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The Media Portrayal of the Disappearance and Death of U.S. Army Soldier Vanessa Guillén: Sexual Harassment, Retaliation, and a Culture of Violence at Fort Hood

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On April 22, 2020, the United States (U.S.) Army soldier Vanessa Guillén went missing from the Fort Hood Army base near Killeen, Texas. In the early part of the search, the soldier's family demonstrated outside of the gates of Fort Hood, demanding more transparency into the investigation of her disappearance (Osbourne & Bradshaw, July 2, 2020). Family members reported that Vanessa had been sexually harassed prior to going missing (Diaz, July 1, 2020). On June 30, 2020, over two months after Vanessa disappeared, her body was located near the Leon River outside of Killeen. A fellow soldier, Aaron Robinson, fled Fort Hood and died by suicide as investigators attempted to question him about his role in Vanessa's murder (Bradshaw, July 6, 2020). Authorities believe Robinson killed Vanessa in the armory room at Fort Hood (Osbourne, July 13, 2020). In November 2022, Robinson's girlfriend, Cecily Aguilar, pled guilty to one count of accessory to murder after the fact and three counts of making a false statement. These pleas were related to her role in helping Robinson dispose of Vanessa's body, with the goal of preventing Robinson from being charged with the crime (U.S. Attorney's Office, 2022).

Vanessa's disappearance and death at Fort Hood ignited the viral #IAMVanessaGuillen campaign on social media, where service members shared their own experiences with sexual harassment and sexual assault. Given the enormous attention Vanessa's life and death received in the U.S. media, this report provides key themes present in the newspaper stories referencing Vanessa Guillén from April 22, 2020 to April 22, 2022 across several English-language newspapers in the U.S. The findings demonstrate messages/themes present in the framing of Vanessa's story.

Literature Review

Why the Media Portrayal of Crime Matters

Cultivation theorists argue that what people see in the mass media impacts their perceptions of the world (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). While most of the research on cultivation theory is applied to television, studies have shown that print news can also impact peoples' perceptions of reality (Arendt, 2010; Vergeer et al., 2000).

With cultivation theory in mind, it is important to understand what types of messages are being disseminated by the media and what consumers may glean from those messages. Vanessa's story reached mega-case status in the U.S.: Mega-cases are those that warrant a massive amount of media attention and become "socially, culturally, politically, and historically important" (Jewkes & Linnemann, 2018, p. 257). Vanessa's life and death brought massive attention to the armed forces and the issues within it, and her story was immortalized via the #IAMVanessaGuillen social media campaign. By analyzing news stories about Vanessa, the media, the public, and policymakers can better understand what messages were commonly consumed by people reading about her. Given how few people receive this level of press attention, it is important to consider why Vanessa's case reached mega-case status and what can be learned from the media's framing of her story.

Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault: Key Definitions

Sexual harassment and *sexual assault* are two forms of sexual harm. *Sexual harassment* is often described as "unwelcome sexual advances, requests, or other sexualized behavior that are pervasive enough to create a hostile working environment or that involve the threat/promise of employment-related punishments/rewards" (Stander & Thomsen, 2016, p. 20). *Sexual harassment* can include offensive comments about a person's body, requests for sexual activity/favors, or the depiction of pornographic materials in the workplace (Bell et al., 2014). The U.S. Department of Defense defines *sexual assault* as "intentional sexual contact, characterized by use of force, physical threat or abuse of authority or when the victim does not or cannot consent" (Sexual Assault Prevention and Response, n.d., para. 1). *Sexual assault* includes rape, sodomy, and unwanted touching and/or fondling. Consent is not given if a person is threatened or coerced into sexual contact or is asleep or unconscious (Sexual Assault Prevention and Response, n.d.).

