

## **The Representation of Women Affected by Sexual Violence**

A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Representation of Gisèle Pelicot in Le Monde and Le  
Figaro

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# THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN AFFECTED BY SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN NEWS OUTLETS

## ABSTRACT

Sexual violence remains a pervasive issue that affects millions of women worldwide and continues to raise urgent social, political, and cultural concerns. In raising the appropriate level of awareness, the media plays a crucial role in shaping the public's perceptions of sexual violence. Therefore, this study investigates how women affected by sexual violence are represented in two ideologically contrasting French news outlets: *Le Monde*, known for its center-left orientation, and *Le Figaro*, associated with a center-right positioning. Specifically, it focuses on the case of Gisèle Pelicot, a 72-year-old woman who filed charges against her husband for over two decades of marital rape and sexual abuse. Her public testimony and the subsequent trial generated significant national and international attention, making her a unique subject for examining evolving media narratives.

Using Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), this study examines 40 articles through a textual and visual analysis, allowing for an in-depth understanding of how semiotic tools work together to create meaning. The results of this study identify two main discourses through which Gisèle Pelicot is represented: a survivor discourse and a victim-blaming discourse. Ultimately, the survivor discourse portrays Gisèle Pelicot as a resilient and agentic figure who became a feminist icon. This aligns with broader shifts in media practices that increasingly portray women affected by sexual violence through empowering narratives.

Conversely, the victim-blaming discourse reproduces more traditional and conservative narratives by portraying Gisèle Pelicot as complicit and unreliable, notably through the exposure and scrutiny of her sexuality. Ultimately, these representations demonstrate that while progress has been made in how women affected by sexual violence are portrayed, dominant cultural norms and institutional pressures continue to influence which stories are legitimized, how they are told, and whose voices are amplified by the media.

Specifically, this study contributes to ongoing research on media representations of sexual violence by demonstrating that contradictory discourses often coexist. This challenges the tendency of previous research, which often treated such discourses as mutually exclusive. Additionally, it addresses a gap in empirical research by focusing on a recent case involving an ordinary French woman affected by domestic sexual violence,

which contrasts with the dominant focus on Anglo-Saxon contexts and high-profile celebrity cases typically found in media representation studies. Finally, the findings offer practical implications for media professionals and advocacy groups, encouraging more cautious, accurate, and ethically responsible reporting on women affected by sexual violence.

KEYWORDS: *Media Representatios, Sexual Violence, Survivor Discourse, Victim-Blaming Discourse, Gisèle Pelicot*

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## 1. Introduction

In a world where injustice and inequality prevail, minorities, particularly women, face immense challenges in voicing their struggles. Sexual violence, as a particularly pervasive form of gendered oppression, exemplifies these difficulties. These challenges are often aggravated by the media's tendency to sensationalize such stories, frequently turning them into public spectacles (Aroustamian, 2020, p. 2). This systemic pattern of sexual violence reveals how power, status, and privilege intersect to uphold persistent societal and gender inequalities. With sexual violence often being stigmatized as shameful and defiling, female victims are frequently blamed and silenced, which perpetuates the "continuum of sexual violence," a range of normalized acts, from everyday harassment to recognized sexual crimes, which all contribute to the systemic control of women (Dartnall & Jewkes, 2013, p. 5).

Globally, nearly one in three women experiences sexual violence in their lifetime, which not only causes physical, mental, and psychological harm but also reinforces structural inequalities that marginalize women (World Health Organization, 2021b, p. 1). This widespread prevalence is often reinforced by societal attitudes that normalize women's silence and control within intimate relationships (Dartnall & Jewkes, 2013, p. 6). In domestic settings specifically, women are frequently subjected to repeated abuse by partners, where certain power dynamics make it even harder to report or escape such violence (p. 7). This showcases the need for systemic change, particularly regarding how sexual violence is addressed institutionally.

As societies become increasingly digital, we share a collective responsibility in shaping the understanding of issues like domestic sexual violence. The media, specifically, as a powerful institution, plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions, as it can either challenge or reinforce the structures that allow such violence to persist (O'Hara, 2012, p. 247). Beyond simply relaying information, news outlets, especially in an age of 24/7 news cycles and heavy reliance on social media, influence whose voices are heard, how people are represented, and which narratives are prioritized (Pelau et al., 2023, p. 2). Although access to information has become easier, it often comes at the expense of essential context and ethical responsibility. This issue can be attributed to the media's obligation to compete for attention in an environment driven by emotional engagement, which often blurs the line between informing the public and seeking sensationalism (p. 3). In cases of sexual violence, the media's influence becomes even more critical, as the narratives they construct shape

societal attitudes and influence how victims and perpetrators are perceived, but also how justice itself is imagined (Franiuk et al., 2008, p. 288).

Furthermore, global news coverage of women affected by sexual violence often follows patterns that reinforce harmful stereotypes and reflect deep-rooted societal biases (Gervais & Eagan, 2017, p. 227). Specifically, media portrayals often reinforce rape myths, blame victims, and objectify women, turning their suffering into a commodity within an attention-driven media economy. Additionally, scholars argue that the emphasis on celebrity culture and high-profile cases has led to skewed news representations of sexual violence (Gallacher, 2024, p. 3). This focus is problematic as it distorts the common understanding of sexual violence and overlooks the broader social and institutional contexts that enable such discourses to be prioritized (p. 4).

Within the French context specifically, the media operate within a corporate democratic model (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 89). Described as a sort of political parallelism, this results in the media, political institutions, and social groups maintaining close ties. This is particularly significant given that previous research on French news coverage often centers on political or celebrity figures, while more common forms of domestic violence remain largely overlooked (Helmke et al., 2014, p. 180). This further sheds light on how French media practices operate, potentially leading to selective reporting and the prioritization of certain narratives, which can significantly influence how sensitive issues like sexual violence are portrayed.

However, various studies also demonstrate a discursive shift in mainstream reporting marked by the rise of various feminist movements, where portrayals increasingly represent sexual violence as part of the broader societal and structural problems rather than as isolated events (Gunderson, 2024, p. 30). However, compared to earlier coverage, which often sensationalized individual cases and disconnected them from systemic patterns, recent reporting shows greater awareness of underlying power structures and gender inequalities, which reflects broader ideological changes within French society (Stricot, 2022, p. 30). Nevertheless, while progress is evident, scholars note that this change remains uneven, with many news narratives still struggling to fully move beyond individualized portrayals (Bolton et al., 2023, p. 491).

Acknowledging these trends, this study engages with one of the most widely discussed French cases in recent years. The one of Gisèle Pelicot, a 72-year-old woman who filed charges against her husband for over two decades of marital rape and sexual abuse. The open court trial, which took place in 2024, and which involved another 51 perpetrators, drew

extensive national and international media attention. The trial triggered many protests and marches globally, demonstrating the collective solidarity that this case has brought about and which further highlights the societal relevance of this paper (Le Monde, 2024c, para. 1). Given the significant media attention, examining how Gisèle Pelicot is portrayed becomes key to understanding broader media narratives surrounding sexual violence (Gallacher, 2024, p. 5). As issues of justice and accountability become increasingly debated in public discourse, the visibility she gained reflects not only the global relevance of her story but also highlights the media's role in shaping how these issues are brought forward, whether in a constructive or harmful way (The Guardian, 2024, para. 2; The Times, 2024, para. 1). While previous studies have primarily focused on either high-profile figures or isolated cases, this research examines the unique trajectory of an ordinary citizen whose experience of sexual violence and subsequent media coverage led her to evolve into a public figure.

Thus, this study seeks to answer the question: “How has Gisèle Pelicot been represented in the news coverage of news outlets Le Monde and Le Figaro during and after the trial?”

As this raises critical questions about how victims and perpetrators are represented and how such representations shape public perception, it becomes necessary to examine both what the media report and how. Therefore, this study contributes to this inquiry by addressing a current case that, due to its recent nature, has not yet been the focus of substantial academic research, while also shifting attention away from the traditionally dominant Anglophone research focus. By focusing on French news outlets, this research broadens the geographical and cultural scope of media representation studies and provides valuable insight into how gendered violence is reported within a distinct national media context.

Additionally, it provides new methodological insights as it will use Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), a differentiation from existing qualitative studies that mainly use framing analysis (Aroustamian, 2020, p. 3). Using this multimodal approach allows for an analysis of how Gisèle Pelicot is portrayed through both text and images, and how these representations convey underlying ideological positions (Machin and Mayr, 2012a, p. 50).

This is particularly relevant in contemporary media as meaning is not only conveyed through language alone but through a combination of modes and design choices that work together to influence interpretation and emotional engagement. When it comes to media coverage of sexual violence, multimodal choices can subtly reinforce certain ideologies and

influence whether audiences respond with sympathy or skepticism toward women affected by such violence, ultimately shaping public understanding of the issue (p. 52). Moreover, comparative studies examining media portrayals of sexual violence across politically contrasting news outlets remain underexplored and by analyzing *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*, two French newspapers with distinct political views, this paper will offer perspectives into how political influences affect media representations of sexual violence (Library of Congress, n.d.; Adintime, n.d.). Highlighting the role of partisan media, this study will also respond to a broader scholarly need to understand how polarization within news media affects not only political reporting but also the coverage of social issues, such as the representation of sexual violence.

Overall, through a multilayered perspective, this study aims to analyze how Gisèle Pelicot is represented in the media and will explore the tools and strategies used to construct these portrayals, offering insight into how the media respond to commercial pressures and shifting audience behaviors in a rapidly evolving digital landscape. This ties directly into broader discussions about how the media industry strategically navigates digital transformation through communication strategies and audience engagement (Erasmus University Rotterdam, n.d., para. 1). Ultimately, this research contributes to the ongoing discourse on the intersection between media, gender, and representation, particularly in how women affected by sexual violence are represented in public narratives. To support this analysis, the theoretical framework is organized into three sections: sexual violence as a societal problem, the role of news media regarding sexual violence, and the news representations of women affected by sexual violence. This structure places this study within broader societal and media dynamics, which provides the basis for examining Gisèle Pelicot's media representation.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Sexual Violence: A Societal Problem**

To understand how Gisèle Pelicot is represented, it is important to first contextualize news narratives by providing insights into sexual violence as a societal problem. This section examines the systemic patterns that sustain the institutional failures that enable its persistence.

Sexual violence, as the broader societal context for this research, is a pervasive global issue that goes beyond cultural, geographic, and socioeconomic boundaries and is defined as “any sexual act, attempts to obtain a sexual act, or acts to traffic for sexual purposes, directed against a person using coercion, harassment, or advances” (University of Glasgow, n.d.; World Health Organization, 2003, p.1). While sexual violence is a global phenomenon that affects individuals across all groups, gender disparities remain, with women being disproportionately impacted compared to men (Kuo et al., 2018, p. 292). According to UN reports, 736 million women worldwide have experienced sexual violence at some point in their lives, with 370 million of them subjected to rape or sexual assault before the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2024, para. 1).

Beyond physical harm, such violence frequently results in long-term psychological consequences, including trauma, chronic and mental health challenges such as post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression, among various others (Basile & Smith, 2011, p. 409). Due to such consequences, scholars have emphasized that sexual violence must be understood as a public health crisis, as it not only disrupts the lives of many but is also often linked to later revictimization, reinforcing cycles of vulnerability (p. 410). These findings demonstrate the need to approach sexual violence not only as a crime but also as a societal issue that has intergenerational and systemic consequences. While these figures confirm the global scale of sexual violence, countless incidents remain unreported due to fear, stigma, and a lack of trust in legal systems, and despite increased awareness, institutional responses remain inadequate, with the prevalence of violence against women remaining alarmingly high.

In the context of France specifically, in 2023, the number of victims of sexual violence was more than double that of 2016, yet reports confirm that only a small portion filed a police complaint as only 6% of physical sexual is said to be reported (Boudoussier, 2024, para. 4). Those who chose not to file a complaint stated that “it would have been useless,” “it was not serious enough,” or that their testimony would “not have been taken seriously” (Boudoussier, 2024, para. 3).

Furthermore, sexual violence takes place within various settings such as the workplace, home, schools, and different communities, with approximately 39% of the perpetrators being known to the victim, often as family members, intimate partners, or acquaintances (Pierre-Brossolette et al., 2024). While sexual violence is often associated with public or unknown perpetrators, a significant portion of it occurs within intimate relationships (Amnesty International, 2020, p. 20). Referred to as marital rape or spousal rape, this type of sexual violence refers to non-consensual acts of sexual violence in which the perpetrator is the victim's spouse. Historically, many legal systems have not recognized rape within marriage as a crime, based on the patriarchal belief that marriage implies constant sexual consent. This "marital rape exemption" is rooted in outdated legal doctrines, which state that a husband cannot be guilty of raping his wife and, although this doctrine is now ineffective in many countries, various others still do not criminalize marital rape (p. 30). As Dworkin and Olf (2024) note, sexual violence "does not happen in a vacuum," but emerges from social contexts where entitlement to women's bodies is normalized by society, making it an issue deeply tied to structural gender inequality (p. 1). Within marriage, the concept of consent is often distorted, and the different sociocultural norms that prioritize marital union and male authority over individual autonomy further complicate the recognition and reporting of such violence (World Health Organization, 2021b, p. 1).

