



Media's Framing of The Richard Huckle Case: Unveiling Media Portrayals of Sexual Violence in Malaysia.

Sharon Wilson^{a*}, Lim Shiang Shiang^b and Yap Hui Shan^c

^{a & c}Department of Mass Communication, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Selangor, Malaysia;

^bHan Chiang University College of Communication, Penang, Malaysia.

*Corresponding author

Abstract

Media coverage plays a dual role in society, as it can both inform and reinforce stigmatizing attitudes on particular issues or situations. Our findings suggest that even negative media coverage could have some advantages, particularly compared to no coverage at all, as it might increase awareness of sexual violence amongst members of society. Anchoring on the case of Richard Huckle, a British pedophile who was arrested and convicted of sexually abusing children in Malaysia, the current study used content and textual analysis to analyse and examine the media coverage of Huckle's stories (n=64) published in *The Star* and *Malay Mail* from 2016 to 2022. Using framing theory, the researchers identified the awareness for the public frame as the most frequently used, followed by methods in prevention, initiator or offender, death of the offender, judiciary and victim's story, which is the least news frame utilised in Richard Huckle's case articles. The study also determined the news settings and frequency that both Malaysian newspapers used in reporting the case of Huckle and examined the extent of the media in dramatising the portrayal of the case. The authors elaborated using Goffman's dramaturgical approach to help understand that media coverage of pedophilia is not a mere reflection of reality but a constructed narrative whereby it focuses on how social actors such as the offender, victim, police, media are cast into roles, what "performance" the newspaper is staging for its audience and what backstage dynamics (e.g., editorial bias or institutional agendas) may influence the front-stage narrative. By analysing selection, framing, characterisation, contextualisation, and the use of visual and auditory cues, the audience and researchers can better appreciate the complex interplay between media, crime, and societal attitudes.

Keywords: Sexual violence; children; media coverage; content analysis; framing

Pembungkahan Media terhadap Kes Richard Huckle: Menyingkap Gambaran Media mengenai Keganasan Seksual di Malaysia

Abstrak

Liputan media memainkan dua peranan dalam masyarakat, iaitu sebagai pemberi maklumat serta mengukuhkan sikap-sikap yang meminggirkan terhadap isu atau situasi tertentu. Penemuan kajian ini mencadangkan bahawa liputan media yang bersifat negatif boleh mempunyai kelebihan jika dibandingkan dengan tiada liputan langsung, kerana ia berpotensi meningkatkan kesedaran masyarakat terhadap isu seperti keganasan seksual. Berpandukan kepada kes Richard Huckle, seorang pedofil British yang telah ditangkap dan disabitkan atas jenayah penderaan seksual terhadap kanak-kanak di Malaysia, kajian ini menggunakan analisis kandungan dan teks bagi meneliti dan menganalisis liputan media terhadap berita-berita berkaitan Huckle (n=64) yang diterbitkan dalam akhbar *The Star* dan *Malay Mail* dari tahun 2016 hingga 2022. Dengan menggunakan teori pembungkahan (framing theory), penyelidik

mengenal pasti bahawa bingkai kesedaran awam adalah yang paling kerap digunakan, diikuti oleh bingkai kaedah pencegahan, pencetus jenayah atau pelaku, kematian pelaku, sistem kehakiman dan kisah mangsa yang merupakan bingkai berita yang paling kurang digunakan dalam artikel-artikel berkaitan kes Richard Huckle. Kajian ini juga menentukan tetapan berita dan kekerapan yang digunakan oleh kedua-dua akhbar Malaysia dalam melaporkan kes Huckle serta meneliti sejauh mana media cenderung mendramatisasikan gambaran terhadap kes tersebut. Penulis menggunakan pendekatan dramaturgi Goffman untuk menjelaskan bahawa liputan media mengenai pedofilia bukan sekadar pantulan realiti, tetapi merupakan satu naratif yang dibentuk, di mana ia menumpukan perhatian kepada bagaimana pelakon sosial seperti pelaku, mangsa, polis dan media dimainkan dalam peranan tertentu, apakah “persembahan” yang cuba dipentaskan oleh akhbar kepada khalayaknya dan apakah dinamika di belakang tabir (contohnya, bias editorial atau agenda institusi) yang mungkin mempengaruhi naratif di hadapan tabir. Dengan menganalisis pemilihan kandungan, pembingkai, pencerian, pengkonteksan serta penggunaan elemen visual dan auditori, khalayak dan penyelidik boleh lebih menghargai hubungan kompleks antara media, jenayah dan sikap masyarakat.

Kata Kunci: *Keganasan seksual; kanak-kanak; liputan media; analisis kandungan; pembingkai*

Introduction

The Richard Huckle case, involving a British national convicted of numerous counts of child sexual abuse in Malaysia from 2006 to 2014, profoundly angered and shocked the Malaysian public. According to Tan & Noor Aziah (2020), Huckle was found guilty of grooming, targeting, and systematically abusing nearly 200 Malaysian children, ranging in age from 6 months to 12 years. The local newspaper described the case as "of the utmost gravity" (New Straits Times, 2016, June 2) and labeled Huckle as one of the worst pedophiles in Britain (Tan & Noor Aziah). BBC News (2016, June 6) reported that the case elicited widespread disgust, anger, and despair across both the press and social media in Malaysia. Huckle's descent into child abuse began in 2005 when he arrived in Malaysia for a gap year teaching placement (Tan & Noor Aziah). In 2006, he allegedly abused a 3-year-old girl in Cambodia before returning to Malaysia (Tan & Noor Aziah). Over the following years, he took steps to further access children by enrolling in a Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults course at the British Council in Kuala Lumpur and pursuing a Diploma in Information Technology and Computing at the University of Metropolitan (Tan & Noor Aziah). The case of Richard Huckle serves as a stark reminder of the dangers posed by predators who seek to exploit and harm society's most vulnerable members. Malaysia still faces significant challenges in protecting children from such threats (Fernandez et al., 2021), underscoring the need for more research and data on child sexual abuse and sexual violence.

