"I dumped my husband for a Turkish toyboy"
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In this article, we analyse how British tabloid newspapers represent relationships between mature British women and the younger Turkish toyboy lovers they meet (and sometimes look for) on their holiday; a practice that is often considered as the female counterpart to male sex tourism, albeit labelled differently as “romance tourism.” Employing a combination of thematic, lexical, narrative, and visual analysis, we examine how the British tabloids make sense of the contradicting social categories and power relations at play in these encounters, in particular with respect to age, gender, nation, and economic position. We consider these contradictions as typical for the intersectionality of gender identities, and use the tabloid stories about romance tourism as a means to study how such intersectionality becomes manifest in everyday practices. We find that the tabloids construct only one dimension of identity as key to women’s lives, that is the one of motherhood and more abstractly of caring for others. In addition, they present women as highly vulnerable to exploitation by foreign, exotic others, who are portrayed either as evil con men or—in the sporadic upbeat, happy-ending story we found—as dependent and passive objects of women’s desires.

KEYWORDS British press; intersectionality; newspapers; romance tourism; tabloids; Turkish toyboys

Introduction

Toyboys have a steady presence in global celebrity and popular culture. Superstars like Madonna, Cameron Diaz, and Demi Moore have dated younger men. Fictional characters have been put in relations with younger men, like Deirdre Barlow in the UK television soap Coronation Street, Jules Cobb in the US television comedy Cougar Town or, especially, Shirley Valentine, the middle-aged working class housewife, in the film of the same name, who has a happy affair with a charming young man in Greece. Women’s and life style magazines equally have published stories with titillating titles like “Do you have a toyboy yet?” or “Toyboy causes early death.” Specialized dating websites in the UK and
the US offer both older women and younger men an opportunity to get in touch with each other or to exchange experiences and advice.

While such fictional and real life stories may suggest that the hegemonic articulation of age and gender is shifting, it has also been claimed that the toyboy trend is a celebrity fad only, exacerbated by glamorous media and Internet attention (Michael J. Dunn, Stacey Brinton, & Lara Clark 2010). Part of the latter criticism is fed by suspicion towards the motives of younger men, who would see the relationship primarily in terms of economic benefit. This was the frame that the UK tabloids applied when UK soap star Cheryl Fergison dated and eventually married her twenty-one-years-younger Moroccan lover. Fergison is an actress who is clinically obese and does not match standard beauty ideals. The British media and the British public sharing their opinions on the Internet therefore doubted the toyboy’s sincerity; he was described as “penniless” and a “goat herder” who would be mostly interested in the legal access to the UK that marrying Fergison could provide him with.

This cursory glance at real life, fictional, and news stories about romance tourism suggests that they are assembled out of intersecting discourses of gender, age, nation, and class, with education, ethnicity/race, religion, sexuality, beauty, and other sources of socio-cultural division possibly coming in as well. Hence, romance tourism offers a steady stream of real life cases of intersectionality, enabling a more detailed examination of which intersections are more and less salient in situated practices, how their constitutive categories (for example, mature women; young men; Western; less developed) are not homogeneous in themselves; and how different levels of inequality are negotiated in situated practices (cf., Kathy Davies 2008; Gill Valentine 2007; Nira Yuval-Davis 2006). We explore these questions through an analysis of British tabloid stories about older British women dating younger Turkish men, who appeared as the dominant category. With their relatively big female readership, and their self-proclaimed status as guardians of public morality and common sense (e.g., Colin Sparks 1992) the tabloids provide the forum par excellence to examine how gender and age are intersected by other dimensions of identity, like nationality, class, or religion. Contrasting headlines like “Two timing Turkish toyboy wrecked my marriage” (Billy Paterson 2002) against “Welcome to the toyboy safari” (Kathryn Knight 2005, p. 46) or “Delight for lovestruck Sylvia” (Geoff Marsh 2003, p. 15) already suggest that these stories may not all work in the same hegemonic direction but may be sources of negotiation and contestation as well.

Before we discuss our methods and findings in more detail, we review the extant literature about romance tourism, especially in relation to intersectionality. We then discuss how the British tabloids have been theorized and researched, in particular with respect to the maintenance and contestation of traditional gender discourse.

