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The Weight of Words: A Content Analysis of Rhetoric in Online News Articles Reporting on Sex Crimes

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THE WEIGHT OF WORDS: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF RHETORIC IN ONLINE NEWS ARTICLES

REPORTING ON SEX CRIMES

by

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ABSTRACT

THE WEIGHT OF WORDS: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF RHETORIC IN ONLINE NEWS ARTICLES
REPORTING ON SEX CRIMES

Julie Snell
Old Dominion University, 2019
Director: Dr. Victoria Time

The purpose of this study is to examine the rhetoric that is used in online news articles
about sexual assault to see if discriminatory language is prevalent when reporting on different
races. A content analysis of 100 online news articles was conducted to answer two research
questions: 1) In what ways, if any, does the media use discriminatory rhetoric in online news
articles when reporting on sexual assault offenders who are, or appear to be, racial minorities?
2) In what ways, if any, does the media use discriminatory rhetoric in online news articles when
reporting on sexual assault victims who are, or appear to be, racial minorities? Further, each
article was selected using a systematic-random sample and analyzed using a mixed-methods
instrument specifically created for this research. Results of the study were inconclusive due to
methodological issues. Recommendations for future research on the topic are discussed.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Sexual assault, regardless of what form it occurs, invariably is considered second to

murder as the worst crime that can be perpetrated against a person (Samaha, 2017). As

Samaha (2017) explains, even when obvious physical injuries are not visible on the victim, the

mere trauma of violating one's autonomy through threats or violence emotionally scars the

victim for a long time, if not for life. Since some states like California have introduced gender-

neutral language such as "person" rather than "female" or "male" to describe victims as well as

perpetrators of sexual assault (Reid, 2012), it makes it necessary to see if language used in

reporting sexual assault crimes has also experienced changes.

Further, 1 in 5 women and 1 in 71 men will be raped at some point in their lives (Black,

Basile, Breiding, Smith, Walters, Merrick, & Stevens, 2011). Data from the National Intimate

Partner and Sexual Violence Survey also shows that 49.5% of multiracial women and over 45%

of American Indian as well as Alaskan Native women report being subjected to frequent sexual

violence in their lifetime (Smith, Chen, Basile, Gilbert, Merrick, Patel, & Jain, 2017). Reports to

law enforcement of rapes has increased by 18.1% since 2014 (U.S. Department of Justice-

Federal Bureau of Investigations, 2019). The increase in sexual assault reports has precipitated

a corresponding increase of media coverage of these crimes. How these crimes are reported by

the media is relevant especially since over time even the punishment for sexual violence has

changed, see for instance *Coker v. Georgia* (1977), where the U.S. Supreme Court ruled it was

cruel and unusual punishment to sentence a rapist to die since the victim did not die. Is media

coverage, for instance, more condemnatory or arbitrary in certain cases than others, depending on who the victim or perpetrator is? In this study the aim is to scrutinize rhetoric used in reporting about victims and offenders of sexual assault to discern if there is discriminatory usage of descriptive words in the story lines.

As Coe (1990) explains, rhetoric is used to influence how someone views a person or subject. Rhetoric can either reinforce previously held beliefs or it can change such beliefs. The use of rhetoric to influence perception means it can be used in a discriminatory manner. Discrimination has been an ongoing issue in our society when it comes to employment, housing, credit, and consumer markets (Pager & Shepherd, 2008). For some time in this country's history discrimination was overt, easily identifiable, and influential when it came to equal opportunities for those of minority groups (Pager & Shepherd, 2008). Despite laws that have been put in place to limit discriminatory practices, it is evident that not much success has been attained because rather than being overtly practiced, it now is more covertly done (Pager & Shepherd, 2008). This means it still exists- in ways that are at times less obvious. For example, it can still be seen in neighborhood development, policies within communities, business practices and media portrayal (Pager & Shepherd, 2008). This research seeks to scrutinize racial discrimination in media portrayals. Since the media can influence public opinion, policies, and enforcement of such policies, it makes it worthwhile to examine rhetoric used by the media in discussions of victims and offenders of sexual violence.

Before discussing the purpose of this study, it is important to define sexual assault, rhetoric and discrimination as these terms are vital to the study. Sexual assault: the term "sexual assault" means any nonconsensual sexual act proscribed by federal, tribal, or state law,

including when the victim lacks capacity to consent (U.S. Department of Justice- Federal Bureau of Investigations, 2019). Rhetoric: Rhetoric is often described as speaking or writing to persuade and influence the reader or listener, often by using words that are figures of speech and other compositional techniques (Coe, 1990). This definition is relevant to this study since descriptive words that relate to the victims and offenders will be examined. Discrimination: For this study, discrimination is defined as unfair or unequal treatment of a person or group based off their perceived race or ethnicity (Pager & Shepherd, 2008). Specifically, this study will evaluate the rhetoric that is used in online news articles about sexual assault to see if there are discriminatory practices in how victims and offenders are analyzed.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This research will examine how victims as well as offenders of sexual assault are described in online news articles to see if the rhetoric that is being used is discriminatory based on race. There are two central research questions that will guide the study.