While Richard Huckle's crimes are profoundly shocking, it is essential to recognize that sexual violence is not an uncommon or aberrant form of sexuality. Until recently, research on sexual violence predominantly focused on individuals within the criminal justice system (Jahnke & Hoyer, 2013). This research is often influenced by media portrayals, which play a crucial role in shaping public perception (McCartan, 2010). The media, as a primary source of public knowledge, reinforces stereotypes by focusing on high-profile cases (Ischebeck et al., 2024). Such sensationalized coverage frequently distorts the term "pedophile," leading to its inaccurate use in everyday language. This sensationalism and societal stigma force individuals with paedophilic tendencies to remain hidden, making it challenging for the public to reassess and correct misconceptions. Therefore, studying media portrayal is crucial, as it significantly impacts public understanding and policy development. Analysing how media representations of sexual violence influence societal attitudes helps uncover underlying biases and misconceptions, which contribute to the stigma faced by individuals with paedophilic tendencies. By examining media coverage, researchers can identify patterns and biases in reporting, leading to more accurate and nuanced public discussions. This study can also emphasise the need for responsible journalism that transcends sensationalism, promoting informed and evidence-based reporting. Such an approach can foster greater empathy and understanding, potentially reducing stigma and aiding in the development of more effective prevention and intervention strategies. Understanding media influence is crucial for addressing the broader implications of sexual violence and improving societal responses to this complex issue.

Due to the vast amount of media coverage surrounding Huckle, this case is likely to be one that will be remembered for some time to come. Therefore, the research focuses on how Malaysian newspapers framed the case of Richard Huckle, a British pedophile who was convicted of abusing Malaysian children. The paper investigates the portrayal and emphasis given by two major Malaysian newspapers to understand the narrative and societal implications constructed around the case. It questions how two major Malaysian newspapers framed the Richard Huckle case, and the impact this coverage had on public discourse and policy in Malaysia.

Pedophilia in the Media

Media coverage is a crucial source of information that shapes our view of the world, especially when first-hand experiences and interpersonal communication are limited (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2014). The role of media is important in covering social problems like sexual violence, as the way media portrays or reports news affects public perception (Elmore et. al., 2020). This is pointed out by Wu et al (2019), who note that news media's tendency to focus on severe crimes, sensationalise violent crimes, and exaggerate the frequency of crime leads to an amplification of public fear. In reporting sexual violence, media coverage often hinges on sensationalized accounts of child sexual abuse, reinforcing negative stereotypes and perpetuating the harmful idea that individuals with sexual violence are inherently predatory (Christensen, 2017). An example is the case of Marc Dutroux, who was portrayed by the media as a dangerous pedophile despite expert testimony suggesting his actions stemmed from a severe antisocial personality disorder (Kitzinger, 2004; Kitzinger, 2008; McCartan, 2004).

In examining media portrayals of sexual violence, Stelzmann et al. (2020) found that only one-third of media coverage depicted sexual violence accurately. They criticized the tendency to label individuals as "pedophiles" based on criminal offenses rather than thorough clinical assessments of their sexual interests. Stelzmann et al. (2022) supported this view, noting that media coverage often lacks nuance, focusing mainly on child sexual abuse and neglecting the fact that many people with paedophilic attractions do not engage in such behaviour. Furthermore, the media rarely presents positive portrayals of non-offending minor-attracted individuals.

The concept of moral panic as discussed by Critcher (2002) also provides a useful framework for understanding how media coverage can amplify societal fears and influence policy responses. In his study on the politics of sexual violence in Britain, Critcher highlights the role of the media in shaping public perceptions and governmental actions through the creation of moral panics. Similarly, Jewkes (2015) discusses the notion of newsworthiness and how certain times such as sexual violence are sensationalised to attract public attention and drive media agendas. Bell (2002) further explored the media's role in constructing narratives around child sexual abuse,

emphasizing the vigilant parents and the pedophile as central figures in contemporary discourses. Their perspectives inform our analysis of the Malaysian media's portrayal of the Richard Huckle case and its broader societal implications.

Ischebeck et al. (2024) further examined this issue through interviews with journalists and highlighted how one-sided coverage exacerbates stigma by wrongly linking minor-attracted persons with child sexual abuse. The findings revealed that while journalists generally understood sexual violence in line with scientific evidence, they frequently overestimated the risk of minor-attracted persons becoming offenders.

Some media outlets, however, provide evidence-based coverage, offering accurate information on treating paedophilic disorder and preventing child sexual abuse (Kitzinger, 2008; McCartan, 2004). Despite its importance, news coverage of sexual violence is relatively limited, possibly due to the sensitive and distressing nature of the subject, and challenges in obtaining accurate and balanced information (Stelzmann et al., 2022). Media outlets may also prioritize sensational stories to attract larger audiences, leading to a focus on dramatic narratives over nuanced discussions.

The scarcity of news on sexual violence can lead to misconceptions, stigma, and discrimination against individuals with pedophilic disorder (McCulloch, 2019). Limited coverage may hinder public education on the complexities of sexual violence and the importance of prevention and treatment. Increasing informed and responsible reporting on sexual violence could promote greater understanding and empathy, and support efforts to prevent crimes against children. Many Malaysians are unaware of the seriousness of these issues (Fernandez et al., 2021). Sexual violence is a growing issue that is worsening every year. This research will examine the Richard Huckle case, Malaysia's most prolific case in recent times (Nabilah, 2021). Using framing theory and Goffman's dramaturgy, the study will explore how Malaysian media portray and present news about pedophiles, focusing on the news frames used by *The Star* and *Malay Mail*, the settings, frequency, and dramatizing portrayal of the Huckle case. Studying Huckle's case will create awareness among Malaysians about the media's influence on societal perceptions of sexual violence, and the need for more prevention programs and laws against child crimes. Malaysia lacks

a sex offender registry, limiting authorities' ability to monitor offenders entering the country.

