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The new portrayal of female child sexual offenders in the print media: A qualitative content analysis

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The new portrayal of female child sexual offenders in the print media: A qualitative content analysis

The mass media has the ability to shape public opinion on child sexual offenders. To date, research has found that offenses committed by female child sexual offenders have been portrayed in the media with undertones of sympathy and romanticization. With the apparent shift in gender roles toward gender egalitarianism, the aim of the present study was to obtain an up-to-date understanding of how female child sexual offenders are portrayed in the print media across western countries. The study utilized newspaper articles involving female child sexual offenders, published in English across western countries from 2012 to 2016 ($N = 35$ articles). A qualitative content analysis revealed two major themes: female child sexual offenders are dangerous and they are accountable for their actions. The findings of the current study are positive and shed light on the potential advancement of the reporting of female child sexual offenders in the print media at an international level.

Keywords

Child sexual abuse; media representation; gender; female child sexual offenders

Introduction

Over the last three decades, the topic of child sexual offending has become a well-explored area in the literature. Only more recently has the topic of females who sexually offend against children begun to be recognized as an issue in western society. However, through a patriarchal structure female child sexual offenders are viewed differently from their male counterparts; traditional sex scripts held about females carry the view that females are innocent and harmless (Boroughs 2004; Denov 2004). The mass media has the ability to shape and reinforce gender roles and sex scripts (Meyers 1996) and, in turn, is a valuable platform to examine the portrayal of female offenders. It is important to explore the representation of female child sexual offenders through this platform, particularly as the media plays an influential role in public perception (Cole and Daniel 2005). In addition to shaping and reinforcing public values, beliefs and myths, the media can essentially stimulate or impasse policies (Berkeley Media Studies Group 2003). The aim of this paper is to obtain an up-to-date understanding of how female child sexual offenders are portrayed in the print media across western society. The current study is the first study of its kind to explore how female child sexual offenders are depicted in newspaper reports across more than two countries.

The understudied nature of female child sexual offenders may be attributable to a number of reasons. One reason is that the general population does not perceive females as potentially destructive sexual aggressors (Clements, Dawson and Das Nair 2014). Regarding the incapability of a female to sexually offend against a child, Mathis (1972: 54) stated “That she might seduce a helpless child into sexplay is unthinkable, and even if she did so, what harm can be done without a penis?” While this appears to be a strong view, recent research has found that the general public report significantly greater anger and significantly greater want for harsher consequences when the child sexual offender was male rather than female (e.g., Geddes, Tyson and McGreal 2013). The general public have difficulty perceiving females as sexual predators because the perception violates traditional sex scripts; that is, females are

submissive, nurturing, passive and innocent (Denov 2003). This misconception – that females cannot perpetrate acts of sexual violence on children – may marginalize or silence victims of female-perpetrated abuse (Hetherington 1999).

A second reason may be due to researchers perceiving these offenders as a rarity and therefore not warranting a focus of study. However, recent research has found that female sexual offenders are much more prevalent than once thought. In fact, Cortoni, Babchishin and Rat (2016) conducted a meta-analysis on 12 countries and found that while police statistics reflected a small amount of sexual offenses as being perpetrated by females, victimization surveys indicated that abuse by female sexual offenders was six times greater than shown in the official data. Although it is indisputable that males make up the majority of child sexual offenders, this does not negate the reality of female child sexual offenders. Contrary to popular belief, victims of female-perpetrated sexual abuse face similar traumatic effects to victims of male-perpetrated sexual abuse, including depression, suicidal ideation, rage, difficulties with identify and substance abuse (Denov 2004). Further, research has found that individuals who experienced sexual abuse by both males and females maintained that the abuse by a female perpetrator was more psychologically damaging (Denov 2004; Elliott 1994).

