Invisible Sexual Predators & Their Silent Crimes: Exploring Media Constructions of Female Teacher Sex Offenders

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Declaration

I hereby declare that the work on which this dissertation is based is my original work (except where acknowledgements indicate otherwise) and that neither the whole work nor any part of it has been, is being, or is to be submitted for another degree in this or any other university. I authorise the University to reproduce for the purpose of research either the whole or any portion of the contents in any manner whatsoever.

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Abstract

The invisibility of female sex offenders (FSOs), and the trend of denialism surrounding the phenomenon, is the social issue that foregrounds this research. Sex offending continues to be regarded as male dominated and, as a result, research has focused almost exclusively on male sex offenders (MSOs). Recent literature has, however, observed that cases of FSOs are rising, globally, and being increasingly publicised in the media. Given media influences on public perceptions, policy action, and crime and penal policies, their construction of FSOs is a good starting point to understanding the ways in which a largely invisible phenomenon is made visible. This study, approached from a social constructionist framework, uses a qualitative desktop research design and conducts a thematic analysis of forty media articles, focusing on ten FSO cases, from seven countries. The findings position the media as complicit in the continued invisibility of FSOs. This complicity is evident through their conceptualisation of the offence; their denial of female agency; their focus on constructing FSOs in terms of social normality; their conception of victimisation; their contribution to the infamy of FSOs; and their acknowledgement of the dichotomy between MSOs and FSOs. The trends of trivialisation, leniency, and denial surrounding FSOs, both in the media and academic literature, need to be addressed. Thus, the overarching aim of this research is to make the 'invisible' FSO visible. The term used for these women across existing literature is FSO. To challenge this veiling of harmful female sexual aggressors, I comment on the ways in which media constructions of FSOs align with understandings of male rapists and male paedophiles. The related observation that the labels of rapist and paedophile are seldom used for FSOs lays the groundwork for my argument towards the degendering of sex offender typologies. As it stands, FSOs are best conceptualised as invisible sexual predators committing silent crimes.

List of Abbreviations

CSA	Child Sexual Abuse
COFEM	The Coalition of Feminists for Social Change
DCS	South African Department of Correctional Services
DoJ&CD	Department of Justice and Constitutional Development
DMFSO	The Descriptive Model of Female Sexual Offending
FCSO	Female Child Sexual Offenders
FSO	Female Sex Offender
MCSO	Male Child Sexual Offenders
MSO	Male Sex Offender
SAPS	South African Police Service
SASA	South African Sociological Association
USA	United States of America

List of Tables

Table of Contents

Chapter 1. An Invisible Phenomenon

1.1 Introduction

We are being increasingly confronted with cases of female perpetrated sexual abuse, particularly female perpetrated child sexual abuse (CSA). Public consciousness has become privy to this phenomenon through media reports of female perpetrated CSA and related depictions in film and television (Darling, Hackett & Jamie, 2018:196). Despite this exposure, there is an inherent misunderstanding that these women are harmful sexual predators. Sex offending continues to be understood as male dominated, with academic research and literature, institutions, and societies more broadly, succumbing to this 'known truth'. The result is an almost exclusive focus on male sex offenders (MSOs), a dismissal of women as sexually deviant (Lambert & O'Halloran, 2008:287), and a failure to conceptualise female sex offenders (FSOs) as a phenomenon.

The case of Fiona Viotti is just one example of this failure, and served as the initial inspiration for this avenue of research. Viotti, a now ex-teacher from Bishops Diocesan College, made headlines in South African media in 2019 after being accused of having sexual relations with a number of adolescent male learners between 2013 and 2019. Being involved in discussions and overhearing conversations about Viotti, it became clear that the case was sensationalised more than it was problematised. There was no criminalisation of Viotti's behaviour, no mention of sexual abuse, rape, or paedophilia. Rather, the discourse was inundated with dismissals. Dismissal of harm to Viotti's victims as a result of her perceived attractiveness. Dismissal of victimisation overall as a result of the victims being boys. Dismissal of Viotti being a dangerous sex offender because she was a woman. The gender dynamics in this case, plainly and simply, challenged 'known truths' about sexual offences, the offenders and the victims. Even now, in 2025, mention of my research and FSOs is met with questions about how women can be harmful sexual aggressors, or comments about how 'lucky' young boys are to be sexually involved with their attractive teachers, with no acknowledgement of their victimisation. These responses prompted a look into the legalities behind female perpetrated sexual violence within South Africa. The Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act 32 of 2007 (SOA) (Government Gazette, 2007) redefined rape as being gender-neutral, understanding rape as being all forms of penetration without consent (Department of Justice & Constitutional

Development [DoJ&CD], 2012:12). This redefinition acknowledges that women can be the perpetrators of sexual offences, and that men can be victims. Despite this, and the attempt of the National Policy Framework on the Management of Sexual Offences (DoJ&CD, 2012) to implement this gender-neutral understanding, a considerable gendered ignorance around female perpetrated rape and sexual offences remains.

The term 'sex offender', according to Robertiello and Terry (2007:508), does not constitute a homogenous group of individuals. Rather, 'sex offender' is considered an umbrella term for a heterogenous population divided into subcategories, based on individual characteristics and varying motives for offending (Ganon, Rose & Ward, 2008:354; Robertiello & Terry, 2007:508; Sandler & Freeman, 2007:87). The five sub-categories that Robertiello and Terry (2007) discuss are (1) rapists; (2) child molesters; (3) female sex offenders; (4) juvenile sex offenders; and (5) cyber offenders. Immediately evident in their classification is that female sex offenders are considered a separate sub-category of sex offender. In fact, in their profiling of sex offenders, Robertiello and Terry (2007:513) suggest that the majority of existing typologies are only applicable to MSOs and not to their female counterparts. The implication here being that female sex offenders cannot be rapists, child molesters, or paedophiles. This trend of denialism, and resultant invisibility of FSOs, has impeded the development of related typologies for FSOs (Vandiver & Kercher, 2004:122). Instead, the focus has been on the empirical generation of MSO typologies, with little consideration being given to FSO typologies and related theories (Ganon et al., 2008:352; Sandler & Freeman, 2007:73). The most widely recognised FSO typologies are those developed by Mathews, Matthews and Speltz (1989), discussed further in the table below.

Table 1. Descriptions of the three female sex offender typologies developed by Mathews, Matthews and Speltz (1989).

FSO typology	Description
Male coerced/male accompanied	'Traditional', subordinate women whose offending is influenced by a male abuser who they fear (Robertiello & Terry, 2007:514). These FSOs are conceptualised as being intimidated by a male into committing the sexual abuse (Sandler & Freeman, 2007:75). They are said to have issues with low self-esteem, alcohol and/or drug abuse, abusive relationships with the men that coerce them or accompany their offending (Mathews et

	al., 1989). Feelings of dependency, helplessness and powerlessness are characteristic of this FSO typology (Anderson, Lee, Langsam, Reinsmith-Jones, 2020:3; Sandler & Freeman, 2007:75). FSOs who are coerced by men into perpetrating sexually abusive behaviour, usually against their own children, are considered the stereotypical FSO typology (Darling et al., 2018:209), and are deemed the most common (Darling & Hackett, 2020:7).
Predisposed	Women who, most commonly, victimise their own children (Anderson et al., 2020:3; Mathews et al., 1989; Sandler & Freeman, 2007:75), or who victimise children in their care (Robertiello & Terry, 2007:514). These FSOs have a history of sexual and/or physical abuse themselves (Anderson et al., 2020:3; Mathews et al., 1989; Sandler & Freeman, 2007:75), have serious psychological disorders, and initiate the sexual abuse, seeking to gain power and/or control (Mathews et al., 1989). These women sexually abuse prepubescent children and should be referred to as paedophiles (Ganon et al., 2008:354), but are categorised as predisposed FSOs instead.
Teacher/lover	Typically middle or high school teachers who abuse their positions of power and authority over their adolescent, predominantly male (Matthews, Mathews & Speltz, 1991:208) students (Robertiello & Terry, 2007:513). This typology is characterised by 'loving relationships' that are sought with victims (Anderson et al., 2020:3; Mathews et al., 1989), the failure to acknowledge the offending as abuse (Mathews et al., 1989) or criminal (Sandler & Freeman, 2007:75), and the minimisation of harm (Anderson et al., 2020:3; Mathews et al., 1989). These FSOs are considered to have significant cognitive distortions (Mathews et al., 1989). Distinctions between FSO typologies are evident in more recent literature too. Augarde and Rydon-Grange (2022:10) discuss female perpetrated CSA in the educational context. Differentiating female educators that sexually abuse their students from other FSO populations, Augarde and Rydon-Grange (2022:10) indicate that they are ordinarily in their early to mid-thirties, are of a higher socio-economic status, and have a higher level of education. These offenders are typically unaccompanied and abuse a single victim who is around fifteen years of age (Augarde & Rydon-Grange, 2022:10; Darling et al., 2018:196). FSOs who sexually abuse children within an educational context, thus, differ from stereotypical portrayals and understandings of FSOs (Darling et al., 2018:209).