Framing Theory and Dramaturgical Explanations

This study draws from both Framing Theory and Goffman's Dramaturgical Approach to examine news framing, specifically in the context of the Richard Huckle case. Both theories have been widely studied and applied to understand how the media frame and construct crime narratives and their societal implications.

Framing Theory posits that the way information is presented influences how audiences perceive and interpret it (Cacciatore et al., 2016). Frames function as organizing principles that select certain aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient to promote a specific problem definition, moral evaluation, or treatment recommendation (Entman, 1993). In the context of this study, the media's framing of the Richard Huckle case not only shaped public perception of the crime but also the broader discourse around pedophilia, justice, and national security. News frames hold significant power in shaping public opinion and behaviour, which further influences responsibility attribution (Boukes, 2021) are especially pertinent. For instance, by emphasizing the foreign identity of the perpetrator or the failure of legal systems, news stories can guide readers toward certain interpretations and policy expectations.

Meanwhile, Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach, as outlined in his work "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life," (1956) can also be applied to understand the media coverage of the Richard Huckle case. Complementing this is Goffman's dramaturgical model (1956), which conceptualizes social interaction through the metaphor of theatrical performance, Goffman's theory uses the metaphor of theater to explain human behaviour and interactions, suggesting that people "perform" roles in everyday life much like actors on a stage. There is limited research that integrates Goffman's (1956) dramaturgy with framing theory (Goffman, 1956; Boje et al., 2003). In news framing, the media serves as the stage, journalists as actors, and the audience as active interpreters. News stories are not neutral accounts but constructed performances shaped by journalistic routines, cultural scripts, and societal expectations. In the coverage of the Huckle case, dramaturgical elements become apparent: the perpetrator is cast as the villain, victims as the

innocent, and law enforcement or governmental agencies as either heroic or negligent. These roles are reinforced by narrative scripts that dramatize the crime, appealing to emotions and moral judgment.

When combined, these theories underscore how crime news like the Huckle case is not only framed to emphasize specific angles but also dramatized to engage the audience. The selection of headlines, imagery, and emotional language plays into both the framing and the performance of the news. For instance, a newspaper may highlight the vulnerability of victims (human interest frame) while using strong visual cues and emotionally charged words to increase the story's dramatic effect. This combination amplifies the story's social impact, potentially leading to moral panic, stigmatisation, or demands for stricter legislation.

Importantly, these media portrayals do not occur in a vacuum. They interact with the audience's preexisting beliefs and societal norms, thereby influencing public discourse and, in some cases, prompting institutional or policy responses. In Malaysia's context, where issues like pedophilia are often underreported or taboo, how the media chooses to frame and dramatize such a case can significantly shape national awareness and legal reform efforts.

Methodological Design

This study employs both quantitative and qualitative content analysis to examine how the media framed and represented the Richard Huckle case. A total of 64 news articles were analyzed, drawn from *The Star* (38 articles) and *Malay Mail* (28 articles), published between 2016 and 2022. Relevant articles were identified using keywords such as "Richard Huckle," "Richard Huckle's case," "pedophile," "Huckle," "British pedophile," and "crimes against children." Articles not related to the case were excluded. *The Star* and *Malay Mail* were selected for their distinct audience profiles and publication formats. The Star and The Malay Mail are influential English-language newspapers in Malaysia, serving urban, English-speaking audiences. Both maintain strong digital platforms and shape public discourse. Despite differences, they share a legacy of national news coverage. During the Huckle case, both operated in print format, reflecting their continued relevance and adaptability. This allowed for a comparative analysis of framing strategies based on

audience and media format. The selection of online newspapers based on readership held a prominent position in Malaysia's media industry.

The coding was conducted by the researcher to ensure consistency and interpretive accuracy. A preliminary reading of the data informed the creation of a coding scheme, which was refined through iterative trial coding and comparison with relevant literature on media framing of sexual crimes. The final coding framework consisted of six major news frames: Victim Frame, Offender Frame, Awareness Frame, Judiciary/Legal Proceedings Frame, Methods of Preventing Frame, and Death of the Offender Frame.

Researchers analysed headlines, sub-headlines, picture captions, body texts, news settings, and frequency of reporting across both newspapers. A Chi-Square test was employed to statistically assess whether significant differences existed in the distribution of news frames between *The Star* and *Malay Mail*. This test was appropriate due to the categorical nature of the data and the study's aim to explore associations between media outlet and framing type. Quantitative results were then used to guide qualitative textual analysis, allowing for deeper exploration of patterns and meaning within the frames. This mixed-methods approach provided a comprehensive understanding of how the Huckle case was portrayed in Malaysian media and how such portrayals may shape public perceptions of sexual crimes against children.

Frame Features

In the last few years, as the media becomes more important in shaping public attitudes and opinion, there have also been more in depth studies on media frames through qualitative content analyses. New studies have changed our understanding of how and what frames are employed (An & Gower, 2009; Schuldt & Roh, 2014). Considering the empirical and theoretical evidence about media and framing theory, it is unsurprising that the media plays an important role in how the public perceives sexual violence, its victims and perpetrators. Concluding this discussion, “exposure to mass media content indirectly affects behaviour by shaping cultural norms” (Baxter, 1985, pp. 1) cited in Aroustamian, 2020:3-4). Previous research on frames in the news shares little conceptual ground

and most studies draw on tentative working definitions or operational definitions of frames designed for the purpose of the specific study. Therefore there is little consensus as how to identify frames in the news. One approach is inductive in nature and refrains from analyzing news stories with a priori defined news frames in mind (e.g., Gamson 1992: Neuman et al., 1992). Frames emerge from the material during the course of analysis (De Vreese, 2005) which is how this study is conducted.

The researchers included the victims frame, the initiator frame, judiciary frame (Aroustamian, 2020), awareness frame (Habib et al. 2023) and methods frame (Victor et. al., 2019) based on the various literature on sexual violence.