Despite the changes brought by the second wave of feminism and more recent social movements on sexual violence and women's rights, juridical systems are often inconsistent and often fail to deliver justice, as sex crimes continue to rise while conviction rates remain low (Schwark, 2017, p. 2). In France, for instance, reported cases of sexual violence have increased by 7% since 2022, which can largely be attributed to the ongoing influence of the #MeToo movement in 2017, which has encouraged more women to speak up (p. 3). However, structural inequality persists, and still, "92% of the population considers that women and men are not treated equally in at least one of society's spheres" (Pierre-Brossolette et al., 2024). As a result, 9 out of 10 women report having changed their behavior to avoid sexist or violent acts. This reveals the need for systemic change, not only within the roots of sexual violence but through the installation of better institutional responses and practices.

Beyond statistics, scholars have also recognized sexual violence as a deeply rooted societal issue, and while there is societal progress, recent academic work emphasizes that to achieve meaningful change, stronger policies need to be put in place alongside an acknowledgment of the patriarchal values that enable such abuse (Dworkin & Olf, 2024, p.

4). In essence, this involves shifting the burden of responsibility away from victims and onto the broader social and institutional contexts in which such violence occurs (p. 8).

More specifically, various feminist scholars have long argued that sexual violence is rooted in what they refer to as "heterosexism," the systemic imposition of heterosexuality that makes women subordinate to men, a dynamic that has been facilitated through time by legal, social, and cultural norms (Coward, 1982, p. 9). Historically, sexuality has been regulated by the state and embedded in policies that reinforce male dominance while failing to protect women. More specifically, this dominance has often manifested itself through normalized practices such as sexual harassment in the workplace or public spaces. Moreover, the different structures of patriarchy have been mentioned; specifically, Walby (1990, p. 20) argues that patriarchy operates through interconnected sites such as family, work, media, and the state, where women's autonomy is systematically constrained. Similarly, MacKinnon (1989, p. 10) argues that sexuality itself has been socially constructed through male access and control, where coercion is mistaken for consent. Thus, whether language, habits, or law, the normalization of male entitlement over women's bodies has become normalised. Ultimately, this reflects a political mechanism that reinforces gender hierarchy. Hence, deconstructing such patriarchal patterns remains complex as they have not only infiltrated common thinking and responses from individuals but are also embedded in everyday life.

Furthermore, attention has been brought to the power that visual representations hold in sustaining these dynamics. For instance, Coward (1982, p. 12) notes that images and language have no intrinsic meaning but instead are shaped by certain ideological beliefs that degrade women while simultaneously enabling inappropriate sexual behavior. These depictions, often present in the media, circulate messages that represent women as controllable through sexuality, portraying their bodies as something to be claimed. Within this scope of research, rape specifically has been defined as an extension of dominant sexual norms and the male appropriation of female bodily autonomy, contributing to the normalization of sexual violence (p. 15).

## **2.2 The Role of News Media regarding Sexual Violence**

Building on the recognition of sexual violence as a societal issue, this section examines the role of the media in shaping perceptions regarding sexual violence. It explores how the media inform the public, sensitizes audiences, shapes perceptions, and has an agenda-setting power, while also addressing the institutional and structural challenges that

influence reporting. This discussion provides a foundation for understanding the media's role in constructing discourses about sexual violence.

### *2.2.1 Informing the Public*

In today's diverse media landscape, television, the press, and online platforms all play a central role in communicating global events to the public (Happer & Philo, 2013, p. 322). News outlets, most importantly, serve as key sources of information on issues such as sexual violence, specifically when audiences lack personal knowledge or direct experience of the events reported (Aroustamian, 2020, p. 2; Coleman et al., 2009, p. 147). In such cases, the media act as the primary lens through which issues are interpreted and made meaningful. Also known as first-level agenda setting, this showcases the public's reliance on the media to construct their understanding of societal issues (Happer & Philo, 2013, p. 323).

Moreover, the media hold significant power to set agendas by directing public attention toward certain topics, thereby narrowing the range of arguments and perspectives that shape public debate, a dynamic that will be further explored in the sections below (Happer & Philo, 2013, p. 322). Additionally, research confirms that issues receiving prominent coverage tend to be perceived as more important by the public (Wanta & Ghanem, 2007, p. 40). In this way, the media act as a gatekeeper, selectively framing reality while marginalizing alternative perspectives, which ultimately shapes societal perceptions and priorities (McDonald & Charlesworth, 2013, p. 97).

However, the media often fail to properly inform the public about sexual violence, which is largely due to how the issue is being reported (DeFacto Consultancy, 2023, p. 10). Specifically, research indicates that many news outlets still portray sexual violence as episodic, isolated incidents rather than situating them within broader social contexts. For instance, an international study, found that only around 1% of news stories addressed gender-based violence topics such as sexual harassment or rape, and even then, such cases "hardly made the major news of the day" (World Association for Christian Communication, 2021, p. 2). Treating sexual violence as isolated events leaves audiences without a comprehensive understanding of its systemic nature, missing opportunities to highlight the underlying power imbalances and prevalence rates (DeFacto Consultancy, 2023, p. 15). When reporters omit crucial context, such as statistics or expert analysis, the public becomes less equipped to grasp the full scope of the issue (World Association for Christian Communication, 2021, p. 4).

### *2.2.2 Sensitizing Audiences and Shaping Attitudes*

Beyond providing basic information, the news media can play a powerful role in sensitizing audiences to the realities of sexual violence, fostering greater understanding and appropriate concern (Aroustamian, 2020, p. 2). As McCombs and Shaw (1972) famously note, “the media is stunningly successful in telling its audience what to think about” (p. 177). Also known as second-level agenda setting, this refers to how media reporting can guide public attention and influence what issues are seen as important. In the context of sexual violence, this dynamic is critical: media coverage, or the lack of it, can either elevate the issue to one of public concern or contribute to its marginalization. However, sensationalist reporting, which emphasizes disturbing details to capture attention, often comes “at the expense of a serious understanding of the problem” (Ransohoff & Ransohoff, 2001, p. 185). When sexual violence is portrayed primarily as a lurid crime, audiences risk becoming desensitized and thus start viewing it as a form of dark entertainment rather than as a human rights violation.

However, news outlets often prioritize scandal over substance, dramatizing sexual violence while diverting attention away from the underlying socio-economic structures that enable it (Mowri & Bailey, 2022, p. 266). Media reports are frequently critiqued for their insensitivity or even for causing additional harm to survivors; some outlets reveal identifying details about victims or use graphic imagery to satisfy voyeuristic interests (DeFacto Consultancy, 2023, p. 15). This reporting style distorts public understanding, as outlets focus on sensationalism to boost audience engagement rather than fostering informed discussion (Mowri & Bailey, 2022, p. 186). Ultimately, such practices distance the public from the real issue and contribute to negative portrayals of victims, reinforcing prevailing stereotypes and existing power dynamics (Franiuk et al., 2008, p. 798; Mowri & Bailey, 2022, p. 271).

### *2.2.3 Institutional Influences and Limitations*

Building on the previous discussion of how the media inform and sensitize audiences, this section explores the structural and commercial forces, particularly institutional pressures and profit-driven motives, that shape news narratives and influence public understanding (Happer & Philo, 2013, p. 323).

Specifically, the media do not operate independently but function within a broader network of structures that shape which discourses are communicated and how (Happer & Philo, 2013, p. 324). Powerful institutional actors manage not only decisions but also control

how information is presented to the public (p. 325). Thus, this raises a crucial question: Does it ultimately come down to power once again?

Chomsky and Herman (1988, p. 19) argue that the media serve as mechanisms for maintaining control over public opinion, benefiting political and economic elites. Hence, rather than addressing individual concerns, media narratives often align with state interests (Becker et al., 2009, p. 85). Within time and space limitations, their goal becomes to deliver “the most acceptable product to the consumer in the most efficient manner” (Shoemaker et al., 2009, p. 76). As a result, media outlets prioritize certain stories over others, selecting those that align with institutional or economic interests (Becker et al., 2009, p. 90). Ultimately, this reflects a core principle of agenda-setting, where the media not only influence what audiences think, but what they think about, by selecting which issues are brought to public attention (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 177). Editorial choices are thus influenced by the anticipated reactions of other media outlets and the public, reinforcing the concentration of narrative control among dominant political, social, and economic actors.

In the context of sexual violence, this dynamic means that media coverage often reflects institutional pressures that obscure the systemic nature of the issue (Shoemaker et al., 2009, p. 73). Institutions frequently engage in deflection tactics, shifting blame rather than taking responsibility, which prevents meaningful structural change. Moreover, scholars argue that there is a pervasive “cultural misogyny” within institutions, including media organizations, that contributes to the minimization and distortion of issues affecting women, particularly sexual violence (McDonald & Charlesworth, 2013, p. 96). This underlying bias not only marginalizes women affected by sexual violence within public discourse but also reinforces narratives that downplay the gravity of gender-based violence. Thus, addressing systemic issues like sexual violence often threatens the interests of those who benefit from these existing structures, explaining the persistent lack of urgency to confront these problems due to the potential political, social, or economic disruption they entail (Mowri & Bailey, 2022, p. 277).

At the core of these dynamics is commercialization, where profit-driven goals heavily influence how issues like sexual violence are reported in the modern media landscape (Chomsky & Herman, 1988, p. 17). In pursuit of higher engagement and revenue, media outlets often sensationalize topics, simplifying or distorting complex issues to align with market imperatives (p. 19). While this reflects an ongoing trend, scholars argue that digitalization has intensified these pressures, forcing news outlets to adapt rapidly to an evolving and highly competitive media environment (Becker et al., 2009, p. 82). Central to

this shift is the emergence of the 24/7 news cycle, where the demand for constant content prioritizes speed and entertainment value over depth and accuracy. As a result, nuanced reporting on systemic issues like sexual violence is often overlooked in favor of more sensational narratives designed to capture audience attention (p. 83).

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the agenda-setting power of the media can work in both directions; it can advance the issue or hold it back (Mowri & Bailey, 2022, p. 266). When media outlets choose to downplay or neglect sexual violence, they signal that the issue lacks societal importance, which reinforces a culture of silence (Mowri & Bailey, 2022, p. 266). Overall, commercial imperatives can distort which stories are told and how, which sheds light on why certain damaging representations persist despite greater awareness.

## **2.4 News Narratives about sexual violence in France**

Given the previously discussed media trends, where the pressure to attract attention often leads to sensationalized coverage, it becomes essential to examine how these dynamics unfold in the French context, where historical, political, and cultural factors shape how sexual violence is reported

In understanding France's media context, Hallin and Mancini's (2004, p. 60) model offers key insights. Specifically, they position France within a corporate democratic model that is characterized by strong political parallelism, where media outlets closely align with political parties and ideologies. This professionalized system, which combines private and state control, further fosters a close relationship between the media, political institutions, and social groups. As a result, the media play an active role in political expression and influence how issues like sexual violence are reported. Ultimately, it is fair to state that the media is never neutral or solely focused on objective reporting.

Furthermore, early research on France's media coverage of sexual violence has historically been far more muted than in countries such as the United States, which reflects distinct cultural attitudes (Saguy, 2002, p. 111). For instance, during the Dominique Strauss-Kahn case in 2011, a high-profile sexual violence case, numerous commentators in France openly dismissed the rape allegations made against him (Stricot, 2022, p. 26). Similarly, in 2018, the famous actress Catherine Deneuve publicly criticized the #MeToo movement, defending what she referred to as the "freedom to bother," a phrase that was widely interpreted as a defense of male entitlement (p. 28).

On the other hand, non-celebrity and domestic cases of sexual violence such as marital rape, incest, or assaults that occur within families and communities, often tend to be underreported in media coverage (p. 29). Academically, these types of cases have also received limited attention in studies on news narratives, leaving a significant gap that this research aims to address. Specifically, Lochon (2021, p.10) highlights that over three decades, incidents where the victim knew the aggressor were largely “invisibilized” in both national and regional press, and when they did appear, they were part of “faits divers,” which translates to “other facts.” This is particularly problematic, as it reduces gender-based violence to minor, rather anecdotal events and thus strips their importance away from broader political and social significance. Furthermore, more recent scholarship, including studies of *Le Monde*, reveal that media coverage tends to heavily publicize assaults committed by strangers, prioritizing sensationalism over reality. Although domestic abuse is more common, it has received significantly less attention (*Le Monde*, 2024a, para. 1). However, when high-profile cases receive significant media coverage, they are more likely to result in policy responses, compared to everyday, non-celebrity cases which often fail to generate the same type of institutional responses.

At the same time, there has been a gradual shift toward acknowledging sexual violence as a systemic failure. Specifically, Dubec et al. (2023, p. 400) note that, under the term “revelations,” the press has increasingly begun to address its structural causes. Lochon (2021, p.14) also notes that feminist perspectives that have emerged from social movements like #MeToo encouraged news outlets to incorporate more gender-focused discourse, marking a shift toward recognizing sexual violence in France as a broader social issue.

Additionally, compared to newspapers, magazines, and tabloids, online news outlets have received less scholarly attention regarding their depiction of sexual violence. For instance, celebrity news magazines generally avoid extensive coverage of sexual violence unless it involves public figures, further seeking voyeuristic purposes rather than educational ones (p. 15). Women’s magazines, on the other hand, have occasionally played a progressive role. *Elle*, for example, has a history of publishing articles that featured various testimonies of women victims of sexual violence, further demonstrating a shift and willingness to create a space for women affected by sexual violence to take ownership of their narratives (p. 16).