Typologies are well-established analytical tools utilised in the social sciences (Collier, LaPorte & Seawright, 2012:217). There are, however, recurring criticisms of typologies that relate to their

rigidity and failure to account for the multidimensionality of phenomena (Collier, et al., 2012:221). The homogeneity myth implies a uniformity to sex offenders and related typologies, suggesting that the phenomenon is limited to violent males who prey on women and children (Zatkin et al., 2022:964). While legal definitions of rapists and paedophiles reinforce this perceived homogeneity (Woessner, 2010:328), there is some acknowledgement that sex offenders are a heterogenous population (Ganon et al., 2008:354; Robertiello & Terry, 2007:508; Sandler & Freeman, 2007:87), although the heterogeneity within typologies is not readily considered (Zatkin et al., 2022:964). My argument towards degendering sex offender typologies involves the expansion of their qualitative dimensions, diversifying the heterogeneity of sex offenders, and the specific typologies under this umbrella term, even further. The reference to typologies in this research thus serves to highlight the need for their deconstruction and degendering to address the current gendered rigidity and perpetuation of the homogeneity myth. If they are well-constructed, sex offender typologies can aid in our understanding of sexual predators and their victims, and in the related development of sex crime prevention policies (Sandler & Freeman, 2007:74). Reconstructed, degendered typologies could continue this contribution if developed appropriately.

A limitation of Mathews et al.'s (1989) FSO typologies, specifically, is that they were developed based on a small sample of only sixteen FSOs (Sandler & Freeman, 2007:75). Further research has proposed more empirically robust typologies, generated from a larger sample of four hundred and seventy-one FSOs (Vandiver & Kercher, 2004), but Mathews et al.'s (1989) FSO typologies currently remain the most widely recognised. As Lambert and O'Halloran (2008:286) assert following their review of literature on FSO typologies, there is a trend of denialism when considering the possibility that these women can be harmful sexual predators. This is evident in the existing FSO typologies, and the fact that neither Mathews et al.'s (1989) nor Vandiver & Kercher's (2004) typologies conceptualise FSOs as rapists or paedophiles. This observation forms the basis of my argument for the degendering of sex offender typologies.

In line with the teacher/lover typology of FSOs (Anderson, Reinsmith-Jones, Lee & Brooks, 2021:3; Matthews et al., 1991:208; Robertiello & Terry, 2007:513), recent research has reported that a disproportionate number of FSOs are teachers (Anderson et al., 2020:2), with most female

perpetrated sexual abuse occurring in schools (Darling & Hackett, 2020:11). As a result, academic literature is expanding to consider the context in which FSOs offend, with schools and child sexual offending being one of the key focuses (Augarde and Rydon-Grange, 2022:1). The teacher/lover typology, therefore, formed the foundation for this research that was initially inspired by the highly publicised South African FSO case of Fiona Viotti.

1.2 Research Problem and Rationale

The current invisibility of FSOs and the associated denialism surrounding their existence is reinforced by socially constructed gender stereotypes (Kramer & Bowman, 2011:244). FSOs are largely overlooked and under researched as a result of this gendered bias (Anderson et al., 2021:1; Grayston & De Luca, 1999:93; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004:121). Beyond academia, FSOs are currently escaping the attention of criminal justice and public health care systems, and will continue to do so until there is appropriate recognition that sexual offending is not a gendered crime (Anderson et al., 2021:1). Statistics show that FSOs are scarce and represent only a small percentage of sex offenders arrested and convicted for reported sexual crimes (Anderson et al., 2020:2; Finkelor, 1984:104; Hayes & Carpenter 2013:162), which offers an explanation for the lack of visibility and interest in FSOs. The trend of denialism surrounding FSOs, however, calls the accuracy of these statistics into question. Obtaining data that accurately depicts the prevalence of FSOs is continuously problematised due to discrepancies in the reporting and recording of female perpetrated sexual offences (Augarde & Rydon-Grange, 2022:2; Darling et al., 2018:197), and differing legal landscapes (Cortoni, Sandler & Freeman, 2015:332). These discrepancies confirm that there is an under-recognition of sexually abusive women (Tozdan, Birken & Dekker, 2019:4). If FSOs are invisible sexual predators committing silent, unreported crimes (Anderson et al., 2021:1; Tozdan et al., 2019:7), how can we confidently characterise FSOs as uncommon or anomalies, and use this characterisation as justification for the scant literature on the subject?

The reality is that FSO cases have historically been underreported, making the phenomenon difficult to research (Tozdan et al., 2019:5). While the research and academic literature on FSOs is in its infancy, cases of FSOs are rising (Christiansen & Thyer, 2002:1) within South Africa (Collins-Mckinnell, 2013:1), and globally, and being increasingly publicised in the media,

generating public fascination (Darling et al., 2018:196; Hayes & Carpenter, 2013:162; Kramer & Bowman, 2011:244). Using the media as a starting point for understanding constructions and correlated perceptions of FSOs offers a viable solution to addressing just one gap in the literature, and contributing to the development of new academic literature on FSOs. How the media construct issues is important to understand, given that the media influence awareness and educate the public (Zhou, Wang, Xia, Xiao & Tang, 2020:2694), and aid the public in making sense of social issues (Berns, 2001:264). In fact, research has shown that individuals change their perceptions and behaviour to align with information provided by the media (Zhou et al., 2020:2694).

Approaching the role of the media from a different angle, research has highlighted the ways in which the media sustain public perceptions towards societal issues (Anderson, 1991:464). In relation to media coverage of cases of sexual offences specifically, the media play a significant role in reinforcing institutional myths about sex offenders (Zatkin, Sitney & Kaufman, 2022:964). A cyclical relationship emerges here in that the media contribute to the perpetuation of social myths (Zatkin et al., 2022:964). These myths, as maintained by the media, then drive policy action and change; with the policy actions and changes then resulting in further media reporting (Zatkin et al., 2022:964). The depiction of crime and criminals in the press becomes critical, therefore, when considering the influence the media have in shaping public support for these crime and penal policies (Deckert, 2020:339) that are developed to appease the public (Zatkin et al., 2022:964).

Hence, the aim of this research was to look at the way in which the largely invisible phenomenon of FSOs is made visible in the media. Approaching this research through a sociological lens allowed ‘taken-for-granted’ ways of thinking (Plummer, 2021:3) and ‘known truths’ about sexual offences, the offenders and the victims to be challenged, while simultaneously positioning the continued invisibility of FSOs as a social ill. The limited literature that exists on FSOs has considered individual cases (Christiansen & Thyer, 2002:2), or has almost exclusively centred around cases in the United States of America (USA) and Canada, with only a few studies from England, one from Germany, and one from Australia (Wijkman, Bijleveld, & Hendriks, 2010:137). My spatially diverse data sample includes FSO cases from Australia, Canada,

England, New Zealand, Scotland, South Africa, and the USA. By focusing on ten cases of female teacher sex offenders, spanning seven countries, I consider the ways in which perceptions of sex offenders, and the gendering of sex offending occurs on a more global scale, albeit Western centric. This was an aim that could not be achieved by focusing on a singular case or on a number of cases from a singular country. The choice to include Viotti's case was driven by a desire to contribute a South African case and a South African voice to the discussion on FSOs which, up until now, has been predominantly led by the Global North, that being developed, 'First World' classified countries (Trefzer, Jackson, McKee & Dellinger, 2014:2).

