# 1. Media as communicator

## 1.1. Media coverage about child sexual abuse

# Quality issues in media representations of child sexual abuse: Newspaper articles, stock photos, and YouTube videos

*Nicola Döring*

Media representations of child sexual abuse (CSA) put the issue on the public and political agenda and shape our understanding of it. While media representations can be helpful in giving survivors a voice and sensitizing and informing the public, they can also disseminate misleading and harmful messages. The present chapter focuses on the representations of CSA in three types of media: newspaper articles, stock photographs, and YouTube videos. Hence, for the first time in this research field, three representation modes (textual, photographic, videographic) and two media systems (mass media, social media) are covered. A sample of media contributions was drawn from each media type and submitted to quantitative media content analysis. Results show that newspaper articles, stock photos, and YouTube videos often rely on stereotypes and myths. Quality issues in CSA representations are discussed in light of the presented data and previous findings. Practical suggestions for quality improvements are provided.
*Keywords:* child sexual abuse, media reporting, media framing, media content analysis, media quality analysis

How societies deal with the problem of child sexual abuse (CSA) depends on many factors. The legal, educational, healthcare, and, last but not least, media systems all play an important role. The media system is particularly relevant as, by constructing and disseminating representations of CSA, it raises the problem on the public and political agenda. In accordance with the so-called framing theory, which leads in this field of research, media representations shape our assumptions about the typical perpetrators, victims, and circumstances of child sexual abuse, its causes and effects, and prevention and intervention approaches (Dorfman et al., 2011; Kitzinger, 2004). Fictional CSA representations found in novels, movies, and television series are important; however, non-fictional representations disseminated via press, radio, television as well as online and social media are even more influential as they outnumber fictional representations by far.

Previous research on media portrayals of CSA paints a mixed picture of the content, quality, and impact of reporting. On the one hand, it has been shown that the media contribute to breaking the taboo around the problem of CSA, that media reports encourage and give a voice to those affected, and that investigative journalism can make a significant contribution to clarifying abuse in institutions such as schools and churches (e.g.,

Donnelly, 2016). On the other hand, media content analyses have shown that press and TV reporting of CSA is often lurid, uses the wrong terms, picks out spectacular individual cases, and privileges sensationalism over accuracy and the public interest (e.g., DiBennardo, 2018). Often, journalists do not sufficiently respect the interests, personal rights, and dignity of CSA survivors, up to and including re-traumatization, for example through voyeuristic interview questions on the sexual details of the assaults (e.g., Jones et al., 2011).

Various institutions of journalism (e.g., DART Centre Europe, 2016) and violence prevention (e.g., MECASA, 2016) have therefore developed guidelines to improve the quality of reporting on sexual violence in general and CSA in particular. The characteristics and quality of public CSA communication continue to be critically discussed.

The present chapter aims to contribute to this debate by looking at CSA representations and related quality issues in three different types of media, namely newspaper articles, stock photographs, and YouTube videos. Thus, consideration will be given to textual, photographic, and videographic representations of CSA which originate from professional actors in the media industry as well as from social media users. The chapter summarizes the state of research on representations of CSA in the three media types mentioned and specifies the research questions. It then describes the methodological approach and presents the main results, with a focus on illustrative examples. A discussion of the findings, limitations, and implications in terms of suggestions for quality improvements completes the chapter.

## Theoretical background and state of research

When it comes to the theoretical conceptualization of media representations of the problem of CSA, the framing approach of communication science is the central theory model (Weatherred, 2015; Popović, 2018). The framing theory emphasizes that media representations do not simply depict real facts such as CSA in text or visual form but, rather, process and shape them in a specific meaning-making way in the course of reporting (Entman, 1993). Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

Media *content* analysis examines how CSA is framed in different media in different countries and historical periods. Typically, quantitative media content analysis is used to determine which types of sexual abuse (e.g., domestic versus institutional) or victims (e.g., girls versus boys) are depicted and in what way this is done (e.g., DiBennardo, 2018).

Media *quality* analysis addresses the question of the extent to which media framing is factually appropriate and of high quality, or whether quality deficiencies in CSA reporting occur. Quality deficiencies can, for example, consist in the fact that media framing particularly emphasizes certain features of the abuse problem which, according to the current state of research, can be classified as myths (e.g., that abuse perpetrators are always "pedophiles"), or that media reporting neglects scientifically recognized prevention measures (e.g., the need to de-stigmatize pedophilia in order to promote the primary prevention of CSA; Stelzmann et al., 2020).

Limited CSA-related media content and media quality analyses of various types of media are available to date and mostly relate to the Anglo-American region.

State of research on newspaper articles

Two peer-reviewed research reviews on content and quality analyses of mass media coverage (especially press coverage) of CSA have been published. A literature review undertaken by communication scientist Jane Weatherred (University of Southern Indiana, United States) included 16 studies and shows that research on mass media reporting on CSA has focused primarily on newspaper articles (Weatherred, 2015). According to research results, CSA-related reporting in recent decades can be divided into five stages, each of which has its own typical stories and effects on society (see table 1).