Overall, France’s coverage of sexual violence remains fragmented both in the media and within academia. Therefore, when analyzing media representations of sexual violence, it is essential to consider the interplay between media representation, public perception, and

the perpetuation of societal norms in understanding the underlying biases within reporting practices (van Dijk, 1993, p. 251).

## **2.5 News representations of women affected by sexual violence**

Building upon the role of news media regarding sexual violence, this section discusses key dimensions of how women affected by sexual violence are represented. The literature highlights two dominant representations: victimization discourses, shaped by rape myths and victim-blaming, and more empowering, survivor discourses, which emphasize more empowering narratives including self-representations. While victimization discourses have long shaped media coverage of sexual violence, recent years have seen a shift toward more empowering portrayals of survivors.

However, women continue to face both quantitative silencing, as they receive less media attention, and qualitative stereotyping, often represented through more passive or submissive victim roles (Blumell & Cooper, 2019, p. 15). These patterns contribute to what scholars refer to as the symbolic annihilation of women in the media (Tuchman, 2000, p. 151). Ultimately, this explains how women's voices and experiences are often either systematically omitted or represented through limiting stereotypes, thereby reinforcing gender hierarchies (Tuchman, 1978, p. 3). Thus, the following sections trace these developments, highlighting some persistent patterns and emerging changes.

### *2.5.1 Victimization Discourses*

Overviewing the literature, women affected by sexual violence are mostly represented as victims (Papendick & Bohner, 2017, p. 722). In line therewith, in everyday discourse, the term “rape victim” is widely used to describe individuals subjected to sexual violence, often so frequently that its deeper implications go unnoticed (Papendick & Bohner, 2017, p. 722). This portrayal can be traced back to feminist movements during the 1970s, where women’s rights activists sought to highlight the seriousness and long-term consequences of domestic and sexual violence, which at the time received little public or legal attention (p. 723). To evoke public sympathy and political action, activists emphasized the harm endured by survivors, creating what scholars later called “victimism,” where women's recognition came at the cost of adopting a victim identity marked by passivity and silence (p. 725).

### *Rape Myths*

Central to victimization discourses are rape myths which represent women as “questionable” and ultimately distort or deny the reality of sexual violence, often suggesting that rape did not happen, was not serious, or that the victim was somehow responsible (Elmore et al., 2021, p. 2). At their core, rape myths are rooted in rape culture, a broader societal context first introduced by Martha Burt, which normalizes and perpetuates sexual violence by positioning men as inherently aggressive and women as passive (Burt, 1980, p. 218; Crocker & Sibley, 2020, p. 25). Although rape culture has become widely recognized, scholars highlight persistent inconsistencies within current discourses (Burt, 1980, p. 219). For instance, it is still often believed that only “certain” women are legitimate victims of rape, while men are portrayed as merely losing control of their urges (p. 220). Ultimately, rape myths are closely tied to the “just world” belief, the idea that people get what they deserve, further fueling the perception that victims are responsible for the violence they endured (Gravelin et al., 2024, p. 211). Similarly, Benedict (1992, p. 25) observed that press coverage of rape often falls into “virgin or vamp” stereotypes, either idealizing innocent victims or implying they invited the assault.

Overall, such representations contribute to a depoliticized view of sexual violence, portraying incidents as isolated rather than as reflections of broader structural inequalities.

### *Victim Blaming*

In connection with rape myths, victim-blaming emerges as a central concept, where responsibility for the assault is shifted onto the victim which ultimately represents women as blamable (Grubb & Turner, 2012, p. 445). Higher acceptance of rape myths is consistently linked to greater levels of victim-blaming, which often manifests through the language used in media reports, the prioritization of legal or police sources, and judgment of the victim's actions or appearance.

Representations often scrutinize women’s behavior according to strict expectations of how a “real” victim should act, reinforcing harmful distinctions between sexual violence and consensual encounters (Hayes et al., 2013, p. 203). Emphasis is placed on victims’ perceived lack of morality, often highlighted through references to behaviors such as dressing provocatively or consuming alcohol (Hayes et al., 2013, p. 207). These portrayals distort public understanding, discourage survivors from speaking out, and weaken institutional responses (Gravelin et al., 2024, p. 211)

Specifically, euphemistic terms like “fondled” or “caressed” are also used when depicting sexual violence, which obscures the violence of the act and rather depicts it as mutual or erotic (p. 105). Such representations distort public understanding and reinforce ideas that women enjoy, or are complicit in, their assault (Thacker, 2017, p. 94).

Moreover, women are often advised on how to avoid sexual violence, reinforcing the idea that failing to follow "rules" makes them partly responsible (p. 95). Scholars argue that there is a specific gendered dichotomy between “good” and “bad” women, which ultimately benefits perpetrators and sustains rape culture (Filipovic, 2008, p. 14). Ultimately, this anti-feminist discourse gives men the benefit of the doubt in the court of public opinion and promotes the idea that victims are responsible for their victimization (Filipovic, 2008, p. 16; Thacker, 2017, p. 95).

Critically, grounding rape prevention in the reinvention of the female self, where women are encouraged to individually interrogate their social conditioning, ultimately shifts responsibility onto women while ignoring structural male violence (Mardorossian, 2002, p. 758). The question is not whether women need to discover or continually reinvent their inner self, but whether this emphasis on interiority and self-reflection functions as a way of domination that pathologizes women and shifts responsibility away from male agency (p. 759).

Moreover, Mardorossian (2002) points out that victims themselves often internalize blame, listing the ways they believe they could have prevented the assault, illustrating how deeply embedded self-blame is even before external judgment occurs (p. 758). Language in news reporting plays a crucial role here: survivors are often described with degrading labels like “hypersexual” or “selfish liars,” suggesting that they provoked their assault (Thacker, 2017, p. 92). Such narratives delegitimize victims' experiences and reinforce the expectation that women must adhere to ideals of passivity and moral purity to be believed (p. 93). Historically, these beliefs have deeper roots; Freud’s 1924 theory linking femininity to pleasurable submission implied that women naturally accepted domination, erasing the recognition of sexual violence as harm (Filipovic, 2008, p. 94). Ultimately, such cultural legacies have profoundly shaped modern forms of victim-blaming.

### *The “Ideal Victim”*

Building on the foundation of victim-blaming, the concept of the “ideal victim” emerges, focusing not on assigning responsibility but on shaping which victims are deemed credible and deserving of public sympathy (Jordan, 2004, p. 32).

Despite decades of public education on sexual violence, it has largely reinforced the expectation that women should know better than to place themselves in situations where they might be assaulted (Mardorossian, 2002, p. 758).

Notably, media narratives tend to favor women who embody characteristics such as passivity, innocence, visible emotional distress, and moral respectability (Jordan, 2004, p. 32). Women who deviate from these expectations are often portrayed as unreliable or dishonest, a pattern seen across both French and international media (Boyle et al., 2022, p. 110).

Moreover, empirical research shows that the victim's social respectability, whether she conformed to norms like sobriety or modesty, directly influences attributions of blame (Lumsden & Morgan, 2017, p. 927). This is particularly evident in the language used by the media to describe sexual violence, where victims are frequently portrayed with adjectives like "flirtatious" or "beautiful" (Benedict, 1992, pp. 103–104).

### *The Silencing*

To understand how such representations are shaped, it is crucial to examine who holds the power to produce and prioritize information. Lochon (2021, p. 5) found that before the #MeToo movement, French newspapers privileged reports of stranger rape over domestic cases, despite domestic violence being more prevalent. Whereas the previous aspects addressed how women affected by sexual violence are stereotypically represented, we also see that they are often also underrepresented and silenced. This editorial choice reveals a hierarchy of victimhood, where only certain stories are deemed worthy of attention (Jordan, 2004, p. 32). Scholars refer to this as the "credibility conundrum": the higher the visible trauma, the more believable the victim appears, but any deviation from societal expectations undermines her narrative (p. 33).

Furthermore, news outlets often encourage binary thinking, categorizing women as either truthful or deceitful, which reinforces rape myths (Zaleski et al., 2016, p. 924). Attributing violence to controllable causes, such as the victim's actions, trivializes gender violence and perpetuates societal denial (Murray et al., 2023, p. 2). A major factor contributing to this distortion is the media's reliance on police and legal sources over the victim's narrative (Jordan, 2004, p. 32). Such reliance reduces the emotional depth of reporting and sidelines survivor voices in favor of official accounts (Murray et al., 2023, p. 2). By focusing on institutional accounts, the media downplay the emotional and psychological impact of the assault and position the victim's voice as less credible than

official narratives (Murray et al., 2023, p. 2). This practice reinforces the notion that a victim's experience must be validated by the criminal justice system to be considered legitimate, ultimately overlooking survivor agency.

Specifically, news outlets often focus on survivors' actions after the assault, such as delays in reporting, which often instill doubt on the legitimacy of their claims (Filipovic, 2008, p. 14; Thacker, 2017, p. 94). Media narratives frequently suggest that if victims waited to disclose the assault, it must not have been serious, thereby minimizing the gravity of the experience. Such representations imply that the survivor's actions, or perceived inactions, cast doubt on the legitimacy of their claims. Ultimately, by emphasizing the victim's behavior rather than the perpetrator's actions, media and societal narratives create an expectation that women must constantly be careful to avoid violence (Filipovic, 2008, p. 19). In this way, sexual violence becomes a form of punishment for women who step outside traditional gender expectations.

### *2.5.2 Empowering Discourses*

#### *Survivor Representations*

In an effort to deconstruct the narratives surrounding women affected by sexual violence, feminist scholars and activists have been instrumental in challenging existing paradigms that represent women's experience of sexual violence as unified (Mardorossian, 2002, p. 743). This rethinking has led to the emergence of survivor discourses, including in news coverage, as a counter-narrative to victimhood, which, rather than defining women solely by the violence they endured, emphasize resilience, agency, and the ability to take ownership of one's story (Mendes et al., 2018, p. 240). While the shift toward empowering representations is positive, it also risks reinforcing a hierarchy of deservingness which suggesting that only 'strong' and 'resilient' survivors are worthy of attention, admiration, or justice.

The term "survivor" originated in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century alongside the anti-rape movement, as women who experienced sexual violence began publicly reclaiming their stories (Papendick & Bohner, 2017, p. 722). More recently, these connotations have been used within therapeutic contexts, where adopting a survivor identity is encouraged to strengthen an individual's coping mechanisms (p. 726). Ultimately, developing a survivor identity focuses on resistance, recovery, and rejecting the passivity traditionally ascribed to women affected by sexual violence (Mardorossian, 2002, p. 747). This shift in language is not only semantic, but rather, it changes the subject from a passive to an active agent in her

recovery and representation (Mardorossian, 2002, p. 743). Some studies have further examined how the survivor label is linked to processes and outcomes, suggesting that while women are initially labeled as “victims,” they may later become “survivors” once they have demonstrated coping and adaptation (Gill & Orgad, 2018, p. 1320). By adopting the term “survivor,” advocates aim to challenge the stigma of rape and the notion that a woman’s life is defined by victimization (p. 1324). Instead, the narrative centers on life after trauma and aims to deconstruct an older media tendency that portrayed women as irrevocably damaged or complicit (Gunderson & Huber, 2024, p. 30). At its core, the survivor narrative offers a more empowering view of sexual violence, one that acknowledges trauma while also highlighting women’s agency in facing and resisting it (O’Shea et al., 2024, p. 2).

Within academia, the term “survivor” discourse has gained global recognition (p. 3). For instance, feminist movements in various regions, from Anglo-American contexts to other continents, activists have explicitly embraced “survivor” terminology to shift public conversation, highlighting that those who endure sexual violence are not destroyed people but rather capable of healing and advocacy (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 10). However, research remains inconclusive regarding whether these labels lead to clear differences in public perceptions of sexual violence cases (Nielsen, 2018, p. 50). Additionally, the meanings and impacts of these terms outside of the English language context have yet to be systematically explored (Papendick & Bohner, 2017, p. 723). Additionally, scholars have pointed out a noticeable stagnation in the theorization of sexual violence, which is particularly striking given the prominence of feminist scholarship today (Mardorossian, 2002, p. 743). This observation underscores the need for renewed research that not only moves beyond narrow, issue-based approaches but also challenges the political implications that shape the academic discussions of victimization (p. 747).

Furthermore, the survivor discourse is not without its complexities and criticisms. As previously discussed, its rise is closely tied to the growing prominence of feminist narratives. In particular, this aligns with what scholars call “popular feminism,” a form of feminism that has gained visibility through emotionally charged stories that portray women as resilient and empowered (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 11). While such narratives challenge older, victimizing discourses, they often remain entangled in dynamics that prioritize individual strength over structural critique. As such, being a “survivor” becomes a consumable figure of empowerment that is celebrated through demonstrations of confidence, agency, and the capacity to overcome trauma. Ultimately, this risks reinforcing a marketable

ideal of feminist success while obscuring the systemic conditions that enable sexual violence in the first place (p. 11).

