

Framing sexual violence



Master Thesis
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Acknowledgements

Where should I begin..... This Master thesis has had hiccups in the beginning, the middle and the end. The journey started with some misconceptions as to where a master's thesis ends and a PhD or doctorate begins. Thanks to the feedback of my thesis supervisor, Alana, I was able to make my research question smaller. During this process, I ended up researching how and what frames are used by Dutch media when talking about sexual violence during the 7th of October 2023 attack by Hamas, but that was after a long journey already.

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Abstract

This thesis examines how four Dutch newspapers frame the alleged sexual violence by Hamas during the attack against Israel on the 7th of October 2023, over six months. In this study, the use of media frames is examined, including sexual violence, rape, terrorism, and the victimisation of Israelis, to justify Israel's subsequent military actions and the humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip. Initial reports, such as one by the New York Times, claimed widespread sexual violence during the attack but were later critiqued. A UN report described preliminary findings and limitations on their research into conduct of sexual violence during the attack.

This research investigates how these frames differ across the four different Dutch newspapers – *De Telegraaf*, *De Volkskrant*, *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, and *Trouw* – and before and since the UN report. The analysis reveals that, while all newspapers emphasized the terroristic nature of Hamas and the victimization of Israelis, their focus varies. The thesis concludes that these media frames contribute to the dehumanization of Hamas, contributing to a narrative that justifies Israeli military action in the Gaza Strip.

Abbreviation list

CRSV	Conflict-Related Sexual Violence
EU	European Union
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICT	International Criminal Tribunal
ICTR	International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda
OHCHR	United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organisation
UN	United Nations
US	United States of America

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	Page 2
Abstract	Page 3
Abbreviation list	Page 4
Table of Contents	Page 5
Introduction	Page 6
Literature Review	Page 11
Case study	Page 19
Methodology	Page 26
Results	Page 33
Discussion and conclusion	Page 41
Bibliography	Page 46
List of Figures	Page 53

1. Introduction

On the 7th of October, 2023, Hamas carried out a large-scale attack on Israel, resulting in widespread violence and casualties on the Israeli side during the attack, and in the Gaza Strip since the attack. Among the accusations directed against Hamas for their wrongdoings during this attack are allegations of sexual violence and rape against Israeli women. The first media article to raise these allegations was “Screams Without Words”: How Hamas Weaponized Sexual Violence on Oct. 7” (Schwartz & Sella, 2023), which brought attention to Hamas’ apparent use of sexual violence and rape as a weapon of war, sparking international outrage. Subsequent media outlets, such as The New York Times and the BBC, further amplified these claims. However, these reports also raised ethical questions. Critics, such as Heidi Matthews and Tanya Serisier (2024), challenged the lack of immediate public testimonies from victims of this alleged sexual violence, suggesting that these allegations of Hamas committing sexual violence and acts of rape against Israeli women have been shaped or framed to fit broader political narratives. This controversy underscores the need to carefully examine how claims of sexual violence and rape in times of conflict are reported, framed, and understood.

Since the 7th of October, different narratives have served as powerful framing tools, rallying domestic and international support for the Israeli case and escalating the conflict against Palestine, Gaza, and Hamas. For example through the use of atrocity stories – emotive accounts of extreme violence, such as systemic sexual violence and rape or attack on children – about systemic rape and necrophilia, or stories of beheaded babies (Gessen, 2024; Wilcox, 1940). This is elucidated by Israeli government officials, such as the Israeli Heritage Minister Amihai Eliyahu and the Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant, who referred to Palestinians as “human animals” and “monsters” (Khan & Tinua, 2024), furthering a dehumanising narrative which can justify harsh military responses, as is seen in the Gaza Strip and other parts of Palestine (Kiper et al., 2019; Picard, 1991). This is important because dehumanising speech and atrocity stories have long been used to invoke outrage and justify non-humanitarian countermeasures (Altheide, 2006; Wilcox, 1940).

This paper focuses on exploring how narratives of sexual violence in the 7th of October, 2023 attack are framed in four different Dutch newspapers, especially when these narratives intersect with possible justifications for military action.

1.1 Political context

On the 7th of October 2023, Hamas carried out an attack on Israel, resulting in the deaths of approximately 1,200 people and the capture of some 250 hostages by Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups (BBC, 2024b). In response, Israel imposed a blockade on the Gaza Strip, cutting off essential humanitarian aid such as fuel and water, and bombing the Gaza Strip, intensifying the humanitarian crisis for the Palestinians living there, and further intensifying regional and international tensions (M. S. Khan & Tinua, 2024). To give an idea of the intensity of the bombings, in the first week after the 7th of October attack, Israel dropped 6000 bombs in Gaza, which nearly matches the US total of dropped bombs in Afghanistan in one year (Kazanci, 2023).

On the 4th of March 2024, the UN published a report on sexual violence in Israel-Palestine during and since the attack. It stated that there are “reasonable grounds to believe that conflict-

related sexual violence occurred” during the attack on the 7th of October 2023, though without identifying specific perpetrators (UN, 2024a). The Israeli government used the attack on the 7th of October to justify its ongoing military actions in Palestine, Lebanon and the broader Middle East. Given that these events form a further justification according to Israel for their ongoing racial segregation and apartheid policies (Amnesty International, 2024), which combined with the current military force and arbitrary violence might very constitute genocide as alleged by several countries, raises the question for the author on how Dutch newspapers report these issues.

As part of the European Union, the Netherlands has maintained support for Israel, similarly to the EU. However, the stance of the EU supporting Israel has attracted criticism, particularly from nations in the Global South, due to the EU’s refusal to condemn Israel’s counter-actions in Gaza. The Netherlands, in particular, has not called for a ceasefire or publicly condemned Israel’s military actions (Borell, 2023; Tardy, 2024; de Telegraaf, 2024). The Netherlands has a clear political line regarding Israel-Palestine. Since a resolution from Kees van der Staaij (*Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij*) in 2021, the Netherlands have abstained from voting in the UN General Assembly on matters regarding Israel-Palestine (Van der Staaij et al., 2021). To give an example, in September 2024, during the tenth emergency special session of the UN where there was a vote to upgrade Palestine’s rights at the United Nations as an observer State, the Netherlands was one of the only European countries to abstain from voting. Showing a different political line from similar European countries such as the Nordic countries (Finland, Iceland, Denmark), the Benelux (Belgium and Luxembourg), and even countries such as France and Spain (United Nations, 2024). Moreover, the Netherlands currently also have a stake in important international organisations and their work in the region. With the envoys of the Secretary-General of the United Nations to both Gaza and Lebanon, and the secretary-general of the North-Atlantic Treaty Organisation being Dutch.

1.2 Research Objective and Research Question

The goal of this thesis is to examine how narratives of sexual violence and rape during times of conflict are framed in Dutch newspapers, with a focus on how these narratives potentially contribute to justifications for military violence. I have chosen to focus on four Dutch newspapers - *De Telegraaf*, *de Volkskrant*, *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, and *Trouw* – and analyse their coverage of the Hamas attack on the 7th of October, 2023, particularly in relation to reports of sexual violence and rape because the current debate about the Israel-Palestinian conflict and the humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip is highly polarised in the Netherlands, both in the political sphere and among the general public, which has caused for a total of over 100 resolutions, parliamentary questions, and amendments in the Dutch parliament, and 109 letters from the government since (TweedeKamer.nl, 2024). Different protests and demonstrations since the attack on the 7th of October, 2023 and the following Israeli response exemplify the polarisation in society, where 50% of Dutch society wants the government to be more critical towards Israel, while the other half doesn’t have either a strong opinion on the matter, agrees with the current stance or wants them to be less critical (Kanne & van de Koppel, 2024).

This thesis will explore how journalistic narratives about sexual violence and rape during conflicts, and more specifically in the context of the Israel-Palestine conflict since the 7th of October attack, 2023, can be used to justify military action and identify recurring trends or framing patterns within these narratives.

For this, I will try to answer the following research (sub-)question(s):

How are stories of sexual violence and (wartime) rape framed in the context of the Hamas attack on the 7th of October, 2023, across four Dutch newspapers (*De Telegraaf*, *De Volkskrant*, *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, and *Trouw*), and to what extent do these frames contribute to justifying military violence, focusing on articles published in the first six months following the attack?

1. What frames are employed in the coverage of sexual violence and rape during the 7th of October, 2023, Hamas attack across the four Dutch newspapers?
2. What patterns can be found in the coverage of stories about sexual violence and rape during the 7th of October, 2023, Hamas attack across the four Dutch newspapers?
3. How do the identified patterns in the coverage of sexual violence and rape during the 7th of October, 2023 Hamas attack align with propagandistic strategies aimed at justifying military violence?
4. How do the used frames and patterns differ between *De Telegraaf*, *De Volkskrant*, *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, and *Trouw*?

Answering these different sub-questions will facilitate a comprehensive analysis of how different Dutch newspapers frame the allegations of sexual violence by Hamas during the attack on the 7th of October 2023.

1.3 Societal relevance

“Discourse is about the world as we experience it, and discourse helps to create our experimental world” (Johnstone, 2008, p. 187). In the volatile context of Israel-Palestine and the Hamas attack on the 7th of October, it is crucial to critically assess allegations and reports, given their potential to justify military actions that directly affect the Palestinian people living in the Gaza Strip. This research focuses on one aspect of these allegations or ‘atrocity stories’ – the framing of allegations of sexual violence by Hamas on the 7th of October 2023 in four Dutch newspapers – as a form of propaganda. Investigating how these stories are portrayed in the media is important due to the media’s significant influence on public opinion and national policy (Ahmad, 2023). This research underscores the necessity of analysing media narratives, particularly considering geopolitical dynamics between the West and Israel.

With the Global West (the EU and the US), voicing strong opinions on the 7th of October 2023 attack and its aftermath, the current situation in Israel-Palestine has become a focal point within international politics and geopolitics. U.S. ambassador Thomas-Greenfield declared an ‘ironclad’ support for Israel’s security and its right to self-defence, highlighting the significant political stakes involved (memo, 2023), and a UN vote on giving Palestinian membership to the General Assembly was vetoed by the US in the security council (United Nations, 2024). The European Union has also faced international condemnation, especially from the Global

South, for its perceived double standards regarding international law, as seen in its contrasting responses between Ukraine and the conflict in Israel-Palestine (Borell, 2023).

Jeremy Scahill (2024) argues that Israel employs certain frames and narratives to legitimise its actions against Palestine, such as stories about systemic rape, necrophilia and beheaded babies (Scahill, 2024). The military actions and blockade of humanitarian aid, Israel has imposed, have resulted in a humanitarian crisis in Gaza, with over 46 thousand Palestinians killed in the war, and an estimated of over 18 thousand Palestinian deaths due to traumatic injuries of the war as of the 10th of January, 2025 (Fick, 2025). Gaza, already a densely populated area, faces an unprecedented humanitarian crisis (BBC, 2024a). Nevertheless, aid organisations, such as the UNRWA, are being hindered by Israel in their work to aid, and Israel has even prohibited the UNRWA from working within Israeli territory, claiming they are (BBC, 2023; Chacar et al., 2023; tagesschau, 2024).

Currently, a genocide case against Israel is under consideration by the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which has issued an interim ruling for Israel to prevent genocidal acts (Lysaght, 2024). The otherwise non-accepted use of force which can be justified with the use of dehumanising speech, hate speech and other tools of propaganda, can be seen now. Genocide is one of the worst acts prohibited by international law, but what we can see now from some countries, such as the Netherlands, is that they do not condemn it accordingly.

By examining the framing of sexual violence allegations in Dutch newspapers, this thesis aims to contribute to a broader understanding of how media can be utilised as a tool for propaganda, potentially legitimising actions that exacerbate humanitarian crises. This critical analysis is necessary for fostering informed public discourse and ensuring that the media is held accountable for its impact on international conflicts and national policy.

1.4 Scientific relevance

About the research topic of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), “there is considerably much more research on the causes of CRSV than on its consequences”(Koos, 2015, p. 22). In other words, the existing research on CRSV focuses more on the question of why people commit acts of sexual violence, such as the idea that it is either because of lust or the rapist being evil, less so than what happens afterwards (Koos, 2015; MacKenzie, 2023). And even when focusing on the consequences, most research is focused on the consequences for the victims (Koos, 2015). As this thesis focuses on the possible geopolitical consequences of media articles writing about CRSV, the amount of research is even less. One of the books that does look at CRSV in combination with media analysis is the book “Good soldiers don’t rape: The stories we tell about military sexual violence” by Megan MacKenzie (2023). Her research provides insights into how myths and narratives surrounding military cultures affect the understanding and handling of sexual violence by military personnel. As the title suggests, there is a myth that good soldiers do not commit acts of sexual violence or rape, which then would make the opposite, that it is only evil soldiers who rape, also true. One of the suggestions Megan MacKenzie (2023) makes for further research into policy and media studies. Assessing how the

media responses to CRSV and how this shapes the public's understanding of the conflict (MacKenzie, 2023).