1.   In what ways, if any, does the media use discriminatory rhetoric in online news articles when reporting on sexual assault offenders who are, or appear to be, racial minorities?

2.   In what ways, if any, does the media use discriminatory rhetoric in online news articles when reporting on sexual assault victims who are, or appear to be, racial minorities?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Prior literature has focused on historical evaluations of race and crime over time. Other research has focused on social judgement and typification, as well as how the media can influence adjudication. While there has been a significant amount of research about race, crime and the media, there has been limited research that focuses on the rhetoric that is used by the

media to describe offenders and victims especially those of sexual offenses. This research seeks to fill that void. It is anticipated that this study would be useful in identifying a problem, and exposing it is a first step in problem solving.

The following chapter will provide the relevant literature as well as limitations of prior studies.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The goal of this chapter is two-fold: First, to introduce readers to prior studies relating

to media coverage of race and crime; second, to discuss the relevance of media coverage in

shaping public perception, and public policy on typification and adjudication.

RACE AND CRIME IN THE MEDIA

Prior research has addressed the subject of race and crime in the media by evaluating

how the media has approached these topics over time. A longitudinal study on race and crime

employed a content analysis strategy to examine content of 30 years of Canadian print media

(Collins, 2014) The purpose of the study was to determine if systemic biases existed in the

depiction of offenders and/or victims based on their race (Collins, 2014). This research did a

conceptual content analysis utilizing a cross-sectional sample of 1190 crime articles found in

four local Canadian newspapers that were chosen due to being widely circulated (Collins, 2014).

The researcher used a retrospective longitudinal design to select periods of time in the past 30

years to evaluate (Collins, 2014). The articles were then coded into manageable themes and

these were further divided into 12 content units or sub-themes (Collins, 2014). These 12

themes that were related to fear of crime and marginalization were then coded as 0 and 1,

where 1 meant the theme was present in the article and 0 meant the theme was not present

(Collins, 2014). Upon collection of the data, an analysis of variance test was conducted (Collins,

2014). The results of the study showed that over time there was a change in the language that

was used to describe crimes. Articles describing crimes against white victims used more fearful

language, while those who were minorities were blamed for their own victimization (Collins, 2014). This research showed that there was consistently a difference in the language that was used by the Canadian media when reporting on minority victims and perpetrators of crime (Collins, 2014).

In addition to the findings and implications of prior research, a trend in the way the media reports on crime and race can also be seen in the next article. This research served more as a preliminary observation rather than an extensive study, but it still identified patterns in how the media reports on crime and minorities. The study sought to analyze how the public responds to interracial relationships and how they have been historically portrayed by the media (Perry & Sutton, 2006). The researchers assessed historical as well as contemporary images and mythologies that have been used to stigmatize interracial relationships by looking at representation in popular media such as movies, television, books and newspapers (Perry & Sutton, 2006). The research only served as a preliminary observation, so while a content analysis of a few select forms of media was utilized, there was no structure to the selection process; the researchers simply looked at popular media over the past few years. This evaluation of popular forms of media brought the researchers to the conclusion that the media enforces stereotypes by portraying inter-racial relationships as violent and by not showing positive representation (Perry & Sutton, 2006). The researchers noted that there are several limitations to their study and significant opportunities to expand on their preliminary work, especially if one were to examine how healthy representation of interracial relationships affects perceptions (Perry & Sutton, 2006).

The final article that will be analyzed from the historical perspective looks at how female

child sexual offenders have been portrayed in the media and how that portrayal has shifted to

be less sympathetic towards female offenders (Christensen, 2018). The research specifically

focused on the rhetoric that has been used by the media in newspapers (Christensen, 2018).

While the research does not explicitly focus on race, it does focus on media trends in reporting

on crime, rhetoric that is used, and how the media can shape and reinforce gender roles

(Christensen, 2018). The aim of this study was to obtain an up-to-date understanding of how

female child sex offenders are portrayed in print media across western countries, as it had been

several years since similar research was conducted (Christensen, 2018). The data was collected

by conducting a qualitative content analysis of 35 newspaper articles about female child sex

offenders published in English across western countries from 2012 to 2016 (Christensen, 2018).

The findings of this study provided a new perspective, as it contradicted previous research in

that it did not find undertones of sympathy and romanticizing towards female child sexual

offenders, when there were previously undertones of these two things in the past (Christensen,

2018). These findings show that there has been advancement in the rhetoric used by print

media when reporting on female child sex offenders (Christensen, 2018). The researcher

identified future research opportunities that could include the use of arrest reports to see if

findings could be generalized (Christensen, 2018).

