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Analysing the Discursive Psychology Used Within Digital Media To Influence Public Opinions Concerning Female Child-Killers

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Abstract. *Background:* Discursive psychology is used to invoke emotion and social action within receivers, and widespread media is notorious for utilizing these linguistic features to negatively skew the public opinion of an individual or group. *Objective:* This study aims to investigate through discursive thematic analysis the ways in which digitised media articles utilise linguistic features and discursive devices to invoke emotion within readers, and in turn influence their opinions concerning female child-killers. *Study Design:* The data gathered for this piece of research were 9 digital newspaper articles published between 2017 and 2021 by any of the top 10 most-read titles according to YouGov (2021) and were sourced using Google Chrome. The key terms used to locate these articles were the names “Rachel Henry”, “Tracey Connelly” and “Louise Porton” followed by the names of the top 10 most-read titles (e.g., “Rachel Henry Daily Mail”). *Analysis:* The themes identified suggest a consistent aim within the media to negatively influence the public opinion of the offenders in question by using discursive devices and psychological categories to attack and invalidate these offenders and portray them as being evil, inhuman, delusional individuals who are inherently different from “normal” members of society. The findings produced within this research may have implications regarding the future of mainstream media reporting, as they suggest an excessive use of strategically influential linguistic features within digital newspapers to create extreme negative representations of women who offend, which may prove detrimental to their future access to, and experience of reformation and rehabilitation.

Keywords: Digital Media; Media Representation; Child-killer; Women Who Kill; Female Offenders; Discourse Analysis

Introduction

The media possesses the ability to influence public opinion, beliefs, decision-making and even emotions through the use of imagery, presentation of emotions and ‘desirable’ behaviours – particularly within advertising – and all forms of discourse (Green & Clark, 2013; Nabi, 2017; Naskar et al., 2020; Utz et al., 2013). These techniques are regularly used to paint certain groups of individuals in an undesirable light, which, when considering the fact that the role of newspapers is supposedly to inform the public and enable them to make judgments of their own, could be considered unethical (McManus, 1997; Tang, 2012). For example, newspaper articles have been known to depict welfare recipients as being undeserving scroungers, and drains on society, as well as being the cause of their own poverty, stressing cultural factors and inducing victim-blaming (de Goede, 1996; Tihelková, 2015). Similarly, Thornton and Wahl (1996) reported that newspaper articles were prone to sensationalizing crimes committed by individuals with mental disorders. This was shown to negatively impact public opinions on this subgroup and encourage harsher attitudes towards these individuals, by providing dramatic and distorted images that emphasise dangerousness, criminality, and unpredictability (Stuart, 2006). It has been demonstrated that the media, particularly in the form of newspaper articles, is capable of negatively skewing readers’ views, which can jeopardize lives and create defamation of careers (Matusitz & Breen, 2007), by inducing negative emotions within them which they can then associate with the subject matter of the article, e.g., offenders suffering with mental disorders.

One group in particular who have been known to face public outrage due to carefully executed media representation is that of criminal offenders. DiBennardo (2018) reported that media articles often use child victims of sexual offences as a rhetorical tool to emphasize the “predatory” nature of offenders and justify retributory violence or harsh legal punishment against sexual predators. Similarly, Wilczynski and Sinclair (1999) noted the way in which media articles individualised and demonised child abusers with little to no coverage of the social causes of abuse, nor steps that could be taken to prevent it, in order to “promote law-and-order agendas”, and moral panic (Francis & Taylor, 2017). This would suggest that the media prioritises demonising offenders and invoking hatred and outrage among members of the public, rather than utilising their vast platforms to spread information on the potential risk factors and early indicators of an abusive individual or relationship (Lonne & Parton, 2014). Malinen et al. (2012) similarly acknowledged that sensationalising sexual crimes within the media and the lack of genuinely informative reporting in this area results in negative community attitudes towards released sex offenders, regardless of the nature of their offense, and therefore may create barriers to community re-entry. It can be argued that these harsh media portrayals are unethical, especially for the offenders in

question, as a failure to reintegrate themselves within their communities may cause strain and in turn result in recidivism (Palermo, 2009; Willis & Grace, 2008), as well as potentially helping to create a self-fulfilling prophecy of deviance and offending which may also result in further recidivism (Farrell & Swigert, 1978; Schultz, 2014).

However, emphasis within the media is not always so eagerly placed on the severity of the offence. It is also common within the media to attribute blame and encourage public disdain based on a suspect or offender's personal characteristics or lifestyle than the crime committed, should they fit the criteria for what is seen within society as being linked with criminality – for example, racial and ethnic minorities have been overrepresented as offenders within the news (Grosholz & Kubrin, 2007; Peck, 2016), and underrepresented as victims (Weiss & Chermak, 1998). It would appear that within the media, tools are used to demonise those of particular characteristics and those who behave in an antisocial manner, sometimes through graphic depictions of crimes committed against innocent and potentially vulnerable victims, such as violent or sexual offences committed against children (DiBennardo, 2018), and through the relation of an individual's ethnic background or cultural differences, including religious beliefs (Habib et al., 2020). Despite the differences in the specific methods used to highlight these individuals, Grosholz & Kubrin (2007) note that the general media had found one aspect of criminal offenders that they could agree on; they were mostly male.

This brings to mind the question of female offenders and whether the media portrays them differently to their male counterparts. This has been explored by researchers such as Ajzenstadt & Steinberg (1997), whose study noted that Israeli newspapers indirectly feminized female offenders, emphasizing their physical appearance, behaviour, and performance as mother, wife and housewife, even when they had committed serious crimes, and Brennan & Vandenberg (2009), whose research found that stories about white female offenders were more likely to contain excuses or reasoning for their alleged or actual offenses and were, therefore, more likely to take on an overall favourable tone than stories about minority female offenders. Frei (2008) went on to claim, very much in line with the aforementioned findings, that female sexual offences did not appear to be taken very seriously within the media. But these findings have yet to consider in any depth, the media representations of women who have committed crimes against the most notoriously innocent victims. What does the media have to say about women who kill children?