**Romance Tourism**

Sex and romance tourism are practices where different dimensions of identity are articulated in particularly strong and fraught ways (cf., Edward Herold, Rafael Garcia, & Tony DeMoya 2001). In sexual or romantic encounters between tourists and local inhabitants, gender, age, class, nation, culture, and global economic inequalities come together in actual dyadic personal relationships. In tourism studies, the traditional male holiday pastime of “sex tourism” has been contrasted with female “romance tourism” (Herold, Garcia, & DeMoya 2001; Jessica Jacobs 2009). Deborah Pruitt and Suzanne LaFont (1995) suggest that women are looking for encounters that are more about romance and the possibility of long-term
romantic relationships, and less about (casual) sex. However, this sharp distinction, reflecting rather traditional gender stereotypes, has been criticized in later studies (Jacobs 2009; Jacqueline Sánchez Taylor 2006). For instance, Herold, García, and DeMoya (2001) suggest that the difference between sex and romance tourism is more like a continuum that is somewhat but not completely gendered. While acknowledging the importance of such a modification, in this study we maintain the terms “sex tourism” and “romance tourism” to separate the practices of male and female tourists, for reasons of clarity and ease.

Scholarly interest in romance tourism is of relatively recent date, and scarce compared with the attention to sex tourism. First, this may be due to the relative newness of the phenomenon. Increasing economic freedom of women has made it easier for women to travel by themselves. As Nancy A. Wonders and Raymond Michalowski write: “Travel to other countries facilitated the fluidity of identity because we typically leave behind the signposts and people associated with our present identity, making it easier to adopt new ones” (2001, 552). This freedom that comes with travelling has now also become available to single women. Second, Pruitt and LaFont (1995) argue that romance tourism may be more invisible and less blatantly exploitative than male sex tourism. Sex tourism privileges male desire and pleasure, commodifying women as dependent objects of desire, thus as body-for-others (Jan Jindy Pettman 1997). In sex tourism, “sex and bodies are viewed as commodities that can be packaged, advertised, displayed, and sold on a global scale” (Wonders & Michalowski 2001, 551). Romance tourism, on the other hand, supposedly fosters female desire for romance, and a long-term emotional and sensual relationship. Although romance tourism unavoidably produces inequalities and complications between two parties, it does not directly commodify the (male) body. Third, romance tourism may have remained somewhat under the radar of scholarship, because it does not fit the framework of most critical research on (sex) tourism. Focusing mainly on Western exploitation of the local population, this framework seems most easily applicable when Western men exploit local women or men (Jacobs 2009). Female romance tourism showing (mature) women as actively looking for sex within a context of great inequality may have escaped scholarly notice precisely because it does not match established gender roles and theoretical frameworks. The somewhat superficial distinction between romance tourism and sex tourism does not help in this respect and may be a reflection of how similar practices often tend to be framed in gender stereotypical terms; hence the notion of romance tourism obscures the possibility that women may be looking for simple sex like men do, whereas the notion of sex tourism may underplay the romantic fantasies that men, similar to women, may foster about their foreign encounters.

While studies of sex tourism generally deal with Asia, the scarce research about romance tourism tends to concentrate on the Caribbean. This is, in part, the result of the proximity of this region to the US, making it a prime holiday destination for US citizens. The Mediterranean and Africa occupy a similar place in the imagination of European romantic tourists. Jacobs (2009), for instance, describes relations between local males and female tourists from across Europe in the Egyptian Sinai, while Franck Michel (2007) identifies Senegal, Kenya, Egypt, and Morocco as popular countries for German romantic tourists. Our own study finds abundant evidence in the British tabloids of romance tourism from the UK to Turkey, Gambia, and Morocco. While the destinations of romantic tourism may differ, their unequal economic status is alike. The Caribbean, parts of the Mediterranean, and Africa are all less developed regions, with their national and local economies depending largely on tourism. As a result, relations between romantic tourists...
and their toyboys are profoundly unequal in economic terms. Thus, they challenge traditional masculine hegemony, while simultaneously confirming the dominance of the developed world.

While the complex gender relations emerging from these contradictory negotiations of power form a key issue in most studies dealing with romance tourism, they generally do not engage with the burgeoning work on intersectionality. The notion of intersectionality, originating from black feminist studies, was specifically developed to deal with contradictory identities and social categorizations and the domination and exclusion produced by such intersections (Patricia Hill Collins 1998; Ange-Marie Hancock 2007; Laurel S. Weldon 2008). The research about romance tourism, by, for instance, Andrea Freidus and Nancy Romero-Daza (2009), Herold, Garcia, and DeMoya (2001), Jacobs (2009), and Jacqueline Sánchez Taylor (2001, 2006) demonstrates the various tactics that both women and men use to quell the confusion arising from their relationship. Embracing traditional gender roles is the central one among them, with men performing particular kinds of masculinity typified by attention, courteousness, and (national) pride, thus articulating “the women tourists’ idealization of local culture and masculinity” (Pruitt & LaFont 1995, 422). Interestingly, some studies interpret this particular performance of masculinity as a transformation of the men, who reclaim their “true” identity until then suppressed by their economic subjugation (cf., Heidi Dahles & Karin Bras 1999; Herold, Garcia, & DeMoya 2001; Pruitt & LaFont 1995). Through this particular focus, the research on romance tourism itself reconstructs a traditional gender discourse in which men are supposed to be autonomous and resistant to changing for the sake of their significant others, whether these are wives and children, or foreign romantic interests. As the distinction between male sex tourism and female romance tourism already suggests, gender emerges as the main social category, and the main analytic concept, in the vast majority of studies on romance and sex tourism. Gender therefore, in this body of work, trumps all other inequalities—precisely illustrating the critique of intersectionality theorists in traditional gender studies (cf., Leslie McCall 2005; Weldon 2008).

