

# Journal of Language and Social Psychology

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Journal:	<i>Journal of Language and Social Psychology</i>
Manuscript ID:	JLSP-14-0021.R2
Manuscript Type:	Original Manuscript
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## The emotional representation of sexual crime in the national British press

Craig A. Harper<sup>1</sup> and Todd E. Hogue<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The relationships between the media, public attitudes and crime are complex, with evidence suggesting that public interaction with these press reports influencing wider social and political attitudes. Here, 543 articles from eight of the ten most-read British national newspapers were examined in terms of their representativeness of crime rates, and their linguistic properties. Results include a 9:1 representation of sexual crime, a 2.5:1 representation of violent crime, and a 1:4 representation of acquisitive crime within press articles compared to official statistics. Rating the linguistic content indicates that sexual crime articles comprised angrier and more emotionally negative tones than stories on all other groups. Tabloid and broadsheet differences were found in headlines, but not in the main bodies of the articles. Cognitive-experiential self-theory is offered as just one social psychological framework for understanding the role of emotion in sexual crime reporting.

*Keywords:* sex offending; media, news reporting, cognitive-experiential self-theory, offender reintegration

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## EMOTION IN SEXUAL CRIME PRESS REPORTING

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3 The national press have been cited as agenda setters of political and public discourse in the  
4  
5 UK (Alibhai-Brown, 2013), and this influence is especially noticeable in the area of criminal  
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7 justice. Press articles on ‘holiday camp prisons’ and ‘soft justice’ are now commonplace  
8  
9 within British newspapers, and are permeating social and political discussions about the best  
10  
11 ways to reform the criminal justice system. In response to public calls for a stronger and more  
12  
13 punitive criminal justice regime, the UK’s coalition Government recently announced its plan  
14  
15 to be “Tough, but Intelligent” (Cameron, 2012) on crime, with the central idea being to  
16  
17 combine punishment with rehabilitation, and make the prison environment harsher for  
18  
19 prisoners. Recently, high-profile incidents of historic sexual abuse have been dominating the  
20  
21 headlines. The sentences passed in these cases have been promoted as examples of ‘soft  
22  
23 justice’, despite the respective guidance against which these cases are tried. In response to  
24  
25 public unrest at the perceived sentencing in relation to sexual crimes, the UK Sentencing  
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27 Council (2014) recently released new guidance advocating longer sentences for these  
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29 offences.  
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35 The abduction and murder of schoolgirl Sarah Payne in 2000 by a previously  
36  
37 convicted child sex offender was a watershed moment for the press in relation to its coverage  
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39 of sexual crime. The national newspaper *News of the World*<sup>1</sup> reacted to public anger by  
40  
41 ‘naming and shaming’ people who had previously been convicted of sexual offences against  
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43 children, intensifying the public’s feelings about the relative riskiness of a group that they  
44  
45 simply labelled as ‘paedophiles’ (see Silverman & Wilson, 2002). There has been a  
46  
47 noticeable shift in the amount of public hostility aimed at this group since the Sarah Payne  
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49 case, with her mother, Sara, now leading *The Sun* newspaper’s crusade for tougher anti-  
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51 paedophile laws. Campaigns such as these have also contributed to a generalized hardening  
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57 <sup>1</sup> The *News of the World* is now defunct following allegations that its journalists hacked into the phone messages  
58 of senior politicians, celebrities, and high-profile crime victims – including the family of Sarah Payne.  
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3 of attitudes toward crime and its perpetrators – specifically in relation to sexual crime – at  
4  
5 both public and political levels (Harper & Treadwell, 2013).  
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7  
8         Soothill and Walby (1991) describe the processes of both the printed and television  
9  
10 news media in “seeking out the sex fiend” (p. 34), citing how serial sexual crimes against  
11  
12 strangers tend to receive the most coverage by news brokers. This is in direct contrast to the  
13  
14 empirical data, which shows that 70-90% of sexual crimes are perpetrated by somebody  
15  
16 known to the victim (Lieb, Quinsey & Berliner, 1998; Radford et al., 2011).  
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18  
19         The reasons for the disparity between the characteristics of ‘newsworthy’ sexual  
20  
21 offending and the realities of this crime type are numerous. One legislative issue that is  
22  
23 considered to be important is that of anonymity, which is granted to those who make  
24  
25 allegations of sexual abuse, but not those who are accused. The effect of this is that there is an  
26  
27 under-reporting of offences where the victim is known to the perpetrator for fear of  
28  
29 identifying the victim. At the same time there is an interest in reporting on the “offender”.  
30  
31 This style of reporting leads to what Foster (1996) calls the pathological public sphere, within  
32  
33 which he claims we are “overrun by voyeurs and exhibitionists” (p. 51), with the public desire  
34  
35 for news about the latest person convicted of a heinous crime being satisfied on a daily basis.  
36  
37 More recently, however, there has been some discussion about extending anonymity rights to  
38  
39 those accused of sexual offences. This proposal was met with public and political disquiet,  
40  
41 with the foremost argument against extending anonymity rights being that this practice could  
42  
43 potentially deter victims from coming forward to report the crimes perpetrated against them.  
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47  
48         Greer (2003) investigated newsroom-level motivations to report sexual crime and  
49  
50 found in that in general, corporate gain appeared to be a primary impetus. This work  
51  
52 suggested that newspaper interests when reporting (sexual) crime are related to popularity and  
53  
54 profiteering, as opposed to representativeness, accuracy, and informed public debate.  
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## EMOTION IN SEXUAL CRIME PRESS REPORTING

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3 However, this previous work neglected to investigate how these newsroom processes translate  
4  
5 into specific media content.  
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8 Harper and Treadwell (2013) offered an account of the ways in which the British press  
9  
10 use carefully selected (and often ‘celebrity’) commentators in order to acquire public support  
11  
12 for their “propaganda-laden messages on crime and punishment” (p. 217). They cite *The Sun*  
13  
14 newspaper’s ‘Sun Justice’ campaign as a prime example of this, with Sara Payne (the mother  
15  
16 of Sarah Payne) and Shy Keenan (a survivor of childhood sexual abuse) being promoted as  
17  
18 spokespeople for victims of crime. Harper and Treadwell (2013) proposed that press  
19  
20 reporting of sexual crime is based on a punitive ideology and misrepresentations, indicating  
21  
22 that a more forceful effort is needed from within academia to better engage the public with  
23  
24 empirical research findings and contribute to debates on policy development.  
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***The Press and Public Attitudes Toward Sex Offenders***