The use of discourse for the purpose of invoking emotion and social action within other individuals has been studied extensively, considering discourse both inside and outside of the media (Björninen et al., 2020; Breeze, 2019; Chilwa & Ifukor, 2015). For example, Weigand (2004) conducted a discourse analysis of a series of utterances between an uncle and his nephew, which took place after they had a mild disagreement. The researcher reported that the use of grievance and

conciliation discourse within the conversation, such as the nephew admitting to his errors, led to an immediate decrease in the emotional tension, which then resulted in consensus, and therefore social harmony was soon restored. However, this particular piece of research focuses solely on the use of discourse between two persons and fails to consider the ways in which discourse could be used to invoke emotion within a large group of people, such as the general public. Augoustinos et al. (2011), however, conducted an analysis of the linguistic features identified within a public apology which was given by an Australian Prime Minister, considering the ways in which discursive devices helped to justify the apology, and invoke empathy and identification within the readers – who, in this case, were members of the general public. Unfortunately, this study is one of very few which specifically considers the influence of linguistic features on public opinion. The findings from both of the aforementioned studies are informative, however they are also limited because both pieces of research focused solely on the ways in which linguistic features can be used to invoke positive emotions within a reader, such as empathy. However, these studies fail to consider the ways in which the written word could utilize discourse to invoke negative emotions in order to influence the reader's opinion and social action.

On the other hand, some researchers have considered the ways in which individuals are portrayed within the media to negatively influence public opinion. Eastal et al. (2015) investigated the presence of patriarchal myths and values in the media portrayals of women who kill, claiming that “Generally, women who commit murder are, in some way, portrayed as an aberration of true womanhood — as either 'bad' or 'mad'.” (Eastal et al., 2015, p.31). This research also noted the extensive use of sensationalized images when it came to reporting these women, all of which were images that depicted debauchery and even vampirism in order to reinforce the notion that women who offend are unnatural and therefore easily distinguishable from the everyday woman. Similarly, Heidensohn (2000) remarked that sensationalized imagery is used to associate evil and depravity with women who offend. Prior to this, Heidensohn (1991) made the claim that criminal convictions are significantly more stigmatising for women, as well as remarking that in court, women are treated as being “doubly deviant”, and their actions are more often explained in psychopathological terms, as though there is an absence of free will and reasoning within women who offend. Unfortunately, whilst these studies shed light on an underrepresented population and have produced relevant findings in the field of female offender media representation, they have not included discursive methodology to investigate the ways in which the written portrayal of these offenders could impact public opinion.

Constructionist discursive psychology is defined by Edwards (1999) as the branch of psychology concerned with how people describe and invoke emotions within everyday talk and text. However, this area of study

is not to be confused with the study of how talk and text may explain or reveal underlying cognitions within an individual (Edwards & Potter 1992). The constructionist epistemology of discursive psychology views emotions as being socially constructed, and therefore aims not to treat everyday discourse as a pathway to cognition, but to focus instead on the role of discourse in invoking and influencing emotions and social action within others through the use of discursive practices – for example, blaming and accusing, or accounting for absence and error (Edwards & Potter 1992). Discursive devices are defined by Wiggins (2016) as being the core analytical tools of discursive psychology that enable us to examine the discursive production of psychological and social actions. The devices considered in this paper are in line with those identified in the comprehensive list devised by Wiggins (2016).

Furthermore, examples of studies which do analyse the use of discursive devices in particular are limited. A study in which the methodology mirrored more closely and resembles the constructive epistemology of discursive psychology is the work of Berrington & Honkatukia (2002). Their research further supported the earlier claims of Eastal et al. (2015) and Heidensohn (1991) by stating that violent women are viewed as being “exceptional, unnatural and doubly deviant” (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002, p.50). The paper goes on to mention that this particular type of portrayal suggests that not only have these female offenders broken the law, but they have also transgressed the norms and expectations associated with appropriate feminine behaviour. This ties in closely with the findings produced by Boritch (1992) which suggested that the court has punished female offenders not only for violating the law but also for deviating from their “motherly” roles and, therefore, for being “bad” mothers. Similarly, Schur (1984), noted that labels such as bad, evil, and deviant are applied to stigmatize and condemn women who are perceived to have failed to fulfil their gender roles or duties. These researchers claimed that usually, in cases involving female violence, the media displays the offender as being either an “evil monster” or a “poor thing”. This both creates and enforces the assumption that in order for a woman to commit a crime, she must be one of two things: she must be either inherently evil or seriously mentally ill, and there is little-to-no consideration of the intricate details of the crimes committed, nor the potential causes or reasonings behind them, once again ignoring the presence of free will within women who offend (Eastal et al., 2015).

However, whilst there has been a small variety of research concerning the media representation of women who kill, there are significant gaps in the literature. Firstly, the majority of the previous research in this field fails to utilize the constructionist epistemology of discursive psychology, by neglecting to consider the use of psychological categories and discursive devices for invoking emotion and influencing opinion. Another notable gap in this literature exists

because whilst some of these studies are concerned with women who offend, there is a lack of investigation into whether or not the dominant discourses, discursive devices and psychological categories differ from what has previously been measured when specifically concerning women who offend violently in general or violently against children. As such, the purpose of this study is to investigate the ways in which the media, specifically in the form of digital newspapers, utilizes discursive devices and psychological categories to influence public opinions concerning female child-killers in line with the discursive devices identified by Wiggins (2016). This research was carried out with a view to considering how these media portrayals may impact the offenders in question later in life, as well as to consider the ethical concerns associated with these representations.

