Delving into the Missing White Woman Syndrome in the Age of Social Media

Angelene Villanueva Obedoza

Abstract

The missing white woman syndrome is a phrase used to describe the phenomena in which missing young white women are featured in news stories at higher rates than any other demographic. This phenomenon was brought up to the public eye when reports of Gabby Petito's disappearance made their rounds on almost every major news site with live updates every few hours, while other missing individuals receive little to no media attention. Is Petito's story an isolated case or is there a pattern of disproportionate reporting in the media? Additionally, is this phenomenon something that can only be found in traditional forms of media, or is it present in social media as well? At a time when most people have access to an information-sharing platform, what role does social media play in all of this? Through analyzing the archives of the Washington Post for their articles on missing individuals and looking at the posts under #missing and #missingperson on the social media site, Instagram, this study aims to answer these questions. Initial analyses of these articles and posts reiterated that, yes, the missing white woman syndrome phenomenon does exist within the Washington Post. However, studies looking into other leading news sites such as CNN and the New York Times must be done to confidently say that the missing white woman syndrome is a pattern among news sites. Additionally, more research must also be done to properly examine the role of social media in perpetuating or calling attention to this phenomenon. While this study proved insufficient in finding a conclusive answer to either of the research questions, it does open more opportunities for scholarship and research. How does the missing white woman syndrome affect men? Why does the missing white woman syndrome occur? It is my intention for other scholars interested in pursuing this field to use this study as a foundation to explore these questions and expand the literature on this topic as well.

Table of Contents

Introduction

"Damsel in distress."

The phrase conjures images of a frail, powerless woman needing the help of a hero, often a strong, macho man, thanks to media productions emphasizing the fragility of the former while highlighting the strength of the latter. This idea of a powerless young woman manifests itself in mainstream media, the most notable being the trope of the Disney princess being saved by a prince, or a hero saving his love interest from a dangerous foe. While movies draw on this theme to propel the story forward, this theme can also be observed in the ways in which stories are reported and covered in the news.

The public's desire to protect a specific demographic of women can be easily related to what is known today as the "missing white woman syndrome," a term coined in 2004 by PBS anchor, Gwen Ifill, describing the phenomenon in which missing young white women are covered by the media at disproportionately higher rates compared to any other demographic for other missing people (Robertson, 2021) (Conlin & Davie, 2015). While coverage of missing white women itself is not inherently detrimental, it does beg the question of why attention and a sense of urgency are only reserved for a certain demographic.

In recent years, issues (such as police brutality) having roots in racial injustice have been scrutinized and brought to light by news stations as well as social media. Given the speed at which information is transmitted and received, more people are becoming aware of how society can discriminate and oppress minorities. Taking this into consideration, several questions that arise are:

1. Given the visibility of several social justice movements in recent years, does the missing white woman syndrome still exist in 2022?

2. How does social media affect how people view the missing white woman syndrome?

Defining the Missing White Woman Syndrome

2021 saw the sensationalization of Gabby Petitio's case in every facet of the media. Throughout the latter months of the summer, her face and story were plastered all over media networks, whether it be news sites such as CNN or social media sites such as Snapchat. Viewers received updates on Petito's story on every development, from new tactics being used to find her, the progression of her fiancé from suspect to criminal, and even the discovery of other missing people because of the nationwide search for her.

The events before and leading up to the tragic conclusion of her case were not the only topics brought into the limelight, however, as this period also ushered in a time of reflection on missing person cases, especially those that don't ever make it to the news, much less receive intensive coverage the same way Petito's case did. While her case generated media attention from every area, countless missing people of color fail to ever make the news.

Ironically, Petito was found in Wyoming, a state that saw the disappearance of 710 indigenous women in the past decade without any developments being shared in the media (Kesslen, 2021). However, it did not take long for people to catch onto this; this collective reckoning by news consumers brought back the phenomenon of the missing white woman syndrome into center stage.

For example, missing Blacks, especially Black men, are not only less likely to be covered in the media but also experience a decrease in the extent and intensity of coverage in instances they *are* covered (Sommers, 2016). When featured on the news as a missing person, their cases are not given nearly as much air-time or details compared to their white, female counterparts. To compare the rate of media attention between the populations, included below are four missing individuals whose media coverage varied greatly.

Gabby Petito (Maxouris, 2022)

- September 11, 2021: Petito was reported missing by family and friends

- September 19, 2021: Human remains matching the description of Petito were found in Teton County, Wyoming

- September 21, 2021: The human remains were confirmed to belong to Petito

- September 23, 2021: Wyoming issues a federal arrest warrant for Brian Laundrie, her fiancé

- October 12, 2021: The coroner's office officially releases Petito's cause of death as strangulation

- October 21, 2021: Officials confirm that the human remains found the day before belonged to Brian Laundrie

- January 21, 2022: The FBI found "written statements by Mr. Laundrie claiming responsibility for Ms. Petito's death," authorities state that the case will be officially closed in the near future

An accurate timeline depicting every turn of the case can be found online with just a simple search of "Gabby Petito." Given the media attention given to this case, it's not surprising that the search for Ms. Petito also paved the way for other missing people[1] to be found (Steinbuch, 2021). In fact, frequent updates on missing people cases are rarely the norm, especially for people that don't fit the mold of a regular damsel in distress.

Daniel Robinson

Daniel Robinson, a young Black man, has been missing since June 23, 2021; his disappearance started to gain traction in the media when his father, David Robinson II, took it upon himself to organize large-scale searches for his son[2] (Ehrlich, 2021). Daniel Robinson is a

---

[1] Robert Lowery, father of two, was missing for four days before searchers looking for Petito's body stumbled upon his remains
[2] Robinson commands anywhere between 80-200 search volunteers in an effort to locate his son

25-year old archaeologist and is described by his father as having an "...innate passion for adventure and is known to travel in opportune moments."[3]

The young Robinson has been missing for more than ten months now, yet his name or face hardly ever shows up on mainstream media. While Buckeye PD has been aiding Robinson II in his search, the family asserts that not enough is being done to find the young man. While Petito's story received nationwide coverage and prompted searches organized by volunteers, people of color such as Robinson do not receive nearly as much attention and depth of coverage.

The most recent update on Robinson's case was an article published by Fox 10 on January 14, 2022 (Garcia, 2022). As of April 20, 2022, Robinson II is still organizing independent searches for his son. Despite lack of media coverage, the Robinsons have been receiving support from community members and other volunteers eager to help a father locate his son.

The coverage disparity between Robinson and Petito is astounding but not surprising. Compared to their white counterparts, Black individuals receive disproportionately less media attention across the board from various media sources, including CNN and the Chicago Tribune (Somers, 2021).

Alexis Gabe

Gabe, a 23-year-old Bay Area native, has been missing since January of this year (Zuniga, 2022). Since then, her family and friends have organized search parties in an effort to find the young woman, whose disappearance seems suspicious to the police. Community members and local news stations have also supported the cause by joining search parties and reporting on the case, respectively. Unlike other missing minority women, Gabe's case has no shortage of news coverage, as her story is regularly updated on several news outlets in the Bay

---

[3] Based on David Robinson II's description of his son on the family-run website, https://pleasehelpfinddaniel.com/

Area. There may be several reasons pertaining to this, and I hypothesize it may be the racial makeup of the region as a whole driving local new stations to predict that this story will be appealing to viewers.

