

# **A Study of Postcolonial Representation of Sexual Violence Against Female International Students in Australian Newspapers**

## **ABSTRACT**

Sexual violence against female international students has received insufficient attention in academic research. This paper fills this void by analyzing how Australian newspaper articles, published from 2000 to 2019, portray sexual violence against these students through a critical framework informed by postcolonial feminist. The analysis reveals that the media tends to reinforce the idea of female international students as vulnerable and passive, reinforcing stereotypes through longstanding postcolonial tropes. Australian newspapers frequently portray them as ignorant, unhygienic, lacking credibility, or as exotic/sexual objects when covering sexual assault cases. Additionally, the media often invokes rape myths and engages in victim-blaming. Such representations in the newspaper may fail to offer a nuanced understanding of sexual violence experienced by female international students and downplay the importance of structural and environmental factors that contribute to this problem. The paper advocates for a change in media focus, urging great attention to structural and environmental factors while acknowledging the agency of the international students. A more nuanced and contextualized understanding of sexual violence against female international students is crucial for the developing effective prevention strategies that address the root causes of this issue.

**KEYWORDS** International students; Asian student; Sexual Assault; Vulnerability.  
Postcolonial representation

## Introduction

In this globalized era, studying abroad enables students to obtain degrees at prestigious universities, experience other countries and cultures, and learn new languages. This experience can easily translate into a competitive edge after graduation. Australia is the second most popular destination in the world for international students after Canada (Duffin, 2022). There have been significant increases in the number of international students going to Australia (DESE, 2021) since the 1990s, and in 2019 international student enrolments totaled 720,150. On average, international students represented 22% of enrolments at Australian universities in 2018 (USYD, 2020). More than half of all international student enrolments in Australia are from Asian countries: China (28%), India (15%), Nepal (7%), Vietnam (3.4%), Malaysia (3.2%), and South Korea (2.8%) (DESE, 2021). The proportion of males and females varies depending on nationality, sector, and broad field of education (AEI, 2011), but overall women account for 48.3% of international student enrolments.

Recent media reports of violence against international students in Australia generated widespread concern, but the experience of sexual assault among international students is rarely addressed in academic discourse in Australia and elsewhere. Sexual violence against female international students<sup>1</sup> is a crucial topic that deserves academic inquiry. However, both research and precise data on the sexual violence of international students is scarce in Australia and elsewhere. The currently available data in Australia is from a 2017 Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) report, which found that one in every 20 international students studying at an Australian university was raped or sexually assaulted in 2015 and 2016. The figure may be even higher (AHRC, 2017), taking into consideration the low rate of reporting to police and other authorities by international students (Lee et al. 2005, p. 178).

Particularly, there has been limited qualitative research on this topic because conducting in-depth interview research with victims/survivors of sexual violence presents ethical and practical challenges due to the sensitive and traumatic nature of the subject matter (Fireborn, 2017; van Wijk & Harrison, 2013). Firstly, the shame and stigma associated with the experience of sexual violence, along with the fear of being identified by their perpetrators, may

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<sup>1</sup> This paper primarily centers on female international students. Given that a significant proportion of international students in Australia originate from Asian countries, and much of the existing research on international students focuses on Asians, a considerable portion of this paper is dedicated to discussing Asian international students.

dissuade many victims from participating in research (Fileborn, 2017). Secondly, engaging in discussions about this sensitive topic with researchers might lead to retraumatization and emotional distress for the victims/survivors during the interviews (Fileborn, 2017).

This paper addresses this gap by analyzing how Australian news media frame sexual violence against these students using media content analysis of Australian newspaper articles published from 2000 to 2019. Engaging in qualitative analysis of media texts is useful for comprehending how the society perceives this topic. As a major institution that can influence social norms and public opinions, media plays a critical role in influencing, reinforcing, or modifying how the public responds to incidents of sexual violence or the extent to which people support prevention efforts. The way in which media represent sexual violence against these students might contribute to efforts to prevent sexual violence (Egen et al., 2020).