Method

Study Design

This piece of research followed a qualitative study design, conducting a discursive thematic analysis using the constructionist epistemology of discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992). The process involved analysing the language utilized in a number of media articles concerning females who had killed their children, in order to identify potential themes in the way that these offenders are represented and investigate the way that psychological categories and discursive devices (Wiggins, 2016) are used to invoke emotion and social action within the reader. The qualitative approach to this research was selected because qualitative methods are known to produce more detailed and insightful results, due to the lack of statistic-related limitations which are commonly faced by quantitative methods (Forman et al., 2008).

The discursive thematic analysis method itself was chosen because it allows for a simple yet insightful investigation into the linguistic features used within a text and can contribute to a range of applied questions and address broader critical issues related to ideology and asymmetry (Edwards & Potter, 2020). This is due to the fact that this form of analysis recognizes language as a function used to invoke emotion and social action but acknowledges that it is not necessarily a reflection of the emotion or cognition within the writer (Edwards & Potter, 1992). This therefore eradicated the need to explore the thoughts and feelings of the authors of the articles used and allows for more focus on the purpose of the language itself, and what it aims to convey to the reader.

Data and Sampling:

The data used in this research was sourced from the internet using systematic sampling online through the Google Chrome search engine in order to locate digitized newspaper articles concerning Rachel Henry, Tracey Connelly and Louise Porton. Each of the articles selected was

published by any of the newspaper companies that fall under the category of top 10 most popular titles, according to YouGov (2021). The list of these top 10 most read titles is as follows: Metro, The Guardian, The Times, The Independent, Daily Mail, Sunday Times, Sunday Telegraph, The Sun, The Daily Mirror, Financial Times. The key terms used to locate these articles using the search engine were the names of each of the top 10 most read titles, accompanied by the terms “Rachel Henry” and “Tracey Connelly” and “Louise Porton” (e.g., “Rachel Henry Daily Mail”), as these are the names of three relatively well-known women responsible for the deaths of their children, whose cases received a significant amount of publicity within the UK. All articles were published between 2017 and 2021. This time frame was selected in order to ensure that no outdated samples may be analysed, as it is recognised that the language commonly used within the media has been known to change and evolve over time (Westin, 2016., Spina, 2013), particularly when reporting on forms of violent crime (Lewis, 2005). Articles with a word count of under 250 words were excluded as these were deemed too short to provide representative and generalizable data. Three articles were sourced per killer, meaning that there was a grand total of nine articles.

The systematic sampling online method of data collection was selected in order to ensure that the data acquired comes from legitimately published articles from companies which are large enough they can not only accurately represent the language used by the general media, but also accurately represent the language most frequently read and received by, and therefore most influential to the general public (González-Carriedo, 2014; Paddock, 2004).

An advantage of using the systematic sampling online method of data collection is that it provides data from a range of different articles, published on different dates and by different authors, which therefore gives more insight into whether these women are represented similarly across multiple media platforms (Yoo, 2011). However, a limitation of using this method of data collection might be that it fails to consider other forms of potentially influential mass media such as televised and radio news. Because of this, this research was focused directly on the language used within text, rather than the language used within audible talk, which could limit the research somewhat as it eliminates the ability to identify certain discursive devices used in talk, such as pauses and hesitancy, for example. However, in this particular instance, this is not a significant issue because the contents of the articles examined in this study, when covered on other media platforms such as the television, would likely be scripted, and therefore allow for less audible discursive devices, such as hesitancy. The data was collected under ethical conditions, with each article correctly referenced and sourced from legitimate, published articles.

Results

The process of thematic discursive analysis allowed for the identification of two main themes throughout the nine articles in the sample, including [1] ‘Categorizing Women Who Killed Their Children as Being “Evil” to Encourage Public Disdain and Minimize the Sympathy Felt for Them’ (subtheme was ‘Invalidating and Dehumanizing Women Who Killed Their Children to Reinforce the Notion that Female Offenders Are Inherently Abnormal’), and [2] ‘Depicting Women Who Killed Their Children as Having Been “Bad Mothers” Prior to Their Offending’ (subtheme was ‘Drawing on the Offenders’ Sex Lives to Suggest that Their Promiscuity Made Them Bad Mothers to Reinforce Societal Values and Stereotypes’). These themes and subthemes are presented in Table 1., which also details the number of articles in which these themes and subthemes were identified.

Table 1.

Themes and subthemes prevalent within the sample

Main Themes	Subthemes	Number of articles which displayed theme
Categorizing Women Who Killed Their Children as Being “Evil” to Encourage Public Disdain and Minimize Public Sympathy	Invalidation	6
	Dehumanisation	6
Depicting Women Who Killed Their Children as Having Been “Bad Mothers” Prior to Their Offending	Promiscuity	5
	Motherhood	5

Discursive devices identified within the extracts have been highlighted in **bold**.

Theme 1 - Categorizing Women Who Killed Their Children as Being “Evil” to Encourage Public Disdain and Minimize Public Sympathy:

This section of the analysis considers the ways in which discursive devices are used to enforce the psychological category of “evil” and therefore inspire negative emotions within the reader and minimize sympathy felt for the offenders in question. The articles which most strongly represented the presence of this theme throughout were articles 3 (Spargo, 2020), 5 (Gammell, 2009), and 7 (Davies, 2019).

Extract A, sourced from Article 3 (Spargo, 2020):

“A devastated Pedro Rios said that he had no idea **Rachel Henry was massacring their family** on Monday despite the fact that he was sitting in the next room because she sang over their screams until they drew their final breaths.”

