reham Saeed. During the interview, personal photos of the girl were published after Saeed asked her if she thought her attire was appropriate. (Youssef, Noman, & Wendling, 2015). Another widely shared sexual harassment case in the media is the On the Run Sexual Harassment in 2018. In the Fifth Settlement, Cairo, a man verbally harassed a woman while she was waiting for a bus in front of On the Run cafe. The harasser repeatedly made uncomfortable remarks to the woman who took a video of the incident and posted it online, igniting public debate between supporters and attackers. The incident quickly became trending in



Egypt, turning both the girl and the guy to memes and jokes (Khairat, 2018). In addition, Al Ayat case of 2019. Three men stole a 15-year-old's phone to get her into a mini bus in Ayat where the bus driver attempted to rape her. The girl was able to defend herself and stabbed the man to death 13 times. The girl and her dad later reported the incident to the police and the investigations started. The case was extensively covered in the media as the girl got detained for the duration of the investigation but was later set free for self-defense. The girl was publicly known and attended TV video interviews showing her face. (Lotfy, 2019). More recently, the Ahmed Bassam Zaki (ABZ) in 2020. The assailant who is said to have sparked the recent Egyptian online feminist movement when the Instagram Platform Assault Police outed him for sexually assaulting a large number of women. Zaki is still facing criminal charges and is so far sentenced to eight years in prison (Michaelson, 2020). In 2020, the Fairmont gang rape case came to light. In 2014, a group of men gang raped a woman after they reportedly drugged her and later circulated the video online amongst their circle of friends. With the rise of the ABZ case, the Fairmont crime came to light in 2020 and some of the accused have been arrested. On May 12, 2021, the Egyptian Public Prosecution released the suspects for the lack of evidence. This case in particular received large media attention, involving not just the victim/survivor, but also witnesses and activists (Magdy, 2020). Lastly, the Meet Ghamr Gang Harassment 2020. Seven men gang assaulted a girl in the Mit Ghamr city of Daqahliya. The victim/survivor took to Twitter and shared her story, pushing for arresting the assailants. She also spoke with TV talk shows and Arabic news outlets, revealing her identity to the public (Sexually Assaulted and Threatened: Egypt's Public Prosecution Orders Arrest of Seven Men in Mit Ghamr Assault, 2020).

While all these cases received some form of media attention, a lot of questions arise about the differences in the coverage. It is unclear why sometimes they reveal the identities of the victims/survivors and other times they do not. It is also yet to be determined how they decide to blame the survivor and when to support her. Moreover, studies need to be conducted about the determinants that make a case an issue of public opinion while others of the same nature do not receive the same attention.



## **Chapter Three**

### **Theoretical Framework**

This chapter discusses the main theories that can explain the different aspects of the media's coverage of sexual violence cases. To understand how the media's coverage of trauma impacts its victims/survivors, an analysis of this coverage must be provided first. This can be done through the framing theory generally and the frames used in sexual assault coverage specifically. The second theory has also been used in explaining people's perceptions of sexual assault is the attribution theory. Both the attribution theory and the framing theory are also highly connected in shaping people's interpretations of the presented stories. The major stereotypes affiliated with rape coverage are also discussed. In the last section of this chapter, media and trauma theories are discussed to trace the role of the media in shedding light on traumatic stories and how that impacts the victims/survivors of trauma themselves. In addition, the sociocultural theory is also tackled to examine how the community as a whole impacts the psychological wellbeing of victims/survivors of sexual violence after the assault.

### **Media Framing Theory**

#### *Theory Definition and Usage*

Todd Gitlin defined frames as the "principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens and what matters." (Gitlin, 1980). In less abstract terms, Robert Entman referred to framing as making certain aspects of a story more salient than others (Entman, 1993). This can happen through promoting a certain problem definition, causal analysis, moral assessment, or promoting treatments (Entman, 1993). Entman further elaborated that framing can occur through text by making some information more dominant through its placement, repetition, or associating it with culturally known symbols (Entman, 1993). In essence, framing is mainly highlighting pieces of information and accordingly base judgments, remedies, and causes. Other definitions focus on framing as reorienting people's minds to think about issues in a certain way from all the different interpretations (Chong and Druckman, 2007). Regardless of its usage and purpose, the framing tool emphasizes the role of mass delivered messages whether through a speech, an article, novel,

or other forms of media in influencing people's perceptions (Entman, 1993). Erving Goffman whose name has also been widely associated with the framing theory illustrates that the world consists of an empirical aspect, a strip or a piece that is cut off an ongoing event, and subjective aspect, the frame, that comprises the sets of rules and regulations that control events and their involved subjects (Goffman, 1974). According to him, people make sense of the world around them and organize their thoughts based on these frames. The frames or the "schemata of interpretation" as he called them, help people understand different pieces of information that seem irrelevant and stack them together in a meaningful way (Goffman, 1974).

Given the fast pace through which journalists need to develop stories, they immediately report stories based on how they perceive them, relying on socially shared frames to help people navigate content easier. Framing in journalism can occur through specific patterns based on the journalists' choice to define this issue, how they perceive it and the reactions to it (Shoham, 2013). Framing then happens through cultural and social codes that put the information into a certain context, depending on cultural dominant understandings (Shoham, 2013). Not only do they push people to focus their attention on certain issues, but they also divert it away from certain aspects (Entman, 1993). Hence, frames not only work by highlighting certain issues like water scarcity or terrorism as national security issues, but also by not underlining issues such as human rights or sexual assault using the same emphasizing rhetoric.

Frames exist based on four main locations: the communicator, the text, the receiver, and the culture (Entman, 1993). Whether intentionally or unintentionally, content creators automatically use frames in their content presentation based on their own ideologies and backgrounds (Entman, 1993). For the text, the usage of specific images, stereotypes, sources, background facts, all contribute to how the readers overall perceive the issue (Entman, 1993). In a story about a rape crime, writing a background paragraph with statistics about poverty, unemployment, and the inability to afford marriage, frames the issue in a way to sympathize with the assailant, shifting the blame on the harsh conditions. On the other hand, stacking statistics about the percentage of rape, the psychological trauma the survivors go through, shifts the focus to the survivor instead. While the frames do impact the way the information is delivered, the receivers may or may not be affected by it based on their personal beliefs as well (Entman, 1993). The last location Entman

identifies for frames is within culture where common understandings of issues exist (Entman, 1993). In the more conservative Egyptian culture for instance, mentioning that a survivor of rape went to the assailant's house will spark waves of victim blaming, whereas referring to that in a Western culture will not be perceived in the same way.

#### *Forces behind Frame Production*

To be able to comprehensively define framing, it is important to identify who exactly produces those frames? Although it's evident based on the aforementioned definitions that journalists have a huge role in the framing process, it's crucial to acknowledge the other contextual factors that come into play. Carragee and Roefs explain how news formation does not occur in isolation, it is a process through which other forces such as social actors, from politicians, organizations, to social movements, intervene (Carragee & Roefs, 2004). The strength of the frame proposed by these actors hinges on their economic and cultural resources, in addition to their grounded understanding of shaping news and public opinion (Carragee & Roefs, 2004). For instance, Former US President Donald Trump's campaign slogan "Make America Great Again" is a frame that started being vivid during the 2016 elections and continued onwards throughout his rule. Not only did he persistently use it and succeed in resonating with the masses, but it was also picked up by the media in covering his speeches or work, positively and negatively. In that sense, it is a frame that was first pushed by a politician and not a journalist. A more local example is the terrorism and Muslim Brotherhood (MB) frame in Egypt. Given that the MB is politically banned in the country and labelled as a terrorist organization, the media consistently uses the terrorist Muslim Brotherhood frame while reporting, even on issues that are not necessarily related to either the MB or terrorism. Again, here the frame was also not first created by a journalist. Since pushing these frames need power and resources, they are more often created by the elites (Carragee & Roefs, 2004). Hence, frames do not develop in a linear way, on contrary, they change, emerge, or disappear based on the political context and the elites in power (Carragee & Roefs, 2004). On that note, a study on public opinion and framing effects highlighted the role of political parties in pushing for more popular frames, not just for their voters, but for the elections generally (Slothuus & De Vreese, 2010). Expanding on the influence of political frames, in his book *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy*, Entman explains that not only does the media cover the frames pushed

by administrations, but also the administrations can alter these frames based on the audience's feedback to them (2004). Negating the sole power of elites in frames production, some scholars argue that citizens do participate in forming frames by interpreting information in their own way, sparking discussions, and resorting to sources that they see fit (Borah, 2011). This can be clearly seen on social media where some audiences challenge news sources and criticize their coverage. Even more, the algorithms used on social media through which the platform automatically picks content based on one's preferences and ideology creates some sort of limited intellectual space to strengthen their own beliefs away from the mainstream media.

### *Frames in Communication*

Although there is no set of rules to identify frames in communication, Chong and Druckman suggest three steps for framing studies. First, examining a frame that is affiliated to a specific event, issue, or political actor (2007). In order to understand how frames influence public opinion, understanding the issues under study and people's attitudes towards them is crucial (Chong and Druckman, 2007). After that, researchers should pinpoint the main themes regarding one issue and code the content (Chong and Druckman, 2007). Iyengar distinguished between two different types of framing effects: generic (thematic) and specific (episodic) (Aroustamian, 2020). For instance, the frames surrounding cases of sexual assault are a type of episodic frames since they focus on specific cases. According to Iyengar, news media resorts to episodic frames to take the attention away from politicians (Aroustamian, 2020). Scholars have resorted to different frame types and units of analysis based on their studies, such as articles or visuals (Matthes, 2009). Coding can focus on just the text and ignore the visuals, or code the visual as part of the frame, or visuals can be discussed in the study but are not the main element of the frame (Matthes, 2009). One of the advantages of framing studies is that they can examine different production stages like how the frames are formed and the consequences they have either through coding content or interviewing content creators (Matthes, 2009).

### *Framing Effects*

The influence of framing effects has been a topic up for debate in the literature, but scholars overall concluded that frames do in fact impact people's perceptions such as tilting people's opinions to certain directions and altering their overall viewpoints (Chong and Druckman, 2007).

This can be shown through a study which found that the people who were exposed to the frame “undeserved advantage” were more prone to become racially discriminatory whereas those who were exposed to the frame “reverse discrimination” were keener on promoting equal opportunities (Chong and Druckman, 2007). Framing, thus works by storing certain information in one’s memory where it becomes more accessible and then people use it to create applicable judgements (Chong and Druckman, 2007). However, other studies limited the magnitude of framing effects by differentiating between specific and general attitude changes. According to the study, *Toward A Social Representation Theory of Attitude Change: The Effect of Message Framing on General and Specific Attitudes toward Equality and Entitlement*, framing can alter specific individual attitudes rather than general communal ones (Sibley, Liu, & Kirkwood, 2006). Therefore, the way to manage change in societies is to focus on altering the attitudes in the individual level and not the socially rooted cultural level (Sibley, Liu, & Kirkwood, 2006). Challenging the guaranteed implications of the framing theory, Druckman concludes that framing effects are not necessarily as strong and widely spread as claimed, they depend more on the context (2004). According to him, elite competition and diverse opinions limit framing effects, and give more room to rational thinking and choice (Druckman, 2004). Druckman also mentions how rational choice scholars are skeptical about framing effects for the lack of experimental realism, among other reasons. (Druckman, 2004). However, it’s unclear how they think this rational choice emerges and on what basis.

#### *Theoretical Issues in the Framing Research*

Despite its popularity in communication research, scholars have pointed out conceptual issues with studies using the framing theory. For one, there is no clear operational definition of the framing process (Borah, 2011). A study on framing literature found that more than half of framing studies used unique frames that are more focused on particular studies and are hard to generalize and add to the comprehensive literature (Borah, 2011). Another critique to framing is that the majority of studies only prioritize content analysis and presenting how content is framed, but rarely do they focus on the impacts of this framing (Borah, 2011). In addition, a relatively large number of studies neglect looking at the production process and how the frames are formed by multiple influence forces (Borah, 2011, Vliegenthart & Zoonen, 2011). Some also criticized framing studies for including different oppositional definitions. Earlier sociological definitions of

framing described it as a process through which events or information is covered in a sociopolitical context without giving agency to journalists or news organizations in the process (Vliegenthart & Zoonen, 2011). Yet, Entman's later definitions considered the intention of journalists and news organizations in framing content in a certain way (Vliegenthart & Zoonen, 2011). Reducing the studies frames to merely attributes or story topics as an expansion to the agenda setting theory is yet another issue pointed out in the framing research (Carragee & Roefs, 2004). According to the Carriage and Roefs, McCombs and Shaw's agenda-setting is a media theory that studies how news outlets set the topics shaping the public agenda, whereas the framing theory originated in the sociology discipline, taking into account deeper forces shaping the flow of events (Carragee & Roefs, 2004). Thus, equating framing effects to media effects belittles the scope of the framing theory (Carragee & Roefs, 2004). Referring to the production of frames mentioned earlier, framing literature is also challenged for ignoring the sources and sponsors creating frames and hence exaggerating the level of autonomy that journalists have in producing their content (Carragee & Roefs, 2004).

## **Media Framing and Sexual Assault**

### *Common Frames in Sexual Assault Coverage*

Referred to as 'the window to the world' by Walter Lippman, the media is often looked at as the reflection to reality. However, Shoham described it as "a thought projected through a prism and reflects the world which it represents or blocks the world it chooses not to represent (2013).

According to Shoham, journalists and editors are the eyes through which this mediated reality is displayed to the public, based on their choices of what to neglect and what to focus on (Shoham, 2013). With regards to stories about rape victims, Shoham referenced Benedict who stated that media portrays raped women in two categories, either the gullible virgin who was attacked by a deviant demon, or an attention seeker responsible for the attack (Shoham, 2013). This can especially be applied to the Egyptian culture which sometimes tends to resort to victim blaming for either sexual harassment or rape cases, commenting on the victims' clothes, the street she decided to take, and whether the time was later or not for her to be outside. There are four main themes through which framing can occur while reporting sexual assaults; normalization, sensationalism, pragmatism and individualization, and eroticizing the story (Shoham, 2013).

Normalization occurs when the media shows that sexual assaults are part of the normal gender power dynamics in the society, where males usually assault females (Shoham, 2013).

Sensationalism happens when journalists ignore certain sexual assault stories if they appear normal, like if the victim knew the assailant beforehand (Shoham, 2013). Pragmatism and individualization are when the media treats assault stories as individual cases and separate events, where the details of particular events are covered, without relating to the fundamental problems behind the issue (Shoham, 2013). Lastly, erotization through which stories became more sexual when the details of the assault are mentioned (Shoham, 2013.)

Other frames that cover cases of sexual violence against women entail questioning whether the survivor falls under the good or bad woman categories based on her personal life and sexual past (Humphries, 2009). For example, public opinion will sympathize more with the ‘good’ victim who did not know her assailant beforehand, and will demonize the ‘bad’ victim who knew the perpetrator. Differentiating between men and women’s roles in society is yet another frame that the media resorts to (Humphries, 2009). For instance, referring to the victim’s social role or what she was doing impacts how people perceive her story, an assault against a student on campus would gain sympathy more than an assault against a woman walking down the street late at night. The difference is also vivid when stories covering women’s assault often mention details on what she was wearing, when she was out, while stories covering assaults against men overlook that. Marginality and class are also from the frames that shape how the media covers women according to Humphries (2009). While Humphries elaborated how this is applicable to racism in US media, it is also highly relatable to social classes in Egypt. The public opinion sometimes treats girls from the less-privileged social classes more harshly than women from the upper social classes. Another issue with framing sexual assault stories is gender constructions by men who tend to stereotype, normalize, or belittle women’s emotions because they do not really understand them (Humphries, 2009).

Adding to the frames that affect the way stories of sexual assault are perceived is narrating details about the assailant’s life such as his profession, where he lives, where he went to school, and his academic and sports achievements. (Siefkes-Andrew and Alexopoulos, 2018). In doing that, the media leaves room for the audience to resonate with the assailant’s story, drawing



comparisons to their own lives. In that sense, the media intrigues people to sympathize with the assailant, thinking that it might have been just a mistake that any normal person can be prone to commit (Siefkes-Andrew and Alexopoulos, 2018).

### *Rape Myths in Sexual Assault Coverage*

“Rape Myths” is yet another concept that determines the nature of the media coverage of sexual assault cases. First discussed by Brownmiller, Burt, and Albin, rape myths refer to the commonly shared beliefs that impact how the survivors, the perpetrators, and the assault itself are perceived (Franiuk et al, 2008). According to Burt, survivors are mostly believed to be liars who change the facts of their stories and are “asking for it”. (Franiuk et al, 2008). The rape culture imposes the perception that there are certain types of women who get raped based on their behavior (Franiuk et al, 2008). Common images about the survivors include “only bad girls get raped”, the type that gets drunk at parties and wears inappropriate clothes (O’Hara, 2012). There is also the innocent virgin or the shameless women who invited the attack, both adding up to problematic stereotypes about survivors (O’Hara, 2012). As for the perpetrators, they are often portrayed as “psychologically troubled” and framed in a way to garner sympathy (Franiuk et al, 2008). “Beasts”, “perverts”, “abnormal” are all adjectives used interchangeably to refer to the perpetrators (O’Hara, 2012). Displaying perpetrators in this light is problematic as it gives the impression that rape crimes are exceptions that are not committed by ordinary people and it galvanizes public opinion to sympathize with the perpetrator who “needs help” instead of the survivor. Moreover, the assault itself is often trivialized and normalized (Franiuk et al, 2008). Accordingly, the media reinforces this rape culture by presenting these myths and delivers them to those unaware (Franiuk et al, 2008). One way that the media strengthens rape culture is through “media revictimization” by using victim blaming rhetoric such as “caressed” or “fondled” (Aroustamian, 2020). Rape myths are also prominent in conservative cultures through religious, legal, and social contexts (Pennington & Birthisel, 2015). These contexts pave the way for stigmatizing victims, objectifying women, and justifying rape (Pennington & Birthisel, 2015). Hence, women’s agency in the coverage of these stories is constantly overlooked (Pennington & Birthisel, 2015).



Feminists first coined the term rape culture in the 1970s to oppose how the culture desensitizes people from violence against women and creates more tolerance for it (Pollino, 2020). The article, *Sexual Assault Awareness in the #MeToo Era: Student Perceptions of Victim Believability and Cases in the Media*, tackles five main factors that cultivate rape culture: following specific typical gender-roles, supporting sexist ideologies, sticking to inaccurate gender and sex rhetoric, promoting hostility against and distrust in women, and overall encourage acceptance of violence (Acquaviva, O'Neal & Clevenger, 2020). This culture also imposes certain definitions of what actual rape is, selling myths such as there are types of women from certain families only that get raped, men do not get raped, women enjoy rape and exaggerate its trauma, and it's unusual to witness sexual assault (Acquaviva, O'Neal & Clevenger, 2020).

#### *Rhetoric and Language of Reporting Sexual Trauma*

Another factor that contributes to how sexual assault cases are framed in the media is the usage of language. One way through which the impact of language is vividly shown occurs by resorting to the passive voice instead of the active voice (Siefkes-Andrew and Alexopoulos, 2018). The passive voice takes the attention and the responsibility away from the assailant and focuses instead on the subject of the assault. For example, stating "A woman was raped..." gives a different tone than saying "A 30-year-old man rapes woman in broad daylight". The second statement holds the man accountable, while the former does not acknowledge the perpetrator. Other language issues that are often present with media coverage of sexual assault is using verbs such as the survivor "claims" or "admits" instead of the more neutral verbs "states" or "says" (Siefkes-Andrew and Alexopoulos, 2018). The verb "claims" implies that the journalist does not really believe the survivor's statements and the word "admits" connotes that the survivor is at fault and admits it. Euphemism is another problematic issue with covering assault cases in the media (Aroustamian, 2020). Euphemism is toning down or sugarcoating harsher unpleasant terms such as saying "horsing around" instead of "sexually assaulting". (Aroustamian, 2020). This is clearly presented in Egyptian media as well when using rhetoric like "acts defying family values" "he took her virginity" "actions against her honor" instead of bluntly saying he "raped" her. Accordingly, calls for being mindful and thoughtful while reporting traumatic stories to avoid doing more harm to the survivors.

“Rape is violence, not ‘sex’. Reporting on sexual assault means finding not only the language but the context and sensitivity to communicate a trauma that is at once deeply personal and yet a matter of public policy,” Aroustamian referenced the Dart Centre for Journalism & Trauma (2020). Therefore, the statement from the center emphasized the vitality of maintaining ethical standards, acquiring the needed skills for conducting interviews, and attaining awareness of the victim’s and the perpetrator's legal and psychological status.

Related to the rhetoric used in reporting on sexual assault cases, scholars point out to the lack of agency given to the subjects of the assault. She is often represented as the weak helpless victim who was attacked by a male stranger, without any mention of her resistance to the assault, beating the perpetrator or defending herself (Hollander & Rodgers, 2014). Although the media may mention her escape, they will still frame her in a way as the hysterical weepy victim resorting to male-support (Hollander & Rodgers, 2014). Therefore, this presentation of the case, without giving much attention to the survivor’s response disrupts the way people perceive rape cases in specific and women’s strength in general (Hollander & Rodgers, 2014). These representations are highly related to myths about women being weaker than men, making it unimaginable that a woman can stand-up against men’s abuse by herself (Hollander & Rodgers, 2014).