The analysis of the media data is informed by a critical framework that incorporates postcolonial feminist perspectives. Postcolonial feminists critique Western scholarship and media for reproducing colonial modes of representation of women from other cultures. This often involves othering, marginalizing, silencing, and depicting women as victims of ignorant, restrictive cultures and the victims of male control and tradition (Mohanty, 2003; Weedon, 2002). Given that a significant portion of female international students in Australia come from Asian countries such as China, India, Nepal, and Vietnam, this postcolonial feminist approach proves valuable for the analysis for this paper.

This paper first provides a critical overview of postcolonial feminist literature followed by an outline of the research methodology. It then presents an analysis of Australian media coverage of sexual violence against female international students. Finally, the paper concludes with future research suggestions and practical strategies.

### **Literature Review: Postcolonial Modes of Representation of Women from Other Cultures and International students**

A central argument of postcolonial feminist literature is that the West has historically portrayed women from other cultures as inferior, backward, ignorant in both media and academic discourse to necessitate the West's intervention and aid or justify invasion and exploitation (Weedon, 2002; Monhanty, 2003; Kotef, 2015; Kerner 2017). Kotef has succinctly described the function of the postcolonial depiction of non-Western women as:

Such images serve to justify wars, expansions, occupations, and the entrenchment of other hierarchical political orders. They also are used to turn our gaze elsewhere, directing our attention away from the modes of violence, exploitation, exclusion, and oppression that are taking place at the heart of Western society. (Kotef, 2015, p. 349)

This recurring colonial representation erases the actual history of “others” and their agency and activities, highlighting victimhood. These modes of representations are still prevalent in media and academic discourse. The saving of the “yellow lady” from their tyranny by “white” has a long history, for example, including in academic discourses in the West on migrant sex work (as discussed in Dalton & Jung, 2019). A study of Chinese international students living in Australia also illustrated that Australian media continuously produced discourses of “the assumed passivity” of this group and pictured them as socially isolated, consequently “needing some form of collective rescue” (Chen 2018, p. 27). Chen also argues that social isolation is understood as proof of this group’s “deficiency,” strengthening the perception of international students as “a source of the social problem” and as “objects needing to be controlled and managed” (Chen, 2018, p. 27). Similarly, othering or even demonizing international students has been prominent in Australian media framing international students as either a cultural threat or a social problem in need of a solution, with one report quoting a university academic calling them “pigs with low IQ,” “visa hunters,” and being involved in “industrial espionage” (Chen, 2018, p. 6)

Sexual objectification of women from other cultures in the western media has been another recurring theme in feminist literature (Chen, 2018; Dalton & Jung, 2019). This reflects a colonial legacy that regards women from other cultures, notably Asian women, as exotic and hypersexual (Chen, 2018; Dalton & Jung, 2019), as well as docile, and eager to please (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2004, pp. 9-10). These views, which originate from “orientalism,” are still in currency, as evident in the fetishization of Asian women or so-called “yellow fever” in the West (Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020). Some argue that the use of this term can dehumanize or infantilize Asian women by reducing them to mere sexual objects and normalizing sexual assault against Asian women (Chen 2018; Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020).

Postcolonial representation is not only confined to victims but also applies to the description of offenders. According to Serisier (2017), media attention focuses on violent crimes committed by “dangerous” strangers - broadly defined as poor men of color - and crimes committed against white and middle-class victims. These representations provide a distorted

image of sexual violence. Again, these representations vary significantly according to race and class. White and middle-class victims are more likely to receive sympathetic coverage, particularly if their offender is from a lower class or more marginal racial or ethnic background. This pattern of media reporting contributes to the ongoing stigma surrounding rape victimization and the reluctance of victims to speak publicly (Serisier, 2017). Similarly, Western media tend to depict the ideal victim as someone who is white, middle-class, educated, well-behaved, young, and attractive (De Benedictis et al., 2019). Young, white, middle-class women are typically perceived as respectful and capable of eliciting public support when they publicly identify their perpetrators (Salter, 2013).

