# Media construction of Missing White Woman Syndrome: A cultural complex of innocence

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**Abstract**

This study assessed whether the media are influenced by the 'cultural complex of innocence' first proposed by psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung using content analysis. The cultural complex proposed is that Western society may be culturally conditioned to view blonde-haired (and possibly blue-eyed) Caucasian women as the archetypal image of innocence. In this study it was reviewed 53 missing persons' cases of women across the United States between the years 2000 and 2009. The characteristics of the missing persons analyzed included age, race, hair color, eye color, socioeconomic status, prostitution history, drug history, history of mental illness, etc. Media related to each of the 533 cases was collected from Google News, CNN online, and MSNBC online. The articles were reviewed to determine frequency of keywords relating to the portrayal of the victim used by the three media outlets**.**

**Keywords**: Missing persons, adult abduction, cultural complex, media, Carl Jung.



## Introduction

The search for missing persons has gone viral from faces on milk cartons to Facebook groups. Although the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) recorded a reduction in missing persons' cases in the United States for the sixth consecutive year, The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) recorded a reduction in missing persons' cases in the United States consecutively for 6-years at an alarming rate of 661,593 (1). With such inundation of missing, lost, or abducted individuals, media simply do not have the resources to provide sufficient attention to each victim. One noticeable trend in the United States is that attractive Caucasian women typically receive more media attention when reported missing (2),(3). Certain cases -- such as those of Elizabeth Smart, Natalee Holloway, Dru Sjodin, and Brooke Wilberger -- attracted such vast amounts of media attention that the term *missing white woman syndrome* (also known as *missing pretty girl syndrome*) was coined to explain the phenomenon. One particularly noteworthy characteristic of *missing white woman syndrome* appears to be a subgroup of Caucasian women who receive more (and some would argue better) media attention; namely Caucasian women with blonde hair and blue eyes.

This research has four general assumptions correlated with this sociological syndrome: (1) the syndrome exists to the extent that Caucasian abduction victims receive more media attention than their minority counterparts, (2) the syndrome is primarily attributable to racial disparity, (3) devalued victims (e.g., drug addicts, prostitutes, mental illness) do not receive comparable media attention, and (4) blonde-haired, blue-eyed Caucasian women receive more media attention than other Caucasian women.

From these assumptions, six research questions were there be formed:

1. Do Caucasians represent the majority of abduction victims?
2. Will a higher frequency of abduction for Caucasians with blonde-hair and blue-eyes?
3. Do blonde-haired, blue-eyed Caucasians receive more media attention than other Caucasian and minority victims?
4. Are blonde-haired, blue-eyed Caucasians portrayed in a more innocent and positive manner than other Caucasian and minority victims?
5. Are abduction victims portrayed more negatively by the media when suffering from substance abuse, afflicted with mental illness, engaged in prostitution, marked with distinguishing characteristics (e.g. tattoos), and/or come from low socioeconomic status?
6. Does the location and region of abduction, time of day, and month associated with the abduction affect the media portrayal of the abductee?

Can one singular, physical typology intrigue all Americans? Many believe the blonde-haired, blue-eyed Caucasian woman can indeed accomplish such a feat. From this assertion, researchers reviewed the extant literature to determine when and where this cultural fascination with the fair-haired maiden began. The researchers also aimed to measure the preoccupation today in relation to the media and its' reporting of missing persons.

**Missing White Woman Syndrome**

A review of the literature regarding the history of *missing white woman syndrome* in the media revealed In 2002 eight missing person cases were reported in the selected media outlets. These abductions chronologically included Beginning with Rachel Cooke (on January 10) and ending with 27-year old Laci Peterson (on December 24), there were a total of eight high profile cases of Caucasian women covered during the course of one year – the other abductions being those of Danielle Van Dam, Ashley Pond, Miranda Gaddis, Elizabeth Smart, Samantha Reunion, and Cassandra Williamson (2)(Smart & Benson, 2005).

Consider statistics here. Seven of the eight reports or 87.5% of the media reports during 2002 fit the portrait of the fair maiden.

Laci Peterson did not fit the traditional description of a missing Caucasian woman who might receive such media attention; but despite being a brunette of Hispanic origin, she nonetheless received considerable national media. Other high profile cases of missing white women also helped trigger scholarly inquiry into *missing white woman syndrome*. The cases of Elizabeth Smart and Natalee Holloway received extensive amounts of media attention, with Holloway's case representing a particular point of contention among scholars that white women -- particularly those who are Caucasian with blonde-hair and blue-eyes-- receive disproportionate amounts of media attention when compared to victims with other physical attributes (4).

Notwithstanding the aforementioned cases, it should be noted that, in addition as discussed in the 2002 media portal cases, white missing women syndrome appears to illustrate that fair-haired maidens do receive more media attention., An alarming discrepancy also appears to exist regarding the media treatment of Caucasian and non-Caucasian child victims. Between the years 2000 and 2005, 76% of child abduction cases featured on CNN involved Caucasians (3), whereas only 53% of abduction victims were actually Non Caucasian (5). While little scholarly research has addressed the phenomenon of *missing white woman syndrome*, a plethora of commentary from journalists who acknowledge that *missing white woman syndrome* is a critical problem in the media. Moreover, most of these pundits seem to opine that the central issue dividing media coverage of victims is the issue of racial disparity. For example, in 2004, Alex Johnson, a correspondent for MSNBC, suggested that "it helps to be young, white, and female" when one goes missing. To further illustrate his point, Johnson compares two missing persons' cases who were both from South Carolina: Shelton Sanders was an African- American male while Dail Dinwiddie was a Caucasian woman. Dinwiddie's case was covered by media outlets in Michigan, Minnesota, Georgia, Florida, and Wisconsin contingent upon the origin of the tips, whereas Sanders' case was given mediocre media coverage, at best, and only in the immediate vicinity from which he vanished.