1.5.1 Research gap in the context of the Israel-Palestine conflict and Dutch media

Previous studies have examined different aspects of sexual violence, media framing, and justifications of violence, but none have combined these bodies of literature within the specific context of the Israel-Palestine conflict, especially not with a focus on the 7th of October 2023 attack, or the current Dutch media landscape. Israel-Palestine is often absent from international reports and scholarly articles on the topics of sexual violence and rape in conflict situations (Medien, 2021). The incorporation of a Dutch context is relevant, as it provides a different perspective on how stories on sexual violence are framed in a Western European country, contributing to a deeper understanding of the interplay between media and public policy in the context of the Netherlands. However, Dutch media portrayals of sexual violence and rape (in times of conflict) have mostly been studied from a historical perspective, either during the Spanish occupation or the end of the 19th century/ beginning of the 20th century (Clare Wilkinson, 2022; Pipkin, 2009). Even though the research topic is centuries apart, a similarity can be found between the articles from Amanda Pipkin (2009) and Carlos Koos (2005), with both of them depicting soldier rapists as evil or devils. However, whether this similarity can still be seen in contemporary Dutch media reports is unknown.

As this thesis looks at how media framing can also influence a country's public policy, the Dutch context is especially relevant now the former Dutch prime minister is the new secretary general of NATO. Possibly explaining the Dutch public's view within this geopolitical setting.

1.5.2 Role of justification of violence and propaganda

Another aspect of this research delves into the role of justification of violence and propaganda, particularly looking at the role that sexuality and gender play in bolstering war propaganda. This part draws from different bodies of literature from propaganda studies and media studies. Previous research has examined similar themes in other conflict settings to contextualise this. Nancy Jabra (2006) has conducted research into the use of propaganda to justify Western violence in the Middle East in the context of the War on Terror, where the US conducted a military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, no such research currently exists in the context of the 7th of October 2023 attack. Mishal Khan and Alu Tacon Tinua (2024) have researched how dehumanising speech about Hamas and the Palestinians has been used since the attack on the 7th of October 2023 to dehumanise the enemy, and how healthcare professionals “continue to justify violence against civilians” (Khan & Tinua, 2024). This shows that, even though the attack happened less than a year ago, other researchers also felt the need to research topics of dehumanisation and frames to justify violence. However, this wasn't in the context of (Dutch) media frames or sexual violence, which means this thesis can shed light on a new point of view within the debate.

2. Literature Review

This literature review examines the intersection of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), wartime rape, and propaganda, analysing how media narratives surrounding these crimes are constructed and weaponised in conflict settings. CRSV and rape are not only grave human rights violations but are also strategically employed during times of war to serve political, military, and ideological purposes. By examining these crimes from an interdisciplinary perspective – law, sociology, media studies, and gender studies – this chapter argues that stories about CRSV and rape do more than expose these atrocities. They also function as tools of propaganda that shape public perceptions, justify violence and retaliation, and dehumanise perceived aggressors through strategies of othering and framing.

This chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section focuses on CRSV and (wartime) rape, distinguishing them from a legal standpoint. The second section examines how narratives about CRSV and wartime rape are framed in the media, analysing the use of propagating messaging strategies to foster in-group solidarity and diminish empathy for the out-group.

2.1 War & sexual violence

To start, this chapter will delve deeper into (conflict-related) sexual violence (CRSV), and (wartime) rape. Exploring the existing literature about CRSV and (wartime) rape. CRSV and rape are not only viewed as grave violations of human rights but also as strategic tools used during conflicts. By examining these crimes from various disciplines – law, sociology, and gender studies – this chapter argues that stories about CRSV and rape are not only considered crimes against humanity in war but also serve as strategic instruments that dehumanise the perpetrator, manipulating public perception to legitimise violence against the perpetrators, by using strategies of dehumanisation and “othering”. First, this chapter will explore the definitions which have been used throughout time to talk about CRSV and rape, secondly, the distinction between these two concepts will be discussed from a legal point of view, arguing that while both CRSV and rape are atrocious, there is a hierarchy between the two. Lastly, the dehumanisation and othering of the group associated with the perpetrators of CRSV and/or rape will be explored.

To clearly define sexual violence, this paper distinguishes between sexual violence, gender-based violence (GBV) and (wartime) rape. As explained by the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, gender-based violence is any harmful act directed against an individual or group based on their gender (UNHRC, 2014). Sexual violence, a subset of GBV, encompasses acts of a sexual nature against women. This includes, amongst others: sexual abuse; forced pregnancy; sterilisation; abortion, and prostitution (UNHRC, 2014). As such, sexual violence serves as an umbrella term that encompasses various forms of sexual harm, not including rape.

Since the 1980s, the discourse on sexual violence, GBV, and rape has evolved, as reflected in societal debates. Scholars have employed various definitions, each contributing to the broader understanding of rape. Diana Russel (1975) provided one of the earliest academic definitions of rape, describing it as “an intercourse imposed on a female against her wishes where her wishes are known to the rapist or where she expresses her wishes forthrightly, verbally, and/or

physically”. This definition underscored the importance of the victim’s explicit expression of non-consent while focusing solely on women as potential victims of rape. In 1987, Catharine MacKinnon, a prominent radical feminist, expanded the conversation about rape by stating: “Politically, I call it rape whenever a woman has sex and feels violated” (MacKinnon, 1987). A claim that emphasises the subjective experience of the (female) victims.

More recently, in 2017, Gabriele Griffin defined rape in the Oxford Dictionary for Gender Studies as “unwanted sexual intercourse involving penetration with body parts or objects, imposed on someone through violence or the threat of violence” (Griffin, 2017). This definition is notable for its inclusivity, recognising various forms of penetration and a broader spectrum of coercion.

These definitions illustrate an evolving understanding of rape. Early definitions focused on explicit non-consent, later definitions incorporated broader contexts of coercion and violence and inclusivity toward defining the victim.

For this thesis, the key elements from these definitions include:

1. Intercourse as penetration, either with body parts or objects
2. The act is unwanted
3. Imposition through violence or the threat of violence
4. Victims do not necessarily have to express their wishes forthrightly

Given that this thesis focuses on CRSV within the context of war amid the longstanding Israel-Palestine conflict, it is important to understand the different definitions and key elements that this thesis uses when talking about rape. However, some points are still missing from the existing literature. First, the literature mostly focuses on women as the victims of sexual violence and rape. When talking about CRSV and rape when focussing on men, the literature mostly talks about the causes, or why they rape. Where perpetrators are either lustful or evil (Koo, 2015). Secondly, the literature rarely mentions rape or sexual violence conducted against men. Even though this also happens, one of the more recent examples is the sexual abuse of a Palestinian man in Israeli detention (UN, 2024b). This suggests that also in the literature on sexual violence and rape, there is a tendency to focus on women as victims and men as aggressors (Aaldering & Van Der Pas, 2020; Wiles et al., 1995).

Another key point missing in the literature is the difference between rape in times of peace, and in times of war. Wartime rape is defined by the Oxford Dictionary of Gender Studies as follows:

“[It is a] Strategy used at times of conflict and war to terrorise enemy populations by sexually assaulting women, children, and sometimes men as a way of humiliating the enemy, disrupting communities through impregnating and, in honour cultures, dishonouring women and therefore their families, sometimes forcing a change in their ethnic composition” (Griffin, 2017).

This strategic use of wartime rape, mentioned in the definition, contrasts sharply with peacetime rape, as it is the systematic and planned use of rape as a weapon of terror. For this reason, it is important to have a look at the legal differences between the act of CRSV and wartime rape.

2.1.1 1998 Rome Statute and the legal distinctions between sexual violence and rape

This thesis makes a distinction between sexual violence and rape in its use as an atrocity story for two primary reasons. Arguing that there is a hierarchy in the level of atrociousness between sexual violence and rape. Both in the acts themselves, their legal definitions, and how they are perceived when written about in media articles.

A significant milestone occurred in 1998 when the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) defined rape as “a physical invasion of a sexual nature, committed on a person under circumstances which are coercive” (ICTR, 1998). This was significant because this was the first instance of an International Criminal Tribunal (ICT) defining rape. In that same year the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) was written. Article 7.1g states that the act of “rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization, or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity” (Rome Statute, 1998), are seen as crimes against humanity when they are “committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack” (Rome Statute, 1998). Arguing that all crimes against humanity are atrocious, article 7 of the Rome Statute creates a certain hierarchy between different atrocities. Simply between the ones that are mentioned, such as (for example) murder, enslavement, torture, and rape, and atrocious acts which aren't mentioned, such as abuse or when an act is individual, not part of a widespread attack against an entire population. But also between the acts of CRSV and rape. As article 7.1g mentions, only acts of sexual violence of comparable gravity to rape are seen as crimes against humanity. This means that the act of rape has more legal gravity than an act of sexual assault where no penetration has occurred.

When examining the hierarchy between sexual violence and rape, particularly in how they are perceived, it is important to consider how narratives of dehumanisation and othering shape public discourse. Othering is when a group is represented as being different, for instance, good guys versus bad guys; the hero against the villain. This is defined as Manichaeism (Feuerstein & Mandelzis, 2017). Dehumanisation, on the other hand, involves portraying a group as subhuman – depicting them as beasts or monsters (Picard, 1991).

This dynamic is exemplified in Tamara Tompkins's (1994) argument that rapists should be treated as “less than beasts” (Tompkins, 1994, p. 890). This language highlights the dehumanisation of individuals who commit rape, framing rape as not merely an act of violence but as an act that defies the boundaries of human behaviour, casting perpetrators as monstrous and fundamentally evil. While this framing emphasises the terrible nature of rape, it also contributes to a moral dichotomy in which rapists, and by extension their communities, are portrayed as irredeemably immoral (MacKenzie, 2023). Which justifies violent responses, and creates a broader narrative of inherently evil rapists, simplifying often more complex realities. Reducing entire groups as subhumans or monsters. By framing the “other” as subhuman and inherently bad, a situation is created where violence against them is justified (Gert, 1969; Jowett & O'Donnell, 2015).

These narratives of othering and dehumanisation risk oversimplification by associating acts of rape exclusively with the enemy, ignoring its prevalence across all layers of society. For

example, the Abu Ghraib prison scandal revealed that US soldiers – who are otherwise widely perceived in Western society as representing the ‘good’ side of the conflict – committed acts of rape and sexual violence against prisoners (Freedman et al., 2005; MacKenzie, 2023; Smith & Dionisopoulos, 2008). This example demonstrates how rape and sexual violence are not limited to the actions of a dehumanised ‘other’ but can also involve individuals who are otherwise regarded as morally ‘good’ by the public. Despite the severity of the violations in the Abu Ghraib prison, the US military maintained its broader image as a force for good, partially through its framing of the Abu Ghraib events as the actions of a few rogue individuals rather than a reflection of systemic issues within its military, a frame which was later picked up by western media outlets (Bennett et al., 2006; Freedman et al., 2005; Porpora et al., 2010; Smith & Dionisopoulos, 2008).

To ‘frame’ an issue is to place it within language and symbolism, allowing it to resonate with the intended audience and spark collective action. “A frame operates to select and highlight some features of reality and obscure others in a way that tells a consistent story about problems, their causes, moral implications, and remedies” (Lavie-Dinur et al., 2015).

This example of frames employed during the Abu Ghraib prison scandal shows a selective framing, reflecting a broader mechanism where ‘our soldiers’ are seen as inherently good, while the ‘other’ or enemy soldiers are seen as inherently ‘evil’, regardless of whether their actions can be similar in nature (MacKenzie, 2023). Showcasing a system in which atrocities committed by ‘us’ are forgiven or looked over, whereas atrocious actions of the ‘other’ are frowned upon and seen as a legitimate reason to dehumanise them and justify a violent response.

2.2 propaganda as a tool for justifying violence

Building on the previous argument that stories about CRSV and wartime rape can be used as strategic instruments to manipulate public perceptions to legitimise violence against the perpetrator, this section will delve deeper into the mechanisms that enable this justification. I will start by explaining some definitions and concepts, such as propaganda, justification, framing, and hate speech. After the current status of these concepts in academic literature is discussed, this second part of the literature review argues that when writing about atrocious acts such as CRSV and wartime rape, media frames these issues in a way which creates an “us versus them” dichotomy, and employ dehumanisation strategies to foster in-group solidarity while reducing empathy for the out-group, thereby normalising and justifying violence against perceived enemies.

The word propaganda was originally used in the context of religious conversion. It is derived from the Latin phrase *propaganda fide*, meaning ‘propagate the faith’. Nowadays, the word is used in many other contexts and has developed a negative connotation, primarily due to its use during the First World War because of its association with totalitarian states and fears of manipulative media. Due to its negative connotation, the term is rarely used, and more ambiguous terms, such as strategic communication and psychological operations, are used. Yet, regardless of the name, it is still used by (non)governmental organisations, intended to change attitudes, beliefs, values, or the actions of individuals (Piehler, 2013).