...

“Rachel had allegedly stashed Mireya’s lifeless body in a closet by then, having suffocated her while fighting off the girl’s brother, who punched his mother and demanded she stop”

Extract A sets out to invoke strong emotion within the reader from the beginning of the very first line, through the immediate use of the term “devastated”. This emotional categorisation aims to inspire sympathy for the father of the victims of Henry’s crimes and paints her as a harmful individual before the reader has a chance to discover what she stands accused of. This followed by what could be considered an extreme case formulation through the claim that Henry was “massacring their family”, which implies several brutal, cold-blooded killings, creates an instant agent-subject distinction between victim and offender, designed to minimize the amount of sympathy felt for Henry herself. Later, the extract goes on to explain that Henry “stashed Mireya’s lifeless body in a closet” - an interesting choice of terminology. The phrasing here portrays Henry as a heartless individual, who was cold to her children even after their deaths. Similarly, the use of the term “stashed”, as opposed to something gentler, or more neutral, such as “placed” or “left” suggests that Henry was treating her child’s body as an object to be hidden, which reinforces the notion that Henry is an evil, unloving individual who acted completely of her own volition and was aware of the severity of her actions all along, encouraging the reader to feel disdainful towards her.

Extract B, sourced from Article 5 (Gammell, 2009):

“. . . Connelly showed scant emotion as the details of her son’s life and death were given.

Her **first sign of contrition** came on the day she was sentenced to a minimum of five years in prison: **“Every day of my life is full of guilt and trying to come to terms with my failure as a mother.”**”

...

“However, prison was a comfort for Connelly and she has piled on the weight, eating chocolate, watching television and taking part in the odd pottery class.”

Extract B begins by depicting Connelly as an evil and remorse-free individual through the use of what could be described as an affect display – or rather, a display of the absence of affect – by explaining that she showed “scant” or insufficient emotion during a discussion surrounding the life and death of her toddler. There is also evidence of minimization in the following line when the author claims that Connelly’s “first sign of contrition” came on the day she was sentenced, followed by reported speech from Connelly herself to increase the factuality of this claim. However, this is problematic because realistically, the author alone cannot say whether this was Connelly’s first sign of contrition, unless they personally had witnessed Connelly’s behaviour during every moment leading up to her trial. This minimization exists to reinforce the idea that Tracey Connelly felt little-to-no remorse for the death of her child and is therefore inherently “evil”. Furthering this, the author goes on to effectively debunk Connelly’s claims to feeling remorseful through extreme case formulations. The phrase “prison was a comfort for Connelly” is very obviously speculation on the authors’ part, for this is not reported speech. Similarly, remarking that Connelly has “piled on the weight” implies a luxurious lifestyle that has not actually been confirmed and the article fails to mention exactly how much weight was gained. These devices are designed to lead the reader to believe that Connelly is not being sanctioned harshly enough in order to further minimize the amount of sympathy felt for her.

Extract C, sourced from Article 7 (Davies, 2019):

“Jailing her for life with a minimum term of 32 years the judge, Mrs Justice Yip, described Porton’s actions as **“evil” and “calculated”**.”

...

“Porton had made **“sinister” internet searches at the time about death and breathing and drowning**. She had researched how long it took for body parts to go cold, Birmingham crown court heard.”

...

“The children’s father, Chris Draper, who never met Scarlett, said in an impact statement he felt “broken” with “nothing to live for”.”

Extract C begins by informing the reader of the sentence Porton received, an informative detail which increases factuality whilst also indicating to the reader the severity of Porton’s crimes to invoke shock and other negative emotions within the reader. The article goes on to include reported speech and corroboration from the judge herself who labelled Porton’s actions “evil” and “calculated”, implying a significant sense of premeditation, which readers can attribute to cold-blooded killers – this quote suggests that Porton’s offences were not crimes of passion, but rather planned over time and therefore “evil”. The extract later

describes Porton's internet searches as being "sinister", another term designed to inspire disgust and disdain within the reader, followed by the details of Porton's internet searches as if to prove this point. Finally, the extract focusses on the impact that Porton's actions have had on other people. Similarly to Extract A, Extract C utilizes reported speech from an individual whose quality of life has been negatively affected by Porton, emotionally categorising him as "broken" with "nothing to live for", which demonstrates his personal investment in the situation, and helps to create an agent-subject distinction between Chris Draper and Louise Porter, inspiring sympathy for the victims and therefore encouraging deeper hatred and a further lack of sympathy for the offender.

Subtheme 1.1 – Invalidating and Dehumanizing Women Who Killed Their Children to Reinforce the Notion that Female Offenders Are Inherently Abnormal:

This section of the analysis is concerned with the use of dehumanizing terminology and the use of discourse to imply to the reader that the offenders in question are inherently different to "normal" functioning members of society. The articles which most strongly represented the presence of this theme throughout were articles 1 (O'Leary, 2020), 4 (Law, 2019), and 6 (Hall & Parker, 2019).

Extract D, sourced from Article 1 (O'Leary, 2020):

"A monster mum sang to her children as she allegedly smothered them to death."

Extract D is short and simple yet reveals most of what we need to know about Article 1 very early on. The term "monster" is used to demonstrate the ghastliness of Henry's crimes by implying that she is inhuman, for only a monster could bring themselves to commit such offences. This aims to inspire shock and disdain, as well as to imply that there is an inherent difference between individuals like Henry and members of the general public, by suggesting that a woman like this must be a ruthless monster. Interestingly, after making this bold claim, the author goes on to use a hedging technique by adding that Henry "allegedly" smothered her children to death, which suggests that the media had no issue demonising Henry as an individual and as a woman, regardless of whether or not she was found guilty of committing the crime in question.