Table 1

*Mass media coverage of CSA over the last 50 years (Source: modified and based on Weatherred, 2015, p. 19)*

| Five stages of CSA media coverage | Prominent stories and effects on society |
|---|---|
| Early history (1960–1979) | Growing media attention paid to CSA as a hidden and widespread societal problem started to sensitize both the broader public and professionals such as pediatricians and teachers. |
| Backlash (1980–1989) | Accusations of high-profile abuse cases in day-care centers widely covered by the press proved false, fostering public suspicion of child protection measures. |
| Sex offender legislation (United States) (1990–1999) | News coverage of horrific child abduction cases pushed the idea of "stranger danger" and prompted a call for more punitive measures against CSA offenders. In the United States in particular, several new sex offender laws were passed. |
| Religious institutions (2000–2009) | The unveiling and intense media coverage of decades of abuse and its cover-up in religious institutions such as the Roman Catholic Church affected trust in the church. |
| High-profile cases involving non-religious institutions (2010–present) | High-profile CSA cases involving non-religious institutions such as schools, universities, and sports associations gained significant media attention. Media predominantly focused on individual perpetrators and their punishment. |

In her conclusion, Jane Weatherred (2015) observes critically that, according to available studies, the media coverage of CSA to date is characterized by *episodic framing*, which picks out sensational individual cases and neglects *thematic framing*, that is, looking at the social context of, and responsibilities for, the sexual abuse problem. At the same time, on the basis of the current state of research, she criticizes the fact that the media, which are supposed to contribute to solving the CSA problem, usually only refer to the punishment of the perpetrator and hardly address prevention approaches at all.

The sociologist Stjeka Popović (University of Zagreb, Croatia) has presented a second systematic review of all content analytical studies on media representations of CSA (Popović, 2018). This literature review includes 24 studies. Once again, these are mainly analyses of newspaper articles, with 15 of the 24 being from the period 2010–2017. The new review emphasizes again that many of these studies analyze CSA press coverage on

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the basis of framing theory. One aspect of framing is whether a pro-victim or a pro-accused perspective is taken. Here, it was shown that a clear *pro-victim perspective* prevails in CSA reporting on the Catholic Church, whereas a *pro-accused perspective* was found in reporting if the alleged perpetrator was a celebrity (e.g., Michael Jackson).

The second literature review confirms that the media usually use episodic rather than thematic framing in their reports on CSA. It also confirms that the media continue to focus on perpetrator punishment as the core solution to the problem, while prevention approaches are ignored. In contrast to the literature review by Jane Weatherred (2015), however, Stjeka Popović's (2018) review reveals a slight tendency in the media to focus more on the responsibility of institutions and society as a whole, in addition to attributing blame to individual perpetrators.

Conclusion: Both research reviews make it clear that the current state of research on CSA media (mainly newspaper) representations identifies various quality deficiencies but does not provide a comprehensive framework of quality criteria for CSA reporting.

State of research on stock photos

Previous research on press coverage of CSA has usually concentrated entirely on text. An analysis of visual language is lacking but necessary (Popović, 2018). There are basically two types of images used in the press coverage of CSA: documentary photos and symbolic photos.

*Documentary photos* depict the real facts of the case, for example a photo of a convicted offender in a court case on CSA taken by the court reporter directly after the sentencing in the courtroom. The documentary photo acts as an *authentic witness to the real scene* of the sentencing of a specific offender (Machin, 2004, p. 317).

*Symbolic photos*, on the other hand, are prefabricated photos taken in completely different contexts and retrieved from one's own archive or a stock photo bank in order to illustrate a factual situation representatively through similar or abstracted image motifs. One example is a photo of handcuffs taken from a stock photo bank, which is used to symbolize a convicted offender, even though the photo in question was taken in a studio many years before the relevant court proceedings. The symbolic stock photo functions as a *principally interchangeable illustration of the general concept* of sentencing (Machin, 2004, p. 317).

The journalistic press code demands a strict orientation towards facts and truth (IFJ, 2019). This means that documentary photos must not

be manipulated by image processing and that symbolic photos must be marked as such.

Symbolic photos and stock photo banks have become more important in the practice of media reporting, advertising, and marketing in the course of digitalization over recent decades. The academic literature now speaks of a *global stock photo industry* worth billions (Frosh, 2001, 2002, 2008; Kalazić et al., 2015) and criticizes stock photo banks for spreading an often "soulless", consumption- and marketing-oriented, glossy imagery (Frosh, 2008; Machin, 2004). Leading stock photo bank providers include dpa / Picture Alliance (https://www.picture-alliance.com) and Getty Images / iStockfoto (https://www.gettyimages.com), which together provide more than 160 million symbolic photos and other symbolic images (e.g., computer graphics). Although some iconography studies on stock photos and their main motifs are available, this type of photos is considered to be disproportionately under-researched, given their wide distribution and great cultural influence (Kalazić et al., 2015).

Conclusion: To date, no knowledge exists on the question of how stock photo banks visualize the problem of CSA or which CSA iconography prevails in the stock photos used in the press.