The Bay Area, especially Gabe's hometown of Oakland, is made up primarily of immigrants who may resonate with the fear of losing their daughter, sister, or cousin. One's connection to the missing person may be enough motivation to follow along with the case and aid in community efforts. Simultaneously, the community's desire for the safe return of Gabe may also be picked up by news outlets, who might consider their audience's interest when deciding which stories to cover. This kind of investigation will not be covered by this research paper but I encourage other scholars to look into the topic if it has not been explored already.

Jocelyn Watt and Jade Wagon (Gerst, 2021)

Jocelyn Watt and Jade Wagon are indigenous women who have both been found dead. Watt and Wagon are sisters, which makes their disappearance and death all the more tragic for their family and community members. Included below is a brief timeline of what is known about their case:

- January 2019: Jocelyn Watt and fiancé, Rudy Perez, were found dead in their Riverton, Wyoming home

- January 2019: Watt's younger sister, Jade Wagon, was found dead in January 2020.

- January 2022: three people[4] have been charged in connection with their death

    Watt and Wagon's story portrays a brighter one than the reality faced by indigenous missing people. Although both their cases ended in deaths, authorities were able to eventually capture and charge their murderers, obtaining some kind of justice for the family. However, had Wagon's story been publicized and circulated just as much as Petito's case had been, she might

---

[4] Patrick Sun Rhodes and Bryce Teran face charges of murder while Korbin Headley is charged with conspiracy to committ burglary (Gerst, 2022)

still be here today. Wagon's death was originally deemed an accident, with officials stating that hypothermia and exposure were the cause of death. Had her disappearance been labeled as such and circulated in the media, the chances of finding her earlier would have been greater.

Native Americans make up only 2.44% of Wyoming's population but they account for 21% of the state's missing person population (Gerst, 2022). In terms of media coverage, only 18% of missing indigenous women were reported on in the news, while the number skyrockets to 50% for missing whites (Grant, Dechert, Wimbish, and Blackwood, 2021).

In a "Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls" report by Urban Indian Health Institute, they called attention to the statistic that among the 5,712 cases of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls reported in 2016, only 116 were recorded in the DOJ database[5]. These cases highlight the disparity in reporting for the different demographics covered. Petito, a white woman, received air time that expedited the search for her remains and eventually led to the capture of her murderer.

On the other hand, people of color such as Wagon, Watt, and Robinson have to wait several days and even weeks for their cases to be checked by authorities, much less reported on by the media. The disproportionate connection between population, disappearance, and media coverage highlights the possibility of white woman syndrome in the modern age and lends itself to a myriad of other possibilities to account for the difference in reporting.

Literature Review

The scholarship surrounding the missing white women syndrome is mainly comprised of researchers studying its validity and effect on different groups. Many studies back up the claim that race plays a significant role in deciding the likelihood of a missing person case being covered in the news (Slakoff, D.C., & Fradella, H.F., 2019) (Somers, 2016) (Moss, J. L., 2019).

---

[5] This statistic is based on a report published in 2018 released by the Urban Indian Health Institute

Most researchers studying this new phenomenon would employ the technique of studying various media sources for an extended period of time, focusing on which demographics appear in the news most often, and comparing that to the broader pool of missing person cases (Somers, 2016) (Slakoff, D.C., & Fradella, H.F., 2019)(Moss, J. L., 2019).

Using this approach, new knowledge is brought into the missing white woman syndrome, most notably the intersection between race and gender (Somers, 2016). One study in particular utilized statistics obtained from the FBI and data from four leading networks; this multi-media approach allows for the examination of coverage by proportion and supports the overall premise of the missing white women syndrome, which is that white women are more likely to be covered in the news than any other demographic (Somers, 2016).

Analyzing coverage in regards to population proportion also eliminates the possibility of falsely attributing disproportionate coverage to the possibility that the population of missing person cases is dominated by the demographic of females and whites. Data from the FBI serves to validate the concern that while white women are not reported missing at higher rates, they do receive more coverage more than any other group.

Additionally, negative representation also seeps into narratives portrayed by the media. Ethnic groups are shown as more likely to be portrayed as criminals than victims or law enforcement officers (Sommers, 2016).

Furthermore, when individuals do not belong to both, or either, categories of female or white, the depth of their story is lacking (Somers, 2016). Inclusion into the sphere of news is difficult to commend when the extent of story coverage is limited, especially compared to others from different demographics. Previously, other studies delved into the race component of the

missing white woman syndrome but this research added the extra analysis on race as it corresponds to gender (Moss, J. L., 2019)(Somers, 2016).

While the recent scholarship on the missing white woman syndrome has yielded many advances in proving its existence, it is lacking in its ability to decipher how the current media climate has either improved or exacerbated the effects of this phenomenon. In terms of relevancy, analyzing the missing white woman syndrome cannot be done without looking into its prevalence in social media. This relatively new form of media acts as an outlet for the previously voiceless to spread awareness about important issues.

Possible Explanations for the Missing White Woman Syndrome

There are various possible explanations for the missing white woman syndrome, such as the devaluation of people of color in newsrooms, audience demographic and interest, and perception of white women versus colored women (Somers, 2016).

Other research indicates the possibility that police officers, and not journalists, are the primary actors in excluding certain groups from news coverage (Liebler, 2021). News media can only do so much in terms of actually searching for missing people and, in some cases, are required to pass on information only from official sources. In this regard, journalists can be seen as middlemen merely interpreting the information they were given.

If that is the case, this alludes to a bigger issue of systemic racism so deeply embedded within our culture, that preferences in helping a certain demographic are present in multiple sectors. The reverse can also be said, in that certain groups may be targeted and neglected, as opposed to one group having an advantage. Recent studies have found that there is legislation aimed at finding all other demographics besides black women (Moss, 2019). While the missing white woman syndrome is concerned with the disproportionate treatment of white women in

overall demographics, the exclusion of black women from the conversation also speaks to the underlying message behind the phenomenon- that it is acceptable to treat one group differently than the others.

Delving into the Missing White Woman Syndrome

As a result of the MWWS, there have been different responses on how to alleviate the issue. One suggested solution is to create legislation at both the state and national levels to account for the coverage disparity in reporting (Moss, J. L., 2019). Looking at data on the number of missing people, their demographic, and the demographics of missing people reported on in the media, they established that there's already legislation in place aimed at finding missing people from all demographics besides Black women specifically.

From these studies, there is a slight disagreement on which demographic, Black men or women, are most adversely affected by the MWWS. While there is still great debate on which group is impacted the most, it's even more important to understand why this happens. Recent literature has shown that the difference in coverage disparities can be attributed to what the media deems as what, or who, is and isn't newsworthy (Sommers, 2016).

One researcher posits that the concept of newsworthiness can be tied back to beauty standards and the implicit bias people have to assist those who possess these qualities (Liebler, 2021). In the 2021 missing person case involving Gabby Petito, it is evident how her physical traits of being young, thin, fit, and blond lend themselves to Western beauty standards, which might have allowed bias to creep into the newsroom.