In 2005, *Washington Post* op-ed author Eugene Robinson addressed the phenomenon of *missing white woman syndrome*, and named Natalee Holloway, Elizabeth Smart, Chandra Levy, Laci Peterson, Lori Hacking, and Jon Benet Ramsey as victims who captivated the hearts of Americans. Robinson suggested that this phenomenon is caused by inherent racism in America (6). In support of this premise, Sheri Parks of the University of Maryland also discussed in 2006 the Holloway case as an example of *missing white woman syndrome* while appearing on Anderson Cooper 360, and concurred that the issue is attributable to racism.

CNN correspondent Tom Foreman (2006) questioned whether *missing white woman syndrome* was derived from racism, or rather merely a reality of the News business (7). Foreman notes that media often portrays pretty, white, young females to attract the most public attention, and, as a result, these fair white maidens are often viewed as "helpless" (p. 1). Malkin (2005) cites Natalee Holloway as a classic example of *missing white woman syndrome* but raises an interesting point that missing middle- to upper-class women may also receive more media attention because their family members are well-spoken and present themselves in a cohesive manner to television audiences (8).

Another unfortunate dimension of *missing white woman syndrome* is the abduction victims at the other end of the spectrum who receive little to no media attention -- often classified as "devalued victims." In Rule's (2004) comprehensive account regarding victims of the Green River Killer, Rule found the public was far more fascinated and consumed by the phantom killer than with victims who tended to be poor prostitutes (9).

Conversely, a massive task force was assembled to more quickly apprehend notorious serial killer Theodore Robert Bundy, most likely because his primary hunting ground was attractive, middle- to upper-class sorority girls. Gilchrist (2010) studied a similar phenomenon in Canada and found that more than 500 Aboriginal women had disappeared or been murdered since the 1980s, yet press coverage on those women was three and a half times less than for Caucasian women -- who were portrayed more favorably (10). As such, it is reasonable to argue that those Aboriginal women are considered devalued in Canadian society.

Jiwani and Young's (2006) analysis of 128 *Vancouver Sun* articles over a 5-year period 2001-2006 revealed that the devalued missing and murdered women in Vancouver's downtown Eastside involved Aboriginal women and women involved in prostitution much like Rule's 2004 findings; whereas, socially respectable white women were given more press coverage (11).

**Blondes in the media**

One common media phrase is "sex sells." Indeed, the blonde-haired, blue-eyed, fair-skinned woman has rapidly become sexualized in western media outlets (i.e. movies and advertisements); thus supporting the assertion that these physical characteristics share an interesting dichotomy -- namely that blondes are perceived as both innocent and sexual. Often this very dichotomy of underlying roles, however, which allows for such a diversified market; men view sexual appeal, while women conversely view beauty, innocence, and a desire to emulate these female archetypes of beauty.

Rich and Cash (1993) examined the contextualization of hair color spanning four decades from 1950 to 1980 in an effort to understand the social construction of the blonde metaphor, and the cultural reactions to this depiction of the blonde. Cash and Rich examined 750 images from *Ladies Home Journal*, *Vogue*, and *Playboy*, and discovered that the rate of blondes appearing in magazine ads far exceeded of the number of blondes in the general population. Further, Cash and Rich found the proportion of blondes depicted in magazine advertisements was lowest in the 1960s, and reached its peak during the 1970s. Additionally, Cash and Rich found that *Playboy* magazine featured a significantly higher number of blondes, particularly in centerfolds) than did ladies' magazines (12).

Englis, Solomon, and Ashmore (1994) examined the contents of *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, *Mademoiselle*, *Self*, *Seventeen*, *Vogue*, and *Men's Magazine* to determine the frequency of various physical characteristics in advertisements. The blonde-haired, light-skinned woman fell under the category of classic beauty and is defined by the authors as:
"blonde/light hair, WASPish appearance. Although most observers (at least within Euro-American culture) probably associate the notion of classic good looks with blonde hair and Nordic facial features, fashion experts do not currently view Aryan features as a prerequisite for Classic beauty"

(13)( p. 63). Englis, Solomon, and Ashmore found 46 advertisements with the *classic* beauty features, outranked only by the *trendy* category 51 advertisements, which is not unexpected since the goal of fashion magazines is to sell trendy items and concepts.

**Theoretical rationale**

The work of psychoanalyst Carl June and his concept of *cultural complex* hypothesized (14)(Jung, 1959). Jung proposed that a cultural complex is derived from the collective unconscious: an amalgamation of archetypes that psychically bond all members of a society. Archetypes are defined as symbols or images engrained in a cultural identity and recognized by all members of that culture as being symbolic of a particular event or emotion. The collective unconscious then -- this psychic bond between all members of a culture -- has the potential to form what is now referred to as a "cultural complex," defined as the process by which certain objects or individuals are collectively characterized by the symbols associated with them (15).