Postcolonial feminists challenge the view that sees women from other cultures as lacking agency by stressing the need to understand that women in other cultures are subjects and agents in given historical and social contexts and to recognize differences and diversity among women cross the culture (race, sexual preference, class, dis/ability, and age) (Pande, 2015; Rye & Andrzejewska, 2010; Weedon, 2002). Studies of female Chinese international students demonstrated that the students exercised their agency as “individual life planners”, developing their best survival strategies rather than being “trapped in a passive victimhood” (Chen, 2018; Martin, 2022). This was despite their structurally disempowered position with limited social and cultural capital in a country they came to study (Chen, 2018, p. 3). For many female Chinese students, the decision to study overseas is, at least to some extent, "a risk management strategy to escape China's re-traditionalizing gender relations and the increasing gender inequalities in the Chinese labor market" (Chen, 2018, p. 49). As Pande has indicated in her research on arranged marriage among South Asian women, agency “takes various shapes and forms,” that can be “fit for purpose” to achieve what they want (2015, p. 183).

Insight from the previous research will provide frameworks for analyzing the collected media data in this paper.

### **Research Methodology: Media Content Analysis**

The influence of mass media has been well-researched, and many researchers have paid an increasing amount of attention to media content since the early 20th century (Macnamara, 2005). The media content analysis is primarily cantered around deciphering messages by studying 'texts' from various media including newspapers (Neuendorf, 2002). Qualitative content analysis of media has drawn criticism for its lack of reliability. For instance, achieving reliability can be problematic or even unattainable given that it relies on researchers'

interpretation of media texts (Macnamara, 2005, p. 6). Owing to its labor-intensive nature, researchers often opt to analyze small samples of media content (Macnamara, 2005). Nevertheless, many researchers have engaged in qualitative analysis of media texts to comprehend underlying meanings of the text and probable interpretations by audiences, which undeniably constitutes the ultimate objective when analyzing media content (Macnamara, 2005).

Feminist research (Collins 2011; De Benedictis et al. 2019) has long employed media content analysis to understand and explore how gender roles, relations, stereotypes, and power dynamics are portrayed in the media, and how media representations can contribute to the reinforcement of gender inequality. Feminist researchers also utilize media content analysis to promote more egalitarian/feminist messages (Döring & Mohseni, 2019) and to study the representation of sexual violence against women (Salter 2013; De Benedictis et al. 2019).

Keeping this methodological frame, the data collection for this study involves Australian newspaper articles from 2000 to 2019, retrieved from the news database, Factiva. Factiva is a widely recognized global news database and is used in academic research extensively. It provides a diverse range of news articles and media content from reputable sources worldwide, encompassing newspapers, magazines, trade journals, newswires, websites, and broadcast transcripts. Its notable strength lies in its vast historical archive of news articles dating back several decades, enabling researchers to conduct longitudinal studies and track trends over time. The database also offers sophisticated search capabilities, allowing researchers to effectively filter and refine their searches using various criteria, such as keywords, date ranges, source types, regions, and languages. For this study, eighteen keywords (see Table 1) were used for searches, along with a data range of 2000 to 2019, with source types focused on Australian newspapers (national and local), and a specific region (Australia) and language (English).

The search criteria consisted of eighteen sets of keywords as presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Factiva Key terms search result**

Key search terms	Number of articles
International students and rape	46

International students and sexual assault	54
Foreign students and rape	22
Foreign students and sexual assault	16
Asian students and rape	7
Asian students and sexual assault	7
Chinese students and rape	36
Chinese students and sexual assault	10
Korean students and rape	14
Korean students and sexual assault	7

The search terms: "Nepalese," "Vietnam," and "Malaysian" were run through the system but did not yield any relevant articles. The six nationalities selected as search terms for this research accounted for a substantial proportion of international students in Australia who originated from these Asian countries (DESE, 2021). The year 2000 was selected as a reference point because there was a significant rise (16%) in the number of international students over the previous year. (AEI, 2000). This increase was attributed to the recovery of Asian economies from the 1997 Asian Economic Crisis, which led to a sharp decline in international student numbers (AEI, 2000). The data included in this analysis goes up to December 2019, before the outbreak of COVID-19, which had a significant impact on the mobility of international students.