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Sexual Harassment and Assault within the U.S. Military: A Brief Overview

Existing research shows that sexual harassment and sexual assault are common issues within the U.S. military (Bell et al., 2014), although prevalence rates vary depending on the reports examined. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2021) refers to sexual harassment and assault during military service as military sexual trauma, and found that about 33% of women and 2% of men reported military sexual trauma. Using data from a survey of 60,000 veterans, Barth and colleagues (2016) report that about 41% of women and 4% of men experienced military sexual trauma. A 2016 Department of Defense survey of active duty military members found that about 21% of women and 6% of men experienced a sexually hostile work environment in the past year (Davis et al., 2017). In a study of former military reservists, 60% of women reported sexual harassment and 13.1% reported sexual assault during their military service (Street et al., 2008). In the same study, about 27% of men reported sexual harassment and less than 2% reported sexual assault while they were in the service (Street et al., 2008). All of these studies underscore that sexual harassment and assault are prevalent issues within the U.S. military.

Importantly, sexual harassment and assault can negatively impact survivors'[1] lives and well-being. People who experience military sexual harm often must continue to work (and sometimes live) with their perpetrator, causing emotional distress (Dardis et al., 2018; Street et al., 2011). Moreover, military veterans who experience sexual harm have higher physical and mental health-related issues, sometimes decades after the harm occurred (Bell et al., 2014; Kimerling et al., 2007). Military sexual harassment and assault are also associated with an increased risk of suicidal ideation and attempts, although military sexual harm "is a single component of many factors related to increased suicide risk" (Livingston et al., 2022, p. 8). Survivors of sexual harm in the military may feel that the military does not have their well-being in mind and that they will be punished for reporting: Indeed, among 16 women who reported their experiences with military sexual trauma to military personnel, half reported perceived retaliation for the disclosure (Dardis et al., 2018). Within the military structure itself, sexual harm can decrease unit cohesion and morale (Thomas et al., 2021) and can negatively impact recruitment and retention (González-Prats, 2017).

[1] There is some debate over whether someone who experiences a crime should be called a "victim" or "survivor." The author has chosen to use the word "survivor" because it is less stigmatized than the word "victim" (see Boyle & Rogers, 2020; Dunn 2005 for more information). It is important to note, however, that some people who have experienced harm may identify with one of the words, neither of the words, or both terms (Boyle & Rogers, 2020).

Methods

For this project, I examined articles about Vanessa Guillén over a two-year period. To begin my search for articles, I used the ProQuest Global Newsstream database on the California State University, Sacramento library website. This database pulls from local and national newspapers and includes their print and online versions. I used the search term "Vanessa Guillén" (quotation marks included), and filtered the search to specifically include newspaper articles written in English and published between April 22, 2020 to April 22, 2022 within the U.S. I also limited the search to articles in which the "full text" was available. This search yielded 285 newspaper articles. After filtering out articles in Spanish, repeated articles (i.e., those that appeared in the dataset more than once), and those that were published somewhere outside of the U.S., the final dataset included 172 newspaper articles. These stories included Vanessa's full name at least once in the text of the story.

Inductive Qualitative Content Analysis

For this project, I used an inductive qualitative content analysis to examine the 172 articles. An inductive qualitative content analysis is led by the data—the researcher begins the process by reading the articles and noting which themes are present in the text without any preconceived notions about which themes will be present (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). In this case, I used MAXQDA, a qualitative coding software, to keep track of these codes/themes. In the first pass through the articles, dozens of different themes were noted, which is common using this type of open-coding procedure. In the second and subsequent reads through the articles, I further sorted the data into themes/codes. Over time, it became clear which themes were most common in news stories referencing Vanessa Guillén. In the Findings section below, I will share what some of the common themes were and provide examples from the articles' text.

Findings

The disappearance and death of Vanessa Guillén received enormous mainstream and social media attention, and several themes emerged from the newspaper articles surrounding her story on many different topics (e.g., sexual harassment, investigative failures, the firing of leaders at Fort Hood, mainstream and social media attention, lawmaker proposals, the graphic details surrounding her murder, etc.). For the sake of this CVI technical report, I focus on the prominent themes surrounding *sexual harassment (of Vanessa and of others)*, *retaliation*, and *a culture of violence at Fort Hood*.