Yet, the research on sex and romance tourism does hint at many other social divisions intersecting with gender. For instance, it suggests how masculinity and geography are connected through the projection of a certain kind of masculinity onto local men. This is particularly clear when looking at South-East Asia as a favourite destination for sex tourism (cf., C. Michael Hall & David Harrison 1992), but much less for romantic tourism. Yiu Fai Chow (2008) has convincingly shown how the physical features of Chinese men are rarely considered masculine in the white Western world. On the contrary, Chinese male characteristics are often seen as delicate and effeminate which apparently does not appeal to Western women looking for romance. The reverse case has been made about South East Asian women embodying Western ideals of subservient and frail femininity, therewith becoming objects of high desire for sex tourists (Ursula Biemann 2002). The combined research thus suggests that romantic tourism not only involves gender relations, but also inequality of race, class, nation, the body, and age: all these structures construct intersecting systems and create contradictory discourses.

The Mediation of Romance Tourism and the British Tabloid Press

A major shortcoming of the research about romance tourism is that there is little to no attention on its representations and evaluation, whether in the public spaces of news,
reality TV, documentary, or in the semi-private spaces of online blogs, commentaries, and forums. There are many studies about women’s travel writing and how travel can be transformative of women’s identities (e.g., Sara Mills 1993), but the connection with romance and sex is less often made. To our knowledge, there are no studies that address how gender, race, class, and nation inequalities interacting in romance tourism stories are represented, debated, and evaluated in popular or serious media alike.

It is clear, however, that media of all kinds are central to the understanding of contemporary intersectionality and to the analysis of postmodern and postcolonial relations of inequality. Media not only facilitate the spread of discourses retrieved from intersecting relations, but also may trigger the public to rethink the hierarchical systems and taken-for-granted beliefs (e.g., stereotypes on gender, age, nation, or class). Globalization, mass migration, and mass tourism have produced all kinds of new encounters and confrontations between people of different backgrounds, of which romance tourism is only one particular practice. Media provide a central resource to make sense of these experiences and to come to terms with the “others” presented to us by modernity and globalization on an almost everyday basis. These others appear as migrants, refugees, or local populations, as postcolonial scholars have theorized (see, for example, Edward Said 1979), but also, as queer studies have shown, as individuals with different sexualities and/or ethnicities (cf., Elizabeth Weed & Naomi Schor 1997). In the current social and cultural conditions of high fluidity and complexity, the notion of “other” has been stretched and proposed as a position that comes into being when people identify others as somehow “different,” “strange,” or “deviant” (cf., Mary K. Canales 2000). With their institutional and cultural assignment to identify and cover the new and the unexpected, media are a core location where “others” are socially constructed, usually in the form of schematic stereotypical images or characters that the intended audience is familiar with. This form of image construction also reproduces and circulates desires and fantasies regarding the “other,” although, conceivably it also facilitates an on-going dominant binary relation between “effeminate, exotic, poor” Third World nations versus “powerful, masculine, wealthy” First World nations. While, as said, there is no research about the representation of romance tourism specifically, it can be expected that various stereotypes will be combined and contested in one and the same story (whether it is fiction or news).

The British tabloid press takes up a special position in the vast media landscape where stories about romance tourism may be found, first, because “sexuality in its various manifestations” is quintessential to this medium, as Sparks says (1992, 41). Evidence to that claim is, to begin with, the on-going phenomenon, be it currently limited to The Sun, of portraying a topless girl on Page 3. Like the sexist jokes that abound in the tabloids, the Page 3 girl supposedly represents “natural” sexuality, while all sexuality that falls outside this realm of normalcy is constructed as deviant, whether it concerns adultery, sex addiction, SM practices, homosexuality, virginity, nymphomania, or doing it with a toyboy. All such stories become even more newsworthy for the tabloids if they can be tied to a popular celebrity or holder of public or religious office. Sex crimes like rape and paedophilia can also count on extraordinary attention from the tabloids through which sexual normalcy and deviance are constructed in particularly ideological ways. According to Keith Soothill and Sylvia Walby (1991, 12) such stories have historically been constructed as a genre of pornography, simultaneously revelling in the details of particular transgressions and raging against the immorality of the alleged perpetrators. They also show how stories about sex crimes focus on “stranger danger” and extreme murder cases, hence making the more
everyday realities of, for instance, date rape and rape within marriage invisible. Cynthia Carter (1998, 220) argues similarly that the tabloids’ reporting of sex crimes has become “more explicit and lurid in detail over the past few decades.” She concludes that part of the ideological effect of such reporting is twofold: everyday sexual violence inflicted by men on their wives or girlfriends is made normal (because it is not deemed worthy of news coverage), and the world outside the home is constructed as a dangerous place where male strangers should be met with fear. Focusing specifically on how the victims of crime are covered, both Helen Benedict (1992) and Diana T. Meyers (1997) found in their studies that news coverage includes an interrogation of the victim’s sexual behaviour, and a suggestion of blame if she does not pass the test of sexual modesty.