### *Survivor Self-Representations*

Furthermore, central to the survivor discourse is the emphasis on self-representation, where survivors reclaim their narratives by telling their stories in their own words (Mowri & Bailey, 2022, p. 273). While some traditional media outlets have started to include self-narrative stories, they are more often found on blogs, social media platforms, or in interviews where survivors directly share their experience, challenging the passivity of traditional media discourses (Manikonda et al., 2018, p. 2). This trend has grown in recent years, especially as social media allows survivors to share their stories directly, without relying on traditional news outlets (p. 3). Ultimately, by incorporating more survivors' stories, the media help women reclaim their agency. For instance, the #MeToo movement has shown how sharing personal stories online can challenge rape myths and shift public understanding, portraying survivors as a widespread and diverse group rather than isolated cases (Elmore et al., 2021, p. 20).

In France specifically, the #BalanceTonPorc campaign, which translates to “expose your pig,” resulted in women publicly naming their harassers, leading to widespread media coverage that emphasized their strength and courage rather than questioning their credibility (Nielsen, 2018, p. 50). Although some French media initially reacted with caution or skepticism, coverage gradually shifted to support survivors and confront the systemic culture that enables this abuse. This marked a significant turn compared to earlier cases like Dominique Strauss-Kahn's, where the victim was repeatedly blamed (p. 52).

Most importantly, sharing one's experience, regardless of the medium, has proven to be deeply empowering for survivors (Haaken, 2010, p. 55). Research indicates that many survivors who publicly disclose their stories report a renewed sense of control, describing the act as “turning the tables” on the shame and silence imposed upon them (p. 56). This is because sharing their experiences often provides personal validation, fosters solidarity among survivors, and gradually helps shift societal attitudes. In doing so, survivors reclaim their narratives, turning experiences of victimization into acts of resistance and resilience. This narrative agency becomes a form of social power, shifting the focus from what was done to the survivor to how one responds, re-centering subjectivity often overlooked in traditional media.

Furthermore, increased survivor self-representation has also begun to influence mainstream news media frameworks (Acchione, 2024, p. 21). For instance, news media are now more likely to incorporate survivors' voices and perspectives into their coverage, rather than relying solely on law enforcement narratives. Moreover, when willing, survivors have also been interviewed about their experiences (p. 22). Such coverage, when done sensitively, can further humanize the survivor. Specifically, news outlets have started to highlight a woman's actions after an assault, such as reporting the crime or pursuing justice, which marks a significant evolution in media narrative structure (Acchione, 2024, p. 21).

Furthermore, scholars have also brought attention to a particular shift in imagery within news media (Schwark, 2017, p. 5). Earlier images that were published in online news articles regarding sexual violence often pushed representations of a weak, helpless victim. However, subsequent research by Schwark and Bohner (2019) highlighted the impact of visual portrayals, showing that when women were depicted as active survivors, confident, or engaged in activism, audiences attributed less blame. Interestingly, while images that showed women's strength as survivors helped reduce some implicit bias, they also led to increased explicit victim-blaming among some male viewers. Scholars suggest this might be due to sexist attitudes that feel threatened and emasculated when women try to reclaim their power (Schwark & Bohner, 2019, p. 1500).

Nevertheless, the growing inclusion of "survivor" representations in the media mark a shift away from one-dimensional portrayals, showing women affected by sexual violence not only as victims but also as multifaceted individuals, such as advocates and agents of change.

However, the shift from victimhood to empowerment in media remains uneven and incomplete (Acchione, 2024, p. 21). For instance, Moody-Ramirez et al. (2019, p. 830) found that although Twitter campaigns amplified survivors' voices, mainstream news often diluted these narratives. Furthermore, even when empowerment narratives are well-intentioned, they can place pressure on survivors to appear publicly strong, which can result in excluding those who cannot or choose not to display such resilience. This also reflects the risks associated with popular feminism discussed earlier (Du Toit, 2019, p. 2; Gill & Orgad, 2018, p. 1320).

Despite these complexities, the overall trajectory of media representation of women affected by sexual violence demonstrates a greater inclusion of survivors' perspectives and a more truthful, respectful, and empowered portrayal of women. Overall, media institutions can help shift the culture of victimization by intentionally challenging stereotypes about

sexual violence, fostering a more just and empathetic media landscape that supports broader efforts to challenge gendered violence.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Description and Justification of Methods**

To address the research question “How has Gisèle Pelicot been represented in the news coverage of news outlets Le Monde and Le Figaro during and after the trial?”, this study employed a qualitative research design. Qualitative research focuses on meaning, interpretation, and context rather than measurement or prediction (Brennen, 2017, p. 4). Specifically, it aims to explore the “how” and “why” of social phenomena by examining the narratives and symbolic structures through which our reality is constructed. This method is particularly well-suited for analyzing media discourses, especially in cases involving complex and sensitive issues such as gender, justice, and sexual violence. As Tracy (2010, p. 841) argues, qualitative research is most appropriate when the subject of inquiry is ethically and emotionally charged, and when the goal is to understand the layers of meaning embedded in both text and image. Moreover, qualitative research enables engagement with the cultural, political, and ideological dimensions of representation, which are central to the study of how Gisèle Pelicot’s public image has been constructed within the media. Furthermore, rather than focusing on generalization, qualitative research emphasizes depth, complexity, and contextual understanding while also acknowledging that multiple, sometimes conflicting, “truths” can emerge from the same set of discourses (Brennen, 2017, p. 5). As such, qualitative research provided a relevant method for analyzing how Gisèle Pelicot is represented in Le Monde and Le Figaro, and for understanding how ideological structures shape the discourses surrounding her portrayal.

In line with the qualitative approach outlined above, this study applied Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) to examine how Gisèle Pelicot is represented in Le Monde and Le Figaro. MCDA combines tools from both discourse analysis and visual semiotics to explore how meaning is constructed through both language and images (Machin & Mayr, 2012b, p. 78). What distinguishes this approach is its critical perspective, which seeks to uncover how certain representations, though they may appear neutral, often carry underlying ideological messages that shape the way individuals and events are understood. Similarly to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), MCDA aims to denaturalize these representations by examining the relationship between discourse and broader social power structures (p. 80). However, it extends its analysis by including visual elements such as photographs, images, or diagrams, which are equally meaningful in the construction of narratives. Specifically, MCDA is based on the understanding that both language and visual elements contribute to the way social reality is constructed (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016, p. 88).

Meaning is not only created within the text or the image, but is shaped by the broader social, institutional, and historical contexts in which these representations appear. As such, MCDA focuses not only on what is communicated but also on how these communicative choices reflect and reinforce particular worldviews.

This method was particularly suited to this study because it enables a contextualized analysis of how text and visuals work together to construct the representation of Gisèle Pelicot, since news articles often include images alongside written content.

### **3.2 Sampling Strategy and Data Collection**

This study employed purposive sampling, a strategy well suited to qualitative research that seeks to investigate how specific narratives are constructed within a clearly defined set of texts. The sample consists of digital news articles from *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*, which were selected for their relevance regarding the representation of Gisèle Pelicot.

Specifically, these two newspapers were selected for their national reach and established reputations. In 2023, *Le Monde* reported a daily print circulation of approximately 494,500 copies, while its online platform attracted over 186 million monthly visits and 500,000 subscribers (Fastly, n.d.). On the other hand, *Le Figaro* had a daily print circulation of around 357,695 copies in 2023 and, by 2024, approximately 227,000 online subscribers and 89 million monthly visits were recorded (Adintime, n.d.; Library of Congress, n.d.). Moreover, these news outlets were also chosen because of their distinct political orientations, *Le Monde* being centre-left and *Le Figaro* centre-right. This contrast enabled a comparative dimension in the analysis, allowing for reflections on whether political orientation may influence how Gisèle Pelicot is represented. While systematically investigating ideological bias is beyond the primary scope of this study, the differing orientations of *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* provided useful context for interpreting the way she is represented.

The sample included news articles only, excluding op-eds, opinion pieces, and commentaries, to ensure a consistent focus on journalistic reporting practices. This distinction further enhanced the validity of the analysis by centering on how mainstream news outlets report on the issue, rather than on individual or editorial opinions. This is because media texts contribute to the construction of public knowledge by embedding broader ideological positions and power relations, which serve as a discursive space where meaning is shaped, negotiated, and often contested (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016, p. 88). More

specifically, only articles containing a minimum of 300 words were included. This ensured that there was sufficient information for qualitative analysis. This prevented content that lacked visual and textual substance from being included.

The research period started from September 1st, 2024, until December 31st, 2024. This time frame was selected to capture the most critical moments surrounding Gisèle Pelicot's trial, both during the trial and after the verdict, which was delivered on December 19th. This period corresponds to what scholars identify as a “critical discourse moment,” a time of heightened media attention which often challenges public discourse, particularly on sensitive social issues (Carvalho, 2008, p. 162). During such periods, media narratives tend to intensify, becoming more detailed with stronger emotional language and are supported by more visuals (An & Kwak, 2017, p. 465). Therefore, this timeframe ensures that the analysis is situated within a discursive moment of peak public interest and potential ideological contestation.

To build the dataset, keyword searches were conducted using terms such as “Gisèle Pelicot,” “Pelicot,” “Mazan Rape,” and “Dominique Pelicot.” This step was essential to ensure that only articles directly relevant to the case were identified. The criteria for inclusion required that the Gisèle Pelicot trial be addressed either in the headline, lead paragraph, or body of the article. This ensured that the trial and thus, Gisèle’s representation, was not briefly mentioned in but was the main focus of the articles. Each article was then manually and extensively reviewed to verify that it contained substantive and meaningful content relevant to Pelicot’s representation during and/or after the trial.

In total, 40 news articles were selected, 20 from Le Monde and 20 from Le Figaro. While the research period was identical for both outlets, the monthly distribution of articles varied, further reflecting different publishing rhythms and editorial priorities of each newspaper. Specifically, the dataset of Le Figaro included 6 articles in September, 5 in October, 2 in November, and 7 in December. On the other hand, the dataset of Le Monde included 10 articles in September, 1 in October, 4 in November, and 5 in December. Although the selection process was based on the relevance of the articles, the analysis used text and visuals from 19 articles. Specifically, 10 of Le Monde and 9 of Le Figaro. This selective approach may raise questions about why some articles were excluded despite being initially deemed relevant. However, it is important to clarify that inclusion in the final analysis was not arbitrary but based on rigorous review. Specifically, articles that lacked sufficient discursive or visual content or repeated information seen in previous articles were excluded to avoid redundancy and maintain conceptual clarity.

Finally, most of the selected articles were written in French. Accordingly, quotes used in the analysis were translated into English. However, a small number of articles were available in English and thus did not require translation. Therefore, it is important to recognize that translation brings differences in connotations and nuances. Thus, considerable effort and caution were taken to preserve the original tone, intent, and meaning of each excerpt to preserve analytical accuracy and objectivity.

### **3.3 Description of operationalization of relevant constructs/concepts**

This analysis focused on key discourses derived from the theoretical framework. Specifically, survivor and victim blaming discourses. Further, specific attention was given to discourses regarding concept of the "ideal victim," rape myths, victim-blaming, and the inclusion of Gisèle's narratives.

Victimization narratives were assessed by examining whether Gisèle Pelicot was portrayed as helpless or emotionally fragile, commonly associated with traditional "rape victim" portrayals (Papendick & Bohner, 2017, p. 3). For instance, the use of phrases like "tragic situation" instead of "sexual assault" or references to Gisèle Pelicot as "vulnerable" rather than "survivor" were carefully noted to identify whether victimization was being reinforced (Benedict, 1992, p. 102).

The study examined how rape myths and victim-blaming appeared in the articles, focusing on whether Gisèle Pelicot was portrayed as provoking the violence or failing to prevent it. This included assessing if her credibility was questioned through references to her behavior, appearance, or past relationships (Grubb & Turner, 2012, p. 445; Hayes et al., 2013, p. 204). Furthermore, the headlines and quotes were closely analyzed to understand if harmful assumptions regarding sexual violence were explicitly reinforced or implicitly suggested.

The "ideal victim" discourse was used as a basis to understand whether Gisèle Pelicot's portrayal aligned or deviated from gendered expectations of what a victim should look like. This included analyzing how her moral character, emotional expressiveness, and conformity to gendered expectations were represented (Jordan, 2004, p. 32). Additionally, the analysis examined whether Pelicot was shown as credible and sympathetic, or portrayed in ways that undermined her and excused the violence she faced.

Conversely, the survivor discourse was examined by exploring how Gisèle Pelicot was portrayed in terms of agency, recovery, and resistance. Specifically, it assessed whether her testimonies were included and if the media portrayed her narrative as one of strength,

further representing her as an active agent rather than a passive victim (Mowri & Bailey, 2022, p. 271).

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

Using Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), the study drew on analytical tools from Machin and Mayr (2012b, p. 78) to examine both textual and visual elements that shaped Gisèle Pelicot's representation. Their framework, particularly the concept of "social actors," allowed for an in-depth analysis of how she was portrayed across *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*. Specifically, a set of discursive tools, which will be further explained in the section below, was used to understand whether she was constructed as a victim, a survivor, or both, and how such portrayals reflected broader discourses on gender, credibility, and justice.

Firstly, the study used personalization and impersonalization to analyze how Gisèle Pelicot was portrayed (Machin & Mayr, 2012b, p. 79). These tools helped determine whether she was represented as a named individual or through personal pronouns. Specifically, such tools were useful in understanding whether media portrayals humanized her or whether she was described in abstract terms, further obscuring her agency.