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30  
31 Hogue (1993) devised the Attitudes Toward Sex Offenders Scale (ATS) by adapting Melvin,  
32  
33 Gramling and Gardner’s (1985) measure of attitudes toward the general prison population.  
34  
35 Hogue found that attitudes became more positive as the individual became more involved  
36  
37 with sex offender rehabilitation, with subsequent studies showing long-term improvements in  
38  
39 attitudes (or, as a minimum, improvements in confidence with regards to working with sex  
40  
41 offenders) as a result of specialised training (Craig, 2005; Hogue, 1995).  
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ATS studies with general public samples have shown significantly more hostile public  
attitudes than those expressed by criminal justice system personnel (McAlindon & Shewan,  
2004). Additionally, a number of ATS studies have examined student attitudes (Harper,  
2012; Kjelsberg & Loos, 2008) which are consistently at around the same level as prison  
officers in Hogue’s (1993) original study. One explanation for this is that youths’ education  
levels (and their greater tolerance of ‘deviance’) is responsible for higher ATS scores

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3 compared to general public samples. Harper (2012) found that those on forensic psychology  
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5 undergraduate degrees did not differ in their ATS scores to students of other disciplines. This  
6  
7 reinforced claims by Hogue (1995) that specialized professional training programmes (as  
8  
9 opposed to courses on general criminal deviancy) are important in addressing stereotypical  
10  
11 thinking about sex offenders. Harper (2012) concluded that something other than the  
12  
13 students' education was mediating attitudes, with the assertion being that this was the national  
14  
15 news agenda.  
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17  
18 Evidence for this proposed relationship between news consumption and ATS scores  
19  
20 was provided by Hogue and Smith (2008). They investigated respondents' perceptions about  
21  
22 the high-profile disappearance of a young British child whilst on holiday with her parents.  
23  
24 ATS scores were found to predict judgments of guilt and punishment, with those expressing  
25  
26 more punitive attitudes being more likely to judge that a sex offender was probably  
27  
28 responsible and suggest harsher punishment if this was the case. A further analysis found that  
29  
30 ATS scores were mediated by newspaper consumption. Further, McCartan (2004) suggests  
31  
32 that media framing of sexual crime, particularly reporting that refers to the emotionally-driven  
33  
34 term 'paedophilia', influences public judgments about the risks posed by child sex offenders  
35  
36 and increases levels of public support for punitive policies to control them (see also Silverman  
37  
38 & Wilson, 2002). These findings appear to suggest that the national press plays an educative  
39  
40 role in informing the general public about sexual crime and its perpetrators. More recently,  
41  
42 Malinen, Willis and Johnston (2014) reported that informative, as opposed to affectively-  
43  
44 driven, media reports can improve public attitudes towards sex offenders, as measured by the  
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46 Community Attitudes Toward Sex Offenders Scale (CATSO; Church, Wakeman, Miller,  
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48 Clements & Sun, 2008).  
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54 Kitzinger (2008) outlined the role of the press in reflecting, and in many cases  
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56 endorsing, public anger about child sexual abuse, by criticizing the notion that the media have  
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3 promoted a sense of “hysteria by creating a moral panic and encouraging a lynch-mob  
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5 mentality” (p. 361). Instead, Kitzinger (2008) makes the case that press and public concern  
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7 about the issue on ‘paedophiles-in-the-community’ has been brought about by poor legislative  
8  
9 decisions, which “begged more questions than [they] answered” (p. 364). One such example  
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11 cited by Kitzinger (2008) was the establishment of the UK sex offender registry in 1996. This  
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13 policy decision led to questions being raised about what information could be disclosed about  
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15 sex offenders, who could receive this information, and would any conditions be applied to any  
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17 such disclosures. Following a number of contradictory guidelines being issued by the Home  
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19 Office, police chiefs and probation workers, the press began reflect public anxieties about the  
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21 issue of sex offenders being based within their communities – an issue that had been placed  
22  
23 on the public and press agenda through the establishment of the register. These reflections of  
24  
25 public anxiety served only to amplify them, with the result being an increasingly punitive  
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27 approach to sex offender policy being advocated by the public and, in turn, the press that seek  
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29 to represent them.  
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34 It is also argued that individual events covered by the news media potentially impact  
35  
36 on public perceptions about the relative riskiness of community-based sex offenders.  
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38 McAlinden (2007) found that 47% of the public thought that it was unacceptable for those  
39  
40 with sexual convictions to be in the community (rising to 70% for those who victimise  
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42 children). Given that these findings are at odds with Brown’s (1999) findings, which were  
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44 largely supportive of community rehabilitation, one explanation for this apparent attitudinal  
45  
46 shift is the national press’ coverage of the Sarah Payne case (and associated campaigns to  
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48 change sex offender management laws). If this case-specific effect of the press on public  
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50 attitudes is true, then examining the strategies used by newspapers to report sexual crime may  
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52 become even more important in the wake of recent high profile reports of historic sexual  
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54 abuse by celebrities (see Gray & Watt, 2013).  
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### *Cognitive-Experiential Self-Theory*

Epstein (1994) introduced cognitive-experiential self-theory (CEST) as a dual-process model of human information processing, and assumed that we process information by using two distinct systems. Epstein (1994) termed these the 'rational' and 'experiential' systems. The rational system is characterised by the conscious and systematic appraisal of incoming stimuli, with judgments being variable as new information is acquired and processed. It is logical and integrated, allowing for cross-modal and interdisciplinary connections to be made in an attempt to make sense of the problem at hand. The result of this processing is delayed action, as the elaborative evaluation of information impedes fast information processing (Epstein, 2003).

Contrastingly, the experiential system is fast, and relies on the affective heuristic appraisal of information, which is typically based upon previous experience and available exemplars. Information is not encoded logically as a series of pieces of evidence in the experiential system, but rather as images, metaphors, and narratives (Berger, 2007; Epstein, 1994). Judgments that are made using the experiential system do not require justification, as it is said that "experiencing is believing" (Epstein, 1994, p. 711). This is in direct contrast to judgments made using the rational system, which require validation through logical analysis and reason. These two systems do not operate separately, but concurrently (Berger, 2007; Epstein, 1994, 2003; Pacini & Epstein, 1999), providing empirical credibility to the notion of intrapersonal conflicts between 'the head and the heart'. In this case, 'the head' is a euphemistic label for the logical rational system, whilst 'the heart' represents the affective experiential system.

The relevance of CEST to the present study is that it offers a theoretical basis for beginning to understand how and why the press may use emotion in news articles.



Information that is encoded experientially, using narratives and emotional language, has been reported to have a propensity to be recalled with greater ease (Schwarz, 2012), and so emotionally-charged sexual crime stories in the press potentially provide the public with easily accessible exemplar cases on which to base decisions about policies.