Out of the many search results, 54 retrieved articles were selected for content analysis. Duplicated articles and short articles lacking sufficient information were excluded from the analysis. As this study focuses on international students attending higher education institutions, only articles involving undergraduate and postgraduate students at universities, colleges, and technical and further education institutions (known in Australia as TAFE) were included. Furthermore, articles, where the international student was the offender rather than the victim, were eliminated from the sample.

As discussed earlier, qualitative content analysis of media texts is subjective and contingent on the researcher's interpretation. To address this, the analysis for this paper is guided by the literature review discussed in the previous section, focusing on themes such as the depiction of the students as ignorant, passive and vulnerable, "rape myths," "victim blaming," sexualized media reporting, and victim's agency. To explore the meanings and potential social impact, the content analysis focused on: 1) how the media represented victims /female international students, 2) how the media constructed the sexual violence experience 3) the choice of language and the types of details selected for reporting, and 4) whether or not the media framed sexual assault issues as individual or structural issues.

### **Research Findings: Othering, Marginalizing and Objectifying.**

Over two decades from 2000 to 2019, Australian newspaper reporting on the sexual victimization of female international students in Australia has focused on cases of homicide involving sexual assault, rather than on cases of sexual assault or sexual harassment only. These include the cases of Aiiia Maasarwe, a 21-year-old student from Israel who was killed in 2019, 24-year-old Indian student Tosha Thakkar (2011), 18-year-old Chinese student Liao Wei (2008), and 22-year-old Chinese student Jiao Dan (2007).

In line with previous research on media reporting of sexual violence (Sutherland et al., 2016), this research found that Australian news media failed to include various types of sexual violence against international students, instead presenting tragic individual incidents with unnecessarily graphic details. For example, reporting on Liao Wei's death described this 'rape and murder case' as a 'balcony plunge' and balcony horror' and sensationalized the incident using the headline 'Sex twist to couples' balcony plunge' (Robison, 2008). The reporting weakened the horrible nature of this crime by including unnecessary sensationalized details:

A knife-wielding intruder is believed to have forced two international students to perform sex acts before they fell naked onto concrete from their third-floor balcony in Waterloo. (Robinson, 2008)

When an offender is non-Australian, or Australian but from a culturally and ethnically different background, the media tends to include more detail about the offender, including family background, any criminal history, and more graphic descriptions of the incident being reported. For example, a series of reports on the 2011 rape and homicide of Indian student,



Tosha Thakkar highlighted that the offender, Daniel Stani-Reginald, was of Sri Lankan descent and that Stani-Reginald's father had previously murdered his mother:

The court heard that several psychiatrists examined Stani-Reginald throughout his extended criminal history. All but one found that while Stani-Reginald was disturbed, there was no clear evidence of a mental disorder or psychosis, even though as a child he had witnessed his father murder his mother. (Bibby, 2013)

The choice of language by the news media was insensitive and sensational, with excessively sexually explicit detail (Sutherland et al., 2016). On the other hand, if a perpetrator is Australian, their nationality is rarely revealed.

As most reporting involves homicides, survivor voices are missing. Cases of rape and sexual assault have few direct quotes from victims or survivors. Instead, the opinions of experts and advocates are frequently included in Australian print media.

#### *Repeating the postcolonial modes of representation*

The longitudinal analysis conducted in this paper demonstrates that Australian newspaper reporting has perpetuated postcolonial representations of female international students. The media have "othered" these students, silencing them and highlighting their perceived vulnerabilities based on gender, culture, social isolation, and language barriers. The portrayal of these students as "soft targets," "silent," "naive," "afraid," and "ashamed" reiterates stereotypes of women from other cultures, especially those from Asian countries, as weak, dependent, and easy targets for crimes.

In particular, media reporting on sexual violence against female international students focused on Asian students, representing them as more vulnerable than domestic students and international students from other countries.

[J]apanese women are vulnerable in Australia because they are not aware of the risks. The grieving Okuyamas want Japanese women to know about the risks to avoid a repeat of their daughter's death, saying, "because of cultural differences, what may be the common sense in Japan often is not recognized overseas." Sugiyama agrees. "Many incidents could be avoided if tourists were more careful. Some incidents are due to cultural gaps," he says. (Wynter, 2005)

This aligns with existing studies on sexual violence against international students, which are also based mostly on Asian students. All highlighted this group's vulnerability due to tradition, rigid gender roles, patriarchal social norms, collectivist culture, and social hierarchies (Chan, 2009; Nayak et al., 2003).