Only four studies to date have explored the textual representation of female child sexual offenders in the media (Chiotti 2009; Hayes and Baker 2014; Landor 2009; Landor and Eisenchlas 2012). These studies identified that the rhetoric contrasted between female and male child sexual offenders was vastly different. For example, in a critical discourse analysis of 13 Australian newspaper articles published between 1998 and 2007, Landor (2009) found that while articles reporting on male offenders had a discourse of pronounced disgust, articles on female offenders had undertones of sympathy. Also, male offenders were exclusively given labels such as “paedophile” and “pervert” and such labels did not appear for female offenders; rather, female offenders appeared “lonely”, “vulnerable”, “heartbroken” and “depressed.” In a different study, Chiotti (2009) conducted a quantitative content analysis that utilized

several media outlets (newspapers, magazines and television programs) in the United States of America (USA) between 1994 and 2009. Like Landor (2009), Chiotti (2009) found a clear distinction in the overall tone of cases; in about 25% of reports, male offenders were portrayed as evil, whereas female offenders were reported negatively in less than 5% of reports. In addition, while male offenders were depicted as predatory in 22% of reports, female offenders were reported as predatory in only about 2% of reports; rather, females were portrayed in a caregiving role to the victim or as having an emotional connection to the victim (e.g., “in love”).

Landor and Eisenchlas (2012) explored the reporting of sexual offenses committed by male and female educators. The qualitative content analysis utilized 29 Australian newspaper reports published between 1999 and 2010. Similar to the previous studies, Landor and Eisenchlas (2012) found markedly different characterizations between female and male offenders. In particular, pejorative gender labels were used for males (e.g., “paedophile”, “pervert”) and not for females, despite similar offenses having been committed. In contrast, female offenders were depicted in a more sympathetic tone, with the romanticization of the offenses (e.g., “pupil lover”) appearing to mitigate the accountability of their acts to some level. Finally, Hayes and Baker (2014) used a discursive analytic on 392 news articles published between 2000 and 2010 across Australia and the United Kingdom. Unlike the previous studies, the authors found that a number of females (in 30 articles) were depicted as pariahs and demonized for their crimes. However, like the previous studies, the authors found that the females were often cast as not completely responsible for their actions, because they had a male accomplice, were mentally ill or were in a “romantic” relationship with the victim.

Gender roles of females in western society are changing away from traditional values toward more egalitarian roles (Fine-Davis 2016). These changes are evident across social, economic and political frameworks (Fine-Davis 2016). Also, with the ongoing implementation of macro-level policies across western countries, ideological institutional change is evident across homes and workplaces; for example,

the proliferation of men's participation in child care and housework (Doucet and Lee 2014). The increase in the status of females is not just evident in demographic and cultural markers, but also in cultural products such as television shows, movies, song lyrics and books (Twenge, Campbell and Gentile 2012). With the apparent shift in gender roles toward gender egalitarianism, and the ongoing implementation of macro-level policies, it begs the question of whether there may also be a shift in how female offenders are depicted in the media – away from the undertones of unaccountability of and sympathy for the offender.

Overall, the studies to date have found an unbalanced rhetoric in media articles between male and female child sexual offenders, even when similar offenses have been committed. The portrayal of female child sexual offenders appears mostly to downplay or romanticize the abuse, often ignoring the imbalance of power between the child and offender. The portrayal of female child sexual offenders is an important topic since the misconstruction may marginalize or silence victims of female-perpetrated abuse (Hetherington 1999), hinder the timely and safe reporting of offenses by victims (Hayes and Baker 2014) and avert attention from correctly profiling sexual offenders (Landor and Eisenchlas 2012). With the apparent shift in gender roles toward more egalitarian roles, and the ongoing implementation of macro-level policies, the study aimed to achieve an up-to-date understanding of how female child sexual offenders are portrayed in the print media across western society. Based on a review of the literature discussed, the current study was guided by the following research questions: how are female child sexual offenders portrayed? Specifically, what language is used, including in relation to the behavior of the female and the context of abuse?

Method

To attain saturation (Altheide 1987) and collate the most up-to-date articles, a sampling frame of all newspaper articles published in English from 1 January 2012 to 31 December 2016 was identified on

the ProQuest Newsstand server using a keyword search.¹ Several search terms were utilized to capture a broad scope of articles. These search terms contained “female child sexual offender”, “female child sex offender”, “female sexual offender”, “female sex offender”, “female child predator”, “female predator”, “female paedophile” and “female pedophile.”² The search returned a total of 71 newspaper articles.