1.3 Key Concepts and Related Argument

When presenting the proposal for this research at the South African Sociological Association (SASA) Conference in 2023, the absence of the word 'paedophile' in the proposal presentation was noted. A question was raised as to whether the decision to not use the term 'paedophile' to describe these female teacher sex offenders was contributing to the very same invisibility of the phenomenon that I was aiming to address. While the question was focused specifically on the omission of 'paedophile', a similar question could be raised about the use of 'rapist' as a descriptive term for FSOs. Thus, before continuing, it is important to briefly discuss current conceptual understandings of rapists and paedophiles. As I argue in this dissertation, the FSO cases studied in this research are reminiscent of current understandings of the terms rapist and paedophile, but these labels are seldom applied by the media. While the literature discussed below takes a different stance, I assert that the labels of 'paedophile' and 'rapist' are applicable to FSOs, and should not be reserved solely for MSOs. This proposal forms the basis for my argument towards degendering sex offender typologies. Women demonstrate some of the same sexually deviant behaviours as men (Ganon et al., 2008:370) and, consequently, should receive the appropriate degendered labels.

When I refer to degendering, I am not referring explicitly to Sitas' (1996) related theoretical contribution. The existing conceptualisation of degendering surrounds the untethering of men and women from traditional gender roles (Sitas, 1996:238). I suggest a broadening of how we understand degendering to, in the first instance, include the untethering of men and women from the gendered stereotypes associated with these traditional gender roles. The concept of gender

within the social sciences has historically affected phenomena under study (Lober, 2000:83). The conceptualisation of crime and the related gender categorisations have been identified as one of the affected phenomena (Lober, 2000:83). The current gendering of sex offenders, and related typologies, has resulted in a failure to conceptualise women as harmful sexual aggressors. The ramifications of this involve potentially unacknowledged paedophiles and unacknowledged rapists, simply because of the offender's gender. Thus, when I refer to degendering in this research, I mean the deconstruction and removal of gender associations within sex offender typologies. The aim is to counteract the current danger of FSOs remaining invisible sexual predators committing silent crimes.

Paedophile

In their article looking at the difference in media representation of MSOs and FSOs, Landor and Eisenchlas (2012:493) noted a discrepancy in the use of 'paedophile' as a descriptive term for these sex offenders. In their analysis, Landor and Eisenchlas (2012:493) found that the term 'paedophile' was almost exclusively used by the media when describing MSOs. In the fifteen articles that reported on cases of female perpetrated sexual abuse, 'paedophile' was only referenced once (Landor & Eisenchlas, 2012:493). This finding is further supported by Zack, Lang and Dirks (2018:63) who discuss media use of 'paedophile' and 'pervert' as labels for MSOs exclusively. FSOs are conversely labelled as 'depressed', 'heartbroken', 'lonely', or 'vulnerable' (Zack et al., 2018:63). While a consistent definition of paedophile is not evident in the literature (Bridge & Duman, 2018:217), there is consensus that 'paedophilia' is a term monopolised by MSOs (Landor & Eisenchlas, 2012:493; Zack et al., 2018:63). Paedophiles are, however, characterised as sex offenders that exercise their position of power over children (Hayes & Baker, 2014:3). The FSO cases considered in this research are female teachers who have abused their position of power over their male students, behaviour akin to paedophilia. Hence, I argue that these FSO cases foreground the need for a gender-neutral understanding of paedophilia and the adoption of 'paedophile' as a label for FSOs.

Rapist

Robertiello and Terry (2007:509) define rapists as men who rape women, and consider rape as a hyper identification with masculinity and the role of men. This is a narrow and gender dependent

definition which highlights a largely gender driven naivety in the broader understanding of rape. Confining rape to such gender binaries contributes to the trend of denialism that surrounds FSOs. Robertiello and Terry (2007) go further and distinguish between 'female sex offenders' and 'rapists'. FSOs and rapists are separated into two distinct categories, and Robertiello and Terry (2007) suggest that there is no instance in which these categories overlap. Following this logic, female perpetrated sexual offences cannot be regarded as rape, and consequently a rapist cannot be female. Existing rape myths and sexual scripts that support this logic have prompted questions about the existence of unacknowledged rapists (Ryan, 2011:780). With this in mind, I conceptualise FSOs as unacknowledged rapists that are not accommodated for in existing rape myths and sexual scripts. I challenge the gendered sex offender categories and make an argument for adopting a gender-neutral understanding of rape, forgoing the gender specific sex offender labels, and acknowledging that FSOs can be rapists.

Conceptualising Use

Beyond their definitions in academic literature, consideration should also be given to the way in which the labels of 'paedophile' and 'rapist' are socially and culturally conceptualised. From a social constructionist perspective, the way in which we understand the world is socially, culturally, and historically specific (Burr, 2015:4), justifying the importance of these conceptualisations. Legal terms for sexual offenders and sex crimes are assigned social and cultural meaning through their colloquial use (DiBennardo, 2018:1). While these legal definitions form the basis of our understanding, social and cultural arenas have a greater influence on shaping perceptions and conceptualisations of sexual predators (DiBennardo, 2018:1). The discourse surrounding sexual predators has become central to how the public perceive sexual violence (DiBennardo, 2018:1). For the purpose of this research I have positioned the media as a socio-cultural arena that shapes interpretations of FSOs through their construction of the phenomenon.

As it stands, the term used for women who sexually offend, across existing literature, is FSO. We are not yet at the stage where 'paedophile', 'rapist', or even 'sex offender' are considered gender neutral terms. While I argue for the degendering of these terms, the implication continues to be that these labels are reserved for men who sexually offend. For this reason, the gendered

demarcations of ‘female paedophile’, ‘female rapist’, and ‘female sex offender’ are still required. This, in conjunction with an attempt to align with the existing literature, justifies my use of the term ‘FSO’ in this dissertation to denote women who sexually offend. I have, additionally, used ‘sexual aggressor’ and ‘sexual predator’ interchangeably throughout my dissertation as descriptive terms for FSOs. While there may be conceptual and legal distinctions between ‘sexual aggressors’, ‘sexual predators’, and ‘sexual offenders’, research has defined sexual crimes as aggressive (Zack et al., 2018:64) and sexual offenders as predators (Zack et al., 2018:63). My interchangeable use of these terms simply serves to challenge the existing gendered discourse and position women as capable of being sexually aggressive and sexually predatory.

1.4 Research Questions and Objectives

The central research questions are:

1. How is the invisible FSO made visible in the media?
2. How do media constructions of FSOs contribute to the trend of social denialism and the resulting invisibility of the phenomenon?

The sub-questions that guided this research are:

- How does the media socially construct ideas of gender norms?
- How does the media socially construct deviance in relation to gender norms?
- What characteristics do the media rely on in their construction of female teacher sex offenders?
- How do the gendered conceptualisations of rape and paedophilia influence the image of the female teacher sex offender as constructed by the media?

While the implications of this research will be considered in more detail in the discussion chapter, the research objectives are briefly outlined below:

- To explore how media constructions of FSOs make the largely invisible phenomenon visible.
- To demonstrate how media constructions of FSOs contribute to the trend of denialism surrounding FSOs as a phenomenon.

- To highlight how media constructions of FSOs are comparable to understandings of male perpetrated rape and paedophilia, but are seldom referred to as such.
- To make an argument for adopting gender-neutral sex offender typologies, and move towards degendering the labelling of sex offenders.
- To contribute to existing scholarship on FSOs through considering their construction by news media platforms that have the power to influence and sustain public perceptions, drive related policy action and change, and shape public support for accompanying legislation. While not a direct objective of this research, I hope that my findings positively inform the degendering of sex offender and sexual victimisation policies and programmes.

1.5 Theoretical Framework, Research Methodology and Design

The intention of this research was to understand media constructions of FSOs and consider how these constructions contribute to the trend of denialism surrounding, and resultant invisibility of, the phenomenon. Given this epistemological assumption I approached the research from a social constructionist perspective. For the purpose of this research, social constructionism is considered synonymous with social constructivism. While there are instances where more refined theoretical distinctions are made between the terms, they are more often than not used interchangeably (Weinberg, 2009:295). The social constructionist ideology is particularly popular among social scientists whose research is centred around gender and sexuality (Weinberg, 2009:283), as it provides a theoretical foundation from which gender and sexuality are acknowledged as socially defined (Javaid, 2018:455). By proxy, sexual violence and sexual victimisation can be understood as a matter of social definition, justifying the use of this theoretical approach.