Propaganda can be defined as “a form of communication that attempts to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist” (Jowett & O’Donnell, 2015). In that sense, it’s similar to acts of persuasion. The main difference is that while “propaganda uses images, slogans, symbols and falsehoods that resonate with prejudices and emotions for persuasion” (Oberschall, 2012), persuasion uses different techniques, such as stereotyping, generalisation, and repetition. In other words, propagating messages use falsehoods and lies to achieve and justify their goal, which persuading messages do not. The use of falsehoods and lies can be through different manners, such as a selective presentation of facts and figures, deliberate mischaracterisation of events and individuals to fabrication and lies (Oberschall, 2012). Since propagating messages can justify otherwise non-justifiable violence towards a chosen group, it is important to define what is meant when talking about justification.

Justification depends on reason. As it is irrational to desire death, pain, disability, or loss of freedom, opportunity, or pleasure, someone would need a legitimate reason to desire otherwise (Gert, 1969). In other words, propagating messages can also be seen as giving reason to groups or individuals to want an otherwise irrational desire, such as inflicting pain on others/ to be inflicted on others. However, propagating messages don’t only influence internal behaviour, but can also be used to manipulate external behaviour like fighting, or agreeing to a fight being fought, for a certain cause (Jowett & O’Donnell, 2015).

Propagandistic messages have several characteristics (Piehler, 2013). These are:

1. “deliberateness”
2. the presentation of only one side of an issue;
3. the exclusion of arguments that support contrary positions;
4. the discouragement of evidence-based evaluation”.

One of the gravest forms of propaganda is hate speech. "Hate speech is one of the gravest tools used in the incitement to commit mass atrocities and genocide" (Faustin, 2016). According to the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers and the American Bar Association, hate speech has several characteristics.

1. It is an expression used to spread, incite, promote, or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, homophobia, or other forms of hatred based on intolerance.
2. Its expressions are abusive, insulting, intimidating, or harassing.

Hate speech has several components, but a red line is that victims of violence are described as subhuman, where accusations are presented in a mirror, and where euphemisms and hateful rhetoric are used (Faustin, 2016). It has three components.

1. “The target group is negatively stereotyped as different, not deserving the protection and rights of life, liberty and property accorded to humans”
2. The targets are characterised as a threat to the survival and well-being of one’s ethnic group;
3. there is advocacy for an eliminationist solution to the threat (Oberschall, 2012).

However, “one of the most time-honoured propaganda devices to mobilise public animosity against the enemy and to justify military action is the atrocity story” (Wilcox, 1940). Atrocity stories, as the term suggests, are stories and narratives centred around acts of atrocities, such as torture, mass violence, or sexual violence (Wilcox, 1940). These stories and narratives usually rely on strategies of ‘othering’ and dehumanisation, portraying the enemy or perpetrator of the atrocity as inherently evil or subhuman. However, these stories and narratives, as well as hate speech, have the power to justify otherwise non-justifiable violence by the act of ‘giving reason’ or justifying the use of more extreme amounts of ‘counter’-violence (Gert, 1969). Or in other words, the use of these specific propagating narratives and frames can persuade others to agree to an extreme amount of violence, by justifying the use of this violence.

These strategies are effective since they create a strong narrative of the ‘us versus them’ dichotomy, where the out-group is framed as fundamentally different, dangerous, or even subhuman. This type of framing not only legitimises violence against the targeted out-group but also fosters the belief that they do not deserve equal rights, including access to humanitarian protections (Picard, 1991).

The same tactics of othering and dehumanisation are frequently employed in media coverage of CRSV and (wartime) rape, shaping public discourse and influencing how these issues are framed both internationally and within Dutch media. An argument that will be explored in the next section of this literature review.

2.2.1 media framing, othering and dehumanisation

Media plays a crucial role in shaping public discourse on rape/CRSV and its alleged perpetrators. While it can raise awareness and influence policy changes, the media, when writing about rape, can also be guilty of voyeurism and sensationalism; decontextualising abuse; encouraging racism; promoting stereotypes of women as virgins or whores (good versus bad girls); blaming victims; and excusing assailants (Kitzinger, 2004). In Western media, women are often framed as helpless victims of sexual objects, while men are commonly depicted as evil aggressors (Wood, 1994).

These portrayals stem from gendered stereotypes, which were already prevalent in the time of Freud. “Freud held the pessimistic view that men are inherently sadistic while women are innately masochistic... Men like to rape, and women like to be raped” (Russell, 1975, P. 261). Although modern perspectives on gender and sexuality have evolved, this stereotype has continued to influence contemporary media narratives. For instance, crimes committed by women are usually depicted as deviations from the norm, rather than as acts of their agency (Lavie-Dinur et al., 2015). Moreover, women are often referred to as “girls” in media coverage of rape, portraying them as childlike victims who lack agency (R. Khan, 2022).

Western societies continue to mobilise this dichotomy through the frame of the ‘good girls’ versus ‘bad girls’. Female rape or CRSV victims from enemy states are often depicted as either deserving of aggression or as collateral damage, while women from one’s own nation, or ally nation, are positioned as innocent victims in need of protection (Herman & Chomsky, 2021). This differential framing creates a double standard in how rape is perceived, reported and

addressed, influencing both public perception and policy responses to international conflicts, where it should be mentioned that stories about wartime rape of ‘our’ women usually spark more public outrage, than women who are depicted as part of the ‘enemy’ group (Herman & Chomsky, 2021).

By framing wartime rape through an ‘us versus them’ or ‘othering’ frame, media narratives do not merely describe rape, they actively shape how audiences interpret these events. The emphasis on ‘evil soldiers’ violating ‘our’ women serves to evoke moral outrage and, in turn, can be used as a justification for military retaliation, retribution, or even the denial of humanitarian aid to enemy populations. In this sense, the media’s reliance on othering frames does not just reflect geopolitical interests but also legitimises violence (MacKenzie, 2023).

The way an issue is framed in the media directly impacts whether it is perceived as a priority for action by international organisations, states, and civil society. As such, media plays a dual role: it can either fuel conflicts or promote reconciliation, shaping attitudes towards political, social and economic disputes, and influencing perceptions of specific cultural and national groups (Feuerstein & Mandelzis, 2017). By selecting certain frames, the media determines which aspects of a narrative become most salient, thereby promoting specific definitions of an issue, moral evaluations, and proposed responses (Feuerstein & Mandelzis, 2017; Kempf & Thiel, 2012).

2.2.2 Framing wartime rape as a security issue

In the context of international conflicts, wartime rape is increasingly framed as a security issue that demands immediate action (Card, 1996). The prevalent narrative of ‘rape as a weapon’ depicts wartime rape as a strategic tool used by male soldiers to subjugate female civilians in order to assert dominance. While this framing exposes the brutality of the crime, it also risks reducing survivors to passive victims, stripping them of agency and reinforcing notions that they only exist in relation to their oppressors (Card, 1996).

For instance, the Civilian Protection Regime associates women, children, and the elderly with innocence and victimhood, while categorizing men as aggressors or combatants. This framing not only justifies sex-selective crimes, such as rape, but also legitimises sex-selective targeting of men and boys in conflict zones (Baines, 2007). In doing so, the media and international conflict policies create a hierarchical structure of victimhood, where certain groups are deemed as more worthy of protection than others.

This reliance on gendered framing in media coverage of (wartime) rape does not only shape public opinion. It also influences policy responses to international conflicts (Card, 1996). By portraying rape through the frame of ‘good girls’ versus ‘evil soldiers’ the media reinforces narratives that can be used to justify military intervention or the denial of humanitarian aid to certain populations, as this is an ‘othering’ frame in combination with an atrocity story (Feuerstein & Mandelzis, 2017; MacKenzie, 2023; Wilcox, 1940).

2.2.3 Dutch media framing of wartime rape

Compared to broader Western media, Dutch media shows both distinct and overlapping patterns in its framing of crime, gender, and conflict-related violence. In crime reporting, Dutch media focuses on individual victims and the location of the crime, with less emphasis on underlying social causes or structural solutions (Rafiee et al., 2023). This singular focus on the individual victim and the location, rather than on the underlying causes, or reasons for committing the crime of the perpetrator is one example of ‘othering’, in this case: the innocent victim and the immoral perpetrator who is only known for his crime, without further knowledge of the situation.

Similarly, Dutch media narratives surrounding refugees – particularly those from Islamic countries – often frame them as threats or problems for Dutch society (Konings & Notten, 2021). This type of framing aligns with broader negative portrayals of Middle Eastern conflicts, where stereotypes of Muslim men as aggressive, dangerous, and inherently prone to violence are reinforced (Morey & Yaqin, 2011). In this way, Dutch media uses an othering frame that mirrors international media, where the ‘other’ is framed as inherently violent against whom protection is needed.

Dutch media also reflects gendered stereotypes prevalent in Western media, portraying men as leaders and dominant figures, while women are depicted as dependent, passive, and in need of protection (Aaldering & Van Der Pas, 2020; Wiles et al., 1995). This framing reinforces the infantilization of women, framing them as helpless victims who lack agency (Wiles et al., 1995). These media framings do more than shape public perception, they also influence national policy responses to both domestic and international conflicts. By depicting wartime rape through frames of ‘othering’ and dehumanisation, Dutch media contributes to the justification of differential treatment, where certain victims are prioritised in terms of humanitarian aid, while others are ignored or even seen as ‘just’ victims.

This tendency to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate victims often relies heavily on generalisations, negative stereotypes, and prejudices, ignoring the socio-political context that leads to the conflict and ultimately strengthening public distrust towards the targeted group (Feuerstein & Mandelzis, 2017).

Dutch media has a broad spectrum of news outlets all with their own ideological backgrounds. At the end of the 19th century, the Dutch political and media spectrum was split up into four different pillars (*verzuiling*), which led to a society in which different groups had their own news outlets, specifically focused on their ideological and cultural preferences (Blom, 2000; ProDemos, n.d.; Spiecker & Steutel, 2001). These four different pillars were liberalism, socialism, Protestantism, and catholicism (ProDemos, n.d.; Spiecker & Steutel, 2001). This system has changed somewhat since then, for instance with the socialism pillar having shifted towards social democracy, but the general idea of these four pillars is still prevalent in contemporary Dutch media and politics and continues to influence how different media outlets frame different narratives, still with their own reader bases stemming from four different ideological and cultural backgrounds (ProDemos, n.d.). Since media outlets within each pillar tailor their reporting and framing to align with the ideological and cultural perspectives of their respective readership, they present news through distinct lenses. As a result, audiences across these pillars are exposed to different narratives and interpretations of events, shaping their perceptions and understanding of various issues in different ways.

3. Case study

This chapter links the theories and arguments made in chapter two, to the specific context relevant to this thesis: Israel Palestine. First, a short history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will be given, after which different examples of other cases where media framing has given reason to other causes of actions than those which would be logical, are explained to show that this thesis is not strictly theory, but that the concepts talked about have had an impact in similar situations. Lastly, the UN report is talked about, which is the first report which set out to find the truth in all the different stories about the events during the 7th of October attack in relation to stories about CRSV and rape.

3.1 Situating Israel-Palestine

The conflict in Israel-Palestine is one of the more deadly conflicts in modern history. This part of the literature review will give some historical context to the events that led to the attack on the 7th of October 2023. Even though this is not (and cannot) be a complete overview, I will try to highlight some of the more important events for this thesis, such as the rise of Zionism, the Balfour Declaration, which promised to support the Jews to start a ‘Jewish homeland’, and the second intifada which is seen as the moment where Hamas became an influential organisation in the Gaza strip. Then, I will talk more about the origins and ideology of Hamas, as the other key actors are analysed in this thesis. To end, I will talk about some media frames that have been prevalent in the Netherlands and other Western media outlets when talking and writing about Israel-Palestine.

In 1896, Theodor Herzl published his pamphlet *Der Judenstaat* (the Jewish State), which nowadays is seen as the beginning of modern Zionism (Khalidi, 2020). In *Der Judenstaat*, Herzl writes about Palestine as the designated homeland for Jews, while acknowledging that Palestine is already inhabited by others who won’t accept easily that they are being driven out but arguing against this by stating that the colonisation of Palestine will bring good things to the people already living there (Khalidi, 2020). Jewish migrants arrived in Palestine in 1882, which led to the start of important Jewish political and social institutions. However, they were not the first Jews living in the area (Rabinovich & Reinhartz, 2008). In 1917, through the Balfour Declaration, the British parliament promised support for a ‘national home’ in Palestine for the Jews (Shlaim, 2005). The support from the British and the international Western community favouring a Jewish state in Palestine led to more migration to the region, causing violent reactions from Palestinian communities in the 1920s and 1930s (Khalidi, 2020). After the Second World War, the United Nations proposed a plan, in 1948, for the founding of the State of Israel in 1948. This led to the first Arab-Israeli war, or War of Independence of 1948, leading to the birth of the State of Israel and the displacement of around 750 thousand Palestinians. In Arabic, this is also called the Nakba, which means ‘catastrophe’ or ‘disaster.’ (Khalidi, 2020; Maddy-Weitzman, 2001; Rabinovich & Reinhartz, 2008).