It is in this minefield of patriarchal heteronormativity that stories of British older women dating younger Turkish men acquire their newsworthiness and their ideological meanings. These women step out of traditional gender discourse by being sexually active with initially unknown men. According to the ideological frameworks of the tabloid press, this is not only transgressive but must also be a recipe for disaster. Their age adds an additional irregularity to their behaviour, as does the fact that they engage with a foreigner, for the tabloids are not only known for their misogynist stories but also for their xenophobic ones. The tabloid treatment of ethnic and religious minorities, migrants, and asylum seekers has been well examined, and generally produces evidence of stereotyping, prejudice, exclusion, and outright racism (e.g., Elizabeth Poole 2002; Elizabeth Poole & John E. Richardson 2006; Teun Van Dijk 1991). Female members of these “other” groups are often represented as victims of an excessive male self-centred culture (as in stories about single motherhood and absent fathers among British Caribbeans [Miri Song & Rosalind Edwards 1997]), or as refusing to adjust to the British way of life, as in stories about Muslim women wearing a veil (e.g., Gholam Khiabany & Milly Williamson 2008). When “indigenous” British women voluntarily cross over to these groups, as the women dating younger Turkish men do, they not only defy norms of passive female sexuality, but they also challenge assumptions of white British superiority. Hence, one can expect the tabloids, as the popular producers of common sense and mainstream morality, to do everything they can to bring these women discursively back under control. Nevertheless, it has also been suggested that specific tabloid stories may sometimes undermine their own general misogynist and xenophobic slant, especially when particularly tragic human-interest stories coincide with the plight of their regular readership. As Elisabeth Bird (1992, 160) says in her study of US tabloids and their female readers: “They are to some extent an alternative way of looking at the world . . . offer scope for some resistance to everyday realities and material for play.” More generally, popular culture has been shown to contain moments and spaces of negotiation (cf., Liesbet Van Zoonen 2005), making the question of their construction of tabloid stories an empirical rather than a predictable one.

**Method**

The word “toyboy” in relation to a foreign country appears for the first time in British tabloid headlines in 1993. It concerns a story about a forty-five-year-old grandmother who allegedly was stabbed to death by her twenty-six-year-old Moroccan lover (Daily Mail, August 5, 1993). Ever since there has been a steady stream of stories about British women and their toyboys from abroad. We focused our search for relevant articles on tabloid coverage of Turkish toyboys, since they seemed to appear most often and because Turkey...
is one of the most popular British tourist destinations, with resorts like Bodrum, Kusadasi, and Marmaris topping the list of favourite holiday places. British tourists are the biggest group of visitors to Turkey, after Germany and Russia (Tursab 2012). A documentary on Channel 4, *Manhunters: Our Turkish Toyboys*, additionally demonstrates the popularity of holiday romance in Turkey. A search for tabloid stories in Nexis, yielded sixty-five stories about ordinary women running off with Turkish men in *The Mirror* and *The Sunday Mirror* (nineteen), *The Sun* (eleven), *The News of the World* (seven), *The Daily Mail* (six), *The People* (six) and sixteen stories from the UK regional press. We looked for the offline version of these articles in the tabloid archives of the Department of Social Sciences at Loughborough University in order to have a full understanding of the placement, spread and layout of these articles.

We applied a combination of thematic, lexical, narrative, and visual analyses to examine these articles in detail. This meant that we coded the articles in terms of the themes they addressed with regards to gender, age, nation; analysed word choice and style to assess the normative dimensions in the stories; examined the particular narratives in terms of behaviour, motives, and interactions of the main characters, the constructions of villains and victim, and the assumed closure of the events; investigated the presence and meaning of images with the stories. We checked the validity of our findings by making an additional search of tabloid articles dealing with toyboys from Morocco, and toyboy stories in the UK broadsheet press. We first present the general tendencies in the data, and then zoom in on two contrasting frames about romance tourism as deviant versus exciting.