Role of the Media

In today's high-speed society, anyone can become part of the media[6]. Thus, it's inaccurate to depict it as something inherently negative. One research posits that the media itself isn't inherently good or bad; rather, it is a tool that allows people to disseminate and receive information at much faster rates than ever before (Miller, Costa, Haynes, McDonald, Nicolescu, Sinanan, Spyer, Venkatraman, & Wang, 2016). However, this *doe*s come with a disadvantage; while information intake is rapid, the validity of events reported and the truthfulness of the story are still subject to inspection.

Social media is one of the newer forms of media allowing for changes in how information is presented and received. Through platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter, politicians, world leaders, and ordinary citizens alike can post anything ranging from their stance on policies to reviews on movies and music. One study analyzing social media's effects and uses noted how such sites are used by different social actors to affect three different spheres: social networking, propaganda, and news/information sharing (Prier, 2017).

With that being said, ordinary people can now become journalists in their own right, documenting important events and having the power of social media to spread it. One research posits that this reason is what drives journalism to undergo major changes; social media use allows more people to receive information in record time, despite the decrease in consumption of regular vehicles of knowledge such as printed newspapers (Bowd, 2016). From this moment on, the court of public opinion handles the lifeline of the story. Whether the story will catch fire or be forgotten is simply up to consumers to decide.

The work of several scholars has insinuated that social media allows more people to receive information in a record amount of time. The contribution of this finding calls to question

---

[6] I define media to be traditional forms of information sharing and collecting, such as newspapers and television news. Social media refers to communication and information sharing platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook

whether social media has affected the MWWS in any way. The rise of Gabby Petito's case made us aware of the situation, but it also raises new questions about whether the MWWS still exists in society; has social media contributed to the MWWS in the same way that it brought this issue to light? There is an element of circular reasoning associated with MWWS that asks us to consider whether social media is bringing this issue to light, or is one of the vehicles heightening coverage disparity.

Relevance

This project adds to the current scholarship on the missing white woman syndrome by considering social media's function in upholding and bringing attention to coverage disparity. While social media usage varies from each individual to the next, the actions of each person are also informed by the social climate of the time. Given the rise of social media usage during the height of the #BlackLivesMatter protest following the murder of George Floyd and the pandemic's impact on our ability to congregate, it is plausible that the use of activism through a digital platform is continuing to be employed.

With that being said, I am approaching my research on the missing white woman syndrome with a critical lens on how the increase in accessibility to media by ordinary citizens has affected or altered the demographics of people being covered. In considering the Washington Post, a traditional news outlet, and comparing this to posts made by regular people on Instagram, I will be able to analyze the impact social media has on the missing white woman syndrome. I will also be able to identify its role in perpetuating or bringing attention to disproportionate coverage and reporting in the media. Borne out of my curiosity on how the missing white woman syndrome plays a role in society and if this is affected by emerging forms of media, the two research questions I focused on are:

1. Does the missing white woman syndrome still exist today?

2. What is social media's role in regards to the missing white woman syndrome? Does it perpetuate this cycle of disproportionate reporting, or does it allow people to call attention to the phenomenon?

Expectations and Hypothesis

In seeing whether the missing white woman syndrome still exists in 2022, I hypothesize that this phenomenon is still present and its very existence and cause are generated by the media. The media is what creates and perpetuates the missing white woman syndrome, while another form of media, *social* media, brings attention to its existence and allows people to realize the disproportion in coverage and reporting. In light of several social justice movements in the past five years, a higher percentage of the population is more aware of the subtle ways people of color, especially minority women, are discriminated against in society.

The distinction between traditional media and social media is an important one, given the capability of any person to become a journalist with a snap of a mobile phone. Social media gives ordinary citizens access to both the consumption and dissemination of information; it gives various actors an avenue to affect different spheres, including news and information sharing (Prier 2017). Individuals who are previously locked into roles of consumption are now able to produce and share stories that become news. Therefore, I postulate that social media plays a crucial role in shining a light on the missing white woman syndrome by giving a platform to those who would not otherwise have access to it.

Research Design

Recent scholarship has indicated that missing white woman syndrome can be found in the media; studies and analyses conducted by various researchers already show a disproportion between missing person reports across the field. Taking this into consideration, I originally

wanted to focus on three media sites that are on opposing sides of the political spectrum. However, I decided to focus my attention on the Washington Post so I can closely analyze more articles within this source instead of doing a surface-level analysis of more news sites.

In the Washington Post's search engine, I typed the word "missing," and looked at articles released within a seven-month window, from September 2021 to April 2022. I took note of each missing person's race and gender, how the case was discussed, and noted whether the case alluded to Gabby Petito's case in any way. After surveying the demographics and seeing which groups are represented most often, I looked at the possibility of overrepresentation by comparing the number of people reported as missing in the news, to the proportion of missing individuals belonging to that group. I took statistics[7] surveyed by the FBI and released by Statista and noted the demographics of all missing person reports.

To analyze the role of social media in calling attention to or perpetuating the missing white woman syndrome, I focused on Instagram and how the platform's tools allow the general public to look for missing people. Specifically, I looked at posts under the category, Top, to see which posts are generating the most attention from other users. From informational graphics to personal pictures, I scanned the captions and, when possible, looked into the user's account to see if it is a personal account or an account created specifically to bring attention to the missing person case. In collecting data, I used the keywords, "#missing" and "#missingperson" in the search bar and looked at the top 100 posts that appeared under the "top posts" category. This category indicates that the post received more traction among users, which aids in identifying which posts on Instagram generate the most attention.

By looking at the hashtags, I was able to make quantitative observations based on how many times a hashtag was used and how each disappearance was described. Specifically, I placed

---

[7] Statista is a database company

a heavier emphasis on evaluating whether missing colored women are discussed in social media more often than in traditional news, the content of such posts and whether users and posters are aware of the missing white woman syndrome. Essentially, the role of evaluating social media sites is two-fold; analyzing a person's use of their account to spread awareness of a missing person and their understanding of disproportional reporting will give insight into the extent of social media's role in eliminating or perpetuating the missing white woman syndrome.

Since there are numerous pictures and graphics posted on the site at any given time, I concentrated on the top 100 posts for the two hashtags, #missing and #missingperson, to get a broad overview of what has been trending. 200 posts give enough data to analyze which people are given attention and if their demographics are drastically different than the demographics of people highlighted in the news.

Results

I will be discussing the missing person articles for the Washington Post and Instagram posts separately.

The distribution of stories amongst various groupings in the Washington Post was not surprising. In scouring missing person articles released by the Washington Post from April 6, 2022, all the way back to September 7, 2021, most reports were on women. Among the 27 reports and stories on missing individuals, seven were on women (25.93% of reports), six on children 12 years old and younger (22.22% of reports), and five mentioned the missing white women syndrome (18.52% of reports), and 4 reports on female teenagers (14.8% of reports). Bringing up the tail end of reports were men, with three articles (11.11% of reports), one report on a person found because of the Gabby Petito case, one report on a senior citizen (3.7% each of total reports) and zero reports on male teenagers.