The conflict, after the Nakba, between the state of Israel and the Palestinian communities, both Palestinian and neighbouring countries, persisted and caused different wars, amongst which the Suez-crisis in 1956 and the Six-day War in 1967, when Israel conquered the Sinai Desert, the Westbank and the Golan heights, this war was fought between Israel and a coalition of Egypt, Jordan and Syria. This strengthened Israel’s military and strategic position while also heightening tensions with the surrounding Arab countries. (Khalidi, 2020; Rabinovich & Reinhartz, 2008). The Six-day War is also seen, however, as “breaking the spell of Arab nationalism, fostering Islamist movements and centralising the Palestinian issue in the Middle Eastern politics.” (Shemesh, 2008). After the Six-day War, during the Nixon administration in

the United States, the United Kingdom went from a leading power regarding matters in Israel to a secondary role to that of the United States, after the US began to see Israel as a ‘quasi-ally’ in the Middle East, later evolving to full allies (Levey & Podeh, 2008).

3.1.1 The Rise of Hamas

The first *Intifada* (revolt) started on the 9th of December 1987, after an Israeli truck hit four Palestinian workers in the Gaza Strip, which led to mass protests. This revolt was fed by years of frustration over the Israeli occupation and rising economic and social inequality. (Khalidi, 2020; Rabinovich & Reinhartz, 2008; Shemesh, 2008).

Hamas, an abbreviation of *Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya* (Islamic Resistance Movement), was born out of the first Intifada and quickly grew into an essential and crucial actor in Gazan politics. The organisation was founded by people with strong links with the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine, who, until then, mostly had an educational, religious and social role in the region. Hamas's founding resulted from internal tensions in the Brotherhood between young activists who wanted a more active role in the resistance and the traditional leaders who wanted to wait for a more favourable political climate and a stronger organisational foundation (Abu-Amr, 1993; Tamimi, 2008). The ideology of Hamas was written down in a charter published in August 1988. This charter stated that the land of Palestine is an Islamic State and will continue to exist for Muslim generations until judgement day (Abu-Amr, 1993; Tamimi, 2008).

Hamas also has a military branch, the ‘*Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades*’, which is named after Izz al-Din al-Qassam, the first leader of armed resistance in the history of modern Palestine whom the British killed in 1935 (Abu-Amr, 1993; Tamimi, 2008). This symbolises the brigades and Hamas’ commitment to armed resistance. Hamas and the brigades have been designated as terrorist organisations by different governments, including the United States, the European Union and other Western countries, after attacks on Israel (K. Robinson, 2024). However, it is supported by Iran, which provides them with material and financial aid, counting Hamas among a coalition of different groups such as the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah and Anshar Allah (K. Robinson, 2024).

The events of the 7th of October 2023, where Hamas attacked Israel during *Operation al-Aqsa Storm*, were during the Jewish Sabbath. This attack was a combination of launching several thousand rockets into the south and centre of Israel and breaching the Gaza border, infiltrating southern Israeli towns where they killed almost 1,200 people, kidnapping others, and, according to UN investigators, there were ‘reasonable grounds to believe’ some Hamas members committed sexual violence (K. Robinson, 2024). Hamas leader Mohammed Deif has said that this attack was a response to Israel’s occupation of Palestinian lands and various crimes against the Palestinians (K. Robinson, 2024). This narrative, portraying the events of the 7th of October 2023 as legitimate resistance, has largely won over populations in the Middle East and other parts of global society (Asseburg, 2024).

However, in response to the attack, Israel has cut off humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip and launched both air and ground strikes, having led to thousands of deaths among the Gazans. They do this in the name of their ‘right to self-defence’. A narrative that has been used before, stating that “whatever Israel may be guilty of, the state is justified in using military force to respond to Palestinian attacks” (Shupak, 2017). This narrative can also be seen in the current frames after the 7th of October 2023 (M. S. Khan & Tinua, 2024). This shows that even before the 7th of October 2023, this has been one of the prevalent ‘narratives’ media outlets use when talking about Israel-Palestine. Mainstream media tends to focus on the threat of continued violence in Israel-Palestine using war frames (Bhowmik & Fisher, 2023; Elmasry et al., 2013).

3.2 Netherlands-Israel relations

The official Dutch governmental stance towards Israel is that they try to maintain a balanced policy about the conflict, which is rooted in their support for a two-state solution. Where they want to secure Israel alongside an independent, democratic, and viable Palestinian state, with the pre-1967 borders as a starting point for negotiations.

The Netherlands strongly condemned the Hamas attack of the 7th of October, 2023, which they describe as indiscriminate violence and human rights abuses as part of a terrorist attack. They expressed solidarity with Israel and has been affirming its right to self-defense since, provided the self-defence complies with international law. Simultaneously, the Netherlands has called for the protection of civilians in Gaza and has urged all parties to balance military objectives with humanitarian considerations. Domestically, the Dutch government recognizes the deep emotional impact of the violence and strives to reduce polarization within society, which includes addressing humanitarian concerns and promoting a balanced discourse in the media (Rijksoverheid, 2024). All of this information comes from the official page of the Dutch government about their policy towards Israel-Palestine. However, when looking more critically to this text, there are some notes to be made. To start, while there is a condemnation of the Hamas attack, the following response from Israel since has not been condemned by the Dutch government, even though the ICJ has said in the case of South Africa against Israel, until their official verdict in the matter, that Israel has to try to commit acts of genocide. So yes, at the moment the ICJ has made a clear verdict that, what we see in Gaza, can be called genocide, but they have mentioned that there are actions which could suggest genocide. Simultaneously, while they recognise the emotional impact, lately there have been two resolutions in the Dutch parliament. One about that all Jewish people in the Netherlands have the right to feel secure, and another one is that all Islamic people in the Netherlands have the right to feel secure. Even though both resolutions had, apart from interchanging Jews for Muslims, the same phrasing, the first one got easily accepted by the parliament (149 of 150 votes in favour), while the latter barely passed (75 of 150 votes in favour)(El Abassi, 2024; Wilders, 2024). As these resolutions were written within the context of the Israel-Palestine conflict, the difference in votes does not seem to be according to the government policy of preventing polarization.

3.3 Examples of other cases of framing

This subchapter will introduce three different examples of instances where frames have been used to change the narrative of a story to justify violence, showing that this is not just theory but has actually happened, in order to answer the question of to what extent stories about CRSV and wartime rape can be used to justify military violence.

The first example is about some of the frames that were used after 9/11 to justify the American invasion of Afghanistan, specifically focusing on gender, sexuality, and Arabs/non-Arabs. These were frames of:

1. Liberated American women vs oppressed Muslim/Arab/Middle Eastern women;
2. A contrast between natural and the 'wholesome' American male sexuality versus the abnormal Arab male sexuality;
3. Contrasts between innocent and good Americans versus evil, violent, savage Arabs (Jabbara, 2006)

9/11 also exemplified that propaganda has the means to stop allies who otherwise would have balked to support them. The Bush administration used a frame of their 'right of self-defence' to justify their actions, even though their actions were not in line with international law (Bordelon, 2005). Showing that justification (by media) can help a population and their allies to accept International Law violations (Altheide, 2006). This is specifically useful in the case of the Dutch stance regarding the current Israel-Palestine conflict, as the policy is that Israel should abide by international law, but in practice, we see that whether they actually do so has faced critique. As such, the example of 9/11 where apparently propagating messages, especially about a state right of self-defence (similar to the stance the Dutch government has towards Israel) were powerful enough to stop allies from being critical of the US military actions, shows that these propagating messages can have a big impact on countries international policies.

This third Manichean frame of good (Americans) versus evil was also used to gather initial public support for employing military force in Iraq in 2003, also by the Bush administration. However, this frame was challenged by the images from the Abu Ghraib prison, representing a 'frame break' (Smith & Dionisopoulos, 2008). The Abu Ghraib prison scandal came to light in 2004 and involved the abuse and torture of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers. After this came to light, the Bush administration framed these events as isolated incidents of abuse by low-level soldiers, rather than the result of systemic issues within the operation, which was later not countered by international media (Bennett et al., 2006; Freedman et al., 2005; Porpora et al., 2010; Smith & Dionisopoulos, 2008).

This example shows how governments can use framing techniques to influence public perceptions, specifically regarding acts of nonhumanitarian violence and sexual violence, to maintain broader military objectives. It is also an example of how the public believes that 'good soldiers' don't rape. Of course, it has been accepted that there have been US soldiers who abused and tortured prisoners, but as the framing was, these were only individuals, it was not part of the culture of the US army as a whole. This is very different from narratives regarding acts of CRSV and rape during the Hamas attack on the 7th of October, where the narrative is that it was Hamas who raped or conducted acts of sexual violence, not 'just' individuals (Williamson, 2023). This shows a different narrative between writing about a country's own, or allied army, or an opposing army.

The third example is about the case of the Yazidi women who were subjected to various forms of violence, including sexual violence, by ISIS. The international media played a significant role in framing the atrocities done to them, which influenced public opinion and justified military interventions against ISIS. In this case, the media focused on the violence, abuse, and torture experienced by the Yazidi women, which was a significant factor in triggering direct international military intervention against ISIS. However, while the media highlighted the severe abuse faced by the Yazidi women, it often overlooked their agency and resistance strategies, such as their strategy to keep silent to survive their mistreatment, challenging assumptions of silence as a sign of disempowerment. In their reporting, the media also breached ethical guidelines, potentially compromising the safety and well-being of Yazidi survivors, contributing to their re-victimisation, with these women now mentioning the pressure they felt from journalists to share their stories (Cheterian, 2021; Foster & Minwalla, 2018; Minwalla et

al., 2022; Sarac, 2020, 2024). This exemplifies how media can use infantilising frames when reporting on stories of sexual violence, while also being an example of what was mentioned earlier, namely that stories or CRSV can be used as an instigator to rally international support for military action against the aggressors of this violence.

3.4 combination case study and theoretical framework

In times of conflict, the language used gains a heightened importance. Staging and sustaining a war often depends on the marshalling of public emotion. Something which propagandistic language can achieve (Picard, 1991; Steuter & Wills, 2010). This is particularly evident in atrocity stories, where dehumanisation and sensationalism help justify military responses that might otherwise face scrutiny.

For example, in the context of 9/11, the article titled “The vermin have struck again” employed a dehumanising frame, portraying al-Qaeda as vermin that must be exterminated. Such framing relies on othering, positioning the enemy as criminals or terrorists, which valorizes aggressive actions against them as necessary or even heroic (Altheide, 2006). The word ‘terrorist’ itself functions as an implicit argument that legal measures alone are insufficient, thus justifying extrajudicial military actions (Altheide, 2006). However, even the act of labelling a crime or person as a terrorist is highly subjective as others could view them as rebels or freedom fighters (Lavie-Dinur et al., 2015). This subjectivity underscores how atrocity stories, whether through dehumanising narratives or CRSV/rape claims, can be strategically employed to justify military campaigns and sustain international support for states violating international law.

3.4.1 The Israel-Palestine case: intersectionality, gendered violence, and framing

In the case of Israel-Palestine, atrocity stories have played a significant role in shaping international perceptions of the situation. The attack on the 7th of October, 2023, brought the topic of gender-based violence into focus (Fox & Kolitz, 2023). According to Matthew Ari Fox and Tamara Kolitz (2023), both experts in disaster medicine, acts of CRSV and rape must be internationally condemned, and the Hamas fighters responsible should be held accountable. However, in the case of the 7th of October 2023, the concept of intersectionality becomes relevant, as it involves Palestinian men - likely Muslim Hamas members - raping Israeli - likely - Jewish women. This racialised and religiously coded dichotomy echoes longstanding tropes from the War on Terror, where Muslim men were framed as a threat to Western women (Akabli & Chahdi, 2022; Bhattacharyya, 2009). Such narratives, when embedded in war propaganda, reinforce deep-seated fears and can justify militarised responses.

Moreover, gendered national security discourses in Israel have further shaped these frames. The centrality of the military in Israeli society fosters an aggressive, militarised masculinity (Ali, 2019; Lavie-Dinur et al., 2015). “The traditional national emphasis, glorifying a women's role as both biological and cultural reproducers of the nation, has placed Israeli women in the private sphere. Associating them as wives or daughters of who should be protected and have little agency to act themselves aggressively” (Lavie-Dinur et al., 2015). Historically, Western colonial narratives have reinforced similar ideas, portraying Palestinian women as backward and inferior, a rhetoric that was also used as part of the justification for colonisation (Stockdale,

2008). Theodor Herzl's *Der Judenstaat* (1896) even referenced Palestine in these terms, illustrating the continuity of this type of framing.

3.4.2 Media framing and public perception

In Israeli media, Palestinians receive significantly less coverage, and when they do, they are often framed as deviants and criminals against whom protection is needed (Lavie-Dinur et al., 2015). This contributes to their dehumanisation: when a population is rendered largely invisible except in criminalised contexts, the public is more susceptible to acts of othering and dehumanisation (Oberschall, 2012).