### *The Present Study*

The present study adopted a predominantly quantitative design to explore the ways in which the British printed press reports on sexual crime in comparison to other crime categories. A particular emphasis was placed on the representations of crime prevalence, and the linguistic properties of crime articles within the national British press. Three categories of crime were chosen for analysis: 'sexual crime', 'violent crime', and 'acquisitive crime'. These crime categories were chosen such as to follow previous studies looking at different crime types, which typically examine 'sexual', 'non-sexual violent', and non-violent' crimes. For the purposes of the subsequent analysis, particular offences were used to operationalize the terms 'sexual crime' (rape, sexual assault, and child molestation), 'violent crime' (murder, manslaughter, actual bodily harm and grievous bodily harm) and 'acquisitive crime' (robbery, theft, and burglary). An analysis of the ways in which the press reports on immigrant groups, asylum seekers, and refugees (referred to as 'immigrants' for the remainder of the paper) was also conducted to act as a control sample, given their typical negative representation within the national press (see Allen & Blinder, 2013; KhosraviNik, 2010). The representations of immigrants within the press acted as a meaningful control subject, particularly in light of recent social and political debates about the impact of mass immigration in the UK, and with many national publications calling for immigration to be markedly reduced.

The research specifically sought to answer questions in relation to representations of crime prevalence and the emotional content of articles published about sexual crime within

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3 the national British press. Specifically, would sexual crime be markedly over-represented  
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5 within press articles compared to violent and acquisitive crimes? Would articles on sexual  
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7 crimes contain more emotional language than articles on violent and acquisitive crimes?  
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10 Whilst the present study was exploratory in nature, it was predicted that (a) sexual and  
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12 violent crime would be over-represented within the British press compared with official crime  
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14 rates, (b) articles on crime would comprise significantly more negative emotional and anger-  
15  
16 related language, but less positive emotional language, than articles on immigrants, (c)  
17  
18 articles on sexual crime would comprise more of this negativity and hostility than articles  
19  
20 published about violent and acquisitive crimes, and (d) this trend would be more noticeable  
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22 within the tabloid press than in broadsheets.  
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## 27 **Methods**

### 28 **Sources**

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30 The 10 most popular UK newspapers by print circulation were selected as target publications  
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32 for analysis, meaning that results could be generalised as widely as possible within a British  
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34 context. Prior to data collection (July 2012), these publications were *The Sun*, *Daily Mail*,  
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36 *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Star*, *Daily Telegraph*, *The Times*, *Financial Times*, *The i*,  
37  
38 and *The Guardian*. Readership figures and proportions of market share are presented in Table  
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[Insert Table 1 Around Here]

Articles were sourced through the LexisNexis online database between 1<sup>st</sup> August 2012  
and 30<sup>th</sup> November 2012. The LexisNexis database is a comprehensive library of press  
articles, and allows users to search using keywords, and narrow their results by date and

publication. *The i* and *The Financial Times* were not archived in the library at the time of data collection and so were not included in the study.

The key phrases used to restrict the number of articles resulting from searches for articles on crime included “guilty” OR “convicted”, followed by:

- a) Sexual crime: “rape” OR “molest\*” OR “sexual assault”
- b) Violent crime: “murder\*” OR “kill\*” OR “attack\*”
- c) Acquisitive crime: “burgl\*” OR “theft” OR “robb\*”

For immigrants, search terms were “immigrants” OR “asylum seekers” OR “refugees”.

The use of an asterisk after words like “molest\*” ensured the inclusion of a number of potentially relevant phrases, such as ‘molestation’, ‘molested’ and ‘molester’. Articles with ‘high similarity’ (as determined by the LexisNexis software) were condensed into one result, reducing the likelihood of duplication. Using the Boolean terms ‘AND’ and ‘OR’ resulted in the search terms being linked. This approach follows previous linguistic research into press reporting styles (Allen & Blinder, 2013; Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008).

### ***Inclusion Criteria***

In order to be considered eligible for the present study, articles pertaining to criminal offences had to have been written about specific individuals who had been convicted of one of the target offences, and published by one of the target newspapers between 1<sup>st</sup> August 2012 and 30<sup>th</sup> November 2012. These criteria eliminated cases of ‘trial-by-media’, whereby publications printed stories referring to particular people accused of committing offences before being tried in a Court of Law (see Greer & McLaughlin, 2012). Articles written about immigrants had to refer to the immigrant population and its impact, positive or negative, on UK society.

### *Final Sample*

Taking these criteria into account, a final sample of 543 articles ( $M = 67.88$  per publication) were found. This figure comprised 81 articles on sexual crime ( $M = 10.13$  per publication), 300 articles on violent crime ( $M = 37.50$  per publication), 73 articles on acquisitive crime ( $M = 9.13$  per publication), and 89 articles on immigrant groups ( $M = 11.13$  per publication). A breakdown of exact figures for each article type, by publication, is provided in Table 2.

[Insert Table 2 Around Here]

### *Analysing Newspaper Content*

*Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count* software (LIWC; Pennebaker, Chung, Ireland, Gonzalez & Booth, 2007) was used to analyse the specific linguistic properties of the articles included in the present study. LIWC allows written texts to be analysed in relation to their linguistic characteristics, and examines texts in relation to 68 distinct variables. These range from descriptive statistics such as overall word counts and average sentence lengths, to thorough analysis of the components of the text, including the use of nouns, adjectives, pronouns, and different emotional tones. Texts are analysed through the reading of digitised documents, with results being converted into a format that is readable by data analysis software.

Data are presented as either raw figures (e.g. word counts, average number of words in a sentence), or percentages (e.g. the proportion of words that equate to expressions of anxiety, or that are adjectives or pronouns), depending on the category. The internal reliability of each category is generally good (average  $\alpha = .83$ ; range .28-.98; Pennebaker, Mayne & Francis, 1997), and findings using LIWC have been used in a range of contexts, most successfully by examining a potential link between mood and the linguistic properties of creative writing by mental health patients (Pennebaker & Francis, 1996; Pennebaker, Mayne & Francis, 1997).

Given that popular punitiveness is cited as a key driver of the general public's thinking about crime and punishment (Bosworth, 2011; Frost, 2010), and that emotion is considered a strong contributing factor to punitiveness (Johnson, 2009; Vidmar, 2001), three emotionally-driven linguistic variables were identified for in-depth analysis, namely negative emotion, positive emotion, and anger. Negative emotion and anger within press articles were postulated as potentially providing the basis for punitive thinking styles, but it was also considered that the existence of positive emotion could mediate any impact of punitive reporting, hence its inclusion in the analysis. Examples of negative emotion words include 'nasty', 'hurt' and 'evil', positive emotion words include 'love' and 'nice', and anger-related words include 'hate' and 'kill'.