**General Tendencies**

Three themes emerged from our analysis, in order of frequency: broken families, deceit, and holiday romance. The dominance of broken families is mainly the result of the 2005 story about a woman named Elaine Walker: according to the press she left her daughter of fifteen alone to join her young Turkish lover. The simultaneous coverage by *The Sun*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Mirror*, *The People*, *The News of the World*, and regional papers—all in August 2005—suggest that the police investigated this case, although none of the articles mention its originating source. The theme of deceit is closely related to the theme of broken families. News items in this category are about women who have been betrayed by their Turkish toyboys who were after their money or a visa to the UK. While the themes of broken families and deceit both construct romance tourism as highly problematic, a minority of news items look at the happiness that these relationships bring to women. Some articles report a successful marriage against all odds; others focus on the joys of unproblematic sex.

The headlines of the articles demonstrate the typical confrontational language of the British tabloids, with their ironic, satiric, and sometimes outright aggressive tone (Dick Rooney 2000). Most headlines, thus, express deep and explicit ideological judgments. For instance, Elaine Walker is described as “worst mum,” “runaway mum,” “fly-away mum,” “nasty Elaine,” and “mummy monster,” who “has lost [the] right to call herself a mother.” Other women are called “man-hungry gal pals,” “granny,” or “OAP” (old age pensioner), who “leave,” “dump,” or “ditch” their husbands; all in different gradations implying a unilateral and cold act of abandonment. Other expressions construct these women as immature, “behaving like a selfish teenager” or “giddy as a teenager,” while yet another type of description focuses on them being fooled: “blinded by love,” “fooled by his charm,” “fool in
love.” None of these descriptions implies a sense of positive female agency. The Turkish men in these stories are much less visible and usually described in terms of their low economic status through characterizations such as “peasant’s son,” “chicken factory worker,” or “waiter” and “barman.” At the same time, however, their romantic behaviour and handsome appearance is often praised, especially by the women themselves. The descriptions of the men’s low economic status in combination with the women’s emphasis on their lovability, constructs Turkish masculinity as consumable rather than productive, a construct that is stereotypically captured by the recurring reference to “Turkish delight.”

With such themes and language, only a limited number of stories are told in which gender, age, nationality, and economic inequality mostly come together in traditional ways. One type of narrative tells about older, lonely, and somehow vulnerable women who are fooled by much younger Turkish men. They are often depicted as humiliated, innocent, and naïve, manipulated for the purpose of economic gain or a British passport. These stories have no happy ending and they draw on stereotypes and clichés about female passivity and male activity, but also about evil men from the (Middle) East (cf., Tim Jon Semmerling 2006). In contrast, other stories construct the women as active agents of their own lives. However, this is usually combined with a moral judgment of deviance; women leaving their families behind for their own self-interest, as in Elaine Walker’s case. In our material, we only found a few exceptional articles in which such agency was presented as desirable and leading to a happy ending (more detail on this will be presented in the next section).

Invariably, the pictures with the articles show a white mature woman, wearing make-up, jewellery, and summer (often pink) attire, while the men in the pictures are young and dark of skin and hair. Typifications like “blonde Rosemary” or “blonde 45 year old-grandmother” further construct a strong ethnic contrast between the women and their lovers. In most pictures, the women take the foreground by being in the front of the picture or, more subtly, through the absence of gestures or poses on the part of the Turkish man that suggest activity. Much more than the language and narratives, the pictures evoke discourses of ethnicity, age, and economic inequality, because the differences are directly visualized.

We thus see, on the basis of these general tendencies, how the themes, language, stories, and visuals together present a rather traditional framework of either victimized or evil women, with little space for positive female agency. This is articulated with an Orientalist discourse of the fearsome and treacherous East, and exacerbated by the age and economic differences between the women and their lovers. In these overall tendencies, two particular cases stand out because they seem structurally the same (sexually active mothers leaving home and hearth for their Turkish lover, ending happily in marriage), but are presented by the tabloids in diametrically opposed ways: the predictable demonization of Elaine “the monster mum” versus the unexpected celebration of “you only live once” Eileen.

Elaine versus Eileen

At the time of the news story in 2005, Elaine Walker is forty-five, divorced and in love with a twenty-six-year-old Turkish man she met on her holiday in Turkey. She decides to go back and live with him in Turkey, but her fifteen-year-old daughter does not want to join her and stays behind alone. She later moves in with her father in the UK and Elaine marries the Turkish man. Eileen Ozdag (the surname of her Turkish husband) tells the same kind of story: she was divorced, had three daughters, went on holiday to Turkey, met a younger Turkish man and married him. Yet, the tabloid coverage about the two women is
completely different. This obviously has to do with the way their stories came to the attention of the tabloids: in Elaine’s case the story came from the police checking on the daughter living by herself. The very first sentence of her news portfolio starts: “A SCHOOLGIRL has been abandoned by her mother who has flown to Turkey to start a new life with a holiday romance boyfriend” (The Evening Standard, August 5, 2005). Eileen’s story, in contrast, is part of a documentary about special people from Dublin, and her introduction to the tabloid readers is very dissimilar: “Meet a real-life Shirley Valentine—she visited Turkey and returned with a hunk!” (Clare Stronge 2005). In 2007, Eileen is back on the screen in a documentary about her efforts to help two other female friends to find love in Turkey (The Turkish Wives Club).