Requirements for inclusion were that the article had to: discuss a specific female child sexual offender (rather than a female who sexually offended against an adult instead of a child or discuss the general topic of female child sexual offending; see Hayes and Baker 2014), be published in English and be published in a western country (only one article was published in English from a non-western country).³ Of the 71 articles, a total of 35 articles met the inclusion criteria.

Analytical approach

Like Landor and Eisenclas (2012), a qualitative content analysis approach was used (Altheide 1987). Qualitative content analysis is a systematic and analytic approach that allows researchers to “document and understand the communication of meaning” (Altheide 1987: 68). This approach was selected over the quantitative content analysis approach as the aim of the current study was not to measure the frequency of articles that reflected particular themes; rather, the aim was to understand the communication of meaning and to formulate a subtle narrative on the portrayal of the offenders (Altheide 1987). Qualitative content analysis is oriented to check, supplement or supersede prior theoretical claims (Altheide and Schneider 2012). This is in line with the objective of the current study: with the evident change in gender roles of females in western society, the current study aimed to achieve an up-to-date understanding of the portrayal of female child sexual offenders in the print media. Similar to Altheide

¹ In the most recent study, a sampling frame from 2000 to 2010 was used (Hayes and Baker 2014). In turn, there was no overlap between Hayes and Baker’s (2014) sampling frame and the one used in the current study.

² While the term “child sex offender” or “child sexual offender” could have been utilized, it would have been impractical to examine all newspaper reports (most on male child sexual offenders), internationally, over a five-year period.

³ As the literature concerning gender roles changing away from traditional values has predominantly focused on research in western countries, articles from non-western countries were not included.

(1987), the researcher read all the newspaper articles without rigid and predefined categories. The newspaper articles were assessed for messages, and general categories were noted. After the establishment of preliminary themes, a continuously refined exploration took place in which the researcher re-read the articles to determine whether the themes could be updated, expanded or re-categorized (Altheide 1987), in turn, finalizing the version of these themes. To enhance the credibility of the analysis, themes were discussed, compared and revised with a second researcher.

Results

Characteristics of articles

Of the 35 articles reviewed, 14 were published in England, 13 in the USA, 3 in Canada, 3 in New Zealand, 1 in Ireland and 1 in Wales. All articles were written on a female child sexual offender that was originally located, currently residing or wanted within the corresponding country of publication. Fourteen of the articles were published in 2016, 5 articles were published in 2015, 6 in 2014, 3 in 2013 and 7 in 2012. The 35 articles portrayed a total of 24 female child sexual offenders; 7 females had been reported on multiple times (either for the same offense or for a new offense e.g., breaching probation orders).

Across the articles that provided the offender's age, the youngest offender was 18 years old at the time of publication and the oldest offender was 50 years old ($M = 34.26$).⁴ Interestingly, the ages of offenders in the USA publications were, on average, higher than the ages of offenders in the newspapers published in England ($M = 40.00$ and $M = 30.78$, respectively). Regarding victim age, the youngest victim was three months old at the time of the offense and the oldest victim was 16 years old.⁵ While the

⁴ The offender's age at the time of the newspaper publication is provided here rather than the offender's age at the time of offense because the newspaper articles most consistently provided the offender's age at time of publication. While most articles indicated when the crime occurred, there was not enough information provided to establish the offender's exact age at the time of offense. Most crimes had, however, occurred within the past five years of the newspaper's publication.

⁵ An average victim age cannot be provided as many articles did not provide the age of the victim. Rather, these articles indicated the child as a "baby", "toddler" or "teenager". In contrast to the offender's age, the articles mainly reported on the victim's age at the time of the offense, rather than their age at the time of the newspaper publication.

victim's gender was not always stipulated, it was evident that most victims were male. In relation to the number of victims the offender had perpetrated against, it appeared that most incidents involved one victim; of the articles that indicated multiple victims, the number of victims was not always clear – for example, “a string” of victims. Regarding the relationship between the offender and the victim, most offenders were either strangers or the relationship was not stated – no articles indicated intrafamilial abuse. There were no other major differences between the articles relating to the offender and victim characteristics, nor were there any major across-country differences.