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Vanessa's Experiences with Sexual Harassment

One of the most common themes in newspaper coverage surrounding Vanessa Guillén is that she experienced sexual harassment before her disappearance and murder. In the *Austin American-Statesman*, Osbourne (Sept. 17, 2020) wrote, "Her family maintains that Guillen was sexually harassed by one or more fellow soldiers at Fort Hood, including Spc. Aaron Robinson, who authorities believe killed Guillen while the two worked together in a Fort Hood weapons room the day she disappeared" (para. 6). Lupe Guillén, Vanessa's sister, was quoted in a different *Austin American-Statesman* story as saying, "'My sister Vanessa Guillen was sexual [sic] harassed, yet nothing was done....My sister is a human, too. She deserves respect. She deserves to be heard because, if this can happen to my sister, it can happen to anyone else'" (Osbourne & Bradshaw, July 2, 2020, para. 31).

For many months, Vanessa's family maintained that Vanessa was sexually harassed, even as the Army said there was no proof of those allegations (Osbourne, May 13, 2021). Importantly, Vanessa's demeanor had changed in the months before her death, as noted by her mother in a *USA Today* article:

Gloria Guillen said she saw her daughter's health progressively deteriorate over the months leading up to her disappearance, saying her normally muscular and vibrant daughter became thin and reserved. She said she begged her daughter to tell her what was wrong. The Guillen family said Vanessa told other soldiers at Fort Hood that she was being sexually harassed (Osbourne & Priest, July 22, 2020).

Eventually, the Army changed their official position. It was not until "more than a year later... that the Army confirmed Guillen was sexually harassed by a superior" (Osbourne, May 13, 2021, para. 13). According to a *USA Today* article, a U.S. Army report stated that Vanessa "'reported that she was sexually harassed on two occasions, and in both instances her supervisor failed to report the harassment, and other leaders failed to take appropriate action'" (Osbourne, April 30, 2021, para. 6).

Vanessa's Harassment was Not Isolated: Many Others Experience Sexual Harassment and/or Assault in the Military

Importantly, Vanessa's experiences with sexual harassment were often tied to stories about other people's experiences with sexual harassment and sexual assault. Put differently, across multiple articles, other people's experiences with sexual harm in the military were commonly depicted. In fact, Vanessa's case was frequently described as a catalyst for other people to speak out about their own victimization. As described in an *Austin American-Statesman* article, "[Vanessa's] family's sexual harassment allegations sparked the viral #IAmVanessaGuillen hashtag, by which hundreds shared stories of sexual assault and harassment within the military" (Osbourne, August 7, 2020, para. 24).

The article continues, "'Vanessa's story has served as a tipping point where survivors spoke out on social media and shared their own trauma'" (Osbourne, August 7, 2020, para. 25). Several articles across the two-year period illustrated how Vanessa's story allowed other survivors to share theirs.

Furthermore, some articles detailed specific (and sometimes graphic) depictions of sexual harm that other military personnel had faced. At Fort Hood, another soldier—Army Sgt. Elder Hernandez—died by suicide after allegedly experiencing unwanted touching by a superior (The *USA Today* Editorial Board, May 7, 2021). A *New Haven Register* article described the drugging and sexual assault of a Navy technician at the hands of three sailors and the sexual assault of a Marines Corps member by her platoon leader (McCarthy, Dec. 9, 2021). In a story in the *Des Moines Register*, a U.S. Army soldier alleged that she was sexually assaulted by a superior *after* she had reported him for sexual harassment (Mercado, Sept. 26, 2020). Throughout the articles, several instances of sexual harm were detailed.