This seven-month snapshot of missing person articles released by the Washington Post is somewhat proportionate with official statistics on missing person demographics, with regards to age and gender. Figures released by Statista show that as of 2021, there are more reports of missing females under the age of 21 than reports of males under the age of 21. However, the same cannot be said for the demographic of 21 and over; there are more missing person reports on males over the age of 21 than there are reports of missing females over the age of 21.
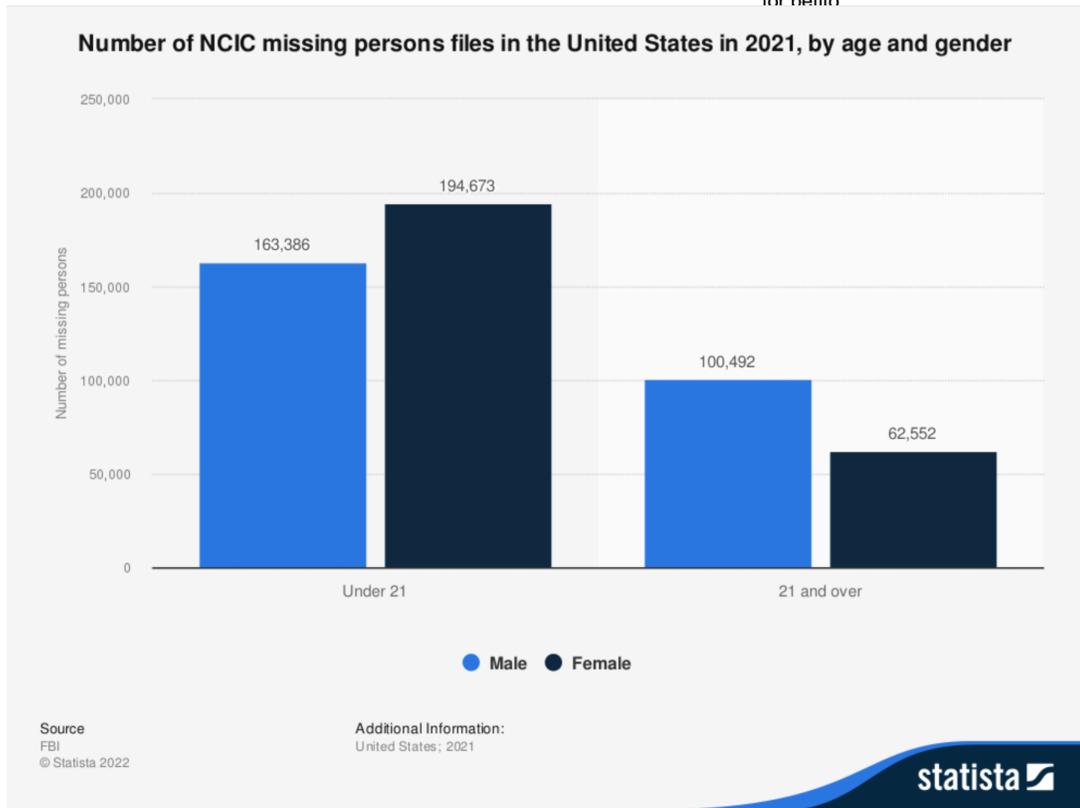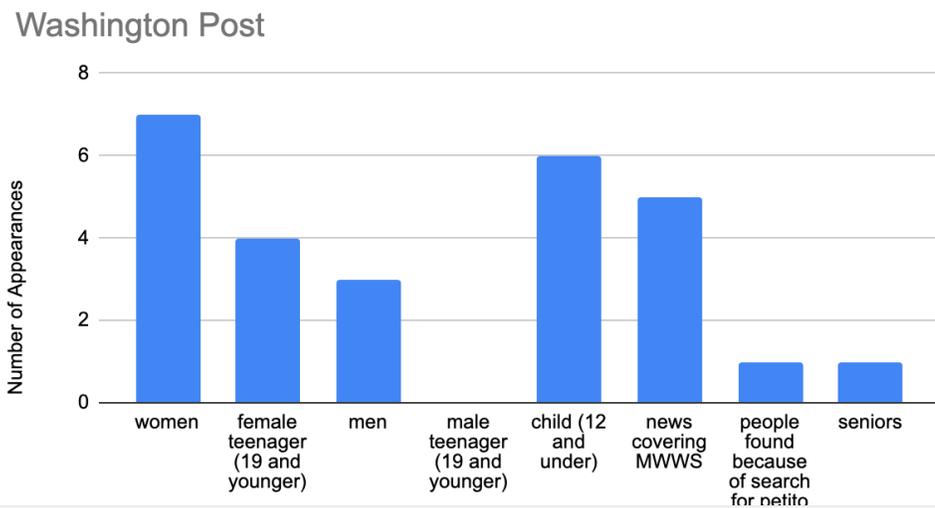
These results were also broken down into racial demographics, with whites being listed 11 times (40.74% of posts), blacks appearing nine times (33.33% of posts), Asians appearing two times (7.41% of posts), and a Hispanic appearing once (3.70% of posts). After completing an analysis the results showed that 21.7% of reports from that seven-month window in this particular news site were on white women, which is still the majority demographic.
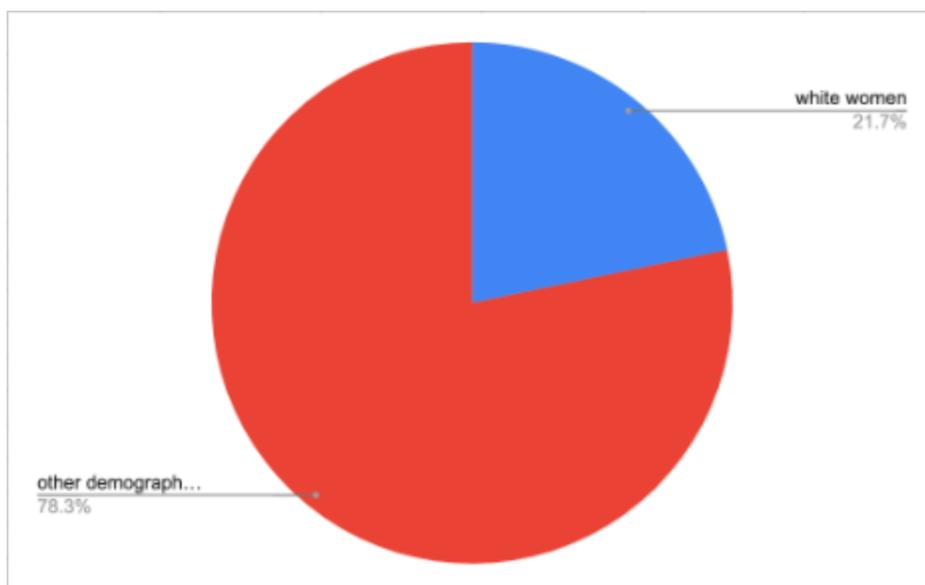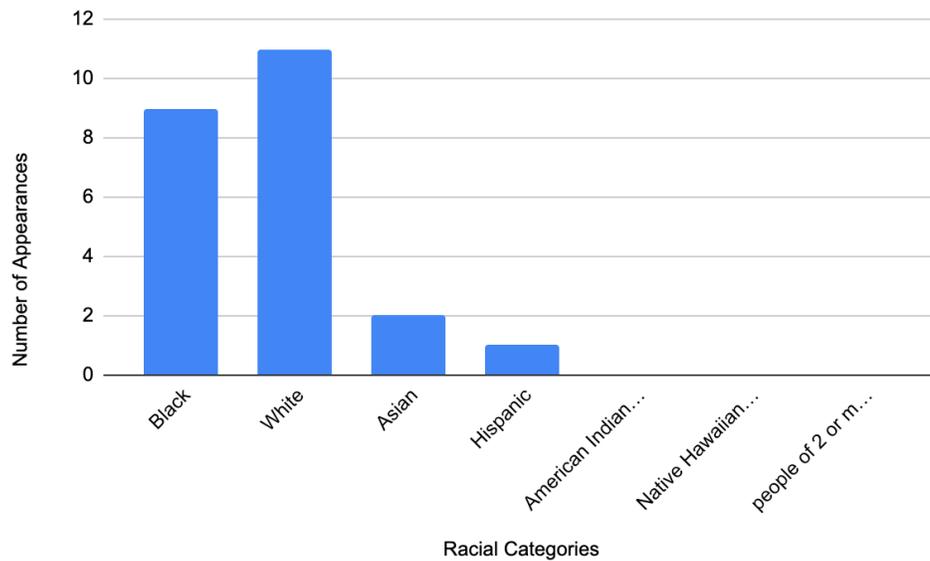
Reports released by Statista and gathered by the FBI are consistent with the missing person reports. Essentially, whites were the majority demographic reported missing, while blacks came in second. Similar to the demographics of missing people reported on by the Washington Post, statistics recorded by the FBI indicate that minority groups such as Asians are not reported missing to the same degree their black and white counterparts are.
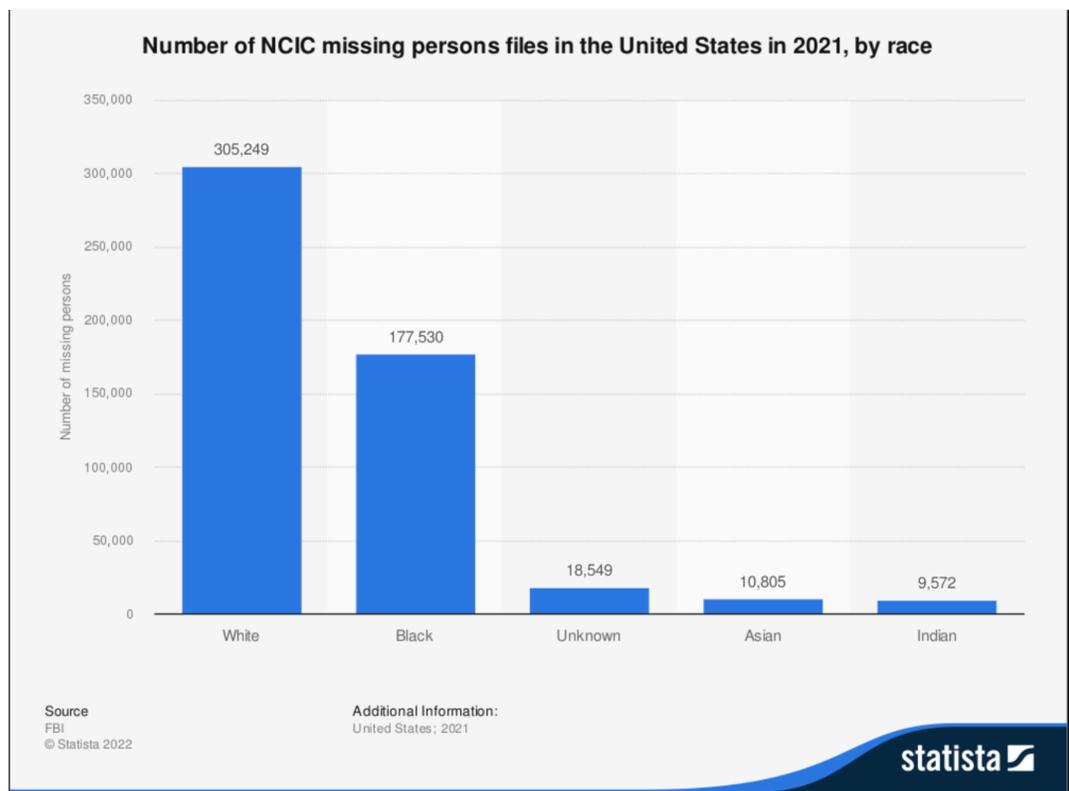
The results pulled from Instagram data were inconsistent with the results found in the Washington Post. Out of the 100 posts under #missing, only nine were actually on missing people. Out of the nine, four were on women (44.44% of posts), two were on men and male teenagers (22.22% of posts, each), one was on a female teenager (11.11% of posts), while no reports were made for seniors or children twelve years old and below. On the other hand, the