Online word cloud software ([www.wordle.net](http://www.wordle.net)) was used to examine the frequency of different descriptors of sexual offenders within newspaper headlines. Word clouds are visual displays that depict material according to the frequency of its use. For example, a word that is used ten-times more often than another within a text will be presented as ten-times the size within the word cloud. These displays provide a clear overview of the predominant themes and phrases within a text and are increasingly used by advertising companies, who examine search engine data when helping organisations design their websites. Word clouds for the whole sample, tabloid, and broadsheet headline descriptors were made to identify any group differences. Descriptors in these word clouds were weighted by the print readership of the newspaper to which they came from, allowing social impact to be assessed. A small focus group ( $n = 6$ ) was involved in a rating exercise to judge the offensiveness of various words that were present within these word clouds.

## Results

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3 Analysis of newspaper reporting was conducted in two distinct ways: (a) representations of  
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5 crime rates within the national British press, and (b) the linguistic characteristics of press  
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7 articles about sexual crime.  
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### 10 11 *Representations of Crime Rates*

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13 Sexual crime made up 18% of the collected sample of articles on crime (official prevalence =  
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15 2%), with violent and acquisitive crimes accounting for 66% and 16% of articles on crime,  
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17 respectively (official prevalence = 27% and 72%, respectively). Compared to official crime  
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19 statistics (Ministry of Justice, 2012), this signifies a nine-times over-representation of sexual  
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21 crime, an almost two-and-a-half-times over-representation of violent crime, and a four-and-a-  
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23 half-times under-representation of acquisitive crime within the collected sample of articles.  
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25 These differences between official and represented crime rates are presented in Table 3.  
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30 Projected crime rates based on media representations are also provided. The  
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32 differences between official and represented crime rates were statistically significant for each  
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34 crime category (sexual crime:  $t(80) = -46.91, p < .001$ ; violent crime:  $t(299) = -109.58, p <$   
35  
36  $.001$ ; acquisitive crime:  $t(72) = 35.56, p < .001$ ).  
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41 [Insert Table 3 Around Here]  
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46 Analyses of the press' coverage of crime rates within the context of both (a) the four  
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48 most-read and the four least-read newspapers (by print readership, see Table 2), and (b)  
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50 tabloid and broadsheet newspapers, revealed that these representations of sexual, violent, and  
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52 acquisitive crime rates were consistent across the entire press spectrum, with no publications  
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54 deviating from these observed crime rate representations.  
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### *Linguistic Properties of Newspaper Articles*

**Negative emotion.** Negative emotion words made up 5.3% of all articles on crime, compared with 2% of articles about immigrants. This difference was significant ( $U = 11,120, p = .001$ ). With regard to subgroups of crime articles, negative emotion words made up 6.2% of articles about sexual crime, 5.6% of articles on violent crime, and 2.9% of articles on acquisitive crime. Article subgroup differences were also significant ( $H(3) = 245.14, p < .001$ ). Post-hoc Mann-Whitney  $U$  analysis showed that the difference in the use of negative emotion words within articles on sexual crime and violent crime was significant (corrected  $p = .035$ ), as were differences between articles on sexual crime and acquisitive crime and immigrants (both  $p < .001$ ). Full details of linguistic properties of the collected sample of articles are presented in Table 4.

Tabloids and broadsheets did not significantly differ in their use of negative emotion words in articles on sexual crime ( $U = 4472, p = .18$ ), but a significant main effect of 'publication' was found ( $H(7) = 16; p = .02$ ). Post-hoc Mann Whitney  $U$  tests on all possible interactions found that this effect was attributable to inflated use of negative emotion words by *The Sun* and the *Daily Star* newspapers. The linguistic properties of sex offender articles are presented in Table 5.

**Positive emotion.** Positive emotion words made up 1.3% of articles about crime, compared with 2% of articles about immigrants ( $p > .05, ns$ ). In relation to subgroups of crime articles, 1.1% of articles on sexual crime, 1.3% of articles on violent crime, and 1.4% of articles on acquisitive crime were comprised of words pertaining to positive emotion. Article subgroup differences were significant ( $H(3) = 33.6, p < .001$ ), but this significance was only attributable

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3 to differences in positive emotion word use in articles on sexual crime and immigrants ( $U =$   
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5 118.5,  $p < .001$ ).

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7       Tabloids and broadsheets did not significantly differ in their use of positive emotion  
8  
9 word in articles on sexual crime ( $U = 443.5$ ,  $p = .09$ ), and no significant differences in the use  
10  
11 of positive emotion words were found when comparing sexual crime articles from individual  
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13 newspapers ( $H(7) = 6$ ,  $p = .52$ ). To examine whether any negative emotion within press  
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15 articles could be mediated by the presence of positive emotion, ratios of positivity-negativity  
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17 were calculated based upon crime and immigrant articles, subgroups of articles (sexual crime,  
18  
19 violent crime, acquisitive crime and immigrants), newspaper type (tabloids and, broadsheets),  
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21 and individual publications. There were significant differences in the proportions of  
22  
23 positivity and negativity in all cases, with the sole exception of articles about immigrants (see  
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25 Table 4 and Table 5).

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32 **Anger.** Anger-related words made up 3.5% of articles on crime, compared with 0.7% of  
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34 articles about immigrants. This difference was significant ( $U = 3250.5$ ;  $p < .001$ ). In relation  
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36 to subgroups of articles, 4.3% of stories on sexual crime, 3.8% of articles on violent crime,  
37  
38 and 0.8% of stories about acquisitive crime were comprised of words relating to anger, with  
39  
40 these levels being statistically significant ( $H(3) = 280.81$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Post-hoc Mann-Whitney  
41  
42  $U$  tests on all possible interactions found a significant difference between the use of anger-  
43  
44 related words in articles about sexual crime compared with violent crime ( $p < .05$ ), acquisitive  
45  
46 crime ( $p < .001$ ) and immigrants ( $p < .001$ ).

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49       Tabloids and broadsheets did not significantly differ in their use of anger-related  
50  
51 words in articles on sexual crime ( $U = 482.5$ ,  $p = .23$ ). Significant differences were found  
52  
53 between individual newspapers in their use of anger in articles about sexual crime ( $H(7) = 18$ ;  
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$p = .01$ ), with this difference being attributable to angrier reporting by *The Sun* and the *Daily Star* newspapers. These figures are also displayed in Table 4 and Table 5.