The initial framing of the story of Elaine as a deranged mother, and Eileen as a happy adventurous woman persists and is extended throughout the rest of the coverage. All initial headlines about Elaine construct the story as being about a daughter left behind (e.g., “Mother leaves girl”; “Girl left behind by mum”, Kathryn Lister 2005, p. 47). The following days bring different extensions of that perspective, first by letting family and neighbourhood speak of their disgust with Elaine, and then by adding ever more detail suggesting what a bad mother Elaine has been before: she has been married three times and has five children with four (or five, the tabloid figures vary in this respect) different fathers; she put a son in care when he was nine and—as a result, according to an angry grandmother speaking in one of the tabloids—the son died of alcohol problems (in another paper he committed suicide) in his late twenties; she would go out drinking and clubbing with another daughter and leave the younger one behind with family. No wonder the popular press concludes in the second week of coverage, through the voice of an ex-boyfriend, that the “worst mum in Britain was like a selfish teenager. Her family always came second to wild boozing, partying . . . and passion” (Chris Tate 2005, p. 16–17). After family, neighbours, and ex-boyfriends have vilified Elaine, she gets to speak herself but first in the Turkish press and television from which the tabloids quote her as not coming back, being prepared to risk everything, madly in love, not concerned about the age difference, and as showing no remorse at all: “I have had a rotten life and Ali is the best thing that ever happened to me” (Mike Underwood 2005, p. 3). Leaving her daughter behind was a price worth paying, she is quoted as saying, although the tabloids also concede that according to Elaine her daughter did not want to come, was left in the safe hands of friends, and agreed to come over for a holiday later, thus putting the story of abandonment in a different light. Nevertheless, when Elaine boasts, according to The Sun (Kathryn Lister 2005) about her Turkish toyboy being “great in bed,” and an “amazing lover” with whom she experienced “the best sex she ever had” and “maybe wants a baby,” the scene is set for a new round of defamation and scorn by the tabloid writers and their readers:

Her excuse? Apparently, until 26-year-old Ali Murat came along she’d had a “rotten life.” Since it encompassed four previous husbands, five children—one of whom she’d put into care and who subsequently committed suicide—it was certainly a messy one. (Sue Carroll 2005)

The overall discourse of the tabloids is that mothers cannot leave their children, and when the victimized daughter opens up and speaks against her mother this frame is then set in stone:
I have had to hear my mum saying she cares more for some man she has just met than her own daughter and it has been torture. Then I have had to read her bragging about her sex life with this man and posing for pictures and it just turns my stomach. ... There has been talk of my mum being charged with neglect if she ever came home and I hope she is. She should suffer. I can't think of a better place for her than prison. They should lock her up, throw away the key and forget about her—just like she forgot about me. (Geirgina Dickinson 2005, p. 42)

In response, Eileen later told other media that her daughter was lying and had made up stories, but “the truth” is not really an issue for the discourse of sacrosanct motherhood that the tabloids are trying to enforce here, and that is typified also by a number of conspicuous absences: how much of the “rotten life” was articulated with being poor and working class? Elaine went to Turkey with her other, older daughter who also fell in love with a Turkish man but the tabloids do not dwell on the question of what kind of mother she is to that daughter? The father of the abandoned daughter is said to be abroad and hurrying back through the course of events but does not enter the picture until weeks later. In addition, there is an almost complete absence of the object of Elaine’s love, the Turkish man. The few occasions in which he does appear in the tabloids it is to ridicule his poor English and discredit his intentions.

The tabloids ignore class, fatherhood, and the Turkish man, thus annihilating several key intersectional dimensions of the story. Instead, they take the opportunity to hammer down traditional gender norms of motherhood being the ultimate fulfilment for women, even if that means giving up personal fulfilment and sexual pleasure. There is no serious attention to any kind of complementary discourse (fatherhood, kinship?), or of an alternative perspective. Wasn’t the daughter in the safe hands of friends and later of her father? When one reads the final instalment of this story, when daughter Laura says: “Mum dumping me to live with her Turkish lover was the BEST thing to ever happen” (Robert Stansfield 2005, p. 35), because she is so happy with her father, one cannot help but wonder where this father was before? But that is a question that does not fit the tabloids’ obsession with motherhood as the core issue in this story.