Western mainstream media also plays a crucial role in shaping these narratives. Studies indicate that Israeli suffering is consistently framed more emphatically than Palestinian suffering, reinforcing ideas of Palestinians as aggressors rather than also as possible victims (Feuerstein & Mandelzis, 2017). This framing does not exist in a vacuum, it aligns with pre-existing Western security discourses that emphasize Israel's position as a democracy under siege. Consequently, when atrocity stories emerge, there already is an existing 'hook' within media narratives.

This aligns with the argument of Yuval Karniel, Amit Lavie-Dinur, and Tal Samuel Azran (2017) that the consistent portrayal of Palestinians as the 'other' enables the easy reinforcement of narratives to justify military action against them. When the dominant frame is one of good Israelis defending themselves against bad Palestinians, atrocity stories can serve as a potent justification for military campaigns that might otherwise be contested under international law.

3.4.3 The UN report and the manipulation of atrocity stories

The role of atrocity stories in shaping international responses becomes especially evident when examining the UN report about the attack on the 7th of October, 2023. The report finds reasonable grounds to believe that CRSV occurred, based on credible sources. However, it also states that claims of rape during the attack remain inconclusive due to a lack of definitive evidence and that the scope of their research was not to find out who the perpetrators of the acts were (UN, 2024a).

This distinction is critical. While CRSV encompasses a broad range of sexual violence in conflict, rape allegations specifically require strong evidence, also because of its different legal status. This suggests that the narratives about rape which have emerged after the attack may be less reliable. These narratives, rather than being purely factual, could be strategically used to manipulate public perception and justify prolonged military actions from Israel in Gaza.

The way these atrocity stories are framed in the media further influences their public impact. There are two types of media journalism in conflict reporting: peace journalism and war journalism. Peace journalism frames stories to encourage analysis and non-violent response by explaining the underlying causes and seeking to avoid the polarisation of the different parties. In contrast, war journalism presents conflicts as a competition. Framing it in win-lose terms and reinforcing typical misconceptions that escalate the conflict and can harden societal beliefs (Feuerstein & Mandelzis, 2017; Kempf & Thiel, 2012).

War journalism, by the frames used in its reporting, aligns closely with the characteristics of propaganda. It often distorts or exaggerates information to fuel hostility, justify military action, and dehumanise the opposing group. By focusing on simplistic, emotionally charged narratives and framing the enemy as evil, war journalism plays a key role in shaping public perceptions and influencing policy. This approach shares many similarities with propaganda techniques, which seek to manipulate and control public opinion to serve a political or military agenda by, amongst other strategies, the use of falsehoods and lies (Oberschall, 2012).

In the case of the 7th of October, 2023 attack, the use of rape narratives in media outlets, especially after the publication of the UN report calls the accuracy of these reports into question. By perpetuating claims of rape which lack conclusive evidence, these outlets are propagating misleading messages that contribute to the polarisation of the conflict. This kind of reporting, in line with other tactics of war journalism, manipulates public sentiment by framing the issue in moral terms, justifying military retaliation. As a result, articles written about these atrocity stories should be read critically.

4. Methodology

This chapter presents the methodologies used in this research. It describes the methods that were used to lead to the results as presented in chapter 4. The choices made in this chapter are mostly based on the literature from Diane E. Schmidt, as described in her book: *Writing in Political Science, A Practical Guide* (2018).

4.1 Research Method

The type of research applied in this thesis is a mixed methods approach, combining descriptive analysis and content analysis. Both methods serve as forms of data reduction, summarising textual information to make it more manageable (Schmidt, 2018). Descriptive analysis typically describes patterns and trends, often used for communicating findings from interviews and observations (Schmidt, 2018). However, it can also be used to ‘interview’ articles and other textual sources, allowing for an in-depth qualitative analysis of the texts (Schmidt, 2018). This approach facilitates an exploration of the underlying meanings and framing of the articles, rather than focusing solely on quantitative data.

Content analysis generates quantitative data by systematically summarising information from original documents, in this case, newspaper articles (Schmidt, 2018). This method provides a structured framework to identify and count the frequency of specific frames or themes within the texts (Schmidt, 2018). The data generated through content analysis will then undergo a Fisher’s exact test to determine if the observed patterns are statistically significant.

This mixed methods approach is chosen for this thesis as the research question involves both qualitative and quantitative elements. The quantitative aspect involves examining how, and how often frames regarding stories of sexual violence and rape are mentioned in the four newspapers, while the qualitative aspect seeks to understand why these frames might have been chosen by each publication, looking at trends within each newspaper, and the respective effects they can have on their readership. By combining these two methods, this thesis tries to answer the research question:

How are stories of sexual violence and (wartime) rape framed in the context of the Hamas attack on the 7th of October, 2023, across four Dutch newspapers (*De Telegraaf*, *De Volkskrant*, *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, and *Trouw*), and to what extent do these frames contribute to justifying military violence, focusing on articles published in the first six months following the attack?

1. What frames are employed in the coverage of sexual violence and rape during the 7th of October, 2023, Hamas attack across the four Dutch newspapers?
2. What patterns can be found in the coverage of stories about sexual violence and rape during the 7th of October, 2023, Hamas attack across the four Dutch newspapers?
3. How do the identified patterns in the coverage of sexual violence and rape during the 7th of October, 2023 Hamas attack align with propagandistic strategies aimed at justifying military violence?
4. How do the used frames and patterns differ between *De Telegraaf*, *De Volkskrant*, *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, and *Trouw*?

To answer the research questions, the following methods will be used:

To answer the first subquestion: “What frames are employed in the coverage of sexual violence and rape during the 7th of October, 2023, Hamas attack across the four Dutch newspapers?”, a combination of descriptive and content analysis will be used. Descriptive analysis will first examine the language and frames used in the articles, identifying how sexual violence and rape are portrayed. Content analysis will then assess how frequently specific frames appear within the coverage, providing a quantitative overview of the key themes discussed in relation to sexual violence and rape.

This leads to answering the second subquestion: “What patterns can be found in the coverage of stories about sexual violence and rape during the 7th of October, 2023, Hamas attack across the four Dutch newspapers?”, where key themes discussed will be analysed in order to find different trends or patterns, using descriptive analysis. These patterns will then be qualitatively analysed to answer the third subquestion: “How do the identified patterns in the coverage of sexual violence and rape during the 7th of October, 2023 Hamas attack align with propagandistic strategies aimed at justifying military violence?”. Using content analysis in combination with the theory from the literature review on propagating strategies, such as othering, the atrocity story, or othering, to see whether the patterns in the media articles align with these propagating strategies. This analysis will help determine if the media coverage of sexual violence and rape contributes to a narrative that supports military actions.

These patterns will then be compared across the four newspapers, each representing a different pillar of the Dutch political, cultural, and media landscape, in order to answer the fourth subquestion: “How do the used frames and patterns differ between *De Telegraaf*, *De Volkskrant*, *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, and *Trouw*?”. Through qualitative analysis, the findings will be examined to understand the significance of these differences and how they reflect the unique perspectives and framing strategies associated with each newspaper’s ideological pillar in relation to sexual violence and military violence in retaliation of the 7th of October, 2023 Hamas attack.

4.2 Data collection

“Discourse” usually means actual instances of communicative action in the medium of language” (Johnstone, 2008, p.2). In this thesis, the discourse analysed will be the language used in newspaper articles. According to Astrid Dirikx and Dave Gelders, more complex ideas are communicated in newspapers than in other media sources, making them suitable for both content and framing analysis (2010).

Compared to online news and other forms of news sources, newspapers provide more detailed and elaborate information (Linström & Marais, 2012).

Since this research examines both the narratives in news coverage and the ideological perspectives of their respective readerships, it is crucial to use a medium where journalists have the space to express their viewpoints. Newspaper articles allow for more in-depth reporting, making them a valuable source for a combination of descriptive and content analysis (Linström & Marais, 2012).

4.2.1 Selection of Newspapers

This thesis focuses on articles from four Dutch newspapers: *De Telegraaf*, *De Volkskrant*, *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, and *Trouw*. These newspapers were selected because they represent a broad spectrum of political and ideological perspectives, rooted in the four pillars which were discussed in the literature review, ensuring a diverse and comprehensive view of how the conflict is framed in Dutch media. Their readerships span across the political spectrum, making them particularly relevant for analysing how sexual violence and rape were reported in the aftermath of the 7th of October, 2023 Hamas attack.

Trouw started in 1943 as the illegal newspaper of the Dutch protestant resistance and still focuses on topics of democracy, sustainability, religion, and philosophy from a protestant-Christian background (Over Ons, 2019; de Puttenaer, 2021).

The *Telegraaf* is the biggest newspaper in the Netherlands and has a more liberal point of view (de puttenaer, 2021; Joost, 2024). The *Volkskrant* claims to be a quality newspaper, focusing on integrity, objectivity, and trustworthiness. They focus on societal discussions. In their origin, it is a roman-catholic newspaper and can be placed on the left of the political spectre (de puttenaer, 2021; Joost, 2024; Volkskrant, n.d.). *Reformatorisch Dagblad* is a Protestant Reformist newspaper, writing articles from a reformist point of view (Joost, 2024; Reformatorisch Dagblad, n.d.).

The aim is to combine the views of these different newspapers to create a spectre of politically diverse newspapers covering most political and societal debates and viewing points on Israel-Palestine and the Hamas attack on the 7th of October, 2023, as well as look as analyse them individually to get an idea of the narrative their respective readerships read.

The more liberal *Telegraaf*; the protestant *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, and *Trouw*, whereas *Trouw* on the spectre between liberalism and socialism is more neutral; and *De Volkskrant* which is catholic and socialist from its origin (Joost, 2024). However, not just their political voice, but also their respective readerships show a similarly big diversity. The *Trouw* has a readership which is known for people looking for good analyses and diverse perspectives on societal debates, trying to be objective and neutral in their political ideological line; *De Volkskrant* mostly attracts people from higher educational backgrounds, who are more favoured towards left progressive ideologies; *De Telegraaf* is more seen as a right-conservative newspaper, attracting readers with an interest in both serious news and entertainment; and *Reformatorisch Dagblad* is a newspaper with a strong protestant, Reformatorisch religious background, which also shines through in how they write about the news (Joost, 2024; Reformatorisch Dagblad, n.d.).

Besides the ideological stances, *De Telegraaf*, *the Volkskrant*, and *Trouw* are also major newspapers in the Netherlands which have a significant political influence and are amongst the most-read newspapers in the Netherlands with a reach of almost 1.5 million (DNR, 2023; Lauf & Scholtens, 2022; NMO, 2024).

Another reason for choosing these four newspapers is that the preliminary research in Lexis Nexis showed that out of all the different Dutch newspapers, these are the four that have written the most articles following the search question, which is necessary for content analysis. As a part of content analysis is to first code all the documents, and then count the frequency per characteristic, it is important to have a sufficient amount of articles, to be able to do this (Schmidt, 2018). For this reason, it was relevant to filter out newspapers which might also have been interesting ideology-wise but simply weren't possible to look into for this research. Examples of these newspapers are the AD and NRC.

For the data collection of the different news articles, the online database Lexis Nexis will be used. The selection will be done using several filters. These are the timeline, from the 7th of October 2023 until 6 months later, the 7th of May; filtering out all newspapers which aren't *De Telegraaf*, *de Trouw*, *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, and *De Volkskrant*; and it will be filtered to only focus on articles writing about the following subjects: Israël; Hamas; Gaza; Palestine, and Rape; Sexual violence; sex, and gender. For all newspapers, the 10 that were seen as most relevant by Lexis Nexis were analysed. However, *Trouw* only had a total of 8 newspapers available after using the different filters. This resulted in a total of 38 articles which I have researched.

4.3 Operationalisation

As mentioned earlier, descriptive analysis allows for a structured examination of texts, similar to interviewing with them. Meanwhile, content analysis systematically categorizes and codes relevant themes within articles to find patterns. This study examines several key elements and themes of the articles: the title, the portrayal of atrocities, terrorism, rape, identification of the victims or aggressors, denials and accusations, dehumanisation, the sources that were mentioned, and whether the article mostly aligns with elements used in peace or war journalism.

The title and sources are relevant for understanding the article's framing. Titles serve as initial points of engagement for readers and often indicate the article's primary focus. Examining trends in word choices in the titles can reveal underlying narratives. The source analysis identifies how frequently different perspectives are included, such as statements from Israeli government officials, Hamas leaders, or NGOs, thereby highlighting any potential biases in the information sourcing.

The other analytical categories, atrocities, terrorism, rape, identification of a victim or aggressor, denials and accusations, and dehumanisation are derived from the literature. Identifying these frames in media coverage provides insight into how sexual violence and rape during the 7th of October, 2023 Hamas attack were reported and whether the patterns in these articles align with propagating messaging and strategies.