---

[8] This table, and the one titled, 'Number of NCIC missing persons files in the United States in 2021, by race and gender,' were taken from the data site, Statista, which received these figures from the FBI

demographics of the missing people featured the most on Instagram were similar to the statistics released by Statista.
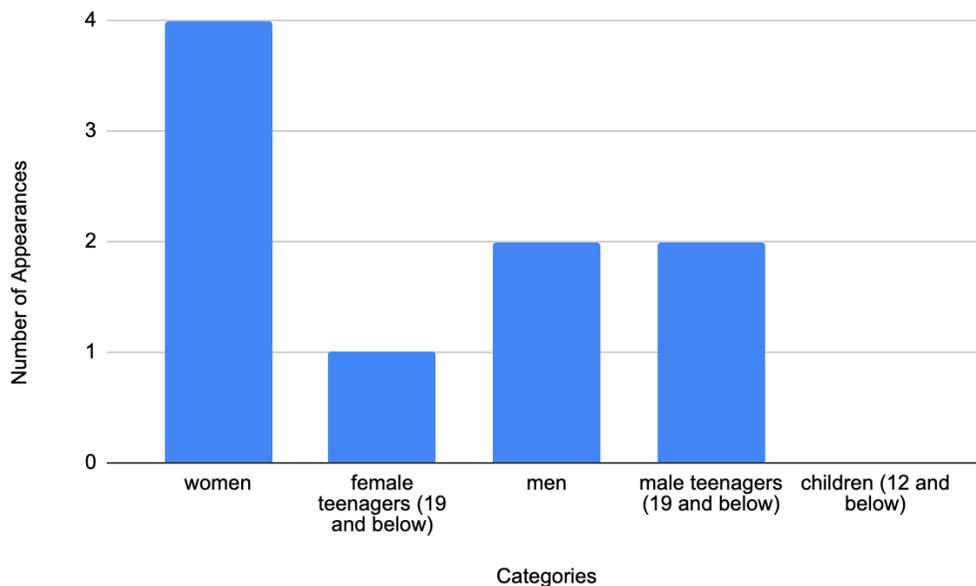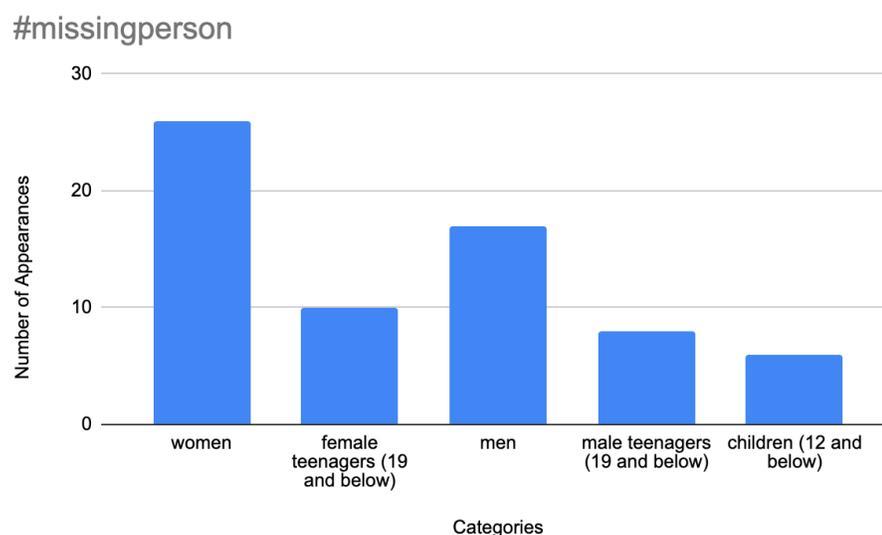