My epistemological assumption also served as justification for the use of a qualitative research design. Past research on news media coverage of sex crimes has largely adopted a quantitative approach (Chiotti, 2009; Navarro & Higgins, 2023:313). These predominantly quantitative investigations could prevent important conversations regarding sex offender media frames (Navarro & Higgins, 2023:313). Adopting a qualitative approach and looking at the ways in which the media socially construct FSOs, and how this construction influences our social

understandings of the offender and their victims, offers a valuable contribution to the existing literature.

Data collection involved desktop research and a sample of documentary data sources. The data sample consisted of news media articles exclusively. By this I mean online articles from various news media platforms. The use of documentary data, and news media articles specifically, granted mediate access to material traces (Mogalakwe, 2006:223) of media constructions of FSOs. The data was initially coded manually, allowing for familiarisation with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006:93), and then coded through NVivo. The data was analysed thematically, which allowed for the trends and recurring themes in media constructions of FSOs to be identified and explored. Through this exploration, I was able to address my central research questions and sub-questions that guided this research as outlined above in Section 1.4.

1.6 Dissertation Outline

Chapter Two provides a comprehensive review of the existing literature on FSOs, framed around the key themes and interrelated areas of scholarship. The gendered assumptions surrounding rape and sexual victimisation are considered. Debates surrounding the definition of 'real' rape and the 'ideal victim' are discussed and contextualised in relation to the broader picture of social harm. I argue that cultural lags and recognition barriers, influenced by entrenched traditional gender roles and sexual scripts, prevent the acknowledgement or acceptance of female criminality, and FSOs more specifically. Finally, I consider the power of the media and how these gendered assumptions, cultural lags and recognition barriers translate into media constructions of female offenders.

Chapter Three discusses the theoretical framework and justifies the decision to adopt a social constructionist approach. I consider the social constructions of sexual violence, sexual victimisation, deviance and FSOs in relation to deviance, and address the role of the media in social constructionism. I argue that FSOs act in contradiction to hegemonic understandings of sexual violence, sexual victimisation, deviance, and related constructions.

Chapter Four justifies my qualitative approach to the study and how the decision to adopt this research design was informed by my epistemological assumptions. I discuss my desktop research and the 'critique checklist' I developed to assist with data collection. I comment on how the use of documentary data enabled me to gain mediate access to media constructions of FSOs, and how I utilised thematic analysis to analyse this data. I end the chapter by considering the trustworthiness of the research, as well as the ethical considerations and limitations of the study.

Chapter Five is the first of the 'findings' chapters. Given that headlines predetermine perceptions of and responses to the article content, I consider the way in which the media initially construct FSOs through their headlines. I comment on how the media articles' headlines trivialise and sensationalise the FSO cases, downplay the offences by highlighting the lenient repercussions for offending, and rely on gendered social norms to construct the FSOs as wives, mothers, and women with no agency. I conclude the chapter by considering the ways in which the construction of FSOs in media headlines influence further reading of the article that follows.

Chapter Six is the second of the 'findings' chapters. The initial themes introduced in Chapter Five are considered here in more detail and in relation to the content of the articles. Discussions around 'understanding of offence'; 'duty of care'; 'social normality'; 'the denial of female agency' considering 'gender roles in sex' and the 'mental health defence'; 'the duality of victimisation' and the resultant 'destruction of the real victim'; and the 'infamy of female sex offenders' continue in this chapter, and serve to highlight media contributions to the trend of denialism that surrounds FSOs. Through these discussions, the media are positioned as complicit in the invisibility of these sexual predators.

Chapter Seven engages in a discussion of the findings as presented in the preceding chapters and considers these in relation to the research problem, central research question, sub-questions, and objectives. The media are positioned as complicit in the invisibility of FSOs. This argument is discussed in relation to the three main themes of trivialisation, leniency, and denial that recurred in media constructions. These patterns in media constructions of FSOs are then contextualised within the broader picture of social harm. Finally, the applicability of MSO typologies to FSOs are debated, and the way in which these FSO cases align with conceptualisations of male

perpetrated rape and paedophilia are highlighted. This debate fortifies the need for gender-neutral sex offender labels and the argument to identify and appropriately label FSOs as 'rapists' and 'paedophiles'.

Chapter Eight makes concluding remarks based on the findings and related discussion. The key findings are summarised and considered in relation to the primary research question, and the contribution and implications of the research are discussed. Recommendations for future research are made based on the limitations of this study, as well as areas of interest that presented themselves during the research that were beyond the scope of this dissertation.

1.7 Conclusion

This research explores media constructions of FSOs. Through this exploration, I comment on the contribution media constructions make to the trend of denialism surrounding, and continued invisibility of, these sexual predators. In the first instance, perceptions of FSOs need to be researched and understood before we can appropriately consider the ways in which these perceptions influence societal, legal and health care systems' related responses. Considering the role the media play in influencing public perceptions, driving policy action, and shaping support for crime and penal policies, this research on media constructions of FSOs provides a strong foundation for future research on this topic. The ways in which the media constructions of FSOs align with conceptualisations of male rapists and/or paedophiles, but are seldom labelled as such, becomes apparent through reviewing the media constructions of the phenomenon. This observation underpins my argument for the degendering of sex offender typologies.

Chapter 2. Filling the Silence

2.1 Introduction

FSOs are largely invisible predators who commit silent crimes. In this chapter, I review the existing literature on FSOs and discuss how this largely invisible phenomenon has been made more visible through scholarship. First, the gendered assumptions surrounding sexual violence, sexual victimisation, and female offenders are highlighted. Second, I comment on how these gendered assumptions have resulted in cultural lags and recognition barriers that prevent the acknowledgement of female sexual criminality. Third, I consider the power of the media and position them as complicit in making social issues selectively visible or invisible.

2.2 Defining 'Real' Rape

There is a consistent gendered narrative surrounding rape and sexual victimisation which has been perpetuated in literature. Rape has historically been understood as a violent political act through which men assert their dominance over, and ascertain social control of, women (Kelly, 1988:23). Sexual violence emanates from, and is maintained through, a patriarchal system in which men are positioned as more powerful than women (Edwards, Turchik, Dardis, Reynolds & Gidycz, 2011:762). Plainly, rape is defined as brutal force exercised by a man over a woman (Ntsoelikane, 1998:1). This power-sex association accords with rape ideologies and rape myths that legitimise the sexual victimisation of women (Edwards et al., 2011:762). Our present day understandings of sexual victimisation have been largely informed by these historical narratives of male dominance and female subordination (Stemple, Flores & Meyer, 2017:302).

The trend of denialism that currently surrounds FSOs can be attributed to difficulties moving past these historical understandings, and the limited definition of rape as the forceful penetration of the vagina by the penis (Cain & Anderson, 2016:1). A focus on completed rapes, which require penetration of the victim, means that FSOs are excluded as perpetrators of rape (Walfield, 2021:6393). The resultant implication is that it is impossible for women to rape men (Walfield, 2021:6396). This restrictive understanding results in a 'cultural denial' around the possibility that women can be dominant, harmful sexual aggressors (Cain & Anderson, 2016:1; Tozdan et al., 2019:7). Simply put, rape perpetration is not considered appropriate for women and is consequently reserved for men (Cain & Anderson, 2016:1). Thus, while rape and sexual assault

are considered as gender-neutral terms (Cain & Anderson, 2016:1), the reality is that they are viewed through an incredibly gendered lens. The immediate assumption in cases of sexual assault is that the victim is a female and the offender is a male (Cain & Anderson, 2016:2). In relation to CSA more specifically, the stereotypical understanding involves a male perpetrator and female child victim (Tozdan et al., 2019:1). Feminist scholars have argued for the elimination of the sex distinctions, and the genital differences specifically, as a means of eradicating the existing divide between males and females (Lober, 2000:81). Degendering sex offender typologies would benefit from this eradication, and the elimination of the vagina and penis as biological markers of men and women. The exclusion of genital differences from the definition would mean that rape could no longer be limited to vaginal penetration by the penis and, by proxy, rape could no longer be conceptualised as exclusively perpetrated by MSOs.