#### *The Power Dynamics in Sexual Assault Cases*

Another theme that dominates the media coverage of sexual violence cases is the absence of an explanation to the societal power-dynamics (Pollino, 2020). In sum, media representations often fail to blame the patriarchal system that allows the spread of violence against women widely, influencing how the crime is framed (Pollino, 2020). Accordingly, two main media approaches to sexual assault exist: the hegemonic and counter hegemonic social positions (Pollino, 2020). The hegemonic representation is that ignoring the patriarchal context, while the counter hegemonic social positions is an opposing rhetoric aiming to put the patriarchal issues in the center of the issue (Pollino, 2020). Related to the hegemony theory, the frames imposed by the media show the dominant ideology that consistently blames the victim instead of the assailant (Pollino, 2020). Due to the strong normalization of these power dynamics, the community itself becomes accustomed to questioning the victim and sympathizing with the assailant, even before

the media does it for them (Pollino, 2020). This normalization is constantly appearing in Egyptian sexual assault cases where the audience hop to ask for excusing the assailant and make up a way to blame the victim. Through the comments' section on social media platforms, it is evident that some people, including women, are sticking to the patriarchal ideologies of victim blaming. Regardless of the case, questions throwing the accountability to the victim instead will immediately be posed by the audience themselves.

## **Attribution Theory**

### *Theory Definition*

Originally introduced in the 1950s by Fritz Heider in his book, *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relationships*, the attribution theory is a set of inquiries about events' causes, consequences, and positive or negative achievements (Weiner, 2010). Belonging to the psychology discipline, the theory looks at causes to make sense of the end results whether intentional or unintentional (Weiner, 2010). It focuses on how people usually justify their own and others' actions. Since the question 'why' is fundamental in human cognition which tries to make sense of events and link them together, the attribution theory is set of principles aiming to explain everyday events (Manusov & Spitzberg, 2008). Accordingly, attributions are defined as the internal thinking and external discussions to interpret events and actions (Manusov & Spitzberg, 2008). "An attribution is a judgment about who or what is the cause of a certain outcome or situation," (Klein, Apple, and Kahn, 2011). Kelly's attribution model lays out three forms of attribution, dispositional, related to qualities or certain characteristics, situational, reasons related to the situation itself, and something odd about the circumstances (Klein, Apple, and Kahn, 2011). Based on that, the fundamental attribution error has been established, where people often underestimate situational factors but over exaggerate dispositional ones (Harvey & Weary, 1984). The theory is also traced back to Aristotle's remarks on placing responsibility (Sahar, 2014). To figure out whether someone is responsible for his/her actions, one must determine whether the action was voluntary in the first place and whether the outcomes were blame or pity (emotionally) and reward or punishment (behaviorally) (Sahar, 2014),

### *How Attribution Works*

There are four main factors that define the attributes or causes related to actions (Weiner, 2010). Firstly, the location of these causes whether they exist within people or outside them. (Weiner, 2010). Secondly, the controllability of these causes, people are capable of altering them or they have to accept them as is (Weiner, 2010). The third factor is endurance and stability, how long these causes can be sustained (Weiner, 2010). Fourthly, the ability to generalize these causes and apply them to different situations (Weiner, 2010). Every cause falls under one spectrum of each of the aforementioned factors (Weiner, 2010). Expanding on these characteristics, scholars have proposed additional four explanations to attributions. The first factor is a focus on correspondence through which people affiliate certain actions to a person's characteristics and nature (Manusov & Spitzberg, 2008). For example, aggressive people behave this way. Relating to sexual assault attributional myths, women who go out late or wear shorter skirts are untrustworthy and are lying about their assault. The second factor is a focus on covariance through which people base attribution on the presence or absence of a cause and action at the same time. A focus on responsibility is the third factor that impacts attributions. This factor is about throwing the responsibility on a certain person or issue to make sense of a situation (Manusov & Spitzberg, 2008). For example, referring to a rapist as 'psychologically troubled' or 'in need of help' to justify his actions (Manusov & Spitzberg, 2008). Focusing on bias is the last factor proposed to explain attribution (Manusov & Spitzberg, 2008). When reasoning about the causes behind actions, people can be biased. The most common type of bias is the fundamental attribution bias through which people justify their actions using external factors rather than internal ones (Manusov & Spitzberg, 2008). According to the theory, there are two explanations that people use to make sense of actions: internal and external reasons (Siefkes-Andrew and Alexopoulos, 2018). Internal attribution is when people affiliate actions to personal reasons such as being shy or angry, while external attribution is affiliating them to external circumstances like the weather or overpopulation (Siefkes-Andrew and Alexopoulos, 2018). The placement of this attribution determines whether these actions are to be considered controllable or not (Siefkes-Andrew and Alexopoulos, 2018).

The attribution theory has also been said to work based on people's urge to make moral judgements affiliated with moral emotions (Sahar, 2014). Referencing Weiner, life is exactly like a courtroom where people feel obliged to pose judgements and live with a "prosecutorial

mindset” that operates as soon as someone violates their social norms (Sahar, 2014). Beyond the individual level, this mindset presumes on a more communal level when attributing reasons for poverty, world hunger, injustice, homelessness, and so forth (Sahar, 2014).

### *Theory Limitations*

Despite the diverse domains that the attribution theory fits with, it was criticized when research limited its scope focusing only on negative consequences like loneliness and shyness. Besides, some scholars point out that attributional explanations often vary from one culture to another which again narrows its applicability. Another limitation to the theory is that the specifications of the theory are still not falsifiable or verifiable almost 50 years later (Manusov & Spitzberg, 2008). The theory is also critiqued for the vague difference between two main concepts of the attribution theory: causes and reasons (Buss, 1978). Causes are more about the circumstances that push for an event to happen, whereas reasons are the goals and purposes aimed from an action (Buss, 1978). The study *Nigel Lawson’s tent: Discourse analysis, attribution theory and the social psychology of fact*, poses three main criticisms to the attribution theory (Potter & Edwards, 1990). First, dealing with the information people perceive to draw conclusions as a given without taking into consideration the contextual factors that come into play (Potter & Edwards, 1990). Secondly, the theory treats language in a neutral way as a mere description while the rhetoric used plays a role in people’s explanations (Potter & Edwards, 1990). Thirdly, the theory hinders the agency of participants in attributional research when researchers construct arguments to infer attributes in a certain way (Potter & Edwards, 1990).

### *Attribution Theory and Sexual Assault*

As mentioned earlier, the attribution theory is mainly concerned with locating responsibility for actions. Related to the established concept of victim-blaming, the attribution theory explains how individuals tend to make judgments about rape victims by placing the responsibility on them instead of the assailants (Grubb & Turner, 2012). These judgments are mainly based on people’s cultural, religious, and personal beliefs (Grubb & Turner, 2012). As previously mentioned, Heider identified two ways of attribution: internal and external. The internal attribution is reasoning that someone behaves this way for reasons within him, while the external is more focused on the situation itself (Grubb & Turner, 2012). This can be applied to victim blaming in

a sense that internal attribution will blame the victim and her personality while external attribution will be more concerned with the situation as a whole (Grubb & Turner, 2012). Another type of attribution that also explains victim blaming is defensive attribution which occurs when people relate to the victim (Grubb & Turner, 2012). Hence, the more similarities people have with a victim, the more likely they will not blame them, and vice-versa (Grubb & Turner, 2012).

Harold Kelley explains that people draw attributions based on three main aspects in a situation: consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness (Klein, Apple, and Kahn, 2011). Consensus occurs when people experience the same issue with the actor, consistency is about whether an actor's action is the same over time, and distinctiveness points out if there is a specific stimulus that triggers this action that would have otherwise been absent (Klein, Apple, and Kahn, 2011). Following Kelley's model, for people to label an act as sexual harassment, they check other people's comments on the victim (consensus), how many times the perpetrator violated the victim (consistency), and whether the perpetrator has had similar situations/ accusations with other women (distinctiveness) (Klein, Apple, and Kahn, 2011). Another way that victim-blaming can be explained through the attribution theory depends on the victims' attributions of the assault themselves (Ullman & Najdowski 2011). Since the victims often blame themselves for their assault using characterological attributions, they elicit people to judge them negatively based on their own attributions (Ullman & Najdowski, 2011).

#### *Attribute Framing*

Attribution theory has been used in research on media coverage of sexual assault as their frames mostly rely on how the audiences attribute the causes of the assault (Siefkes-Andrew and Alexopoulos, 2018). Linked to the framing theory, the attribution theory can clearly explain how audiences draw attributions while reading stories about sexual assault based on the journalists' frames for the story. As mentioned in the section on framing and sexual assault, language plays a huge role in how people perceive stories and hence attribute causes (Siefkes-Andrew and Alexopoulos, 2018). When the frame used highlights the time when the victim was out or her clothing, it automatically intrigues audiences to infer this information as reasons for the assault (Siefkes-Andrew and Alexopoulos, 2018). Besides, the high exposure to myths that shape

people's perceptions of sexual violence later helps them automatically apply them while reasoning about any other case of assault (Siefkes-Andrew and Alexopoulos, 2018). In a study experimenting the link between frames and people's inference, the authors conclude that inferences from frames can generate a standard attribute framing effect through which people automatically draw general conclusions to similar situations (Leong et al, 2017).

## **Stereotyping Theory and Sexual Assault**

### *Defining Stereotypes*

In 1978, French Printer Didot coined the term 'stereotype' referring to a printing process where certain materials have to be repeated (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1981). A related term 'stereotypy' was later developed by psychiatrists describing a pathological condition of repeated and persistent modes of expression (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1981). With Lippman's book *Public Opinion* in 1922, social scientists started picking on the term. He introduced the notion of 'the pictures in our head' illustrating that people's minds are shaped not by reality, but through the representation of reality through the media, which he called 'the pseudo environment' (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1981). Given the complexity of the ideas presented in reality, the pseudo environment entailed more simplistic cognition mainly based on stereotyping (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1981). For Lippman, stereotypes are mental processes that help people navigate, process, and access information to make sense of the world (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1981). Amidst the noise and overwhelming amount of information of the outer world, Lippman explained people resort to already developed cultural stereotypes (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1981). In essence, stereotypes and stereotyping are the key words that come to mind when a specific cognitive category is activated (Cox & Devine, 2015). It's crucial to study how these stereotypical ideas are formed, their content, and their structural cognitions as they are the basis of oppression, discrimination, and prejudice (Cox & Devine, 2015). For example, black people are often stereotyped as being criminals which is problematically oppressive, and hence studying how these images come about is important (Cox & Devine, 2015).

Cox and Devine related stereotypes to the connectionism theory which studies how knowledge is acquired, presented, and recovered (Cox & Devine, 2015). The connectionist approaches' central



principle is based on brain activity and the cognition it follows (Cox & Devine, 2015). In that sense, stereotypes are characterized by affiliating groups stored in the memory with specific attributes (traits and characteristics) (Cox & Devine, 2015). Yet, Cox and Devine refer to the concept of heterogeneous stereotype directionality to point out the problem with putting the groups and the attributes affiliated to them on equal footing (2015). According to them, it's crucial to not just examine how the groups activate certain attributes, but also the opposite whether attributes bring the affiliated groups to mind (Cox & Devine, 2015).

Katz and Braly were the first to empirically use stereotyping in studies. Applied first on Princeton students, subjects were given a list of traits and they had to pick the five most typical traits of a specific group (McCauley & Stitt, 1978). A trait was considered a stereotype based on the extent of agreement between the participants (McCauley & Stitt, 1978). Due to the lack of a quantitative measure to stereotypes, there is not enough literature about how stereotypes are formed, changed, or lead to behavioral change (McCauley & Stitt, 1978). In an attempt to develop a better measurement mechanism to stereotypes, Theorist Brigham asked subjects to determine the percentage of interest or characteristics affiliated with a specific group stereotype (McCauley & Stitt, 1978).

Stereotypes are considered a middle ground between qualitative and quantitative research through humanities, cultural, and administrative methods (Seiter, 1986). Understanding the impact of stereotypes will help scholars examine their role in the media and have a more comprehensive understanding of media effects theories such as uses and gratifications (Seiter, 1986).

#### *Are Stereotypes Entirely Bad?*

Since stereotypes have been highly referred to as prejudices, they have been regarded as 'negative' and 'bad' (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1981). Allport criticized stereotypes for oversimplifying and overgeneralizing information and hence inaccurate (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1981). Moreover, stereotypes consist of rigid beliefs and can hinder the cognitive process (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1981). Stereotypical images about minorities also stress and threaten them as they are constantly pressured to defy them (Cohen & Gracia, 2005). Besides, a sense of



collective fear and threat develops in stereotyped groups where they constantly worry about how their group members are presented to avoid threatening situations (Cohen & Gracia, 2005). This can be particularly shown in the example of Muslims in the US or Europe where Muslims constantly worry they may be subjected to racist attacks in response to radical terror groups affiliating themselves with Islam. It is why Muslim leaders and communities constantly condemn any terrorist attacks saying they do not represent Islam. In a political contextual level, leaders or groups can play on negative stereotypes to ignite propaganda against their opponents (McFarlane, 2014). Theorist McFarlane referred to social Darwinism through which people rely on stereotypical images to survive (McFarlane, 2014). This is often seen in political debates when some candidates make ageist or sexist comments against other candidates to question their capabilities.

On the other hand, some scholars argue that despite their negative impacts, stereotypes are useful in helping people navigate their thoughts easier (McFarlane, 2014). Stereotyping constitutes the basis for socialization, social learning, cultural syncretism, in addition to behavioral and social processes, as they all depend on processing previous and current experiences about social phenomenon (McFarlane, 2014). Given the constant change and one's lack of sufficient information, people rely on stereotyping to make automatic and fast judgements (McFarlane, 2014).

#### *Sexual Assault and Stereotypes in the Media*

Media representations of assault are heavily influenced by the dominant culture's images and stereotypes (Hirsch, 1995). These stereotypes impact the story narrative in a way that if either the victim or the perpetrator alter the set standards, the victim can be blamed and the perpetrator excused (McKimmie, Masser & Bongiorno, 2015). According to Stuart, McKimmie, and Masser, there is a misconception around what 'real rape' is (2016). People often perceive rape happening in deserted public areas where a stranger attacks his victim, while it has been reported that the majority of rape crimes are committed by preparators known to the victim (Stuart, McKimmie & Masser, 2016). Accordingly, people usually only sympathize with the rape crime that conforms to their stereotypical image (a stranger's crime) and blame the victims whose stories do not fit the rape stereotype (an acquaintance's crime) (Stuart, McKimmie & Masser,

2016). To consider her a ‘real’ victim, she has to fit in certain behavior stereotypes like proving she did nothing to seduce the perpetrator, showing she was almost physically injured resisting the attack, immediately report the attack, and appearing emotionally traumatized enough (Stuart, McKimmie & Masser, 2016). If they fail to achieve these standards, victims will automatically be viewed as untrustworthy and blamed for their own assaults (Stuart, McKimmie & Masser, 2016). Interestingly, rape stereotypes are just the primary framework that people access rape stories through, they later resort to gender stereotypes in case the former failed to form their judgement (Stuart, McKimmie & Masser, 2016). For example, explaining that the victim left her children at home and went to work or left them with a babysitter will ignite talks about mothers staying at home caring for their children. A more recent example in Egypt happened with the story of a woman whose neighbors and portman barged into her house and allegedly killed her by throwing her off her balcony on the sixth floor (Daily Mail). When the media reported the story, they wrote “killed wearing her clothes” and some attempted to show her innocence by explaining that the guy was not a friend, but a pipe seller because if she wasn’t wearing her clothes or did not fit into any of the socially accepted ‘good woman’ stereotypes, she will lose all the sympathy.

Adding to the notion of ‘ideal’ victim, referencing Susan Estrich and Elizabeth Stanko, women are expected to look after their own safety by not attracting men’s attention and assessing risks. This has been related to the neo-liberalization privatization strategy through which problems are assessed on the individual level and not the societal holistic level (Randall, 2010). Another common stereotype that the media uses with victims is the ‘fallen angels’ which is problematic since it intrigues the court and the public to question this innocence and eventually discredit her for the lack of ‘angelic qualities’ (Hirsch, 1994). Alcohol and intoxication in rape crimes have also contributed to the stereotypes against victims in the literature where intoxicated parties face partial blame for their rape (Finch & Munro, 2007). Moreover, Sampert tackles the most common rape myths and stereotypes including, sexual assault is a sexual not violent act, women falsely accuse innocent men, perpetrators are from the minority groups, men with well-off backgrounds do not violate women, the victim is responsible for the assault (2010). Accepting rape myths and stereotypes strengthens the patriarchal system by sympathizing with assailants at the expense of demonizing women victims (Chapleau & Oswald, 2013).

After discussing the framing, attribution, and stereotyping theories, it is essential to note that their intertwining is apparent, especially with covering cases of sexual violence. Studies on sexual assault have been using all three theories together to give a holistic understanding to the issue. The frames used overall imply the tone and the theme to perceive the story, using attributes that people can automatically link together, and common stereotypes regarding women in general and victims of assault in specific.

## **Trauma and the Media**

### *The Role of the Media in Trauma Coverage*

Trauma is an unresolved event that is continuously re-lived in the present as an imposed memory (Ross, 2003). Psychologist Judith Herman stated that traumatic events affect their subjects' sense of control, connection, and meaning which accordingly makes them feel overwhelmed and disempowered (1998). Therefore, they seek validation and regaining control over their lives (Herman, 1998). After working on cross-cultural therapy and treating people from fifty different countries, Ross realized that private therapy is not enough and the societal problems cannot just be solved with the privileged few who can afford therapy (2003). Hence, she acknowledges the role of mass information delivered through mass media for the healing process (Ross, 2003). Despite the criticisms posed to the media, Ross considers it an ally that is in a good place to help people cope with trauma (2003). Accordingly, it has the power to impact society and transform horror to hope (Ross, 2003). Moreover, delivering stories of trauma about certain groups helps people resonate and emphasize with them (Meek, 2011). Yet, covering their stories in the media right after they have experienced a newsworthy traumatic event may end up harming them instead (Embelton et al, 2003). This highly depends on how the media treats their stories and the experience with the journalists that may affect their recovery speed and their tendencies to develop post-traumatic stress (Embelton et al, 2003).

Aside from the previous subject-centric analysis of the media's coverage of trauma, it's vital to pinpoint the profit-centric motif behind it. "If it bleeds, it leads," is a common motto that has been used by journalists while determining the newsworthiness of a story (Barnes & Edmonds, 2015). Based on this mentality, news editors prefer dramatic stories because happy news does

not sell (Barnes & Edmonds, 2015). Given the intense competition between media outlets, journalists often pick the tragic stories instantly and cover them leading to sensational news coverage (Barnes & Edmonds, 2015). This is probably why news of disasters, accidents, and tragedies spread the news (Castle, 1999). In the journalists' defense, Castle illustrates that bad news usually transfers faster even in families or on a personal level (Castle, 1999). He argued that the media's interest in trauma does not necessarily imply their lack of empathy, it's just a representation of real life (Castle, 1999).

### *The Speak-up Dilemma*

Neurologist and the Founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud once stated that the way people react to traumatic events varies based on a person's background, memories of previous catastrophes, and the cultural and political context where the trauma takes place and how it is managed by institutions such as legal forces or the media (Kaplan, 2005). In her book, *Popular Trauma Culture*, Rothe navigates how trauma functions in today's culture (2011). According to her, trauma culture is shaped and reshaped by the media and its engagement with the audiences. Therefore, it is essential to explore how the media presents these stories (Rothe, 2011). The "self-help" notion that the media promotes is primarily based on the victim vs survivor narrative where the victim has to speak up and share her/his story to heal (Rothe, 2011). There are different ways through which survivors cope with their traumas, including understanding and expressing their emotions in addition to regaining control over their experiences (Strauss Swanson & Szymanski, 2020). Healing from trauma is also reported to occur when the survivors share their sexual assault stories, gain support from others, and install healing strategies (Strauss Swanson & Szymanski, 2020). Survivors' engagement in activism to out perpetrators, help other survivors, and publicly share their experiences is also considered one form of healing. (Strauss Swanson & Szymanski, 2020). Through the article, *Covering Trauma: Suggestions for a more Collaborative approach*, Herman illustrates how traumatic experiences alter people's sense of control, connection, and meaning (Sykes, Embelton, Green, Hippocrates, and Richards, 2003). For them to recover, they need to validate their experiences and feelings with others from their support circle (Sykes, Embelton, Green, Hippocrates, and Richards, 2003). Literature on post-traumatic stress suggests that the first step for coping is by telling the story (Dworznic, 2006). Five out of the six methods for counselling victims of trauma include retelling the story because

talking helps them draw meanings out of their experiences (Dworznic, 2006). For instance, tackling stories of sexual assault in the media is important to respect the survivors' voices, shed awareness on the cause, and provide advocacy (Whiting et al., 2020). Telling the story hence is considered a progress through which a victim moves to the stage of being a survivor then an advocate (Delker, Salton, & McLean, 2019). Moreover, the concept of 'forced silence' imposed when the victims are unable to share their experience and suffer in silence is considered a highly destructive secondary trauma (Lister, 1982).

While the speak-up rhetoric has gained popularity, some theorists were skeptical about the media's impact on covering these events on the survivors themselves. For one, it was accused of using people's pain for entertainment or more viewership (Rothe, 2011). Even the hit Oprah Winfrey show was criticized for selling people's tragedies as commodities to consumers, creating ad breaks before an important revelation to keep them engaged (Rothe, 2011). On a more contextual level, it is criticized for its positive narrative that changes victims to survivors and punishes perpetrators, donating that the system is justly functioning and does not need change (Rothe, 2011). According to Rothe, this self-help culture harms the community in a sense that it makes the issue individualistic (the survivor has to heal and the perpetrator has to be punished) and neglects the larger picture to create policies and alter the system (Rothe, 2011). While sharing their stories may help survivors garner support, it labels them as people who are in need of psychological help, asking for pity, or even more, defines their societal roles as merely victims or survivors (Rothe, 2011). Moreover, survivors risk facing discrimination, stigmatization, retaliation from the perpetrators, or getting fired (Hart, 2019). Some survivors also share the view that the perpetrators will not be penalized and hence avoid the hustle of reporting (Hart, 2019).