4.3.1 coding process

For this analysis, the different articles are coded. "To codify is to arrange things in a systematic order, to make something part of a system or classification, to categorize" (Saldaña, 2021, P. 13). Coding permits data to be divided and organised into different groups (Saldaña, 2021). These groups are derived from the literature review. These different groups the data is to be coded in are showcased through a codebook.

This codebook will then be used to first, highlight in all of the different articles the relevant parts of the text for the different codes, and second to see how they can be categorised, for the descriptive analysis of the data.

Within these narratives or categories, it is relevant to see whether they are even mentioned or talked about in the different articles, and then what is mentioned or written specifically within these codes. With the possibility to create subcodes within these categories. All of these will be coded and written into the Excel document.

This Excel document will have different columns to label the different articles. These contained the following information: The date of publication, the name of the newspaper, the title of the article, a summary of the article, whether a certain category was mentioned yes or no, and then how the author or the article wrote about this topic specifically, showing the possible subcategories or codes. The initial coding of these categories is part of the content analysis while looking for trends in the specific writing within the categories is part of the descriptive analysis.

4.4 Limitations and Validity

This study has several limitations that must be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the articles were not randomly selected, but filtered through specific keywords in the Lexis Nexis database. While this ensures the relevance of the articles to the research topic, it introduces the possibility of sampling bias, as potentially relevant articles that don't match the search terms may have been excluded. This limitation affects the ability to generalise the findings.

Second, the study focuses on four Dutch newspapers selected for their political and ideological diversity within the Dutch media landscape. However, this selection does not encompass the entire spectrum of Dutch media, excluding other possible relevant outlets such as *NRC Handelsblad* and *Algemeen Dagblad*, which may provide alternative perspectives or frames.

Third, the study is restricted to Dutch media, which limits the generalisability of its findings to other national contexts. Media framing and reporting styles are often shaped by cultural and political factors, meaning that the results may not be directly transferable to international media studies. Future research comparing Dutch media narratives with those of other countries could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how framing varies across different cultural and geopolitical contexts.

Another limitation concerns the dataset size, which consists of only 38 articles. Due to the small sample size, Fisher's exact test was used for statistical analysis, as it is more suitable for small datasets. However, this test is less robust than other statistical methods, potentially affecting the reliability of identifying causal relationships. A larger dataset would have allowed for more robust statistical analysis.

Furthermore, the research focuses exclusively on articles published in the six months following the 7th of October, 2023 attack. Capturing immediate and short-term media framing. While this provides valuable insights into how the event was reported in its aftermath, it does not account for potential shifts in reported narratives over a longer period. Future studies could examine how media framing evolves over time, particularly in response to political and military developments, public discourse, or new evidence.

Finally, as the analysis was conducted by a single researcher, there is a potential risk of evaluator bias in the coding and interpretation of the data. Although efforts were made to maintain objectivity, such as systematically checking for explicit mentions of specific narratives, subjectivity may still have influenced the framing and categorisation of the different narratives. Employing multiple coders and conducting inter-code reliability tests in future research could help lessen this limitation.

4.4.1 validity

Despite the limitations, several measures were taken to enhance the validity of this research. Internal validity was maintained through systematic data collection and coding, ensuring consistency by applying a single codebook across all articles to minimise random errors and subjective interpretation. The use of predefined frameworks derived from the literature review to further strengthened the reliability of the coding process, ensuring that the frames analysed were relevant and theoretically grounded. Additionally, the mixed-method approach allowed for a cross-examination of the findings, which enhanced the credibility of the results. Transparency is also prioritised, with the codebook and findings being shared without any adjustments of any sort.

In terms of external validity, several factors were considered to enhance the generalisability of the study. The selection of four ideologically diverse newspapers ensured a broad spectrum of media perspectives, increasing the representativeness of the analysis for the Netherlands. The six-month timeframe provided insight into both the immediate reactions after the attack, as well as the ongoing discussions following in the months after the attack, capturing the evolution of media framing over a period which is possible to analyse within the scope and timeframe of this research. While the research is specific to Dutch media, its findings may hold broader relevance, particularly in comparative studies examining media framing in different cultural or geopolitical settings, or when conducting media research in countries which are culturally similar to the Netherlands, such as Germany. However, caution should be exercised when generalising these results to other contexts, as differences in political climates, media systems, and journalistic norms may influence framing strategies. Future research could address this by analysing media coverage from other countries or by examining Dutch media narratives on different geopolitical conflicts.

4.5 Positionality

As a Dutch national, my background and worldview inevitably shape my interpretation of media narratives, particularly regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict about which I have strong opinions. I approached this research with a firm belief in equal human rights where every individual has the right to legal representation and is innocent until proven guilty.

I acknowledge that I entered this research with the assumption that Israel actively employs propagating strategies to legitimise their actions in the Gaza Strip, by keeping the international narrative on the events focused on the attack itself and Israel's subsequent right to defend itself. Recognising this, I made a conscious effort to question my assumptions and conclusions drawn from the literature by discussing my thesis with my peers and actively listening to their feedback and counterarguments.

In the beginning, I had concerns about my position as a Dutch researcher writing about the Middle East without having a personal background in the region. Questioning myself, as well as questions about this from my supervisor, whether I was the right person to write about this topic. To address this, I have chosen to focus on a Dutch context, researching exactly what I

otherwise would have questioned. Namely, how is this topic written about from a Dutch background?

I have struggled with an ethical dilemma where I risked legitimising possible perpetrators of sexual violence and rape. While I condemn sexual violence and rape in all its forms, I do feel strongly that even those accused of this crime are entitled to due process. Simultaneously, I oppose collective punishment for the crimes of a few, such as we are still seeing against Gazans.

To minimise bias in my source selection, I deliberately considered the geopolitical origins of the sources I used and critically assessed how their positions could have been influenced by their ideological perspectives. Additionally, my own critical stance towards the origins of the sources also helped me identify this as an important part of writing articles, which resulted in also analysing the sources that were used in the different news articles.

Despite my efforts, I acknowledge that complete objectivity is impossible. My background and personal values inevitably influence how I interpret the data. However, by being transparent about my positionality I aim to produce research that is critical, while also giving readers of this research the possibility to be equally critical when reading this thesis.

5. Results

This chapter presents the main findings from the analysis of the 38 different newspaper articles, with a focus on identifying trends regarding narratives, frames, and themes when writing about atrocities, sexual violence, or terrorism.

5.1 Key findings

5.1.1 Explicit mentionings

Table 4.1 shows how many times the different narratives of dehumanising, terrorism, atrocities, victimisation, and systemic rape were explicitly mentioned in the different articles, with the second column giving the number of how many articles, out of 38, this was the case.

EXPLICIT MENTIONS OF NARRATIVES AND FRAMES	
DEHUMANISING	25
TERRORISM	23
ATROCITIES	18
VICTIM	16
SYSTEMATIC RAPE	12

Table 4.1: Explicitly mentioning different narratives and frames in the different articles

The most mentioned narratives and frames were those of terrorism and dehumanisation. Dehumanising frames however also have a subdivision, between frames of terrorism (23 mentions) and other frames (11 mentions), such as mentions of brutes or monsters. This doesn't add up to a total of 25, as some articles use both framings and are thus counted double.

5.1.2 Titles

Table 4.2 shows the trends found through descriptive analysis in the titles of the newspaper articles, and which frames were mostly used. This table categorizes the main focus of the titles into different frames.

DIFFERENT TRENDS OF FRAMING IN THE TITLES	
SEXUAL VIOLENCE	6
SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND TERROR	3
RAPE	2
ANTISEMITISM	2
DEHUMANISING AND TERROR	1

Table 4.2: Different trends of frames in the newspaper articles titles

The titles of the articles primarily framed the events during the Hamas attack through the lens of sexual violence, with some combining this with terror. Two titles explicitly mentioned rape, and antisemitism, while only one title had a distinct focus on the combination of dehumanising and terror. These framings in the titles serve to hook a reader's interest and give a quick idea of what will be the topic of the article itself.

Of the total 9 titles mentioning either sexual violence or rape, 6 explicitly identified Hamas as the aggressor of this violence. In all 3 titles that mention terror, Hamas was identified as the actor behind the acts of terror. Both of these framings can create an image of Hamas as the sole source of terror and violent acts.

This is showcased through several of the article’s titles, such as articles number 1, 2, 3, 15 and the article titled: *“Hamas verkrachtte vrouwen”* (Hamas raped women), which was published in *Reformatorisch Dagblad* on the 6th of December 2023, explicitly accusing Hamas of rape, reinforcing narratives of Hamas as the sole aggressor. In contrast, the articles that shift the focus to Israeli women as victims do not have equal clear titles and are thus not represented in the quantitative analysis shown in Graph 4.2. One such example is the article *“Opnieuw met twee maten meten”* (again measuring with different standards), about the lack of support from the international community in condemning Hamas’s actions. Published also by *Reformatorisch Dagblad* and published on the same day as the other article. This article appeared just one day after the BBC’s exposé on how Hamas allegedly raped and mutilated Israeli women on the 7th of October 2023.

This shows two cases of framing. The first is where a clear aggressor, Hamas, is already identified explicitly in the title, prompting readers to condemn Hamas’s actions. The second involves a less direct framing. Shifting focus to the issue of international response, and away from the Israeli rape victims talked about in the article. Prompting the question, should we feel more outrage because of the stories on sexual violence and the victimisation of Israeli women or because of the lack of international condemnation of the aggressors due to these actions? In other words, is it the act itself we should be outraged about, or is it just used as a context to make a point campaigning towards more international support for Israel and against Hamas?

5.1.3 Atrocities

Of the in total 38 articles, 18 mentioned that the acts performed by Hamas on the 7th of October 2023 were atrocious or horrific, and the other 20 didn’t.

Table 4.3 shows the different trends of atrocities which have been written about in the analysed news articles.

DIFFERENT TRENDS OF MENTIONING CERTAIN ATROCITIES	
SEXUAL VIOLENCE	31
MURDER	20
HOSTAGES	13
TORTURE	4
MUTILATION	4
SELF-DEFENCE	3
GENOCIDE	1
WAR CRIMES	1
ANTISEMITISM	1

Table 4.3: Different trends of mentioning different kinds of atrocities

Table 4.3 shows that the atrocities that were mentioned most were sexual violence, followed by murder and hostages. The three least mentioned kinds of atrocities are genocide, war crimes, and antisemitism. This suggests that the articles prioritize writing about immediate and more individual forms of victimisation over broader political or historical contexts.

The different trends when writing about sexual violence are shown in Table 4.4.

DIFFERENT TRENDS WITHIN MENTIONS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE	
RAPE	23
SEXUAL MUTILATION	9
NECROPHILIA	4
GROUP RAPE	4
SEXUAL TORTURE	3
HUMILIATION	2
PAEDOPHILIA	1
ASSAULT	1
SEXUAL CRUELTIES	1

Table 4.4: Different trends in writings about sexual violence atrocities

Table 4.4 delves deeper into the specific narratives of CRSV, detailing the specific acts described in the news articles. The most frequently described act is rape (23 times). More specific acts, such as sexual mutilation, necrophilia and paedophilia are mentioned less often but do highlight the articles’ focus on explicitly describing very atrocious acts. These narratives often serve to underline the perceived inhumanity of the aggressors and the severity of the violence which the victims have faced. In all of these cases, it was clear that Hamas was seen as the sole aggressor of these acts of sexual violence.

5.1.4 Terrorism

In total, 23 of the 38 articles mentioned terrorism, and 15 didn’t.

Table 4.5 shows the trends in framing in the news articles’ descriptions of terrorism.

TRENDS IN FRAMES ABOUT TERRORISM	
TERROR ORGANISATION HAMAS	8
HAMAS TERRORISTS	7
PALESTINIAN TERROR MOVEMENT	4
TERROR ATTACK	4
PALESTINIAN TERRORISTS	2
ISLAMIC TERROR STATE	1

Table 4.5: Different trends in frames about terrorism

The most commonly used frames are about Hamas as a terror organisation or its fighters as terrorists, with a total of 15 times across the different articles. Broader terms like “Palestinian terror movement”, or “Palestinian terrorists” are used less frequently, however, they do suggest that the aggressors behind the Hamas attack on the 7th of October are not only Hamas members but all Palestinians. Only one article mentions “Islamic terror state”, suggesting that there is a religious underlining behind the terrorism framings.

5.1.5 Systemic rape

Table 4.6 shows the frames that have been used when writing about acts of rape during the 7th of October attack.

TRENDS IN FRAMES ABOUT SYSTEMIC RAPE

RAPE AS A WEAPON	6
SYSTEMIC RAPE	6
PLANNED RAPE	3

Table 4.6: Different trends in frames about systemic rape

All of these frames suggest deliberated and planned actions by Hamas against Israeli victims, which amplify the severity of the crimes and the moral culpability of the aggressors.

While 12 of the articles mentioned systemic rape, the other 26 didn't. This shows that although it is a point of focus, it is not as widely covered as the topic of terrorism.

