

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

### **Iconographies of child sexual abuse: Symbolic images in press articles and prevention materials**

*Nicola Döring & Roberto Walter*

**Nicola Döring (Prof. Dr.; korrespondierende Autorin)**, TU Ilmenau, IfMK, Ehrenbergstraße 29, 98693 Ilmenau, Germany. Contact: [nicola.doering@tu-ilmenau.de](mailto:nicola.doering@tu-ilmenau.de). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1299-4586>

**Roberto Walter (M.A.)**, TU Ilmenau, IfMK, Ehrenbergstraße 29, 98693 Ilmenau, Germany. Contact: [roberto.walter@tu-ilmenau.de](mailto:roberto.walter@tu-ilmenau.de). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3350-8754>



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### 1. Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is quite widespread in Germany and internationally (Barth et al., 2013) and often has serious and long-term consequences for those affected. How the public and politicians perceive the social problem of child sexual abuse and which prevention and intervention approaches are pursued depends to a large extent on media reporting. Here, previous communication science research shows both strengths and weaknesses of CSA-related media representations (Popović, 2018; Weatherred, 2015): On the one hand, the media contribute to uncovering child sexual abuse, giving those affected a voice and raising public awareness. On the other hand, media reports are often clichéd and lurid, sometimes to the detriment of those affected.

### 2. Objectives

Research into the content and quality features of media reporting on child sexual abuse has so far completely ignored one important aspect, namely the use of images (Döring & Walter, 2020; Popović, 2018). The *Iconography* (i.e. the set of typical image motifs for a topic), however, is an important element of media coverage; it generates attention and emotions. This is where the present study comes in. It answers the following four research questions (RQ): How often are symbolic images used in press coverage of child sexual abuse (RQ1), and what image motifs are used (RQ2)? In addition, it examines two related questions: How often are symbolic images used in prevention materials from specialized counselling centers on child sexual abuse (RQ3), and what image motifs are used there (RQ4)? The study focuses on symbolic images and stock photos (as opposed to

documentary photos) because they are increasingly used but heavily under-researched (Frosh, 2001; Kalazić et al., 2015; Machin, 2004).

### 3. Methods

In order to work out the respective iconographies of child sexual abuse, a sample of N=1,437 German-language online press articles about CSA and a sample of N=230 German-language CSA prevention materials were drawn and the symbol images contained therein were each subjected separately to a standardized image content analysis (Grittmann & Ammann, 2011). Both codebooks and respective reliability test results can be retrieved from <https://osf.io/g2cxa/>.

### 4. Results

It showed that 29.2% of online press articles (RQ1) and 62.0% of the prevention materials (RQ3) used symbolic images. The CSA iconography of the press based on 419 symbolic images is oriented towards the framing of criminal reporting (see appendix) and visualizes 1. crime contexts (29.2% symbolic images in the press sample), 2. course of the crime and people involved (24.3%), and 3. consequences of the crime for the people involved (46.6%). The most popular image type was the conviction of the abuse perpetrator visualized with police cars, handcuffs and prison grids (RQ2).

The CSA iconography of the prevention materials based on 450 symbolic images is oriented on the framing of prevention approaches (see appendix) and visualizes 1. primary prevention (57.6% of symbolic images in the prevention material sample), 2. secondary prevention (8.7%) and 3. tertiary prevention (33.8%). The most popular image type showed carefree and happy children protected from CSA through primary prevention (RQ4).



### 5. Conclusion

The iconography of child sexual abuse in the press is defined by the main motifs of the symbolic images used. It reveals several severe problems, namely episodic instead of thematic framing, a lurid-voyeuristic presentation of victims and acts of abuse and a complete invisibility of prevention approaches. Not only journalistic quality criteria (Döring & Walter, 2020) but also CSA survivors demand an improvement of the reporting in words and pictures (Baugut & Neumann, 2020; Kavemann et al., 2019). Prevention materials with their CSA iconography offer no solution for the press, though. The article discusses several measures to both improve the CSA iconography in press reporting and foster the image literacy of the audience.