Extract E, sourced from Article 4 (Law, 2019):

“Earlier this year, astonishing letters written from jail revealed how she dismissed her involvement in her son's death and detailed her friendship with mass murderer Rose West.

She said West, who killed at least 10 girls with husband Fred and buried them in their 'House of Horrors', had been helping her to lose weight.”

Extract E appears to take on a more subtly comparative tone. The extract very vaguely touches on Connelly's failure to provide any real insight into her feelings or reflections regarding her involvement in her son's death, which ties in with the process of categorising Connelly as “evil” (See Discussion), and then quickly goes on to introduce Connelly's newfound “friendship” within the prison. The author paints a grisly image of Rose West, not just by immediately introducing her as being a “mass murderer” but also by including information regarding her offences, such as “West who killed at least 10 girls . . . “and buried them in their House of Horrors”. These detail devices are designed to invoke shock and contempt within the reader initially, as well as to eventually encourage them to begin comparing the two offenders. Where Connelly was found responsible for one death, the reader is now encouraged to view her as being equally as evil and inhuman as one of the most famous female killers within the UK. In order to emphasise this, the author addresses West's victims as “girls” rather than “women”, to inform the reader that her victims were children, solidifying the connection found between West and Connelly, and almost suggesting that in the case of monsters, it takes one to know one.

Extract F, sourced from Article 6 (Hall & Parker, 2019):

“A source told the Daily Star: "Her fury when she was told was intense. It was a wild tantrum.

"She's not scared of a row and she's had plenty. She walks around like she owns the place.”

. . .

“But the parole board clearly thought she was deluded, lacked remorse and saw she still couldn't take responsibility for what she did to her baby boy.”

Extract F begins with some very vague reported speech of an affect display from an anonymous source, consisting of the emotional categorisation of Tracey Connelly as being furious. Her anger is described as being “intense”, followed by what may be an example of extreme case formulation through the description of her reaction as being a “wild tantrum”. The use of the word “wild” here almost implies an animalistic element to her behaviour, once again perpetuating the idea that there is something feral and inhuman about Connelly. This is then followed by the term “tantrum”, which is commonly attributed to children – a clear demonstration of the article's aims to portray Connelly as immature and

therefore worthy of less respect from readers. The article goes on to paint her as an individual who rarely shies away from confrontation and remains abnormally entitled, even in incarceration. Finally, the extract acts as an animator of the discourse given by the parole board, which describes Connelly as “deluded”, lacking in remorse and being unable to take responsibility for her offence. By labelling her as “deluded”, any and all claims made by her are rendered invalid to the reader, and by claiming that she “couldn’t take responsibility”, as opposed to saying that she “wouldn’t accept responsibility”, the author drives home the notion that Connelly is undeniably abnormal, and therefore maybe even inhuman, because she is physically unable to take responsibility for her actions or feel remorse for them. Adding to this, the use of the term “clearly” here suggests that this description may not in fact be reported speech, but rather an assumption made by the author. This format applies a degree of pressure to the reader for consensus – it would appear that “clearly” is used here to imply that these assumptions regarding Connelly are not only true, but also extremely obvious, and therefore the reader ought to agree with them, lest they run the risk of sympathizing with or relating to the inherently “deluded” Connelly.

Theme 2 - Depicting Women Who Killed Their Children as Having Been “Bad Mothers” Prior to Their Offending:

This section of the analysis examines the authors’ use of discourse to paint the offenders in question as bad mothers who have always been bad mothers, through the scrutiny of their financial statuses, employment, alcohol and drug use, as well as their general life choices, in order to reinforce societal values and stereotypes usually associated with socially acceptable women. The articles which most strongly represented the presence of this theme were articles 3 (Spargo, 2020), 5 (Gammell, 2009), & 8 (Dolan & Duell, 2019).

Extract G, sourced from Article 3 (Spargo, 2020):

“Two friends of the accused killer told The Sun that Rachel had struggled since that death, and her once "casual drug use" quickly escalated into a "full-blown addiction."”

...

“Rachel was booked into jail and in her first appearance in front of the judge complained about her bail being set at \$3 million.

"How will I be able to get any money?" asked Rachel.

"I don't have a job or anything."

Prosecutors referenced her past custody issues and drug addiction during that appearance.”

Extract G begins with reported speech from not one, but two individuals who were close with Henry before her arrest, which creates a sense of consensus and reliability. The article claims that the two had described Henry's addiction to methamphetamines as starting out as "casual drug use" and then escalating into a "full-blown addiction". The idea that a mother, who is supposedly responsible for three children, would engage in "casual drug use" using hard drugs immediately conjures up an image within the reader's mind of the kind of mother that Henry was to her children. These allegations promote the idea that she was irresponsible, impulsive, immature and therefore unfit for motherhood. The idea that she was unsuccessful as a mother, in more ways than one, is reinforced further when the article utilizes reported speech from Henry herself who, during her first appearance in front of the judge, revealed that she was unemployed. This paints an unfortunate picture of Henry by depicting her as someone who failed as a mother to provide for her children prior to their deaths and did not care enough about this to seek employment, nor help for her growing drug addiction. The author then refers back to her drug use, perhaps subtly aiming to remind the reader that despite being unemployed and therefore already strapped for cash to support her children with Henry was continuing to fund her addiction somehow. This, coupled with the vague mention of her "past custody issues" implies that she has never been a model parent, as her children have been removed from her care in the past.

Extract H, sourced from Article 5 (Gammell, 2019):

"Tracey Connelly was a self-obsessed, lazy, chain-smoking woman who never held down a full-time job and was more interested in alcohol and her boyfriend than her own son. Overweight and transfixed by the internet, she spent hours of her day searching pornography websites and playing poker online."