- The victim frame puts emphasis on injury or harm the victim suffers, power differentials between the victim and offender, as well as descriptions of harmful behaviours of the offender to the victim.
- The offender frame highlights the behaviour of perpetrators or offenders rather than injuries or damages to victims.
- Awareness frame aims to educate the public about the realities and impacts of crime. The goal is to increase understanding and empathy among the public and potentially mobilize action to address underlying issues related to crime.
- Judiciary, Legal proceedings or Punishment refers to refers to the aspects of the legal system related to the administration of justice. This can include reporting on court cases, trials, judgments, and sentencing.
- Methods of preventing focus on strategies and information that can help reduce the occurrence of crime. This can include reporting on crime prevention programs, sharing tips for personal safety, or highlighting community initiatives that aim to reduce crime rates. The goal is to inform the public about actions they can take to protect themselves and their communities.
- Death of the offender refers to the reporting on the death of an individual who has been involved in criminal activities or who has been convicted of a crime. This includes situations where the offender dies as a result a consequence of their criminal behaviour.

Findings

Table 2: Types of News Frames

Frame Feature	The Star (%)	Malay Mail (%)	Total
Victim Frame	1 (3.57)	0 (0)	1 (1.56%)
Offender Frame	9 (23.68)	3 (10.71)	12 (18.8%)
Awareness Frame	9 (23.68)	13 (46.42)	22 (34.4%)
Judiciary, Legal proceedings or Punishment Frame	4 (10.52)	4 (14.28)	8 (12.5%)
Methods of Preventing Frame	8 (21.05)	5 (17.85)	13 (20.3%)
Death of the Offender Frame	5 (13.15)	3 (10.71)	8 (12.5%)
Total	36 (100%)	28 (100%)	64 (100%)

The total number of news frames used in *The Star* and *Malay Mail* is (n=64, 100%). Among all of the news frames, “Awareness for the Public” is the most frequently used (n=22, 34.37%). The second news frame that is most frequently used is “Methods in Prevention” (n=13, 19.4%), followed by “Initiator/Offender” (n=12, 18.75%), “Death of the Offender” (n=8, 12.5%), “Judiciary” (n=8, 12.5%), and “Victim's Story” (n=1, 1.56%) which is the least news frame utilized in Richard Huckle’s case articles. This is due to the fact that the victims were underaged and the media were not allowed to have an interview with them. Findings also demonstrate that *The Star* and *Malay Mail* frequently placed the news articles of Richard Huckle under the section of nation or top news in Malaysia (n=58, 90.63%). While only six news articles were placed under world section for both *The Star* and *Malay Mail* (n=6, 9.37%). The total number of news frames used in *The Star* and *Malay Mail* is (N=67, 100%). Among all of the news frames, “Awareness for the Public” is the most frequently used (N=22, 32.84%). The second news frame that is most frequently used is “Initiator/Offender” (N=14, 20.89%), “Methods in Prevention” (N=13, 19.4%), followed by “Death of the Offender” (N=11, 16.42%), “Judiciary” (N=8, 11.94%), and “Victim's Story” (N=1, 1.49%) which is the least news frame utilized in Richard Huckle’s case articles. This

is due to the fact that the victims were underaged and the media was not allowed to have an interview with them. Findings also demonstrate that *The Star* and *Malay Mail* frequently placed the news articles of Richard Huckle under the section of nation or top news in Malaysia (N=61, 91%). While only six news articles were placed under world section for both *The Star* and *Malay Mail* (N=6, 8.96%).

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	4.998 ^a	5	.416
Likelihood Ratio	5.458	5	.363
Linear-by-Linear Association	.019	1	.890
N of Valid Cases	64		

a. 6 cells (50.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .44.

The Chi-Square test of independence was conducted to examine whether there was a significant difference in the use of news frames between *The Star* and *Malay Mail*. The result shows that both *The Star* and *Malay Mail* did not differ significantly in how they framed their reports. $\chi^2(5, N = 64) = 4.998, p = .416$.

Awareness for the Public

According to the findings, it was found that among all of the categories of news frames, the ‘awareness for the public’ (n=22) is the most common news frame used in Huckle’s news articles. It also may be ascertained that since the authorities and journalists from *The Star* and *Malay Mail* keep the pressure on being aware of the perpetrator to the public explicitly stating the details of the offender, the authorities in hunting the offender’s accomplices and how the Australian police catch the offender in the body content of the articles. The researcher identified that both *The Star* and *Malay Mail* were more focused on forming awareness among the public about the existence of the worst pedophile and making the public to be attentive to the current issue.

Among some of the comments given about awareness include “Police: It’s a crime to publicly identify Huckle’s victims”, “Speak up on child sex abuse”, “Hard to catch predators” (*The Star*).

These are written to create awareness of the issue among the society or communities and also to let them be aware that one should not keep quiet when encountering crimes against children. One should speak up and file a police report so that the police are aware of such crime and take action against the offender to prevent more victims from encountering the same incident in the future. Additionally, due to most adults' low level of awareness of grooming methods, it is harder to catch the predators. Thus, journalists tend to create awareness in the minds of the public that it is important to learn and understand the grooming methods in order for the authorities to catch the predators easily. Somehow, if every victim is willing and brave enough to speak up when they encounter sexual abuse, and all adults study and learn about grooming methods, it will indirectly decrease the number of crimes against children cases in Malaysia, as well as increase the chances for the authorities in catching the predators.

On the other hand, *Malay Mail*'s journalists used sentences such as "*The rehabilitation of sexually abused children exploited by British pedophile Richard Huckle must be carried out quickly*", "*The healing process took 'between six months and several years', depending on the severity of the case and the trauma suffered by the victim*" (*Malay Mail*) to frame the new stories whereby to let the public aware that rehabilitation is needed for the victims and it is crucial to get it in order to avoid unnecessary consequences. It will be a trauma for the victims and it will never be healed if the victims do not attend a rehabilitation program. They might even be afraid of going out from the house or even seeing or touching a male. Their lives may be destroyed by what Huckle has done to them, and it needs to be fixed as soon as possible to get everything back to normal.