State of research on YouTube videos

The current state of research on media representations of CSA is strongly focused on the mass media, especially press coverage. Communicators in the mass media are typically professional journalists. With the popularization of social media, the question arises of how and by whom the problem of sexual abuse is dealt with on these participatory digital platforms. By far the most widely-used social media platform to date is the video platform YouTube. In the Alexa ranking of the most visited websites, YouTube.com ranks second, with only the search engine Google.com being more popular (Alexa, 2022).

YouTube research is booming, and numerous content and quality analyses are available that explore the video representations of diverse topics and issues. Current studies deal, for example, with political communication, health communication, education, marketing, and entertainment on YouTube. However, whether and how the social problem of sexual violence in general and CSA in particular is addressed in YouTube videos has to date largely been described as a research gap.

Nonetheless, discussion and analysis have been ongoing for some considerable time as to how social media in general are used for feminist

activism against sexual violence (Mendes et al., 2019). The focus here is usually on so-called "hashtag activism", which is primarily pursued via Twitter, where experiences of sexual violence and/or other gender-related social grievances are shared under a particular hashtag (e.g., #MeToo). The respective hashtag and its political message then gain public attention and sometimes develop into a social movement (e.g., the so-called "#MeToo movement"). *Feminist hashtag activism* is increasingly being scientifically investigated, for example by manual or computer-assisted content analysis of the Twitter tweets, interviews, or surveys with Twitter activists, thereby investigating the practical and political consequences of hashtag activism. Examples are studies on anti-violence feminist hashtag activism related to hashtags such as:

- #MeToo (Bogen et al., 2019; Hosterman et al., 2018; Jackson et al., 2019; Kaufman et al., 2019; Lindgren, 2019; Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2018; Mendes & Ringrose, 2019; Suk et al., 2019);
- #YesAllWomen (Barker Plummer & Barker Plummer, 2017; Rodino-Colocino, 2014; Thrift, 2014); and
- #WhyIStayed (Clark, 2016; Weathers et al., 2016).

Although feminist hashtag activism is reaching its limits and receiving a backlash, previous research clearly acknowledges the benefits of this form of social media communication, which leads to public awareness, solidarity, and the politicization of individual experiences of sexualized violence such as rape and CSA.

Related forms of online activism such as the *feminist photo or selfie activism* of "Project Unbreakable" (https://projectunbreakable.tumblr.com) are in similar circumstances. This project was launched in October 2011 by 19-year-old photography student Grace Brown from New York City. It consists of a collection of user-submitted photographs (mostly selfies) in which rape and CSA survivors hold up a poster with a quote from their tormentors. The first photo of the project shows a poster with the inscription "You wanted it, though". The feminist selfie project is described in the academic literature as a successful digital form of mobilization and solidarity against sexual violence (Ferreday, 2017).

Apart from collective online activism, social media are also used individually to break the silence around sexual abuse and share personal abuse experiences. For example, the video "My story: Struggling, bullying, suicide, self-harm", which was published on YouTube in September 2012, gained sad fame worldwide. The 9-minute video was produced and published by 15-year-old student Amanda Todd from Canada. In this video, the teenager tells her story of online sexual abuse, ongoing bullying, desperation,

loneliness, and suicidal thoughts by holding labeled notecards up to the camera. Four weeks after the video was released, she took her own life. In the course of the subsequent intense media coverage, her video went viral.

Telling traumatic experiences via notecards has since established itself as a video genre in its own right on social media. Communication scientist Kelli Fowlds (2014) examined $N = 90$ such authentic notecard story videos on YouTube. She found that most of them are made by girls and young women and often tell stories of sexual abuse. The author explains that girls and young women use YouTube as a digital space for mutual support. An analysis of the viewer comments on the notecard videos showed that the audience mostly reacts positively. In contrast to the situation of Amanda Todd, the study expresses hope that social media such as YouTube can help to overcome the isolation of those affected by CSA as they network and support each other online.

Conclusion: Apart from Kelli Fowlds' master's thesis (Fowlds, 2014), no other published studies could be identified that investigate the representation of the CSA problem on YouTube, either individually or in the context of feminist anti-violence online activism.

Research questions

Against the background of the limited research to date, the present chapter aims to answer the following three practice-oriented research questions (RQ), which relate to textual, photographic, and videographic CSA representations and their quality deficiencies:

- RQ1: Which quality criteria should be applied to CSA-related newspaper articles? Which quality problems are to be identified and solved?
- RQ2: How is CSA visualized in the stock photos used by the press? Which quality problems are to be identified and solved?
- RQ3: How is CSA treated in YouTube videos? Which quality problems are to be identified and solved?

Methods

To answer the three RQ regarding newspaper articles, stock photos, and YouTube videos, different methods of content and quality analysis were used. Inductive and deductive approaches were combined in the development of the codebooks and the reliability of all instruments was tested

by determining the intercoder agreement. In all three studies the relevant rules of research ethics were implemented.