#### *Issues with the Media's Coverage of Trauma*

Covering trauma in the media is challenging for both journalists and the sources. Referencing Pierre Janet, traumatic memories are hard to be narrated and resist the language to tell the story (Ross, 2003). In addition, the failure to survive in a specific traumatic event impacts the way people react to future stressful events (Ross, 2003). Hence, trauma is problematic in communication contexts given that it's hard for the subjects to make sense of their experience

and narrate it despite the resistance (Ross, 2003). The media then recreates the traumatic experiences by making sense of its vagueness and providing excess content which creates more sensation to the stories (Ross, 2003). For journalists, the mission is to promptly get the story, which ignites questions about the possible benefits or harms of the story for the sources themselves and the way subjects of trauma should be treated journalistically (Kay et al, 2010). Nevertheless, the journalistic techniques in trauma coverage have been questionable, forcing people to call for a 'do no harm' motto to make sure no ethical lines are crossed (Kay et al, 2010). While there are benefits to the communities who speak out to the media such as healing and validation, as mentioned earlier, journalistic practices can hinder this process just by its mere presence (Kay et al, 2011). With the increasing number of reporters in the scene, the chaos, emotional intensity, feelings of intrusion, and stress elevates (Kay et al, 2011). To top it off, interviewers may harm the victims by showing a lack of empathy or asking inconsiderate questions (Kay et al, 2011). Another issue with the media coverage lies in the inaccurate reporting that can lead victims to lose trust in the journalists altogether (Kay et al, 2011).

Adding to the dilemmas that journalists face while reporting traumatic events is getting the story in the first place (Maxson, 2000). How to draw the line between respecting their privacy, being sensitive, and still having a good story? (Maxson, 2000). Some reporters expressed feeling like intruders who interfere in people's private grief time (Kay et al, 2011). "I felt like I had to compromise my humanity. A 12- year-old girl was raped and murdered while babysitting. I had to interview the family. I felt it was their time, and why should I be sticking my nose in their business when they needed time to grieve," Maxson quoted a reporter sharing his insights (2000). Besides, working under stress makes it harder for journalists to maintain their code of conduct: should they wait for permission to take a historic war picture, help the victim instead, or just cover the story? (Englund, Forsberg, & Saveman, 2014). Not only this, but also the shift from an empathetic reporter on the field to a tough-minded writer on a computer unconsciously creates a change in the language that may seem betraying to the trusting source (Josph, 2011).

With the previously discussed possibilities and dilemmas, the media can both provide a great sense of healing and validation to traumatized communities, or add more stress and retraumatize

the victims. Whether help or harm, it's entirely the journalists' role in making a victim of trauma's experience with the media positive with the least possible harms. (Kay et al, 2011).

### **Sociocultural Theory**

To comprehensively examine victims/survivors' experiences after speaking-up, the cultural aspect influencing their general reactions cannot be overlooked. In 1978, theorist Vygotsky developed the sociocultural theory to assess how individuals make sense of the world and accordingly behave. To Vygotsky, people's minds do not solely work by spontaneously responding to the physical world, but also depend on methods and approaches to change the world and their circumstances (Lantolf, 2000). Humans resort to signs and tools that regulate their relationship with others. Both physical and psychological tools are socially constructed by culture and inherited from one generation to another (Lantolf, 2000 ). In that sense, Vygotsky explained that psychology's role is to examine social and mental activities based on cultural conceptions (Lantolf, 2000 ). Identifying people's mental mechanisms cannot be traced to simple social interactions, but rather to the process and approaches used by individuals while they interact with one another (Scott, 2013). These signs can be presented in a form of arts, language, counting system, maps, writings, and so forth . Yet, people use cultural appropriation to these signs in order to apply them to different contexts. Accordingly, people acquire new skills and knowledge about the world norms through interacting with people since childhood (Scott, 2013). The purpose of the sociocultural theory then is to examine the natural, individual and social factors that make up individual' collective understanding of the world (Mahn, 1999). In that sense, societal meanings both create and are created by humans (Mahn, 1999). It is noteworthy to mention that a theoretical divide exists within the theory between scholars who acknowledge that both the individual and the group/environment is inseparable, contrary to others who reject the existence of individuals or groups and only view the world as process such as events (Sawyer, 2002).

Applying the concepts of the sociocultural theory to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, some scholars argued that new dynamics between the individual and society altered the older understandings. During the early 20 century when Vygotsky established the sociocultural theory, individuals' identities were more or less universalized and people had to follow the same liberal democracy ideals through self-discipline and motivation (Torres-Velásquez, 2000). On the other hand, in today's world,



diversity and individualization are respected and encouraged. Hence, people have room to create their own interpretations of culture as opposed to the rigidity of cultural concepts in the past (Torres-Velásquez, 2000).

The sociocultural theory has been linked to sexual violence, explaining that the cultural factors surrounding a victim/survivor can impact her psychological well-being and how she feels about the assault. For instance, the study *The impact of sociocultural contexts on mental health following sexual violence* on ethnic minorities in a global sample, identified three the main contextual factors that affect how a victim/survivor feels after a sexual assault (Dworkin & Weaver, 2020). Firstly, social norms, which are the normalized cultural beliefs and ideologies. Secondly, structures, that are solid systems and institutions followed within society. Thirdly, common stressors such as collective trauma or challenges (Dworkin & Weaver, 2020). The study concluded that the aforementioned factors affect how both the victims/survivors and the community react to sexual violence. In addition, the presence or absence of these factors can also either lead the victim/survivor to feel more stressed or more protected (Dworkin & Weaver, 2020). In a qualitative study exploring the influence of sociocultural factors on communities' response to sexual assault by interviewing leaders of sexual assault response teams, it was suggested that the efficiency of the response is highly dependent on sociocultural norms (Greeson, 2018). For example, communities that resort to victim-blaming, rape myths, denial of sexual assault, or stigmatizes victims/survivors, often face resistance to criminalizing sexual violence. Accordingly, this resistance hinders the victims/survivors' access to the needed services (Greeson, 2018). In essence, it can be summarized that cultural factors impact how a victim/survivor feels about her assault.



## Chapter Four

### Methodology and Research Questions

As the literature review suggested scholars disagree about the different impacts of the media's coverage of trauma on the subjects themselves. As previously mentioned, some believe speaking up publicly is therapeutic and helps inspire other survivors, while others think it can be triggering and threatening. In essence, it is unclear how the media's portrayal and the interactions with journalists impact the survivors themselves. Why do the survivors speak to the media in the first place? What do they expect from the media? What makes one coverage better than another? What are the main issues with the Egyptian media's coverage of sexual assault? Before delving into these questions, it is essential to examine the Egyptian media's treatment of sexual assault cases first to analyze how it impacts its victims/survivors. According to the literature, there are multiple frames that generally dictate the media's coverage of sexual violence cases such as victim blaming, sensationalizing the assault, discrediting the victim, and normalizing assault. Although there are a few studies about the Egyptian media's portrayal of sexual assault, they are still very scarce. Accordingly, the following research questions are posed.

**RQ1: How are cases of sexual assault framed in the Egyptian media?**

**RQ2: How do journalists cover cases of sexual assault in Egypt?**

**RQ3: Why do victims/survivors seek the media?**

**RQ4a: How does the media's coverage of sexual assault impact the survivors? Is the media's overall impact more negative or positive?**

**RQ4b: Does the media frames influence how victims/survivors perceive their media experience?**

### *Triangulation*

In this study, a triangulation technique is used to obtain the data. Triangulation is a data collection approach through which more than one method is used to tackle the issue comprehensively and holistically (Carter et al, 2014). There are four types of triangulation; method triangulation, investigator triangulation, theory triangulation, and data source triangulation (Carter et al, 2014). Method triangulation occurs when the researcher uses different research methodologies for the same inquiry, investigator triangulation is the involvement of two researchers in one study to give different insights, theory triangulation is about analyzing issues through different theories, and lastly data source triangulation is the usage of multiple sources from different fields for interviewees (Carter et al, 2014). This research uses both the method triangulation and the data source triangulation. Since the purpose of this paper is to explore the effect of media coverage of sexual assault on the survivors, it is essential to analyze the media coverage of sexual assault cases first. Accordingly, a content analysis is conducted on the coverage of three major Egyptian sexual assault cases to pinpoint the main frames, rhetoric, and trends of the coverage. The second stage of this study involves intensive interviews with the survivors of these three cases and others to evaluate their media experience and its consequences. Following the data source triangulation approach, interviews with journalists about their precautions and policies with covering sexual assault are also conducted. In addition, interviews with feminist activists who work closely with survivors of sexual assault are also conducted to develop a more thorough understanding about reporting sexual assault to the media and its implications on the survivors.

### *1. Content Analysis*

Content analysis is the process of obtaining information from certain delivered material or messages such as texts to derive the main themes of the messages (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). It is considered a lenient and flexible method for researchers as they can tailor its usage to their specific studies (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Content analysis studies function through sampling the content to identify the material that will be analyzed, creating a coding book to categorize the content, conducting the coding, then doing the analysis.

### *Sample*

In this study, three cases are picked to analyze the Egyptian media scene and how it covers sexual violence against women in 298 articles. Each case is looked at through different media outlets based on its number of followers and number of articles covering the case. Different media outlets, from both English and Arabic language outlets, are used for representativeness. Moreover, both local and international media outlets are examined to get an overview of their coverages. The local outlets examined are Youm 7, Egyptian Streets, Al-Shorouk, Daily News Egypt, and Rasd News Network, while the international outlets used are Reuters, BBC Arabic, Gulf News, and New York Times.

The first case covered in this study is the Tahrir square gang harassment cases that increased after the 2011 revolution and vividly re-appeared in the following years at the Tahrir Square on the days celebrating its memory. Given the timing and context, this case is important to be examined, especially that it featured victims/survivors who openly and freely talked about their experiences with a so long taboo subject. For this case, four main news outlets are examined: Youm 7, Egyptian Streets, Reuters, and BBC Arabic. The Youm 7 paper is chosen as it has the highest number of followers (19 million followers on Facebook) and the largest number of articles on the case (10 articles). Egyptian Streets is picked to represent the English papers, representing six articles given that their followers reached 378K and their posts receive a lot of engagement. For the international coverage, both Reuters (15 articles) and BBC Arabic (18 articles) are chosen as they had the highest number of articles in the international category.

The second case is the Ayat girl's rape attempt. The story revolves around a teenage girl who stabbed her rapist to death after he kidnapped and tried to rape her. This case is interesting for analysis as the girl publicly spoke-up including on videos and pictures. Unlike the other cases in this study, this survivor comes from a more conservative background and hence provides a different cultural response to both the incident and the media coverage. The case is extensively covered in Egyptian media, however it is not equally covered internationally. The choice of outlets for this case was also based on both the outlet's popularity and the number of available articles. Youm 7 is picked for 83 articles. Egyptian Streets reports on this case only reached three articles, accordingly, two articles from the English newspaper Daily News Egypt are examined

to add more English language content. Al-Shorouk newspaper is also examined for its wide coverage through 44 articles on the case. Lastly, three articles from Rasd Network are assessed given their relatively large number of followers on Facebook (12 million) and the high engagement of audiences on their page through comments, shares, and likes.

For the international outlets, the Ayat case was almost not covered. For this study, one article from New York Times and one article from the Gulf News are examined as the only international coverage of the assault accessed.

The third case tackled in this study is the Ahmed Bassam Zaki (ABZ) which ignited the latest digital feminist movement in Egypt in 2020 with the rise of the Instagram platform that outed him, Assault Police. This case was extremely crucial for examination as it garnered both domestic and international media attention. The choice of outlets was based on the number of articles published on each platform. The outlets used to analyze this case are Youm 7 (63 articles), Egyptian Streets (41 articles), Reuters (eight articles), and BBC Arabic (seven articles).

Since the articles accessible in each case were limited to a great extent, sampling was not needed and the whole population was included in the research. For each case, specific search keywords were used through the search mechanism in each outlet. In the first case, the search terms used were “gang sexual harassment in Tahrir Square” and in Arabic, “تحرش جماعي بميدان التحرير.” The Ayat case used the keywords, “Ayat girl”, “teenager stabs her rapist to death”, and the victim/survivor’s name in English and Arabic. For the ABZ case, the words used were “Ahmed Bassam Zaki or Ahmed Bassam Zaky” and in Arabic, “أحمد بسام ذكي” and “أحمد بسام زكي”.

Media Outlet	Number of Articles	Case
Youm 7	10	Tahrir Gang Assault
Egyptian Streets	6	Tahrir Gang Assault
Reuters	15	Tahrir Gang Assault
BBC Arabic	18	Tahrir Gang Assault
Youm 7	83	Ayat Rape Attempt
Egyptian Streets	3	Ayat Rape Attempt
Daily News Egypt	2	Ayat Rape Attempt
Al-Shorouk	44	Ayat Rape Attempt
Rasd Network	3	Ayat Rape Attempt

Gulf News	1	Ayat Rape Attempt
New York Times	1	Ayat Rape Attempt
Youm 7	63	ABZ
Egyptian Streets	41	ABZ
Reuters	8	ABZ
BBC Arabic	7	ABZ
Total	298	

Intercoder reliability: To calculate intercoder reliability, 10% of the sample was re-coded by an international management master's degree holder. The mean percentage of agreement was 95.4%.

### *Coding Process*

In this study, the unit of analysis is a textual article. The coding primarily focused on the language of the authors, the adjectives used to describe the victim/survivor and the assailant, the section under which the article is covered in the papers, whether the names of the victim/survivor and the assailant are mentioned, and finally the picture used for the piece. In addition, frames derived from the literature (mentioned in chapter three) such as victim blaming, sensationalizing sexual assault coverage, normalization, mentioning the assailant's background, and discrediting the victim were also installed to examine whether these articles conform to the established rape myths or not.

### Content Analysis Variables and Operational Definitions

#### A. How was the survivor portrayed?

1. Victim (referring to her helplessness, psychological trauma, struggles against the perpetrator,..)
2. Demon (making the assault her fault or portraying her in a guilty light, )
3. Survivor (mentioning positive developments in her life, respecting her agency,...)
4. Mentioned as a victim, but also was blamed
5. Other (did not mention much about her)

#### B. How was the perpetrator portrayed?

1. Demon/criminal

2. Psychologically troubled
3. Neutral

C. Rape Myths: (Yes or No)

-Normalization (mentioning sexual assault as systematic targeting of women/ the case is one of many)

-Sensationalism and erotization (making the story sexual and mentioning explicit sexual details of the assault or using “kissed” instead of “assaulted/violated”, etc.)

-Victim Blaming and individualization (making it the girl’s individual problem, mentioning her clothes, mentioning she was out late, etc.)

-Discrediting the victim (questioning her story, using her personal life to downgrade her, etc.)

D. Mentioning the background of the assailant/his family.

1. Yes
2. No

E. Which term was used in reference to the girls, victims or survivors?

1. Victim
2. Survivor
3. NA (not referred to as either)

F. Which section was the story covered with?

1. News
2. Accidents/Crime
3. Women
4. Other

G. Was the name of the survivor mentioned?

1. Yes

2. No
3. Initials only or fake name
4. First name only

H. Was the name of the assailant mentioned?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Initials only or fake name
4. First name only

I. What picture was used?

1. General (picture of the court, Egyptian street,...)
2. Survivor
3. Survivor with eyes/face covered
4. Assailant
5. Assailant covered
6. No picture

## 2. Interviews

The second method used in this research is intensive interviews with different stakeholders to get a holistic view of the media's coverage of sexual assault. Interviews are helpful to delve deeper into people's experiences and insights with certain issues than other data collection methods such as surveys and focus groups (Mears, 2012). Interviews are conducted in a semi-structured way with mostly open-ended questions through which the researcher follows a set of thoughtfully written questions, but also has room for follow-ups based on the conversation (Brounéus, 2010). The feminist interview structures is one of the various types of interview structures that takes a non-hierarchical approach (Legard et al, 2003). Instead of the researcher-participant approach, they push for a more participatory method to avoid objectifying the participants. Hence, both parties are able talk about a specific issue to reach collaborative conclusions (Legard et al,

2003 ). Interviews are also highly beneficial with more complex and sensitive issues as they provide a participant-centric atmosphere to help participants freely expand on their experiences and ideas (Coombes et al, 2009). Besides, the fact that researchers can ask for more details and clarifications increases the validity of the interview results (Coombes et al, 2009). However, some scholars point to the ethical issues of conducting interviews for the dilemma of maintaining privacy and confidentiality of the participants (Allmark et al, 2009). In addition, some literature points to the possibility of academic interviews harming the participants (Allmark et al, 2009).

Given the sensitivity of this topic, interviews are the most convenient data collection method to provide the participants with room to freely talk and expand on their experiences. Three main groups of participants are interviewed for this study: survivors of sexual assault who spoke to the media, feminist activists who work closely with survivors of sexual violence, and journalists who cover gender-based violence issues. To address the ethical issues with interviews, all participants were filled-in with the details of this study and the main areas of discussion to know what to expect before they choose to participate. They were all also given a standard consent form (verbal/written) noting that their participation is voluntary, and that they can skip questions, or quit the interview at any time in case they feel triggered. Moreover, activists and journalists were given the option to participate anonymously while all victims/survivors remain anonymous in this research for their own security. Interviews with the victims/survivors were mainly about why they spoke to the media, how their experience with the reporters was, what makes one coverage better than the other, the rhetoric they preferred, and the issues with reporting anonymously. For the activists, the discussions were about the media's role and whether it does more harm or good to the survivors based on the feedback they get and the main issues with the coverage of sexual assault in Egypt. Lastly, the journalists were asked about the precautionary measures (if any) they take to cover stories of sexual violence, how they reach their sources, their motifs from covering these stories, and so forth. All interviews lasted for about 30-45 minutes on average.

### *Sample*

Due to the sensitivity of the issue, it was necessary to use non-probability sampling to reach the participants as they fall under the category of hard to reach populations. Accordingly, some survivors were contacted through purposive sampling through which a specific relevant case was



picked like the ABZ and Tahrir survivors. Others were picked through snowballing techniques where survivors were reached through activists they trust after getting their consent.

The same techniques were applied to the activists and journalists who were contacted through either purposive sampling for their expertise on the topic or through snowballing through which some participants were contacted through their colleagues. For journalists, a social media call on a group for journalists on Facebook was also used.

### \*Victims/Survivors Interviews

Seven interviews were conducted with survivors of sexual assault who spoke to the media. One of the survivors is a minor (under 18 years old) and was not psychologically ready to speak, so an interview with a close source to her was conducted instead. For easier reference, the victims/survivors will be labelled as Victim/Survivor A, Victim/Survivor B, Victim/Survivor C, Victim/Survivor D, Victim/Survivor E, Victim/Survivor F, and Victim/Survivor G. The choice of these particular cases was based on their psychological readiness to participate.

**Victim/Survivor A:** One of the survivors of the Tahrir Square gang-assault in 2013 during the second anniversary of the 25<sup>th</sup> of January revolution. She spoke to the media publicly and was interviewed by both domestic and international media outlets who referred to her by name.

**Victim/Survivor B:** A victim/survivor of the Tahrir Square gang-assault in 2013 and another rape crime that happened at her home years later. She also became a feminist activist afterwards working on sexual harassment in specific. While her identity is known, she was only comfortable sharing her story with specific media outlets in her own writing and hence did not give any interviews. However, some outlets still picked up her story.

**A close source to victim/survivor C:** Since this survivor of a rape attempt is considered a minor and was unready to speak, an interview with a source close to her about his experience with the media was conducted. The media extensively covered this case with live interviews, videos, and

photos of the survivor and her family. Details about this case will be limited to avoid identifying the source who wished to remain anonymous.

**Victim/Survivor D:** One of the victims/survivors of Ahmed Bassam Zaki (ABZ) in 2020 and one of the first to speak-up against him publicly. She shared her story on both social media and later through international media outlets.

**Victim/Survivor E:** A survivor of rape and abuse at work by her boss. She only shared her story in a video on her personal social media account in 2020 then deleted it later. Her case is important as she preferred digital media where she controls the narrative and intentionally avoided mainstream media.

**Victim/Survivor F:** A sexual harassment and physical abuse victim/survivor who first shared her story on social media in 2021 then was contacted by mainstream media. She posted the story publicly and her identity is known to the public.

**Victim/Survivor G:** As an 11-year old Egyptian residing in the US, her Egyptian priest sexually assaulted her during a confession session while they were both in America. When she finally grasped what happened, she tried to report him to the church when she was 16-year-old and kept fighting for 17 years afterwards. After she realized the church is not taking actions against him, she took to the social media to out him publicly using her own social media platforms in 2020. A few days later, her case was picked by domestic and international media until the priest was finally defrocked from the Coptic church both in Egypt and the US. She is also now an activist against sexual assault.

#### \*Activists Interviews

Ten interviews were conducted with feminist activists and lawyers directly working on cases of gender-based violence. This sample of activists was picked based on their availability and openness to speak about the topic.