In relation to the type of abuse, 46% of offenders had been recently convicted for penetration/intercourse offenses. When considering previous criminal history (which was often reported in the articles), this figure increased to a 54% conviction rate for penetration/intercourse offenses. Only one case solely comprised indecent assault (e.g., touching/fondling). Rather, many articles indicated that various types of child sexual abuse had been perpetrated, for example, penetration/intercourse *and* indecent assault, or pornography/dissemination of images *and* indecent assault. When including previous criminal history, it was evident that nearly all females (96%) had been convicted of child sexual offenses at some point. Overall, 75% of offenders had received a custodial sentence at some point (where indicated, these sentences ranged from three months to 30 years; $M = 78.78$ months). There were no other major differences in the articles relating to the types of abuse and sentencing, nor were there any across-country differences.

Themes

The analysis identified two major themes concerning how female child sexual offenders were portrayed in relation to their behavior and the context of abuse: dangerous offender and offender accountability. These themes, along with their sub-themes, are discussed below.

Dangerous offender

Many articles conveyed the female perpetrator as being dangerous. Three sub-themes were found regarding the female's character and were expressed as: a registered child sexual offender, a child predator and a cold and unsympathetic female.

Registered child sexual offender. Many articles described the perpetrator by referring to the factual and legally assigned label of a "registered child sex offender" or being on the "child sex offender register." Some of these articles identified the level of recidivistic risk; for example, a "high-risk sex offender", "a level-2 offender" and "a moderate risk to reoffend." A number of these articles incited further fear by reporting on the child sexual offender, who lived in the community, as being "on the run" or having failed to notify the police about a change in their conditions (e.g., the offender did not report to authorities that they were living with *another* child sexual offender). By using such language, and by identifying the level of recidivistic risk, the rhetoric suggests that the female offender is a potential danger to *all* children in the community.

Child predator. Reports of females being portrayed as a female pedophile that preyed on children accounted for the largest category within this theme. These articles attributed predatory words to the offender such as "evil woman", "targeted teenage boys", "vile", "sexual playthings", "perv", "most wanted" and "worst ever." Moreover, in one article that suggested the teenage boy was in a "willing" relationship, the female was described as a "paedo" and quotes by the victim's mother were included indicating the offender's predatory nature, in particular that she "groomed him" and got her "claws into him." In addition to the emotive language used in the articles and various quotes from the families of victims, a number of articles included quotes from the judges that described the female's behavior as predatory and evil; for example, "harrowing", "depravity", "preyed upon" and "gruesome."

Cold and unsympathetic. Despite the females having been charged with and convicted of serious crimes, a number of articles depicted the offender as having no remorse in the court room even if the

offender pled guilty. Although some articles did indicate that the offender showed emotion (e.g., “sobbed uncontrollably”), the articles were careful to make a clear distinction between the words used to describe this emotion and the offender’s lack of remorse (e.g., “showed no pity”), indicating that that the offender did not show remorse and sympathy toward the victim. Rather, the articles expressed the female as being “embarrassed” and “ashamed” for her *own* position. These articles highlighted the offender’s cold and taciturn persona by identifying the lack of emotional capacity necessary to feel remorse or to sympathize with the victim.

Offender accountability

Most articles highlighted the accountability of the female offender. Rather than these females being described as mentally ill and having committed the crime out of poor emotional capacity (one article) or being in an “equal” relationship (one article), most articles held the female accountable. Three sub-themes were found: negative impact on victim, irrelevance of gender and non-coercive role of male co-perpetrators.