**Methodology**

This study employed a combination of qualitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative and qualitative data are not adversarial in nature but rather complementary in that they simultaneously achieve a more in-depth understanding, as well as to construct a sturdier research framework (16).

The objectives of this study were two-fold. The first objective was to discover whether a higher incidence of abduction for Caucasian women with blonde-hair and blue-eyes compared with Caucasian women possessing varying physical features existed. Concurrently the researchers sought to shed light on the rate of minority abductions (e.g. African American, Latina, and Asian); which may provide valuable information to the criminal justice community regarding the prevalence for this type of victim. The second objective was to examine which demographic variables contributed to the frequency of coverage and the portrayal of a victim allocated by the media; and in so doing, provide some insight into the motivation for the media's fascination with blonde-haired/blue-eyed Caucasian abductees.

The independent variables selected for this study were (1) demographic characteristics obtained from the Charley Project and (2) the content of the coverage within online news sources namely CNN, MSNBC, and Google News. Stepwise regression analysis was used to determine the degree to which a linear combination of those independent variables could explain the variance in the (1) amount of media coverage defined as number of articles written, (2) frequency with which a missing person was portrayed as innocent or positive in the media articles, and (3) frequency with which a missing person was portrayed in a negative manner in the media articles. Next, the data sources and collection will be discussed.

**Data sources and collection**

The source for the collection of victim data was the Charley Project: a non-profit, on-line list of missing individuals in the United States and internationally. Given there is not a centralized database (to date) of all missing persons in the United States, the Charley Project was considered the most comprehensive source available. All cases (from 2000 to 2009) of abducted females except for family abductions were analyzed. The purpose for this particular timeframe was two-fold: (1) an adequate sample of missing persons was obtained for periods of time both before and after the emergence of the term *missing white woman syndrome* in 2002, and (2) the data had an adequate population size from which to randomly select victims for the qualitative portion of the study.

The independent variables outlined in Figure 1 were selected for several reasons. First, the victim's physical description was imperative to provide the foundation for examining the phenomenon of *missing white woman syndrome* in the context of the proposed cultural complex of innocence. Second, the victim's socioeconomic status was important to collect and whether a victim had tattoos, history of drug use, history of mental illness, and/or history of prostitution to examine the role if any these factors

| Victim Information | Abduction Information |
|---|---|
| Age | Month |
| Hair Color | Location |
| Eye Color | Time of Day |
| Race | Region |
| Socioeconomic Status (SES) | |
| Distinguishing Marks | |
| Drug Use History | |
| Mental Illness History | |
| Prostitution History | |

**Fig. *1:*** Victim and abduction information analyzed from Charley Project

may have in media coverage. Third, elements of the abduction were also important to consider. For example, abductions in foreign, tropical locations, such as Natalee Holloway in Aruba, may have more viewer interest than the case of a child abducted on the way to school.

**Qualitative data**

The qualitative portion of this study was a non-traditional content analysis of a disproportionate stratified random sampling of abduction stories within three online news sources -- CNN, MSNBC, and Google News. The original intent was to obtain a random sample of 600 cases divided into 200 blonde-haired, blue-eyed Caucasians, 200 non-blonde Caucasians, and 200 minorities of individuals both over and under the age of eighteen. However, due to an insufficient number of blonde-haired, blue-eyed Caucasian women and blonde-haired Caucasian women in general, coupled with the removal of all abduction victims under 18 years of age, where n = 126 in the Charley Project because of author concerns regarding their disproportionately low percentage of 9.5% when compared to the FBI (2012) statistics regarding the actual number of juvenile missing persons at 75.2% (1). The final sample tallied 533 adult abduction cases spanning four categories including: (1) 112 Caucasian women with both blonde-hair and blue-eyes, (2) 77 Caucasian women with blonde-hair and eye-colors other than blue, (3) 177 non-blonde Caucasian women, and (4) 167 non-blonde, non-Caucasian women. Abduction victims evaluated in this project ranged from 18 to 95 years of age. The most common victims were between the ages of 18 and 25, which are consistent with national averages (17).

The online sources were selected because the sources were the most visited news networks on the internet (18). Given that not every missing persons case selected for examination in this study received national news coverage, utilization of these particular sites were especially beneficial because the sites often were able to retrieve local news coverage. The most critical element of the study's qualitative portion was assessing the two major ways in which an abduction victim was portrayed by the media: (1) media innocent and positive portrayal and (2) media negative portrayal.

**Analysis of data**

Tables 1 and 2 outline the personal and environmental demographic characteristics of the abduction victims within both the Charley Project population and stratified media sample; however, only that which pertains to the stratified media sample is addressed. With regard to personal demographics, the majority of abduction victims in the media sample were Caucasian (68.7%), had blonde (35.5%) or brunette (34.9%) hair, and brown (49.7%) or blue (29.5%) eyes. Moreover, victims tended to have no tattoos (72.9%), not be engaged in prostitution (97.4%), be from lower (46.3%) and middle (50.5%) socioeconomic strata, not be suffering from mental illness (79.5%), and have no history of drug abuse (82.2%).