1. **Shady Noor:** An Egyptian filmmaker and activist who was heavily involved with survivors of the ABZ and the Fairmont gang rape cases. Aside from supporting the survivors and offering guidance, he also helped some survivors speak to international media outlets anonymously for the cause.
2. **Nada Hassan Nashat:** A lawyer at the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance (CEWLA) which works on women's rights cases. She has worked closely with a diverse range of sexual assault survivors.
3. **Zeina Amr:** Founder of Catcalls of Cairo, an online platform covering anonymous testimonies of women who have been sexually harassed in Cairo. She is also one of the feminist activists who were involved in the 2020 Egyptian Me Too movement online.
4. **Amal Elmohandes:** Former director of the Women Human Rights Defenders Program at Nazra for Feminist Studies and a feminist activist.
5. **Ragia Omran:** Lawyer and human-rights activist with twenty years of experience. She is actively involved in civil society organizations and served in the Egyptian National Council for Human Rights for four years.
6. **Alia Soliman:** Former marketing and communication unit head at HarassMap, a non-governmental organization working on mapping and curbing sexual harassment in Egypt. She also holds an MA degree in gender and development and worked on training for journalists on the coverage of gender-based violence stories.
7. **Mozn Hassan:** Founder of the organization Nazra for Feminist Studies. As a feminist activist and human rights defender, she has worked with a large number of gender-based violence survivors and witnessed their experiences with the media first hand.

8. **Dina Elmokadem:** An Egyptian lawyer who is particularly relevant to this study as she represented the aforementioned Ayat girl case and attended the media interviews with her.
9. **Speak-up Founder:** The founder of the Facebook page and initiative Speak-Up which supports victims/survivors of gender-based violence. She preferred to keep her identity anonymous.
10. **The Co-founder of an application for survivors of gender-based violence:** The mobile application provides various legal and psychological support for victims/survivors of sexual assault. She preferred to keep her identity sealed.

*\*Reporters Interviews:*

Seven interviews were conducted with journalists and TV presenters about their experiences with covering sexual assault cases. This sample was picked based on their reachability and availability.

1. **Riham Saeed:** An Egyptian TV host at Al Nahar TV channel, tackling societal issues in Egypt, including sexual assault. Her episode on the show Sabaya El-Kheir with the victim/survivor known in the media as the “Mall Girl” in 2015 stirred a lot of controversy and the victim/survivor later sued Saeed for it causing the show’s suspension for a while. Saeed was also sentenced with six months in prison after the incident (Riham Saeed Sentenced to Prison for Airing Private Photographs of a Sexual Harassment Victim, 2016). She sparked a lot of controversies during her career tackling topics such as interviewing people who believe they are possessed. More recently, she was accused of torturing animals on live television and making unacceptable comments on obesity, both leading Egypt’s Supreme Council for Media Regulation to suspend her show temporarily.
2. **Mai Shams El Din:** A video producer at a reputable international outlet who worked on the ABZ case and was later contacted to cover the Fairmont case and interview the victim/survivor anonymously.

3. **Nihal Samir Saad:** A journalist at Daily News Egypt in charge of the women's section through which sexual assault cases are usually covered.
4. **Heba Anees:** Freelance editor and writer at Mada Masr and El Manassa. She recently worked on producing a video for the survivor of the Masnoura gang harassment case.
5. **Hany Samih:** A journalist at Al Dostor Egyptian newspaper for the investigations section.
6. **Doaa Gaber:** A reporter at Cairo 24 newspaper.
7. **Nada Mohamed Nour:** Editor at the Egyptian El Watan newspaper.

## Chapter Five

### Results

#### RQ1: How are Cases of Sexual Assault in Egypt Framed in the Media?

In order to answer this question, the dominant frames of sexual violence found in the literature were assessed within the media coverage of the three aforementioned cases. Accordingly, the content analysis was conducted to analyze three different cases: the Tahrir Square gang harassment, the Ayat rape attempt, and the case of Ahmed Bassam Zaki (ABZ) who was found guilty of sexually assaulting a number of girls. For the first case, 10 articles were examined from the Egyptian Youm 7 paper, six articles were analyzed from Egyptian Streets outlet, 15 articles from Reuters and 18 articles from BBC Arabic. The Ayat girl case had 83 articles on Youm 7, three articles from Egyptian streets, two articles from Daily News Egypt, three articles from Rasd Network and 44 articles from Al-Shorouk newspaper. For the international outlets, the Ayat case was almost not covered. Only two articles were found on the New York Times and the Gulf News. The ABZ case was tackled through 63 articles from Youm 7, 41 articles from Egyptian Streets, eight articles from Reuters, and seven articles from BBC Arabic.

Media Outlet	Number of Articles	Case
Youm 7	10	Tahrir Gang Assault
Egyptian Streets	6	Tahrir Gang Assault
Reuters	15	Tahrir Gang Assault
BBC Arabic	18	Tahrir Gang Assault
Youm 7	83	Ayat Rape Attempt
Egyptian Streets	3	Ayat Rape Attempt
Daily News Egypt	2	Ayat Rape Attempt
Al-Shorouk	44	Ayat Rape Attempt
Rasd Network	3	Ayat Rape Attempt
Gulf News	1	Ayat Rape Attempt
New York Times	1	Ayat Rape Attempt
Youm 7	63	ABZ
Egyptian Streets	41	ABZ
Reuters	8	ABZ
BBC Arabic	7	ABZ
Total	298	

### *Comparative Overview of the Three Cases in the Media*

Differences between how each category of media outlets presented the cases were vividly shown. For instance, the mainstream local newspapers overall used the most victim-blaming and sensational rhetoric while it was absent in the international media. In addition, differences were found within Arabic speaking and English speaking local outlets where Arabic newspapers (Youm 7 and Al-Shorouk) used more rape myths than English speaking outlets (Egyptian Streets and Daily News Egypt).

The Ayat rape attempt had the most rape myths in its coverage. Through the case, 39 articles (47%) of articles mentioned the survivor as a victim yet still blamed her, while 31 articles (37%) mentioned her as just the victim, and 6% demonized her on Youm 7. In Al-Shorouk newspaper, 31 articles (70%) articles referred to her as a victim and still blamed her, while 13 articles (30%) mentioned her as just a victim. On the other hand, the rest of the papers did not blame the victim. Not only this, but also, 35 articles (42%) of articles on Youm 7 paper used sensational rhetoric while the rest of the papers did not.

More interestingly, the survivor's name in this case was mentioned way more across all outlets than the assailant's name. In total on all the examined outlets, 38% of articles mentioned her full name, 34% mentioned her first name only, 25.3% did not mention her name, and 2% mentioned initials only. On the other hand, only 10.8% of articles mentioned his full name, 49.2% of articles did not mention the assailant's name, 28% mentioned his first name only, and 11.5% mentioned his initials. Even more alarming, the most pictures used were of the survivor but eyes/face covered through 47 articles (34%), then generic pictures of governmental buildings and Egyptian streets through 46 articles (33%), then the survivor with no cover through 31 articles (22%). On the other hand, the assailant's picture was never used, only 13 articles (9%) articles used a covered picture of him. Also noteworthy, the phrasing used in the Egyptian Youm 7 was also more problematic. Notions like "check her virginity" "to protect her honor" were used. The story was also highly dramatized, narrated in a more dramatic tone to the extent that one of the articles explicitly stated the case should be adapted into a movie. More exaggerated terms such

as ‘murdered’ in Arabic ‘Zabahatho’ was used instead of just ‘killed’ him, which also implied a bit of sympathy with the assailant. Not only that, but also most articles mentioned that the survivor was in a relationship with one of the accused, which sources for this research negated, stating that it was false news. Regardless of whether she was in a relationship with one of the accused or not, the sole fact of unnecessarily referring to that in the article by default entails blaming rhetoric. Sentences like “Before the rape attempt, she was on a romantic date with her boyfriend” were also used.

Moving to the ABZ case, the coverage from Youm 7 as opposed to Egyptian Streets, Reuters, and BBC Arabic distinctively varied. Unlike all the other three sources, Youm 7 showed more victim blaming and sensational discourse. For example, 46 articles (73%) of articles from Youm 7 represented the victim/survivor as a victim but still blamed her, while only 14 articles (22%) of articles victimized her without blaming. Moreover, 45 articles (71%) of articles on Youm 7 resorted to sensational content. Unlike the Ayat rape attempt, the name of the assailant was mentioned more than the survivors who were only referred to through either initials or first name. In addition, there was no face for this case or a publicly identified victim. Other prominent issues with the Youm 7 coverage of the ABZ case was using problematic terminologies. Instead of “assaulting” the victim, they used “kissed”. “She entered his car without any force” was also a repeated phrase that implied the victim is also at fault for not resisting. Similar to the Ayat rape attempt, they used wording such as ‘continuing their relationship’ implying the victims were in a relationship with the assailant. An uncalled for detail that would not be received well. Opposing the Ayat case, the pictures featured the perpetrator and the perpetrator covered while no pictures of the victims were used.

The Tahrir gang assault case had almost no rape myths in its coverage. There were no significant differences between all the outlets covering the case. The only distinct aspect was using the normalization frame in some articles, tackling the assault as a systematic attack and part of a series of violence against women. Similar to the Ayat case, the names of the victims/survivors were mentioned more than the perpetrators’. However, unlike the Ayat case, general pictures of government buildings or Egyptian streets were used more than the survivors’.



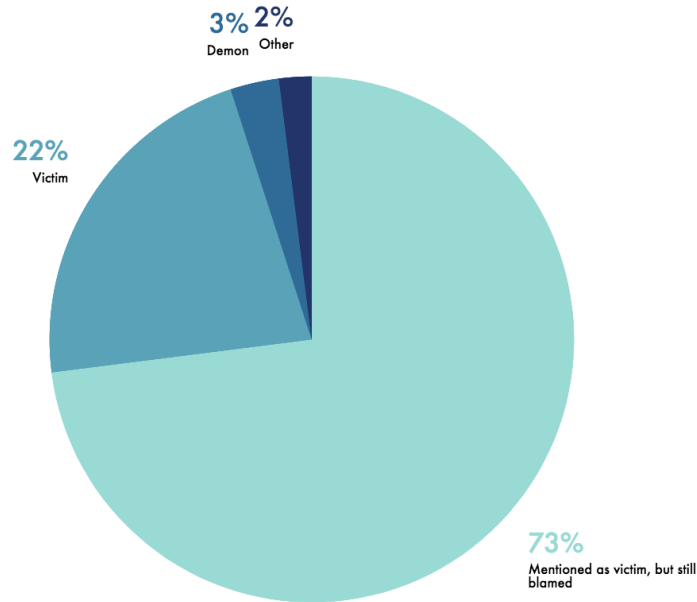
Surprisingly, across all cases on all platforms, the term ‘survivor’ was almost not used, except for a few times on both Egyptian Streets and BBC Arabic. The remaining outlets referred to the subject as either victim or did not refer to her at all. It is also noteworthy that articles on Reuters often referred to the assailant’s side, stating they could not reach them to comment on the allegations against them. However, it is still unclear how to ethically cover these cases objectively without voicing perpetrators with platforms that may give them more power. Based on the previous cases, it can be said that there are some problematic frames within the local Egyptian outlets.

In the following sections, the sexual violence frames assessed in the media will be discussed in detail.

#### A. *The Portrayal of the Victim/Survivor*

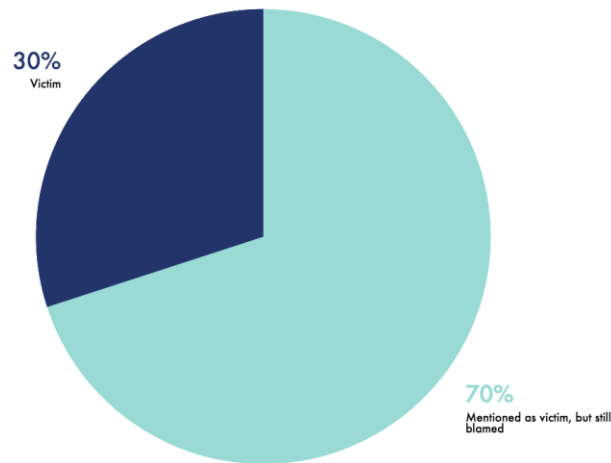
For the ABZ case, out of the 63 articles on the Youm 7 paper, 22% of articles portrayed the subjects of assault as victims, 3% presented them as demons, and 73% displayed them as victims but also used blaming rhetoric such as “she entered the car without any force”. Through the Egyptian Streets platform, all the articles portrayed the subject as a victim to the assault. All articles on Reuters and BBC also regarded the subject as a victim.

## ABZ- Victim/Survivor Portrayal on Youm 7



Through the Ayat rape attempt, 31 articles (37% ) from Youm 7 displayed the victim/survivor of assault as a victim, five articles (6%) demonized her, 1% pushed her into the survivor category, and 39 articles (47%) presented her as a victim but still blamed her. Al-Shorouk newspaper showed that just 13 articles (30%) articles referred to the subject as a victim, while 31 articles (70%) blamed the victim. All Daily News Egypt, Rasd Networks, and the NY Times presented the subject as a victim without blaming. However, the article on Gulf Newspaper represented the girl as a victim and still blamed her.

## Al Ayat- Victim/Survivor Portrayal on Al-Shorouk newspaper

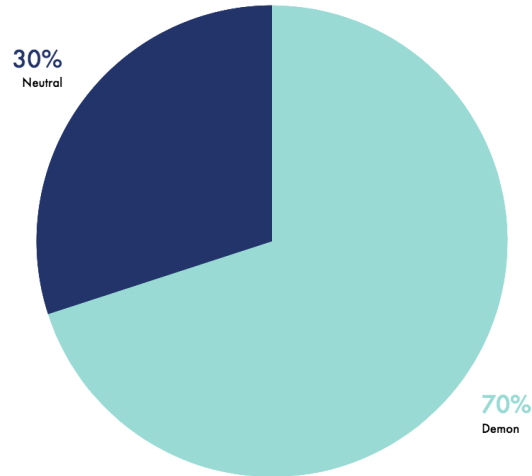


In the Tahrir Square case, all articles from the four outlets presented the subject of assault as a victim without blaming.

### B. The Perpetrator's Portrayal

All articles on ABZ from Youm 7, Egyptian Streets, Reuters, and BBC Arabic demonized the perpetrator, detailing his violations to the girls. Yet, 13% of articles on Reuters were neutral and mentioned that they reached out to his side for comment with no response. Al Ayat articles from Egyptian Streets, Daily News Egypt, Rasd Network, Al Shorouk, NY Times, and Gulf News all demonized the assailant, while Youm 7 had 70% articles referring to him as a criminal and 30% of articles were neutral about him by just reporting the story and not mentioning details about him. Similarly, all articles on the Tahrir case also demonized the assailants. No articles on any of the cases referred to the perpetrators as psychologically troubled people.

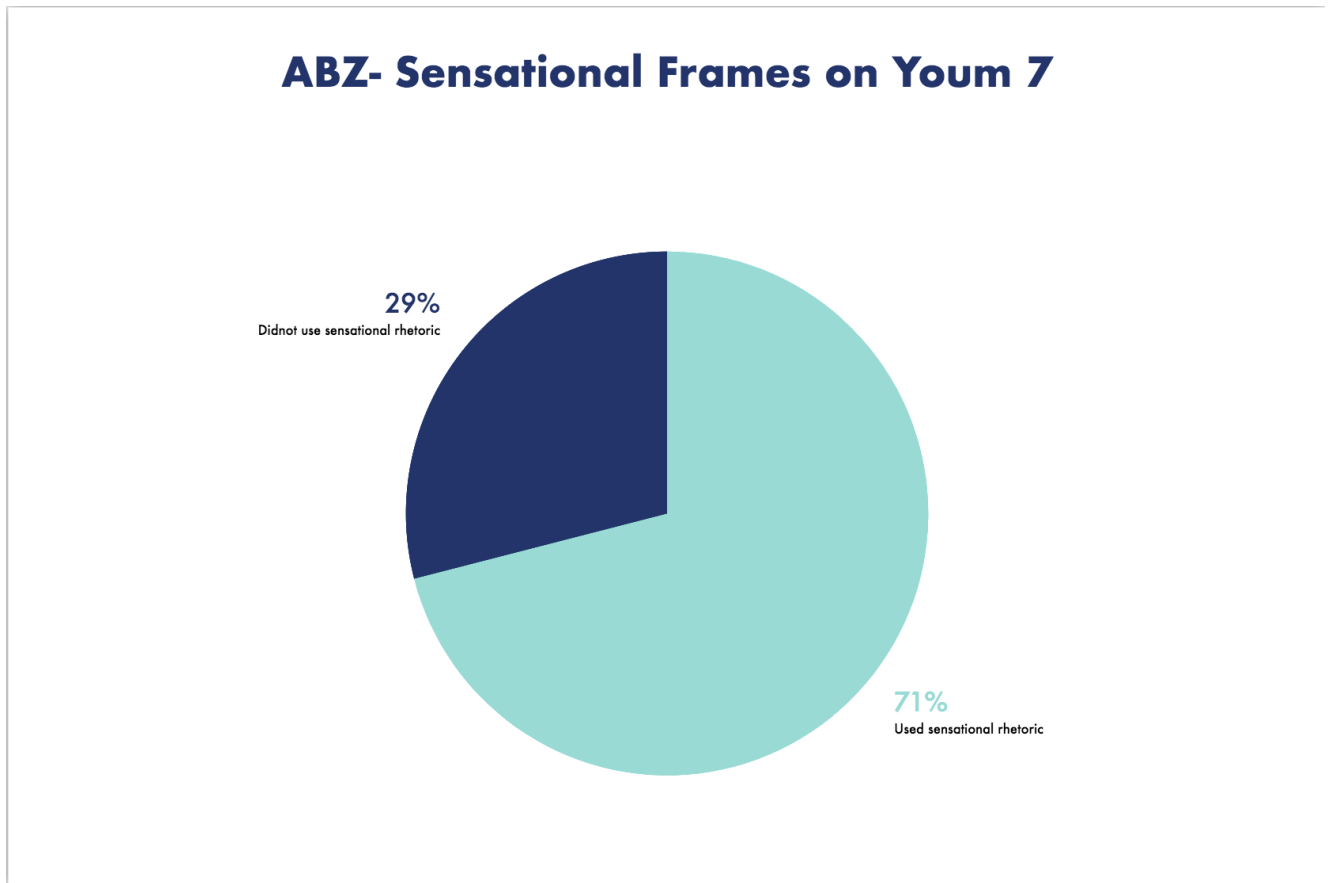
## Al Ayat- Perpetrator Portrayal on Youm 7



### C. Rape Myths Frames

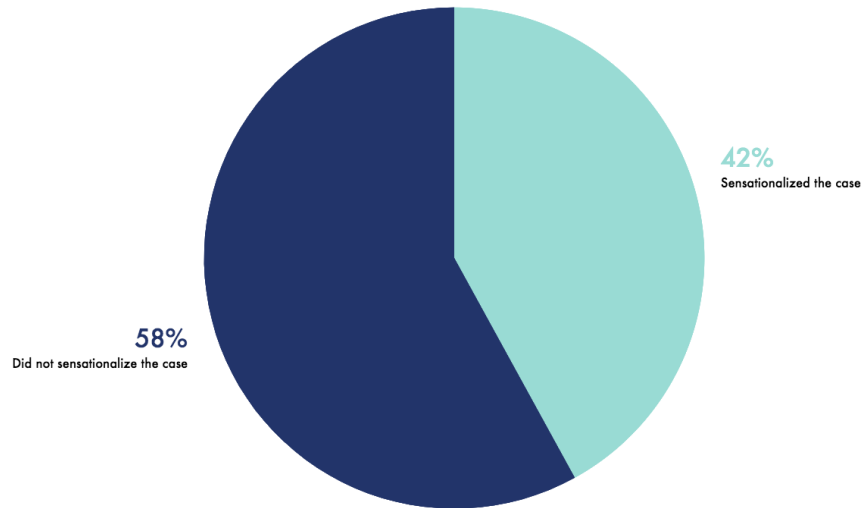
Assessing the common rape myths frames found in the literature, the articles were evaluated based on five main frames: normalization of assault cases (tackling its context as systematic targeting of women or as a case of many), sensationalizing the story, blaming the victim, discrediting the victim, and finally mentioning details about the assailant's life to garner sympathy. All articles on ABZ from the different outlets lacked the normalization frame. The Ayat case's articles did not contain any normalization except one article from Youm 7. For the Tahrir case on Youm 7, five articles (50%) resorted to the normalization frame by mentioning how rape is systemized and is a case of many, while the other five (50%) did not refer to the normalization frame. BBC Arabic had 33% of articles with the normalization frame referring to sexual harassment as a tool used to disrupt demonstrations.

The sensationalism frame is one of the most relatable frames in the Egyptian culture where some papers cover the cases dramatically as scandals. In the coverage of the ABZ case, 45 articles (71%) from the Youm 7 paper used sensational rhetoric. However, for Egyptian Streets, Reuters, and BBC Arabic, all articles did not sensationalize the case.



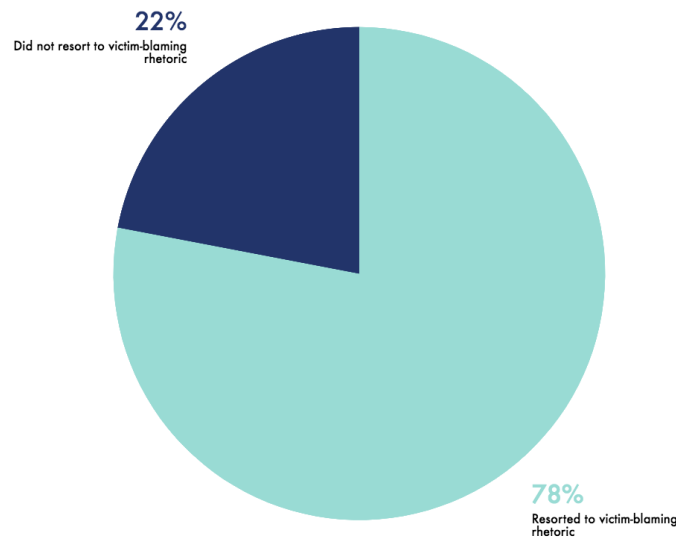
For the Ayat rape attempt case, 35 (42%) articles on Youm 7 paper sensationalized the case as opposed to 58% of articles that did not. Only one article in Egyptian streets used sensational content and the other two did not. All the other outlets covering Al Ayat case on Daily News Egypt, Rasd Network, Al Shorouk, the NY Times, and the Gulf News did not use sensational content. Almost all articles on Tahrir Square case domestically and internationally did not use sensational rhetoric except one on the Youm 7 paper.