It is important to consider the weaknesses of each research article outlined above. One

of the common themes among each article is a limited sample size. Two of the articles outlined

above have a sample size of 35 or less, which brings validity, reliability and generalizability into

question. While the 30-year analysis of Canadian print media had a sample size of 1190 it also

only pulled samples from 4 local newspapers. The research on media representation and interpersonal relationships did not offer a research design, making a re-creation of their research to see if their conclusion is valid, impossible. Without an exact experimental design their work was an observation of a phenomenon and leaves room for further research. The research on female child sexual offenders strictly evaluated articles that focus on female offenders to see if rhetoric has changed over time. This means that the researcher did not compare rhetoric that is used when reporting on male child sexual offenders to see if that rhetoric has also become harsher. The final critique is on the media representation and interracial relationships article. This research did not examine how the images used by the media affect future representation of interracial couples. Each article evaluated from a historical perspective provided exceptional insight into the media's portrayal of race and crime, but no one article examined how the rhetoric used by the media may be discriminatory when reporting on sexual assault victims and offenders.

TYPIFICATION

Past research has considered media representation of crime and race by looking at how it affects a person's assumptions about populations and how those assumptions influence their social constructs. There are several examples of research that have taken this approach when evaluating media portrayal of race and crime. Two research articles that took a similar approach focus on rape as well as sexual assault myths in the media by looking at headlines and articles in newspapers (Franiuk, Seefelt & Vandello, 2008; Sampert, 2010). In addition to these articles, research that assessed the influence of depiction and misrepresentation on racially

diverse individuals are reviewed to see to what extent media portrayal influences the general

population (Mastro, Lapinski, Kopacz, & Behm-Morawitz, 2009; Dixon, 2007).

There have been numerous efforts by researchers to document the prevalence and

effects of the media perpetuating myths about rape and sexual assault. Two different studies

focused on such myths created by the media and how perpetuating these myths affects social

judgment and typification of survivors (Franiuk, Seefelt & Vandello, 2008; Sampert, 2010). It is

first important to note that the definition of a rape myth is a false belief and/or generalized

belief about rape (Franiuk, Seefelt & Vandello, 2008; Sampert, 2010). The first article evaluated

the prevalence and effects of rape myths in newspaper headlines by conducting a content

analysis and by looking at 555 headlines from 3 different online sources from 2003-2004 that

were reporting on the Kobe Bryant (a then professional basketball player) sexual assault case

(Franiuk, Seefelt & Vandello, 2008). The same researchers also surveyed 154 students at a

midsized university in the Midwest after the charges against Kobe Bryant were dropped

(Franiuk, Seefelt & Vandello, 2008). The study found that 10% of the media headlines that were

evaluated contained myths about rape (Franiuk, Seefelt & Vandello, 2008). An additional

finding of the study was that men who were exposed to myths about rape reacted differently

than women to headlines about rape and were more likely to believe the perpetuated myths

(Franiuk, Seefelt & Vandello, 2008). Limitations of this research included not making racial

comparisons, using a limited dependent measure, and using an inadequate number of online

samples.

Additional research about sexual assault myths was evaluated in a research paper that

focused on how media reporting on sexual assault may negatively affect reporting rates in

Canada (Sampert, 2010). The researcher utilized critical discourse and a content analysis to analyze the prevalence and persistence of sexual assault myths in six English-Canadian Newspapers in 2002 (Sampert, 2010). The researcher utilized mixed methods to collect data and defined what sexual assault myths are for the purpose of the study (Sampert, 2010). The researcher determined that the rhetoric used by the media perpetuates sexual assault myths, and is subject to stereotyping (Sampert, 2010). The researcher concludes the article with a call to action, as these myths will continue to be perpetuated until policy and rhetoric is changed (Sampert, 2010). Limitations of this study include not identifying a specific experimental design and a lack of clearly defined sample size.

Mastro, Lapinski, Kopacz, and Behm-Morawitz (2009) argue that media exposure has perpetuated a persistent racial prejudice among whites, especially when blacks are characterized as violent and aggressive. This research took a group-based priming perspective and specifically focused on media priming (Mastro, Lapinski, Kopacz, & Behm-Morawitz, 2009). The research design utilized a two-study experimental design where the first study investigated associations using videotapes in a small group and controlled setting, the second study had a larger sample and provided individuals with computer workstations (Mastro, Lapinski, Kopacz, & Behm-Morawitz, 2009). The first study had a sample size of 117 while the second study had a sample size of 188, all participants were white college students from a midsized eastern university, and the typical participants were females around 19 years old (Mastro, Lapinski, Kopacz, & Behm-Morawitz, 2009). The researcher conducted an analysis of variance utilizing five dependent variables in study 1, seven dependent variables in study 2, two independent variables in study 1 and three independent variables in study 2 (Mastro, Lapinski, Kopacz, &

Behm-Morawitz, 2009). Study 1 found that both the gender of the viewer and the race of the television news suspect influenced social judgment (Mastro, Lapinski, Kopacz, & Behm-Morawitz, 2009). Study 2 found the same thing, but additionally found that the race of the suspect also affected attitudes towards black people in greater society (Mastro, Lapinski, Kopacz, & Behm-Morawitz, 2009). While this study provided relevant information, there were inconsistencies within and across the study, as noted by the researchers, and it fails to control for racial prejudice, level of racial and gender identification, and television news consumption (Mastro, Lapinski, Kopacz, & Behm-Morawitz, 2009).