Eileen’s coverage started six days before Elaine’s, at the end of July 2005, because she was featured in a documentary about Dublin and its multicultural life. She is shown in the documentary and described in the newspapers as an adventurous woman who searched for and found love in Turkey. Like Elaine, she speaks of a difficult past: “I was a single mum-of-three after my marriage of 22 years ended in divorce. At 44 I considered myself washed up” (Rebekah Connane 2007, p. 40). After her divorce, Eileen “developed an appetite for Moorish toyboys” and when she met a Turkish barman they got married within weeks (Liam Fay 2005, p. 28). The feelings of Elaine and Eileen for their Turkish men also are described similarly: Elaine is “head over heels in love,” and “the luckiest woman alive,” while Eileen “feels good” and sees herself as “young and lightening up,” or “opening like a flower.” In addition, like in Elaine’s case, the English of the Turkish partner is also not very fluent. Yet, while Elaine received scorn for her impulsive move to Turkey, Eileen is well understood and supported. This may be, firstly, because she tells her story at a moment when her love has been proven; the media present her with her Turkish husband’s last name as Eileen Ozdag. Secondly, there is also no sign of her three children needing her care (in fact, none of the articles gives any information about her children, nor of their age when she began seeking love in Turkey). It seems as if motherhood becomes less pressing for the tabloids when the
children have grown up. *The Mirror*, for instance, writes supportively about another woman, fifty-six-year-old Linda and her toyboy. She is quoted as saying “I should’ve been enjoying life. I’d been divorced five years, my girls were grown up—surely now it was ‘me’ time” (Anna Wharton 2007, p. 30). The only doubt about Eileen’s happy story is inserted by Eileen herself, who admits that her friends doubted her husband’s sincerity and thought he was looking for a visa (Liam Fay 2005, p. 28). Two years later Eileen again appears in a documentary, which draws eager and mostly supportive tabloid attention. In *The Turkish Wives Club*, Eileen tells how she fell in love with barman Ulas Ozdag, “a man HALF her age and TWICE her size” (Erin McCafferty 2007) and how she loves for her single female friends to find the same happiness. The programme is a one-off reality-type documentary following the women on their “search for Turkish talent” (Maev Quigley 2007, p. 1). The tabloids are clearly on the side of Eileen and her friends; the stories are friendly and supportive and seem to accept that women of a certain age are entitled to pleasure and fun (unless they have family obligations as in Elaine’s case, or let themselves be duped as in the many stories about deceit). Yet, this positive frame seems to rest on the fact that Elaine and her friends go abroad for their search.

Turkey and its men are constructed as being available at will, and made into passive consumables for British women. Eileen is the active person in all stories, making the first move on Ulas who never gets to speak in any of the tabloids. On more than one occasion she is quoted as calling him her “Turkish delight” (e.g., Erin McCafferty 2007) and in the documentary she says jokingly: “He is great at carrying my bags through the airport” (*Sunday Business Post*, September 16, 2007). Turkey itself is described as a land of “sand, sea and no-strings sex,” where “besides the climate and the party atmosphere the main attraction is the men” (*Sunday Business Post*, September 16, 2007). Turkish men are available on this “market” for Eileen’s friends as “foreign lovers to spice up their lives” (Maev Quigley 2007, p. 1), or “as a bit of eye candy on the arm” (Rebekah Conmane 2007, p. 40). Only one newspaper, not a tabloid for that matter, is critical about this limited and stereotypical portrayal of Turkey and its inhabitants (*Sunday Business Post*, September 16, 2007), but without these stereotypes a positive frame of the UK women looking for love and excitement may be impossible. One cannot imagine similar upbeat stories with Brighton or Newquay in the UK as the main hunting grounds.

**Discussion**

The general tendencies in our data and the specific contrasts between the stories of Elaine and Eileen suggest strongly that motherhood, nationality, and economic status are the main dimensions of identity that together construct the particular coverage of romance tourism in the British tabloids. The theme of broken families is prominent, and comes into play when older women leave their husbands and/or children for a Turkish lover. Elaine’s story has been constructed as a quintessential transgression of good motherhood and hence her vilification serves the tabloids well in restoring moral order. Her ex-husband, like Eileen’s, hardly appeared in the coverage, suggesting that it is not wifehood but motherhood that is the key driver of these narratives. This is further demonstrated by the fact that single, divorced, or widowed older women are entitled to some fun in their difficult lives, according to the tabloids, but only if they don’t get themselves duped by conning Turkish men; otherwise they are framed as brainless and naïve. The only way out of this kind of coverage is when a woman like Eileen has managed to turn the odds around: she is
shown as in control of her situation, of her husband, and of Turkey, to the extent that she “offers” it to her friends to find pleasure and romance.