The salient beliefs that surround sex offenders, however, continue to come into play when defining 'real' rape, and 'real' sex offenders. The first salient belief is that sexual offenders disproportionately target a specific victim base, those being women and children (Mancini & Picket, 2016:259). The result is that crime laws developed against sexual offences exist as a way to protect women and children who are classified as the most vulnerable populations (Mancini & Picket, 2016:261). The second salient belief is that sex offenders customarily victimise strangers (Mancini & Picket, 2016:260; Nagy, 2017:98). 'Real' or 'typical' rape involves the sexual attack of a women by a predatory male stranger (Anderson, 2007:225; Posel, 2005:242; Ryan, 2011:776; Spencer, 2009:225). Media constructions reinforce the narrative of a male stranger, contributing to the notion of 'stranger danger' (Hayes & Carpenter, 2013:161). The MSO is considered a social pariah and is distanced from the community through a process of 'othering' (Spencer, 2009:225). This salient belief is contested by some researchers who argue that the notion of 'stranger danger' is one of the primary misconceptions of sexual offences (Craun & Theriot, 2009:2057). In reality, the majority of sexual assault cases involve a perpetrator who is known to the victim (Benedict, 1993:15; Craun & Theriot, 2009:2058; DiBennardo, 2018:15; Zatkin et al., 2022:953). As Ryan (2011:776) cautions, limiting understandings of rape to align with these notions of 'stranger danger' prevents the recognition of acquaintance rape. The FSO cases considered in this research involve female teachers sexually victimising their known male students. These cases are just one example of acquaintance rape that are overlooked in

discussions of ‘real’ rape and related narratives of ‘stranger danger’. The danger is that victims may not come forward or interpret their experience as rape if their experience does not align with the relied upon ‘real’ rape scripts (Ryan, 2011:777).

Sexual relationships between teachers and young children are considered abusive, but there is an ambiguity around what constitutes sexual abuse when the victim is an adolescent (Dollar, Perry, Fromuth, & Holt, 2004:91). South Africa’s Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act of 2007 (Government Gazette, 2007:18), however, does specify that sexual acts cannot be considered voluntary if they involve an abuse of power or authority. Similarly, O’Brien and Minoff (2004:244) define second degree rape as the forcible sexual assault of a victim who is not capable of consent. Srinivasan (2021:126) argues that students’ consent to sexual relationships with their teachers is more likely the result of fear, not genuine want. This argument casts further doubt on the legitimacy of consent in cases of teacher/student sexual abuse, even in cases where the student is of consenting age.

While legal definitions and societal considerations of rape differ, the focus should be on lack of consent rather than whether the encounter was wanted or unwanted (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007:82). The dominant model of sexual wanting, however, promotes a narrow definition of rape which may result in victims believing that their experience does not constitute rape, particularly if there was an element of initial want or desire (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007:74). Peterson and Muehlenhard (2007:72) problematise the dichotomous dominant model of sexual wanting, which conceptualises sexual interactions as either wanted and consensual or unwanted and non-consensual, and caution against conflating consent and want. Despite this concern, Peterson and Muehlenhard (2007:72) note that research on sexual offences is typically consistent with the dominant model. In accordance with the dominant model, wanting sex is considered equivalent to consenting to sex (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007:73). Wanted but non-consensual sex is, therefore, deemed impossible (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007:73). For sex to qualify as rape it must be unwanted (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007:73), with any evidence suggesting the victim wanted sex bringing into question whether the incident was in fact rape (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007:82). The applicability of labelling an offence as rape is, therefore, questioned when the victim had initial sexual desires or wants (Ryan, 2011:777). In their opposition of the

dichotomous dominant model and their differing consideration of rape, Peterson and Muehlenhard (2007:85) argue that rape is the absence of consent, rather than the absence of want or desire.

Conceptualising the 'Ideal Victim'

The gendered assumptions surrounding 'real' rape also influence perceptions of what constitutes a victim. Classic literature on victimisation has deduced that 'victim' is not an objective term (DiBennardo, 2018:3). Rather, perceptions of victims are influenced by individual and socio-cultural understandings of crime (DiBennardo, 2018:3). 'Legitimate' victim status is given to individuals, or a group of individuals, deemed 'ideal victims' (Christie, 2018:12; DiBennardo, 2018:3; Nagy, 2017:98). Individuals who are afforded 'complete' and 'legitimate' victim status are characterised as being weak, sick, old, or young individuals (Christie, 2018:12; Collins, 2016:298). While there is no explicit identification of gender as being one of the attributes of the 'ideal victim', the 'ideal victim' is referred to as 'she' (Christie, 2018:12; Collins, 2016:298), and a young man is identified as the antithesis (Christie, 2018:12). The implications of the gendered conceptualisation of the 'ideal victim' become clear in rape cases. Men are not 'ideal victims' and, by proxy, women are not 'ideal perpetrators'.

Sexual victimisation interventions are targeted towards prioritising certain kinds of victims and certain kinds of violence (Du Toit & Le Roux, 2021:115). Research has resulted in a call from academics for more awareness surrounding men as victims of abuse, and improvements to the support services that are available for male victims (Javaid, 2018:454; McCool, 2023). Many of the support services that are available to victims of abuse are targeted towards women, following the prevailing narrative that women are more prone to being victims of abuse than men (McCool, 2023). Cases of sexual violence against female victims are consequently prioritised by support services, resulting in what Du Toit and Le Roux (2021:116) refer to as a championing of a certain type of victim. This championing results in a hierarchy of victimhood (Du Toit & Le Roux, 2021:116). The Coalition of Feminists for Social Change (COFEM), for example, champion female victims (Du Toit & Le Roux, 2021:116). They argue that incorporating male victimhood results in a diminished focus on female victimhood and programmes targeted at women as victims of sexual violence (Du Toit & Le Roux, 2021:116). The fear expressed in these instances

is that the inclusion of male victimhood will contribute to the renewal of male privilege and a prioritising of male needs at the expense of female victims (Du Toit & Le Roux, 2021:116). Responding to this feminist critique, given my avenue of research, the focus on male victimisation of female perpetrated sexual offences is not intended to threaten the important focus on female victimisation within a patriarchal society rife with dominant gendered practices. While there is a gendered hierarchy to victimisation, a focus on female perpetrated sexual offences arguably contributes to challenging the very same patriarchal gendered practices that feminist scholars express concern over. The danger is that the politicisation of rape as a purely feminist issue may result in the isolation of male victims (Walfield, 2021:6392).

Rape, however, continues to be conceptualised as a sexually abusive act that involves male offenders and female victims (Walfield, 2021:6392). The result is a scarcity of literature on, and victimological models for, male sexual victimisation (Crome and McCabe, 2001:402; Javaid, 2018:456). In the few instances where it is considered, the research has suggested that sexual victimisation is more psychologically damaging (Denov, 2003:311; Walfield, 2021:6408), and more emotionally intense (Crome & McCabe, 2001:402) for men than it is for women. Using adult male rape victims as an example, Crome and McCabe (2001:401) discuss how the victims with the most intense responses to their victimisation are those who are considered, by themselves and society, to be the least vulnerable to victimisation. This emotional and psychological damage is further exacerbated by the general disbelief that surrounds FSOs. In a context where the social construction of sexual violence and victimisation is gendered, consideration needs to be given to instances where victims and/or offenders do not conform to the gendered narratives. Rape victims are typically viewed as vulnerable (Javaid, 2018:454), a vulnerability which contradicts hegemonic notions of masculinity. Adult male victims fail to conform to these masculine ideals, and their victim status is devalued as a result (DiBennardo, 2018:15). Socially we struggle to acknowledge men as victims while simultaneously acknowledging them as men (Walfield, 2021:6394). The emotional and psychological suffering of male victims is negatively compounded by this belief that the male gender is not vulnerable to victimisation. The dismissal of their vulnerability to victimisation can only render their emotional and psychological suffering worse (Walfield, 2021:6394), making this a social ill that

needs to be addressed. The interconnection between understandings of vulnerability and perceptions of sexually victimised men needs to be examined (Javaid, 2018:454).