Negative impact on victim. Many reports highlighted the negative psychological impact the abuse had on the victim’s psychological state. These articles used emotive terminology to explain the victim’s wellbeing, for example, “anxious”, “loss of trust”, “depressed”, “loss of self-confidence”, “lonely” and suffering “emotional turmoil.” Even in articles that involved sexual activity between a female offender and teenage victim (most often male), these articles indicated that the male victim was “disturbed”, “disgusted” or “profoundly affected” by the abuse. Despite one article suggesting the teenage boy was in a “willing” relationship, the article reported his parents’ perception of his psychological state: that his life had “completely fallen apart” and that it had “been ruined” because of the offender. The negative psychological impact on the victim lends to the accountability of the female offender’s actions.

Irrelevance of gender. The irrelevance of gender, when discussing the severity of the crime and the punishment, was prominent in a number of articles, with females receiving “no breaks” because of

their gender. Gender irrelevance was often highlighted in quotes from the judges, which noted that the female's gender was irrelevant and that she would not be let off gently in terms of punishment because of her gender. Some articles highlighted the judge "rejecting" claims made by the defendant's defense team, for example, that the female was "pestered" for sex by the male teenager. Other articles applauded the judge for "seeing past" the offender's context. For example, one article related how, despite the female being pregnant at the trial, the judge stressed that she was no more likely to escape a custodial sentence – because if a male were to prey on a girl in a similar way, the male would receive a custodial sentence.

The quotes made by the judges indicated that they made a concerted effort to highlight the issue of power differentials: that it is against the law, regardless of gender, to target individuals below the age of consent. The level of harm experienced was also acknowledged by the judges, for example, that there was "no less harm" and that the abuse was "extremely damaging" despite some people holding a "double standard" regarding female offenders and male victims. In fact, one article reported how a judge was praised from an outside association (which deals with victims of child sexual abuse) for acknowledging the seriousness of the crime. Interestingly, a different article described a judge criticizing the severity of another woman's sentence – that her sentence was too long and that several factors were ignored in the sentencing. The irrelevance of gender suggests that being a female makes her no less accountable for her crime.

Non-coercive role of male co-perpetrators. Across the articles, there were some cases of abuse that involved male co-perpetrators. In contrast to describing the woman as being controlled by the male co-perpetrator (one article), the language in these articles either suggested that the female was an independent part of a team (e.g., a "willing" and "active" participant) or did not suggest the role of the male at all aside from him co-offending. In one instance, the female was depicted at the "centre" of the abuse. In fact, the article portrayed the male co-perpetrators as having taken part in the abuse *only* because of the influence of the female offender. A quote made by a police officer described the female as

the focal point of the “spider’s web” of abuse. The non-coercive role of male co-perpetrators across these articles gives rise to the female’s accountability.

Discussion

The current study analyzed the portrayal of female child sexual offenders in newspaper articles over the last five years across western society. Previous research has found the portrayal of female child sexual offenders as having undertones of sympathy and romanticization. In contrast, the current study did not find undertones of sympathy and romanticization; rather, female child sexual offenders were portrayed as dangerous and accountable for their actions. The characteristics of the articles, along with the themes, are discussed below in light of the previous research.

Characteristics of articles

The characteristics of the articles revealed some interesting findings, in particular concerning the relationship between the offender and victim, the type of abuse and the imposed sentence. Regarding the relationship between the offender and victim, the current study found that intrafamilial abuse was not evident in any article. This was an interesting finding particularly when research suggests that the child’s mother is the main perpetrator of sexual abuse (Boroughs 2004; Denov 2004; Kalders, Inkster and Britt 1997). One explanation for this finding might be attributable to the older age of the children (teenagers) in the current articles, with research demonstrating that the offender–victim relationship becomes more distant the older the child is (Christensen, Sharman and Powell 2016). A second explanation for the finding might be due to the relationship between the offender and victim being more newsworthy: research has found that the media exaggerates child sexual abuse cases of “stranger danger” while underreporting cases of intrafamilial abuse (Cheit 2003).