Furthermore, results suggested that the Australian media attributed victimization to the ignorance of international students. Some research suggests that definitions of sexual violence can vary significantly between cultural groups (Taylor & Putt, 2007). This can affect both sexual assault perpetrators' and victims' understanding of sexual assault. This means that international students from other cultural backgrounds may not define sexual assault in the way it is defined under Australian law:

When we learn the English language, nobody really teaches us the word “rape”, or what it means. It is a hard word to come to terms with. (Mohammed, 2017)

Lievore (2003) found that sexual assault is understood as necessarily comprising vaginal penetration in some cultures. In a survey of Asian students, many did not see “overt unwelcome physical contact and coercive sexuality” as forms of sexual harassment (Chan, 2009, p. 79). The newspaper reported that some students even viewed sexual assault as part of Australian culture:

Snr Const Giles said the defendant's actions were predatory, and the woman – who spoke little English – felt embarrassed about what happened, at first believing the man's behavior was part of Australian culture. (Iaria, 2007)

The analyzed media also stressed the international students' lack of language competency and understanding of Australian culture. It also highlighted their perception of sexual violence as a taboo subject that could bring dishonor to themselves and their families:

Ms Purintanawut said that in her home country of Thailand sexual assault and harassment were considered “a scar” on one's life that also tainted one's family. “If bad things happen in my life, it's going to be bad for my family as well if others know about it,” she said. (Marriner, 2016)

Some studies of Asian sexual violence victims suggested Asians experience higher levels of self-blame and suicidality, helplessness, shame, and embarrassment than Caucasian victims (Lee et al., 2005, pp. 179-180). Research suggests that in Asian society, rape was understood

as "a sexual matter" (Lee et al., 2005, p. 179) rather than a crime. The analyzed newspapers tended to reinforce these findings suggested in existing research.

“I felt ashamed ... I felt like it was my fault ... I think because of the way that sex is perceived here, he felt it was OK to do what he wants as it's a freer culture,” said Nair. (Jacks & Cook, 2016)

Cultural understandings of sexual violence could influence women's response to victimization, coping strategies, and post-victimization help-seeking behaviors (Bonistall, 2020). Existing literature highlighted the long-lasting impacts of sexual violence on women from other cultures. The students would give up studying and go back to their country after they experienced psychological difficulties such as "panic attacks' and "lived in the constant fear of men.” A student quoted by *Daily Mail Australia* (Flower, 2019) said of their life after sexual violence, “my personal life has been destroyed,” and “life is a shadow.” (Flower, 2019).

The Australian media has frequently reported that female international students are seen as having a lack of sex education in the newspaper.

Some international students are from countries where they have not had any sex education, and were talking about sex – let alone rape – is taboo. There are other concerns, too – a desire not to cause distress or shame to family back home. (Drevikovsky, 2019)

“I have spoken to students who were pregnant who didn't even know how they got pregnant, or why their stomach was swelling. There is a complete lack of very basic knowledge.” ...[T]hey thought that abortion was a form of contraception. (Jacks & Cook, 2016)

The same article reported that inadequate sex education among international students, particularly from Asian countries, has resulted in "poor sexual hygiene, unprotected sex, sexually transmitted diseases, and pregnancy" (Jacks & Cook, 2016). The use of expressions such as “sexual hygiene” and “diseases” stigmatize international students as unhygienic and as disease carriers or disease breeders.