The most common calendar month demographics were January/February (21.0%) and May/June (20.1%) months during which victims were abducted; whereas the most common locations for the abductions were residences (27.2%), and more specifically, a variety of other indoor locales (42.4%). Table 1 follows.

**Table 1:** Personal demographic characteristics of abduction victims

| Variable | Charley Project (N = 1,323) | | Media Sample (n = 533) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | n | % | n | % |
| Race | | | | |
| Caucasian | 777 | 58.7 | 366 | 68.7 |
| African American | 304 | 23.0 | 90 | 16.9 |
| Hispanic | 167 | 12.6 | 37 | 6.9 |
| Asian | 48 | 3.6 | 22 | 4.1 |
| Native American | 14 | 1.1 | 9 | 1.7 |
| Mixed | 13 | 1.0 | 9 | 1.7 |
| Hair Color | | | | |
| Blonde | 230 | 17.4 | 189 | 35.5 |
| Brunette | 590 | 44.6 | 186 | 34.9 |
| Red | 61 | 4.6 | 20 | 3.8 |
| Black | 386 | 29.2 | 122 | 22.9 |
| Other | 56 | 4.2 | 16 | 3.0 |
| Eye Color | | | | |
| Blue | 276 | 20.9 | 158 | 29.5 |
| Brown | 811 | 61.3 | 266 | 49.7 |
| Green | 102 | 7.7 | 48 | 9.0 |
| Hazel | 134 | 10.2 | 61 | 11.4 |
| Distinguishing Characteristics | | | | |
| No | 1,020 | 77.1 | 390 | 72.9 |
| Yes | 303 | 22.9 | 143 | 27.1 |
| Prostitution | | | | |
| No | 1,296 | 98.0 | 519 | 97.4 |
| Yes | 27 | 2.0 | 14 | 2.6 |
| SES | | | | |
| Low Income | 608 | 46.0 | 247 | 46.3 |
| Middle Income | 682 | 51.5 | 269 | 50.5 |
| High Income | 18 | 1.4 | 17 | 3.2 |
| Unknown | 15 | 1.1 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Mental Illness | | | | |
| No | 1,087 | 82.2 | 424 | 79.5 |
| Yes | 145 | 11.0 | 60 | 11.3 |
| Unknown | 91 | 6.9 | 49 | 9.2 |
| Drug Use | | | | |
| No | | | 438 | 82.2 |
| Yes | | | 48 | 9.0 |
| Unknown | | | 47 | 8.8 |

Note: Percentages have been rounded to the nearest tenths position.

**Table 2:** Environmental demographic characteristics for abduction victims

| Variable | Charley Project (N = 1,323) n | % | Media Sample (n = 533) n | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Month | | | | |
| January/February | 221 | 16.7 | 112 | 21.0 |
| March/April | 209 | 15.8 | 86 | 16.1 |
| May/June | 247 | 18.7 | 107 | 20.1 |
| July/August | 226 | 17.1 | 92 | 17.3 |
| September/October | 217 | 16.4 | 75 | 14.1 |
| November/December | 202 | 15.3 | 61 | 11.4 |
| Location | | | | |
| Residence | 349 | 26.4 | 145 | 27.2 |
| Outside Residence | 178 | 13.5 | 63 | 11.8 |
| Parking Lot | 163 | 12.3 | 68 | 12.8 |
| Park / Outdoor | 59 | 4.5 | 29 | 5.4 |
| Other | 569 | 43.0 | 226 | 42.4 |
| Unknown | 5 | 0.4 | 2 | 0.4 |
| Region | | | | |
| Eastern | 149 | 11.3 | 54 | 10.1 |
| Midwestern | 153 | 11.6 | 61 | 11.4 |
| Southern | 605 | 45.7 | 252 | 47.3 |
| Western | 416 | 31.4 | 166 | 31.1 |
| Time | | | | |
| Morning | 122 | 9.2 | 47 | 8.8 |
| Afternoon | 119 | 9.0 | 46 | 8.6 |
| Evening | 126 | 9.5 | 47 | 8.8 |
| Night | 147 | 11.1 | 69 | 12.9 |
| Unknown | 809 | 61.1 | 324 | 60.8 |
| Cross-Listed on FBI Site | | | | |
| No | | | 523 | 98.1 |
| Yes | | | 10 | 1.9 |

Note: Percentages have been rounded to the nearest tenths position.

Furthermore, most abduction occurred in Southern (47.3%) and Western (31.1%) states, and usually at times of day unknown to the media (60.8%). Lastly, a very small percentage (1.9%) of abduction cases was housed within the FBI online missing person's website.

With respect to the aforementioned research questions in relation to the Charley Project, a clear majority of abduction victims were Caucasian (n = 777, or 58.7%); African Americans (n = 304, or 23.0%) comprised the largest minority group. Moreover, most abduction victims only 112 (8.5%) did not possess blonde- hair and blue-eyes, such cases within the Charley Project population. Lastly, the regression results for particular significant subgroups within the media sample may be limited in their explanatory value given small frequencies for certain victims: (1) mixed race (*n* = 9), (2) engaged in prostitution (*n* = 14), (3) high socioeconomic status (*n* = 17), and (4) cross-listed on the FBI website (*n* = 10).