Individualization and collectivization were used to assess whether Gisèle Pelicot was portrayed as a unique individual or as part of a larger group (Machin & Mayr, 2012b, p. 80). Being shown as part of a group can lead to generalization or stereotyping, while being presented individually adds nuance and encourages empathy.

Furthermore, nomination, classification, and functionalisation were used to analyze how Gisèle Pelicot was portrayed (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 91). Nomination, through the use of her full name, could signal respect, familiarity, or status. Classification involved references to her age, gender, or background, such as calling her an "elderly woman," which may carry implicit assumptions or reflect ideological positions. Furthermore, functionalisation was used to understand if Gisèle was portrayed through her role or actions (p. 82). On the other hand, appraisal was used to examine the evaluative language used, such as adjectives like "emotional" or "brave", to understand how morally or psychologically she was represented.

Exclusion and suppression were used to assess who was left out or backgrounded within the discourses. Specifically, the analysis focused on whether Gisèle's own voice was present, through direct quotes or self-narratives, or whether she was spoken about indirectly (p. 102).

Additionally, the study analyzed lexical choices such as adjectives, verbs, and phrases used to describe her, such as “vulnerable” or “resilient.” Euphemisms like “tragic situation” were also assessed to see whether they dramatized or downplayed the violence (Benedict, 1992, p. 102). Together, these tools helped reveal how language aligned with discourses of rape myths, the ideal victim, or survivorship.

Furthermore, the study also drew on the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), a branch of Critical Discourse Analysis that examines how language constructs meaning within social and historical contexts (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 87). Specifically, truth claims, statements presented as facts, were examined to understand if they supported or challenged dominant narratives about victimhood, credibility, and sexual violence (p. 102).

The analysis also examined intertextuality and interdiscursivity to understand how meaning shifts across and within articles (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 89). Intertextuality refers to how articles reuse information, while interdiscursivity refers to a mix of different types of narratives, such as legal, medical, or gendered. These processes shaped how Gisèle Pelicot’s representation shifted depending on context. Lastly, recontextualization was used to understand if the same content used in a different context reflected a different portrayal of Gisèle (p. 91).

Regarding the visual analysis, it first focused on the denotative aspects of the images, such as Gisèle’s appearance, body language, and setting. It then examined the connotative meanings, the symbolic messages conveyed through visual features like lighting, camera angles, and proximity (Aiello & Parry, 2020, p. 14). Furthermore, elements such as visual gaze, focus, camera angle, and lighting tone were analyzed to understand how visual composition played a role in the construction of her representation. Lastly, elements like foregrounding and objects were assessed to determine how certain features were emphasized or downplayed (Machin & Mayr, 2012a, p. 55).

Finally, the contextual and cultural analysis will integrate both visual and textual elements by situating them within their broader societal context. This step will examine how the representation of Gisèle Pelicot aligns with or challenges dominant cultural narratives regarding sexual violence. By considering how both text and image reflect or subvert social ideologies, this step will uncover how media representations of women affected by sexual violence either reinforce or challenge gendered norms and victim-blaming.

### 3.5 Credibility and Research Ethics

In line with the understanding that media actively shape reality, this study treats news coverage not as a neutral account of events, but as a space where meaning is produced and shaped. This makes transparency essential, not only in how data was selected, but also in how theoretical and interpretive choices were communicated throughout the analysis (Brennen, 2017, p. 5). Additionally, because the study addresses a recent and largely unexplored case, it adopts an exploratory stance, open to ambiguity and nuance as media narratives and representations often are fragmented, inconsistent, or even contradictory. In line with this, it is important to acknowledge that the same material could be understood differently. Thus, a certain openness to complexity was maintained throughout the research process.

Furthermore, in qualitative research, credibility relies on transparency, reflexivity, and methodological coherence (Silverman, 2011, p. 362). Therefore, this study followed clear inclusion criteria and sampling, with an analysis grounded in Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA). Validity was ensured by selecting only articles with sufficient information, and by utilizing content from *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*, a balanced perspective was reached. While most articles required translation from French to English, which might have introduced some discursive nuances, particular care was taken to preserve meaning, with full transparency about the translation process to maintain analytical and academic honesty.

Lastly, as a woman researching the media representation of a female figure at the center of a rape trial, I am aware that my positionality cannot be detached from the research purpose of this study as scholars have long argued that researchers are not neutral observers but epistemologically entangled in their research (Venäläinen, 2023, p. 359). Because justice for women is personally significant to me, and as part of the group disproportionately affected by sexual violence, this shapes both my sensitivity to the material and how I engaged with the discourses regarding Gisèle Pelicot. Therefore, I acknowledge that this may have introduced interpretive bias. However, I aimed to approach the material with a sense of ethical responsibility and remain reflexive throughout the research process.

Moreover, taking into account the highly sensitive nature of the case and the multimodal analysis of this study, I remained cautious when engaging with the material to not reproduce dominant or harmful narratives, which could reinscribe harm or amplify voyeuristic purposes.

#### **4. Results**

The study's findings demonstrate that in news outlets Le Monde and Le Figaro, Gisèle Pelicot is predominantly represented through two major discourses: the survivor discourse and the victim blaming discourse. While the survivor discourse constitutes most of her representations and forms the core of her media portrayal, the victim blaming discourse, though less frequent, is still substantial and analytically significant.

Importantly, these discourses do not always appear in isolation. Rather, they often intersect and produce a dual representation through which Gisèle is simultaneously portrayed as both empowered and implicitly questioned. This interplay reflects broader cultural tensions in media narratives regarding sexual violence, where subjects are often represented in contradictory and multi-dimensional terms. As such, the analysis below does not treat the discourses as mutually exclusive, but rather as coexisting modes of representation that reflect opposing ideological positions.

As this study employed a multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA), the interpretation of the discourses draws on various discursive tools developed by Reisigl and Wodak (2009) and Machin and Mayr (2012b). Different tools were used to examine how meaning is constructed within specific socio-political contexts, allowing for an analysis of the connotative and ideological dimensions of both language and imagery in Le Monde and Le Figaro (Aiello & Parry, 2020, p. 14).

##### **4.1 Survivor Discourses**

The survivor discourse at its core transforms the subject from a victim status to an active survivor, which emphasizes attributes of strength and self-determination (Mardorossian, 2002, p. 743). In the coverage of Gisèle Pelicot, this discourse is seen through a progression of the interconnected aspects of resilience, agency, and collectivization which resulting in her emerging as a feminist icon.

###### *4.1.1 Gisèle Pelicot as a Resilient Figure*

Within the survivor discourse, resilience, the ability to endure and recover from trauma, is central to Gisèle's representation. Specifically, it emphasizes Gisèle's emotional composure, moral strength, and determination.

A first example of such resilience is Gisèle Pelicot being described as "a woman in the midst of rebuilding herself; a woman still standing" (Leroux, 2024, para. 1). This quote draws on multiple discursive strategies, including nomination, personalization, and

appraisal (Machin & Mayr, 2012b, p. 79; Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 89). Specifically, the phrase “rebuilding herself” conveys a sense of self-directed transformation, which suggests that she is actively working through her recovery after the trauma, rather than being passively defined by it. This aligns with Mardorossian’s (2002) definition of the survivor discourse, which shifts the subject from a position of victimhood to one of resistance in control of its narrative (p. 743). Furthermore, the expression “still standing” functions as a metaphor of endurance, which makes a reference to the emotional and psychological resilience that she demonstrates. Specifically, it hints at both the physical recovery and psychological aspect of her resilience, which aligns with the work of Papendick and Bohner (2017, p. 722) who introduce a dual function to the survivor label, one that is not only a linguistic shift, but a repositioning of agency. Additionally, the temporal structure of the phrase “rebuilding while still standing” implies that her recovery is an ongoing process, which resonates with O’Shea et al. (2024, p. 2), who argue that survivor discourses are part of a longer recovery journey that is constructed gradually. In this case, her resilience is not shown as full recovery, but as an ongoing strength that highlights her persistence and places her within the survivor discourse.

Furthermore, the inclusion of Gisèle’s testimonies within media coverage plays a significant role in shaping her representation within the survivor discourse. For instance, she describes herself as “a boxer who falls down and gets back up again” (Leroux, 2024, para. 1). This metaphor that draws from combat sports aligns with a discursive focus on the interconnected aspects of struggle, endurance, and the refusal to surrender, all core dimensions of resilience. According to Machin and Mayr (2012b, p. 78), metaphors serve to construct meaning ideologically; in this case, the reference to boxing does more than illustrate her suffering; it portrays her as someone who actively resists it. Furthermore, the self-comparison to a boxer functions as a form of appraisal, where she implicitly evaluates her own experience as one of strength and persistence despite defeat. This further aligns with a notable shift of “self-representations” within the media, where subjects of sexual violence have slowly been given a space to speak for themselves (Acchione, 2024, p. 21). Ultimately, the inclusion of Gisèle’s own words contributes to a more complex discursive construction: she is not reduced to the status of a victim but positioned as an individual capable of defining her narrative. Ultimately, by referring to the well-known image of a boxer, the media use Gisèle’s testimony to present her struggle as relatable, reinforcing resilience as something publicly recognized and socially intelligible.

In addition, Gisèle is defined as being “calm and determined,” which further shapes her representation within aspects of resilience (AFP, September 5, 2024, para. 1). Specifically, these adjectives exemplify an evaluative lexical choice that constructs emotional restraint as a moral virtue. The term “calm” neutralizes emotions of anger or despair, which would typically be expected from trauma victims, and instead portrays her as someone who regulates her emotions. Further, the word “determined” conveys a certain assurance and strength of will. Together, they represent her in control of herself, which specifically aligns with Papendick and Bohner’s (2017, p. 723) critique of how public narratives often favor survivors who appear emotionally stable, thus reinforcing social legibility through calmness.

Likewise, the phrase “delivers her story with her head high” evokes a visual symbol of pride (AFP, September 5, 2024, para. 1). This further connotes dignity and suggests that Gisèle’s story is not rooted in shame but articulated publicly and visibly, which enables her to reclaim her power. Particularly, the verb “delivers” implies that her speech is structured and purposeful, which not only represents resilience as personal strength but also as a visible performance of composure. Furthermore, the words “head high” specifically resonate with Butler’s (2004, p. 20) idea of the subject becoming intelligible through normative gestures. Essentially, it constructs Gisèle as a symbol of resistance, where trauma is converted into moral visibility.

Supporting the claims made above, Gisèle is described as someone who stays “true to herself” (D’Adhémar, 2024, para.1). Through personalization, Gisèle is represented as someone who stays close to her morals and values despite the violence she endured which constructs a narrative in which trauma does not alter who she is. Instead, she is defined by her integrity, which aligns with the survivor discourse’s emphasis on narrative control over victimhood (Mardorossian, 2002, p. 743). Gisèle does not become “other” than herself despite the trauma.

Moreover, through a set of descriptions that rely on appraisal, personalization, and individualization, Gisèle’s resilience is conveyed through a highly aestheticized and positive description of her physical appearance, as seen in the following: “The impeccable bob of her hair. The elegance of a flowing dress in midnight blue print and the subtle twist of camel suede boots. A lively body, a graceful, supple allure, a poised voice, carefully chosen words. An invincible woman appeared.” (Robert-Diard, 2024, para.1). Ultimately, this represents Gisèle as emotionally regulated, physically composed, and morally elevated. More specifically, the use of overlexicalization and individualization through the repetition

of the words “impeccable,” “elegance,” “graceful,” and “poised” connote normative ideals of femininity which reinforces the notion that media narratives tend to favor women who favor the narratives of women who embody such characteristics (Jordan, 2004, p. 32). Lastly, Gisèle being described as “an invincible woman” serves as a culminating statement that reinforces her resilience into a form of symbolic strength. Crucially, these lexical choices shift attention away from trauma and focus on a more positive representation and public legibility.



**Figure 1.** Screenshot from Le Figaro. September 5, 2024.

In line with the statements above, Figure 1, seen above, reinforces the representation of resilience through specific visual tools. The setting, a courthouse, connotes exposure, judgment, and legal authority. Although journalists and cameras are visible in the background, they are blurred, which makes Gisèle the central focus of the frame and constructs her representation through a certain visual authority. This salience not only draws attention to her but also isolates her as someone who stands out. Moreover, the proximity of the picture creates partial intimacy: her facial expressions are exposed while simultaneously maintaining a certain distance. Particularly, her sunglasses introduce a symbolic boundary that reflects a form of detachment and self-protection, a way of preserving autonomy in a context where she has already been publicly exposed. Ultimately, the glasses reinforce her self-possession and the idea that she has chosen to be seen on her terms by choosing to make the trial public. Furthermore, the lighting is natural and even, which contributes to a serious and composed ambience. This aligns with Schwark’s (2017, p. 5) observation that the

representations of survivors in the media have shifted away from images of passivity or helplessness toward more composed and resilient depictions.



