Iconography of Child Sexual Abuse in the News (Justice and Crime Reporting)

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a major global problem (Barth et al., 2013). Therefore, it is important for researchers in communication science to systematically examine the representation of the CSA issue in the media using manual and computational methods of content analysis. According to previous review papers (Popović, 2018; Weatherred, 2015), existing content-analytical studies are mostly manual and limited to newspaper articles and the text level. Currently, it is unclear what kind of visual representations are used to illustrate the CSA issue in the media. We therefore present a tested new instrument to analyze the dominant image motifs (= iconography) in CSA news media coverage (Döring & Walter, 2021).

FIELD OF APPLICATION/THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

CSA reporting often focuses on specific cases of CSA (Dorfman et al., 2011). Therefore, media reporting on CSA mainly falls into the area of justice and crime reporting. From a theoretical perspective, CSA representations in the media are mostly analyzed based on *framing theory* (Entman, 1993). Respective studies investigate which aspects of the CSA problem are emphasized in the media and which are neglected. Research shows that stereotypes and myths are spread and episodic framing (= focus on individual cases) is often prevalent, while thematic framing (= representation of CSA as a societal issue) is missing in the media coverage (Popović, 2018; Weatherred,

2015). There are hardly any empirical findings on visual framing and the iconography used in CSA media reporting (Döring & Walter, 2021). However, some more research exists on the broader issue of visual representations of sexual violence in the news (e.g., Schwark, 2017).

REFERENCES/COMBINATION WITH OTHER METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

Generally, the text analysis method dominates in the field of justice and crime reporting (e.g., portrayals of crimes in newspapers vs. television; Pollak & Kubrin, 2007). The few available image analyses in this field have not yet addressed CSA but focus on different crimes (e.g., portrayal of the 9/11 terrorist attack and its commemoration in the press; Ammann, 2015).

In addition to pure content analyses, combinations with other methods of data collection that incorporate the communicator's perspective can contribute to a more in-depth investigation of the CSA iconography. For example, interviews with journalists on how they select CSA-related images for news reporting would be insightful, but such studies are currently lacking.

Equally important are combinations of content analyses with data collection methods that focus on possible media effects on the recipients, for example by conducting experiments exploring the effects of different textual and visual CSA representations. Although there are experimental studies on the effects of textual elements of CSA reporting (e.g., different perpetrator and victim constellations; Scheufele, 2005), there is a lack of studies on the effects of visual elements.

EXAMPLE STUDIES

Researchers interested in conducting content analyses about CSA reporting in general – and visualizations of the CSA problem in particular – can consult the following example studies:

- review papers on content analyses of CSA media reporting (Popović, 2018; Weatherred, 2015),
- CSA-related content analyses focusing on textual elements (Dorfman et al., 2011; Mejia et al., 2012),
- CSA-related content analyses focusing on both textual and visual elements (Popović, 2021: explained below),
- CSA-related content analyses focusing on visual elements and in particular the dominant image motifs in terms of the CSA iconography (Döring & Walter, 2021: explained below).

INFORMATION ON POPOVIĆ, 2021

Authors: Stjepka Popović

Research question: How are victims of child sexual abuse represented in the press in Croatia?

Object of analysis: Probabilistic cluster sample of N = 1 159 CSA-related news reports (text and photos) of the six most popular daily printed Croatian newspapers

Time frame of analysis: 2007-2016

INFORMATION ABOUT PHOTO-RELATED VARIABLES

Variable name/definition: Victim endangering CSA news reporting practices linked to photos were measured with three mutually exclusive variables (p. 238).

1. Indirect disclosure of victim's identity: photo of either a) victim's home; b) location of abuse; c) family members, relatives or neighbors
2. Direct disclosure of victim's identity: a) blurred photo of victim OR b) photo of victim taken from the back
3. Sexually explicit material: a) photographs or illustrations of the child in explicit poses or underwear OR b) photographs or illustrations of abuse OR c) forensic drawings of victim

Level of analysis: Symbolic and documentary images.