Furthermore, there was additional research that evaluated the effects that misrepresenting black offenders on television news can have on social judgement. The goal of this research article was to identify the extent to which crime on the news is racialized and how this racialization can affect how negative or positively the officer and perpetrator are viewed (Dixon, 2007). The research design for this experiment implemented a 3x3x2 factorial design, looking at officer race (Black, White, & Other), perpetrator race (Black, White & Other), and prior news consumption (heavy or light) (Dixon, 2007). This study surveyed 240 undergraduate students enrolled in a communication studies course at a large Midwestern university where 76% of the participants were White, 7% Black, 4% Latino, 11% Asian and 2% other (Dixon, 2007). The results found that perpetrators where the race was not identified were rated as having a high likelihood of being Black, heavy news viewers expressed a high likelihood to believe that an unidentified officer was White, and that heavy news viewers were more likely to have a positive perception of unidentified officers but not identified Black officers (Dixon, 2007). In addition to these findings, the researcher expressed concerns that the environment in

which the study was conducted could influence judgements and the study could be recreated in a controlled environment to see if the results are generalizable (Dixon, 2007).

Chiricos and Escholz (2002) evaluated 3 television news stations in Orlando, Florida to see if race and ethnicity were typified when reporting on crime, thus contributing to the public's perception of race and crime. The research utilized 3 coders to look at program level issues and two coders to analyze criminal suspect issues (Chiricos & Escholz, 2002). The data was collected by looking at 3 weeks of programming in 1998 from local news affiliates to include 115 hours of news programming and 301 crime reports (Chiricos & Escholz, 2002). This research found that Blacks were not overrepresented among television suspects in relation to their proportion in the population, while Hispanics were slightly overrepresented (Chiricos & Escholz, 2002). In addition to these findings the research also found that Blacks and Hispanics are presented in a more threatening context than whites (Chiricos & Escholz, 2002). The research concludes by identifying that television stations can contribute to the social construct of threat, perpetuate modern racism, and exude social controls (Chiricos & Escholz, 2002). While this research presented interesting findings, it was limited by the sample size, as it only looked at 3 networks in 1 city.

When considering the research that was evaluated above, it is important to identify that one of the common themes among each article was a limited sample size. Each article focused specifically on a certain location, population, and period of time. In addition to these limitations, there was also a pattern of surveying college students, which may not make the research generalizable. Furthermore, several of these research articles have a limited research design, did not express their control variables, and identified inconsistencies across their

studies. Only two of the articles evaluated the rhetoric that is used by the media and how that may also influence typification, as well as social judgments.

MEDIA INFLUENCE ON ADJUDICATION

It is commonplace for researchers to identify characteristics that establish a pattern between one thing and another. This statement is true when looking at how the media can influence adjudication, and common characteristics. Two research articles that look at offender characteristics also evaluate how these characteristics can influence adjudication. The first looks at how an offender's characteristics and victim's characteristics affects the case processing decisions with sexual assault cases (Spohn & Spears, 1996). This research found that the defendant's race interrelates with the victim's race to produce harsher sentences for blacks who sexually assault whites (Spohn & Spears, 1996). The researchers used data on defendants from the Detroit Recorder's Court to examine racial makeup of the offender/victim, while also testing for interaction between offender/victim race, the relationship between the victim and the offender, and evidence of risk-taking behavior by the victims (Spohn & Spears, 1996). The results of this study showed that sexual assaults involving black men and white women are not always treated more harshly than other types of assaults (Spohn & Spears, 1996). They also concluded that the sexual stratification hypothesis must be modified to account for the role of factors other than the racial composition of the offender/victim pair (Spohn & Spears, 1996).

Maxwell, Robinson and Post (2003), focused on whether sexual assault offenders were differently adjudicated from other violent felons and if so, to what extent any differences in adjudication decisions could be explained by the defendant's race. The data was collected by using a weighted sample of 41,151 cases decided between 1990 and 1996 that were

representative of cases in the seventy-five most populous United States counties (Maxwell, Robinson & Post, 2003). Surprisingly, the results did not support the hypothesis that sexual assault cases were given, on average, more leniency than less serious violent offenses (Maxwell, Robinson & Post, 2003). In addition to these findings, the results also showed that minorities were treated more severely compared to Caucasians when they were charged with an assault, robbery, or murder, but they were treated more leniently when they were charged with sexual assault (Maxwell, Robinson & Post, 2003).

A commonality of these articles are issues with sample size and generalizability. Each research article could benefit from being recreated to see if the results are valid, especially if the studies were recreated in diverse environments. None of the articles specifically addressed how rhetoric used by the media directly affects adjudication, nor do they assess a wide variety of media. Most of the studies are more than 10 years old so they cannot attest to how access to media has changed and how that change can affect adjudication.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A theoretical framework provides a rationale for predictions about the relationship among variables of a research study and helps guide the entire process (Mehta, 2013). The theoretical approach that will be utilized for this research is conflict theory. The following section will provide a brief description of conflict theory and how it relates to the current research.