**Figure 2.** Screenshot from Le Monde. September 9, 2024.

Additionally, apart from resilience as a self-directed process, media coverage has largely represented Gisèle as a survivor whose strength is rooted in the support she receives. Specifically, it is said that “she appeared surrounded by her family and her lawyers, united and dignified,” as they “form a united, solid front.” (D’Adhémar, 2024b, para. 1). Through nomination and appraisal, the words “unified” and “dignified” attribute a shared moral strength and emotional control between Gisèle and her family which also appears in Figure 2. Specifically, the repetition of “united” and the metaphor of a “solid front” reflect resistance and cohesion, which ultimately represents Gisèle being supported by her lawyers and her family. Figure 2 further adds substance to the lexical choices as Gisèle is shown surrounded by what appears to be her lawyer and her children, which creates a structure where she is supported, but not visually diminished. Specifically, the body positioning of her peers creates a sense of protective frame, visually mirroring the “solid front” described in the text. Even though Gisèle is positioned at the back of the picture, she remains salient because of her bright red clothing, which signifies a certain vitality and resistance.

However, Gisèle’s resilience is not only constructed through her strength but through a discursive tension between fragility and perseverance. This dual representation is made visible through metaphors, particularly. For instance, she is described as someone who managed to “transform this mud into noble material to overcome the darkness of this story

and find meaning in it” (AFP, 2024b, para. 1). This metaphor positions her as an agent that is seeking transformation and who wishes to reclaim meaning from suffering. At the same time, she is referred to as “the strong victim” who “sometimes seemed lost in a sea of melancholy” (Robert-Diard & Seckel, 2024, para. 1). Here, the media present a certain juxtaposition where her strength is acknowledged but lies within a certain vulnerability. Ultimately, the media approach Gisèle’s resilience with caution, which portrays her resilience not only as heroic but also as complex (Du Toit, 2019, p. 2).

#### *4.1.2 Gisèle Pelicot as an Agentic Figure*

While the section above introduced Gisèle as resilient through the survivor discourse, describing her as emotionally composed and morally strong, agency appears because of that resilience. In this sense, agency is a development of resilience. It represents the point where the survivor not only appears as someone who endured violence but as someone who actively challenges it, making her presence in the media self-directed. Ultimately, it is the first form of activation of Gisèle’s resilience.

Specifically, in her testimony, Gisèle states that she has “invited the whole of society to take up this case” which signals a sense of collective agency within the survivor discourse (Seckel, 2024, para. 1). Specifically, building upon collectivization as a discursive tool, Gisèle places herself as an agent within society who engages broader social actors. The term “invite” implies initiative, and thus, she is not only responding to violence but mobilizing public attention towards it. Moreover, she claims that it is necessary to “make our debates the breeding ground for a new awareness” (Seckel, 2024, para. 1). This metaphor redefines the purpose of the trial and uses her experience as something that challenges systemic violence and represents her agency within the survivor discourse. This representation is further reinforced in Figure 3, a courtroom sketch, where she is seen alone in the courtroom stand as she speaks into the microphone. Her hands, which are firmly placed on the podium, suggest composure and intentional speech. To some extent, the sketch mirrors the text: Gisèle is represented as the central subject, an agentic figure who uses her voice to initiate change. Ultimately, her agency lies in the way she occupies both symbolic and physical space, a presence which was enabled by her resilience, which further places her within the survivor discourse.



**Figure 3.** Screenshot from Le Figaro. October 23, 2024.

Furthermore, Gisèle states that this is for the “education of every young boy, because that is where the fight for equality and respect begins” (Forgar, 2024, para. 1). Through interdiscursivity, her testimony draws attention to the educational field that needs reform. By placing education as “the fight,” she is represented as someone who seeks to transform public attitudes towards sexual violence. Her agency is placed within her wanting collective change. Gisèle’s wish to change the way society views sexual violence further aligns with the “continuum of sexual violence,” where structural inequalities and cultural norms allow violence to persist (Dartnall & Jewkes, 2013, p. 5) While this goes beyond the scope of this study, it reinforces Gisèle’s representation as a survivor who seeks to address the systemic roots of sexual violence.

Gisèle Pelicot’s representation as an agentic figure is further deepened by her role as a facilitator of collective protest. Rather than being portrayed solely as a survivor who takes personal action, she is depicted as someone who channels her experience into broader social movements. In this sense, her agency fuels her ability to inspire collective awareness, which contributes to her emerging as a feminist icon, a type of representation that will be further explored in the final section of the survivor discourse.

A particularly significant quote used across various forms of media coverage is the phrase “shame must change side,” which, through the discursive tools of collectivization and modality, conveys moral urgency that has also been associated with Gisèle Pelicot as an individual (Forgar, 2024, para. 1). Shown in Figure 4 below, the slogan represents one of the clearest visual expressions of collectivization in the coverage of Gisèle Pelicot and reflects a shift in Gisèle's representation as her trauma is no longer individual but part of a shared cause. The protestors, who each hold a letter, embody shared speech, and the public setting reinforces the idea of confrontation. Specifically, each person carrying a different letter becomes symbolically meaningful. Shame, a concept which will be explored further in the victim-blaming section, is now redirected toward perpetrators and institutions. In doing so, the media construct Gisèle's representation not only as a survivor but as a catalyst for change and aligns with the reality that beyond providing basic information, the news media can play a powerful role in sensitizing audiences (Aroustamian, 2020, p. 2; McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 177). Particularly, “the media may not tell people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its audience what to think about,” in this case, Gisèle acts as a portal that reminds people that change happens as a collective (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 177).



**Figure 4.** Screenshot from Le Monde. December 19, 2024.

#### *4.1.3 Gisèle Pelicot as a Feminist Icon*

In the sections above, Gisèle's representation has been constructed through aspects of resilience, agency, and collectivization. Together, these layers build towards her emergence as a feminist icon, a culmination of the survivor discourse.

The media directly address her as such, as it is stated that she is now “a woman who has now become a feminist hero around the world” (AFP, 2024b). This description is presented alongside the headline: “Gisèle is #MeToo with a face” (Robert-Diard & Seckel, 2024, para. 1). Ultimately, this constructs her as a symbolic figure within the survivor and broader feminist discourse. Through appraisal and individualization, the media now represents her as a charismatic figure whose experience now inspires many. Her story is now recontextualized as a universal cause, which reflects what Banet-Weiser (2018, p.10) describes as popular feminism, where the media elevates women through resilience and change through emotional storytelling and strong visual representations.

Furthermore, Figure 5, seen below, reinforces this discourse by presenting Gisèle through a vibrant red and orange sketch, which conveys strength and empowerment. Gisèle, seen at the center of the cover, functions as a form of visual appraisal. The hand-drawn style conveys a certain softness and intimacy, which further humanizes her. This international recognition, as she is described as “one of the most prominent personalities of the year 2024” according to *The Times*, further implies her representation as a survivor who has become globally recognizable (Devynck, 2024, para. 1).

Nevertheless, it is important to consider the implications of this visibility. While Gisèle is represented as an inspiring survivor, this representation also reflects a type of commodification found within an attention-driven media economy (Gallacher, 2024, p. 3). Specifically, this iconization could, to some extent, reduce her experience to a specific media narrative by positioning her primarily as the spokesperson for women affected by sexual violence rather than acknowledging the full complexity of her journey. However, Gisèle herself chose to speak publicly to “inspire other women,” which therefore reflects a nuanced critique of such mediatization, as her visibility is both mediated and self-directed (Devynck, 2024, para. 1).



**Figure 5.** Screenshot from Vogue Germany in Le Figaro. November 27, 2024.

Furthermore, Gisèle is said to be the “heroine for all imperfect victims” (Friedmann, 2024, para. 1). The use of appraisal as a discursive tool specifically reflects a certain recontextualization of the “ideal victim” (Elmore et al., 2021, p. 20). Specifically, it defies old notions of the “ideal victim” that fit specific characteristics of emotional distress to be believable (Jordan, 2004, p. 32). Her being described as “imperfect” suggests she fulfilled a specific narrative of survivorship that made her authentic and credible in the eyes of the public (Lochon, 2021, p. 14). In essence, this signals a feminist push to value women’s testimonies even when they do not fit traditional respectability (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 10). Importantly, it validates scholarly research that acknowledges a present shift in recognizing sexual violence as a societal issue in France specifically (Lochon, 2021, p. 14). Furthermore, the French media turning her into a feminist icon suggests that her story had qualities that were deemed credible, such as emotional resistance, calmness, or sympathy, which resonated with mainstream audiences. This is a crucial aspect of Gisèle’s representation as media representations often demand a certain narrative of the survivor, as vulnerable, resilient, relatable, and which also fits with broader institutional interests (Becker et al., 2009, p. 90).



**Figure 6.** Screenshot from Le Monde. December 30, 2024.

Lastly, the quotes “we are all Gisèle” and “GiselleS on vous croit” illustrate how Gisèle Pelicot’s narrative is discursively collectivized (Makouke, 2024, para.1). Specifically, the intentional addition of an “S” transforms her name into a plural subject, which conveys the merging of her individual experience with those of others. This shift can also be observed in Figure 6, which shows a protest scene outside a courthouse. The protestors, being women predominantly, wear glitter on their faces and can be seen shouting, which demonstrates the physicality of solidarity. One cardboard is held with the words “Thank You Gisèle,” which visually reinforces her representation as a spokesperson for survivors. Together, the visual and textual choices firmly represent Gisèle’s own words: “What I do today, I do it on behalf of all those women who may never know that they were victims.” (Makouke, 2024, para. 1). Her representation now is beyond that of individual trauma and survival, instead, it is one of solidarity, which represents her as a feminist icon who is inspiring and mobilizing people.

Ultimately, Gisèle’s media coverage appears to contradict the long-standing claim that the media tends to obscure the systemic nature of sexual violence, as she is largely represented as a resilient, active, feminist survivor (Shoemaker et al. 2009, p. 73). Is Gisèle’s wish manifesting? Perhaps. Still, as van Dijk (1993, p. 251) points out, reporting is never neutral but is entangled in complex layers of editorial obligations, audience expectations, and institutional biases. Therefore, while Gisèle’s voice resonates with a wider audience, it

does so within a media system that remains selective and strategic in how such stories are represented, which reflects certain tensions between advocacy and the structural limits of the media economy.



**Figure 7.** Screenshot from Le Monde. September 9, 2024.

In line with Figure 7 shown above, Gisèle is said to be “The 'superpower' of banality” (Seckel, 2024, para. 1). Through this metaphor, she is said to have become an icon that rises from an everyday individual to an international figure. This notion defies past trends where incidents where the victim knew the aggressor were largely “invisibilized” (Lochon, 2021, p. 10). In essence, it reflects the role of the media as an agenda-setting decision maker and its role in bringing systemic problems into public knowledge (Elmore et al., 2021, p. 534). By highlighting the “banality” of her case, the media further acts upon its power, which could be understood as a push to encourage other women to speak up.

#### **4.2 Victim Blaming Discourses**

As discussed in the previous section, Gisèle Pelicot’s representation predominantly reflects the survivor discourse. However, some elements of her representation fall within the victim-blaming discourse, which shifts responsibility from the perpetrator onto the victim by questioning the subject’s behavior, credibility, and morality (Grubb & Turner, 2012, p. 445). Although this discourse is less prominent, it constitutes a meaningful aspect of her portrayal.

This aspect of her representation will be examined through aspects of complicity, through socio-cultural dimensions, the exposure of her sexuality, references to medicalization, and instances of internalized blame.

#### *4.2.1 Gisèle Pelicot as a Complicit Figure*

The first way Gisèle is represented through the discourse of victim blaming is through accusations of her being complicit, in the sense that she would have worked alongside Dominique Pelicot, her ex-husband, to orchestrate the rapes. This logic is discursively introduced when she was asked if “she was not an ‘accomplice’ in these rapes” (D’Adhémar, 2024b, para. 1). The question alone reflects a form of intertextuality, as courtroom language is quoted directly, which functions as a type of moral inversion. Instead of being represented as a victim of sexual violence, she is made potentially responsible for it, and rather than being protected, she is subjected to suspicion, which further introduces doubt into the public record. While this quote originates from trial proceedings, the media’s choice to use it, in headlines specifically, without further critique, reflects the role they have within the dynamics of commercialization and sensationalism (Chomsky & Herman, 1988, p. 17). By amplifying such statements, the media not only seeks emotional impact and audience engagement but also reproduces harmful gendered tropes. In this case, it reinforces the portrayal of women affected by sexual violence as morally ambiguous or untrustworthy, a central element of the victim-blaming discourse, which shifts focus away from structural issues and toward individualized suspicion.

This representation can further be observed in Figure 8, where Gisèle is seen exiting the courtroom with her lawyer. Her gaze is downward, and her expression appears to be confused. Notably, she is not wearing her glasses, a subtle but significant detail that suggests a potential vulnerability or exposure compared to the imagery analyzed in the survivor narrative, where her sunglasses act as a sort of shield. Her lawyer, who walks behind her, also looks down and his presence appears to be rather withdrawn rather than protective, a distinct difference to his depiction seen in the survivor discourse where he was often positioned in front of her, further implying his presence as leading and protective. Around her, there is intense movement. Microphones and cameras are pointed at her, and a woman stands close, as she holds a microphone, potentially questioning her, which contrasts with Gisèle’s static posture as she appears frozen and disengaged. Ultimately, there is a certain tension where everything seems to be happening around her, but not with her. Rather than presenting her as someone demonstrating resilience, the image represents her as someone

weighed down by the trial, potentially complicit through visual ambiguity, where the burden of guilt is not only redirected but visually and symbolically misplaced.