In addition, "*Police are tracing Malaysian victims of British pedophile Richard Huckle*" and "*Hunting Huckle's accomplices*" (*The Star*) are the phrases the journalists used to make the public aware that the authorities are doing their job and the progress of it. Some victims refused to stand forward and tell the authorities about their encounter with Huckle because they were afraid and embarrassed. The public should know and be aware that it is important to come forward so that they can undergo rehabilitative treatment introduced by the authorities. At the same time, the police could get information pertaining to the ways or how the offender committed crimes as a means of creating a profile for pedophiles in Malaysia. In Malaysia, society does not want to admit

the fact that there are pedophiles lurking around and their actions go unreported. Since Malaysia is an Islamic country, topics such as sex is still considered taboo, which hinders victims from filing reports against sexual predators. People are always reserved and shy when it comes to sexual topics and they decide to remain silent rather than lodging a report, resulting in a striking number of sexual crimes.

Methods in Prevention

It was discovered that in the news coverage of Huckle, the frame of ‘methods in preventing crimes against children’ (n=13) is the second most frequently used news frame. This frame is used to cover the urge to strengthen the law of Registration of Criminals and Undesirable Persons Act 1969, or Act 7, which is the law that will only register an offender without giving the power to the authorities to monitor him or her. In addition, news articles like parents and teachers in school should play their role in educating children on sexuality and workshops on how to protect children conducted to address the threat of sexual predators in churches are covered with the frame of methods.

The Star’s journalists used phrases such as “workshop on how to protect children”, “Amendments to the Child Act 2001” and “A sex offender registry needs to be implemented” (*The Star*) to put emphasis on the methods in avoiding crimes against children. After the incident of Huckle’s case, the authorities should have known that it is important to give knowledge to the public, mainly parents, about the strategies for preventing crimes against children. For example, teach children how to independently manage their personal hygiene such as bathing in order to reduce the need for them to depend on adults for assistance, teach children about boundaries whereby nobody can touch their private parts, learn and know about warning signs of crimes against children such as a person who often seek opportunities to be alone with a child, disregarding a child’s need for personal space such as in the restroom, and giving money or presents to children without any specific reason or certain occasion.

Aside from that, the government should realize that a sex offender registry ought to be implemented in Malaysia in order to give the power to the authorities to monitor the offenders when entering Malaysia. Basically, a sex offender registry includes the physical appearance, criminal history and address of the offender. When the government has this information of a sexual abuse offender, they could enforce the law when anything happens and notify the public about the existence or entry of the offender into a country. By doing so, the public will take note and be cautious of the offender whenever they meet him or her on the streets or anywhere in the country. Somehow, Malaysia will only take proactive moves in improving the laws when something huge or bad happens, just like Huckle's case. After the occurrence of Huckle's case, the government only then looked into Malaysia's laws, resulting in amendments to the Child Act 2001. The Malaysian government should be more concerned and take proactive steps in solving crimes against children issues since Malaysia recorded a high number of crimes against children cases.

In contrast, *Malay Mail* utilized phrases like "*Stricter laws to protect our children*" and "*Educate children on sexuality*" (*Malay Mail*) in framing the news stories based on the prevention methods. Not only parents should play their role in educating their children on sexuality, but teachers in schools should teach the kids about strangers touching their private parts is wrong and prohibited. This is due to the fact that children are naive, so they are easily influenced by strangers if they show a nice and kind attitude to children. So, children should learn to say "no" when they feel uncomfortable with strangers touching their private parts or invading their personal space. Besides that, children should be taught basic rules on keeping safe such as not to follow a stranger or accept food from someone they do not know.

The Initiator or Offender

The frame of 'initiator or offender' (N=11) is the third most used frame that the journalists used to deliver the offender's details. The offender scored a '*good cumulative grade point average (CGPA) of 3.51 when he was studying Diploma in Information Technology at Kuala Lumpur Metropolitan University College*', '*he acted like he is a kind person by engaging himself in social work and going to Sunday school to teach the kids*'. These details give the reader some background

into the character of the offender. In some ways trying to establish a discussion that he was a normal, everyday next-door neighbour type of person that could be trusted.

For instance, who Huckle is, the purpose of coming to Malaysia, what he did when he was in Malaysia and why he is referred to as a *'beast'*, *'monster'* and *'devil'* and could be harmful to the public. Phrases such as *"stayed at an orphan in Bangalore, India"*, *"Middle-class British boy"*, *"'Good guy' Huckle fooled residents"*, *"Television character Mr Bean"* and *"Christian social worker"* were used to describe Huckle's background in *The Star* whereas *"offered tutoring services to kindergarten, primary and secondary students in Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya"*, *"used to carry a camera and a sketchbook when he attended classes"* and *"pursued a diploma in Information Technology and Computing at Kuala Lumpur Metropolitan University"* were used in *Malay Mail*.

In addition, his former course mate called Huckle *'Bean'*, just like the television character *'Mr. Bean'* who never said a complete sentence. When the offender was pursuing his diploma course, the image that he presented in class was quiet and someone who was hard to interact with. By looking at these phrases, the journalists frame Huckle in a way that he was just a normal boy like the others when he was young. He was educated and active in doing social work, which gave people a good image of him. However, he was not as kind and good as he acted and behaved. *'Good guy'* was used to describe Huckle to show that the journalist frames the offender in a way that the people who live in his area thought he was a good guy because he mixed easily with the locals and was welcomed at their events. He fooled the residents in his neighbourhood as they were shocked when they found out Huckle was a pedophile.

Judiciary, Legal proceedings or Punishment

Information on judiciary, legal proceedings, and punishment are often provided in media coverage of a crime for several reasons. Reporting on the legal aspects of a crime provides context and helps the audience understand the judicial process. It educates the public about how the legal system works and what steps are being taken to address the crime. Media coverage of legal proceedings

can help ensure transparency and accountability in the justice system. By reporting on court cases and outcomes, the media can hold the judiciary and legal system accountable for their decisions and actions.