Conflict theory is the idea that society is in a state of perpetual conflict as people are competing for limited resources, and those who have the majority of the resources use their power to maintain social order (Akers & Sellers, 2013). This means that the most powerful

group controls the law, so their principles are adopted as the legal standard for behavior (Akers & Sellers, 2013). The law, according to Akers and Sellers (2013), is a form of social control which sets guidelines about how people should and should not behave through the use of formal and informal social controls. Informal social controls exist in families, friendship groups, churches, neighborhoods, and other community groups, while formal social controls include the law and the criminal justice system (Akers & Sellers, 2013). Social control relies heavily on socialization, which is the process of teaching as well as learning values, norms, and customs through examples and application (Zembroski, 2011). This means that individuals in society are taught how they should act and react, and they are either rewarded or punished based off of those actions.

Originally, conflict theory viewed social and economic institutions as tools used to maintain inequality and the dominance of the ruling class, but more recent versions of conflict theory evaluate social, religious, as well as other types of groups and how they can influence inequality (Zembroski, 2011). This is relevant to the current study as it is important to consider how the media could be an influential group when it comes to power, control, and inequality. According to Cian and Amann (2018), the growth in online media consumption has resulted in the development of new ways in which people who are in positions of power maintain social control. The media is an institution and operates with social and economic logic, thus it provides a depiction of real-life events, but it does so in a way that is meant to facilitate consumption and encourage those that are not in power to adhere to social controls (Rollins, 2015).

The media is a form of social control, and the image that the media builds influences understanding of current events and it impacts how people interact within society. In recent years with the growth of access to the internet, it has become increasingly important to analyze how people develop meaning and understanding of social order from their online consumption of news articles. This understanding is especially relevant for the current research which evaluated the rhetoric utilized in online news articles to see if discriminatory language is used when reporting on sexual assaults. Disparate rhetoric may occur at times based on who the victim is, or who the perpetrator is, and following conflict theory, the tendency would be more likely to have language that is more conciliatory used in the reporting of a powerful victim or perpetrator. It is of the interest of this research to see if this is the case regardless of race.

SUMMARY

The prior research that was reviewed in this chapter evaluated media influence when reporting on crime and race. The research that was examined presented several different themes, including race and crime in the media, typification, and how media representation can influence adjudication. The chapter concluded with the theoretical framework that this study will utilize.

The next chapter will elucidate the research methodology that will be utilized by the current study.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the methodology that was utilized to explore the rhetoric that is being used by online news articles to determine if there is racial bias in reporting. The chapter begins with a discussion about the research design that was utilized to conduct the content analysis and why this approach was taken. Following that section, the research questions will be briefly reiterated before delving into the procedures and instrumentations. This chapter will then describe how the data was analyzed and why that method was utilized. The chapter will close with a discussion about the limitations of the methodology and a summary.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study utilized a content analysis to examine whether there is systematic discrimination in the rhetoric that is used by the mass media in online news articles when depicting sex crimes. Content Analysis: Content analysis is a type of research that interprets material, such as media content, and then systematically assigns the content into categories according to rules to analyze for a statistically relevant relationship (Riffe, Lacy & Fico, 2014).

The data for this research was collected by conducting a content analysis of 100 online newspaper articles that mention sexual assault. To select newspaper articles the researcher utilized the LexisNexis database which is an online database that has been collecting news articles from the United States and other countries since the mid-1980's. The researcher then typed in the keywords outlined below, before utilizing a systematic random sampling to choose every 5th article to analyze. The keywords that were searched were sexual assault, molestation,

rape, date rape, forcible intercourse, grope, sex crime, sexual abuse, sexual offense and nonconsensual. To garner an understanding of the current rhetoric that is being used when reporting on sex crimes, the articles that were surveyed were limited to articles written from 2016 to 2018. The types of newspaper articles in this study included: editorials and feature stories. Articles that do not include allegations of a sexual assault were excluded from the analysis. Examples of such articles that were excluded were: articles that are written about ending sexual assault on campus; reviews of other forms of media that exhibit sexual content; blogs; and news articles that discussed community programs that provide victim-advocacy or services.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This mixed-methods content analysis was used to examine online news articles to determine if the media uses discriminatory rhetoric when reporting on sexual assault crimes. Thus, the questions that the researcher is sought to answer were:

1.   In what ways, if any, does the media use discriminatory rhetoric in online news articles when reporting on sexual assault offenders who are, or appear to be, racial minorities?

2.   In what ways, if any, does the media use discriminatory rhetoric in online news articles when reporting on sexual assault victims who are, or appear to be, racial minorities?

PROCEDURES AND INSTRUMENTATION

The purpose of this study was to examine the rhetoric that is used by online news articles when reporting on sexual assault. To achieve this goal, the researcher collected primary data from the LexisNexis database utilizing a mixed methods approach. The data was collected using an original instrument that had been specifically created to analyze qualitative and

quantitative information from each article. The quantitative data that the instrument collected was: state that the crime occurred in, region of the United States (using the four statistical regions: West, Midwest, South and Northeast), biological sex, reported race, type of picture included, age, marital status/family status, and employment status. Data was collected in each of the above-mentioned categories for the accused and for the victim, if the information was available.