The breakdown of racial demographics slightly differed from the results of the Washington Post as well. Out of the nine missing person posts, four were on blacks (44.44% of posts), three on whites (33.33% of posts), two on Hispanics (22.22% of posts), and none for Asians, Native Hawaiians, Pacific Islanders, American Indians, Alaska Natives, and people of two or more races. Based on the data, one out of the eight individuals was a white woman (11.1%).
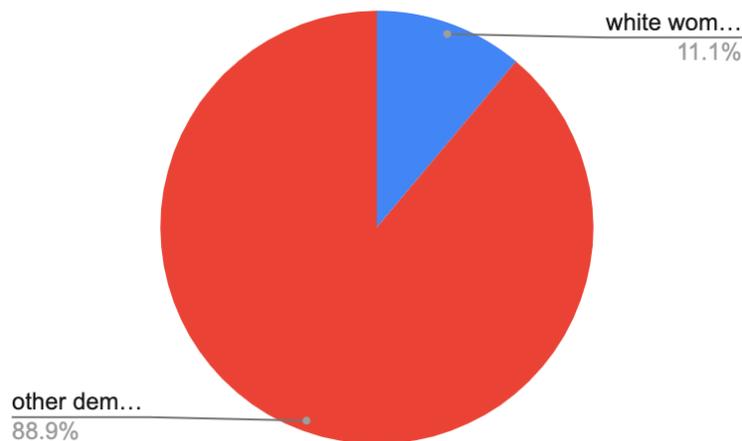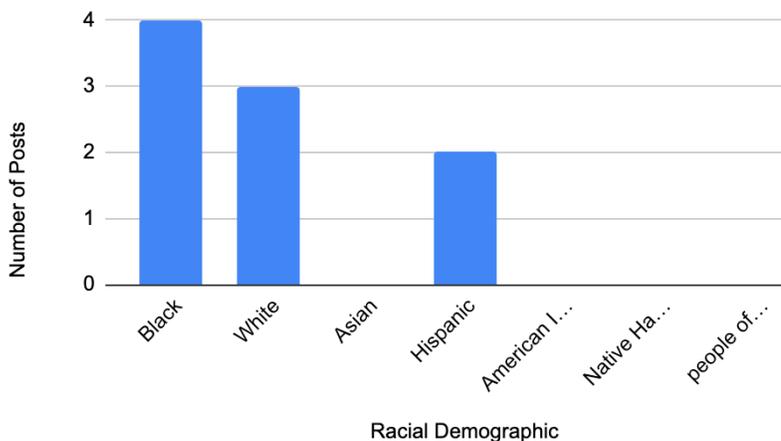
On the other hand, #missingperson yielded a higher number of relevant posts; 67 out of the 100 posts surveyed were actually about finding a missing person. Out of the 67, 26 were women (38.81% of posts), 17 were men (25.37% of posts), ten were female teenagers (14.93% of posts), eight were male teenagers (11.94% of posts), and six were on children 12 and below (8.96% of posts).

#missingperson

In terms of the breakdown in racial demographics, the results were similar to the results found in the Washington Post. Whites constituted the majority of posts, with 21 out of 67 posts concerning a white individual (31.34% of posts), 18 covering blacks (26.87% of posts), 13 covering Hispanics (19.4% of posts), seven on American Indians/Alaska Natives (10.45% of posts), three on Asians (4.48% of posts), one on a Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander (1.49% of posts) and zero posts on individuals of two or more races.
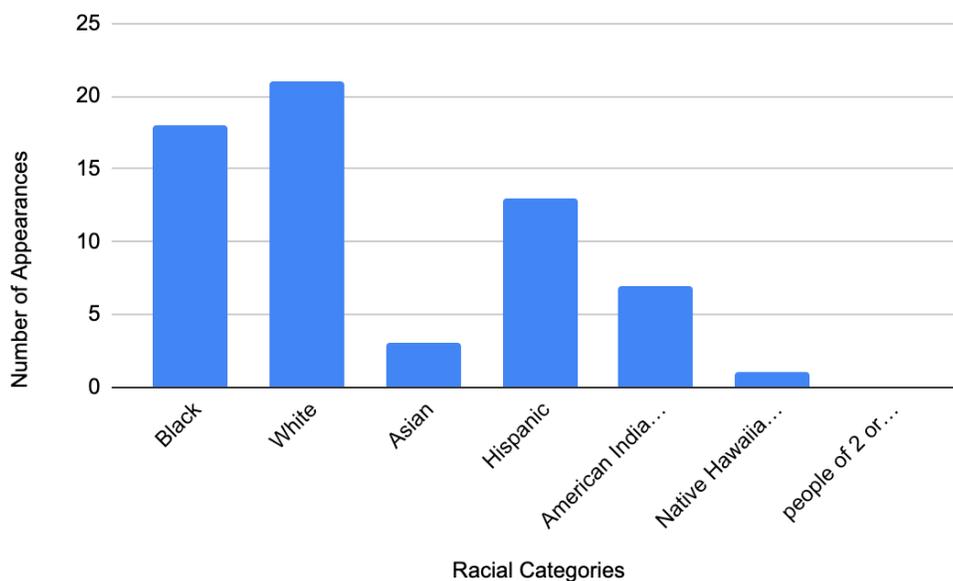
For this sample, 11 out of 67 posts concerned a missing white woman (16.42% of posts).

Discussion

The results I received were both expected and surprising. Since there are two components to my research, I will break this down by mode of research conducted; first, I

will discuss the importance and implications of the Washington Post results and then the results of the hashtags on Instagram.