5.1.6 Sources

Table 4.7 shows the different sources that were used for information or as an authority. They are categorised into 8 different groups:

1. Israeli sources, meaning Israeli civilians or non-governmental Israeli organisations
2. Israeli authority sources, such as ministerial sources, President Herzog or ambassadors
3. Hamas spokespersons
4. Hamas fighters who are taken captive by Israel
5. The UN, either reports or persons working for the UN
6. International newspapers
7. NGO's
8. Joe Biden

DIFFERENT SOURCES USED AND MENTIONED

ISRAELI AUTHORITIES	20
ISRAELI	17
UN	17
(INTERNATIONAL) NEWSPAPERS	11
HAMAS SPOKEPERSONS	5
NGO'S	5
JOE BIDEN	2
HAMAS FIGHTERS	1

Table 4.7: Different sources used and mentioned in the different newspaper articles

What is shown mainly from Table 4.7 is that most of the sources that were used derive from Israeli background or the UN, and barely any from official Hamas spokespersons. This can create a bias in favour of Israeli stances and ideas, as they are mentioned more often. Official Hamas sources can provide the official stances and reactions from Hamas, one of the key actors in this conflict, offering insights into their perspectives and possible justifications for actions. These sources are crucial for understanding both positions and providing context. However, they are barely present. And even sometimes, when they are mentioned, it is in a context of distrust. For example, the article mentioned before from *Reformatörisch Dagblad* where a quote from the Hamas spokesperson Basem Naim isn't given value or in the article from *Trouw* "VN

vinden aanwijzingen voor seksueel geweld bij Hamas-terreuraanval” (UN finds indications sexual violence during the Hamas terror-attack) that was published on the 6th of March 2024. Here, they repeat a Hamas statement denying having sexually violated women during the 7th of October 2023. However, the article doesn’t go further into this denial, giving it less merit.

5.1.7 Victims

Of all the different articles, 36 of them mentioned a clear victim or aggressor, within all of them the main aggressor being Hamas.

DIFFERENT FRAMES OF VICTIMS

ISRAELI VICTIMS	20
ISRAELI VICTIMS OF CRSV OR RAPE	12
JEWS	3
GAZANS	3
HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS	1

Table 4.8: Frames about who are the victims

As table 4.8 shows, a small number of articles, 3 in total, mentioned Gazans as victims. These were the three articles that mentioned multiple victims, these being Gazans and Israelis. However, these were also the only three articles giving a justification for one of the two being a victim/aggressor, namely Gazans as justified victims and Israel as a justified aggressor.

5.2 Results subdivided

Apart from the key findings, several other factors of the different news articles were analysed. Such as justifications for a group being a victim, whether there are denials from accusations, and whether the articles showcased specific elements which can be attributed either to war or peace journalism. The information from analysing all these different elements will be interpreted in this chapter. First whether there are newspaper-specific reportings divided per category, and secondly looking at possible temporal elements of the reporting.

5.2.1 Newspaper-specific reporting

The following is an analysis of how the four Dutch newspapers -*Reformatorisch Dagblad*, *De Volkskrant*, *De Telegraaf*, and *Trouw* – covered the events surrounding the Hamas attack on the 7th of October, 2023.

5.2.1.1 Images of atrocities

The analysis when specifically looking at the use of atrocity images in each of the different newspapers shows some notable variations. *De Volkskrant* reported most frequently on the different atrocities, followed by *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, with *Trouw* and *De Telegraaf* writing about these topics to an equal amount.

There are some trends to be seen in the thematic focus of each newspaper. *De Volkskrant* is the only newspaper that refrains from using images of mutilation. *De Volkskrant* and *Reformatorisch Dagblad* have more of a focus on sexual violence than *De Telegraaf* and *Trouw*. *Reformatorisch Dagblad* also shows a focus on writing about the hostages taken, while *Trouw* is the only newspaper to mention topics with more of a legal and historical background, such as genocide, war crimes, and antisemitism.

5.2.1.2 Images of sexual violence

Trouw is the only newspaper to mention sexual assault and places a greater emphasis on the subject on sexual torture. *De Volkskrant* is the only other newspaper to even mention sexual torture. *De Telegraaf* is the only newspaper to mention necrophilia. Both *Reformatorisch Dagblad* and *Trouw* mention stories of humiliation. Mentions of necrophilia are distributed equally across all newspapers. Rape is most frequently mentioned in *De Telegraaf*, followed closely by *De Volkskrant*, then *Reformatorisch Dagblad* and lastly *Trouw*. Among all topics, rape emerges as the most covered mentioned form of sexual violence in all articles.

5.2.1.3 Terrorism frames

Mentions of “ Hamas terrorists ” and “ terror organisation Hamas ” were prevalent across all newspapers except *Trouw*, where these terms appeared only in 25% of all frames that were used. However, *Trouw* referred to “ terror attack ” most frequently, followed by *De Volkskrant* and then *De Telegraaf*. The term “ terror attack ” is more objective as it focuses on the act itself without explicitly pointing a finger at who is seen as the aggressor.

Both *De Telegraaf* and *Reformatorisch Dagblad* also mention “ Palestinian terrorists ”, while only *Reformatorisch Dagblad* and *Trouw* mentioned “ Palestinian terror movement ”, with *Reformatorisch Dagblad* mentioning this more often than *Trouw*. *De Telegraaf* was the only newspaper to mention an “ Islamic terror state ” when referencing Palestine. The mentions linking Palestinians to terrorists are significant, even though they weren’t mentioned much, as they create a frame linking all Palestinians as being terrorists. “ Islamic terror state ” is similar, but then creates a link between Islam and terrorism.

5.2.1.4 Images of systemic rape

In the different mentionings of systemic rape, *Trouw* only refers to it as “ rape as a weapon ”. *Reformatorisch Dagblad* divides it evenly between “ systemic rape ” and “ rape as a weapon ”. *De Telegraaf* focuses on “ systemic rape ”, while both *De Telegraaf* and *De Volkskrant* mention “ planned rape ” an equal amount of times. “ Rape as a weapon ” seems like the more objective frame, as it focuses on the theoretical strategic use of sexual violence within the context of conflict. As such it is more of a legal term also.

5.2.1.5 Sources

The overall majority of sources referenced across the news articles originate from Israeli officials, institutions and individuals. For *De Telegraaf*, over half of the cited sources are Israeli, with the other contributions coming from UN and international newspapers as sources. *Reformatorisch Dagblad* relies on Israeli sources for half of its references and is the only newspaper to cite U.S. President Joe Biden. It references a Hamas spokesperson once, though in a dismissive matter. Approximately 25% of its sources come from the UN, and other sources used are NGOs and international newspapers.

De Volkskrant ranks third in its use of Israeli sources and is the only newspaper to reference a Hamas fighter who is held captive by Israel. *Trouw* employs the lowest proportion of Israeli

sources, instead prioritizing international newspapers and UN sources, which together make up half of its references. *Trouw* also is the second outlet to include Hamas spokespersons as a source.

5.2.1.6 Victim frames

In terms of representation of the different kinds of victims and their framing, *Trouw* mostly frames Israelis as victims, with roughly 33% of its mentions referring to Israeli victims of CRSV. *De Telegraaf* is the only newspaper that mentions a holocaust survivor as one of the victims, explicitly connecting the suffering of contemporary Jewish victims to the atrocities of the Second World War. Both *De Telegraaf* and *De Volkskrant* are the only newspapers to explicitly mention Jews as victims, signifying that it is not just Israel who has been attacked, but all Jews.

De Volkskrant and *Reformatorsch Dagblad* are the only news outlets to mention Gazans as victims. However, *Reformatorsch Dagblad* writes about this together with giving a justification for this group being a victim, attributing the responsibility for Gazan suffering to Hamas.

5.2.1.7 War and peace journalism

The only newspapers which showcase some elements of peace journalism, such as encouraging further analysis and avoiding polarization, are *Trouw* and *De Volkskrant*. *Reformatorsch Dagblad* is the only newspaper that uses the war journalism element of justifying a victim being a victim. Overall, there was a clear inclination towards war journalism.

5.2.2 Cross-newspaper comparison

This section will analyse whether there are distinct trends and patterns to be found in the narratives and frames used per newspaper.

De Telegraaf's coverage showed mostly elements of war journalism, emphasizing the brutality of the attack. They showed a sensationalist approach to writing about this subject, exemplified by their use of mentioning necrophilia, systemic and planned rape, and focusing on Jews and a Holocaust survivor as the victim of the attack. This religious narrative of Jews versus Muslims was also showcased through the mention of an “Islamic terror state”. They heavily relied on Israeli sources and showed the least diversity in their sources used from all newspapers.

Reformatorsch Dagblad

Reformatorsch Dagblad showed solely elements of war journalism, even showcasing elements such as justifying one's being a victim and emphasizing the suffering of Israelis. When looking at the atrocities they mentioned, they had more of a focus on the hostages taken by Hamas than the other three newspapers. This is an example of the justification used to explain why Gazans are currently justified victims of Israeli violence. They also wrote about stories of sexual humiliation, which places an emphasis on the tactical use of CRSV. They were the newspaper with the most usage of frames where all Palestinians were linked to acts of terror, instead of only Hamas. This is also exemplified by their mentions of Gazans as justified victims. Similar to *De Telegraaf*, they relied heavily on Israeli sources, referencing a Hamas spokesperson once, although dismissively.

De Volkskrant

While *De Volkskrant* mostly used elements of war journalism, they also employed some elements of peace journalism, such as emphasizing broader implications of the attack and avoiding polarization. They were the only newspaper to refrain from using images of mutilation, and mostly used the term “terror attack”, refraining from pointing fingers, but focusing on the acts themselves. They did mention rape, as well as sexual torture. Similar to *De Telegraaf* they also mentioned Jews as victims, but refrained from making the comparison to then the Islamic aggressor. Overall, *De Volkskrant* did still employ more sensationalist framing, they seem to be a bit more critical overall in the narratives they use.

Trouw

Trouw, similar to *De Volkskrant*, also employed elements of peace journalism, such as encouraging analysis and avoiding polarization in some of their articles, although they still used more elements of war journalism. When looking at their overall framing, it shows a trend for mentioning more nuanced and historically/legal subjects, such as writing about genocide, antisemitism and war crimes, while for instance refraining completely from pointing a finger, as they only referenced to the events as a “terror attack”.

5.2.3 Temporal elements

On the 4th of March, the UN published an official report about the research they conducted on CRSV during the 7th of October. This report served as a milestone in the knowledge about the occurrence of CRSV and rape during the Hamas attack on the 7th of October, as it was the first report to give researched answers as to what happened. The UN report mentioned that there were indeed indications to assume CRSV had been used during the attack, but they did not find clear evidence yet whether there was rape conducted, for that more research would be necessary. They also didn't point a finger towards who they thought was the aggressor, as that was not within the scope of their research (UN, 2024a).

A Fisher's exact test was conducted to analyse the use of all different frames before and after the UN's report publication, and found significance only in the use of terrorism frames, focusing on whether terrorism was clearly mentioned in the news articles yes or no. The results indicate a statistically significant difference in the frequency of terrorism frames employed, with a p-value of 0.013. This finding suggests that the null hypothesis of there being no correlation can be rejected with the given data, implying that the UN report did have a positive influence in the use of terrorism-related narratives across the different newspapers. Or in other words, according to this test, the UN report caused newspapers to mention terrorism, concerning reports about CRSV and rape during the 7th of October 2023 Hamas Attack, more often.

6. Discussion and conclusion

“Women’s bodies are being used as political weapons. ... If it happened, not in my name. If it didn’t happen, it’s shame on the state to use women’s bodies and sexuality to promote political agendas, to promote further dispossession of land, to promote further killings, to promote abuse and rape.” (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2024).

This statement from Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2024), who has since been questioned by Israeli police on the suspicion of incitement, encapsulates the heart of the discussion surrounding the role of women in conflict and the complex, often weaponised narratives that are employed when writing about them, and the heart of this thesis (Staff, 2024). The analysis of the 38 newspaper articles reporting the events during the Hamas attack on the 7th of October, 2023, reveals the different ways in which women’s bodies and experience of CRSV and allegedly rape are framed in the media, reflecting political agendas and fueling a polarised narrative. The news articles covering CRSV and rape during the 7th of October, 2023 Hamas attack, do not simply recount the acts committed on the 7th of October, they serve as a narrative, either in creating new frames or enforcing already existing ones. This chapter will discuss the different results that were found and give a conclusion to the research question: “How are stories on sexual violence and rape in times of conflict, specifically in the context of the Hamas attack on the 7th of October, 2023, framed in four Dutch newspapers, and to what extent can these have been used to justify military violence?”.