**Figure 8.** Screenshot from Le Figaro. September 18, 2024.

Building upon the statements made above, another instance that represents Gisèle through the discourse of victim blaming is a headline that states: “Madame was consenting and playful” (Forgar, 2024a, para. 1). On the surface, “Madame” appears to be a polite term, but in this context, it becomes loaded with irony. While the English translation may not fully convey this nuance, in French discourse, the term carries layered connotations of shame and moral judgment. It sets up an expectation of dignity and respectability upon Gisèle, which is then undermined by suggesting that she was behaving in a sexually inappropriate or provocative way. This aligns with a core element of the victim blaming discourse, which justifies the abuse experience on the subject’s behavior as a supposed trigger (Hayes et al., 2013, p. 207). While this remark is deeply sexist, it also targets a particularly invasive aspect of her sexuality, a specific type of narrative that will be explored further in the following sections. Her complicity is further exemplified when she described being part of a “libertine couple in which Gisèle Pelicot pretended to be asleep and consented” (Seckel, 2024b, para. 1). By presenting this claim without further context, the media challenges her credibility and reinforces the narrative that she was not only aware of, but in some way accepting of the violence inflicted upon her. This represents her as morally deviant and weakens the legitimacy of her testimony. Particularly, it participates in a broader victim-blaming

discourse that suggests that a woman's prior sexual behavior disqualifies her from being recognized as a "true" victim (Hayes et al., 2013, p. 203). In this way, the media reproduces a gendered suspicion that shifts the blame onto the survivor, making her complicit in her victimization.

In a different yet related way, Gisèle is represented as complicit through the way the media portrays Dominique Pelicot, her ex-husband's actions as excusable. Specifically, the sexual violence she experienced is said to have happened to "take revenge on his wife" (Robert-Diard, 2024b, para. 1). This statement which relies on euphemism not only downplays the gravity of the sexual violence committed but installs the belief that Gisèle had done a certain wrongdoing to provoke such a response. As such, it aligns with the discourse of victim blaming through the mechanism of complicity. Specifically, it suggests that Gisèle bears partial responsibility for the violence inflicted upon her. This aligns with the belief of a "just world" belief, where people ultimately get what they deserve (Gravelin et al., 2024, p. 211). In this sense, Gisèle is portrayed as bearing responsibility for her victimization, positioning her within a discursive framework of shame and moral accountability.

Moreover, it is said that "the accused had been 'manipulated, overwhelmed by the criminal scheme imposed on them by her husband'" (Leroux, 2024, para.1). This not only diminishes the responsibility of the perpetrators but further represents them as objects of manipulation rather than actors. One might wonder why the representation of the other men in the trial is relevant to the representation of Gisèle? Well, this works as a sort of interconnected circle. By diminishing the actions of Dominique and the other men through euphemism, Gisèle is further represented as someone unreliable. This works by presenting the facts in a way that portrays her as guilty, a key aspect of victim blaming that distorts and denies the reality of the sexual violence (Elmore et al., 2021, p. 2).

Another layer of this moral suspicion lies in the socio-cultural contrasts between Gisèle and her husband, which subtly shape her portrayal. These representations do not accuse her of a certain wrongdoing explicitly but rather construct an environment in which the differences between her and her husband can be understood as a form of justification for the violence she endured. In this sense, her complicity is not within what she has or has not done but in who she is seen to be in contrast to Dominique Pelicot.

For instance, it is reported that she was "supposedly assumed to be racist" (Forgar, 2024, para. 1). Presented without critical distance, this accusation functions as a truth claim. By presenting such allegations, the media subtly shifts attention from the violence she

endured to her perceived personal failings. This constructs her not only as someone with prejudiced views, but risks implying that the harm she experienced is, in some way, a consequence of her character. This aligns with a broader logic of moral retribution, in which socially undesirable traits are used to rationalize or contextualize violence in a way that is justified (Lochon, 2021, p. 10).

This is further sustained when a testimony from Dominique Pelicot is used where he states that: “There is a very significant difference in social background between you, with, on one side, a working-class background, and on the other, the great European aristocracy. We see that there are still differences in education and life paths” (Forgar, 2024, para. 1). Here, classification is used to reduce Gisèle within a certain socioeconomic bracket to which he is not part of which could explain their difference in morality. This reflects a certain type of dissonance or cultural misunderstanding that subtly shifts responsibility back onto her, as it suggests that her values and background did not align with those of Dominique Pelicot, which is represented as being a “her” issue. Such a statement reinforces social hierarchy as moral hierarchy, where her legitimacy is tied to a difference in social and cultural differences. In essence, guilt is redirected from Dominique Pelicot towards her.

#### *4.2.2 Gisèle Pelicot as Sexualized and Suspect*

While the previous section demonstrated how complicity operates as a central mechanism within the victim-blaming discourse, particularly through Gisèle’s association with Dominique Pelicot, this section introduces a related dynamic: the exposure of female sexuality. Here, Gisèle’s sexual history is used as a sign of moral deviance that is used to undermine her credibility to suggest consent. In this way, the discourse constructs her sexuality as both suspect and blameworthy. This reinforces long-standing gendered stereotypes that place women’s sexual freedom within guilt (Filipovic, 2008, p. 94). The section below explores how the exposure of her sexuality delegitimizes that and repositions her as a figure of complicity.

Firstly, it is said that “The woman’s body is an object of conquest” (AFP, 2024b, para. 1). Through this metaphor, broader cultural narratives are communicated where a certain entitlement to women’s bodies is normalized by society (Dworkin & Olf, 2024, p. 1). By presenting this as a truth claim rather than a contested ideology, the statement reinforces gender hierarchies and contributes to the normalization of sexual violence as a problem. Particularly, this aligns with research that states that consent, especially within marriage, is often distorted (World Health Organization, 2021b, p. 1). This aspect is further

emphasized using intertextuality when it is claimed that "This isn't American law, in France, you don't need to have obtained the victim's consent to necessarily ensure that there is no rape." (D'Adhémar, 2024c, para. 1). Ultimately, this aligns with a broader societal framework first identified by Martha Burt, in which rape myths position men as naturally aggressive and sexually assertive, and women as passive or ambiguous in their resistance (Burt, 1980, p. 218; Crocker & Sibley, 2020, p. 25). This not only excuses Dominique Pelicot's actions but also places Gisèle as confused regarding what consent is. This reproduces an environment where sexual violence is normalized, and survivors are met with suspicion rather than belief.

Furthermore, Gisèle's supposed sexuality is used as a weapon to justify her complicity as her private life becomes public evidence. Specifically, the media relays details from the court, such as a "series of photos that reveal suggestive poses of herself with sex toys", which positions her body as an object of scrutiny and is presented in a way that instills doubt (Sénéchal & D'Adhémar, 2024, para. 1). Because Gisèle is presented as a promiscuous person, she becomes less credible in the eyes of the public and therefore fits within the discourse of the victim blaming. In this way, sexual expression is represented through moral failure, which associates female sexual desire with deviance (Burt, 1980, p. 218). In doing so, the media not only questions her legitimacy as a victim but also participates in a broader cultural mechanism that punishes women for their sexual autonomy.

This is reinforced by her being described as having an "extramarital affair" and "exhibitionist tendencies," to which she responded, "I have never had threesomes or swinging" (D'Adhémar, 2024d, para.1). These quotes highlight the invasive nature of the questioning, which pushes Gisèle to defend and disclose intimate details of her private life. Rather than focusing on the violence she experienced, the attention shifts to her sexual behavior, suggesting that her credibility depends on how she conforms to certain expectations of female respectability. This reflects a misogynistic tendency in victim-blaming culture, where women are often seen as responsible for provoking or enabling the violence they endure (Filipovic, 2008, p. 94). Specifically, it comes back to the notion that sexuality has been regulated by the state and embedded in policies that reinforce male dominance while failing to protect women (Coward, 1982, p. 9).

The textual cues that place Gisèle within the victim-blaming discourse are also reflected in Figure 9, shown below. She is positioned between two bright red vertical bars, and although these are likely part of the building's security system, they give the impression of a scanning device or lie detector. This visual setup creates a symbolic atmosphere of

surveillance and interrogation, which suggests that she is not only a victim seeking justice, but a subject under scrutiny. The red bars reflect a sense of entrapment within the legal system that she is now part of. Her tensed facial expression and guarded posture reinforce this impression and convey emotional restraint rather than vulnerability. This is because she appears composed, but not relaxed, a visual cue often expected of those defending themselves. Ultimately, Figure 9 not only depicts Gisèle as present during a legal proceeding but also positions her as someone being judged and scrutinized. Symbolically, it reflects her being ‘on trial’ for her credibility.



**Figure 9.** Screenshot from Le Monde. November 20, 2024.

#### *4.2.3 Gisèle Pelicot as an Object of Medical Discourse*

Another layer through which Gisèle Pelicot is represented within the victim-blaming discourse is medicalization, where she is portrayed as someone showing signs of illness. This representation is used to question her credibility, making her appear mentally and physically weak. Specifically, it is mentioned that during her consultations, doctors were asked whether they had noticed “a beginning of Alzheimer’s” (D’Adhémar, 2024d, para. 1). This not only shifts attention away from the violence she experienced but also gives a sense of medical justification, which supports the idea that she cannot be trusted. Questioning her mental health makes it easier to discredit her testimony and place her outside the image of a “real” victim. In this way, the media contributes to a broader cultural belief that those who do not fit a certain standard of mental or emotional stability are less worthy of belief (Hayes et al., 2013, p. 207).

Moreover, Gisèle is described as “an alcoholic” (D’Adhémar, 2024d, para. 2). Presented as a truth claim, this places her within a stigmatized category, which is often associated with instability and lack of control. Specifically, this label reduces her identity to that of a person defined by addiction. In doing so, the focus is no longer on the violence she suffered, but on a supposed personal failure that overshadows her victimhood. This draws on deeply rooted cultural beliefs about addiction and its intersection with gender, where women who are perceived as drinking excessively are often seen as less trustworthy. In this context, the label of alcoholism becomes a tool that reinforces the idea of her complicity, making her appear as responsible for the violence she experienced (Hayes et al., 2013, p. 207).

Moreover, while Figure 10, seen below, does not directly reference the previous statements, it represents Gisèle through a sense of solitude and isolation. Particularly through the exclusion of her sunglasses, an accessory that almost functioned as a protective shield, as seen previously. Her bare face and the camera’s close focus highlight signs of fatigue or emotional strain, which suggests a certain vulnerability or instability. In addition, the neutral lighting adds to the raw, unfiltered atmosphere of the picture, which reinforces the feeling that she is being watched. Ultimately, this portrayal contrasts with images tied to the survivor discourse, where sunglasses seemed to offer control and distance.



**Figure 10.** Screenshot from Le Figaro. September 23, 2024.

#### 4.2.4 *Gisèle Pelicot as a Figure of Internal Victimization*

Building on the theme of medicalization, which undermines Gisèle's credibility through external diagnoses, another layer of representation emerges, one in which the suspicion directed at her from the outside appears to be internalized. These moments do not constitute a sustained theme within her representation, but instead reveal how the discourse of complicity has, to some extent, been absorbed and is reflected in her testimonies.

For instance, Gisèle states that "Mr. Pelicot had a lot of kinks, and I couldn't fulfill them all" (AFP, 2024b, para. 1). Here, modality is used to suggest that her inability to meet his desires played a role in the sexual violence she experienced. This positions her not as someone subjected to violence, but as someone who failed to meet expectations, making her further responsible for the sexual violence she endured. Furthermore, through functionalization, particularly, she defines herself in relation to his needs, which reduces her subjectivity to a certain lack of compliance. In this way, it is communicated that her preferences, or limits, are what disrupted the relationship, which then led to the violence she endured. Ultimately, this internalized victimization, as she reflects on what she "failed" to do, aligns with specific misogynistic beliefs that hold women responsible for not conforming to male sexual expectations. In essence, it is not her suffering that is emphasized, but her failure to satisfy, which blurs the line between victimization and fault.

Fundamentally, Gisèle Pelicot's media representation in *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* reveals a complex interplay between the survivor discourse and the victim-blaming discourse. As discussed previously, the survivor discourse within her media portrayal is dominant and is structured around resilience, agency, and collectivization, making her emerge as a feminist icon whose experience transcends personal trauma. In contrast, the victim-blaming discourse, though less frequent, remains significant. Specifically, it was communicated through interconnected aspects of complicity, sexuality, medicalization, and internalized victimization. This further represented her as potentially responsible for her abuse, which undermined her credibility. Highlighting the multimodal nature of this analysis, the accompanying images often reinforced the textual narratives, creating a sense of coherence between the discursive and semiotic tools used across the news coverage.



## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study sought to investigate how women affected by sexual violence are represented in news coverage. Specifically, the research question that guided this study was: “How has Gisèle Pelicot been represented in the news coverage of news outlets Le Monde and Le Figaro during and after the trial?” Using MCDA to examine both textual and visual content found within the two well-known French newspapers Le Monde and Le Figaro, the findings reveal that Gisèle Pelicot is predominantly portrayed through a survivor discourse and, to a lesser extent, through a victim-blaming discourse.