Extract H is extremely rich in discursive devices all designed to depict Connelly as being an abysmal mother even before the committal of her and her partners' offences toward her son. The article appears to categorise Connelly as being extremely selfish throughout. The author holds nothing back and begins the article by describing Connelly as "self-obsessed" and "lazy" – both of which imply a degree of selfishness that does not bode well for somebody who is responsible for children. The author then refers to her as a "chain-smoking woman", because evidently to inform the reader that she is a smoker is not enough; the use of "chain-smoking" suggests a lack of self-control and a disregard for her own personal health and hygiene – again, indicators of somebody who struggles enough to take care of themselves, let alone their children. This is followed by the claim that she "never held down a full-time job", which places emphasis on the notion that Connelly has always failed to provide for her

children and has never been particularly bothered by this. The potential extreme case formulation that she was “more interested” in alcohol consumption than paying attention to her son portrays her as a reckless and irresponsible individual who frequently functioned under the influence of alcohol and therefore ignored and failed to meet her duties as a mother. Finally, the author goes on to describe Connelly as “overweight” and “transfixed by the internet” before providing the reader with details about the time she spent browsing pornography websites and gambling, all of which reinforces the notion that Connelly has always been lazy and selfish, and opted to make time for her own unsavoury habits instead of meeting the needs of her children, therefore perpetuating the idea that she was failing as a mother all along.

Extract I, sourced from Article 8 (Dolan & Duell, 2019):

“Mrs Justice Yip described her actions as 'evil' and 'calculated', and told her: 'These were blameless young children who were plainly vulnerable and ought to have been able to rely on their mother to protect and nurture them.'”

...

“It was all clubbing, clubbing, clubbing. She was a bad mum and she deserves everything she gets.”

Extract I utilizes corroboration by using reported speech from the judge herself, who described Porton’s actions as “evil” and “calculated”, which links in with our first theme concerning the representation of these women as “evil” (See Discussion). More interesting than this, though, is the judge’s claim that Porter’s children should have been able to rely on their mother to “protect and nurture them”. This quote depicts Porter as an aberration of womanhood, and as someone who has absolutely failed to fill her nurturing role as a mother but also as a woman, which is significant as it implies that Porter is being judged more harshly for her poor parenting skills than for the offence itself. Later, the article supplies the reader with reported speech from a former friend of Porton, who utilized listing to convey that Porton was frequently spending time “clubbing” away from her children, which in turn implies late nights and the probable use of recreational drugs or alcohol, all of which reinforce the idea that Porton was a poor mother to her children. This is solidified when the quote goes on to end with “She was a bad mum and she deserves everything she gets.”. This is a direct indication of the way Article 8 aims to portray Porton as a bad mother, as well as encouraging the reader to agree that Louise Porton deserves suffering as penance for her crimes.

Subtheme 2.1 – Drawing on The Offenders’ Sex Lives to Suggest that Their Promiscuity Made Them Bad Mothers:

This section of the analysis focuses on the authors' use of discourse to depict female offenders as promiscuous and overly sexual to deepen the public's outrage and disgust towards them as well as to reinforce societal values and stereotypes associated with socially acceptable women. The articles which most strongly represented the presence of this theme were articles 4 (Law, 2019), 7 (Davies, 2019), and 8 (Dolan & Duell, 2019).

Extract J, sourced from Article 4 (Law, 2019):

“Connelly, 35, watched porn in a drunken haze as her 17-month-old son Peter, known as Baby P, was tortured to death in 2007 by her lover Steven Barker and his brother Jason Owen. The mother was jailed for a minimum of five years and then freed on licence in 2013 but later recalled after she had been sending indecent images of herself to perverts obsessed with her notoriety.”

Extract J begins by specifying that Tracey Connelly was watching pornography at the time of her son's death; which first of all reinforces the notion that she was a selfish and lazy mother, but this is perhaps worsened by the inference that Connelly was actively enjoying herself despite knowing that her son was being tortured to death nearby – she was aware of the cruelty taking place in her own home, and yet opted to indulge in pornography rather than step in, which suggests that not only was she aware, but she valued her own sexual gratification over the prevention of her son's abuse. The remark that follows informs the reader that Connelly had been jailed a second time after violating her parole by sending indecent images of herself to “perverts obsessed with her notoriety”. This particular detail appears as though it aims to suggest to the reader that Connelly had not changed at all as a result of her first five years in jail, and continued to place more importance on her own sexual activity and gratification than following the rules of her probation and maintaining her freedom, which further reinforces the notion that she not only failed as a parent, but continued to fail to uphold her role as a respectable woman within society because she was too promiscuous.

Extract K, sourced from Article 7 (Davies, 2019):

“When Lexi was ill in hospital, Porton took topless photos in the hospital toilets and was arranging to perform sex acts for money with a man she had met through a website, the jury heard.”

Extract K is brief but informative. The author informs the reader of Porton's actions during her daughter's previous visit to hospital after another of Porton's attempts on her life. The article specifies that despite her child being hospitalised and unwell, Porton continued to make arrangements for her sex work as well as posing for indecent photos in the

hospital toilets. This information is designed to imply, similarly to in extract J, that Porton placed more value on the completion of her sex work than the wellbeing of her child, which is uncharacteristic of a respectable woman, or a nurturing mother, and implies that Porton is neither. The inclusion of the detail surrounding the location that the photos were taken in may also be designed to encourage disdain within readers by associating the imagined dirtiness of a public bathroom with Porton's sex work lifestyle.

Extract L, sourced from Article 8 (Dolan & Duell, 2019):

“A sex-obsessed mother was today jailed for life with a minimum term of 32 years after suffocating her two daughters less than three weeks apart when they 'got in the way' of her sordid lifestyle.”