[Insert Table 4 and Table 5 Around Here]

### *Descriptions of Sexual Offenders*

The headlines of the articles depicting sexual crime were analysed to investigate the ways in which those convicted of sexual offences were described. Of the 81 sexual crime articles, 33 (41%) of the headlines made reference to either ‘monster’, ‘fiend’, ‘beast’, ‘paedo’, or ‘pervert’. Additionally, another 13 articles referred to either ‘rapist’ or ‘molester’. Other headlines referred to either the gender of the offender (e.g. ‘man’; 9 articles), the relationship between the offender and the victim (i.e. ‘dad’, ‘brother’ or ‘cousin’; 3 articles); the ethnic origin of the offender (i.e. ‘asylum seeker’; 3 articles), or the occupation of the offender (i.e. ‘builder’, ‘boxer’ or ‘karate instructor’; 12 articles). The remaining 8 headlines named the offender explicitly within the headline.

By weighting the headlines from sexual crime articles by each newspaper’s print circulation, it was possible to use ‘word clouds’ in order to establish the prominence of particular words or phrases used within sets of text. Word clouds for the descriptors of sexual offenders (see Figure 1), as stated in newspaper headlines, revealed a substantial effect of the tabloid press. Key phrases that had particular prominence in headlines of the tabloid sexual crime articles included “beast”, “monster” and “perv”, whereas the most offensive words used in headlines of broadsheet articles about sexual crime were “paedophile” and “rapist”.

These word cloud findings indicated clear differences between the overt descriptions of sexual offenders between tabloids and broadsheets. Words prominent within tabloid articles were viewed as more offensive than those expressed within broadsheet headlines.

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3 The reasons provided by the focus group included that phrases such as ‘monster’ implied  
4 some form of abnormality on the part of the perpetrator, whereas ‘paedophile’ and ‘rapist’  
5 were seen by participants as more formal, legal and scientific terms.  
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11 [Insert Figure 1 Around Here]  
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## 16 Discussion

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18 The present study explored the ways in which the national British press report on (a) crime  
19 compared with immigration, and (b) different subgroups of crime, namely sexual, violent, and  
20 acquisitive crime. All original predictions were broadly supported, with sexual and violent  
21 crime being respectively subject to nine-times and two-and-a-half-times over-representations  
22 (when compared to official crime statistics). Despite violent crime being the most-reported  
23 crime type within the sample of articles collected, it was the scale of the over-representation  
24 of sexual crime within the sample that was the focus of the analysis.  
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34 Crime articles consisted of more negative and angry, but less positive, language than  
35 articles about immigrants. Further, sexual crime was described in significantly more  
36 negatively emotional and angry ways than violent crime, acquisitive crime, and immigrants,  
37 respectively. However, the opposite trend was observed in relation to the use of positive  
38 emotion. Tabloids and broadsheets did not significantly differ in their use of negative  
39 emotion words, positive emotion words, or anger-related words within the main body of  
40 articles on sexual crime. However, substantial differences in the use of negative descriptors  
41 of sexual offenders in the headlines were found between the two newspaper types, with  
42 tabloids being more overtly offensive. Articles on all crime categories consisted of higher  
43 proportions of negative emotion words than positive emotion words, but articles on  
44 immigrants comprised identical levels of positivity and negativity. Individual newspaper  
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3 differences between the use of negative emotion or anger-related language were attributable  
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5 to more negative and angry reporting styles used by *The Sun* and the *Daily Star*. Contrary to  
6  
7 expectations (and widely held stereotypes), articles about sexual crime in the *Daily Mail*  
8  
9 comprised of comparatively low amounts of negative emotion and anger-related words.  
10

### 11 12 13 14 ***Political Representations of Sexual Crime*** 15

16 It is important to appreciate the political landscape within which press reporting of sexual  
17  
18 crime takes place. For instance, there is an on-going public debate about the treatment of  
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20 sexual abuse victims within the British criminal justice system at present (see Hewson, 2013),  
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22 with ‘victims-versus-offenders’ being a common theme in many of these discussions (Drake  
23  
24 & Henley, 2014). Additionally, the current British Government continues to advocate the  
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26 ‘*Tough, but Intelligent*’ message, advocating a rehabilitative drive in conjunction with tougher  
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28 sentences and harsher prison conditions.  
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34 **The issue of anonymity.** It was observed that distinct groups of ‘sex offenders’ are being  
35  
36 manufactured within the headlines of sexual crime articles. These can broadly be categorised  
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38 as: (a) ‘monsters’, ‘perverts’, and ‘beasts’, (b) those in positions of trust, (c) celebrities, and  
39  
40 (d) others. The ‘others’ category is generally depicted as ‘Man convicted of...’ or outlines the  
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42 offenders’ relationship to the victim. By promoting the ‘monster’ caricature, it is easy for  
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44 newspapers to present a homogeneous image of ‘the sex offender’. On the issue of  
45  
46 relatedness, Radford et al. (2011) estimated that as much as 90% of all sexual abuse of  
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48 children and young people is carried out by somebody known to the victim, with a large  
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50 proportion of this offending taking place within the child’s own home. Within the present  
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52 study, only three of the headlines accompanying sexual crime articles cite any form of  
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3 familial relationship between the offender and the victim. Even when articles are analysed in  
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5 full, just 33% of stories refer to sexual offences where the offender was known to the victim.  
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7 Anonymity laws are almost certainly responsible to some extent for such a difference  
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9 in rates as observed in the present study. There are automatic restrictions on reporting the  
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11 identity of the victims of sexual crimes under the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act 1992,  
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13 and so newspapers act to avoid exposing these identities. As such the press appear to report  
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15 on more incidents of sexual crime whereby the offender and victim are not related, such as to  
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17 protect the identity of victims whilst maintaining the ability to 'name and shame' offenders to  
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19 an increasingly voyeuristic general public.  
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25 **Tabloid and broadsheet differences.** Substantial differences were observed between the  
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27 practices of tabloid and broadsheet publications. Tabloids were found to be hostile within  
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29 both headlines and the main text of articles about sexual crime, whilst broadsheets expressed  
30  
31 less hostility within headlines, but were not linguistically different to tabloids within the main  
32  
33 body of articles. These findings call into question traditional ideas about the differences in  
34  
35 journalistic style between tabloids and broadsheets. The common perception is that tabloid  
36  
37 publications have a greater emphasis on sleaze, scandal and sensationalism than do  
38  
39 broadsheets, but the findings here indicate no significant linguistic differences between the  
40  
41 two with regards to articles on sexual crime. This reporting pattern seems to be indicative of  
42  
43 the prevailing societal opinion of sexual offending. Even those newspapers who are  
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45 historically the in-depth, fact-based providers of news are hesitant about challenging the  
46  
47 popular negative sentiment about sexual offenders.  
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52 It is argued that the key factor behind this finding is that newspapers do not wish to  
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54 engage in evidence-based reporting of such a contentious issue, fearing that their position may  
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56 be misconstrued as condoning sexual crime. This type of response was apparent when *The*  
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3 *Guardian* published its article “*Paedophilia: Bringing dark desires to light*” (Henley, 2013),  
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5 which was promptly denounced by celebrity commentators in *The Sun* newspaper as “pro-  
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7 paedophile propaganda” (Payne & Keenan, 2013). An alternative (or complimentary)  
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9 explanation is that journalists, despite their position as society’s informers, are still members  
10  
11 of the public, and as such they hold their own views and attitudes toward the topics that they  
12  
13 write about. Despite writing for a broadsheet publication, it is plausible (and likely) that these  
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15 journalists hold punitive views about the issue of sexual crime, and that this translates into the  
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17 linguistic characteristics of their articles.  
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21 With regard to the use of language in the headlines of the articles about sexual crime,  
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23 differences in the use of offensive language may be more indicative of tabloids’ and  
24  
25 broadsheets’ corporate aims. Broadsheet editors are not likely to want to alienate their  
26  
27 traditional readership by becoming associated with what would traditionally be classified as  
28  
29 ‘tabloid-style’ journalism. This overt expression of more neutral headlines allows  
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31 broadsheets to appear comparatively balanced in their approach - but only on a superficial  
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33 level - whilst still incorporating popular sentiment within the main bodies of articles.  
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### 38 *Theorizing the Role of Emotion in Sexual Crime Reporting*