The results yielded by my examination of articles released by the Washington Post in a seven-month period were unsurprising. The fact that white individuals were the highest racial demographic featured in their missing person narratives, while women were also rated highest in
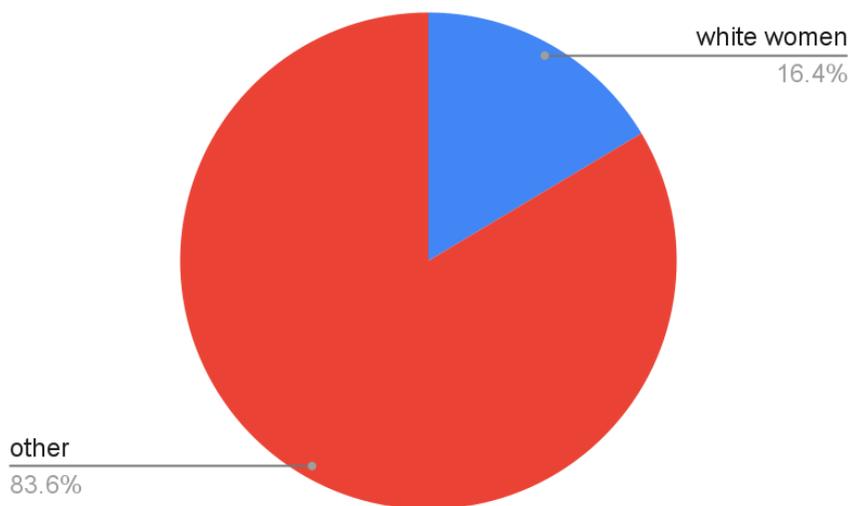
terms of gender, is what the missing white woman syndrome posits. The category of white women specifically made up 21.7% of reports, which is a huge number if the combinations of race and gender are considered. This is consistent with other scholarship claiming the existence of the missing white woman syndrome in traditional news media.

However, I did find that the articles were written in a very interesting manner. Articles written on missing women took a neutral stance in conveying the story. In fact, most stories about missing women are actually about those who have been missing for a long time and have been recently discovered. Therefore, it's difficult to gauge whether the author of the article has a bias toward reporting on missing white women because the point of the story is to inform readers about the conclusion of a story that was reported decades ago. During the research process, I came across enough articles to create a category of articles that mention the missing white woman syndrome, especially when it is incorporated within an article featuring a report on a person of color.

These articles were released around the same time Gabby Petito's case was getting heightened attention in the media and calls for equity in reporting were being echoed by the public. Whether this is caused by accident or the influence of public opinion, it is not something I was surprised by. The murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the social justice movement that came in the form of #BLM might have invigorated people to fight for justice, including the right to equity and inclusion in other sectors of life.

Additionally, I was equally shocked to see that black individuals came in second in terms of reports being conducted, while Asians and Hispanics are barely covered with two or fewer reports, each. In terms of numerical value, black individuals were only reported two fewer times than their white counterparts, while other communities of color were way below.

More analysis has to be done on the demographics of missing people reports to analyze how population proportion in terms of how many people are missing relative to a specific demographic and if this number is proportionate to the number of missing person reports. However, it is also worth noting that some missing person cases are underreported. American Indians and Native Hawaiians accounted for zero reports in the Washington Post, which emphasizes the disparity in media coverage, given the number of Indigenous women that go missing every year[9].

One of the things I found most surprising was that men were one of the demographics bringing up the tail end of the demographic groups. Future research can and should be done on how missing male reports are handled since they are also a demographic not covered extensively in terms of missing person cases. It would be interesting to see how missing white woman syndrome affects males, especially black males.

In fact, children were represented more often in the Washington Post study compared to the males. Most of the articles written on missing children were stories of children being taken or hidden by adults that outwardly appeared trustworthy, so the connection to the individual and overall audience shock may play a factor in children's representation being higher than males.

In terms of Instagram data, I will be breaking up my discussion into two parts: the first will be on #missing while the second part will be on #missingperson.

The results of #missingperson were very similar to the Washington Post study, which surprised me. Since Instagram is a platform accessible to all, I thought the field would be leveled out, considering that anyone with a phone can become a reporter. However, the results show that the priorities of people are still the same, with women being the most well-represented group in

---

[9] A report published in 2016 titled the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Report highlights the disappearances of Indigenous women in urban cities all over the United States

terms of gender, and white individuals having more representation compared to other racial demographics. White women made up 14.1% of all demographic combinations compared to the 21.7% of all missing person articles by the Washington Post.

However, the second demographic most featured on Instagram stories is men, which is a deviance from the results produced by analysis in the Washington Post. It's also worth noting that Hispanics are more well-represented on Instagram with 13 posts concerning this demographic. Despite the fact that white women are still the most represented, it is apparent that Instagram aids in leveling the field in terms of the number of reports. Even Native Americans and Native Hawaiians are represented on Instagram, whereas Washington Post yielded zero reports on these demographics.

Moving on to a discussion of #missing, I was pleasantly surprised I was correct in foreseeing that white individuals would not be the leading demographic. Black individuals had the highest amount of missing person reports; this demographic received four posts while white individuals had three. While it is not a big difference, it's a refreshing sight after seeing the result of both the Washington Post and #missingperson yielding the same result of white individuals gaining the most traction in the media.

However, the small sample size should also be considered. While I used the same method looking at the top 100 posts under the Top Posts category, #missing yielded many posts that had nothing to do with missing people, and thus could not be used in my research. Out of the 100 posts I surveyed under #missing, only nine were actually on missing individuals. On the other hand, out of the 100 posts I analyzed under #missingperson, 67 were actually about missing individuals.

Even with the low sample size, the results for #missing yielded similar results to those revealed by the Washington Post. Hispanics were represented twice in these posts, while Asians, American Indians, and Native Hawaiians were not represented at all. The demographic breakdown of gender and age group reflected the same findings by the Washington Post as well, with women being featured the most often, while men and male teenagers were represented equally.

Overall, I was not too surprised by my findings. Studying the literature on the missing white women syndrome and looking at data produced by other researchers equipped with more resources than I have access to, I expected to see a similar trend of white women being more represented in published articles such as the Washington Post. Because of my research, I was informed about how white women are more likely to be reported and featured in mainstream media such as this, while minorities have a more difficult time getting their stories heard.

However, I was a bit shocked that social media, or Instagram, more specifically, was not being utilized in the way, and to the extent, that I thought it would be. Considering that #missingperson yielded a bigger usable sample size than #missing, I will be focusing more on the data collected from this study.

Since Instagram is a social media platform accessible by all, I had originally thought that it will be used more often by minority groups who don't have the same access to mainstream media like the Washington Post. Out of the 67 posts that were on missing people, 21 were on white individuals, and 11 were on white women specifically.

Instagram data did not produce the results I expected them to, but the limitations of this research should also be discussed before establishing that social media does not play a role in calling attention to the stories of missing individuals from minority backgrounds.

Limitations

The validity of this research can be greatly improved by simply increasing the sample size for all data points. For the Washington Post, I looked into their missing person archives and evaluated a seven-month window. If given the resources and time, one improvement that can be made is creating a longer time range, perhaps expanding it to a three or five-year window to properly document the missing person reports. Efforts to obtain permission from CNN, the New York Times, and other leading news sources should also be made. The results in this research are not enough to speak for news publications and media in general because only one source was surveyed, which was the Washington Post.

The same can be said in regards to the amount of Instagram posts analyzed. In the future, #missingperson should be the main hashtag used, since #missing generated a surplus of unnecessary posts that do not relate to missing people. Instead, the number of posts analyzed for #missingperson should be increased to at least 200 top posts taken from an interval- some ideas would be an analysis of the top 200 posts every Monday of the week, for a whole month, or even a year. Doing so would reveal if there is a pattern in missing person posts since this research is limited to what was the popular post for a particular day. A brief screenshot of a moment in time is not always best in revealing the bigger picture.