## Al Ayat- Sensational Frames on Youm 7



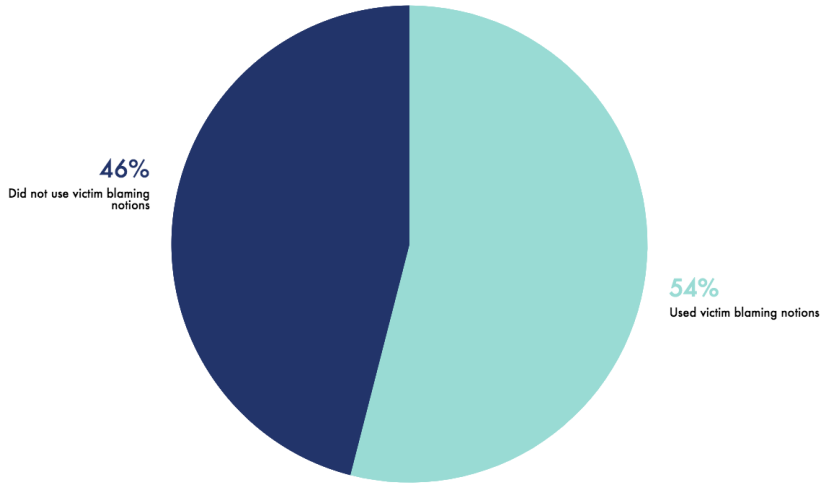
Another dominant frame in sexual assault coverage is victim-blaming. Through the ABZ case, 49 (78%) articles on Youm 7 paper resorted to victim-blaming rhetoric by using sentences like “she entered the car without any force” or giving a background on their relationship before the assault implying that she may have been complicit, as opposed to 14 articles (22% ) of articles on Youm 7 that did not. The remaining ABZ articles on Egyptian Streets, Reuters, and BBC Arabic did not entail any victim blaming rhetoric.

## ABZ- Victim Blaming Frames on Youm 7 newspaper

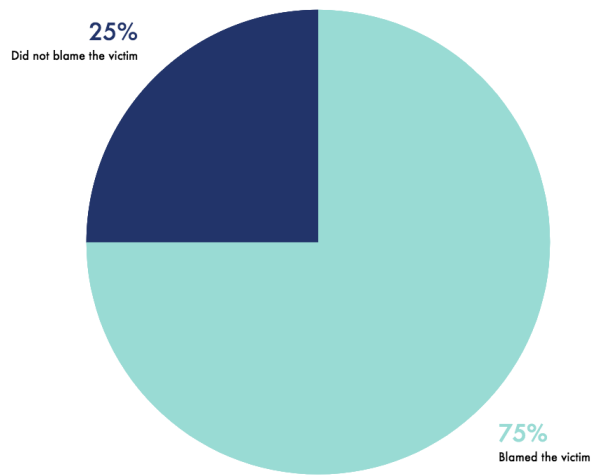


The Ayat rape attempt had its fair share of victim blaming as well by reporting on how the assault happened after she was out on a “a romantic date”, a notion that the Egyptian culture tends to reject and place the blame on the victim for meeting a man outside of formal boundaries. Through the Youm 7 paper, 45 (54%) articles used victim blaming notions, while the rest did not. Moreover, 33 articles (75%) on Al-Shorouk newspaper blamed the victim as opposed to 11 articles (25%) that did not. For Daily News Egypt and Rasd Network, all articles blamed the victim as well. The one article covered on the Gulf News also used victim-blaming rhetoric. However, neither did the articles on Egyptian Streets or NY Times blame the victim. Lastly, the Tahrir Square gang harassment case had no victim-blaming rhetoric on both the domestic and international outlets analyzed.

## Al Ayat- Victim Blaming Frames on Youm 7 newspaper



## Al Ayat- Victim Blaming Frames on Al-Shorouk newspaper





The fourth frame assessed is discrediting the victim by pointing out to how her story changed or questioning her narrative. While this frame existed to an extent in the analyzed coverage, it was not dominant. No articles on the ABZ and the Tahrir Square cases discredited the victim. For the Ayat rape attempt case, 9.6% of articles on Youm 7 discredited the victim. Moreover, 6.8% articles on Al-Shorouk paper used the frame of discrediting the victim. For example, an article on Youm 7 mentioned how she narrated a false story to the police at the beginning of her case to hide the fact that she went out to meet her “boyfriend”. The remaining articles on this case did not discredit the victim.

Lastly, the frame giving more details on the background of the assailant which grants him more sympathy was also assessed. Nevertheless, it was completely absent from all the analyzed coverage.

#### *D. Victim or Survivor?*

Referring to the aforementioned victim/survivor dilemma, it was essential to examine how the media refers to the subjects of sexual assault. Overall, the victim wording was used more than the survivor wording, especially in local media outlets. Also used more than the term ‘survivor’, some outlets refrained from resorting to either words and used “girls, women, or defendants” instead.

For the ABZ case, all the 63 articles analyzed on Youm 7 paper used the word ‘victim’. Through Egyptian Streets paper, 65.9% of articles used ‘victim’, 7.3% used ‘survivor’, and 26.8% did not use either words. Reuters’s eight articles did not use either terms, while BBC Arabic’s seven articles used ‘survivor’ instead.

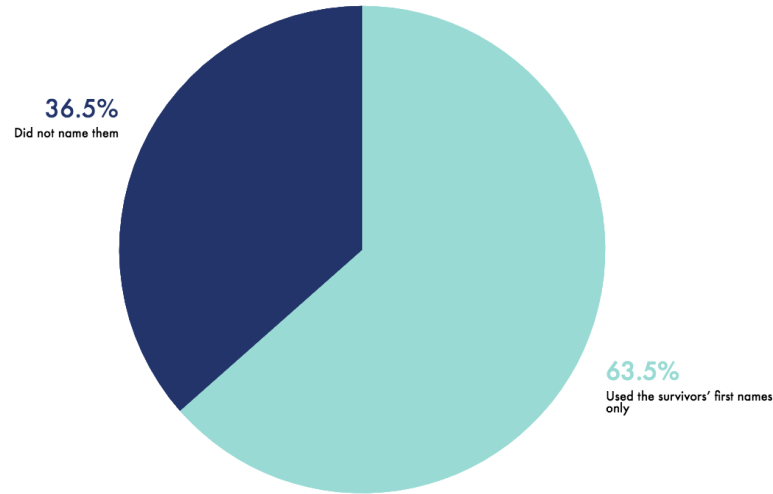
Moving to the Ayat rape attempt case, 2.4% of articles on Youm 7 paper only referred to girl as a ‘victim’, while the remaining 97.6% articles did not use both terms. 66.7% published on Egyptian Streets used the word ‘victim’, while 33.3% did not use both terms. Daily News Egypt’s articles referred to her as a victim. Only one article on Al-Shorouk paper referred to the

girl as a victim and the remaining 97.7% of articles did not use either words. The media outlets Rasd Network, NY Times, and Gulf news refrained from using either victim or survivor terms. Lastly, for the Tahrir Square gang assault case, Youm 7, Reuters, and BBC Arabic all referred to the subjects as ‘victims’. Only Egyptian streets had 50% using ‘victim’, and 50% did not refer to the girls using both terms.

### E. Survivor’s Name

As previously mentioned, one of the pressing issues in covering sexual violence is the identity of the victims/survivors and assailants. Based on each case, some editorial policies require keeping their identities anonymous, others use initials or fake names, and some use the full names. Nevertheless, some use different policies with the victim/survivor than the perpetrator by for instance revealing the identity of one and not the other. For the ABZ case, 63.5% of articles on Youm 7 paper used the survivors’ first names only, while 36.5% did not name them. All the remaining articles on Egyptian Streets, Reuters, and BBC Arabic refrained from using the survivors’ names.

## ABZ- Mentioning Survivors' Names on Youm 7



Moving to the Ayat rape attempt case, 34.9% of articles on Youm 7 stated her full name, 15.6% articles did not mention her name, 5% articles used initials, and 46.9% articles used her first name only. For Al-Shorouk paper, 31.8% of articles used her full name, 47.7% did not name her, 2% used initials, while 18% used her first name only. The remaining articles on Egyptian Streets, Daily News Egypt, Rasd Network, NY Times, and Gulf News used her full name as well.

As for the Tahrir Square gang assault, one article on Youm 7 named the victim/survivor, while 90% did not. All articles published on Egyptian Streets did not name the survivors. 13% of articles on Reuters named the victim/survivor, while 86.7% did not. On BBC Arabic, 27.8% articles named the survivor, while 72% did not.

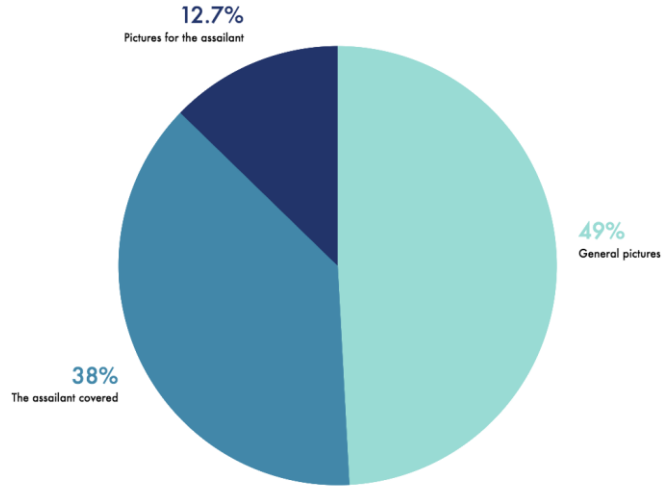
### F. The Assailant's Name

All media outlets analyzed on the ABZ case used the perpetrator's full name. However, the majority of articles reporting the Ayat rape attempt did not mention the perpetrator's name. Through the Youm 7 paper, 10.8% of articles only mentioned the assailant's name, 34.9% did not, 13.3% articles used fake names or initials, and 41% of articles used his first name only. For Al-Shorouk newspaper, 13% used the assailant's name, 63% did not, 11% used initials/fake names, and 11% used his first name only. The remaining articles on Egyptian Streets, Daily News Egypt, Rasd Network, NY Times, and Gulf News did not mention the assailant's name at all. All articles on the Tahrir Square gang assault case covered did not mention the perpetrators' names.

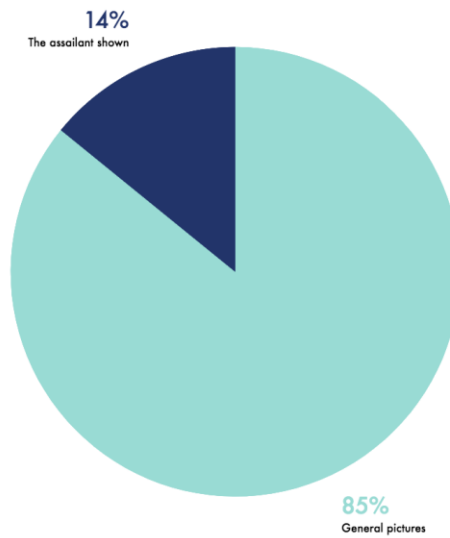
### G. The Feature Picture

The last examined issue is the pictures used in covering the cases of sexual assault, whether general pictures (establishing shots of court buildings, the public prosecution, or people in the street), the survivor shown, the survivor covered, the assailant shown, the assailant covered, or no picture at all. Through the ABZ case, no pictures of the survivors were used either covered or normal. Youm 7 used 49% general pictures, 12.7% of pictures for the assailant, and 38% of the assailant covered. Egyptian Streets used 85.4% general pictures and 14.6% of the assailant shown. Both Reuters and BBC Arabic used general pictures for all their articles.

### ABZ- Feature Picture on Youm 7



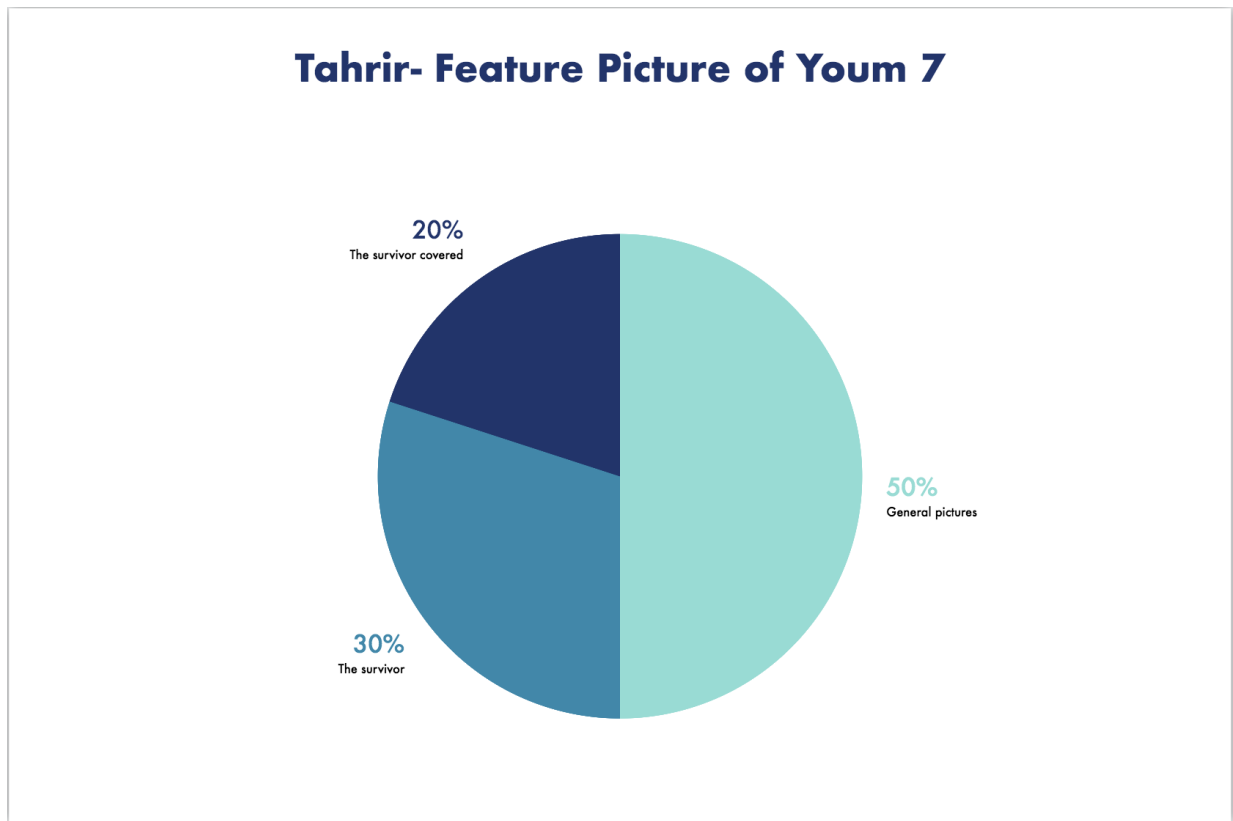
### ABZ- Feature Picture on Egyptian Streets



On the other hand, the Ayat case coverage showed more pictures of the survivor both covered and uncovered. Youm 7 used 22.9% general pictures, 30% of pictures of the survivor uncovered,

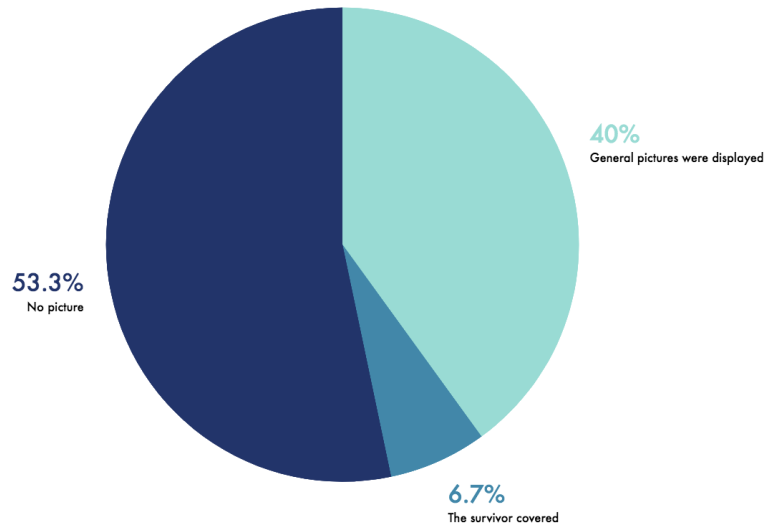
31% of the survivor covered, and 15.7% of the assailant covered. Al Shorouk newspaper used 40.9% general pictures, 11% of the survivor uncovered, and 47.7% of the survivor covered. Rasd Network used 75% general pictures and 25% of the survivor. The remaining articles on Egyptian Streets, Daily News Egypt, Gulf News and the NY times used general pictures only.

For the Tahrir case, general pictures were used more overall. Youm 7 used 50% general pictures, 30% of the survivor, and 20% of the survivor covered.

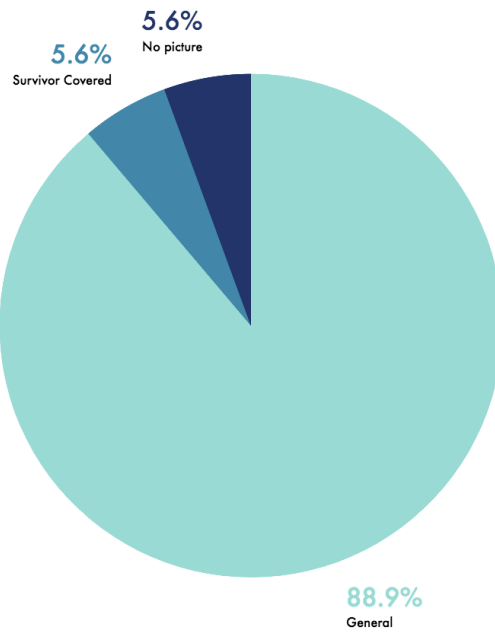


All articles on Egyptian Streets had general pictures. On Reuters, 40% general pictures were displayed as opposed to 6.7% for the survivor covered. 88.9% of articles on BBC used general pictures as opposed to 5.6% that featured the survivor covered, and 5.6% that showed no picture at all.

## Tahrir- Feature Picture on Reuters



## Tahrir- Feature Picture on BBC Arabic



The second phase of this study includes a total of 24 interviews, 10 interviews with activists, seven interviews with journalists/tv presenters, and seven interviews with sexual assault victims/survivors who shared their stories with the media.

## **RQ2: How do Journalists Cover Cases of Sexual Assault in Egypt?**

To determine how reporters tackle cases of Egyptian sexual assault, seven interviews with journalists/tv presenters in Egypt were conducted. The first theme in this section tackles the journalists' methods in covering sexual violence, following their motivations, how they reach survivors, their main challenges and experiences with victims/survivors, and finally their stances on anonymous reporting. In order to examine journalists' take on the media's role in sexual violence coverage, the second theme focuses on the journalists' assessment of the media coverage and whether it harms or benefits the victims/survivors.

### **A. How do Journalists Cover Sexual Violence?**

#### *1. The Journalists' Motivations in Covering Sexual Violence*

The interviewees shared various reasons to cover sexual assault: raising awareness, pushing stakeholders to take action, challenging common rape myths, and helping the survivor. It should be noted that only two journalists out of the seven mentioned the victim/survivor's benefits of the process, while the rest focused on the impact for the community instead.

**Raising Awareness:** Both journalists Heba Anees and Mai Shams El Din stated that they cover the cases to raise the communities' awareness on the vitality of the issue. Moreover, journalist at Cairo 24 Doaa Gaber elaborated that not discussing assault publicly increases its frequency since



people are unaware of the options they have when exposed to it. TV host Reham Saed also elaborated that she tackles cases of sexual violence in her show to spread public morals.

**Pushing for Action from Stakeholders:** Related to the previous point, Shams El Din and Anees believed the coverage brings awareness that eventually pushes for action. For instance, Anees revealed that her latest video covering the victim of gang sexual harassment in Mansoura was meant to be a call to the General Prosecutor to put her assailants behind bars after the pressure on another similar case on social media helped alter the verdict and detain the assailants. Agreeing with that, Daily News Egypt's Nihal Samir revealed that she reports these cases to push for policy change through national and international stakeholders from her outlet's audiences. Violence against women is one of the most crucial issues that Egypt has been facing in the last couple of years, stated Samih, justifying why he covers these cases. Samih aspires to make women more comfortable speaking up to fight all perpetrators.

**Challenging Common Rape Myths:** Samir and Gaber illustrated that through their coverage, they aim to defy the common misconceptions about sexual violence and change its problematic narrative.

**Supporting the Victim/Survivor:** Both Anees and Shams El Din stated that they are in fact biased towards women because they understand what the survivors have gone through. Anees added that she aims to inform that they are not alone and that is there to represent and support them.

## 2. *How do Journalists Reach out to Survivors?*

Most interviewees agreed that contacting the survivors is one of their hardest challenges. This process can be divided into three stages: the preparation phase, contacting the survivor, and then getting them comfortable to speak.

**The Preparation Phase:** During the first stage, journalists research the topic thoroughly and try to tackle it holistically by providing facts and statistics, both Samir and Samih illustrated. In the

past, reporters used to hear about stories from the Ministry of Interior's page on crimes, Saeed clarified. None of the participants in the study mentioned any prior trainings or editorial frameworks on how to cover sexual violence they are obliged to take before talking to victim/survivors.