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43 **Press reporting and emotion.** From the perspective of CEST, articles about sexual crime  
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45 published in the national British press appear to be more driven by negative emotional tones  
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47 than articles written about other marginalised groups, such as alternative offender populations  
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49 and immigrants. As outlined by Epstein (1994, 2003), emotional information is processed  
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51 experientially, which enables a perceiver to form rapid judgements about incoming  
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53 information. This experiential system forms judgments based upon previous knowledge and  
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55 heuristics (see Kahneman, 2011), which are frequently anchored around the availability of  
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3 exemplars. Within the context of sexual crime reporting, the emotionality of press reports  
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5 adds an extra dimension to perceivers' sexual crime exemplars, enabling the individual to  
6  
7 recall cases with greater ease (Schwarz, 2012).  
8

9  
10 The implications of this ease of recall are potentially important for legislators, with  
11 highly emotional information and easily available exemplars being linked in the literature to  
12 public and professional perceptions of risk (Finucane, Alhakami, Slovic & Johnson, 2000;  
13 Gerrard, Gibbons, Houlihan, Stock & Pomery, 2004; Slovic & Peters, 2006). For instance, it  
14 may be the case that the salience of negative emotion in press articles about sexual crime are  
15 inflating the public's perceptions of the risks posed by sex offenders, particularly within the  
16 context of such marked over-representations of the prevalence of sexual crime. This claim  
17 cannot be made directly from the data at hand, but this is an issue that warrants further  
18 investigation.  
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29 Moral disengagement theory (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara & Pastorelli, 1996)  
30 offers a suitable theoretical framework for interpreting the data pertaining to headline  
31 descriptors of sex offenders, particularly those presented by the tabloid press. Moral  
32 disengagement refers to the processes by which people rationalise immoral behaviour by  
33 "reducing prosocialness and anticipatory self-censure and by promoting cognitive and  
34 affective reactions [to external stimuli] conducive to aggression" (Bandura et al., 1996, p.  
35 364). These processes occur through the use of a variety of cognitive mechanisms, such as  
36 'moral justification' (allowing antisocial behaviour to be justified by attributing to it the  
37 quality of upholding social or moral values), 'euphemistic labelling' (designed to minimise  
38 the harm caused by antisocial or immoral actions), 'advantageous comparison' (morally  
39 reprehensible behaviour is compared against other behaviour that the actor deems to be even  
40 worse), and dehumanisation (the target is immoral behaviour is described in ways that  
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removes their individuality, and places them at a lower level than the actor of the immoral behaviour.

In relation to the data at hand, the frequent usage of negative emotion words, such as 'evil', attributes a demonic, subhuman quality to sex offenders that isn't the case for other offenders groups. More specifically, the dominant descriptors used, such as 'fiend', 'beast', 'monster' and 'perv' (Figure 1) are all clear examples of the dehumanisation of sex offenders by the national British press. When these dehumanisation processes are coupled with comparisons of 'offenders-versus-victims' rights (an example of 'advantageous comparison'; for a full discussion on this debate, see Drake & Henley, 2014), an argument can be made that the national British press are activating the mechanisms of moral disengagement at a societal level. The effects of this widespread activation of moral disengagement processes on support for punitive sexual crime policy, and attitudes towards sex offenders more generally, is another topic that requires greater empirical inquiry.

**Press reporting as dissonance reduction.** At a more general societal level, the methods used by the national British press to report on sexual crime may also serve a dissonance-reducing function.

With crime stories making up around 65% of all newspaper articles (Carrabine, 2008), and given that the present study reveals such an emphasis on sexual crime within this subset of articles, it appears that the 'sex sells' theme infiltrates all areas of society. Foster's (1996) idea of the pathological public sphere is just one way of theorizing why sexual crime makes up such a large proportion of news stories. Related to Foster's (1996) idea of the voyeuristic and exhibitionist society, Young (2011) makes reference to ontological insecurity at the level of the individual. People are constantly comparing themselves to others in the late-modern society, and attempting to form a socially-acceptable, competitive identity. In this sense, the