Method for newspaper article analysis

To answer RQ1, a framework of quality criteria for media reporting on CSA was developed. Four different sources were used for this purpose:

- $N$ = 22 journalistic guidelines on high-quality media reporting about CSA;
- $N$ = 7 scientific publications on high-quality media reporting about CSA;
- An online survey of $N$ = 29 survivors of CSA from Germany on the quality of media reporting about CSA; and
- An online survey of $N$ = 59 CSA counseling centers in Germany on the quality of media reporting about CSA.

All four expert sources were systematically analyzed (for methodological details, see Döring & Walter, 2020). The study was supported by a grant from the Independent Commissioner for Child Sexual Abuse Issues of the German government (Z2/21.31.10/P/17). As a result, the quality requirements of all sources were integrated into a criteria framework with ten central quality criteria for CSA media and press coverage.

Method for stock photo analysis

To answer RQ2, a gross sample of $N$ = 2,000 CSA-related online newspaper articles (German language) was composed using the online archives of 20 regional and national newspapers. From each of the 20 online newspaper archives the first 100 articles for the search term "sexual abuse" were sampled. This gross sample of $N$ = 2,000 CSA-related online newspaper articles contained a net sample of $N$ = 419 articles with one CSA-related stock photo each. All these stock photos were subjected to a systematic quantitative image content analysis, so that a CSA-related stock photo iconography could be created (for methodological details, see Döring & Walter, 2021). This iconography comprises seven image types of photo motifs that can be assigned to three thematic groups.

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Method for YouTube video analysis

To answer RQ3, a sample of $N = 300$ CSA-related YouTube videos (German language) was drawn by entering the search term "child sexual abuse" in the YouTube search mask. The top 100 hits of each of three YouTube filters (relevance, upload date, and view count) were included in the sample and subjected to a quantitative media content analysis (for methodological details, see Döring, 2018). As a result, five groups of CSA-related YouTube videos from different types of video producers were distinguished and characterized according to their content and quality.

## Results

The results of the three studies are presented here in a cursory manner with a special focus on illustrative examples and practical ways of improving media quality. A more detailed presentation of the results on newspaper articles, stock photos, and YouTube videos can be found in the original papers (Döring, 2018; Döring & Walter, 2020, 2021).

Results on newspaper articles

According to the public interest model of normative media theory (McQuail, 2010), news media have the duty – in addition to their economic goals – to serve the public interest. With regard to CSA, the press should, accordingly, orient its reporting in such a way that it contributes to the education and sensitization of the public and the treatment of the problem, which can be understood as a public health epidemic. A prerequisite of responsible journalism that serves the public interest is that journalists follow the seven fundamental journalistic quality dimensions on which there is broad consensus in journalism research (Jungnickel, 2011). In the course of study 1, ten CSA-specific quality criteria were assigned to these seven general quality dimensions (see table 2). These CSA-related quality criteria, which are based on four CSA expert sources (journalistic guidelines, academic literature, CSA survivors, CSA counseling centers), can be used in research as well as in journalistic practice to identify and remedy quality deficiencies in CSA reporting.

In accordance with the fundamental first journalistic quality dimension, QD1, "Relevance" (see table 2), CSA reporting, in particular, is required to

overcome the typical focus on individual cases (episodic framing). For this purpose, sufficient contextual information is to be provided in the sense of the first quality criterion, QC1, "Thematic framing of CSA", which embeds the individual case in a broader societal context. CSA reporting typically comes in the form of *crime and court reporting* that by definition focuses on unusual cases as they are regarded as the most newsworthy (Henshall & Ingram, 2012, chapters 36 and 65). Hence, court and crime reporting is highly biased towards exceptional cases and neglects the most common and typical cases (Young & Hermida, 2015). To counterbalance these problems of episodic framing, CSA-related court and crime reporting should adopt thematic framing by including crime statistics, expert statements, and background information on those social causes that facilitate the committing and covering up of sexual abuse. The available content and quality analyses of press coverage (Wheatherred, 2015; Popović, 2018) are unanimous in their call for more thematic framing. Moreover, journalistic guidelines, counseling centers and, last but not least, sexual abuse survivors urgently demand more contextualization of the reporting on individual CSA crime and court cases. In order to promote thematic framing in journalistic practice, it makes sense for specialist institutions to provide journalists with up-to-date, *national fact sheets on CSA* (e.g., NSVRC, 2015).

*Computational journalism* offers another route to thematic CSA framing. The *Los Angeles Times*, for example, complements its crime reporting on homicides by hosting a publicly accessible and searchable database called "The Homicide Report" (https://homicide.latimes.com/). This database provides a short, automatically generated digital news report on each and every homicide case documented by the Los Angeles County Coroner since 2010. The database is the successor to a blog project initiated by award-winning journalist Jill Leovy in 2007 and allows for statistical analyses and geographic mapping by date and location of killing, cause of death, and victim's age, gender, and race/ethnicity (Young & Hermida, 2015). It is maintained by the *Los Angeles Times* to overcome the problem of very selective, biased, and episodic coverage of homicides in the newspaper itself. This continuously updated and complete homicide database has, for the first time, publicly demonstrated that only very few selected homicide cases (about 10 % of annual homicides) are reported in the newspaper, usually with an emotionalizing "human touch". Providing objective, up-to-date, and complete homicide data organized by algorithms and curated by journalists in a public service database enables a better understanding of patterns of the homicide epidemic, for example in terms of who is disproportionally affected or non-affected. While the general turn to more computational journalism brings its own challenges regarding the ethics and quali-

ty of news reporting (Helberger et al., 2019), it holds out the prospect of more accurate, contextualized, and unbiased reporting in terms of thematic framing (Young & Hermida, 2015). If and how The *Los Angeles Times'* Homicide Report can serve as an example for future CSA-related computational journalism projects remains an open question.