The qualitative data that collected will come from the evaluation of the rhetoric that is used to describe the social history, criminal history, and psychological history of both the accused and the victim. Specifically, for social history rhetoric that describes the athletic ability, socioeconomic status, and physical appearance of both the accused and victim was evaluated. For criminal history the rhetoric used to describe the criminal record as well as substance use history of both the accused and victim was evaluated. Finally, the researcher also examined rhetoric that is used to describe both the accused and victim's mental health and history of crisis interventions.

The data was collected by two researchers and then coded into SPSS by the same researchers. To increase reliability and ensure that the same information was gathered for each article that was surveyed, the researchers utilized the same mixed-methods code sheet for each article that was assessed. To increase the validity of the data collected, the researchers also tracked each article that was analyzed by keeping a spreadsheet with the URL of each article and numbered them. Additionally, to insure intercoder reliability a second coder conducted a reliability sub-sample of 25 of the 100 articles which was randomly selected. The same coder also conducted a reliability screening of the sample collection process by collecting articles

using the same search parameters to ensure that the research design was being utilized. Each

coder was subjected to pre-coding training to become familiar with the variables, the themes as

well as the guidelines for classifications and coding.

ANALYSIS

After the articles were coded into SPSS, the data was analyzed. To analyze the

qualitative data, it was organized into themes that are related to social history, criminal history,

and psychological history. The themes that were utilized were: words that describe the mental

health of either the offender or victim, the history of crime or violence, reference to

occupation, reference to socioeconomic status, familial status, and education status. The data

was then organized into categories based on these themes to analyze whether the relationships

were significant. For the qualitative information that was collected, the findings reported

patterns in the rhetoric that was used. Additionally, descriptive statistics assessed the

quantitative data that was collected and specifically focused on region of the United States,

biological sex, reported race, type of picture included, age, marital status/family status, and

employment status.

LIMITATIONS

Despite taking precautions to reduce the limitations of this content analysis, it should be

noted that as with most studies, limitations still existed. The first limitation is that although

steps were taken to increase the reliability of the data, such as using one primary coder and a

second coder to cross check data collection, coding errors can never be truly eliminated.

Furthermore, a limitation of the data collection process was that articles were selected through

a systematic random sample of every 5th article, which did not guarantee that the articles

would specifically report the race of the victim or accused, and it did not ensure the quality of the article. Another limitation of the data occurred in the validity of the list of words/sentences that were being categorized as racially biased rhetoric. The decision about what words or sentences fit into the theme of racially biased rhetoric was made by the researcher, thus the process remained vulnerable to interpretation. Additionally, it did not consider how these interpretations may change over time. An additional limitation of this study was that the data was not all inclusive or even exhaustive due to time constraints, and only using the LexisNexis database, making the data set relatively small. Thus, the findings may not be generalizable.

CONCLUSION

This chapter outlined the research questions and how the researcher will seek to answer them by conducting a content analysis of online news articles that reference sex crimes. To obtain these articles, the researcher will use a database called LexisNexis that gathers news articles into one searchable engine. The articles will then be selected by applying keywords to filter the news articles, and then utilizing systematic random sampling to review articles written in the last 2 years. Each article will be reviewed by one data collector who will use a mixed-methods survey to collect the same information from each article. The quantitative data will then be coded into SPSS by a singular coder, while the qualitative data will be grouped into themes and analyzed. This chapter concluded with an evaluation of the limitations of this research. The next chapter will present the finding for this research study.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

In this chapter, the findings and results of the study are presented. This study sought to evaluate the rhetoric used by the media in online news articles about sexual assault to see if there is discrimination in how these types of crimes are reported. In carrying out this research, a content analysis was conducted utilizing a mixed methods survey that evaluated 100 online newspaper articles using the LexisNexis database. To select these articles, a systematic random sample was employed and every 5th article was analyzed. In this chapter the quantitative descriptive statistics and findings are discussed.

QUANTITATIVE DATA

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics about the quantitative variables in the study. The results from the descriptive statistics reveal that out of the 100 newspaper articles that were sampled, 23 (23%) articles were not about specific cases of sexual assault, they were specifically about untested rape kits across the country. For the purpose of this study this was categorized as "Not Case Specific" in the descriptive statistics. Of the articles that were sampled, 13 (13%) were from the Northeast, 35 (35%) were from the South, 30 (30%) were from the West, and 22 (22%) were from the Midwest. In the evaluation about the reported sex of the accused and the victim, the sample showed that 74 (74%) of those accused were male, while 1 (1%) were female, and 25 (25%) of the articles sampled did not report the biological sex of the accused. The dispersion of the biological sex of the victim showed that 68 (68%) were female, 5 (5%) were male, and 27 (27%) was not reported. The reported race of the accused presented that 10

(10%) were African American, 10 (10%) were White, 2 (2%) Other, 55 (55%) not reported, and

23 (23%) of the sample was not case specific. The reported race of the victim showed that 1

(1%) were African American, 0 (0%) were White, 1 (1%) Other, 75 (75%) was not reported, and

23 (23%) of the sample was not case specific. When evaluating the 100 sample articles to see if

the age of the accused was reported, 55 (55%) of articles reported the age of the accused 22

(22%) did not report the age, and 23 (23%) were not case specific. Of those 100 articles 42

(42%) reported the age of the victim, 35 (35%) did not report the victims age, and 23 (23%)

were not case specific.