Moreover, in a *Washington Post* article, Vanessa's killing is further described as a painful reminder of the culture of violence in the military, of which many people have been victimized: "For some women in uniform, [Vanessa's] case is emblematic of a military culture that they say has downplayed or ignored allegations of sexual harassment and assault and created an atmosphere that pressures men and women to keep accusations quiet" (Horton, July 8, 2020, para. 5). In the same article, an officer in the Air Force Reserve is quoted as saying, "'You know if it's not you, it's one of your peers who has experienced it....her murder is rare, but the experiences of sexual harassment and being afraid of reprisal - that's not unique'" (Horton, July 8, 2020, para. 6). A *Wall Street Journal* article noted that sexual harassment has tremendous impacts on survivors and results in a high turnover rate: "A Rand Corp. study concluded that sexual harassment was responsible for the 'premature loss' of roughly 16,000 service members within 28 months of being harassed" (Youssef & Lebold, Feb. 23, 2021, para. 15). In sum, it was clear from the news articles that Vanessa was not alone in her experiences of sexual harm.

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Retaliation

In conjunction with many of the sexual harassment/assault stories featured within the news articles, *retaliation* was described. Retaliation was often depicted as 1) a response to reporting sexual harm and/or 2) a key reason why survivors did not report the misconduct. Several articles described how Vanessa herself feared reporting sexual harassment due to concerns over retaliation (e.g., Bender, July 30, 2020; Mulcahy, Sept. 8, 2020). Concerns over retaliation were common for other soldiers at Fort Hood as well, as described in an *Austin American-Statesman* article: “Many soldiers did not report their personal experiences with sexual assault and harassment because they fear retaliation” (Osbourne, Dec. 9, 2021, para. 11). A *Chicago Tribune* article further illuminated how large of an issue retaliation is:

According to these reports, 64% of the women who reported their sexual assault said they faced retaliation. Even more concerning, 73% of the retaliation reports alleged that the retaliators were superiors. It’s no wonder that a vast majority of all cases go unreported. A staggering 76.1% of victims stated they did not report their assaults (Murphy, October 19, 2020, para. 6).

In a *Philadelphia Daily News* article, a former victim advocate in the Navy describes how women who report harm are treated: “It’s just never-ending nonsense and bulls- on that base. Nonstop retaliation and making the women out to be these Jezebels if they speak up” (Bender, July 30, 2020, para. 34). In another article, a U.S. Army soldier is described as reporting sexual misconduct and being treated horribly in the aftermath: The woman told the *Des Moines Register*, “You feel like a caged animal because the whole time you’re making complaints, thinking you’re going to be heard, but instead they’re constantly retaliating against you” (Mercado, Sept. 26, 2020, para. 19).

Culture of Violence at Fort Hood

Another common theme in newspaper articles about Vanessa Guillén is that Fort Hood, the base she was killed on, had a *culture of violence*. Vanessa’s “brutal” death, as described in an *Austin American-Statesman* article, “became a catalyst that exposed Fort Hood’s hidden reputation of violence and misconduct among soldiers, particularly sexual assault and sexual harassment” (Osbourne, April 18, 2021, para. 2). Indeed, many articles described Fort Hood as a dangerous and violent base. The installation was portrayed as having “the highest rates of violent crime in the U.S. Army” (Hauck & Osbourne, Nov. 5, 2020, para. 7), with “the most cases for sexual assault and harassment and murders for our [the U.S. Army’s] entire formation” (Mulcahy, Sept. 8, 2020, para. 10).

In the aftermath of Vanessa’s death, an Army investigation found a “‘permissive environment for sexual assault and sexual harassment,’ and numerous leaders on the base were relieved of their duties” as a result (Steinhauer, Jan. 26, 2021, para. 5).

While many of the news articles focused specifically on a culture of violence at Fort Hood, some also described how issues at Fort Hood mirrored similar issues at other military bases. As described in *The Texas Tribune*, “advocates for military sexual assault victims say the problem is bigger than just Fort Hood. They say the military creates a siloed environment allowing sexual harassment and sexual violence to occur, many times unnoticed and unreported” (Oxner, April 30, 2021, para. 9). In all, it was clear that Vanessa’s disappearance and murder exposed a culture of violence at Fort Hood, a culture that permeates beyond one singular base.