The survivor discourse, as developed in 4.1, illustrates how the news coverage reinforced her image as a figure who actively resists victimhood, specifically by presenting her as resilient and agentic. This representation is consistent with existing literature, which notes that empowering narratives are becoming increasingly prevalent in media portrayals of women affected by sexual violence (Mardorossian, 2002, p. 743). Moreover, as discussed in section 4.1.2, agency appears as an extension of resilience, which not only marks an evolution in Gisèle’s media representation but also in her trajectory as a woman affected by sexual violence. Ultimately, Gisèle not only transcended the status of victim to become a survivor; she also publicly challenged the systems that enabled the violence she endured. This evolution also further supports previous studies that argue that survivor identities are not fixed but rather tend to develop progressively over time as survivorship manifests itself differently for each person (p. 744).

Furthermore, Gisèle’s testimonies were consistently included in the news coverage of both Le Monde and Le Figaro, which highlights the prominence of her self-representation within the survivor discourse. This aligns with Acchione’s (2024, p. 21) argument that survivor self-representation plays a crucial role in challenging historically passive or distorted portrayals. While such narratives are more often found in more personal spaces, such as blogs or social media accounts, Gisèle’s voice was granted space within mainstream media, which broadened access to her story, thereby extending her visibility beyond survivor communities. This shift contributes to a reorientation of the media gaze, from portraying women as voiceless victims to recognizing them as having control over their own experience (Elmore et al., 2021, p. 20). Specifically, this allows women affected by sexual violence to gain visibility. In this context, however, visibility does not equate exposure; rather, it functions as a form of narrative control, which reinforces how Gisèle’s story is publicly understood (p. 22).

Further expanding upon Gisèle as a survivor, her emergence as a feminist icon within the broader #MeToo movement is particularly significant. Her portrayal did not arise in isolation but was shaped by the highly mediatized nature of her case and the broader cultural context of gendered violence. Referred to as “#MeToo with a face,” her representation illustrates how the media often amplifies certain narratives and individuals over others to serve broader ideological functions (Mowri & Baile, 2022, p. 273). Specifically, this aligns with “popular feminism,” where narratives of resilience and agency are sometimes packaged for public consumption through emotionally charged storytelling (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 10). In this context, Gisèle's visibility reflects not just her journey but her positioning within a broader cultural shift where sexual violence is increasingly recognized as a collective social issue rather than a private matter (Dubec et al., 2023, p. 14).

However, this shift must be understood within the institutional and editorial mechanisms that are present within media dynamics. As explained in the theoretical framework, the media not only dictate what people think, but rather what they think about, which is particularly relevant here (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 177). While Gisèle's visibility may signal a growing societal awareness, it also results from editorial decisions shaped by broader institutional pressures. This is because media narratives are not neutral but instead are filtered through selective logics that often align with specific political, economic, or social interests (Becker et al., 2009, p. 85; Shoemaker et al., 2009, p. 73).

In this light, Gisèle's representation, though extremely empowering, remains contingent on the media's willingness to center her narrative. As a gatekeeper, the media can both amplify and constrain visibility, which highlights the limits of institutional recognition as not all women affected by sexual violence receive equal attention or are treated with the same depth or care (McDonald & Charlesworth, 2013, p. 97). Hence, her emergence as a feminist icon reflects both the transformative potential of the media and the structural boundaries within which such recognition occurs. Nonetheless, even within these constraints, her visibility played a meaningful role in raising public awareness about sexual violence as a societal issue.

However, while this shift in representation is both positive and significant, it is not singular. As shown in section 4.2, Gisèle was also represented through a victim-blaming discourse, primarily through accusations of complicity. For instance, the coverage included highly invasive references to her sexuality and adopted a medicalizing lens, which referred to a history of substance abuse. Both of these representations align with existing research that expands on what is believed to be considered an “ideal victim” (Jordan, 2004, p. 32).

Because Gisèle did not conform to dominant expectations of innocence, emotional vulnerability, and purity, her portrayal was shaped in ways that highlighted a certain “moral deviance,” further shifting the blame onto her and challenging her credibility (Jordan, 2004, p. 32). This representation also reflects broader cultural narratives that often deny or downplay sexual violence, suggesting that rape did not happen or was not serious, thus revealing the broader systemic issues that enable sexual violence to persist (Elmore et al., 2021, p. 20). Specifically, scholars refer to a certain “cultural misogyny” which contributes to the minimization and distortion of how sexual violence is understood (McDonald & Charlesworth, 2013, p. 96). Furthermore, Gisèle being portrayed through this “moral deviance” further aligns with the notion of a “just world” belief where people ultimately get what they deserve, which ultimately insinuates that she is responsible for the violence she endured (Gravelin et al., 2024, p. 211).

Additionally, as demonstrated in section 4.2.4, such accusations appear to have contributed to Gisèle partially internalizing blame, particularly through comments that suggested that she had failed to satisfy her husband. This particularly blurs the boundary between victimization and fault, which repositions responsibility onto the survivor. Such dynamics are consistent with existing research, which indicates that language, especially when degrading, can lead survivors to internalize blame for the violence they endured (Thacker, 2017, p. 92). This process also reflects Benedict’s (1992, p. 25) analysis of media representations of rape, which often rely on the “virgin” or the “vamp” representation which represents the victim either as innocent and passive or as provocative and inviting. In Gisèle’s case, even if these representations were less explicit, they nonetheless reproduce longstanding and stereotypical narratives that distort how women affected by sexual violence are represented.

Consequently, this study offers both academic and societal contributions. Firstly, it sheds light on a very recent and underexplored case of an ordinary citizen who gained international visibility within the largely overlooked national context of France. This is crucial as most media representation studies have taken place within Anglo-Saxon regions, and America specifically. Additionally, it deepens an underexplored aspect of academia as French media representations of sexual violence has mainly focused on celebrity cases, thus neglecting instances of domestic sexual violence such as marital rape, incest, and assaults within families and communities (Stricot, 2022, p. 29).

Secondly, analyzing coverage of *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* distinguishes this study from previous research, as these two newspapers represent contrasting political orientations,

Le Monde being center-left, and Le Figaro center-right, which brings nuance and depth to the analysis. While their overall coverage was more aligned than initially expected, some differences emerged. Specifically, Le Monde's articles tended to be longer, more detailed, and more analytically developed. Additionally, the coverage peaked in September, aligning with the start of the trial. In contrast, Le Figaro's coverage was more concentrated in December, the month of the verdict, but the articles were generally shorter, less detailed, and included fewer of Gisèle's testimonies. Purely based on assumption, this discrepancy may reflect editorial priorities: Le Monde may have aimed to contextualize the case within broader socio-political debates on sexual violence, whereas Le Figaro may have focused on the judicial outcome of the trial, which would be more consistent with its more conservative view of public affairs.

Moreover, while Le Figaro published several substantial articles that engaged with the societal and legal dimensions of sexual violence, some of the more detailed pieces, particularly those featuring Gisèle's testimonies, appeared in its women's supplement, "Madame Figaro." Although this observation remains interpretative, it is nonetheless revealing. Madame Figaro offered greater narrative depth and complexity, but it is considered part of the "women's section" that positions these stories within gendered boundaries, which raises a critical question: Why was such extended coverage not included in Le Figaro's main news coverage section? I argue that this suggests a form of symbolic partitioning, where the experience of sexual violence is acknowledged, but still presented as secondary, which implicitly reinforces the notion that sexual violence remains a "women's issue" rather than a collective societal concern.

Academically, this study distinguishes itself from most of the existing media representation research by using MCDA rather than thematic or framing theories and methods. Specifically, MCDA offered a more comprehensive approach for analyzing how meaning is constructed across both text and visuals, which is particularly suited to today's digitized media landscape, where language and images often operate together to convey deeper ideological representations (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016, p. 88). In this context, Gisèle Pelicot's representation demonstrated the importance of multimodality in shaping public discourse.

Theoretically, this research builds on existing scholarship that examines the intersection between sexual violence as a societal issue and the media's role in shaping public narratives around it. More specifically, this study demonstrates that survivor discourses, which historically were absent from media coverage, are now more present and

often intersect with victim-blaming narratives in complex ways. This challenges earlier research, which often examined survivor or victim-blaming discourses in isolation. Ultimately, this reflects a broader cultural and discursive transformation in the way women affected by sexual violence are represented.

However, to remain cautious in interpretation, it is important to acknowledge that firm conclusions cannot be drawn without further research. This is because the case of Gisèle Pelicot remains exceptional and must be acknowledged as preparations for the trial began as early as 2020, which may have contributed to a more deliberate and careful media approach than is typically observed in other similar cases.

Moreover, this study's limitations lie in its focus on a single case and reliance on two national newspapers. While *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* provided substantial material, they may not fully reflect the diversity of media representations across platforms or regions. Future research could benefit from a broader media sample, such as regional press, television, and social media. Further, it could also be valuable to explore survivor self-representations on social media to examine how they compare to the coverage of news outlets and whether certain narratives are amplified or marginalized across platforms. Nonetheless, given the recent nature of this case, the analysis remains highly relevant considering the current state of research.

Finally, this study provides valuable insights for media professionals, advocacy groups, or institutions working on issues related to women affected by sexual violence and media representation. Specifically, journalists, editors, and news outlets can benefit from a deeper understanding of how certain discursive and visual strategies can unintentionally reinforce victim-blaming narratives or undermine survivor credibility. Such actors may also use these findings to better analyze how public discourse influences both institutional response and societal attitudes. Ultimately, this study encourages a better, more ethical approach to media representations of women affected by sexual violence, one that avoids sensationalism by minimizing the spread of harmful stereotypes.

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## Appendix A: Definitions of the Discursive Tools Used

### Textual Tools:

- Nomination
  - Use of proper names
    - Example: Gisèle Pelicot
- Personalization
  - Referring to someone in a human, individualized way
    - Example: Referring to her by name or pronoun
- Personalization
  - Referring to someone in abstract or institutional terms that removes individuality
    - Example: Referring to her as “the party involved” rather than by her name.
- Individualization
  - Representing someone as a unique, individual person
    - Example: Emphasizing her personal experience as a survivor.
- Collectivization
  - Describing someone as part of a group
    - Example: Describing her as “one of many women affected by marital rape.
- Classification
  - Defining a person by social categories like age, gender, or nationality
    - Example: Identifying her as “a retired person.”
- Functionalization
  - Representing someone by what they do or their role
    - Example: Calling her “a mother of three.”
- Appraisal
  - Using evaluative language (adjectives/adverbs) that implies moral or psychological judgment
    - Example: Labeling her actions as “courageous” or “controversial.”
- Metaphors
  - Describes one thing in terms of another, implying a symbolic or conceptual similarity without using “like” or “as”
    - Example: Calling her “a lighthouse in the storm.”
- Word Connotations
  - Words that imply ideological or emotional meaning
    - Example: Using “scandal” rather than “case.”
- Key Words
  - Repeated or emphasized terms
    - Example: Recurring use of “justice,” “truth,” “shame.”
- Lexical Choices
  - The words chosen and their interpretive effect
    - Example: Saying “claimed” versus “testified.”
- Overlexicalization
  - Excessive repetition to stress an idea

- Example: Several synonyms or variations of “suffering,” “trauma,” and “sadness.”
- Euphemism
  - Softening harsh content with milder terms
    - Example: Using “marital problems” instead of “rape.”
- Modality
  - Use of modal verbs showing doubt, obligation, or certainty
    - Example: “She likely exaggerated” or “She must have known.”
- Suppression
  - Absence or backgrounding of relevant voices or details
  
- Structural Oppositions
  - Binary contrasts in the narrative
    - Example: Referring to her as “heroic” but also “unstable”
- Truth Claims/Topoi
  - Statements presented as facts
    - Example: “True victims don’t act that way.”
- Intertextuality
  - Referencing or quoting other texts
  
- Interdiscursivity
  - Combining multiple discourses (e.g., legal, emotional, political)
    - Example: Combining legal, feminist, and medical language.
  
- Recontextualization
  - Reusing quotes or references in a new context, which changes/distorts the original meaning
    - Example: Using her courtroom testimony in a political editorial.

### **Visual Tools:**

- Denotation
  - What is literally shown in an image
    - Example: A photo of Gisèle entering the courthouse.
- Connotation
  - The implied or emotional meaning of visuals
    - Example: Her walking alone may suggest vulnerability.
- Objects
  - Symbolic interpretation of objects
    - Example: Microphones, legal files.
  
- Setting

- The place or environment shown in the image and what it symbolically implies
    - Example: Gisèle is shown outside the courthouse, which represents authority and justice
- Saliency
  - What visually stands out due to size, placement, or color,
    - Example: Gisèle is in the center of the frame.
- Foregrounding
  - Visual elements are placed at the front of the frame to imply a certain importance
    - Example: Her face is focused while others are blurred.
- Focus
  - Visual clarity or blur that determines which parts of the image are emphasized
    - Example: A close-up of her face during her testimony.
- Visual Gaze
  - Whether the subject looks directly at the camera
    - Example: Gisèle looking straight into the camera (suggesting agency).
- Proximity
  - How close the subject is to the camera
    - Example: A close-up which creates a sense of emotional closeness.
- Camera Angle
  - The angle from which the image is taken
    - Example: A high angle that makes her appear small or vulnerable.
- Lighting/Tone
  - Brightness, contrast, or color in the image, which sets the mood
    - Example: Dark lighting creates a tense atmosphere
- Body Language
  - Gestures, stance, or expression of the people in the image
    - Example: Folded arms, which suggests discomfort.

- Intertextuality (visual)
  - Reuse of images from other sources
  
- Recontextualization (visual)
  - An old image placed in a new context that shifts meaning