**Analytic Plan**

Results for this section were generated from stepwise regression models to explain the variance in media coverage of the three dependent variables of Total Articles, Media Innocent and Positive Portrayal, and Media Negative Portrayal. Researchers considered the relative influences of 13 independent variables from the Charley Project (see Figure 1) and one additional independent variable noting which victims were listed on the FBI website at the time of data collection. Tolerance values for the three stepwise regression models indicated no

issues with multicollinearity among the independent variables.

*Correlation Matrix* (n = 533)

**Table 3**: illustrates the correlations among the three dependent variables selected for stepwise regression. The only strong and significant correlation was between 'media innocent and positive portrayal' and 'total articles' (r =.671).

| Variable | TA | MIPP | MNP |
|---|---|---|---|
| Total Articles (TA) | ------- | .671** | .066 |
| Media Innocent/Positive Portrayal (MIPP) | .671** | ------- | .114** |
| Media Negative Portrayal (MNP) | .066 | .114** | ------- |

** p < .01.

Total Articles

Tables 4 and 5 present the stepwise regression results and corresponding descriptive statistics for the dependent variable 'total articles.' The most significant variable in this model (β = .30) accounted for 10.7% or roughly 85% of the total variance of 12.5%, indicating that a missing persons case featured on the FBI's website would generate, on average, 20 more articles (b = 20.36). Time of abduction (β = .11) accounted for 1.1% of the total variance and demonstrated that the number of articles associated with each victim increased (b = 0.94) by nearly one when abducted during the evening hours instead of morning/afternoon and nearly two articles when the abduction occurred in the nighttime hours.

Month of abduction (β = .09) accounted for a mere fraction 0.7% of the total variance, and indicated that victims abducted during the months of January and February receive approximately two more articles (b = 1.94) than victims abducted during other months.

**Table 4:** *Total articles stepwise regression model*

| Significant Predictors | Rank | $R^2$ | *b* | *SE b* | β | *t* | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Cross-Listed on FBI Site | 1 | .107 | 20.36 | 2.81 | .30 | 7.26 | |
| Time Abduction | 2 | .118 | 0.94 | 0.35 | .11 | | 2.66 |
| Month Abduction | 3 | .125 | 1.94 | 0.93 | .09 | | 2.09 |
| Constant | | | -0.21 | 0.50 | | -0.42 | |

Note: *n* = 533, SE = 8.62, F = 25.19, R = .35, $R^2$ = .13, Adj $R^2$ = .12, p = .000

Coding Legend: Cross-Listed on FBI Site (Yes = 1, No = 0); Time Abduction (Night = 3, Evening = 2, Morning/Afternoon = 1, Unknown = 0); Month Abduction (January / February = 1, Other = 0)

**Table 5:** *Means comparison – total articles*

| Significant Predictors | N | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cross-Listed on FBI Site | | | |
| Yes | 10 | 23.00 | 56.66 |
| No | 523 | 0.86 | 4.64 |
| Time Abduction | | | |
| Night | 69 | 4.12 | 22.04 |
| Evening | 47 | 3.23 | 14.95 |
| Morning/Afternoon | 92 | 1.28 | 2.09 |
| Unknown | 324 | 0.38 | 0.88 |
| Month Abduction | | | |
| January/February | 112 | 3.45 | 19.82 |
| Other | 421 | 0.70 | 1.25 |

Note: Means and standard deviations have been rounded to the nearest hundredths position.

Media Innocent and Positive Portrayal

Tables 6 and 7 present the stepwise regression results and corresponding descriptive statistics for the dependent variable 'media innocent and positive portrayal.' The most significant variable in this model (β = .46) accounted for almost three fourths or 24.7% of 34.0% of the total variance in the dependent variable and indicated that a missing persons case featured on the FBI website would generate approximately 10 more innocent or positive terms per article (b = 10.54). The second most important variable in the model (β = .19) captured an additional 4.6% of the total variance and indicated that blonde victims receive slightly in excess of one additional innocent or positive portrayal per article (b = 1.25) when compared with women with other hair colors.

Time of abduction (β = .13) represented only 2.7% of the total variance and essentially indicated that the number of innocent or positive portrayals increased (b = 0.36) proportionately as the abduction time transitioned from morning/afternoon into the evening and nighttime hours. The next most significant variable in this model (β = .10) represented 1.2% of the total variance and indicated that being abducted in the Eastern portion of the United States generated about one half (b = 0.47) more innocent or positive portrayal than those abducted in the Southern region, and nearly one additional innocent or positive portrayal than those abducted in the Midwestern or Western states.

Location of abduction (β = .10) also had a significant effect on how many times victims were referred to as innocent or positive and indicated that those abducted from parks and other outdoor areas received slightly more portrayal as innocent or positive (b = .22) than those abducted from a residence and progressively more such innocent or positive portrayals when compared with those abducted from a parking lot, outside a residence, and a variety of other indoor locales.

This model supports the premise that victims of abduction with blonde hair received significantly more positive or innocent terms per article than victims with varying hair colors.