Discussion and Implications

Vanessa’s shocking disappearance and murder at Fort Hood at the hands of another soldier led to the viral #IAMVanessaGuillen social media campaign, which encouraged many military members to describe the sexual harm they experienced during their military service. Indeed, a couple of news articles noted that Vanessa’s disappearance initiated the military’s version of the #MeToo movement (Coronado, October 8, 2020; Horton, July 8, 2020), drawing attention to issues of sexual harassment and assault within the armed forces. Given the social and political significance of Vanessa’s story, it is important and timely to examine newspaper articles about her for key themes. According to cultivation theory, what people see in the media impacts their perceptions of the world (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), and Vanessa’s case is particularly important because of the tremendous amount of attention her story received.

Across newspaper articles about Vanessa, themes surrounding *sexual harassment (of Vanessa and of others)*, *retaliation*, and *a culture of violence at Fort Hood* were commonly depicted. Importantly, these themes painted a picture of the U.S. military as being permissive to sexual harm and unsafe for many members of the armed forces. Unfortunately, sexual harm continues to be a prevalent issue within the U.S. military (Absher, 2022; The Associated Press, 2022) and in many other workplaces (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission [EEOC], 2022). Moreover, some survivors of sexual harm are afraid to speak out due to retaliation (Dardis et al., 2018; Marín et al., 2021), a detail included in many of the articles about Vanessa Guillen and about military sexual harm broadly.

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Furthermore, many of the news articles implied that what happened to Vanessa was part and parcel of the larger issue of a permissive culture of violence at Fort Hood (and, by extension, the larger U.S. military).

The media portrayal of Vanessa's story seemed to follow a distinct outward trajectory. At the center of the story was Vanessa, a young woman who experienced sexual harassment at work, feared retaliation, and who was murdered by a fellow soldier. Her family was instrumental to fighting for coverage of her case. From there, the media focus moved outward and discussed other people's experiences with military sexual harm and concerns over retaliation. As the story progressed, Vanessa's life and death were used to illuminate larger structural issues at Fort Hood and within the military. Given that the media often use individual cases to simplify complex social issues (Jewkes & Linnemann, 2018), this media trajectory was not entirely surprising. In many ways, the death of Vanessa Guillen humanized and individualized the large-scale issues related to sexual harm within organizational structures. Essentially, Vanessa became the face of a complex social issue, and her story taught consumers about sexual harm, retaliation, and environments permissive to harm.

The media continues to be an important source of information for people about crime (Rader, 2023). In this particular case, Vanessa's story received a massive amount of local and national media attention—arguably because of the unusual nature of her disappearance and what her story revealed about violence in the workplace. Media personnel should continue to use their platform to teach consumers about complex social issues (Berns, 2009) such as gender-based violence, sexual violence, and sexual harassment. This messaging can help people learn about the issue and can place pressure on politicians to act (Yanovitzky, 2002). Moreover, the media should note that Vanessa Guillén—a Hispanic woman—is (and always was) newsworthy. Often, women and girls of color who are victimized receive less coverage than their White counterparts and are portrayed in a more negative light (Slakoff & Brennan, 2019; Slakoff & Brennan, 2023). Vanessa is worthy of this level of humanizing, sympathetic coverage, as are all victims/survivors.

Importantly, Vanessa Guillén's story changed the armed forces and led to important policy changes within the U.S. military. For the first time in the military's history, sexual harassment is now viewed as a standalone criminal offense within the Uniform Code of Military Justice (the military's laws; Absher, 2022; Hlad, 2022). Moreover, prosecutorial decision-making in cases of sexual harm in the military will change in the near future: Independent prosecutors, not commanders, will soon determine whether someone in the military will be prosecuted for a sex crime (Hlad, 2022; Myers, 2022).

Although these changes to the prosecutorial decision-making process may not be implemented fully for several more months (Absher, 2022), these amendments will hopefully help restore people's confidence in the military's reporting and investigative procedures. In the end, the military's goal should be to support survivors who have experienced harm and to reduce the number of victimizations that occur within its ranks. Moreover, policymakers should take note of how many people experience sexual harassment and sexual violence and should support victim assistance programs that provide support to survivors. Vanessa's story revealed how many survivors were struggling in the aftermath of a victimization—it is imperative that survivors have resources and support for their healing process.

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