The Broader Picture of Social Harm

The reliance on these normative frameworks has contributed to a veiling of, and secrecy surrounding, male rape victims (Couturier, 2012:1). The reinforcement and protection of traditional gendered norms and assumptions has meant that the rape of males remains a largely taboo topic (Couturier, 2012:1). While there have been substantial advancements in the reforming of rape laws, the recognition of male victims of sexual violence has been slow (Walfield, 2021:6392). Rape continues to be conceptualised as a sexually abusive act that involves male offenders and female victims (Walfield, 2021:6392), with law and enforcement policies conforming to this gendered assumption (Denov, 2001:311; Javaid, 2018:454). Rape and law policies continue to adopt a gender-specific approach which disregards the sexual victimisation of men (Javaid, 2018:455). The gendering of victim and sexual predator narratives need to be examined when considering the creation and reproduction of victim hierarchies (DiBennardo, 2018:3). This examination would generate an understanding of why certain victims are readily recognised and valued over others (DiBennardo, 2018:3). As it stands, 'victim' has been socially constructed to refer to individuals who are considered helpless and weak (Stanko & Hobdell, 1993:413), which is the antithesis to hegemonic notions of masculinity.

This trend of denialism has extended into law and health care institutions, playing a key contributing role in legal and healthcare professionals' accounts of, and responses to, female perpetrated sex offending (Denov, 2001:304; Tozdan et al., 2019:1). Professionals in healthcare institutions or justice systems have been shown to respond inappropriately to female perpetrated CSA (Tozdan et al., 2019:1). In considering law enforcement responses to male assault victims, research has highlighted that the social construction of 'victim' and the gendering of victim status has negative consequences for those that are considered 'unlikely victims' (Javaid, 2018:467; Stanko & Hobdell, 1993:413). Male victims who report their sexual assault are met with disbelief, and experience hostility and insensitivity in response to their rape claim (Javaid, 2018:467). This hostility stems from these 'real' rape myths and sexual scripts, embedded in societies, that perpetuate prejudicial attitudes and gendered stereotypes (Javaid, 2018:467). Male

victims are acutely cognisant of how their gender and related rape myths influence responses to the disclosure of their victimisation (Walfield, 2021:6410). The danger is that male victims of female perpetrated sexual abuse may, therefore, opt not to report their assault because it does not align with prior definitions of rape, and they fear they may be met with disbelief or scepticism as a result. The training these working professionals receive, and the organisational policies being implemented, reinforce the dominant ideology that sexual assault is an exclusively male perpetrated crime against women (Denov, 2001:311). The delay in recognising male sexual victimisation has meant that the sexual exploitation of boys and men is often invisible (Azhar, 2023).

There have been attempts at generating FSO specific theories and models, such as the descriptive model of female sexual offending (DMFSO), aimed at aiding institutional professionals in working with FSOs and responding appropriately to their victims (Gannon et al., 2008:368). Our front-line working professionals, however, are struggling to conceptualise sex offending as being independent of gender binaries (Denov, 2001:311; Javaid, 2018:467). The danger of this conformity to the socially constructed, prescribed and enforced gender norms that influence understandings of rape and sexual assault is that certain groups of victims are marginalised. Male victims of sexual abuse are also less likely to come forward and report their rape as a result of these societal constructions of men (Javaid, 2018:464). The consequence of FSOs being socially taboo is that the victims experience difficulty recognising that they have been sexually abused (Tozdan et al., 2019:5). Acknowledging the existence of FSOs, therefore, becomes particularly important when considering the harm that failure to grasp this abuse can cause (Christensen, 2021:4116). In comparison to other violent offences, sexual victimisation is considered to have one of the worst, everlasting, emotional effects on victims (Mancini & Picket, 2016:259). Coupled with this, the psychological impact has been shown to be more damaging for victims of female perpetrated sexual violence than victims of male perpetrated sexual abuse (Denov, 2003:311). Failing to acknowledge FSOs means failing to recognise victims of female perpetrated sexual violence, contributing to their secondary victimisation. The fact that victims of female perpetrated violence are not being conceptualised as ‘real’ victims is a major social ill that needs to be addressed.

2.3 The 'Cultural Lag': Perceptions of Female Criminals

Female perpetrated criminal behaviour has historically been foregrounded in biological reasoning, attributed to issues with their development (Estrada, Nilsson & Pettersson, 2019:138), or their hormones (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002:53). Despite this suggested biological grounding to female criminality, there has been a decline in the gender crime gap between male and female perpetrated crimes (Estrada et al., 2019:1438). This observation challenges the notion that female criminal behaviour has a purely biological basis. If the gender crime gap was purely based on the biological differences between men and women, then there should not be any variation in this gap over time (Estrada et al., 2019:139). A more plausible explanation is that the increase in crimes committed by women, and the resultant narrowing of the gender crime gap, is the result of gains in gender equality (Estrada et al., 2019:139). This foray of women into the world of violence, one that has historically been considered male dominated, is largely attributed to a shifting in the related gendered social boundaries (Collins, 2016:297). In considering the eternal nature versus nurture debate, female perpetrated crimes and perceptions of the female criminals are better explained through understanding social influences, rather than biological ones (Estrada et al., 2019:139).

Despite this, FSOs' behaviour continues to be given a biological basis (Kramer, 2010:36). FSOs are commonly considered mentally ill, or emotionally maladjusted (Kramer, 2010:36), exhibiting problems with depression or disordered personalities (Mathews et al., 1989; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004:122). This perception is reflected in research which identified 100% of incarcerated FSOs as having poor social skills and high rates of mental illness (O'Connor, 1987:615). 48% of this same sample had a known history of psychiatric and psychological disorders (O'Connor, 1987:615). There is, in fact, a disproportionate interest in biological grounding and the related categorisation of FSOs as 'mad' and/or 'sad', which is in contrast to their male counterparts (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002:53; Denov, 2001:321). Female offenders are considered rare exceptions who need to be cured (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002:54). The institutional implications of this are that MSOs are given comparatively harsher sentences than FSOs (Denov, 2001:321).

The Influence of Traditional Gender Roles and Sex Scripts

The relationship between gender stereotypes and perceptions of, and responses to, female criminality has started to generate interest in academia (Hernández-Flórez & Klimenko, 2023:1). Women have historically been relegated to subordinate roles which has influenced perceptions of their potential involvement in crime (Hernández-Flórez & Klimenko, 2023:1). The cultural denial that exists around FSOs is largely influenced by difficulties moving past gender confines, and the related belief that women could be more than mothers, wives, and primary caregivers, as is their 'traditional role' (Cain & Anderson, 2016:1; Tozdan et al., 2019:7). Perceptions of FSOs, and the biases against studying the associated phenomenon, are exacerbated by societal constructs around these traditional roles of women (Christiansen & Thyer, 2002:3). Society struggles to comprehend that women, who they have historically positioned in the gender stereotyped role of 'nurturer', can be capable of committing sexual acts which are directly in breach of this prescribed role (Anderson et al., 2020:1; Christensen, 2021:4117; Christian & Thyer, 2002:3). Reports that do exist on female perpetrated sexual abuse show that the abuse is typically hidden in child caring practices, which are associated with the stereotyped role of women to 'take care of' (Sandler & Freeman, 2007:74; Tozdan et al., 2019:5; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004:122; Wijkman et al., 2010:136). Vandiver and Kercher (2004:133) even went so far as to develop a 'heterosexual nurturer' typology of FSO, with the oxymoronic 'nurturer' seemingly being a nod to the traditional and stereotyped role of women. Thus, in the rare instances where there is an acknowledgement of FSOs, this acknowledgment is in conjunction with their traditional and stereotyped role as primary caregivers and nurturers.

These sex-role stereotypes are perpetuated in rape myths. Rape myths influence socially and culturally determined sexual scripts which dictate patterns of, and responses to, sexual behaviour (Ryan, 2011:774). Rape scripts, defined as beliefs about rape (Ryan, 2011:775), consider socially constructed sex-role stereotypes including perpetrator and victim gender, victim disposition, and perceived vulnerability of the victim (Crome & McCabe, 2001:405). These scripts dictate perceptions of and responses to victims of rape (Crome & McCabe, 2001:405; Javaid, 2018:454). Understandings of sexual conduct, rape, and victim vulnerability vary across genders (Crome & McCabe, 2001:408). Scripts surrounding male sexual victimisation are largely influenced by the victim being male, and related questions about male vulnerability and victimisation as a paradox

of masculinity (Crome & McCabe, 2001:408). Female victimisation is better understood and accepted in rape scripts, given the stereotypical construction of women as vulnerable, weak, submissive, obedient, and 'appropriate' victims of male dominance (Collins, 2016:298; Crome & McCabe, 2001:408). These scripts influence victims' reactions to their rape, with reactions being substantially different for male and female victims (Crome & McCabe, 2001:410; Javaid, 2018:464; Walfield, 2021:6410).