**Contacting the Survivor:** Accordingly, the team would contact the survivors through formal institutions. Some articles feature quotes from the survivors while other reporters refrain from contacting them and publish the piece as news. Samih illustrated that he usually contacts the survivor to validate and fact check the story. In case she is open to the media coverage, he interviews the victim, her family, her friends, and witnesses if possible, added Gaber and Mohamed. In case the victim/survivor refuses to speak, reporters then resort to the lawyers from both sides, activists, online published testimonies, and so forth, stated Shams El Din. During the ABZ case, Shams El Din was not able to get to the survivors so she resorted to these alternative methods instead.

**Getting the Survivor to Speak:** After contacting them, Anees stated that survivors are asked if they want to speak, how they want to speak, what kind of information they wanted on and off record, and lastly whether they want to remain anonymous or public. Anees also highlighted the importance of granting exceptions to survivors of sexual assault sources and being more lenient to help them report the case. All the participants pinpointed the vitality of establishing mutual trust between the interviewer and sources so they could freely speak. Some reported telling the survivors how important their participation will be to other girls, some send them previous work samples to gain trust, portray their participation as a deterrent to these crimes, or granting guarantees like keeping the identity anonymous, and so forth. Shams El Din also highlighted the importance of giving the victim/survivor her space. She can skip questions, quit the interview at any time, or stay anonymous, granting her all the possible terms. Shams El Din added that she has spoken to one of the highly popular gang assault cases through a mutual trustworthy friend without knowing her identity until this very day. Shams El Din and Anees reported that they usually send survivors the full article before publishing to double check the image they want public, although this option is not granted to any other sources. On the other hand, Saeed stated that her precautionary measure is to have the survivors sign a form that states the information

they share is their sole responsibility to avoid the repercussions in case they share inaccurate information.

### *3. Main Challenges in Sexual Assault Coverage*

Participants mentioned several main challenges of covering sexual violence cases: accessing victims/survivors, physical and psychological threats to journalists, and maintaining objectivity.

**Access to Victims/Survivors:** Tackling sexual violence for the media is not easy. To begin with, all the participants stated that reaching the survivors and getting their consent to talk is of its own a challenge. Anees explained that victims/survivors fear speaking up to avoid the stigma, backlash from the family, bullying from friends, or threats from the perpetrators. Besides, retelling the story also takes its toll on the survivors, Shams El Din added. “The biggest challenge is to get them to speak normally without fear. They have this fear that journalists are using them and will expose them,” said Saad. Access to information in general is a common challenge as well, reported Shams El Din.

**Threats to Journalists:** Interestingly, risks to the journalists’ well-being after covering these cases were also discussed. Daily News Egypt’s Saad confessed that she sometimes feels psychologically traumatized after speaking with the victims/survivors about their assault. Not only are there psychological challenges, but also physical risks. From her experience with crime coverage in general, Saeed revealed that it can threaten the reporter’s life since some convicts may think they were imprisoned because of her and seek revenge. Journalists are also often faced with backlash or criticism when they tackle sexual violence cases instead of more positive stories in the community and get accused of tarnishing the country’s image, added Saeed.

**Maintaining Objectivity:** Another pressing issue in the coverage of assault that was brought up in the discussions is the notion of ‘objectivity’. It is unclear how journalists should tackle these crimes impartially without siding with the survivors. In addition, some feminist activists argued that giving space for the already privileged perpetrator gives him more power. When asked about this issue, Anees stated that as a journalistic institution, they are required to represent the two

sides of the story. While she admitted being biased to the survivor, she stated that she usually calls the lawyers or the perpetrators from the other side to comment. She also stated that her editors usually tone down the rhetoric to achieve this balance. Yet, her latest video covering the victim of a famous gang harassment story did not mention anything of the perpetrators because she thought this would traumatize the victim. Moreover, Shams El Din explained that getting quotes from the perpetrator's side is also a challenge since they usually avoid the media.

Criticizing taking the survivors' side, Saeed stated that the two sides of the story need to be presented equally to the public. Saeed cited her experience with the infamous "Mall Girl" case when a girl reported being sexually harassed in an Egyptian mall and slapped the guy afterwards. According to Saeed, people on social media sympathized with her and did not question her story. Afterwards, Saeed reported investigating the story and talking to the assailant's sister as well for fact-checking. For Saeed, journalists should rely on their gut feeling and interview questions to reveal the truth.

#### *4. The Experience of Interviewing Survivors and their Feedback to Journalists*

"Although we experience this every day, every time we discover something new," said Anees about interviewing victims/survivors of sexual assault. She illustrated that it is a very sensitive issue to talk about given all the trauma they have been through. "This is something that they can never forget. It's as if you keep pressing on an injury". Accordingly, some do not like talking unless they are wearing sunglasses or avoiding eye contact," she added. Confirming the difficulty of interviewing victims/survivors, Samih explained how demanding it is to get the sources comfortable to speak. Moreover, Gaber elaborated that even when survivors choose to speak, they do not go over the complete details of their stories. Their families also insist on avoiding interviews with the media. Recalling her experience, Gaber stated that some survivors exaggerate their stories for media propaganda.

None of the participants mentioned they received negative feedback from the survivors after publishing their stories. Anees stated that most of her feedback was positive and the survivors felt their talk made them feel better. Interestingly, Shams El Din reported that she was contacted

to cover one of the popular gang assault cases after she received positive comments on her coverage of the ABZ case. Daily News Egypt's Saad also stated that the survivors were overall satisfied with her coverage and thanked her for presenting their concerns. Although she did not mention this incident in the context of negative feedback, TV Presenter Saeed referred to her case with the aforementioned "Mall Girl" case. During the girl's live interview with Saeed, personal pictures of the victim/survivor were leaked on air, igniting the public to shame and judge her. This case caused a lot of backlash and the victim/survivor sued El Saeed's show for it. In her interview for this research, Saeed never mentioned the issue of the leaked pictures, she just referred to the case when she was talking about the harms of social media in fabricating news, asserting that the victim/survivor used social media to lie about her assault case.

#### 5. *Anonymous Vs Public Reporting*

The participants shared different views on whether the identities of the survivors should be kept public or private. Most participants acknowledged the problematic nature of identifying the victim/survivor's identity. Yet, some stated they preferred anonymous coverages, one was against it, and the rest illustrated that they leave the choice to the victim/survivors.

**Pro Anonymous Reporting:** Anees, Shams El Din, Mohamed, and Saad stated that they usually write the stories without names to protect the victims/survivors. Anees also resorted to using the outlet's lawyer to ensure the survivor's and her personal protection. For Saad, anonymous reporting is crucial since the community is still patriarchal and defames the survivor instead. While Shams El Din acknowledged that people believe the story more when they see a name and face representing it, she still believed that their anonymity should not threaten credibility because when one victim speaks up, more come forward to validate her. Referencing the Instagram Platform that outed ABZ, Assault Police, Shams El Din stated that it was able to compile more than 100 testimonies against him. To her, it is unthinkable that the platform fakes 100 testimonies on a crime like this in Egypt. "Sometimes, they need a face, but this is not very reasonable to happen with rape stories," she added.

**Based on the Choice of the Victim/Survivor:** On the middle ground, Samih stated that he gives the option to the survivor if she chooses to stay anonymous or public. Agreeing with that, Gaber reported that she usually gives them the option to use their names or not, however, she avoids using pictures or videos of the victim/survivor.

**Against Anonymous Reporting:** On the other hand, Saeed does not believe in covering the victim/survivor's faces during their interviews. "I do not believe in this. The message will not be delivered and people will not believe her without eye contact," she said. Besides, Saeed stated that she often tells survivors that covering their faces will not grant them full anonymity since people who know them can still identify their voice or overall attitude. She also stressed that people who cover these cases should be brave enough to portray them normally. Yet, she still mentioned how this is sometimes hard to achieve given the community's stigmatization of assault. "It is why we internally feel that we are exposing the victim because people will not look at her the same," she concluded.

## **B. Journalists' Perceptions of the Media's Coverage of Sexual Violence**

### *1. Assessment of the Media's Coverage to Sexual Violence*

To evaluate the current media scene, Shams El Din and Samih pointed out to the gradual progress in covering sexual assault after effort from the feminist movements. However, Shams El Din stated that the coverage is still dominated by the patriarchal notion of protecting the assailant. Both Shams El Din and Anees pointed out the presence of censorship in Egyptian media outlets based on their ownership. "Some of the TV hosts themselves are perpetrators of sexual harassment or are influenced by their backgrounds that discard the victims' experiences and believe they are exaggerating," she added. Another issue that Shams El Din referred to in the coverage are the conspiracy campaigns pushed by the assailants themselves to smear the victim's reputation, change the narrative, and cover the story in a sensational and scandalous way. Mohamed also provided a more critical critique to the media, "The media does not provide the reader with the full picture, it needs more accuracy and thoroughness." In addition, the coverage

generally focuses on the highly popularized cases for a while, but when it is no longer trending, the stop following up with the details of the lawsuit.

Moreover, most participants referred to the role the media plays in raising awareness. For instance, Anees emphasized its duty in shedding light on sexual assault cases as a mediator that generally helps citizens assess their institutions. Yet, she clarified that a lot of the assault cases are dangerous and threaten the victim's safety which forces them to find a balance of prioritizing the victim's well-being while publishing the story. Egyptian presenter Riham Saeed expanded on the media's role stating that she usually covers sexual assault cases as inspirational stories to guide the community. Nevertheless, Saeed stressed that some people misjudge this by not differentiating between using the story to create a media scandal and tackling the story for public morale.

## *2. Do Journalists Believe the Media does more Harm or Good to the Survivors?*

Despite the negative issues with the media's coverage of assault the participants tackled, some believed the media is overall beneficial, some stated it is harmful, while others illustrated it was based on the case.

**The Positive Impact of the Media:** "The media does not harm her. The biggest harm is that she carries a burden that she cannot speak of," said Anees, while still acknowledging that the media can do more to shame the assailants instead of the victim/survivors. Shams El Din agreed with Anees stating that speaking-up certainly gives the survivor a push. "She feels stronger, heard, and ready to face the situation. She feels like she is not alone with a more sense of justice. Nothing will heal the wounds, but it strengthens them," added Shams El Din, mentioning that one of the survivors she spoke to occasionally sends her links to good coverage as a form of victory. Adding to the positive role the media plays, Samih elaborated that the coverage helps combat the crime to an extent through naming and shaming assailants.

**Case-dependent Impact:** Other participants believed the impact of the coverage depends on the case itself. Journalist Saad stated it relies on how the reporter tackled the story and the angle used or also on the receivers and their beliefs. “There is no rule. It harms some and helps others,” she added. Cairo 24’s Gaber also believed that the coverage effect depends on the case, however, she believes it is overall helpful. Expanding on Saad and Gaber, Mohamed illustrated that the positive effect of the story highly depends on its accuracy and credibility in conveying the victim/survivor’s voice.

**The Media’s Negative Impact:** Offering a different perspective, Saeed clarified that she encourages victims/survivors of assault to speak up and fight for their rights to out their perpetrators. However, she stated that she will most certainly be harmed in the process given the communal stigma against this issue. Accordingly, she conducts assessments to evaluate whether the benefits of the interview will spread awareness and outweigh the harms done to the victim/survivor.

### *3. The Role of Social Media*

When asked about the role of social media in portraying sexual assault, the participants adopted different views. Anees, Saad, and Samih emphasized the positive and important role of digital feminism. “Social media helped a lot of people speak out. The numbers did not increase, but social media movements increased awareness of the issue,” stated Saad. Samih referred to the Maadi Child Molester case through which a man was caught assaulting a young girl on camera. According to Samih, social media helped virally circulate the video and eventually locate and arrest the perpetrator. However, other interviewees were more skeptical about its role. For instance, Gaber explained that the digital platforms give room for defaming either the victim or the assailant, turning the issue into public debate between supporters and attackers to the victim/survivor. Yet, she noted that social media can help escalate cases legally to a limited extent. Mohamed also expanded on the social media’s limited capacity, stating that it only sheds light on the cases, but the mainstream media tackles them more holistically and comprehensively. Totally opposing the vitality of social media, TV host Saeed stated that it is 100% harmful and blamed it for brainwashing the audiences since it only gives one side of the



story. Referencing the ABZ case, Saeed elaborated that online platforms only showed the survivors/testimonies and not the assailant's side, especially after he was arrested and could not respond to the accusations publicly. Yet, Anees refuted that by saying that it is not the social media's role to provide the full picture. To her, the social media just directs journalists to the community issues in an easier way, but they are the ones that should do the fact-checking and holistic coverage.

Overall, the reporters interviewed for this study acknowledged the problematic issues the media poses while covering sexual violence. Most of them agreed that it benefits rather than harm them, except for Saeed who said she encourages victims to speak to out their perpetrators and raise awareness, but still stated she believed the media mostly ruins the victim/survivor's lives in Egypt. With regards to the frameworks or editorial policies on sexual violence coverage, none of the participants in this research mentioned any specific trainings or tests that they had to take before contacting survivors. Yet, two of them mentioned they adopt their own methods in establishing mutual trust and respect with the victims/survivors. Moreover, the majority of participants revealed they cover these cases for more audience-oriented reasons such as raising awareness and calling out stakeholders, only a few answered from the victim/survivors' perspective.

### **RQ3: Why do Victims/Survivors Seek the Media?**

This question is addressed through interviews with both sexual violence victims/survivors and feminist activists working on the cause. The first part of this section tackles the reasons why survivors share their stories publicly. Moreover, the second part tackles how and when activists and lawyers resort to the media in their strategies.

#### *1. Why do the Victims/Survivors Share their Stories Publicly?*

Each victim/survivor had a different motif behind seeking the media based on her case's specific circumstances. The main reasons shared from both survivors and activists were: seeking justice, warning other girls, and psychological reasons. However, it was also noted that some victims/survivors do not get the luxury of choosing whether to speak to the media or not.

**Seeking Justice:** A large number of the participants sought the media to take action against their perpetrators. “Even before the assault, I had this motivation for attacking this monster called sexual harassment and the terrible way women are treated in Egypt,” victim/survivor A of the Tahrir gang assault stated. Victim/survivor E who was raped by her boss did not intend to speak publicly fearing the consequences that she witnessed with other girls who out their abusers. It wasn’t until she saw her abuser in a video campaign supporting another rape victim that she realized she should publicly shame him. “It was very triggering to see the guy who raped me participate in a campaign for a victim of rape,” she said. Her anger and frustration encouraged her to post a video of herself telling her entire story naming her perpetrator and sharing his pictures to out him. “It was the hardest thing I have ever done in my life,” she explained. Also frustrated with the patriarchal culture that helps assailants get away with sexual abuse, victim/survivor F first shared her story on her personal account on social media and accepted mainstream media interviews because she felt violated and couldn’t get justice. After a boy sexually harassed and physically hit her in the street, victim/survivor F hit him back and filed a legal case against him. However, her family forced her to report it as physical abuse legal suite and not a sexual harassment case. Accordingly, she felt obliged to report the truth online to both seek justice, raise awareness to stop the stigma against sexual violence, and encourage other girls to speak up. Sharing the same motif of attaining justice, victim/survivor G sought the media as a last resort after failing to remove her abuser from priesthood, fighting privately for 17 years. When she realized the church conducted investigations that proved him guilty and still did nothing, she threatened them to go public, even though she did not truly consider it. At first, they were able to convince her to stay silent. Later, she realized that she could not stay silent and wanted to defrock him. After her post, someone sent her the investigation file that she forwarded back to the church saying she will publish it if they do not take action. Hence, in days, the priest was defrocked. “I did not understand the power of the media until I was exposed to it. The power of the media is pretty incredible. I really wanted to be heard and share the truth,” she added.

**Warning other Girls:** Feeling like she can no longer tolerate her perpetrator's consistent abuse, victim/survivor D of the ABZ case went public to out him and warn other girls about him. “I knew I couldn’t stop this person from harassing, but I can help other girls be more aware of this person who is a harasser. Rather than control his actions, control their reactions. If I got through

to one person, I would have been satisfied,” added victim/survivor D who first ignited the ABZ case. After her post, she got a message from a girl thanking her because she was about to attend the perpetrator's birthday at his house the following day.

**Psychological Reasons:** Aside from taking action and seeking justice, other survivors shared their stories for other personal reasons. For instance, victim/survivor B stated that she spoke freely about both her assault cases because she did not want to create a taboo out of it. It is why she picked specific platforms and ways to share her story so she can control the narrative. According to Mozn Hassan, founder of Nazra, some survivors speak up because they believe it is part of their role as activists. Some survivors also become activists after their trauma as some sort of social responsibility and others deal with it as a personal healing process. Moreover, activist Shady Noor stated that recognition and acknowledgment are part of the healing process. Through the ABZ case, the survivors were young and went forward both anonymously and publicly without their families knowing. “It was an empowering aspect to the survivors that they felt heard. They understood the extent of the historical difference they made even though their name wasn’t on there,” added Noor, referring to the ABZ survivors who spoke to the media. Yet, he illustrated that only a few of the survivors (three-four) who were open to speaking with the media. In addition, they only went through with it after the case was solid and he was arrested. According to lawyer Ragia Omran, victims/survivors speak to the media for validation and credit after going through the hard steps. The Founder of Speak-Up online platform also elaborated that some survivors share their stories so the community can give them more courage to pursue legal actions and seek help from professionals.

**Forced Media Interactions:** While most survivors in this research sought the media themselves, the case of victim/survivor C was very different. According to a source close to her, the media reached out to them to sell their story. If it was up to them, they knew the media is of no help in their case. However, he conducted a lot of media interviews following their lawyer. “Our lawyer helped us a lot and paid a lot for our case so I felt it would be impolite of me to reject her media requests. I knew she certainly wanted to get publicity for her work and her office so I could not reject her request,” he said. Moreover, they did not mind it if she talked to the media about their case without resorting to them. As for the victim/survivor herself, she did not have much to say

about seeking the media since the circumstances of her case imposed it as a public opinion matter. In addition, Advocacy Coordinator at the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance (CEWLA) Nada Nashat reported that most survivors she has dealt with avoid the media except in two cases: the perpetrator used the media to defame them or the case became an issue of public opinion. However, they generally scare away from reporting legally to avoid being identified, let alone speak to the media.

Both Founder of Catcalls of Cairo Zeina Amr and feminist activist Amal Elmohandes discussed the different factors that determine whether a victim/survivor will reach out to the media or not. For Amr, it depends on how supportive the victim's family is and whether they know about the assault or not. It also depends on the sensitivity of the case and what the media can possibly do for it based on legal assessments. Elmohandes highlighted that the survivor's context matters. In communities that still view these crimes in a shameful way and blame the victim, she will not get access to support services. Consequently, she will not try to talk to the media or even tell a friend about it.

## *2. Activists' Strategies with Speaking-up*

When asked if they think survivors of sexual assault should interact with the media, the majority of activists agreed that the agency of the survivor should be respected by giving them all the possible options and services through which they can decide on their appropriate routes. For Nazra organization, Hassan clarified that they never advise survivors to contact the media or connect any journalists to survivors. Even when girls ask to have their names published with the testimony, Hassan refrains from using their names. "We never publish a testimony with a name because the survivor's opinion and feelings change over time. One day she may want to take it back so I do not want to be responsible for taking a decision for her and I do not know if I can remove the testimony later," she added. Having represented some of the ABZ victims/survivors, Lawyer Ragia Omran explained that her strategy differs from one case to another based on the survivor's targets. If they only wish to name and shame without legal punishments, the media can help do that. However, if they are aiming for legal repercussions, seeking the media before the witnesses come forward and the case is solid can actually harm the case more. Confirming

the risks of resorting to the media without a legal action, Catcalls of Cairo's Zeina Amr referred to the defamation suits that perpetrators file against their victims if they shared their names online. This is what activist Shady Noor called "the perpetrators' how to get away with sexual assault manual".

Accordingly, Nashat explained that an assessment of the case has to be done first before deciding on the steps based on the survivor's preference. For Nashat, the media is not a tool. She does not really consider the press because their number one priority is protecting the survivor and her identity. However, she believes the media can be important in certain cases where the survivor has already been defamed by the perpetrators in the media, hence, they are forced to use the same tool. This is why the application founder that preferred to remain anonymous in this research stated that her application offers the survivors with all the options, after discussing with them all the benefits and negatives of each action because they are the ones who would bear the consequences.

Despite her respect for the survivors' agency, Activist Amal Elmohandes was more weary of the media's performance with sexual assault coverage. When survivors ask for her advice to report, she usually brings up the consequences such as how the media can change her story or reveal her identity. On a personal level, she said she would never report to the media unless she is 100% sure she is protected legally and from the media. Otherwise, she would expose herself to serious issues like what happened with the Fairmont case witnesses who were imprisoned and attacked by the media. Given all these scenarios, as Hassan stated, survivors should have the right to both speak or stay silent without any pressure.

#### **RQ4a: How does the Media Impact the Victims/Survivors of Sexual Violence? Is the Overall Effect Positive or Negative?**

After speaking with both survivors of sexual violence and feminist activists, it became evident that there is no general or abstract answer to this question. Both negative and positive experiences were reported. The first part of this section tackles the survivors' experiences with

the media during their interaction with journalists and the repercussions of speaking up. The issues with Egyptian media are also discussed. The second part of this section tackles the factors that influence the media coverage.

## **A. Overview of the Victims/Survivors' Feedback after their Media Exposure**

### *1. Victims/Survivors' Experiences with the Media*

The victims/survivors' experiences with the media differed based on their individual cases and the outlets they spoke to. Some reported feeling understood and respected by the journalists they spoke to. On the other hand, more negative experiences were reported mainly for sensational coverage, violation of the victims/survivors' privacy, inaccurate information, and insensitive questions.