Table 2
*A framework for high-quality press reporting on CSA (Source: modified and based on Döring & Walter, 2020, p. 405)*

| Seven generic journalistic quality dimensions (QD) | Ten issue-specific quality criteria (QC) for CSA media coverage |
| --- | --- |
| QD1: Relevance | QC1: Thematic framing of CSA |
| QD2: Communication | QC2: Non-sensational reporting on CSA<br>QC3: Use of appropriate terms regarding CSA |
| QD3: Diversity | QC4: Inclusion of CSA stakeholders |
| QD4: Appropriateness | QC5: Non-stereotypical reporting on CSA<br>QC6: Inclusion of CSA-related prevention and intervention |
| QD5: Legitimacy | QC7: Ethical treatment of survivors of CSA<br>QC8: Lawful reporting on CSA |
| QD6: Impartiality | QC9: Balance of CSA survivors' and alleged perpetrators' interests |
| QD7: Transparency | QC10: Disclosure and reflection of official sources |

The second quality dimension, QD2, "Communication", refers to a clearly understandable and appropriate journalistic language style. For reporting on CSA, this means, in concrete terms, that sensationalism, which aims to shock with sexual details of the crime and emotionalize with descriptions of the perpetrator as a "monster" or a "pervert", should be avoided (QC3). Similarly, misleading terms (QC4) such as "sex scandal" or "sex affair" should be replaced by correct terms such as "child sexual abuse". Presenting perpetrators of abuse as "monsters" is misleading because, among other things, such individuals often initially appear friendly and trustworthy. Suspected abusers are often referred to in the media as "pedophiles", which is another inappropriate practice since many are not pedophiles at all and, conversely, many people with a pedophilic preference do not commit any abusive acts. The misleading linguistic equation of pedophiles with abuse offenders makes primary prevention more difficult, because in a climate of harsh stigmatization people with pedophilic tendencies hardly dare to reveal themselves and seek help at an early stage, which increases the

problem of abuse (Jahnke, 2018). Negative examples of sensationalism and inappropriate labeling are newspaper articles with titles like

- "PURE EVIL: Monster mum sold daughters, 7 and 8, to pedophile and watched as he raped them in a car" (*The Sun*, Lockett, 2020),
- "Monster who planned to rape baby tells of secret international pedophile ring" (*Liverpool Echo*, Docking, 2019),
- "Pedophile who abused up to 200 children stabbed to death in prison" (*New York Post*, Steinbuch, 2019).

The third quality dimension, QD3, "Diversity", is to be implemented according to the fourth quality criterion, QC4, "Inclusion of CSA stakeholders", in such a way that a variety of stakeholders have their say in CSA reporting, namely CSA survivors, specialist counseling centers, researchers, law enforcement agencies, etc. To foster CSA media reporting that includes the voices of diverse experts and stakeholders, the establishment and maintenance of national and local databases with CSA experts willing to speak with the media would be useful.

A particular concern of all sources examined for this study is the implementation of the fourth quality dimension, QD4, "Appropriateness", which is characterized by non-stereotypical reporting (QC5). This means that journalists should not uncritically adopt common CSA stereotypes or, even better, should actively refute them. This includes stereotypes and myths such as that the danger of abuse is primarily posed by strangers ("stranger danger"), whereas in reality it often emanates from known and trusted persons (Weatherred, 2015); that CSA is becoming ever more widespread, whereas in reality it is decreasing (Finkelhor & Jones, 2004, 2012); that perpetrators are conspicuous "monsters", "perverts", "predators", and "pedophiles", whereas in reality abusers are often people who are socially well respected and act in a trustworthy and sympathetic manner (DiBennardo, 2018); and that online abusers are ugly, old, pedophilic men who pretend to be adolescents on the net, whereas in reality it is often attractive younger men who manage to awaken the interest of some minors precisely because of their openly communicated adult status (Hasinoff, 2014; Wolak et al., 2010).

In addition to avoiding and explaining common misconceptions, stereotypes, and myths about CSA, appropriate press reporting should include the proper assessment of the causes of the problem and, in particular, of possible solutions. For this reason, quality criterion QC6 requires the inclusion of prevention and intervention approaches. Just as it has become an established practice in reporting on suicide cases to refer to help hotlines at the end of each article, reporting on CSA cases can and should

regularly refer to national contact points for CSA victims, witnesses, and potential perpetrators. Furthermore, effective prevention and intervention approaches can also be explained in more detail in the reporting itself (Davies, 2014; Mejia et al., 2012). This includes, for example, references to CSA protection concepts in institutions, recommendations for the early detection of abuse, explanations of support services such as legal and psychological counseling or trauma therapy, and references to political initiatives on children's rights and protection against violence.