**Table 6:** *Media innocent and positive portrayal stepwise regression model*

| Significant Predictors | Rank | $R^2$ | *b* | *SE b* | β | *t* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Cross-Listed on FBI Site | 1 | .247 | 10.54 | 0.82 | .46 | 12.84 |
| Hair Color | 2 | .293 | 1.25 | 0.23 | .19 | 5.34 |
| Time Abduction | 3 | .320 | 0.36 | 0.11 | .13 | 3.20 |
| Region Abduction | 4 | .332 | 0.47 | 0.17 | .10 | 2.73 |
| Location Abduction | 5 | .340 | 0.22 | 0.09 | .10 | 2.58 |
| Constant | | | - 0.92 | 0.32 | | - 2.84 |

Note: *n* = 533, SE = 2.53, F = 54.31, R = .58, $R^2$ = .34, Adj $R^2$ = .33, p = .000

Coding Legend: Cross-Listed on FBI Site (Yes = 1, 0 = No); Hair Color (Blonde = 1, Other = 0); Time Abduction (Night = 3, Evening = 2, Morning/Afternoon = 1, Unknown = 0); Region Abduction (Eastern = 2, Southern = 1, Midwestern/Western = 0); Location Abduction (Park/outdoor = 4, Residence = 3, Parking Lot = 2, Outside Residence = 1, Other/Unknown = 0)

Tables 8 and 9 below present the stepwise regression results and corresponding descriptive statistics for the dependent variable 'media negative portrayal.' Mental illness (β = .21) accounted for 4% or approximately one quarter of the total variance of 14% and indicated that victims suffering from mental illness if such status was unknown received approximately one half additional negative term per article (b = .43) than victims not suffering from mental illness.

Race (β = .15) accounted for 3.1% of the total variance and indicated that mixed race abduction victims received the greatest amount of negative terms. The regression model specifically estimated that mixed race victims received one quarter more negative terms per article (b = .26) than Caucasian abduction victims and just more than one half more negative terms than that generated for other non-Caucasian abduction victims.

To a lesser degree and more generically depicted, the regression results also showed in order of contribution that (1) being abducted in December

and February, (2) engaging in prostitution, (3) being part of the upper class socioeconomic spectrum, (4) being more youthful, and (5) being abducted in the Eastern and Western states as opposed to Southern and Midwestern states all produced more negative terms per article.

**Table 7:** Means comparison – media innocent and positive portrayal

| Significant Predictors | N | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cross-Listed on FBI Site | | | |
| Yes | 10 | 12.20 | 13.48 |
| No | 523 | 0.85 | 2.06 |
| Hair Color | | | |
| Blonde | 189 | 2.03 | 4.71 |
| Other | 344 | 0.57 | 1.53 |
| Time Abduction | | | |
| Night | 69 | 2.48 | 5.89 |
| Evening | 48 | 2.10 | 3.96 |
| Morning/Afternoon | 92 | 1.72 | 3.31 |
| Unknown | 324 | 0.43 | 1.42 |
| Region Abduction | | | |
| Eastern | 54 | 2.56 | 4.40 |
| Southern | 252 | 1.00 | 3.54 |
| Midwestern/Western | 227 | 0.70 | 1.86 |
| Location Abduction | | | |
| Park/Outdoor | 29 | 1.90 | 2.79 |
| Residence | 145 | 1.89 | 4.84 |
| Parking Lot | 69 | 1.35 | 2.56 |
| Outside Residence | 62 | 1.00 | 2.69 |
| Other/ Unknown | 228 | 0.37 | 1.32 |

Note: Means and standard deviations have been rounded to the nearest hundredths position.

**Table 8:** *Media negative portrayal stepwise regression model*

| Significant Predictors | Rank | $R^2$ | *b* | *SE b* | β | *t* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mental Illness | 1 | .040 | 0.43 | 0.89 | .21 | 5.10 |
| Race | 2 | .071 | 0.26 | 0.07 | .15 | 3.61 |
| Month Abduction | 3 | .089 | 0.23 | 0.07 | .13 | 3.31 |
| Prostitution | 4 | .108 | 0.68 | 0.22 | .13 | 3.14 |
| SES | 5 | .123 | 0.72 | 0.24 | .12 | 2.97 |
| Age | 6 | .132 | - 0.01 | 0.00 | - .11 | -2.58 |
| Region Abduction | 7 | .140 | 0.09 | 0.04 | .09 | 2.18 |
| Constant | | | - 0.05 | 0.12 | | -.373 |

Note: $n$ = 533, SE = .79, F = 12.22, R = .37, $R^2$ = .14, Adj $R^2$ = .12, p = .000

Coding Legend: Mental Illness (Yes/Unknown = 1, No = 0); Race (Mixed = 2, Caucasian = 1, Other = 0); Month Abduction (December = 2, February = 1, Other = 0); Prostitution (Yes = 1, No = 0); SES (Upper Class = 1, Other = 0); Age (in actual years); Region Abduction (Eastern = 3, Western = 2, Southern = 1, Midwestern = 0)

**Table 9:** Means comparison – media negative portrayal

| Significant Predictors | N | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|
| Mental Illness | | | |
| Yes/Unknown | 108 | 0.56 | 1.29 |
| No | 425 | 0.14 | 0.67 |
| Race | | | |
| Mixed | 8 | 1.38 | 2.77 |
| Caucasian | 367 | 0.28 | 0.91 |
| Other | 158 | 0.04 | 0.25 |
| Month Abduction | | | |
| December | 25 | 0.64 | 1.58 |
| February | 51 | 0.45 | 1.22 |
| Other | 457 | 0.17 | 0.72 |
| Prostitution | | | |
| Yes | 14 | 0.93 | 2.02 |
| No | 519 | 0.20 | 0.79 |
| SES | | | |
| Upper Class | 11 | 1.09 | 2.43 |
| Other | 522 | 0.20 | 0.78 |
| Region Abduction | | | |
| Eastern | 54 | 0.37 | 1.12 |
| Western | 165 | 0.31 | 1.08 |
| Southern | 253 | 0.16 | 0.67 |
| Midwestern | 61 | 0.10 | 0.35 |

Note: Means and standard deviations have been rounded to the nearest hundredths position.