The news media analyzed also used tropes that regarded women from other cultures as being not credible, or exotic when covering sexual violence cases against female international students. In the existing studies Asian women are also stereotyped as “passive, loyal, obedient

and sexually compliant, but also manipulative and promiscuous” (Lievore, 2003, p. 68). Their limited language skills are often perceived by police, judges, and lawyers as lacking intelligence and being without credibility (Lievore, 2003, p. 68). Research suggested that these women might not want to report crimes to the police and pursue legal redress because they fear not being believed or being blamed, losing support, losing custody of children, or being identified (Lievore, 2003, p. 67; Lievore, 2005, p. 105). This is evident in the reporting of sexual violence against female international students. For example:

“I went to police HQ in Roma Street, but the officer didn't take me seriously because I wasn't raped. He said he couldn't help me. The cab company didn't help us at all. The police got back to me just before I left the country to ask if I wanted to withdraw my complaint”. (Wynter, 2005)

Other results conveyed that the Australian media used the term Asian "fetish" to explain the sexual violence of Asian international students as the following example illustrates:

Tosha doesn't know that her neighbor is not long out of jail, that he's got a sexual fetish for Indian girls, that he's got a favored stomping ground for trying to rape women at knifepoint, and that he's busted a huge hole in a gyprock wall downstairs, so that he can slip in and out of the empty shop at night, unnoticed. (Callaghan, 2014)

An “Asian fetish” is defined as the sexualized objectification of the appearance of Asian women, which reflects resurrected postcolonial or oriental representations. Said’s seminal work (1995) shows how imperial and colonial hegemony has affected Western cultural discourse on the non-Western other. Women from non-Western culture in Australian news media are constructed as sexual objects, using recurring stereotypical, often negative, images and cliches such as:

Korean students at the University of Sydney have complained to their Student Representative Council that white men with Asian fetishes are deliberately targeting them. “Looking the way they look, there is an assumption by white men they'll be a certain kind of person, more submissive, more docile,” Sydney SRC international officer Hannah Elten said. (Marriner, 2016)

This kind of reporting lays bare the continuation of Western postcolonial constructions of othering and blaming and marginalizing minority groups in society, (in this case, female international students) as ignorant, helpless, unhygienic and exotic/sexual objects.

### *Reinforcing rape myths and victim blaming*

The results of the data analysis suggest that Australian news media often allude rape myths when reporting female international students' experiences of sexual violence, and to justify the actions of offenders. Rape myths are considered a specific set of attitudes and beliefs that contribute to shifting blame for sexual assault from perpetrators to victims (Iconis, 2008). Rape myths are understood as prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists. These myths include "women ask for it," "rapists are insane," and "only promiscuous women get raped" (Iconis, 2008, p. 47). Rape myths also define which behaviors are considered rape (Iconis 2008). The media frequently report offending men as being incapable of controlling sexual instincts, for example:

An Egyptian student found guilty of raping three women in Melbourne let "passion overcome reason." (Le, 2018)

Additionally, victim blaming was prevalent in media reporting, as illustrated below:

"If you had been sexually assaulted by the accused, it is an extraordinary situation that you would be dancing for nearly an hour and a half before breaking away with your friends," [the judge] said. (Spillett, 2011)

The same article described the assault as "a case of consensual sex that turned sour." "The article further reported that the allegations were devised to 'save face' with her friends" along with the judge asking, "why she had remained at the club after the alleged assault." (Spillett, 2011).

Existing studies also suggest that Asian students are more likely to hold the belief that rapists are 'strangers' (Lee et al., 2005, p. 190). This could lead both perpetrators and victims not to see sexual assault or rape perpetrated by acquaintances, friends, or intimate partners as 'real' rape (Lee et al. 2005, p. 191). Lee et al. also argued that Asian students were more likely to attribute responsibility to women for failing to prevent rape (2005, p. 191), which was clearly illustrated in media reporting:

Because your whole life, there's this other part of your culture that's been saying 'don't dress like that, don't behave like that, don't be Western like that or else that will happen to you,' so then when it does happen to you, you're like 'Oh well, it's my fault.' ('Afraid, Ashamed and Alone', 2018)

One woman, from Colombia, on Thursday, said she arrived in Australia in 2015 excited to learn English and "with a suitcase of dreams" ... But after Nafady raped her, she blamed herself for trusting him and going to his Windsor flat for help writing her resume ... "I thought I was going to die, and I felt dirty." (Le, 2018)

Many articles highlight comments about women's responsibility to not wear revealing clothes or to not go out alone at night, for example, to avoid sexual victimization or killings:

"I suggest to people, particularly females, [that] they shouldn't be alone in parks," Detective Inspector Hughes told ABC Radio. (Tuohy, 2019)

The consul's advert urges Japanese women "please be careful," avoid "geographically dangerous" areas, and avoid wearing clothes that "expose skin" such as tank tops and shorts. (Wynter, 2005)

The police cited in media reports also endorsed the rape myth of victim-blaming, such as "why she was out at night alone" and "she should be more careful." The police emphasized the responsibility of the victim to prevent this crime by saying that "some incidents are due to cultural gaps." (Wynter, 2005)

#### *Representing the agency of the victims/survivors*

The dismissal of the agency of women from other cultures, particularly for Asian women, is pronounced in academic discourse and the media. The Australian media has taken a paternalistic and blanket approach, accentuating vulnerability, and differences between domestic students and international students, and ignoring differences and cultural diversity among international students. While it is not necessarily the norm, the newspapers analyzed in this research *did* report instances of international students' demonstration of agency by actively seeking help and reporting to the police. For example:

"Remarkably, the woman – who Judge Baly described not as a victim but a "survivor"—convinced Rowe to walk with her back to Byron Bay, where she sought help at her accommodation. ...She had the courage and emotional strength to call upon her resources, including strength that she gained during her childhood, to steer the situation to one whereby she was able to get to a position of safety and raise the alarm. (Turner, 2019)

In some cases, not reporting sexual violence seems to be a strategic choice that the international student has made for their own safety and well-being. Time constraints, as international students are temporary migrants, also make it hard to seek justice in long-running legal procedures.

She said she did not pursue charges against her attacker because a lot of the evidence would have been missed as she did not report to the police immediately after the assault, and also her case "might take two to three years". ... She said she wanted to move on and live her life. "I can't visit the police every week or month in the two or three years. This type of 'revenge' only leads to opening the wound again and again. What I did was the best choice for my own mental well-being," Leu posted. (Han, 2018)

The mother of the 18-year-old Chinese student Liao, who was sexually assaulted and fell to her death from a balcony as she and her boyfriend sought to escape their attacker, said of her daughter and injured boyfriend's actions:

People might misunderstand and think they were not strong enough, but actually, they tried their best and both are brave children. (Marcus, 2008)

As a female international student from China commented in an interview in the documentary *Australia, Rape on Campus*, produced by *Al Jazeera*, female international students are not passive and ignorant victims but "life planners" forming survival strategies despite limited resources and in the face of structural disempowerment.

"We should be proud of ourselves," she says. "We should just stand up ... say I don't deserve this ... Stand up, reach for help ... We are survivors." ('Afraid, Ashamed and Alone', 2018)

## **Conclusion**

The longitudinal analysis conducted in this paper reveals that Australian newspaper reporting has repeated postcolonial representations of female international students and invoked rape myths and victim blaming. The media portrays these students as "other," effectively silencing their voices and emphasizing their perceived vulnerabilities based on factors like gender, culture, social isolation, and language barriers, especially in cases of sexual assault.

The portrayal of these students as "soft targets," "silent," "naive," "afraid," and "ashamed" reinforces stereotypes of women from other cultures, especially those from Asian countries, as weak, dependent, and easy targets for crimes. The news media analyzed also resorts to

longstanding postcolonial tropes such as being ignorant, unhygienic, not credible, or exotic/sexual objects when covering sexual assault cases against female international students. Such representations in the newspaper might fail to offer a nuanced understanding of sexual violence experienced by female international students in Australia. By attributing this group's vulnerability to their victimization, media reports may overlook structural factors such as racism, discrimination, and toxic university culture, including the absence of policies that safeguard international students and address issues of sexual violence on campus.

This paper further argues that Australian newspapers need to see female international students not only as victims but also as active agents making choices and crafting strategies to enhance their future. Therefore, qualitative research based on in-depth interviews becomes imperative to gain a comprehensive understanding of this issue and to develop relevant policies for a more effective solution. Moreover, it is essential to challenge the postcolonial modes of media representation by critically examining deep-rooted tropes and stereotypes in how the "other" is represented in Western media.

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