In CSA reporting, the fifth general quality dimension, "legitimacy", includes ethical dealings with CSA survivors before, during, and after press interviews (QC7) and consideration of the respective national legal framework (QC8), for example with regard to the right to one's own image or privacy. Here, it is apparent that journalists sometimes treat CSA survivors very insensitively and disregard their rights, for example by revealing the identity of underage victims (Jones et al., 2010) or not making their journalistic interviews trauma-sensitive (for detailed information on good and trauma-sensitive interview practice, see, for example, WITNESS, 2013).

The sixth general journalistic quality dimension, QD6, concerns impartiality. In the context of CSA reporting, this means that, despite all empathy and support for CSA survivors, it remains a journalistic duty to thoroughly examine the facts and consider the rights of suspected offenders (QC9). Here, a special sensitivity is required so that CSA survivors do not experience the journalistic necessity to ask questions and run fact-checks as disrespect or mistrust. A tragic lesson in the damage that a lack of fact-checking can cause in the reporting on sexual violence is the article "A Rape on Campus", published in *Rolling Stone Magazine* in November 2014. The article revealed the shocking case of a young student known as "Jackie" who was raped multiple times at a fraternity party on the campus of the University of Virginia and then found that the university was unwilling to acknowledge and prosecute the crime. The article had been written by an award-winning investigative journalist who specialized in reporting on sexual violence. However, it had to be retracted soon after its publication due to lack of substance and led to a considerable backlash and several lawsuits, among others for damage to reputation. A scientific analysis precisely identifies the serious journalistic mistakes made in this reporting that meant to protect and support the alleged rape survivor but disregarded the alleged perpetrators' rights as well as the principles of impartiality and fact-checking (Coronel et al., 2015). The detailed scientific analysis of this notorious case of well-intended but badly executed reporting on sexual violence also explains how to avoid such mistakes in the future.

Finally, the seventh and last general journalistic quality dimension is transparency. In the context of CSA, the identity of survivors (particularly minors) often needs to be protected. However, other sources must be precisely named and very critically questioned. For example, in the case of long-standing and systematic CSA in institutions, official sources often claim they had no knowledge of any abuse in the past. In such cases, officials and their claims need to be carefully scrutinized by journalists. A positive example is the *Indianapolis Star's* now multiple-award-winning coverage of decades of sexual abuse of hundreds of underage girl gymnasts in the USA by the well-respected and popular Olympic sports physician Larry Nassar. The "Out of Balance" series of articles, published in August 2016, ultimately led to the criminal conviction of Larry Nassar and Steve Penny, President of USA Gymnastics, and exposed the extent of both the sexual abuse and its institutional cover-up to the public. A Netflix documentary ("Athlete A") and a podcast series: https://believed.michiganradio .org have now been published about this exemplary press reporting, which also cast a critical eye on the role of the gymnasts' parents, who tragically failed their daughters. The critical questioning of the official statements of USA Gymnastics played a central role in this investigative journalistic work (Kwiatkowski et al., 2020).

Results on stock photos

The analysis of the symbolic photos used in press coverage showed that the *CSA iconography* (i.e., the set of typical image motifs for the representation of the issue of CSA) follows the main narrative of crime and court reporting in the articles (Henshall & Ingram, 2012). Therefore it takes up (1) the context of the crime; (2) the events of the crime and the people involved; and (3) the consequences of the crime (see table 3). Two types of crime contexts are visualized: real-world (e.g., a church, a school) and virtual (symbolized with computer equipment). In the symbolic visualization of the events of the crime and the people involved, there are three types of image motifs: the perpetrator before or during the crime, the victim before or during the crime, and the perpetrator and the victim together before or during the crime. The visualization of the consequences of the crime has two main types of motif: the consequences of the crime for the victim and the consequences of the crime for the perpetrator (see table 3).

Table 3

*CSA iconography of stock photos used in press reporting (Source: modified and based on Döring & Walter, 2021, p. 378)*

| Three groups of CSA-related stock photo motifs | Seven types of CSA-related stock photos motifs | Stock photo examples |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Context of the crime | Real-life context of the crime | Photo of a church, a school, a public swimming pool |
| | Virtual context of the crime | Photo of computer equipment |
| Events of the crime and people involved | Perpetrator before or during the crime | Photo of a gloomy, anonymous, hooded man |
| | Victim before or during the crime | Photo of a defensive girl, see figure 1 |
| | Perpetrator and victim before or during the crime | Photo of a defensive girl, whom a man is approaching in a threatening manner |
| Consequences of the crime for the people involved | Consequences of the crime for the victim | Photo of a dirty, undressed doll lying on the floor, see figure 2 |
| | Consequences of the crime for the perpetrator | Photo of handcuffed man |

A critical evaluation of the CSA iconography created by stock photos reveals basically the same quality issues that are discussed for press reporting. Main weaknesses of traditional CSA press reporting explained above are episodic framing (Wheatherred, 2015; Popović, 2018) and neglect of prevention (Davies, 2014; Mejia et al., 2012). Looking at stock photos, we see the same patterns. The visual framing of CSA in stock photos remains episodic and case-related. The use of visual language to illustrate the larger social implications of CSA (e.g., computer graphics to illustrate the spread of the problem using statistical data) could not be observed. In addition to stock photos, the $N$ = 2,000 online press articles examined used documentary photos at best (e.g., real crime scene photos) but no illustrations of background information in the sense of visual thematic framing. The only solution to the problem of CSA represented in stock photography is perpetrator punishment. All other prevention and intervention approaches remain invisible.