Regarding the type of abuse, over half of the females had been convicted, at some point, of penetration/intercourse offenses. The high rate of penetration/intercourse offenses was an interesting finding when research has found that indecent assault offenses (e.g., touching/fondling) are the main type

of offense committed by female perpetrators (e.g., Kalders et al. 1997; Peter 2008). One reason for the current finding might be due to the child's disclosure; research suggests that victims of more severe child sexual abuse are more likely to disclose than victims of less severe abuse (Christensen et al. 2016; Lam 2014; Leclerc and Wortley 2015). In turn, these cases may have been more likely to come to the attention of authorities and possibly the media. Another reason might be attributable to the older age of the children (teenagers) in the current articles; research has found a positive association between the child's age and abuse severity (Christensen et al. 2016; Snyder 2000). A final reason for this finding might merely be due to newsworthiness; Cheit (2003) found that the media reports on more severe cases of child sexual abuse than on cases involving less severe abuse.

For the imposed sentence, the current study found that 75% of offenders had received a custodial sentence at some point. This was an interesting finding, particularly as research has found that female offenders are likely to receive a conditional release (Sandler and Freeman 2011). While this study did not compare incarceration rates of female offenders to male offenders, the rate of incarceration for female offenders in the current study appeared to be robust. One explanation for this finding might be related to the severity of the crime: over half of the offenders were convicted of penetration/intercourse, which carries heavier sentences than indecent assault offenses. Another reason might be attributable to the perpetrator's level of accountability (discussed later). Alternatively, the finding might simply be attributable to the selective reporting; research has found that the media more often covers stories of child sexual abuse that result in longer sentences as they are deemed more newsworthy (Cheit 2003).

Themes

Interestingly, the two main themes that emerged from the articles were that female child sexual offenders are dangerous and that they are accountable for their actions. In relation to females being portrayed as dangerous, three sub-themes were found: a registered child sexual offender, a child predator

and a cold and unsympathetic female. For the second theme, accountability for actions, three sub-themes appeared: negative impact on victim, irrelevance of gender and non-coercive role of male co-perpetrators.

The sub-theme of registered child sexual offender was not a surprising finding, particularly as this term is an objective and factual label assigned to such offenders. The “branding” of sexual offenders is essentially used to shame the offender as well as target general and specific deterrence (Quinn, Forsyth and Mullen-Quinn 2004; Tewksbury and Lees 2007). The articles also revealed the sub-theme of child predator. This finding was in contrast with Landor’s (2009) finding, that terms such as “predator” and “paedophile” were exclusively given to male offenders and that female offenders were instead depicted as the child’s lover. Although the current finding was somewhat consistent with Hayes and Baker (2014) who found that some females were depicted as pariahs and demonized for their crimes, Hayes and Baker also found that the female’s status was often highlighted including terms such as “wife” and “mother”, whereas in the current study, very few articles indicated the status of the females. For the limited articles in the current study that did include the status, it was not reported in relation to heteronormative female sex scripts; for example, rather than report that the female was a “wife”, one article factually stated that the woman “had a husband.”

It was also interesting to find that females were depicted as cold and unsympathetic in the court room, particularly when research has found that most female offenders recognize the inappropriateness of the behavior (e.g., Matthews, Mathews and Speltz 1991). Even in the articles reporting that the female appeared to be emotional, she only appeared regretful for her situation rather than for the negative impact she had on the victim. This finding was, however, consistent with more recent research that utilized the visual analysis of drawings of female offenders in the courtroom; such research has found that court drawings of females display an evident lack of emotion and remorse (Barlow 2016).

Regarding the second theme, accountability, the articles highlighted the negative psychological impact the abuse had on the victim. This was in contrast with previous research that has found that female

child sexual offenders are often portrayed as “lovers” who “seduce” their victims and get involved in a “willing” relationship, in which their behavior is often mitigated or minimized (Chiotti 2009; Hayes and Baker 2014; Landor 2009; Landor and Eisenchlas 2012). The articles reviewed for the current study did not portray female offenders in a similar light. The use of emotive terminology highlighted the psychological impact the abuse had; even in articles that involved the abuse of older male victims (teenagers), these teenagers were described as emotionally disturbed from the abuse. Unlike previous research, only one article suggested that the teenage boy was in a “willing” relationship. This article still painted the negative impact the abuse had on his psychological state.