Conclusion

Although this research paper started a conversation about the relationship between the missing white woman syndrome and social media, this work can be extended to account for the limitations identified. Consistent with current scholarship on the missing white woman syndrome, research on the Washington Post's archives from September 2021 to April 2022 shows that missing white women are featured more often than any other demographic. However,

more sophisticated technology can be used to survey a greater amount of Instagram posts; doing so would reveal and clarify any uncertainty about the presence of the missing white woman syndrome in social media. I was limited to using my personal account to manually sort through 200 total posts and classify them based on what posts revealed about the missing person, but more advanced technology can potentially look into a bigger sample of posts.

My limited data points tentatively reveal that the missing white woman syndrome does exist in the Washington Post, but the data found in this research should be compared to the number of missing people in a certain demographic that go missing, relative to the total number of missing people. Doing so would reveal whether any disparity in missing person coverage is actually due to bias in reporting, or simply mirrors the fact that a particular demographic goes missing at higher rates. Additionally, this study alone is insufficient in gauging social media's role in regards to the missing white woman syndrome, but it does open the door for other researchers curious about the topic.

With that being said, I hope to inspire other social scientists to delve more deeply into other social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, to see if there are discrepancies between the missing person posts on each website. Once this is established, another topic of focus is to what extent men are being neglected in mass-scale searches for missing people and if this is related to the missing white woman syndrome. Specifically, the disappearance of black and indigenous men can be looked into and compared to the overrepresentation of white women in missing person reports on social media.

Another question left unanswered is why the missing white woman syndrome exists. One factor that should be explored is whether the demographics of the newsroom play a role in the diversity and variety of stories being featured. For example, more time and resources would

allow the next scholar to look into a variety of news sites such as CNN, the Washington Post, and the New York Times and look into the demographics of the employees there, specifically those in charge of choosing which stories to publish.

While the findings in this paper remain limited due to various factors, I am listing these recommendations for future study because the research within this paper can be used as a general foundation. Research on who else is affected and how this relates to social media can give insight into the bigger question of *why* the missing white woman syndrome affects newsrooms and publications today.

Works Cited

Bowd, K. (2016). Social media and news media: Building new publics or fragmenting audiences? In M. Griffiths & K. Barbour (Eds.), *Making Publics, Making Places* (pp. 129–144). University of Adelaide Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.20851/j.ctt1t304qd.13

Conlin, L., & Davie, W. R. (2015). Missing White Woman Syndrome: How Media Framing Affects Viewers' Emotions. Electronic News, 9(1), 36–50. https://doi.org/10.1177/1931243115572822

Elamroussi, A., & Simonson, A. (2021, November 4). *New details emerge in the car crash related to Daniel Robinson's disappearance*. CNN. Retrieved June 2, 2022, from https://edition.cnn.com/2021/11/04/us/daniel-robinson-missing-investigation/index.html

Ehrlich, B. (2021, December 14). *Father's search for missing son uncovers two sets of human remains -- and more questions*. Rolling Stone. Retrieved June 3, 2022, from https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/daniel-robinson-missing-geologist-search-1270669/

Garcia, N. (2022, January 15). *Search for Daniel Robinson: 7 months after disappearance, family of missing geologist still trying to find him*. FOX 10 Phoenix. Retrieved June 3, 2022, from https://www.fox10phoenix.com/news/search-for-daniel-robinson-7-months-after-disappearance-family-of-missing-geologist-still-trying-to-find-him

Gerst, E., Perez, N., & Aadland, C. (2022, January 23). *Three charged in 2019 Riverton double murder*. Casper Star-Tribune Online. Retrieved June 2, 2022, from

https://trib.com/news/state-and-regional/crime-and-courts/three-charged-in-2019-riverton-double-murder/article_f8aaf6d6-8f3e-5351-98de-c3411ca726e1.html

Google. (n.d.). *Wy MMIP Handout.pdf*. Google Drive. Retrieved June 2, 2022, from

https://drive.google.com/file/d/165nim_yq2nsjZzDSLjIvuLBzgX2oLnEn/view

Jordan-Zachery, J. S. (2021, October 13). *Analysis | The Media Loves 'missing white women.' black women are already missing from public view.* The Washington Post. Retrieved June 2, 2022, from

https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/10/14/media-loves-missing-white-women-black-women-are-already-missing-public-view/

Maxouris, C. (2022, January 21). *A timeline of 22-year-old Gabby Petito's case*. CNN. Retrieved June 2, 2022, from

https://edition.cnn.com/2021/09/16/us/gabby-petito-timeline-missing-case/index.html

Miller, D., Costa, E., Haynes, N., McDonald, T., Nicolescu, R., Sinanan, J., Spyer, J., Venkatraman, S., & Wang, X. (2016). What is social media? In *How the World Changed Social Media* (1st ed., Vol. 1, pp. 1–8). UCL Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1g69z35.8
"How the World Changed Social Media?"

Moss, J. L. (2019). The forgotten victims of missing white woman syndrome: An examination of legal measures that contribute to the lack of search and recovery of missing black girls and women. William & Mary Journal of Race, Gender, and Social Justice, 25(3), 737-764.

Please help find Daniel Robinson. Please Help Find Daniel. (2022, May 23). Retrieved June 3, 2022, from https://pleasehelpfinddaniel.com/

Published by Statista Research Department, & 31, M. (2022, March 31). *Number of missing persons files in the U.S. by age and gender 2021*. Statista. Retrieved June 2, 2022, from https://www.statista.com/statistics/240387/number-of-missing-persons-files-in-the-us-by-age/

Published by Statista Research Department, & 31, M. (2022, March 31). *Number of missing persons in the U.S. by race 2021*. Statista. Retrieved June 3, 2022, from https://www.statista.com/statistics/240396/number-of-missing-persons-files-in-the-us-by-race/

Prier, J. (2017). Commanding the Trend: Social Media as Information Warfare. *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, *11*(4), 50–85. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26271634

"Commanding the Trend: Social Media as Information Warfare" by Lt Col Jarred Prier

Research. WYSAC. (n.d.). Retrieved June 2, 2022, from

https://wysac.uwyo.edu/wysac/reports/

Robertson, K. (2021, September 22). *News media can't shake 'missing white woman syndrome,' critics say*. The New York Times. Retrieved June 2, 2022, from

https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/22/business/media/gabby-petito-missing-white-woman-syndrome.html

Slakoff, D.C., & Fradella, H.F. (2019). Media messages surrounding missing women and girls: The missing white woman syndrome and other factors that influence newsworthiness. Criminology, Criminal Justice, Law & Society, 20(3), 80-102.

Sommers, Zach (2016). Missing white woman syndrome: an empirical analysis of race and gender disparities in online news coverage of missing persons, 106 J. Crim. L. & Criminology https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/jclc/vol106/iss2/4

Steinbuch, Y. (2021, September 29). *Coverage of Gabby Petito case leads to apparent discovery of another body*. New York Post. Retrieved June 3, 2022, from

https://nypost.com/2021/09/29/gabby-petito-search-uncovers-another-missing-persons-remains/

Wyoming Public Radio | By Melodie Edwards. (2021, September 21). *Taskforce releases data on missing and murdered indigenous people in Wyoming*. Wyoming Public Media. Retrieved June 2, 2022, from

https://www.wyomingpublicmedia.org/tribal-news/2021-01-08/taskforce-releases-data-on-missing-and-murdered-indigenous-people-in-wyoming