Overall, themes, language, narrative, and visuals of news coverage of romance tourism thus produce three basic frames: transgression (bad), victimization (stupid), or exploitation (good). Before discussing these outcomes in more theoretical terms, it is important to check whether they depend on our choice of media (tabloids) and of the particular nation (Turkey). A quick scan of tabloid coverage of Moroccan toyboys shows similar frames: there is a story of a “besotted OAP,” described as a “plump redhead” who “ditched her husband” and met with disapproval of her children (transgression: Alex Peake 2002, p. 27) and of a Moroccan toyboy suspected of murdering his older girlfriend (victimization: Daily Mail, August 5, 1993). In the tabloid coverage of obese EastEnders actress Cheryl Fergison dating and marrying her younger Moroccan lover, all the elements in our data come together: the romance is first described as “far fetched” (Daily Mail, July 12, 2010), with the Moroccan being a “goat herder” and suspected of only wanting to marry her to get a visa (Samantha Wostear and Kelly Strange 2010, p. 42–43). Cheryl, however, is portrayed as happy and longing for her new man, without ignoring her family duties: “My son Alex was so excited—we were instantly like a little family” (The Mirror, November 9, 2011). Nevertheless, the Moroccan man in question does not enter the picture; he is exoticized, also by Cheryl when she confesses that she wants to marry with “a few camels and a tent” (The Mirror, February 23, 2011). While the camels are not part of the stereotypes of Turkey, the focus on poverty, little education, or a low-status occupation in an exotic context speaks of a similar orientalist angle as in the construction of Turkey. The UK broadsheets did pay attention to the stories of Elaine and Eileen with the same kind of frames but much less intensively. A general Nexis search for toyboy and Turkey, Morocco, or Gambia and for “romance tourism” in the broadsheets delivered less than a handful of stories which all connected to celebrities, theatre plays, or television shows. This particular tabloid focus on romance tourism of ordinary woman is more evidence, first, of how sexuality is a main, constitutive concern of these newspapers, as we discussed in our literature review, and, second, of how through their stories about ordinary women instead of celebrities or the élite, they connect with “the people,” i.e., their readership of working class women and men.

Our analysis shows, furthermore, that despite the intersectionality of women’s romantic encounters with Turkish men, there is only one dimension of identity that counts, as far as the tabloids are concerned, and that is the one of motherhood. More generally, this connects to a traditional discourse of care through which people of the female sex are positioned as either good women looking after others (husband, children, family, and neighbourhood) or as failing ones, putting their own interests above those of others (cf., Berenice Fisher & Joan Tronto 1990), which they do if they chose a younger Turkish man over their husbands and kids. Only if there are no others to look after anymore and if women have proven that they gave their very best (“I had a difficult life”), then will the tabloids allow them to go for their own fun.

Evidently, if that fun would undermine traditional relations of care, it would present a transgression and be once again morally reprehensible. The search for Turkish or other exotic young men is in that respect safe because they are not part of the normal horizon of care for British women; white, Western young men would be much too easily confused with their sons. It is hence possible, but a matter for further research, that the tabloids would be even less “accepting” of relationships with younger British men. On the other hand, while
presenting exotic and easily consumable pleasure Turkish men are also constructed as a risk because, as the tabloids keep repeating, their motives for dating older British women will be economic and exploitative. Such exploitation turns traditional patterns of the global economy around, at the expense of British women, and is thus furiously condemned by their surroundings and the tabloids alike. There is only one situation in which romance tourism fits the conservative politics and moral of the British tabloids and supports capitalist and patriarchal hegemony: this is when the woman in question has fulfilled her caring duties and may legitimately pursue her own happiness, and when she recreates the global economic order by exploiting the “Others” of developing countries, whether these are in Turkey, Morocco, Gambia, or elsewhere on the poorer parts of the globe. Intersectionality is thus highly visible in tabloid coverage, as is the way their particular articulation of gender, nation, and economic wealth maintains the global status quo.

NOTES

1. Available at http://vrouw.blog.nl/, translation from Dutch by the authors.
2. Available at www.nu.nl/, translation from Dutch by the authors.
5. Available at http://www.mirror.co.uk/3am/celebrity-news/eastenders-star-cheryl-fergison-marries-129931.
6. According to Sun Editor Dominic Mohan, talking to the Leveson Inquiry, the Page 3 girl “is an innocent staple of British life whose daily pictures of topless models celebrate natural beauty” (Dan Sabbagh 2012).
7. Based on a search in Nexis UK.
9. Man Hunters is a documentary series, which explores a growing holiday trend, where it’s not just sun, sea, and sand on tap, but love, affection, male companionship, and for some, sex.
10. Search conducted on September 10, 2012.

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