In addition to demographic information, the quantitative part of this study also

evaluated whether or not the newspaper articles mentioned marital status, family/social

relationships, employment status, school status, and criminal activity or mental health concerns

for either the victim or accused. Of the 100 articles sampled, 2 (2%) mentioned marital status,

13 (13%) mentioned family/social relationships, 9 (9%) mentioned employment status, 17 (17%)

mentioned student status, and 20 (20%) mentioned prior criminal activity or mental health

concerns. The last quantitative component that was evaluated was to see if there was a picture

included in the news article and if so, the type of picture included. Of the 100 articles sampled

19 (19%) included a picture. And of those articles, 16 had pictures provided by law enforcement

and 3 were provide by an outside agency such as a school or family member.

TABLE #1: Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables (n=100)

Region of Offense	Northeast	13%
	South	35%
	West	30%
	Midwest	22%
Sex of Accused	Male	74%
	Female	1%
	Not Specified	25%
Sex of Victim	Male	5%
	Female	68%
	Not Specified	27%
Race of Offender	African American	10%
	White	10%
	Other	2%
	Not Reported	55%
	Not Case Specific	23%
Race of Victim	African American	1%
	White	0%
	Other	1%
	Not Reported	75%
	Not Case Specific	23%
Age of Accused Reported?	Reported	55%
	Not Reported	22%
	Not Case Specific	23%
Age of Victim Reported?	Reported	42%
	Not Reported	35%
	Not Case Specific	23%
Marital Status Mentioned for Accused or Victim?	No	75%
	Yes	2%
	Not Case Specific	23%
Family/Social Relationships Mentioned of Accused or Victim?	No	64%
	Yes	13%
	Not Case Specific	23%
Employment Status Mentioned for Accused or Victim?	No	68%
	Yes	9%
	Not Case Specific	23%
Student Status Mentioned for Accused or Victim?	No	60%
	Yes	17%
	Not Case Specific	23%
Prior Criminal Activity or Mental Health Concerns Mentioned for Accused or Victim?	No	57%
	Yes	20%
	Not Case Specific	23%
Picture Included in Article?	No	58%
	Yes	19%
	Not Case Specific	23%
Type of picture included if applicable	Law Enforcement Provided	16%
	Provided by Outside Agency	3%
	Not Applicable	81%

QUALITATIVE DATA

The qualitative data points for this research sought to evaluate the rhetoric used in the sample articles to describe the social history, criminal history, and the psychological history of both the accused and the victim. In the evaluation of the social history specifically rhetoric describing athletic ability, socioeconomic status, relationships, school status, character witness descriptions, and physical descriptions was analyzed. To evaluate the rhetoric used to describe criminal history in each news article of the sample words used to describe substance use, prior involvement with law enforcement, and any previous criminal charges were analyzed. The final evaluation looked at how the psychological history of the accused and victim was described. This focused on descriptive words used to describe any current or historical mental health concerns.

Of the 100 articles included in the sample 23 of the articles could not be analyzed for the qualitative portion of this research because they were not about specific rape cases, they were about untested rape kits across the country. Of the 78 remaining cases, 56 of those articles were not feature length news articles and only provided basic descriptive information about a crime occurring, they did not go into details about the victim or the accused. The remaining sample available was 22 news articles. 2 of the articles in the sample mentioned that the accused were in "committed" relationships, 7 of the articles used the word "supportive" to describe the family of the victim, while 3 of the articles used the term "family man" to describe the accused and 1 article mentioned that the accused had a famous sister.

Of the 9 articles that mentioned employment, 3 used the term "unemployed" to describe the accused while the other 6 articles mentioned specific professions such as plumber

and police officer for the accused. 17 of the articles discussed the student status for both the

accused and the victim. Of the 17 articles that mentioned student status, 7 of those cases were

specifically about the rape case in Tennessee that occurred at Vanderbilt University and

involved 4 football players and 1 student victim. Of these 7 articles, only one mentioned what

the victim was studying at the university. All 7 articles discussed what the 4 football players

were studying and their football careers. 1 article about the Vanderbilt University rape case

used the term "anti-male bias" to discuss the actions taken by the university and law

enforcement. 12 articles specifically mentioned that the victim had been drinking, using terms

such as "intoxicated" and "drunkenly" to describe their state at the type of the assault. One of

these cases involved a victim who was accused of drinking and "acting out" prior to her assault.

3 articles mentioned the victim's prior history of mental health, specifically citing being

"institutionalized" and "depressed".