...

“The part-time model, who offered men she met online nude photographs or sex for cash, had tried to kill Lexi twice before succeeding in January 2018.”

Extract L opens by labelling Porton as a “sex-obsessed mother”; two terms which do not tend to appear together very often. This is designed to create a sense of discomfort within readers upon having to link the two. Typically, a mother's sex life should not be directly related to their status as a mother, nor should it be directly related to their children. However, in this instance, “sex-obsessed” is used in the same breath as “mother” in order to imply that Porton's active sex life negatively affects her performance as a mother, although it is not clear how. The extract then goes on to claim that Porton's children “got in the way of her sordid lifestyle”. The phrase “got in the way” aims to suggest to the reader that Porton prioritized her sex life over the comfort and needs of her children, similarly to in extracts J and K. This is then followed by extreme case formulation through the use of the term “sordid”, which, when used to describe something as natural as one's sex life, immediately sets the assumption that whatever Porton's sex life consisted of, it was unethical and squalid. This may be designed to act as a reinforcement of societal norms and values associated with women and promiscuity which aim to inspire disdain and judgment within the reader by suggesting that as a sex worker, she is not a respectable woman and therefore cannot also be a good mother.

Discussion

This thematic discursive analysis was concerned with exploring how psychological categories and discursive devices are used within digital media to invoke negative emotions within the reader and influence the public opinion of women responsible for causing or allowing the death of their children. Two main themes were identified as being present across the articles, each having their own subtheme.

The most prominent theme identified in the language across all nine of the articles was the aim to encourage public disdain and minimize the amount of sympathy felt for the offenders in question, by portraying them as “evil”, and by association, heartless and lacking in remorse, through the frequent use of discursive psychology. The articles create these depictions of “evil” by invoking strong feelings of disgust, anger and hatred within the reader when reporting on the offenders themselves by including graphic, vivid or exaggerated depictions of the crimes committed (Davies, 2019; Gammell, 2009; Spargo, 2020), as well as by invoking feelings of sympathy and sadness within the reader when reporting on the impact that the offences may have had on their victims and other individuals (Davies, 2019; Spargo, 2020).

This thematic portrayal of “evil” is consistent with the findings of Berrington & Honkatukia (2002), whose paper identified the tendency within published media to portray women who offend as being unnatural, “doubly deviant” and labelling them as either “evil monsters” or “poor things”, with little-to-no consideration for any other potential factors, such as freewill or other reasonings. Also consistent with these findings are the claims made by Francis and Taylor (2017) and Lonne & Parton (2014), which detailed the media’s tendency to provide readers with a one-sided, uneducated perspective by demonising offenders, especially through the use of emphasis placed on the experience of child victims (DiBennardo, 2018; Wilczynski & Sinclair, 1999) and failing to report on potential causes, risk factors and methods of prevention of offending behaviours. This selective emphasis, similar to that noted by Tang (2012), negatively manipulates public opinions towards female offenders rather than detailing all of the facts and allowing readers to make judgments of their own (McManus, 1997), which could prove unethical as it can be theorised that these negative portrayals could result in offenders experiencing difficulty reintegrating after incarceration which may therefore result in recidivism (Palermo, 2009; Willis & Grace, 2008).

A similar secondary pattern which encompasses the use of discursive psychology to dehumanise and invalidate the female offenders in question was present across several articles. In order to encourage the belief that these offenders are inherently different to “normal” people, or functioning members of society these individuals were dehumanised. This is carried out through the use of dehumanising terminology, such as “monster” (O’Leary, 2020) and comparison devices used to liken the offenders in question to other notorious offenders, or “monsters” (Law, 2019), as well as downplaying any emotions or opinions the offenders may have by labelling them as “deluded” and categorising them as lacking in, or being incapable of remorse (Hall & Parker, 2019).

These findings are very much in line with the conclusions made by Easteal et al. (2015), who noted that females who offend tend to be portrayed as being either “bad” or “mad”, much like the findings of Berrington & Honkatukia (2002). This implies to readers that there is no in-

between, and therefore leaves little room for readers to form an opinion outside of this bracket, which as was pointed out by McManus (1997), could be considered unethical. These findings line up as well with the claims made by Heidensohn (1991), which suggested that female offenders are portrayed as having an absence of free-will or reasoning, which is demonstrated very clearly in Extracts D, E and F, where the offenders in question are represented as being either evil monsters, or delusional individuals who are incapable of remorse and taking responsibility for their actions, therefore perpetuating the idea that women who offend are inherently and socially abnormal, and that the offences in question could only be committed by individuals who are distinctly different from the rest of us. It can be theorised that this label of abnormality could be detrimental to the offenders' rehabilitation during or after incarceration as it may aid the creation of a self-fulfilling prophecy which, as was noted by Farrell and Swigert (1978) and Schultz (2014), may in turn lead to recidivism later on.

Furthermore, a distinct pattern was identified which was very much in line with the findings of Ajzenstadt & Steinberg (1997), who noted that in Israeli newspapers, female offenders were feminized, and judged based on their expected gender role performances such as their performance as mothers and housewives. Theme 2 reveals an apparent consistency in the media's aim to portray these women who offend as bad mothers who have always been bad mothers. This is carried out through the encouragement of scrutiny of the offenders' employment, drug and alcohol habits (Gammell, 2009; Spargo, 2020), their personal hobbies (Dolan & Duell, 2019; Gammell, 2009) and even their weight (Dolan & Duell, 2019).