This finding in the current study – that the articles reported the impact of female-perpetrated sexual abuse as having a negative impact on the victim – is a progressive and positive finding. It is important since not only do victims of female-perpetrated sexual abuse face similar traumatic effects to victims of male-perpetrated sexual abuse (Denov 2004), but also recent research has found that the public perceives adolescent male victims who are raped by older females as “lucky”, suggesting praise of male victims (Zack, Lang and Dirks 2016); such misconstruction is damaging as it may marginalize and silence victims (Hetherington 1999). Rather, the apparent change in language in the current articles has the ability to change public perception (Cole and Daniel 2005).

One of the most notable findings of the entire study was the sub-theme of the irrelevance of gender in terms of the severity of the crime and the punishment. The irrelevance of gender was often concerned with quotes from the judges highlighting that the offense committed was no less severe than if the perpetrator had been male. This is an important finding for two reasons. First, the general public report significantly greater anger and significantly greater want for harsher consequences involving male offenders than for female offenders (e.g., Geddes et al. 2013). If the general public continue to perceive female child sexual offenders as less deserving of harsh consequences than their male counterparts, victims of female-perpetrated abuse will continue to be silenced. Rather, the language used in the current

articles around the irrelevance of gender opens up a new discourse that may, over time, result in a change in perception among the public – that sexual abuse perpetrated by a female can be just as damaging as can sexual abuse perpetrated by a male. Second, and importantly, such language on the irrelevance of gender sends the message of general and specific deterrence.

Across the articles that involved co-perpetrators, the language suggested that these female offenders were not coerced by their male partner (except in one case). This was an interesting finding since the previous research on media reports found that female child sexual offenders' behavior is often referenced in light of mitigatory circumstances. For example, Hayes and Baker (2014) found that female offenders are stereotypically positioned as passive in contrast to their "aggressive" and "dominant" male counterparts, in turn, minimizing and mitigating their behavior to some degree. Conversely, the articles in the current study suggested that the females played an active, willing or even central role in the abuse, lending support to their accountability. Again, the language in the current articles is positive – that females can be accountable for their behavior even when they perpetrate abuse with co-perpetrators.

Despite the strengths of the current study, several limitations should be noted. Although the focus of the study was on the representation of female child sexual offenders, it did not allow for comparisons to the representation of male child sexual offenders, evident in some of the earlier studies (Chiotti 2009; Landor 2009; Landor and Eisenchlas 2012). There has been an abundance of newspaper articles published on the topic of child sexual offending over the last five years, rendering the comparison impractical; for example, a key term search on ProQuest Newsstand of "child sex offender", "pedophile" and "child sexual offender" over the five-year period resulted in a return of 74,764 newspaper articles. In order to get a sound comparison between the representation of female child sexual offenders and male child sexual offenders, one idea for future research is to use a random selection of newspaper articles that have reported on male child sexual offenders. Such a comparison may minimize any biases that potentially threaten the validity of the current findings.

A second limitation was that while some countries had a number of newspaper articles, other countries had few publications. However, the point of the study was not to examine the differences in the portrayal of female child sexual offenders *across* western countries. Rather, the objective was to garner an overall and up-to-date perspective of female child sexual offenders; in doing so, this study found no differences in the discourse between the countries. Finally, while the results suggest a potential advancement in the portrayal of female child sexual offenders, more certainty would come with further research that could compare the differences in representations across two periods of time. By adopting the same methodology across the two periods, and thereby providing a greater comparison, it would allow for stronger conclusions to be made on the changes in portrayal

In conclusion, the findings of the current study shed light on the potential advancement of the reporting of female child sexual offenders in the print media at an international level. In contrast to the previous research that has identified the romanticization and undertones of sympathy regarding female child sexual offenders, the current study found that female child sexual offenders are portrayed as damaging and accountable for their actions. The findings from the study are positive – there appears to be advancement in terms of steering away from traditional sex scripts, potentially toward a change in public perception. Further research could confirm the results of the current study through the utilization of triangulation techniques; in addition to newspaper articles, interviews with the judiciary and the general public as well as the utilization of administrative data (e.g., police and prosecution data) would contribute to a more accurate and complete picture.

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