DISCUSSION

The questions that this research sought to answer were: 1) In what ways, if any, does

the media use discriminatory rhetoric in online news articles when reporting on sexual assault

offenders who are, or appear to be, racial minorities? 2) In what ways, if any, does the media

use discriminatory rhetoric in online news articles when reporting on sexual assault victims who

are, or appear to be, racial minorities? The emphasis for this research is on rhetoric used to

describe racial minorities who are accused of, or victims of, sexual assault. Of the 100 news

articles that were sampled only 22% reported the race of the accused and 2% reported the race

of the victim. Furthermore, of the 100 articles sampled 23% were not about specific sexual

assault cases, they were about untested rape kits, so the rhetoric used was not analyzed and

56% of the articles were not feature length news articles, so they reported basic information about a crime occurring, but did not go into detail about the victim or the accused. This yielded 22 remaining articles in the sample that could be analyzed for using rhetoric. Unfortunately, this resulted in inconclusive findings for this research. The research questions could not be answered as there was not enough information about racial status in the sample thus the study is not generalizable and validity could not be accounted for.

CONCLUSION

This research sought to evaluate rhetoric in online news articles to see if there is discriminatory language used based on the race of the accused or victim. 100 online news articles were selected for the sample using a systematic random sample of every 5th article about sexual assault employing the LexisNexis database. The outcome of this sampling method provided 23 articles that were not about specific sexual assault cases and 56 articles that were not feature length articles that provided details about cases. Additionally, only 22 of the articles reported the race of the accused and 2 reported the race of the victim. This resulted in a study that lacks validity and could not be properly analyzed. In the next section limitations of this study and recommendation for future studies will be provided.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Prior literature examined race, crime and the media, but rarely did it do so by evaluating the rhetoric that is used. This study used a mixed methods approach to evaluate the rhetoric that is used in online news articles to determine if there is discriminatory language present when reporting on sexual assaults. Evaluating the language that the media utilizes is important because rhetoric is used to influence how someone views a subject, and it can either reinforce previously held beliefs or change such beliefs. This means that discriminatory rhetoric when reporting on sexual assault is especially important to evaluate as the media can influence public opinion, policies, and enforcement of such policies for victims and offenders of sexual violence.

Two research questions guided this study. Those questions were: 1) In what ways, if any, does the media use discriminatory rhetoric in online news articles when reporting on sexual assault offenders who are, or appear to be, racial minorities? 2) In what ways, if any, does the media use discriminatory rhetoric in online news articles when reporting on sexual assault victims who are, or appear to be, racial minorities?

Overall, the analyses ran for this study did not provide answers to these research questions due to flaws within the methodology. A systematic random sample of 100 online news articles resulted in 23 articles not being relevant for this study as they were not case specific, and 56 articles that were relevant, were not full-length stories so the rhetoric could not be completely analyzed, they simply provided basic demographic information about a crime occurring. The descriptive statistics did provide demographic information about sexual assaults

that occurred, and of the 100 articles sampled, only 22 reported the race of the accused, and 2

reported the race of the victim. This limited demographic information did not provide enough

data to fully evaluate if there is discriminatory rhetoric used by the media when reporting on

sexual assault as validity and reliability could not be measured.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In the current research, there were a number of limitations present. The research was

primarily limited by flaws within the data collection design. Data was collected using a

systematic random sample through the LexisNexis database by searching keywords about

sexual assault. While this method did provide online news articles about sexual assault, the

quality of articles was not controlled for, and the method did not eliminate articles that were

not about specific sexual assault cases. Additionally, 56 of the articles in the sample were not

feature length newspaper articles and only provided descriptive information about a crime

occurrence, no additional information was provided. This resulted in articles that were

irrelevant or inadequate for answering the research question being included in the sample. A

recommendation for future research around this topic would be to utilize a purposeful sample

of online news articles, so as to provide information rich articles in which the researcher can

effectively utilize the mixed methods tool to collect meaningful qualitative data.

An additional recommendation for future research is to either eliminate the focus on

discriminatory rhetoric in reference to racial minorities or to utilize a specific sample to ensure

that race is reported in each article. Of the 100 online newspaper articles 22 of the articles

specifically reported the race of the accused and only 2 reported the race of the victim. This did

not allow for the research questions to be answered as there was not enough of a sample to

make the research valid and generalizable. Future research may also benefit from narrowing the sample from all articles about sexual assault to focusing on specific online news resources. This method may provide further insight into the rhetoric that is being used to identify if there are specific online news sources that are discriminatory or even if there are specific writers on the topic.

CONCLUSION

This research focused on discrimination because it is an ongoing issue in our society and has historically been overt, easily identifiable, and influential. In recent years due to laws that attempt to limit discriminatory practices, it has become more covert. One of the means in which discrimination can be perpetuated is through media portrayals, and that is why this research sought to evaluate the language that is used in online news articles when reporting on sexual assaults. Although the method utilized to collect the sample was flawed, this research provided a promising opportunity for future research and offers insight into the importance of analyzing rhetoric that is used by the media when reporting on sexual assaults.

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