Furthermore, the CSA stock photo iconography can be characterized as sensationalistic and stereotyping. For example, the perpetrator in the symbolic photo typically appears as a gloomy, anonymous, hooded man. Thus,

misleading concepts of mysterious foreign perpetrators and a ubiquitous "stranger danger" (Weatherred, 2015) are visually propagated.

From the perspective of CSA survivors, who demand a comprehensive social reappraisal and appropriate press coverage (Kavemann et al., 2019), the visualization of the victims conveyed by stock photos is likely to be particularly problematic. For example, there are numerous examples of the image motif "victim before or during the crime" that objectify the victims, sexualize them through light clothing and camera focus between the legs, and force the media audience into the role of perpetrator (see figure 1).

Figure 1
*CSA-related stock photo with the motif type "Victim before or during the crime" (Source: Adobe Stock)*



Also worthy of criticism are the stock photos with the motif "consequences of the crime for the victims". The visual cliché of the child doll lying on the floor or in the gutter, soiled and stripped, with dead or closed eyes, is intended to visualize the physical and mental suffering of the victims and have an accusatory effect (see figure 2). At the same time, however, this (again often sexualizing) depiction reduces those affected by CSA completely to their passive role as victims and negates any hope of overcoming the trauma of abuse and creating a positive future.

Figure 2
*CSA-related stock photo with the motif "Consequences of the crime for the victim" (Source: Adobe Stock)*



Similarly problematic to the visual example in figure 2 are textual clichés for CSA consequences such as "soul murder". The psychoanalytic discourse on physical, emotional, and sexual abuse discusses traumatizing effects and talks about "soul murder". However, this academic literature also stresses resilience and possibilities of "soul-saving" change through social support and therapy (e.g., Shengold, 1978, 2011). Media representa-

tions often omit this perspective and absolutize the victim status of people affected by CSA.

An analysis of the prevention materials of CSA counseling centers showed that they completely dispense with such victim clichés and use a visual language that depicts CSA survivors as thoughtful, sad, or angry, but not alone. Their images of consequences of the crime for the victim include the seeking and finding of help, support, confidantes, and community, and also contain symbols of resilience and hope, such as a photo of a lifebelt or a flower breaking through asphalt (Döring & Walter, 2021).

Since stock photos are designed to visualize abstract concepts, they are usually simplified and clichéd as that is how they are easily recognizable, attract attention, and can emotionalize the audience (Machin, 2004, p. 317). These functions contradict a differentiated visual language with regard to the problem of CSA. To achieve qualitative improvements here, the textual framing of CSA would first have to change: Only when the press reporting in the text includes prevention approaches more strongly, it will make sense and be appropriate to also integrate stock photos representing prevention and intervention. Furthermore, it would be desirable for the critical questioning of CSA stereotypes and myths on the part of journalists to concern not only the text but also the visual language. Journalists could search for alternative image motifs in the comprehensive stock photo banks or at least avoid particularly problematic ones (e.g., sexualizing symbolic photos of CSA survivors). Last but not least, photo projects and competitions are conceivable which are aimed at developing and implementing alternative image motifs to CSA and uploading them to stock photo banks so that more diverse and sensitive image material is available there under the search term and tag "sexual abuse".

Results on YouTube videos

Although YouTube as a social media platform allows the active participation of media users, the analysis of a sample of $N = 300$ CSA videos showed that about half (47 %) came from media companies (see table 4). In German-speaking countries, it is mainly TV documentaries on CSA that are distributed by the media companies themselves or by private individuals on YouTube. The most frequently viewed CSA-related videos on YouTube cover particularly spectacular cases. The public video comments are accordingly emotionalized: Sympathy is expressed with the victims, whereas anger, disgust, hatred, and revenge and death fantasies are articulated with regard to the perpetrators. Sometimes conspiracy theories are voiced, for

example that top government circles systematically promote CSA (Döring, 2018; Kline, 2017).