Among the phrases given about punishment in *The Star* are “22 life sentences”, “arrested at Gatwick Airport” and “charged Huckle with 91 counts”. On the other hand, *Malay Mail*’s journalists used phrases “serve a minimum term of 25 years before being considered for parole”, “take Huckle into custody” and “have to serve at least 23 years behind bars”. These phrases were used by journalists in framing the news stories of the offender in terms of the punishments given. Eventually, the offender was given 22 life sentences and pleaded guilty to 71 charges over 91 of them. When Huckle was arrested he was aged 30, and he was punished to spend the rest of his life in prison. Legal proceedings and punishment are often of public interest, especially in high-profile cases. People want to know the outcome of a trial and what punishment, if any, will be imposed on the accused. Media coverage of legal proceedings and punishment can serve as a deterrent to others considering similar actions. Knowing the potential legal consequences of criminal behavior may discourage individuals from engaging in unlawful activities. For victims and their families, media coverage of legal proceedings can provide a sense of closure and healing. Seeing justice being served can help them move forward after a traumatic event.

Death of the Offender

The ‘death of the offender’ frame (N=8) was used to cover Huckle’s death after he was found dead in jail. It gave the public knowledge of the “ending” of the criminal offender as no one would think that death would be his actual “ending” when everyone thought that prison is the ‘ending’ of the story of Huckle. Phrases “stabbed multiple times with a makeshift blade” and “raped, tortured and murdered in his prison cell” were used by *The Star*’s journalists to frame the death of Huckle whereas “Huckle died aged 33 in prison” and “stabbed to death in jail” was utilized in *Malay Mail*. The phrases used somehow showed the offender suffered and died in pain in prison and this time, he is the victim and not the offender of the rape anymore.

Victim's story

The last news frame, which is 'victim's story' (N=1), was found to have little to almost none of it in the coverage of Huckle's case. The one and only news article that covered the victim's story was presented in *The Star*. It could be seen that Malaysian media would not put their attention on the victims compared to other elements or stories. This is due to the reason that the victims are underaged and the media is not allowed to have an interview with them. Therefore, the media could only cover a little of the victim's story as a result of the limited information provided due to the fact that the victims were underaged and the media was not allowed to interview or focus on them.

Based on the news articles in *The Star*, the sentence "*Maria (not the victim's real name) recounts how her grandmother told her to be careful with Huckle, but as a child she did not understand the caution until he began taking nude photos of her and her younger sister.*" (*The Star*) was written by the journalist to express and frame the news story using the frame of victim's story. Not only that, the sub-headline of the article was "*Child victim recalls abuse began she was four*" (*The Star*), indicating that the victim was abused by the offender at a very young age. The journalist used "*Maria*" as the name of the victim to protect the victim. From the words used, it is known that the journalist covered the victim's story by just writing about the facts and not exaggerating or downplaying the story or blaming the victim for the incident. This does not only show respect to the victim but also shows that the journalist takes the story and issue seriously.

Other Findings

In the context of the Huckle case, the front stage is represented by the media coverage that presents the information to the public. Newspapers like *The Star* and *Malay Mail* curate their content to fit societal norms, journalistic standards, and the expectations of their audience. The coverage is intended to inform, provoke, and sometimes manipulate public sentiment. For journalists and editors, this might involve the decision-making process, discussions about how to frame the story, and the ethical considerations involved in reporting such a sensitive issue. These discussions and

decisions are not visible to the audience but significantly influence the procedures in creating frames of the story by managing impressions through selective reporting, the choice of words, headlines, and images. By focusing on certain aspects of the Huckle case, such as the gravity of his crimes, the number of victims, and the international dimension of his trial and imprisonment, the media shapes public perception. Key actors in the news story, including law enforcement officials, politicians, and child protection advocates, also engage in impression management. Their statements and actions, as reported by the media, aim to convey competence, authority, and responsiveness to public concerns. Editors and journalists play the role of information providers and watchdogs and their job entails investigating, reporting, and commenting on the case in a manner that adheres to journalistic ethics and engages the audience.

In the media narrative, Huckle is cast in the role of the villain, with his actions scrutinized and condemned. This role is essential to evoke strong emotional responses from the audience. While the victims and advocacy groups are often portrayed as the innocent and vulnerable, deserving of empathy and protection, they (advocacy groups) use the media spotlight to push for reforms and greater awareness of child protection issues. The audience, influenced by the media's performance, reacts with outrage, fear, or calls for action. This reaction can lead to public pressure on authorities to take more stringent measures against child sexual abuse. The public outcry, as managed and amplified by the media, can result in policy changes, legislative action, or increased funding for child protection programs.

This paper has discussed three themes: positive, neutral and negative in order to better understand how news about Richard Huckle is reported in both newspapers. Based on the findings, the words used in *The Star* and *Malay Mail* are more negative. In terms of themes, there is not much difference in the manner Richard Huckle is portrayed in both newspapers. Based on the analysis, both *The Star* and *Malay Mail* portray Richard Huckle in a negative manner. Through consistent coverage of the Richard Huckle case, the Malaysian media has played a key role in bringing attention to the threat of sexual crimes against children. By keeping the issue in the public eye, the media has helped spark wider conversations at a time when such crimes are becoming increasingly prevalent in society.

Discussion

The media's portrayal of sensitive issues such as sexual violence can have a significant impact on public perception and discourse. In the case of the high-profile Richard Huckle child sex abuse case in Malaysia, it is important to examine how the local media framed and reported on the story. This research paper aims to critically analyze the ways in which Malaysian newspapers, such as *The Star* and *Malay Mail*, covered the Huckle case and to assess the implications of their narrative choices.