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2  
3 press' negative reporting of sexual crime (particularly that which makes use of language such  
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5 as 'monsters' and 'beasts') provides a clear framework for 'us vs. them' styles of thinking.  
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7 This delineation between the 'good' and 'bad' is suggested as a society-wide  
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9 manifestation of the fundamental attribution error. The so-called 'law abiding majority'  
10  
11 ignores the fact that sex offenders are a heterogeneous group and come from a range of  
12  
13 backgrounds and experiences. Newspapers instead consider specific and unusual aspects of  
14  
15 perpetrators' personalities and experiences while highlighting how different the sexual  
16  
17 offender is. The continuation of this type of press reporting also resonates with the uses and  
18  
19 gratifications model of press reporting, which assumes that audiences actively seek out  
20  
21 information to reinforce existing views (Gerbner & Gross, 1976).  
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25 These ideas can also be conceptualised using Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance  
26  
27 model. As Brown (1999) suggests, there was an undercurrent of public support for  
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29 community rehabilitation schemes for those convicted of sexual crimes. However, whilst the  
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31 public acknowledges the importance and potential efficacy of these kinds of schemes, they are  
32  
33 unwilling to support them in their own communities. The caricatured press presentation of  
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35 'the sex offender' can therefore be used to rationalise their objection to locally-based  
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37 rehabilitation schemes, alleviating any feelings of dissonance associated with the often  
38  
39 populist opposition to the rehabilitation of sexual offenders in the community. The press are  
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41 therefore suggested as a remedy of the cognitive dissonance bought about by the fusion of the  
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43 political rhetoric around the 'rehabilitation revolution' and localised fears about living in the  
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45 vicinity of convicted sexual offenders.  
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50 Politicians then view this reporting as being representative of the public's thinking  
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52 about sexual crime and adopt punitive policies to appease an electorate that is increasingly  
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54 apathetic to the political class. These punitive policies (e.g. community notification  
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56 procedures and longer custodial sentences) potentially hinder the reintegration prospects of  
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3 former sexual offenders once they are released back into the community (Maruna, LeBel,  
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5 Naples & Mitchell, 2009; Willis, Levenson & Ward, 2010), which exacerbates social risk  
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7 factors for recidivism (Ward & Siegert, 2002). When recidivism does occur, this is reported  
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9 in a way that exacerbates initial public concerns, and perpetuates a cycle of public hostility,  
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11 punitive policies, and the recidivism of sexual offenders. Each time this cycle is reported,  
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13 cognitive dissonance on the issue of criminal rehabilitation is alleviated once more, producing  
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15 more entrenched (and typically more negative) attitudes toward sexual offenders.  
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### 20 21 *Limitations and Future Directions*

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23 Given the predominantly quantitative nature of this study, it is not possible to make concrete  
24  
25 suggestions about exactly how the linguistics of crime reporting translate into public attitudes  
26  
27 toward convicted sexual offenders and their subsequent reintegration into society. However,  
28  
29 previous research can help to infer what the effects of punitive press reporting may be. Future  
30  
31 studies should adopt a mixed-methods design, incorporating interviews with both producers  
32  
33 and consumers of the media messages - including former offenders - to assemble a deeper  
34  
35 understanding of the press' influence in relation to the self-perpetuating nature of societal  
36  
37 attitudes. This study exclusively focused on the national British press, which limits the  
38  
39 generalizability of the findings. It may be that the press in other countries have a different  
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41 approach to sexual crime, although general attitudes towards sexual offenders do seem similar  
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43 across countries (Meridian & Hogue, 2013). Similarly it is also possible that local news  
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45 reports on crime have different linguistic properties, or that public engagement with local  
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47 news differs from engagement with national news. This is another potentially fruitful area of  
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49 investigation for future studies to explore.  
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54 Recently there has been a shift in the ways in which the public consume the news.  
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56 Newspapers are being exchanged for online and increasingly social platforms, where news  
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3 can be read, shared, and debated in real time with potentially anybody else in the world. Thus  
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5 far the academic literature on the relationship between crime and the media has been slow to  
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7 investigate how this consumption shift enables the rapid and widespread exchange of  
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9 information and ideas. The potential effects of this explosion in the accessibility of crime  
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11 news and public debate, in terms of individual and social cognition, are numerous (e.g.  
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13 through direct contact with policymakers and the acceleration of the hardening of societal  
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15 attitudes). This therefore makes an examination of this news consumption shift an important  
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17 target for future research.  
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### 20 21 22 *Conclusions*

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24 Over-representation of sexual crime feeds into the public's thinking (and subsequent political  
25  
26 discourse) about the most appropriate responses to sexual offending. The extent of these  
27  
28 over-representations, in conjunction with the hostile reporting strategies adopted by  
29  
30 newspapers, leads to the conclusion that punitive reactions to sexual crime are exaggerated by  
31  
32 press reporting. That is not to say that negativity is not pre-existing within public thinking,  
33  
34 but rather the press enhances societal negativity toward sexual offenders, in line with Gerbner  
35  
36 and Gross' (1976) uses and gratifications model of audiences.  
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41 Tabloid and broadsheet approaches to sexual crime appear to be politically-driven,  
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43 with tabloids acting as expected with populist and offensive headlines. In comparison,  
44  
45 broadsheets use less offensive headlines than tabloids, but equal amounts of hostility within  
46  
47 the main body of articles. This enables them to maintain an outward appearance of balance  
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49 whilst avoiding tabloid accusations of condoning sexual crime.  
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52 The combination of widespread hostility and press influence on public policy is  
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54 proposed as a society-fulfilling prophecy, with these factors hindering the reintegration  
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56 prospects of people with sexual convictions. When former offenders do progress to commit  
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3 further crimes, this is seen as evidence for the press' (and, by extension, the public's) original  
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5 views, and enhances the prophecy still further. This has another function, in that this reduces  
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7 the state of cognitive dissonance brought about by the simultaneous political rhetoric of the  
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9 'rehabilitation revolution' and localised objections to community-based rehabilitation  
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11 programmes for sexual offenders.  
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14 It is argued that the best way to tackle this issue is to develop a stronger public  
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16 engagement programme from within the academic community. It is not enough to produce  
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18 journal articles and present to like-minded peers at professional conferences, but evidence  
19  
20 from empirical studies must be shared in more open ways within the public sphere. Findings  
21  
22 from the present study indicate an over-representation of stranger-perpetrated sexual crimes  
23  
24 within newspaper stories, and so research evidence from academic and professional sources  
25  
26 could be used in this case to better inform the public-at-large about the true characteristics of  
27  
28 sexual offending. Additionally, localised fears about community-based sexual offender  
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30 treatment could be addressed through better education about sexual offender treatment  
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32 efficacy and reoffending rates, which are substantially lower than for other groups of  
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34 offenders. Furthermore, the affectively-driven nature of sexual crime reports in the press  
35  
36 potentially provide the public with easily-accessible exemplar cases upon which to base their  
37  
38 continued and increasing support for punitive policies aimed at sentencing and managing  
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40 convicted sex offenders. Again, a multidisciplinary approach to reporting sexual crime,  
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42 involving stakeholders from the press, the academic community, the general public, and sex  
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44 offenders themselves is required to facilitate the development of a balanced social debate  
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46 about the issue of sexual offending. These discussions need to occur within a mass media  
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48 context, in line with the 'public criminology' tradition (see Harper & Treadwell, 2013; Loader  
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50 & Sparks, 2010). Press and wider media support for such a campaign will undoubtedly be  
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required to have optimum impact, but quite how this can be achieved is still an unanswered question.