**Discussion**

The findings of this study provide support for the existence of a cultural complex of innocence. Blonde abduction victims were portrayed by the media as more "positive" or "innocent" than other Caucasian and minority women. Conversely, mixed race victims were viewed more negatively than victims of other races. Other notable results included the appearance of time, region, location, and month of abduction across the three models.

From the initial Charley Project population (n = 1,323) of missing persons (2000–2009), Research question 1) supported that Caucasians or 58.7% were abducted more frequently than all other minorities combined or 41.3%. Although cases listed on the Charley Project do not purport to be representative of the entire population of missing persons in the United States. Census data indicate that the Caucasian majority was reasonably consistent though a bit underrepresented with the racial distribution of the general population (Caucasian abductees represented 75.1% while Black abductees represented only 12.3%; but equally demonstrates that the Black abduction victims nearly double their percentage within the general population (19).

Research Question 2 proposed there would be a higher incidence of abduction for blonde-haired, blue-eyed victims across the United States; however, this research question was not supported by the research. A – possibility for the possible negative finding was that a consequence of predators being influenced by the cultural complex of innocence; however, this thought was not supported, and only a small portion 17.4% of abduction victims were blonde-haired women and an even smaller number 8.5% possessed both blonde-hair and blue-eyes. Brunette victims were by far the most common 44.6%; however, brunettes – quite unlike blondes transcend racial groups.

Research Question 3 that sought to determine if hair color was a significant factor in media reports was not support. The number of articles generated for Caucasian blondes were roughly doubles that of their non-blonde minority and Caucasian counterparts. Subsequent regression analysis; however, indicated that the large disparity could not

be attributed to the variations in victim hair color. As such, one cannot conclude that hair color has a great bearing on the reason for the larger number of articles written about Caucasian women, but blonde haired women do receive more media attention.

Research question 4 asked whether or not Caucasian abduction victims with blonde hair were described significantly more often as innocent or positive was supported in this research. Caucasian blondes represented an average of more than one term per article, followed though not closely by brunettes, redheads, and victims with black hair.

Race was not a significant predictor of how often a victim would be described in a positive or innocent manner. This finding supported the general hypothesis of a cultural complex of innocence because racial disparity did not appear to be the only contributing factor to the sociological phenomenon of missing white woman syndrome.

While race was not a significant predictor of whether a victim would be described in a more positive or innocent light by the media, race was a significant predictor for whether victims would be portrayed negatively. Data revealed that mixed race victims were most likely to be portrayed negatively, followed by Caucasian victims, and subsequently victims of other races. While noteworthy, the finding nonetheless is not generalizable given that mixed race victims represented such a small portion of the media sample (n = 9), or 1.7%.

While not a formal research question, a case cross-listed on the FBI's website was discovered to be a significant predictor for the amount of total articles related to a case. Also on an average, such a cross-listing generated approximately a 23-to-1 ratio of articles compared to victims who were not cross-listed on the site. Again, though, as with mixed race victims, these discrepancies – though startling -- are not generalizable given their small number of cases within the media sample (n = 10) or 1.8%.

The authors also investigated in research question 5 whether certain personal demographic variables would contribute to negative media portrayals and found support for this hypothesis. Victims not reported to be afflicted with a mental disorder and victims engaged in prostitution at the time of their disappearance, received approximately one half and three quarter more negative terms per article respectively. The socioeconomic results were somewhat surprising, in that upper-class victims received nearly four times the number of negative terms per article than the amount allocated to lower- and middle-class victims. Lastly, the findings indicated that fewer negative terms per article were utilized as the abduction victim becomes older. The findings did not; however, reveal any significant indication that possessing distinguished marks on the body, such as tattoos influenced their manner of media portrayal.

Research question 6 covered whether the region, location, time and month of abduction would affect the nature of victim portrayal by the media. This hypothesis was supported by the research. Both the time and month of a victim's abduction were significant predictors regarding how much media attention as calculated by the total articles the case would generate. On average, victims would receive nearly two more news articles when abducted in January or February. A similar amount of coverage as the time of day progressed from morning and afternoon into the nighttime hours. Media Innocent and Positive Portrayal, showed that time, region, and location of abduction were significant predictors. Victims would receive one extra innocent or positive reference per article as the day progressed from morning and afternoon and into the nighttime hours. Moreover, victims abducted from the Eastern region of the United States would receive the greatest number of innocent or positive terms per article representing nearly one half more per article than for abductions in Southern states, and progressively less when abducted from Midwestern and Western states. Victims also were more often described as innocent or positive when taken from a park or other outdoor area.