Table 4
*Composition of a sample of N = 300 CSA-related German-language YouTube videos (Source: based on Döring, 2018, p. 343)*

| Types of producers of CSA-related YouTube videos | Percentage of videos | Example content |
|---|---|---|
| Media organizations | 47 % | TV documentaries on CSA cases |
| CSA survivors | 17 % | Accounts of CSA survival |
| CSA experts | 14 % | Explanation or demonstration of CSA-related therapy |
| YouTube celebrities | 3 % | CSA-related clickbait |
| Further video producers | 19 % | Far-right and anti-Islamic ideologies and conspiracy theories regarding CSA |
| Total | 100 % | |

One sixth of the videos in the sample (17 %) came from CSA survivors. However, the notecard videos described in the state of research (Fowlds, 2014) are not foregrounded. Instead, CSA survivors typically face the camera and report orally on their experiences, including trauma consequences, court cases, and psychotherapy. In the video comments, they receive support in most cases. The video comment section is also used by other survivors to share their stories and give further references to offers of help.

One seventh of the YouTube videos in the sample (14 %) were produced by CSA experts. The main content of their videos consists of social campaigns or recordings of lectures and conferences. In some cases, the qualifications of the video producers are clearly visible. Sometimes, however, there are also questionable videos by self-appointed therapists who claim that sexual abuse trauma can easily be cured, some of whom receive enthusiastic support in the video comments. This result is not surprising because healthcare information on YouTube is known for its diverse quality and often missing background information on information providers (Madathil et al., 2015).

A very small percentage of the videos in the sample (3 %) came from YouTube celebrities who take up the problem of abuse in a way that is differentiated but also deliberately lurid, thus generating great attention in the sense of clickbait. Using misleading, sensationalized video titles and video thumbnails is a common practice on YouTube used by media com-

panies, social media influencers, and ordinary social media users. Clickbait is considered a type of online disinformation (Kapantai et al., 2020).

The fifth and last group of CSA-related YouTube videos originated from "further video producers" and is quite large, at just under one fifth (19 %) of the YouTube videos in the sample. This video group points to the problem that the authorship of YouTube content is often not clearly attributable. For example, there are some YouTube channels in German-speaking countries that visually imitate the appearance of TV news but do not, in fact, originate from journalists or news organizations. Instead, they stem from individuals or networks that disseminate ideological content and instrumentalize the issue of CSA in order to spread far-right or Islamophobic messages and conspiracy theories that are also investigated as a separate type of online disinformation (Kapantai et al., 2020).

Overall, the YouTube video analysis confirmed the current state of research on the significance of social media for dealing with sexual violence (Fowlds, 2014): YouTube is used by CSA survivors for mutual exchange, networking, support, and public relations. While personal accounts and stories of survival could be identified, the sample did not entail examples of feminist anti-violence activism on YouTube.

The analysis also revealed serious quality problems. YouTube as a social media platform seems to further amplify the tendency of the mass media to sensationalize selected abuse cases and focus mainly on perpetrator blame and punishment instead of treating CSA as a societal problem (Wheatherred, 2015; Popović, 2018). This takes place through two mechanisms: Videos of extreme cases are more often uploaded to YouTube, and they receive more views, shares, and comments. As a result, the YouTube algorithm then displays those videos particularly frequently in search queries and video suggestions. The sensationalizing style of the videos is further intensified by highly emotional video comments, which simplistically pity the victims and fantasize about revenge on the perpetrators.

Other quality problems include click baiting (e.g., YouTube influencers take up the abuse problem to generate attention with sensationalized abuse content or "abuse pranks"), self-proclaimed therapists, and dubious therapeutic approaches as well as the ideological appropriation of the abuse problem by inhuman ideologies.

It is unlikely that these quality problems of CSA-related YouTube videos will be solved by educating the video producers, since they profit from their specific framing of the abuse problem. Instead, approaches to mitigating this problem consist primarily in (1) producing and publishing more high-quality and wide-reaching CSA-related content on YouTube and (2) fostering the YouTube literacy of the audience.

## Discussion

The present content and quality analysis of CSA representations in press articles, stock photos, and YouTube videos provides indications a) of which quality criteria are to be applied in each case and b) that various, sometimes serious quality deficiencies are apparently widespread.

The generalizability of the current analysis is limited by the fact that mainly German-language media examples were examined. It will be the task of future research projects to apply standardized quality criteria to larger and internationally comparable samples of media materials in order to be able to assess the distribution of quality deficiencies more accurately and also to monitor quality changes over time.

In order to promote practical improvements, *workshops* bringing together stakeholders such as CSA experts (e.g., survivors, counselors, researchers) and media professionals (e.g., journalists, editors) to discuss the quality deficiencies identified and develop possible solutions for better quality reporting on CSA are promising. In addition to raising awareness and training journalists, concrete *tools* are also relevant, for example annually updated national fact sheets on CSA and pedophilia, up-to-date databases of experts and survivors available for press interviews, or collections of quality-controlled stock photos. Using computational journalism to foster thematic CSA framing seems to be another fruitful approach.

Last but not least, it should be mentioned that distortions and weaknesses in media representations of CSA cannot be completely eliminated; hence, the *media literacy* of the audience is an important factor. This is particularly true for social media, where the audience must be extra careful and critical in selecting and assessing content and also in reacting to content via likes, shares, and comments. Pedagogical measures in the areas of media education, sexual education, and violence prevention (and their interfaces) should therefore take up CSA-related social media content, discuss it critically, and practice competent usage patterns.

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