The finding reveals that Malaysian newspapers journalists covered the story from various angles to ensure a comprehensive coverage of the crime. However, the extent to which media outlets like *The Star* and *Malay Mail* dramatize their portrayal of the Huckle case demonstrates a tendency to sensationalize in order to capture public attention. This aligns with Stelzmann's (2020) findings that media coverage of sexual violence is often undifferentiated, emotionally charged, and stigmatizing. While the media utilized an awareness frame in portraying the Huckle case, most stories focused on catching the predator and fighting for the rights of child sex abuse victims. Sensational headlines and coverage perpetuated anger and hatred towards Huckle, especially when highlighting his death in prison without providing a comprehensive understanding of paedophilic behaviour. There was a lack of clear education on what constitutes sexual violence, with media coverage often equating sexual violence solely with child sexual abuse. McCartan (2004) supports this view, noting that media portrayals frequently conflate sexual violence with child sexual abuse, often labelling individuals as "pedophiles" based solely on criminal convictions rather than a comprehensive clinical assessment of their sexual interests. This approach fails to recognize that not all offenders or cases of child abuse involve sexual violence, a point also emphasized by Harper and Harris (2015), who identify stigmatization as a recurring issue in the literature on sexual violence across Western nations. Media coverage, particularly by *The Star* and *Malay Mail*, shapes public perception by constructing narratives rather than simply reporting facts. Drawing on Goffman's dramaturgy, media acts as both performer and director, framing stories to evoke emotional responses. Sexual violence reporting often emphasizes shocking details, portraying perpetrators as evil and victims as helpless. This approach influences societal attitudes, simplifies

complex issues, and reinforces stereotypes. Characterization and selective framing guide how audiences interpret events, motives, and responses. The media's role involves backstage dynamics like editorial bias, shaping the narrative presented on the "front stage" of public discourse and moral judgment.

Contextualization is also significant. Media coverage often frames sexual violence within broader narratives about crime, morality, and justice. For example, cases might be linked to concerns about child safety or debates about the effectiveness of sex offender registries. By situating sexual violence within these larger contexts, the media shapes audience perceptions and influences public opinion. Overall, Goffman's dramaturgical approach helps us understand that media coverage of sexual violence is not a mere reflection of reality but a constructed narrative. By analyzing selection, framing, characterization, contextualization, and the use of visual and auditory cues, we can better appreciate the complex interplay between media, crime, and societal attitudes. While there was a notable increase in public awareness and some measures were introduced, the extent of the societal impact and the effectiveness of the changes remain topics of ongoing analysis.

Conclusion

The media's tendency to dramatize and sensationalize sensitive issues like sexual violence highlights the need for more nuanced and informed reporting. By recognizing the power of media framing and its impact on public perception, journalists and media outlets can strive for more balanced and educative coverage that fosters a deeper understanding of such complex issues. The media's portrayal of the Richard Huckle case highlights the significant role of media in shaping public perceptions and the importance of responsible journalism in reporting sensitive issues. More comprehensive and educational coverage can contribute to a more informed and empathetic society. This research underscores the need for more nuanced and informed reporting on sensitive issues like sexual violence. By recognizing the power of media framing and its impact on public perception, journalists and media outlets can strive for more balanced and educative coverage that fosters a deeper understanding of complex issues.

References

- Aroustamian, C. 2020. "Times up: Recognising sexual violence as a public policy issue: A qualitative content analysis of sexual violence cases and the media." *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 50: 101341. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2019.101341>
- Ashman Adam. 2020. 'Report: Convicted pedophile Richard Huckle got 'a taste' of own sexual assault on Malaysian, Cambodian children before death'. *The Malay Mail* <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/11/21/report-convicted-pedophile-richard-huckle-got-a-taste-of-own-sexual-assaul/1924736>
- BBC News 2016, June 6. "Richard Huckle: Malaysians deplore 'devil that hid in the church'." Accessed April 28, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-36445818>
- Bell, V. 2002. "The Vigilant(e) Parent and the Pedophile: The News of the World Campaign 2000 and the Contemporary Governmentality of Child Sexual Abuse." *Feminist Theory* 3(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1460012002003001068>
- Boje, D. M., Luhman, J. T., & Cunliffe, A. L. 2003. "A dialectic perspective on the organization theatre metaphor." *American Communication Journal* 6(2), 1-16.
- Boukes, M. 2021. "Episodic and Thematic Framing Effects on the Attribution of Responsibility: The Effects of Personalized and Contextualized News on Perceptions of Individual and Political Responsibility for Causing the Economic Crisis." *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 27(2): 374-395. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220985241>
- Cacciatore, M., Scheufele, D., & Iyengar, S. 2016. "The end of framing as we know it ... and the future of media effects." *Mass Communication & Society* 19(1):7-23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2015.1068811>
- Christensen, L. 2017. "Child Sexual Offenders: The Psychology of Offending". *The Psychology of Criminal and Antisocial Behaviour*, 439-458. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/B9780128092873000158>
- Critcher, C. 2002. "Media, Government and Moral Panic: The Politics of Sexual violence in Britain 2000-1." *Journalism Studies* 3(4): 521-535. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670022000019182>
- De Vreese, C. H. (2005). News framing: Theory and typology. *Information design journal+ document design*, 13(1), 51-62.
- Elmore, K. C., Scull, T. M., Malik, C. V., & Kupersmidt, J. B. 2020. "Rape Myth Acceptance Reflects Perceptions of Media Portrayals as Similar to Others, but Not the Self." *Violence Against Women* 27(3-4): 1-23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801220908335>