Values: 0 = absent, 1 = present (binary coding for each image)

Reliability: Krippendorff's Alpha: 0.90 for entire coding matrix

INFORMATION ON DÖRING & WALTER, 2021

Authors: Nicola Döring & Roberto Walter

Research question: Which iconography (i.e. set of main types of image motifs) is used to visualize the issue of child sexual abuse in newspaper articles?

Object of analysis: Convenience sample of N = 1 437 CSA-related online news reports including N = 419 stock photos from different German-language newspapers and news magazines (e.g., Die Zeit, Bild, taz, Süddeutsche, Spiegel, Focus)

Time frame of analysis: 2014-2018

INFO ABOUT IMAGE-RELATED VARIABLES:

Variable name/definition: Iconography of child sexual abuse in the news (set of 7 mutually exclusive image motif types categorized into three image motif groups; see Table 1). The complete codebook, data and analysis scripts are available at https://osf.io/g2cxa/ (Döring & Walter, 2021).

Level of analysis: Symbolic images.

Values: 0 = absent, 1= present (binary coding for each image motif type)

Reliability: Holsti: 0.94 – 0.98; Gwet's AC1: 0.90 – 0.98 (see Table 1 for each image motif type)

Table 1. *Codebook for the iconography of child sexual abuse in the news.*

Variables: Types of image motifs	Variable descriptions plus example images	Values	Reliability - Holsti - Gwet's AC1
1. Context of the crime			
1.1 Real-world context	Code as present if the image shows the real-world context of CSA (e.g., a church, school or swimming pool) but does not focus on the people involved. „Young priest praying to God on dark background" © Pixel-Shot – stock.adobe.com	0 = absent 1 = present	.94 .91
1.2 Virtual context	Code as present if the image shows the virtual context of CSA (e.g., a laptop, keyboard or webcam) but does not focus on the people involved. „Computer crime concept" © REDPIXEL – stock.adobe.com	0 = absent 1 = present	.98 .98

2. Course of the crime and people involved

2.1 Perpetrator before/ during the crime	Code as present if the image shows the perpetrator before/during the crime but does not focus on the context or victim.	0 = absent 1 = present	-[a] -

„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

2.2 Victim before/ during the crime	Code as present if the image shows the victim before/during the crime but does not focus on the context or perpetrator.	0 = absent 1 = present	.96 .95

„Stop abusing violence. violence, terrified, A fearful child"
© nareekarn – stock.adobe.com

2.3 Perpetrator and victim before/during the crime	Code as present if the image shows the perpetrator and the victim before/during the crime but does not focus on the context.	0 = absent 1 = present	.94 .90

„cropped view of father holding belt and scared daughter sitting on floor"
© LIGHTFIELD STUDIOS – stock.adobe.com

3. Consequences of the crime

| 3.1 Consequences for the victim | Code as present if the image shows the consequences of the crime for the victim (e.g., physical and emotional pain, trauma). | 0 = absent
1 = present | .94
.93 |

„Misshandlung und Missbrauch von Kindern"
© Gina Sanders – stock.adobe.com

| 3.2 Consequences for the perpetrator | Code as present if the image shows the consequences of the crime for the perpetrator (e.g., arrest, conviction). | 0 = absent
1 = present | .98
.97 |

„Arrest the offender. Prison male criminal standing in handcuffs with hands behind back."
© methaphum – stock.adobe.com

Note. [a]Reliability for this variable could not be calculated, because the image motif was not present in the pretest sample.

Depending on the research question, the whole set of seven main types of image motifs of the CSA iconography can be measured or only selected motifs can be chosen as all binary variables are independent from each other. Also, new motifs can be added. For example, visualizations that illustrate the societal relevance of CSA (e.g., info graphics that show prevalence rates) or visualizations of primary, secondary and tertiary prevention methods (e.g., therapy for victims and/or perpetrators) could be added as further image motif types. For a more granular quantitative analysis of a large-scale sample of newspaper articles, it is possible to code not only the image motif type (e.g., real-world context), but also the individual motifs that belong to this type (e.g., church, school, swimming pool, sports club). Last but not least, for selected image motif types an additional qualitative image analysis might be fruitful. For example, the image type "victim before/during the crime" often operates with objectification and sexualization of the victim than can be further explored qualitatively (e.g., type of clothing of the victim, camera angle and perspective).

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