For Peer Review

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For Peer Review

## EMOTION IN SEXUAL CRIME PRESS REPORTING

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Table 1

*The Top 10 British Newspapers by Print Circulation and Market Share (Press Gazette, July 2012)*

Publication Title	Print Readership	Market Share
The Sun	2,583,552	30.2%
Daily Mail	1,939,635	22.6%
Daily Mirror	1,081,330	12.6%
Daily Express	602,482	7%
Daily Star	602,296	7%
The Daily Telegraph	574,674	6.7%
The Times	400,120	4.7%
Financial Times	297,225	3.5%
<i>i</i>	272,597	3.2%
The Guardian	211,511	2.5%
Total	8,565,422	100%

## EMOTION IN SEXUAL CRIME PRESS REPORTING

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Table 2

*The Number of Articles Sourced from Each Newspaper, by Article Subject*

	Sexual Crime	Violent Crime	Acquisitive Crime	Immigrant Groups	Total
The Sun	27	83	14	12	136
Daily Mail	5	19	12	14	50
Daily Mirror	23	69	8	6	106
Daily Express	2	29	9	24	64
Daily Star	4	23	6	9	42
The Daily Telegraph	9	41	18	15	83
The Times	8	25	4	7	44
The Guardian	3	11	2	2	18
Total	81	300	73	89	543

## EMOTION IN SEXUAL CRIME PRESS REPORTING

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Table 3

*The Representations of Crime in the National British Press Compared with Official Crime**Figures*

	Recorded		Crime Articles in		Projected Crime
	Crime Figures	%	Study Sample	%	Figures*
Sexual crime	52,178	2%	81	18%	506,317
Violent crime	747,448	27%	300	66%	1,856,492
Acquisitive crime	2,013,241	72%	73	16%	450,058
Totals	2,812,867		454		2,812,867

Note: \* 'Projected Crime Figures' are calculated based upon weighted newspaper coverage of each crime category

## EMOTION IN SEXUAL CRIME PRESS REPORTING

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Table 4

*The Use of Negative Emotion, Positive Emotion, and Anger in Newspaper Articles*

	Negative Emotion	Positive Emotion	Positivity : Negativity Ratio	Anger
All Crime	5.3%	1.3%	1 : 4.1*	3.5%
Immigrant Groups	2%	2%	1 : 1	0.7%
Sexual Crime	6.2% <sup>a</sup>	1.1% <sup>a</sup>	1 : 5.6*	4.3% <sup>a</sup>
Violent Crime	5.6% <sup>b</sup>	1.3% <sup>a</sup>	1 : 4.3*	3.8% <sup>b</sup>
Acquisitive Crime	2.9% <sup>c</sup>	1.4% <sup>a</sup>	1 : 2.1*	0.8% <sup>c</sup>
Immigrant Groups	2% <sup>c</sup>	2% <sup>a</sup>	1 : 1	0.7% <sup>c</sup>

Note: those with different superscripts differ at the  $p < .05$  level

\*  $p < .01$

EMOTION IN SEXUAL CRIME PRESS REPORTING

Table 5

*The Use of Negative Emotion, Positive Emotion, and Anger in Newspaper Articles about Sexual Crime*

	Negative Emotion	Positive Emotion	Positivity : Negativity Ratio	Anger
Tabloid	5%	1%	1 : 5*	3.1%
Broadsheet	4.3%	1.3%	1 : 3.3*	2.7%
The Sun	7.1%	1%	1 : 7.1*	5.2%
Daily Mail	4.4% <sup>a</sup>	1%	1 : 4.4*	2.8% <sup>a, b</sup>
Daily Mirror	5.6% <sup>a, b</sup>	1%	1 : 5.6*	3.6% <sup>a, b</sup>
Daily Express	6.9%	0.3%	1 : 23.9*	5.6%
Daily Star	7.4%	0.5%	1 : 14.8*	6.1%
The Daily Telegraph	4.9% <sup>a, b</sup>	1.3%	1 : 3.8 *	3.1% <sup>a, b</sup>
The Times	6.6%	1.3%	1 : 5.1*	4.7%
The Guardian	5.7% <sup>b</sup>	1.5%	1: 3.8*	4.4%

Note: a = significant difference from *The Sun*; b = significant difference from the *Daily Star*

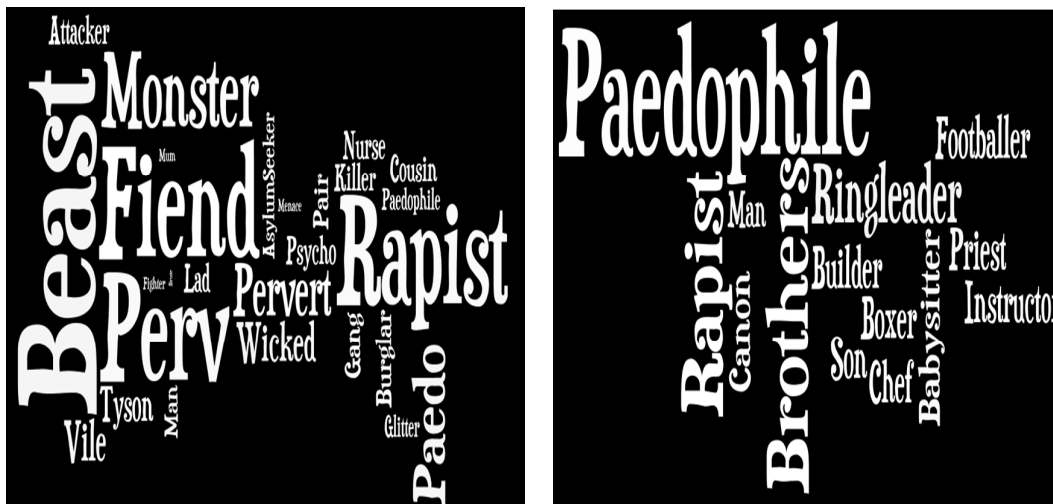
\*  $p < .01$



## EMOTION IN SEXUAL CRIME PRESS REPORTING

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Figure 1. Word cloud of descriptions of perpetrators of sexual crime in tabloid (left) and broadsheet (right) headlines.



Peer Review

**Author Biographies**

**Craig Harper** is a doctoral candidate in social and forensic psychology. His research interests span forensic, social, and criminological psychology, and specifically include public attitudes, social cognition, and offender desistance.

**Todd E. Hogue** is a Professor of Forensic Psychology. His research interests include the development of assessment methods to measure risk and offence related sexual interest in sexual offenders as well. He is also interested in attitudes towards sexual offenders and their impact on social judgments and decision making.