Recognition Barriers: Defining the Female Sex Offender

A recurring suggestion is that sex offender typologies typically associated with MSOs are not applicable to their female counterparts (Matthews et al., 1991:208; Robertiello & Terry, 2007:513). Matthews et al. (1991:208) identify 'teacher/lover' as one of the specific typologies of FSOs. As discussed in Table 1, the 'teacher/lover' typology is one applicable to women, most commonly high school teachers, who abuse their power over their adolescent male students, seeking relationships with them (Matthews et al., 1991:208; Robertiello & Terry, 2007:513). This 'teacher/lover' typology is considered as separate from the 'rapist' typology, which implies that female teachers having sex with their male students is not considered rape. Rape continues to be a sexual offence reserved for male perpetrators (Robertiello & Terry, 2007:509). Robertiello and Terry's (2007:513) suggestion that their two sub-categories of 'female sex offender' and 'rapist' do not overlap is one that I challenge. It should be possible for FSOs to be considered rapists if their behaviour accords with a 'rapist' labelled MSO. In line with this classification system, male sex offenders are readily accepted and labelled as rapists, but their female counterparts who commit the very same sexual offences are contrastingly considered under the 'teacher/lover' typology. There is a need to look at these overlaps between the sub-categories of sex offenders, an overlap which negates Robertiello and Terry's (2007) argument that the same typologies cannot be equally applicable to MSOs and FSOs. There is a gap in the literature, seemingly driven by a fundamental misunderstanding and failure to acknowledge that women can be harmful sexual predators, or rapists and paedophiles more specifically. The degendering of sex offender typologies that I motivate for would contribute to the closing of this gap through the acknowledgement of women as possible sexual aggressors.

Research has supported the distinction between FSO and MSO typologies, through the observation that teacher/lover FSOs are not perceived as unfavourably as male teachers who sexually abuse their students (Dollar et al., 2004; Fromuth, Holt & Parker, 2002). The latter of which are readily labelled as rapists or paedophiles. Social and cultural constructions of gender are so entrenched that the sexual abuse of boys by FSOs is not afforded the same social meaning (Dollar et al., 2004:92). Student peers of the male victims, for example, view the relationship with the female teacher as 'cool' (Dollar et al., 2004:98). Concerns have also been raised about how these gender role stereotypes influence the way schools handle sexual abuse cases perpetrated by female teachers (Doller et al., 2004:99).

2.4 The Power of the Media

The media are characterised as one of the most influential and farthest-reaching social institutions (Mikell, 2019:71). They have the power to educate the public and influence public awareness (Zhou et al., 2020:2694). Individuals change their behaviour based on, and align their beliefs with, the information provided by the media (Zhou et al., 2020:2694). The role of the media in relation to social and institutional power is, therefore, vitally important to consider given that this research focuses on media constructions of FSOs. Social power is defined as the social relationship of control between groups or institutions (Van Dijk, 1995:10). This involves the members of the group or institution who are perceived to be more powerful, controlling the behaviour, actions and/or minds of the members of the group or institution who are considered less powerful (Van Dijk, 1995:10). This social relationship of control ultimately leads to power dynamics, with power typically presupposing privilege (Van Dijk, 1995:10). The groups or institutions that have control, power, and privilege, have access to socially valued resources, knowledge, status, wealth, and income (Van Dijk, 1995:10). The media are positioned as an institution that have both symbolic and persuasive power over their readers and within societies (Van Dijk, 1995:10). News media has been shown to favour one side or group, typically those in power or those who are considered 'the elite' (Boudana, 2016:602; Wasserman, 2014:314). So, while the media claim to be objective reporters of events, the reality is that their practice tends to align with the subjective opinions of groups and institutions who have the power and the control within society (Wasserman, 2014:315).

Framing, agenda setting and priming are identified as being the three new emerging models of political communication (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007:10). Agenda setting as a model of political communication considers the correlation between media framing of certain issues and the importance that is attributed to the issue by the public (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007:12). Priming, understood as being an extension of agenda setting, considers accessibility of information and how accessibility influences interpretation of information (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007:12). The model of political communication most applicable to this research on media portrayals of female teacher sex offenders, however, is that of framing. Mass media are pinpointed as role players in determining which frames get presented, how they get presented, and the extent to which they are presented (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002:55; Misra, Moller & Karides, 2003:483; Navarro & Higgins, 2023:313; Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007:12). The media create different frames to assist with locating and understanding particular issues (Collins, 2016:297; Misra et al., 2003:483; Navarro & Higgins, 2023:314). These frames are established based on social, cultural, and political influences, and shift over time as a result (Misra et al., 2003:483).

Representations, or frames, within the media not only reflect broader societal attitudes and policies, but also play a role in shaping public opinion and initiating policy debates (Misra et al., 2003:483). They also affect criminal, legal and social definitions of violence and related responses (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002:58). Hence it is crucial to consider the media framing of sex crimes given that the media is the primary source from which the public obtain information on crime (Colburn & Melander, 2018:384), and on sex offenders more specifically (Malinen, Willis & Johnston, 2014:536; Navarro & Higgins, 2023:313). With this in mind, I consider the ways in which the media frame female teacher sex offenders. The variance in my data sample allowed me to comment on how these frames either remained the same, or shifted across time and across space, influenced by societal attitudes and policies. I also consider the potential influence that the framing has on public opinion as well as possible policy implications. While Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007:12) do not consider framing as a potential tool of deception, I consider the possible ways in which media framing diminishes the complexity of FSOs as a phenomenon, and the resulting contribution made to the trend of denialism.

In relation to the power of the media in cases of sex offending specifically, sex offenders receive remarkable levels of attention in the media (Spencer, 2009:219). News media is conceptualised as a medium through which public attitudes towards cases of sexual abuse and sexual offenders are constructed (Navarro & Higgins, 2023:313), and then subsequently sustained (Zatkin et al., 2022:954). Research has made particular reference to the extensive media coverage of sex offenders in the English-speaking West, namely Britain, the USA and Canada (Spencer, 2009; Zatkin et al., 2022). The British newspaper *News of the World* and their campaign against paedophiles in 2000 and 2001 (Spencer, 2009:225) is one example. In this campaign, the newspaper publicly named and shamed forty-nine, almost exclusively male, paedophiles posting their photographs, details of their offences and their locations (Spencer, 2009:225). In each depiction, the paedophile was portrayed, visually and verbally, as an evil, predatory force that prayed on innocent child victims (Spencer, 2009:226). This portrayal fortifies the 'bogeyman fallacy' (DiBennardo, 2018:4), and the salient belief that children are a disproportionately targeted and vulnerable victim base (Mancini & Picket, 2016:259). The campaign further portrayed the perpetrators as 'outsiders' (Spencer, 2009:225), aligning with the belief that sex offenders target strangers (Mancini & Picket, 2016:260). Honing in on similar landmark cases of sexual assault within the USA, Zatkin et al. (2002:954) discuss the cases that involved the Catholic Church and inspired the movie *Spotlight*, as well as the case of Jerry Sandusky and Penn State University. As was the case with Spencer's (2009) research, Zatkin et al.'s (2022) is centred around male perpetrators and their portrayal in the media. The cases conform to what Zatkin et al. (2022:964) identify as the homogeneity myth. The homogeneity myth suggests that there is a uniformity to sex offenders, that they are all violent males who prey on the most vulnerable victim base, that base being women and children (Zatkin et al., 2022:964). This homogeneity myth is one that is perpetuated by the media and their coverage of cases of sexual offences, as well as by policies that have been implemented against acts of sexual offences (Zatkin et al., 2022:964).

While this characterisation may be applicable to certain sex offenders, the reality is that there is a heterogeneity to sex offending that is not readily considered (Zatkin et al., 2022:964). Despite the continued narrowed focus on MSOs within the media and within the literature, the media and their coverage of cases of sexual offences remain highly influential in the public's perception and

responses to the crimes (Zatkin et al., 2002:959). Individuals who have had no experience with rape are likely to rely on scripts that are developed and made available through the process of socialisation to aid in their understanding (Crome & McCabe, 2001:405). The media play a key role in constructing scripts and stories that influence public perceptions of victims and perpetrators (Crome & McCabe, 2001:406). Accordingly, the media are positioned as a platform that can influence societies perceptions of and responses to sexual abuse cases, including the acceptability of the perpetrator's behaviour, or the culpability of the victim in their sexual victimisation (Crome & McCabe, 2001:406). This continued emphasis on the power of media portrayals of sex offenders serves as a further justification for this research on the portrayal of female teacher sex offenders in the media, which is a starting point to begin addressing the gap in the literature on FSOs.