6.1 Result Interpretation

The results of the research conducted show a clear alignment with the propagandistic strategies which were discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis. These strategies, particularly in the context of CRSV and (wartime) rape, are used to justify military violence and manipulate public perception. Chapter 2 also discussed how mentions of (wartime) rape can serve a strategic purpose as an atrocity story to dehumanise the alleged perpetrators, painting them as beasts (Tompkins, 1999). This is particularly relevant given that the UN report explicitly mentions that there has been no conclusive evidence to support claims of rape during the Hamas attack on the 7th of October (UN, 2024a). In this context, any mention of rape having happened, without mentioning that this is still under assessment, in the media should be considered falsehood, whether intentionally or due to a lack of due diligence by the writer of the article. As stories of wartime rape are both an atrocity, othering, and a dehumanising message, this narrative can’t be interpreted as anything else than a deliberate propagating message. In the Western world, there is a phenomenon to write about either ‘good’ or ‘evil’ soldiers, where the idea is that it is only the ‘evil’ soldiers who rape (MacKenzie, 2023). Although there wasn’t a clear narrative about who in this case the ‘good’ soldiers would be, it’s clear that Hamas is perceived as ‘evil’ soldiers, which furthers a narrative of polarization/othering them as the sole enemy. When focusing more on the frame of ‘rape as a weapon’, it is seen as a narrative that highlights the brutality of the crime while stripping the victims of their agency (Card, 1996). And, when looking at the different articles, none of the women who were victims of this rape according to the articles were mentioned or seen as agents. The articles only talked about the act, instead of about the actual victims apart from them as being part of a group and ‘Israeli victims of CRSV/ rape. This is in line with theories

about Dutch media, where women are often depicted as passive, in need of protection, and as victims lacking agency (Aaldering & Van Der Pas, 2020; Wiles et al., 1995).

Another prevalent theme in Dutch media is a narrative of depicting Muslims as evil in general (Konings & Notten, 2021). This is exemplified by the frame “Islamic terror state”, as used by *De Telegraaf*. Since Dutch crime reporting focuses on the location of the crime rather than social causes is partly seen (Rafiee et al., 2023). There wasn’t a clear focus on the locations where the events occurred, but there being little emphasis on the social causes of the crimes, is quite true. Explaining the underlying causes is one of the elements which can be seen in war journalism. However, this element has not been noticed, nor have the other two elements of avoiding polarization and encouraging analysis been highly present in the news articles (Feuerstein & Mandelzis, 2017).

The three strategies used in hate speech, i.e. othering, dehumanisation, and the atrocity story have all been seen in most news articles and across all different newspapers (Faustin, 2016; Feuerstein & Mandelzis, 2017; Oberschall, 2012; Picard, 1991; Wilcox, 1940). As hate speech is the most successful strategy from different propagating messages in being able to incite, or persuade people to commit or agree to mass atrocities and genocide, the fact that these strategies are prevalent in Dutch media framing when writing about the Hamas attack, shows that in fact there are clear narratives across the different ideological newspapers to justify the counterviolence Hamas and the people living in Gaza have undergone since the 7th of October, 2023 (Faustin, 2016).

Especially the justification of a group as a justified victim shows this, as Gazans have only been mentioned as victims in three different articles, and in all three articles there was a justification for this fact (Oberschall, 2012). This is one of the clearest examples of propagating strategies used to justify military violence, as the mention of a justified victim is one of the strategies used in hate speech.

6.2 Implications

This research has the potential to influence several domains in the Netherlands, particularly in the context of the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict. These domains include media practices, public perception, and the shaping of policies.

The findings show a reliance on elements of war journalism in Dutch media. By employing dehumanising narratives and misconceptions, such as writing about still unproven acts of rape, without giving a disclaimer that this still has to be researched, the media plays a role in shaping public discourse and narratives about the events of the 7th of October, 2023. Given the power of the media to influence societal perspectives, this thesis, in my opinion, underscores the ethical responsibilities journalists should employ by adopting peace journalism approaches, rather than war journalism. This approach can foster understanding and reduce polarisation, also within the country, in reporting on conflicts, such as the one in Israel-Palestine. Even though reducing polarisation is also one of the official goals of the Dutch government, both they and the media have not been showcasing the steps necessary to actually reach this goal, rather they are justifying violence. This research could help as an academic

argument for policymakers advocating for this change in policy and narratives, as well as serving as a critical reminder of the media's role in either escalating tensions or fostering informed public discussions about complex conflicts.

Policymakers often rely on media narratives to inform their decisions. The findings from this research suggest the need for critical engagement with these narratives, especially when they entail topics such as conflicts or atrocities such as sexual violence and acts of terror. Policymakers should strive to distinguish between journalistic framing and evidence-based analysis to avoid supporting actions that could exacerbate injustice against already vulnerable populations, such as the people living in Gaza.

6.3 Suggestions for further research

Building on the findings of this study, several suggestions can be made for future research into media framing, on the post- 7th of October, 2023, conflict in Israel-Palestine.

The first suggestion is to expand the subject matter. Future research could investigate media frames surrounding other accusations that have surfaced in the aftermath of the 7th of October attack. For instance, examining narratives about allegations against the UNRWA, or the sensationalised stories about beheaded babies. This could provide a deeper insight into how such claims are framed and used.

The second suggestion is to broaden the temporal scope and extend the timeframe to which the analysis is conducted. This could offer a more comprehensive view of how media narratives evolve. This could involve comparing frames before, during, and after key events, such as the first Israeli attacks in Rafah, or the exploding radios in Lebanon.

Several suggestions can be used for further research into the topic of media frames about Israel-Palestine since the attack on the 7th of October 2023. Subject-wise, research can be done into frames about other accusations. Such as Israel accusing UNRWA employees of helping Hamas or the stories of beheaded babies.

Secondly, also this research can be done over a longer period. Discourse analysis is also a possibility to research whether different atrocity stories, such as stories on sexual violence, indeed are used or published by Israel to justify their violent actions in the Gaza Strip. For instance, it could focus on media frames of the conflict, before and after the Israeli attack in Rafah. Another research can be done to analyse the potential impact of the various media frames on public perceptions. For example, by developing media strategies in favour of peace journalism through interviews.

Thirdly, a discourse analysis could prove useful to further explore whether atrocity stories, including those about sexual violence, are strategically employed by Israel or other actors to justify military actions in Gaza, by identifying patterns of narrative constructions and their correlation with policy shifts or military escalations, such as the attack to Rafah.

Fourth, the actual impact on the public's perception regarding the ongoing events in Gaza could have been interesting. For instance, by using interviews or surveys over a longer period, each

employed after a new pattern or trend is shown in the narratives used to talk about the events in Gaza.

Lastly, a comparative analysis across newspapers from different countries or regions could uncover cultural or political biases in reporting on the events during or in the aftermath of the 7th of October, 2023. Such a study could also identify regional variations in the adaptation of practices concerning war journalism versus peace journalism.

These different directions and research methods could deepen the understanding of media framing in conflict reporting and contribute to developing new policies or media strategies in times of conflict.

6.4 Conclusion

This thesis set out to answer the research question: “How are stories on sexual violence and rape in times of conflict, specifically in the context of the Hamas attack on the 7th of October, 2023, framed in four Dutch newspapers, and to what extent can these have been used to justify military violence?”. The analysis, which used both qualitative and quantitative methods, reveals how the strategic use of media narratives, especially those surrounding sexual violence and rape which is a short step towards othering and dehumanising the alleged perpetrator, can influence public perception and, in some cases, provoking outrage and justify military violence.

The findings show that the four newspapers did indeed employ frames that emphasized the brutality of the attack, with a specific focus on the atrociousness of different forms of CRSV and rape. These stories were framed as part of a larger narrative that dehumanised Hamas soldiers and, in some cases, even Gazans and Palestinians. Common tropes included depicting alleged perpetrators as savages, and using rape as a weapon. These tropes served to heighten the brutality of the event while stripping the respective victims of their agency. Notably, none of the articles provided specific details about the individual victims, reinforcing the portrayal of rape as an act of collective victimisation, rather than as a personal crime with unique individual stories, victims and perpetrators. Both the victims and the perpetrators were only mentioned as part of the group to which they belong, Israeli citizens or Hamas fighters.

Patterns across the four newspapers were largely consistent. Across all publications, the dehumanisation of Hamas and the victimisation of Israelis were central themes, as well as stories and images of the atrocities committed. One notable returning pattern is the use of mostly Israeli sources, suggesting a lack of critical due diligence in portraying both sides of the conflict by the authors of the articles. However, some differences were found in the different patterns when looking at the data per individual newspaper and comparing them.

A key finding was the shift in framing following the UN report, which highlighted the lack of conclusive evidence for claims of rape by Hamas during the attack. Despite this, media coverage continued to frame these still unproven acts as truth, underscoring the narrative of Hamas soldiers as brutes and evil. This framing justified violence against them, and, by extension, the whole of the Gaza Strip. The UN report also led to an increase in references to the UN as a source, suggesting its influence on the articles written, though the precise impact

is unclear. However, what is clear is the statistical correlation between the UN report and its influence on media articles explicitly writing about terrorism in relation to the 7th of October attack.

Across all newspapers, the dominant frames contributed to the justification of military violence in the Gaza Strip. These narratives, with their use of legal terms like systemic rape and terrorism, while failing to present both sides of the story, align with principles of war journalism by emphasizing conflict and polarisation rather than fostering understanding and reconciliation. Such narratives can shape readers' perceptions and opinions, influencing their views on the legitimacy of Israel's retaliatory actions in response to the 7th of October attack.

6.4.1 Frames in Dutch Newspapers

The frames, which can also serve as propagating messages used in hate speech, most prevalent in the news articles from *De Telegraaf*, *De Volkskrant*, *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, and *Trouw*, include those of sexual violence, systemic rape, Hamas as a terror organization, and the victimisation of Israelis. While the quantitative analysis found no statistically significant variation in the frequency of these frames across the newspapers, qualitative differences do show some trends and patterns, revealing possible editorial biases.

- *De Telegraaf* emphasized frames that dehumanise Hamas, Palestinians, and Islam, portraying them as brutes and underscoring the victimisation of Israelis and Jews, as well as holocaust survivors.
- *De Volkskrant* offered a slightly more nuanced approach, recognising the effects of the Israeli response on Gazans, however, while still framing Hamas as a terror organisation.
- *Reformatorisch Dagblad* leaned toward more war journalism-prone reporting, portraying Gazans as justified victims of Israeli violence.
- *Trouw* presented a more balanced approach in its reporting, incorporating strategies used in hate speech, while also providing a broader historical and legal context, in comparison to the other newspapers. *Trouw* focused more on the objective frame of “terror acts” instead of making accusatory statements or creating an ‘us versus them’ narrative. Additionally, *Trouw* also mentioned facts with a broader historical and legal meaning, such as genocide, war crimes, and antisemitism.

These differences are interesting, as they reflect the different ways in which their respective readerships get their information about events during the 7th of October, and evoke different emotional responses to the events that have happened in the Gaza Strip since. For example, *De Telegraaf*'s emphasis on dehumanising Hamas, Palestinians and Islam helps create an ‘us versus them’ narrative, framing Israelis as victims and Hamas, and by extension Palestinians and Islam as a whole, as a threat to our security. In contrast, *De Volkskrant* offers a more nuanced view, also acknowledging the impact of Israeli actions on Gazans, which also causes their respective readership to see Hamas and Islam as less than a security threat against whom immediate action is justified and necessary. This contrast between the two newspapers shows how the ideological leanings, or pillar background, affect the way they report on conflicts. As a result, the different readerships also show different opinions on what military responses from Israel in the Gaza Strip are justified.

6.5 Final reflections

This thesis concludes that media coverage of CRSV and rape in the context of the attack on the 7th of October, 2023, mirrors a broader pattern of wartime propaganda. The framing techniques employed by the four Dutch newspapers play a role in shaping narratives which justify Israel's military violence. By focusing on atrocities, while neglecting to present the perspectives of all parties involved, the media perpetuates a polarised view of othering and dehumanises both Hamas and Palestinians and strips victims of their individuality. This approach aligns with the principles of war journalism.

These findings underscore the need for a shift in Dutch media towards peace journalism, prioritising truth, fairness, and the inclusion of multiple voices. Such an approach can reduce dehumanising rhetoric that often follows conflict. By referencing a more varied set of sources and focusing on proven facts, the media can adequately write about the events of the 7th of October, 2023 attack, without evoking strong negative emotions from readers.

In times of conflict, the media can either polarise the public or contribute to mutual understanding, and journalists must embrace their role in supporting the latter.

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List of Figures

Figure 1: “The view from my window in Gaza”	Page 1
Table 4.1: explicitly mentioning different narratives and frames in the different articles	Page 33
Table 4.1: explicitly mentioning different narratives and frames in the different articles	Page 33
Table 4.1: explicitly mentioning different narratives and frames in the different articles	Page 34
Table 4.1: explicitly mentioning different narratives and frames in the different articles	Page 35
Table 4.1: explicitly mentioning different narratives and frames in the different articles	Page 35
Table 4.1: explicitly mentioning different narratives and frames in the different articles	Page 36
Table 4.1: explicitly mentioning different narratives and frames in the different articles	Page 36
Table 4.1: explicitly mentioning different narratives and frames in the different articles	Page 37