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Appendix Table 1. Exemplary symbolic images for the image type group  
"1. Context of the crime" of the CSA-related iconography in online press reporting.

<div>1.1 Real world context</div> <div></div> <div>„Young priest praying to God on dark background” © Pixel-Shot – stock.adobe.com</div>
<div>1.2 Virtual world context</div> <div></div> <div>„Computer crime concept” © REDPIXEL – stock.adobe.com</div>

Appendix Table 2. Exemplary symbolic images for the image type group "2. Course of the crime and people involved" of the CSA-related iconography in online press reporting.

<div>2.1 Perpetrator before/during the crime</div> <div></div> <div>„Man in blue hoodie. Close up portrait of a man in a hood on the sky background. An unrecognizable face is hidden in the shadow.” © Serhii – stock.adobe.com</div>
<div>2.2 Victim before/during the crime</div> <div></div> <div>„Stop abusing violence. violence, terrified, A fearful child” © nareekarn – stock.adobe.com</div>
<div>2.3 Perpetrator and victim before/during the crime</div> <div></div> <div>„cropped view of father holding belt and scared daughter sitting on floor” © LIGHTFIELD STUDIOS – stock.adobe.com</div>

Appendix Table 3. Exemplary symbolic images for the image type group "3. Consequences of the crime for the people involved" of the CSA-related iconography in online press reporting.

<div>3.1 Consequences for the victim</div> <div></div> <div>„Misshandlung und Missbrauch von Kindern“ © Gina Sanders – stock.adobe.com</div>
<div>3.2 Consequences for the perpetrator</div> <div></div> <div>„Arrest the offender. Prison male criminal standing in handcuffs with hands behind back.“ © methaphum – stock.adobe.com</div>



Appendix Table 4. Exemplary symbolic images for the image type group "1. Primary prevention" of the CSA-related iconography in prevention material.

<div>1.1 Cheerful children and youth - protected from CSA</div> <div></div> <div>„Gruppe Kinder beim Tauziehen“ © Robert Kneschke – stock.adobe.com</div>
<div>1.2 Empowered children and youth - educated about CSA in the real world</div> <div></div> <div>„Mädchen in Schule steht vor Tafel mit Muskeln“ © Robert Kneschke – stock.adobe.com</div>
<div>1.3 Empowered children and youth - educated about CSA in virtual worlds</div> <div></div> <div>„Mädchen lernt in der Computer Klasse“ © Robert Kneschke – stock.adobe.com</div>

Appendix Table 5. Exemplary symbolic images for the image type group  
"2. Secondary prevention" of the CSA-related iconography in prevention material.

**2.1 Silence and silencing around CSA**



„Adult man covering scared little boy’s mouth on dark background, space for text. Child in danger”  
© New Africa – stock.adobe.com

**2.2 Getting emergency help when affected by CSA**



„Depressed/Sad teen girl leaning against high school wall during sunset while wearing a backpack, holding binders, and talking on a smartphone”  
© Brian – stock.adobe.com

**2.3 Disclosure of and talking about CSA**



„Female psychologist working with teenage girl in office”  
© Pixel-Shot – stock.adobe.com

Appendix Table 6. Exemplary symbolic images for the image type group "3. Tertiary prevention" of the CSA-related iconography in prevention material.

### 3.1 Children and youth affected by CSA



„Sad and lonely young girl feeling depressed”  
© Paolese – stock.adobe.com

### 3.2 Social support and therapy for children and youth affected by CSA



„Lifebuoy on concrete wall background.”  
© Bowonpat – stock.adobe.com

### 3.3 Positive future prospects for children and youth affected by CSA



„chamomile in cracks of asphalt road. Single chamomile  
breaking through road. concept of nature and environment  
protection. copy space. soft selective focus”  
© Ju\_see – stock.adobe.com