#### Positive Experiences with the Media

After carefully filtering the outlets that she talked to, victim/survivor D of the ABZ case stated that her overall experience was positive, clarifying that her interviews were interesting to the extent that she wanted to befriend one of the journalists. She felt they understood where she was truly coming from. Having spoken to English language Egyptian papers and international outlets, victim/survivor G who sought the media to seek justice against the priest who assaulted her, also had a fruitful experience. "It was very intimidating. I felt very honored and humbled . I am so grateful that people actually want to write about it. It's been a very good relationship. They need me, I need them," she explained. Moreover, she stated that she took some time to open up to the media after posting the story. When asked if she was bothered if people wrote about her case without interviewing her, she said she was in fact happy they were writing about the issue for the cause and not for her. "It is not about me, it is about raising awareness," she asserted. Despite that some reporters who did not interview her published inaccurate information, she stated the inaccuracy was not completely odd or harmful," she added.

Despite the negativity he faced with the media, victim/survivor C's close source stated that the only benefit of talking to the media was pressuring the prosecution to move the case faster

because of the public opinion's attention. While she also reported some negative encounters with the media, victim/survivor F (who was sexually harassed and physically abused in the street) stated that one of the journalists of an Egyptian newspaper was sincere with her and kept following up on her psychological well-being after publishing the story.

### Negative Experiences with the Media

Victim/survivor A, one of the Tahrir gang assault survivors, recalled her troubling experiences with the media. For one, her first report had inaccurate information and misquoted her. Moreover, a reporter misphrased her quote and attributed a term she rejected to her. He used the sensational headline (roughly translated), “They undressed me and the doctor’s bed sheet covered me (Saterteny)”. Rejecting the Egyptian notion of “El Satr” (rough translation: covering), she called the reporter who then said, “this is what the public wants”. Through another interview, the reporter asked her about very intimate and graphic details to which she answered but asked to remain off record. To her surprise, the reporter then sends her back the story with very explicit and problematic details. However, the reporter amended the story after her feedback. For an international outlet that an Egyptian NGO connected her to, she wrote a testimony that was then harshly edited and nothing was amended after her complaints.

Although she did not directly speak to reporters, victim/survivor B, also one of the Tahrir gang assault case victims/survivors and was raped in her house years later, stated that her story was leaked after filing a suit. The story was then published in a very sensationalized image making her feel more violated. They also posted personal pictures of her without asking for her consent. “The only thing left for them was to publish my home address,” she stated. For victim/survivor B, the media is harmful for its problematic rape discourse. “They cannot help themselves. To them, this is a sensational topic so they have to use sensational descriptions, titles, and questions that feed interest to sexualizing rape instead of portraying it as a crime of violence,” she asserted. In addition, she illustrated that the media used to also demonize the Tahrir demonstrations and hence used these crimes to demonize the victims of the gang assault themselves.

For victim/survivor C, the media exposure was invasive and problematic which stressed the family. “There were a lot of reporters in front of the court. Everyone is trying to get me to speak

to them by pulling me or telling me they will help and I was psychologically exhausted,” the close source recalled. Moreover, some took pictures of him and recorded him without asking his permission and published. “It was all for nothing. I knew she was innocent with or without the media intervention. Her case was crystal clear” he repeatedly affirmed. Moreover, he revealed that some media outlets published inaccurate information about the victim/survivor being in a relationship with the assailant which was not true. Overall, he explained that the media is not to be trusted or watched as they belittle their audience’s IQ levels and described them as exposed actors and liars.

Moving to victim/survivor F who was sexually harassed and abused in the street, she reported having some issues with how a journalist was insensitive while asking his questions by mentioning how people did not support her, how her assailant hit her, and so forth. “I was shocked by how the question was phrased and told him I could not continue the interview and he could check my post for the details,” she said. Another journalist sent her a WhatsApp message with a voice note from her editor giving the reporter instructions on what she wants exactly from the interview. Victim/survivor F thought the voice note was sent by mistake, but it was never deleted. Besides, she revealed that she accepted a lot of video interviews with journalists and reporters from famous TV shows who contacted her, but they never called her back or tackled the issue at all. “This was the most frustrating thing. I was ready to talk, but they neglected my case,” she added.

## *2. The Feedback Activists get from Survivors after their Media Exposure*

### Positive Feedback

Given the sensitivity of the issue, most of the interviewees stated the feedback they received from the survivors was okay because they usually connect them with professionals they personally trust. Yet, those who approached the media without mediators had different experiences. Both lawyer Omran and activist Noor reported the feedback they received from survivors after the interviews with journalists were more or less positive because they made sure they would remain anonymous and they were dealing with trust worthy interviewers. However,



Omran stressed that the positive feedback is not always guaranteed since some survivors speak without censorship and some journalists take advantage of that.

### Negative Feedback

On the other hand, Nazra's Hassan reported that a lot of the survivors she dealt with panicked when they spoke to the media because they were retriggered. "We went a lot to pick up girls from TV studios because they did not feel well after speaking." Yet, she stressed that there is no standard reaction for survivors after the media exposure. "They all get attacked, but some people have the tolerance to move past it while others do not," she added. She explained that this is why some survivors feel liberated and self-actualized after speaking up while others suffer.

Expanding on the survivors' experiences, Nashat elaborated that some survivors were bothered by how some journalists tried to reach them. "The problem with the Egyptian media is that they treat sexual assault crimes as scandals which is why a lot of women do not trust the media apparatus," she added. She also said that the media is usually more interested in covering these cases when either of the sides are well-known people because their main issue is the press competition and not the cause.

### *3. The Repercussions after Publishing their Stories*

The victims/survivors reported both positive and negative consequences after publishing their stories. The positive results included feeling supported, empowered, and heard through the media. On the other hand, the negative consequences included being defined as a victim, receiving threats from the perpetrator and his family, and staying anxious about what may happen next.

### Positive Consequences

After publishing her case online, victim/survivor F who was sexually assaulted and physically abused in the street felt supported by people who do not know her through social media. Despite the threats, victim/survivor D of the ABZ case felt satisfied when her story was out. "The experience was very surreal. It was weird to see family members watching me on TV.

Victim/survivor A of the Tahrir gang assault case revealed that she received overwhelming support from people after shooting a TV episode. While she also received backlash especially on social media, she decided to ignore all the negativity and just answer the positive feedback. When asked if she regrets speaking up, she said she did not, yet, she hoped she was more aware of the repercussions before taking this step.

According to victim/survivor E who was raped by her boss and shared her story on Social Media years later, the experience was empowering. She was relieved to change the power-dynamics and make her perpetrator fear her, not the other way around. “This for me constitutes a win. It is a very small win compared to what he put me through the last five years,” she added.

### Negative Repercussions

**Being Defined by the Assault:** According to victim/survivor A of the Tahrir gang assault case, the main issue with speaking up against sexual violence is being defined by the assault. “If you google my name, you will not find my work as a journalist, you’ll find articles about my assault as a victim,” she said. Confirming this, victim/survivor E who was raped by her boss stated that was identified as “the girl who was raped” but he was also labelled as the criminal who raped her.

**Threats from the Assailant's Side:** After exposing her perpetrator, victim/survivor D of the ABZ case revealed that she received threats from his family. The assailant himself tried to contact her family while his sister called and threatened to sue her. In addition, she received a call threatening to sue her if she does not remove her post. “I would barely eat and sleep because my phone was blowing up,” she stated. Not only this, but she also renewed her passport because she wanted to ensure a way out in case her physical safety was at risk. After checking the comments on her story through social media, victim/survivor D was heartbroken and disgusted. She stated that it is going to need more time to change the narrative with the mainstream public.

“Terrified and anxious, I have never felt this anxious in my life,” this is how victim/survivor E recounted her feelings after posting her story of being raped by her boss online.

#### 4. *Common Issues with Egyptian Media’s Coverage of Sexual Violence*

Lack of trainings, insensitivity, commercializing sexual violence, and lack of professionalism were the problems that the activists discussed with regards to the media’s coverage of sexual violence.

**Lack of Trainings:** Lawyer Omran illustrated that some journalists are not properly trained to portray the survivors. For instance, tackling details like the survivor was in a party drunk will not be well received with the Egyptian conservative culture that fosters rape myths (El Ashmawy, 2017). Hence, going over these details prompts attacks on the survivor instead of the assailant.

**The Insensitivity of the Media:** Founder of Catcalls of Cairo, Amr pointed to the insensitive nature of reporters and TV presenters while reporting assault by talking in a way that can be triggering to the survivors watching. In addition, they do not mention a “trigger warning” sign before the show or article. Amr also stressed that the media can negatively influence public opinion which in turn can harm the case legally.

**Commercializing Sexual Violence:** Both Nashat and Elmohandes clarified that the media treats sexual assault as scandals to attract more readership. “Hot Sexual News” and “View before Removing” are all catchy headlines the media uses to attract readers in an unethical and unprofessional way, Elmohandes added. Researcher Soliman also criticized how some camera shots zoom in while the victim is crying in a way that victimizes her and dramatizes the story, making it more sensational than informative.

**Lack of Professionalism:** Activist Noor elaborated that the Egyptian media treats victims differently based on both their gender and class. More privileged victims or boys get more sympathy than less-privileged victims. Noor also criticized the media’s spread of false information, referring to how he himself was tarnished in the media during the Fairmont case when he was presented as one of the rapists although he was an activist helping the survivors involved.

## 5. *Would Survivors Encourage other Victims/Survivors of Sexual Violence to Speak-up?*

After going through the experience first-hand, only two participants said they would encourage other survivors to speak to the media while others stressed their agency in deciding whichever route.

Citing victim/survivor A, survivors should try all the available options even if they fail. She explained that suing the perpetrator legally is not enough, the media also should be used to aim for deeper and bigger outcomes such as raising awareness on the issue and combat rape culture. “Every time I see girls speaking up publicly about their assault I feel like they are doing the right thing,” she added. Nevertheless, before they speak, she stressed that they have to identify their goals for speaking up, the platforms they will use, check previous work for journalists approaching them, and so forth. Agreeing with the vitality of speaking up, victim/survivor F asserted that in her opinion, survivors should ignore all the repercussions and focus to get justice through speaking-up.

The remaining interviewees highlighted that nobody should be encouraging the survivors to do anything because they are the ones that bear the complete consequences. Two victims/survivors pinpointed the importance of informing the survivors with the possible repercussions before they take the step of speaking-up. For example, they may not win the case legally, some might find a way to prove him innocent, it is hard to prove sexual assault, others may lose their family or friends.

### **B. The Factors Impacting how the Stories are Covered in the Media**

#### *1. Factors Impacting the Media Coverage of Sexual Violence*

According to the activists, there are four main factors that impact how a story of a sexual assault victim/survivor is covered, the story background, the nature of the outlets, and the publishing timing.

**The Story Background:** For instance, as Catcalls of Cairo's Amr stated, people only sympathize with the ideal victim based on their own assumptions and biases. The ideal victim is the conservative girl who never goes out, hence if the victim does not fit this criteria, the blaming and shaming begins. Knowing that, the media influences people's reactions according to the details or the frames they choose to publish. Amr and Nashat explained that this is very apparent in the ABZ case where people sympathized with young innocent victims who were harassed at their universities, but blamed and questioned the victims who went to his house or were in his car. Another element in the ABZ case was how one of the victims was a boy which ignited public outrage at the assailant, both Amr and Noor point out.

**The Nature of the Media Outlets and the Publishing Process:** Noor stated that there are different types of media outlets in Egypt. He specifically avoided Egyptian governmental media and only connected the survivors he dealt with to international media outlets as the safest option since they respect them and their privacy. He also explained that the international media outlets are usually easier to speak to which makes the survivors more comfortable. However, there is a risk that they get accused of tarnishing Egypt's reputation abroad. Some of the victims/survivors were more comfortable with specific platforms to share their stories than others. For instance, victim/survivor A of the Tahrir gang assault stated that she mainly picked international media and avoided the Egyptian media for its sensationalism. For her healing process, she also talked to NGOs and accepted interviews. On the other hand, victim/survivor B, who was assaulted in the Tahrir gang assault and was also raped in her own house, did not accept any interviews with the media about her assault. However, she wrote her own story through an English speaking media outlet because she shared their same vision. She also reported avoiding the Egyptian traditional media because she thought they perpetuate rape culture discourse. Agreeing with them, victim/survivor D of the ABZ case only did interviews with international outlets through trust worthy connections. Although she got an invitation to speak on a local TV channel with a well-known host, she was not comfortable participating. "Egyptian media scares me more than the media abroad. I think the whole family values and religiousness, they look at it too closely. You do not know what these people expect from you. I have a very western mentality and it could not match up," she added. For victim/survivor E who was raped by her boss, social media was the

only form of communication she was comfortable with through her personal Instagram account. “I think what made the difference between my story and a lot of stories that I saw was the element of me telling it myself,” she said. Although she did not think it through before posting on social media and was using the only tools she had in her power, victim/survivor E stated that she was not comfortable talking with the mainstream media because it would turn into a public opinion issue that invites judgements, invasive questions, and victim blaming.

**The Timing of Publishing the Story:** Lawyer Omran stressed that if the media covers the details of the story before a legal action is taken, it alarms the assailants to use the media and demonize the victim through posting her personal pictures or her background to smear her image. Therefore, in case the media publishes about a certain case before its legal course, they have to avoid mentioning a lot of details that can help both the assailants and the people identify the victim. Omran explained that the media’s strategy can lead the assailant to escape the country before the arrest warrant like what happened with the Fairmont case. Even worse, the backlash from the media through either threats, naming, or shaming can deter the victim from seeking legal action which also happened with another recent case.

## 2. *Anonymous vs Public Reporting*

Based on the previous discussions on anonymous vs public reporting, this section discusses the victims/survivors and activists’ insight on the issue. All the victims/survivors participating in this research shared their identities publicly. Yet, they differed on which way is more appropriate for covering sexual assault. Moreover, some activists were completely against mentioning the names of the victims/survivors, while others stated that it depended on the case.

**Pro Anonymous Reporting:** Three of the participating victims/survivors and three of the activists argued for keeping the identities of victims/survivors hidden to protect them. They also refuted the claims suggesting that anonymity compromises credibility.

-Protection of the Victim/Survivor: Victim/survivor B, who was sexually assaulted in the Tahrir gang assault case and raped at her house, also encouraged anonymous reporting given that the public can check credibility based on the outlet's reputation itself. She also stated that using anonymous identities or initials is the least the media can do to protect the survivors. "Names are not important, it's either I am against sexual violence or not, the cause is more important," stated Nazra's Founder Hassan. She illustrated that there is a lack of respect to people's privacy generally and people can easily penetrate the legal case and publish the names. For Hassan, putting a face to the story invites judgements while keeping the identity hidden protects the survivor which should be the main target.

-Challenging the Anonymity Equals Lack of Credibility Notion: Victim/survivor A of the Tahrir gang assault case believed anonymous reporting does not impact credibility because everyone knows these crimes exist. When asked if she thinks hidden identities leave room for questions on credibility, Nazra's Hassan clarified that credibility can be attained when credible organizations publish about it which is their strategy in Nazra. "I believe solidarity is important. However, I honestly am sick of the supporters that want us to expose ourselves so they believe us because whether we like it or not, the assault happened and it is more important," added Hassan. Agreeing with Hassan, Catcalls of Cairo's Amr revealed that if she was ever a victim of assault, she would choose to remain anonymous to avoid being overwhelmed with both judgements or support. Activist Elmohandes also advocated for keeping the identities hidden to protect the victim from the societal shaming and the threats of the perpetrator's family.

**Pro Public Reporting:** The remaining victims/survivors preferred publicly identifying themselves. For victim/survivor D of the ABZ case, she felt the urge to add credibility to her story and did not want to be hiding behind something. "If me coming out makes it more credible then I would do that," she added. Also preferring open identification, victim/survivor E who was raped by her boss revealed that she did not share her case anonymously because she was encouraging survivors to end their silence. Hence, she felt she should be more brave given that rape is nothing to be ashamed of. Moving to victim/survivor F who was sexually assaulted and physically abused in the street, she stated that cases with hidden identities do not receive much attention. Lastly, for victim/survivor G, keeping her identity public helped her case because she

was already an established person with the church and held a high position for a year. Therefore, people paid attention when she spoke, as opposed to a fake account that nobody can identify. Moreover, Lawyer Dina El Mokadem explained that giving a face to a story can inspire girls to reject violence in all its forms.

**Case-dependent Analysis:** Lawyer Omran, activist Noor, and the founder of Speak-Up agreed that the issue of the identity depends on the story and the victim herself. For instance, Omran stated that the media has to be very careful with the survivors' identities, stressing that their protection is as important as garnering support. The founder of the application that preferred to remain anonymous also emphasized that revealing a victim's identity depends on her social background, age, whether her address is known to the perpetrator, and the amount of risks she can endure based on her revelation. Some victims do not tell their parents, some may not have the mental capacity to be publicly judged, and others may be facing complex cases like speaking up against sexual assault in the church. The founder of Speak-Up platform also stressed that generalizing all cases of sexual assault is impossible as long as abuse and rejection of the victims exist. Confirming that every case is different, activist Noor discussed that the identities should remain anonymous in case the victims are average people, however, if the survivor is a celebrity, she can garner more support and validation. He referenced the testimony of the young Actress and Musical Artist Lella Fadda on Instagram against ABZ which gave the case a push and authenticated it.

#### *The Media's Role in Sexual Assault Coverage in Egypt*

Despite all the aforementioned issues with the media's coverage of sexual violence, almost all the feminist activists participating in this study acknowledged the vitality of the media's role in covering sexual assault cases for various reasons. For instance, Founder of Nazra for Feminist Studies Mozn Hassan stated, "I am an intersectional feminist and I don't like to forsake some rights for others. Freedom of expression is important. People need to have a public sphere to speak." Referencing a highly popular recent rape case, Hassan illustrated that when discussions were prohibited on the case, people stopped getting information about the verdict and



repercussions for the assailants, while the girl had already been exposed. Moreover, she discussed how feminism is not a parallel movement and needs to be mainstream since victims/survivors do not choose violence, it's imposed on them. Accordingly, discussing the issue on a larger scale helps people understand that violence should not be tolerated. Because of this exposure, feminist initiatives keep emerging for the cause. Not only this, but also feminist activist Amal Elmohandes explained that the work of these movements changed the news coverage of assault cases from scandals to crimes. With the latest feminist digital movement, the Public Prosecution started using social media to report updates on the cases.

Lawyer Ragia Omran also illustrated that the media can sometimes be helpful in making the issue more in focus and help people understand more about it. Besides, it can help the community get outside of the state of denial that these crimes exist and it is not the fault of the victim/survivor, added Elmohandes. In addition, the media can alter the rape myths by promoting a more ethical and mindful narrative. Feminist researcher Alia Soliman also stressed its role defying victim stereotypes and giving people a sense of the magnitude of the problem. Adding to the media's role in raising awareness, Advocacy Coordinator at the CEWLA Nada Nashat explained that it's necessary for people to define sexual violence and its different forms and that it can be committed by the closest of people. However, the question remains about what happens after the coverage? If a girl speaks up to the media and shares the details of the story and nothing happens. While it fills people with anger and motivates them to work more on the cause, it also burns them out. "It is not about the publishing process, it is about the post publishing and how we handle it."

Not only is the media significant for shedding awareness, but also for protection. Founder of Catcalls of Cairo Zeina Amr stated that the media can be an essential tool especially with more powerful perpetrators who use their positions to threaten the victims/survivors. It can help counter this power and direct public opinion to the victim/survivor's side. In addition, it's crucial to spread awareness, encourage survivors to out their abusers and put them behind bars. Expanding on the media's role in protecting survivors, Noor also emphasized the role of the media in not just shedding light on the issue, but also on pressuring the stakeholders to take action. During the ABZ case, Noor resorted to the international media to gain the public

opinion's side, especially after ABZ's family threatened them and the victims. "We wanted the protection of the media because the media is power," he added. Nashat also stated that the media can be used to discredit, name, and shame the perpetrator and protect other girls from him. Moreover, when the case is known in the media, it is under the spotlight and hence there is no room for manipulation or changes in the case based on the assailant's connections.

Although the activists more or less agreed on the benefits of talking to the media, they stressed that it can only achieve these targets if they tackled the stories ethically without breaching the survivors' privacy or demonizing them. "I think the coverage is important, but there has to be certain ethical policies to ensure how the media tackles it," stated Nazra's Mozn Hassan.

#### **RQ4b: Does the Media Frames Influence how Victims/Survivors Perceive their Media Experience?**

As previously mentioned, some interviewees reported feeling violated after they read the stories on their cases due to the sensational rhetoric, the inaccurate information, and disrespecting the victim/survivor's privacy. To assess this more thoroughly, a comparison between the dominant frames identified in the content analysis and the feedback from the victims/survivors on their media exposure is provided.

For the Tahrir square gang assault case-study, the frames found in the content analysis did not represent the interviews with its victims/survivors A and B. For instance, the content analysis showed no problematic rape myths or sensational rhetoric across all platforms. However, both victims/survivors reported reading sensational rhetoric on their stories. In addition, victim/survivor B stated that she avoided interviews with the media because she does not perceive the media as an ally in general.

For the Ayat rape attempt case-study, the coverage and the rape myths frames analyzed in the content analysis was found to have impacted the victim/survivor. The Ayat case content analysis portrayed sensational rhetoric, victim-blaming, and to a limited extent, discrediting the victim in both Youm 7 and Al-Shorouk newspapers. In addition, the name and the pictures of the

victim/survivor were used more than the assailant's name. According to sources close to the case, the media's coverage was overall negative for the victim/survivor based on these frames. Not only this, but also the sources revealed that some journalists promised not to share her pictures or full name publicly, but went ahead and published. Sources also revealed that the coverage had a lot of inaccurate information about the details of the assault itself. Accordingly, this case suggests that the frames do in fact impact how the victims/survivors perceive the coverage.