Through the use of extreme case formulations and carefully tailored details about their less desirable personal habits, they are categorised as being selfish and lazy individuals and aberrations of womanhood and motherhood, who have always been failures and are unfazed by this, which supports the notions put forth by Boritch (1992) and Schur (1984) that women who offend are judged more harshly for their abandonment or failure to carry out their "motherly" duties. This again puts forth a very black-and-white image of what it takes to be a female offender, by pushing this notion that not only is bad motherhood somehow related to offending, but also that it is something which has always been present in the offenders in question, as opposed to being brought on or worsened by external factors, which also suggests an ignorance of the presence of free-will and reasoning, similar to that mentioned in the work of Eastal et al. (2015), Heidensohn (1991), and Berrington and Honkatukia (2002). This failure to acknowledge the causes of offending, or even what may have caused this perceived "bad motherhood" is also consistent with the findings of Lonne and Parton (2014) and Francis and Taylor (2017) as it suggests an emphasis being placed on the demonisation of the offenders rather than covering risk factors or early indicators of these behaviours in order to better inform the public, further supporting the findings of McManus (1997) and Tang (2012) which suggest that newspapers have become more deceptive and unethical.

Expanding upon the findings within theme 2, subtheme 2.1 refers to a pattern found within the articles involving the authors' criticism of the female offenders' sex lives to reinforce the outdated societal norm that promiscuity in women equates to bad motherhood. The extracts suggest that the women in question placed more value on their own sexual gratification than the wellbeing of their children. This ties in with the findings presented by Ajzenstadt and Steinberg (1997), with the newspaper articles feminizing women by attacking their perceived failure to adhere to their assigned roles as women and mothers. The presence of this subtheme is also supportive of the findings of researchers Boritch (1992) and Schur (1984) which suggest that women who offend are punished not only on the grounds of their violation(s) of the law but also for their deviation from their "motherly" roles. In many instances, this is carried out by describing the offenders' sex lives as though they define them as individuals.

There is also evidence of extreme case formulations when describing exactly how promiscuous the offenders are (Law, 2019). Similarly, emphasis is placed on the when and where of certain aspects of their sex lives (Davies, 2019; Dolan & Duell, 2019; Law, 2019) in order to highlight the offenders' prioritisation of their sexual gratification over the serious events taking place around them. The apparent aim of this theme overall is to imply that this level of promiscuity in women is unacceptable and suggests that there is a relationship between promiscuity and bad motherhood/womanhood, and a relationship between bad motherhood/womanhood and female offending, which strongly supports the findings of Eastaale et al. (2015), whose research claimed that women who offend are perceived as true aberrations of womanhood. This constant reinstatement of the notion that these individuals are not only offenders, but aberrations of womanhood and motherhood is supportive of the claims made by Lonne & Parton (2014) which suggest an aim to demonise the offenders in question without considering the reasoning or causes of their offenses, similarly to Heidensohn's (1991) claims concerning female offenders being regarded as having an absence of free-will or moral reasoning.

Limitations and Implications

This work is discussed in light of two main limitations. Firstly, it focuses solely on written rather than broader types of media such as radio and national television broadcasting. In the future, it could be beneficial to examine the language used to describe female child-killers within spoken media to investigate how it may differ from the language used within written text. Secondly, future research in this field could benefit from a broader range of articles, as this study is concerned only with women who were found guilty of murdering their own children. It may be interesting to examine whether the discursive psychology used by the media differs in cases where the offender is a serial murderer or has killed children who are

not her own, as it could be theorized based on this study that those who commit serial murder, particularly against children, are likely to be attacked more harshly for deviating from their gender norms than offenders guilty of fewer crimes. Similarly, it may be interesting to analyse articles which are concerned with male child-killers to allow for a potential comparison. However, overall, this study has been highly insightful, and has revealed how potentially unethical this form of newspaper reporting may be, as it utilizes discursive devices and psychological categories to manipulate and negatively skew the public opinion of certain individuals which could in turn negatively impact the offenders' experience of attempting to obtain rehabilitation and re-enter society in the future (Malinen et al., 2012; Palermo, 2009; Schultz, 2014; Willis & Grace, 2008). Therefore, this research could have practical applications in the future as it could support an argument for placing limitations on the language and discursive devices used within mainstream media reporting, in order to prevent further deception (McManus, 1997) and jeopardizing the lives and careers of those reported on in the future (Matusitz & Breen, 2007).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear there is an abundance of discursive psychology present within digitised media articles surrounding female child-killers. Numerous discursive devices and psychological categories are utilised to invoke negative emotions within readers and therefore negatively shape their views surrounding the individuals in question by not only detailing the offences they have committed, but also by attacking their personal and sex lives, and encouraging judgment of the ways in which they have apparently failed to fulfil their expected gender roles. The findings produced within this piece of research may have implications regarding the future of mainstream media reporting, as they suggest excessive use of linguistic features within digital newspapers to create extreme negative representations of women who offend. This is unethical as it can be theorised that these extreme negative portrayals could potentially be detrimental to the offenders' future reformation and rehabilitation.

Positional Statement

This research was conducted at a University within the United Kingdom, of which the lead author, KH, was a final year undergraduate student of forensic psychology. LW is a lecturer in forensic psychology and was the lead author's supervisor. During all stages of the research and data analysis, the authors acknowledge their position within this area of research and do not believe that any methodological decisions or results were affected by this.

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Availability of data and material

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Author's contributions

Personnel	Role	Responsibilities
Kessia Harris	Principal Investigator	Responsible for all study-related issues
Joanna Adhikari	Co-Investigator	Study design
Louise Wallace	Co-Investigator	Study design and final review

Conflict of Interest

No conflicts of interest have been reported.

Informed Consent

This research did not involve human experimentation therefore informed consent was not reported.

Ethics Approval

This research was approved by the University of Derby: College of Health, Psychology, and Social Care Ethics Committee on the 4th of December 2020. The procedures used in this study adhere to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki.

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