- Fernandez, J. A., Joyce, A. F., & Jaladin, R. A. M. 2021. "Beware of the menacing monsters around us: protecting Malaysian children from sexual abuse". *British Journal of Guidance Counselling* 51(5):705-714. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2021.1938970>
- Goffman, E. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: The Overlook Press.
- Habib, G., Ullah, M. U., Khanum, T., & Khan, A. 2023. "Role of Media in Coverage and Reporting of Child Abuse Case." *Journal Of World Science* 2(4): 753-764. <https://doi.org/10.58344/jws.v2i4.273>
- Harper, C. A., & Harris, A. J. 2017. "Applying Moral Foundations Theory to Understanding Public Views of Sexual Offending." *Journal of Sexual Aggression* 23(2): 111–123. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552600.2016.1217086>
- Ischebeck, J., Kuhle, L. F., Rosenbach, C. & Stelzmann, D. 2024. "Journalism and sexual violence: Background on the media coverage of a stigmatized minority." *Stigma and Health* 9(1): 20–29. <https://doi.org/10.1037/sah0000301>
- Jahnke, S., & Hoyer, J. 2013. "Stigmatization of People with Sexual violence: A blind spot in stigma research." *International Journal of Sexual Health* 25(3): 169–184. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19317611.2013.795921>
- Jewkes, Y. 2015. *Media and Crime* (3rd ed). London: Sage.
- Kitzinger, J. 2004. *Framing Abuse: Media Influence and Public Understanding of Sexual Violence against Children*. Pluto Press: London, UK.
- Kitzinger, J. 2008. "Pedophile-in-the-community' protests: Press Reporting and Public Responses." *Sex Crime*, 8, 356–376.
- Klein, J. L., Tolson, D., & Longo, L. M. (2013). Pretrial Publicity and Pedophilia: A content analysis of the Jerry Sandusky case. *Justice Policy Journal*, 10(2).
- Kuan¹, L. Y., & Beng, L. Y. (2016). Language and Child Abuse: An Analysis of the Richard Huckle Case in Malaysian Mainstream Newspapers. In *SOCIAL SCIENCES POSTGRADUATE INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR (SSPIS) 2016* (p. 64).
- McCartan, K. 2004. "Here There Be Monsters': The Public's Perception of Pedophiles with Particular Reference to Belfast and Leicester." *Med. Sci. Law* 44: 327–342. <https://doi.org/10.1258/rsmmsl.44.4.327>.
- McCartan, K. 2010. "Media constructions of, and reactions to, sexual violence in society. In K. Harrison (Ed.), *Managing high risk sex offenders in the community: Risk management, treatment and social responsibility*. London: Routledge.
- McCulloch, M. 2019. "The Portrayal of Sexual violence in the media: An analysis of themes and

stigma in South African newsprint media 2013-2018.” Accessed April 15, 2024. <https://researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/handle/10413/17352>

Nabillah, H. A. Z. 2021. “Monitoring Internet Child Pornography (ICP) in Malaysia.” *Pertanika Social Sciences & Humanities* 29(S2), 185-203. <https://doi.org/10.47836/pjssh.29.S2.13>

New Straits Times 2016, June 2. “British Pedophile may have molested 200 Malaysian children.” Accessed April 15, 2024.

<https://www.nst.com.my/news/2016/06/149173/british-pedophile-may-have-molested-200-malaysian-children>

Sheheta, A., & Strömbäck, J. 2014. “Mediation of Political Realities: Media as Crucial Sources of Information”, in Esser, F., Strömbäck, J., *Mediatization of Politics*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Stelzmann, D., Jahnke, S. & Kuhle, L. F. 2020. “Media coverage of Sexual violence: Benefits and risks from healthcare practitioners’ point of view.” *Int J Environ Res Public Health* 17(16): 5739. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17165739>

Stelzmann, D., Jahnke, S. & Kuhle, L. 2022. “Media Coverage of Sexual violence and Its Impact on Help-Seeking Persons with Sexual violence in Germany—A Focus Group Study.” *Int J Environ Res Public Health* 19(15): 9356. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19159356>

Tan G. M., & Noor Aziah, M. A. 2020. “Sexual Offences Against Children Act 20 Act 2 – A Boost to Police investigation And Prosecution.” *International Journal of Asian Social Science* 10(5): 273-286. <https://doi.org/10.18488/journal.1.2020.106.273.286>

Victor, J., Jenny Heng, G. K., Govindaraju, G. M., Tan P. L., Rajaratnam, U. D., Yang, L. F. 2019. “Media Reporting of Suicide: A Comparative Framing Analysis of Malaysian Newspapers.” *SEARCH Journal* 11(2), 73-88.

Wu, Y., Li, F., Triple, R. A., & Sun, I. Y. 2019. “Media Consumption and Fear of Crime in a Large Chinese City.” *Social Science Quarterly* 100(6): 2337-2350. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12692>

Zalif, Z. 2020. “Maldives; a Paradise for Pedophiles?” Accessed April 15, 2024. <https://raajje.mv/70345>

Biodata

Assoc. Prof. Dr Sharon Wilson holds a Ph.D. in Communication from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and received her BA in Translation and Interpretation and a Master’s in Communication from Universiti Sains Malaysia. She has been a Scholar of the Study of the United States Institutes’ Journalism and Media Program (SUSI) at Ohio University and a Fellow of the Summer Institute for Asia Fellows in News Literacy Program in Hong Kong. Her research focuses on media, crime

and society. Currently, she chairs the Centre for Media and Communication Research (CMCR) at Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman and leads a research team on anti-scam in collaboration with the Royal Malaysian Police and Malaysian Crime Prevention Foundation. Dr. Wilson was an expert panellist for the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in developing an Issue Paper on Effective Communication Practices for Fraud Prevention. Her research focuses on media, crime and society and women and identity.

Dr. Lim Shiang Shiang is a dedicated researcher and Programme Manager cum Lecturer at Han Chiang University College of Communication (HCUC). Her research interests lie primarily in media studies, crisis reporting, fake news, media freedom, and democratisation. She is particularly focused on analysing media content in relation to politics, the state, the market, and ideological representation. Her scholarly work is published in reputable Scopus-indexed journals, including *Plaridel*, *SEARCH Journal of Media and Communication Research*, *Pertanika*, *International Journal of Media and Information Literacy*, and the *Malaysian Journal of Communication*. Dr. Lim has also served as a co-researcher on projects funded by the International Federation of Journalists Grant and the Allianz Centre for Governance Grant. She regularly presents her research at both national and international conferences

Yap Hui Shan holds a bachelor's degree in Corporate Communications from Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman. Her interests are in media research and corporate social responsibility. Yap has been an engaging and active student especially as a research assistant. She works in the banking sector and is currently embarking on her Masters.