Through the ABZ's case-study, the Youm 7 coverage was the only outlet that referred to victim blaming and sensationalism. Egyptian Streets, Reuters, and BBC Arabic did not entail any of that. Given that the victim/survivor D of the ABZ participating in this study was only interviewed by international outlets, her feedback confirmed that the media frames in fact impact how victims/survivors feel after sharing their stories. For instance, she concluded that her overall media experience was positive and that she felt respected through her media interviews. When asked if she checked other comments on the case, she stated that she felt disappointed in some victim blaming rhetoric, but it did not influence how she thought of the overall coverage. It is also important to note that she refused to interact with Egyptian local outlets for fear of being shamed and blamed, which again supports the content analysis that showed both victim-blaming and sensational coverage of the ABZ case in the Youm 7 newspaper.

## Chapter Six Discussion

This study aimed to examine the impact of the media's coverage of sexual violence on its victims/survivors. Before addressing that, a content analysis on three highly popular Egyptian sexual violence cases was conducted to identify the main frames used in the media. Moreover, interviews with journalists were conducted to discuss the measures and approaches they take while covering these stories. Afterwards, interviews with survivors of sexual assault and activists working on the cause were conducted to reveal why they seek the media, their feelings after the media exposure, the main issues with the media coverage, the factors impacting the coverage, and whether the media frames affect how they feel after their media exposure.

### *The Dominant Frames in the Coverage of the Cases*

The content analysis examined the cases, the Tahrir gang assault, the Ayat Girl rape attempt, and the Ahmed Bassam Zaki (ABZ) case who assaulted and harassed a large number of girls in both local media outlets (Youm 7, Egyptian Streets, Daily News Egypt, Rasd Network, Al Shorouk newspaper), and international media (Reuters, BBC Arabic, New York Times, and Gulf News). After analyzing the data, the Ayat rape-attempt case recorded the most problematic coverage in the Arabic speaking Egyptian outlets (Youm 7 and Al-Shorouk newspapers). Owing to the complexities of the case, it was not surprising to identify victim-blaming and sensational rhetoric frames in the coverage. Not only was it a rape attempt, but also a murder crime, amounting to just the perfect ingredients for sensational media stories. To top it up, the victim/survivor was said to have known one of the accused in her case and was out on a 'romantic date' with him before the assault, which in turn invited more judgments and scrutiny. In addition, given that the victim/survivor was a young girl from a less-privileged community, it was clear that no precautions were taken to revise or supervise her media interviews. For instance, some reports included direct quotes from her that left room for victim-blaming such as, "I learned from my mistake and I will not lie to my parents again", which tackles the issue on an individual level instead of condemning sexual violence on a social level. Journalists highlighted this to attract readers. More problematically, her pictures (either covered or clear) were used more than the assailant's pictures. Her full name was also referred to more than the perpetrator's in both local

and international outlets. This can be justified by the fact that she was arrested after she murdered her perpetrator, giving the media more access to her full identity and pictures, without allowing her much room to reject the media attention.

While it was regarded by some activists interviewed for this study as a revolutionary case since the perpetrator was publicly shamed and arrested, the ABZ case in the Arabic speaking outlet Youm 7 showed some troubling frames of victim-blaming and sensationalism. Phrases such as “she entered his car without any force” or “He ‘kissed’ and touched all her body” were repeatedly used. It is noteworthy to mention that these frames were used even though there was no public face to the victims/survivors of ABZ. Their identities remained mostly anonymous, and the Youm 7 was the only outlet in this study that either referred to their first names or just initials. One of the main reasons this case was considered revolutionary both legally and with media coverage is that it was named after the assailant, unlike the Ayat case which was name the victims/survivors instead. However, it should be noted that the reference ‘ABZ’ was first pushed by the Instagram platform Assault Police compiling all the testimonies against him and not the mainstream media. For Egyptian Streets, Reuters, and BBC Arabic, the coverage was more or less the same for this case, tackling none of the aforementioned rape myths. The media’s usage of the term ‘survivor’ was relatively low in the entire coverage. The BBC Arabic was the only outlet that used the term survivor for the ABZ case, and only 7.3% of articles on Egyptian Streets. It is still unclear why this was the case.

As for the Tahrir gang assault case, access to articles was very limited. According to one of the survivors of this case, a lot of articles were deleted. Unlike the other two cases, the Youm 7 in this case did not use any sensational or victim-blaming rhetoric. It is unclear why this was the case, yet, it can be linked to the fact that a lot of the articles published were about Egyptian President Abdelfattah Al-Sisi's visit to one of victims/survivors in the hospital. Hence, there might have been no room to question or eroticize the content. Moreover, it could be that the rape myths coverage was amongst the deleted articles. Similar to the Ayat case, names of victims/survivors were mentioned more than the assailants’ names. However, this might be the case because the assailants were never caught or known.

### *The Journalists' Approach in tackling Sexual Violence*

The other element of media exposure that is also essential to examine is the journalists' approach in interviewing and contacting the survivors. The interaction with journalists on its own can trigger the victims/survivors and traumatize them more. The participants in this study did not mention any editorial frameworks or trainings that media outlets use to protect the survivors. Consent forms are not used, only TV host Reham Saeed mentioned she provides the victims/survivors with forms to guarantee their full responsibility for the information they reveal for the show. None of the journalists mentioned any prior training to qualify them to interview vulnerable populations. Nonetheless, a few journalists reported they adopt their own methods with the victims/survivors. Only two journalists stated they grant the victim/survivor with all the needed terms and guarantees to make her comfortable to speak. One journalist also mentioned she leaves room for survivors to quit the interview at any point or skip any triggering questions. In addition, two journalists confirmed they sent the articles before publication to the survivor to double check that she is satisfied with it, although they never allow this for other sources.

When asked about their motivations behind covering assault stories, most journalists stated they do it to raise awareness, call for action, and end the cycle of silence. Two journalists explained they care about these stories because they understand what the survivors go through and hence they want them to feel like they are not alone facing their trauma. Most journalists specified reasons related to informing the public and pushing stakeholders to take action without really focusing on the survivor herself and how this can in turn impact her.

The interviews with the journalists overall did not mention unethical procedures for reaching out to the survivors. The participants agreed that the most challenging aspect of covering assault is getting the victims/survivors to open up to them. Survivors often dread sharing their stories to the media for fear of exposing them and receiving backlash from the family and the community. Knowing that, some journalists illustrated they reach out to survivors through mutual connections, women's rights organizations, or activists. Two of the journalists emphasized they never pressure survivors to talk to them. For one of the journalists, if survivors refuse to participate, she goes back to the organization to help her establish mutual trust with them. This was the only ethically problematic instance mentioned. Going back to the organization that

already exercises some form of power dynamics over the victims/survivors can in fact be pressuring to them since they would not want to reject an offer from someone who was helping them. Hence, if they said no from the beginning, it would be better to let the interview go to avoid pressuring them.

On the anonymous reporting option, the interviews with journalists explained the dilemma on why names of survivors and assailants are used differently in each case (like the ABZ and Ayat examples). All journalists revealed that they never had an editorial policy for that before the recent law by the government to keep the identities of the victims/survivors anonymous in the coverage. Accordingly, journalists were left to their own devices to decide how they intend to cover the case. For this study, most journalists stated they are more or less lenient and write based on the survivors' preferences. Only Saeed stated she completely opposes covering the victim/survivor's face because it harms the credibility of the story.

Most journalists communicated that the media overall benefits the victims/survivors more if the case was covered professionally. They stated they believe it empowers them and makes them feel validated and heard. Only Saeed shared that she believed the media overall does more harm to the victim/survivors who are often culturally stigmatized. Yet, she stated that she still encourages victims/survivors to speak-up and shame their perpetrators.

It is essential to note the difference in the rhetoric used by journalists working internationally or domestically. Reporters working nationally referred more to Egyptian rape myths notions mentioned through El-Ashmawy's aforementioned paper (2017), such as the virginity of the victim/survivor and relate it to the assault. When attributing reasons to why survivors avoid the media, they referred to these rape myths concepts such as how nobody would marry a survivor who openly shared her rape story.

#### *The Survivors and Activists' Feedback on their Media Exposure*

It is apparent that the media is one of the tools that victims/survivors or activists can use to benefit the case. A lot of the participants discussed the risks and negative repercussions of interacting with the journalists and the psychological trauma it can cause to the

victims/survivors. Yet, they were not against the media's intervention altogether, they were mainly concerned about how the coverage itself is executed. Some victims/survivors purposely sought the media to incite actions from stakeholders, out their perpetrators, raise awareness for other girls, or for personal healing. Others were forced to interact with the media if the case had already gone viral or the media interfered on their own. Based on the interviews, there is no clear cut answer to whether the media harms or benefits the victim/survivors. Some survivors reported feeling empowered, heard, and supported while others reported feeling violated and misrepresented. It should be noted that these conclusions are only based on interviewees who spoke-up about their assault. They do not constitute the majority of sexual assault survivors that usually prefer staying silent and avoid media intervention, most activists and lawyers interviewed for this study stressed.

Below are the main factors that impact how the survivors perceive their media exposure.

### *1. Details of the Assault itself*

The location of the assault, the background of the survivor/victim and the perpetrator, and the context are all factors that impact how the case is framed in the media and the public reactions to it which in turn make the survivor feel supported and empowered or retrigger her trauma. For instance, some activists such as Catcalls of Cairo's Zeina Amr and the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance (CEWLA)'s Nada Nashat referred to the people's sympathy to the 'ideal victim'. The respectful conservative girl that does not smoke, drink, or party. If the victim breaks any of those stereotypes, she is often blamed and shamed. According to Nashat, this was vividly shown in the ABZ case where girls who were assaulted on campus were not blamed while girls who were inside his car or house were shamed. Related to the ideal victim notion, the fact that the survivor knew her assailant beforehand or was in a relationship with him also ignites victim blaming and discrediting. These issues were confirmed through the cases of victim/survivor D and victim/survivor E who avoided the mainstream media altogether because they believed they had 'western mentalities' that would not fit with the Egyptian context. Moreover, victim/survivor F stated that her family forced her to wear the hijab (head scarf) while filing her lawsuit so people do not question or place the blame on her. It's why some activists stated that one of the factors they use in assessing whether a case should resort to the media is



based on her background and character. If her character can bring controversy and harm the case, they either do not talk to the media or cite her anonymously.

## 2. *The Platform Used*

Another determinant of how the survivor feels about her story's publishing is the type of platform used to convey the message. Almost all the participants from activists and survivors differentiated between the types of media outlets in Egypt, clarifying that variations exist within the domestic media itself. Overall, some activists and survivors were more comfortable with the international media outlets followed by English-speaking Egyptian outlets. However, they specifically avoided the mainstream Egyptian media and affiliated it with sensational and victim-blaming rhetoric. For instance, activist Shady Noor stated he specifically advised the survivors to not give interviews with journalists at local papers to protect them and their identities. It is why victim/survivor D from the ABZ survivors only contacted international media outlets and was satisfied with the interview experience. To Noor and other activists, the international media respects the survivors and their privacy more.

Not only is the outlet itself a factor, but also how the survivor decides to share her story on any outlet matters. For example, victim/survivor B who was both one of the victims of the Tahrir gang assault and was also raped in her own house years later, stated she only preferred writing her own story by herself and publishing it on a trustworthy Egyptian independent outlet. Although she did not mind publicly speaking of the case, she wanted to do it using her own words on her chosen outlet. She avoided interviews with journalists and said she would have never shared her story in mainstream Egyptian media because they would not understand where she was coming from. She also reported feeling violated when one mainstream Egyptian outlet published her story with her personal picture after getting access to her lawsuit without her consent.

Another difference in platforms that impact how survivors feel about their assault is whether the case was published on social media only or mainstream media. For instance, victim/survivor E shared her story in a video through her personal Instagram account to out her perpetrator. While she did not mind revealing her identity online, she said she would have never done interviews

with mainstream media because she did not want the case to turn into a public opinion issue where judgements and blaming can be placed on her. To her, the Instagram community was safer and more supportive. Although she did have a lot of followers, it was still more controlled than the mainstream media's sharing.

This factor is also related to the survivor's agency and gaining control over their situation. Their feelings about the coverage are probably going to be more positive if they approach the media themselves, as opposed to being pressured to share their stories. This could be shown through the case of victim/survivor C's close source who had no interest in the media. Because the case was already a matter of public opinion, journalists and reporters would wait in front of the court to get interviews. Hence, he regarded the media as being intrusive and only looking for their own personal interests.

### *3. The Timing of Speaking-up*

Related to the victim/survivor's agency mentioned in the previous factor, the fact that the victim/survivor picks the timing to share her story matters. The victims/survivors reported feeling more comfortable when they shared their stories at their own pace, while they felt more violated and resentful to the media when the timing was imposed by the journalists. For instance, victim/survivor G who was sexually assaulted by her priest as a child, chose to speak after years of her assault when no legal actions were taken from the church. After posting her story online, she had the luxury to reject live media interviews at the beginning because she thought she was unready until she was comfortable to talk a few months later. The link between her choice of timing and her satisfaction with her media exposure cannot be overlooked. Contrary to this case, a close source to victim/survivor C reported feeling mentally pressured and unable to speak, but since the case was already a matter of public opinion for legal reasons, he was bombarded by journalists that pressured him into talking. This in turn made him unsatisfied with the media coverage or their interaction with journalists.

### *4. The Experience with Journalists*

One of the most essential aspects that has a significant impact on how the survivors feel after their media exposure is their experience with journalists. Their interviews with reporters can either help them talk and let out their feelings or retrigger them. According to one of the activists, the media trauma can be as stressful as the assault trauma itself. Nashat referred to how some journalists often pressure the victims/survivors to speak and call them a lot. Nazra's Founder Mozn Hassan also recalled how a lot of survivors called her from media studios to pick them up after panicking and feeling retriggered. Moreover, victim/survivor A recalled she was once asked "why didn't you push the perpetrators away?". Expanding on that, victim/survivor F said she quit two interviews with two journalists who treated her in an insensitive manner and asked inappropriate questions. The close source to victim/survivor C also complained about the way journalists were pressuring him while he was already psychologically stressed to talk and would take pictures of him without his consent for publishing. Not only that, but also some journalists promised they would not reveal his daughter's identity when in fact they did with pictures.

On the other hand, the victims/survivors who had good experiences with the media attributed it to the way journalists were understanding, cooperative, and professional in the way they communicated with them. This was the case with victims/survivors D and G who were exposed to considerate journalists.

##### *5. The Frames used in the Coverage*

Founder of Nazra for Feminist Studies, Mozn Hassan stressed that the frames the media uses highly impact how the survivors feel after their exposure. "It depends on the perception that their stories are being told with. How the coverage is showing how they truly feel. They get threatened if their stories got twisted and put the blame on them," she added. There are four main themes through which framing can occur while reporting sexual assaults; normalization, sensationalism or eroticizing the story (Shoham, 2013). Other frames in the media coverage include mentioning details about the assailant's background (Siefkes-Andrew and Alexopoulos, 2018), referring to him as 'psychologically troubled' (O'Hara, 2012), and discrediting the victim (Siefkes-Andrew and Alexopoulos, 2018). Based on the aforementioned content analysis, the most frames identified in Egyptian local media were sensationalism and victim-blaming.

Both the interview with victim/survivor D and the content analysis of her case showed that media frames have a high impact on the victims/survivors' feelings after their media exposure. The ABZ case's coverage overall included victim-blaming and sensational rhetoric on mainstream Egyptian media, while international outlets did not. Based on the interview with victim/survivor D of the ABZ case, the experience with the media was overall positive. Yet, this might be the case because she only contacted international media outlets and her face or name were not really identified in mainstream media. She also actively avoided mainstream Egyptian media fearing they publicly shame or blame her. Not only that, but she only spoke to outlets through activists or lawyers she trusted and stressed that she intentionally avoided the local media. Besides, although problematic frames existed within the case coverage in the local media, the case's route was overall better than a lot of similar cases since the assailant was convicted and proven guilty. Hence, it makes sense that victim/survivor D of the ABZ case was overall pleased with her media exposure.

Moving to the Ayat rape-attempt, the frames identified in the case coverage were aligned with the interview conducted with a close source to the victim/survivor, suggesting that media frames impact victims/survivors' perceptions of their assault after their media exposure. Given the previously discussed problematic issues, the Ayat coverage was more problematic with victim blaming and sensational elements. In addition, they identified the survivor and her family with pictures more than they identified the perpetrator. Sources for this case were not pleased with the coverage for using misinformation and identifying the victim/survivor by name and pictures without their consent. They also reported being pressured by the journalists they interacted with.

On the other hand, the link between the analyzed media frames in the content analysis and the interviews conducted for this study was not prevalent in the Tahrir gang assault case. The analysis of the case revealed that no common rape myths frames were used in the coverage. However, the victims/survivors for this case reported some negative experiences with journalists and sensational coverage that was not shown in the sample of this study. It should be noted that the sample for this case was limited and inaccessible. In addition, one of the sources revealed

that a lot of articles were removed. Thus, the problematic frames might have been within the deleted articles.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude this study, some general remarks about sexual assault coverage in Egypt is provided. For one, through the research, it became apparent that victims/survivors from less-privileged social classes are treated differently than those from more privileged classes. Classifying victims/survivors' classes was based on how they spoke of and described their social backgrounds during the interview. For instance, the two survivors who belonged to less-privileged classes faced different challenges while speaking up. One of them reported having to fight unsupportive parents who forced her to file a physical abuse lawsuit than a sexual harassment case. According to her, they felt this defied their conservative roots. More obviously, through the other survivor's case, it was apparent that the girl herself was not asked whether she was open to speak to the media and have her pictures published or not. A source close to her revealed that it was her father who mainly took the decision, even though he did not want to, because he did not want to reject his lawyer's request. Since he was unable to afford to hire a lawyer, he felt that he owed his lawyer after all her help with the case. On the other hand, victims/survivors from more privileged backgrounds had more freedom in their choices.

Another issue that needs to be pointed out is how some media outlets dropped the story of victim/survivor F even when she told them she was ready for the interview. It is unclear why about three different outlets would suddenly decide to neglect a story. Assumptions about why they dropped the story might be because it was not as viral as other cases online. However, the survivor herself did not have any justification on why this occurred.

It is also noteworthy that most survivors and activists emphasized the role of the legal step before the media exposure to protect the victim/survivor. Referring to what activist Shady Noor called the 'How to get away with sexual harassment manual', perpetrators often sue victims for defaming them. Hence, the legal action not only protects the victim, but also impacts the whole course of the case. It is why victim/survivor E who was raped by her boss removed the video that she posted online after a while because she was not psychologically ready to sue her perpetrator.

She tried, but she felt that she was unable to handle all the questions and the retelling of the story. Fearing a defamation suit, she removed it.

Another issue with the media's coverage of assault both locally and internationally is the absence of trigger warnings. None of the articles analyzed included any warnings or notes before reading the articles which can be problematic to other survivors accessing the stories.

Additionally, despite the rise of digital feminism in Egypt against sexual violence after the ABZ case, it is crucial to note that its impact is still limited to certain classes who have access to the internet and the English language. One of the survivors from the less-privileged classes reported never hearing of ABZ or the digital movement at all. In addition, victim/survivor B criticized the movement for being reductionist and simplifying sexual assault without putting it into context.

Lastly, the dilemma of referring to the subjects of assault as survivors or victims mentioned in the literature review was not apparent in this study. Both local and international outlets overall used the term victim or did not use either terms more than they used the term survivor. Some international and one Egyptian outlet referred to them as survivors only for a few articles. It is still vague why this is the case. However, two of the survivors mentioned they did not mind the usage of both terms since each describes a different stage of their experiences. Additionally, victim/survivor B stressed that journalists should use a more neutral term in case they do not know what the victim/survivor's preference is.

Overall, based on the media's coverage and how the victims/survivors felt about it, the media can in fact be beneficial to the coverage of sexual assault only after more legal and editorial policies are placed to protect the victim/survivors who decide to share their stories.

## **Limitations**

One of the major limitations of this study is the inaccessibility to more survivors of sexual assault. Gaining access to the survivors was the main challenge in this research since they refused to speak either because they were not in a psychological place to talk or lack of trust.

Accordingly, most survivors were reached through lawyers or activists to make them more comfortable. Given the sensitivity of the issue, the conversations had to be highly structured and follow-ups were limited to specific cases to avoid retriggering the survivors. Another limitation to the study is the limited choices of outlets for the content analysis. The content analysis did not examine the same media outlets since they had different numbers of published article on each case. Accordingly, each case had a specific content analysis approach based on the articles found. The case on the Tahrir gang assault had very limited articles online across all platforms. Hence, the sample may not be very representative. The second part of the study is qualitative analysis so the results cannot be generalized.

### **For Future Research**

One of the major complex issues with covering assault is maintaining objectivity. After speaking with feminist activists, most of them rejected giving the perpetrator a platform to speak since this empowers him even more. This by default defies the basic rule of journalistic ethic to portray both sides. Journalists on the other hand argued that they should stick to providing both sides of the story as possible. Yet, one of the journalists stated she could not be giving space for perpetrators to speak after the victim/survivor because this can trigger and traumatize her even more. For future studies, this issue can be examined to figure out a way to cover assault professionally

Another research question that can be posed is on the impact of the media and public opinion in igniting legal actions. While a lot of the survivors and activists mentioned how public pressure can move the legal stakeholders, it is still unclear if this is true and how exactly it happens with cases of sexual violence.

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