One reasonable inference from such a finding was that victims actually are more innocent because the likelihood of victims voluntarily disappearing under such circumstances is highly improbable. Conversely, month and region of abduction were shown to be significant predictors of whether a victim would be negatively portrayed by the media. Being reported missing in December or February added upward of one half additional negative terms per article, whereas disappearing from the Eastern region of the United States similarly enhanced the likelihood of receiving more negative terms per article.

This research sought to examine whether the primary contributing factor to the phenomenon of *missing white woman syndrome* was indeed racial disparity, or rather the result of other contributing factors. The findings somewhat support the notion that racial disparity contributed to the concept of *missing white woman syndrome*; that is, minority victims with black and brown hair were found to receive different treatment than Caucasian victims with the same hair color and Caucasians with blonde hair. These victims received less media attention in general, were less likely to be portrayed in a positive or innocent manner, and often times received less attention from law enforcement as reflected in media accounts.

The frequency of race within major news network report about abduction victims also is interesting. The vast majority of articles used for this study were derived from Google News. Surprisingly, CNN and MSNBC featured very few missing persons' cases that also were in the Charley Project population. However, when abduction victims were featured on CNN and MSNBC sites, the disparity in the amount of coverage for Caucasian and minority cases was somewhat disturbing.

On CNN, seven cases within the media sample were featured: Kelsey Collins, Renee Pernice and Leah Roberts once each Kyla Porter and Lisa Stebic twice each, Maura Murray 4 times, and Jennifer Kesse 8 times. While coverage of one Black victim, Kelsey Collins, in a group of seven victims or 14.3% was quite consistent with the proportion of Blacks or 12.3% within the U.S. general population, the number of actual articles written about the victims was far from equitable, as only one single article or 5.3% of the 19 total articles was devoted to the Black victim

MSNBC featured four cases: Kimberly Whitton once, Cherryl Pearson and Lisa Stebic twice each, and Jennifer Kesse 4 times. Again, with the exception of Pearson a successful pediatrician, all victims were Caucasian women. There does appear, then, to be some degree of racial disparity reflected in trends, which emerge from an examination of CNN and MSNBC two news sources.

**The cultural complex**

It Is the phenomenon of *missing white woman syndrome* wholly attributable to racial disparity; or rather has western culture in the United States become subconsciously conditioned to viewing the blonde-haired, blue-eyed Caucasian woman as an archetypal symbol of innocence – a conditioning process which appears to be a result of cultural overexposure to various media platforms which consistently feature these physical characteristics as innocent, beautiful, and frail.

The two regression models used in this research statistically demonstrated that hair color was a significant predictor of how abduction victims are portrayed. Specifically, blonde Caucasian women were more likely to be portrayed in an innocent or positive manner by the media. Perhaps there were elements of racial disparity related to the sociological phenomenon of *missing* white woman syndrome; there was an even more significant factor at play: the collective unconscious. These results illustrated that the disparity in both the amount and quality of media coverage devoted to blonde Caucasians and minorities differed little from the disparity between those same blonde Caucasians and other Caucasians. This finding has significant implications because it supported the hypothesized cultural complex of innocence as defined by Jung (20) which explains the process by which certain objects or individuals are defined collectively by the symbols associated with them (15). This research has shown that the blonde-haired Caucasian woman, to some degree, has evolved over the centuries in Western culture as synonymous with innocence.

**Limitations and future research**

The authors identified four potential limitations of the current study. One limitation was not fully exploring the social construction of the concept of *missing white woman syndrome* because reader comments had to be excluded from analysis. Another limitation was the research still merely scratched the surface of what a comprehensive sample of missing persons' cases would entail, although the number of cases in this study provided ample opportunity for evaluation. A third limitation was the juvenile population under 18 years of age was removed from the analysis. The final limitation was the sizes of the varying racial groups were not well distributed, while there were 200 minority cases included in the media sample.

The researcher, however, believed that they should distinctly consider each racial subset to determine if there were significant differences between or among minority groups. Nonetheless, this limitation

precludes completely generalizing the results to the greater population. As a whole, though, the authors believe these limitations were not a significant hindrance to the validity of the research findings.

There are several possibilities for future research. First, replication of this study with a larger sample is encouraged. Second, equal group sizes of Caucasians and minorities would allow for more direct comparisons. Three, researchers should replicate the study with both a juvenile and adult population to determine if there any differences between the groups in reference to media coverage and quality of portrayal. Four, literature suggests that 'motherhood' seems to be a critical factor in portraying the victim in an innocent or positive light; and as such, future researchers may want to explore the differences in media coverage between groups of women who do and do not have children.

Moreover, this study exclusively examined women; future researchers should consider gathering a sample of male abduction victims for comparison purposes. Lastly, is the researchers recommend that a survey of both media professionals to examine which factors may influence the promulgation of *missing white woman syndrome* and law enforcement officials to examine what, if any, bias exists in the midst of such investigations would be a wise investment.

**Conclusion**

The problem of abduction is pervasive in American culture. Nearly 700,000 individuals are reported missing annually in the United States (1). This inquiry into the etiology and promulgation of *missing white woman syndrome* was a preliminary attempt to shed light on which victims receive the most media attention, and what factors lead the media to believe even if subconsciously that some victims of abduction are more deserving of attention than others. No family asks for their daughter to be torn from their arms, and no victim of abduction asks for their life to be stolen. In that sense, all victims are innocent.

**Conflict of interest**

None declared

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