The media maintain rape myths in their presentation of information to the public through these scripts (Edwards et al., 2011:7623; Nagy, 2017:98). Within this presentation, the media endorse rape myths which, in turn, influence public perceptions and attitudes towards victims and offenders (Edwards et al., 2011:7623; Nagy, 2017:98). This affects legal decisions made in relation to sexual abuse cases (DiBennardo, 2018:3; Edwards et al, 2011:763). While the rape myths considered are in relation to male perpetration and female victimisation, Edwards et al. (2011:768) do confirm that the media are biased in their framing of rape cases. The information the media choose to present, in comparison to the information they choose to exclude, results in the public picking sides in these rape cases (Edwards et al., 2011:768). As per social psychological theory, the media being in a position of social power allows them to exert influence over the public and over elements of policy and legislation (Edwards et al., 2011:769). While Edwards et al. (2011:770) emphasise the social responsibility of media reporters to report on cases of rape factually and avoid the permeation of rape myths, their research has highlighted that this approach to reporting is uncommon. The reality is that the salacious reporting and sensationalised storylines are what attract the public and readership (Benedict, 1993:8; Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002:55; Edwards et al., 2011:770), which outweighs the potential distortion of the true incidence of crime (Collins, 2016:296).

The media contribute to structuring sexual scripts in relation to notions of masculinity and femininity (Ryan, 2011:799). A preoccupation with sex is considered a characteristic of masculinity, specifically in relation to heterosexual men and their sexual objectification of women (Ryan, 2011:799). The prevailing sexual scripts that boys subscribe to are those that render their sexual engagement with girls as forceful and aggressive (Javaid, 2018:456). Sex is considered crucial for male development, transforming boys into men who embody hegemonic notions of masculinity (Javaid, 2018:456). The media endorse these gendered sexual scripts and reinforce rape myths by forgiving instances on male aggression and sexual coercion, and equating it to typically masculine behaviour (Ryan, 2011:799). Women are conversely designated gatekeepers of sex (Hayes & Carpenter, 2013:170; Ryan, 2011:799; Tozdan et al., 2019:4), and responses to their sexual conduct are typically negative (Ryan, 2011:799). These social and cultural scenarios underpin understandings of sexuality and influence perceptions of, and responses to, sexual interactions and practices (Javaid, 2018:456).

2.5 The Construction of Female Offenders in the Media

The media are a platform that have the power to make social issues visible or invisible (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002:55; DiBennardo, 2018:16; Happer & Philo, 2013:322; O'Shaughnessy, Stadler & Casey, 2016:198). Given that the media can remove issues from public discourse, the analysis of media content, and what is conveyed and not conveyed by the media, becomes important (Happer & Philo, 2013:322). The media often masks social issues by considering them in relation to personal or psychological terms within society's dominant moral framework of what is considered good and/or evil (O'Shaughnessy et al. 2016:1999). An example of this would be the media attributing criminal behaviour to the criminal's personality and individual characteristics (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2016:1999). This observation is particularly relevant to this study on media portrayals of FSOs and the tendency to categorise FSOs as 'mad' and/or 'sad' (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002:53; Denov, 2001:321). Female criminal behaviour is invariably attributed to personal, individual characteristics (Denov, 2001:321), and the broader social issue is left unaddressed. Female perpetrated violence is individualised, which seemingly justifies not challenging the broader traditional and stereotypical beliefs surrounding gender and related human nature (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002:54). Media critics condemn the way the media use their power to misrepresent reality (Kempf, 2006:2). Thus, this research considers the

ways in which the media use their power to construct FSOs. Specifically, the extent to which media constructions of FSOs misinterpret reality and contribute to the trend of denialism and the continued invisibility of the phenomenon.

News media is a domain through which crime and deviance are constructed, and related understandings enforced (DiBennardo, 2018:1). The public is largely distanced from crime, which results in the media becoming the source through which they define and understand criminal cases (DiBennardo, 2018:3). The media play a substantial role in sharing knowledge about crime with the public (Colburn & Melander, 2018:393), and shaping public perceptions of sexual offenders and their respective crimes (Benedict, 1993:4; Gavin, 2005:410; Zatkin et al., 2022:960). There is a cyclical relationship that drives and reinforces institutional myths surrounding sexual offending (Zatkin et al., 2022:953). The cyclical relationship involves media perpetuation of institutional myths, the perpetuation of which drives policy, policy which then leads to media reporting (Zatkin et al. 2022:953). The media play a critical role in the way events are presented to, or hidden from, the public (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002:55).

Systematic investigations have been conducted on how news media represents sexual predators, their crimes and their victims, with consideration being given to how these reports portray the sexual predator (DiBennardo, 2018). Estrada et al. (2019) looked at crime statistics, the reporting of crime within the media, and how accurately crimes committed by women were reflected within the news. The perception and categorisation of female offenders as being either ‘mad’ and/or ‘sad’ extended into the media, reinforcing the notion that female criminality is predominantly caused by mental and/or physical deficits (Estrada et al. 2019:141). This reaffirms the suggested biological basis for their deviance (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002:53; Estrada et al., 2019:138). The media also introduced a new category of FSO: ‘bad’. The ‘bad’ categorisation of FSOs is based on the perception of female criminality as being in direct breach of their femininity (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002:59; Estrada et al., 2019:141). Consequently, female offenders are constructed in the media as being the antithesis of a ‘normal’ woman (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002:53).

Consideration should be given to the wider influence media constructions of FSOs have, particularly given that public perceptions of sex offenders are most influenced by the media (Gavin, 2005:408; Tozdan et al., 2019:6). Research has examined public comments made on FSO related news articles with the aim of understanding public perceptions of the phenomenon (Zack et al., 2018). The findings have informed the depiction of sex offenders as a group that influences modern day moral panic (Zack et al., 2018:63). Male rapists, however, seldom make headlines as their criminal behaviour conforms to the stereotype of men as being violent and aggressive (Zack et al., 2018:63). While the media do present criminal cases as social, cultural and political concerns, they are also presented as entertainment (DiBennardo, 2018:3). The more the crimes deviate from social and cultural norms, the more entertaining and newsworthy they are considered to be (DiBennardo, 2018:3) and are, therefore, sensationalised by the media (Colburn & Melander, 2018:384). These sensational media stories, and their related eye-catching headlines, are what sell newspapers (Benedict, 1993:8; Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002:55; Edwards et al., 2011:770). The increase of recorded instances of female perpetrated violent crimes has led to sensationalised reporting of these crimes in the media (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002:52). In direct contrast to MSOs, female rapists are receiving increased amounts of media attention and public scrutiny as their behaviour contradicts preconceived gender norms and perceptions of femininity (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002:57; Zack et al., 2018:63). The suggestion is that, by conforming to their socially defined 'feminine' roles, women are less likely to offend (Scheuerman & Keith, 2022:116). Women's violence is, consequently, considered 'doubly deviant' (Richardson & May, 1999:326) and generates 'double fascination' (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002:57) in the media.

With the intention of advancing South African literature on FSOs in mind, existing South African research on the subject is important to discuss. There are increasing numbers of female perpetrated sexual offences being reported in South African media (Collins-Mckinnell, 2013:4), but a lack of related scientific literature (Collins-Mckinnell, 2013:2). Collins-Mckinnell (2013:2) conducted a literature search on available data surrounding FSOs in South Africa, with no specified time period, and only located one result within a South African journal. While the hope was that this body of literature had increased since 2013, contributing to the lack of South African voices in the already existing gap on literature surrounding FSOs, the reality is that this

unfortunately is not the case. The data available at the time came from the South African Department of Correctional Services (DCS) where twenty-four FSOs were on record as at December 2008 (Collins-Mckinnell, 2013:3). Additional statistics referenced in the paper indicated that only 1% of sex offenders within South Africa are female (Collins-Mckinnell, 2013:3). This finding is accompanied by the acknowledgement that the statistic may not be accurate given that many female perpetrated sexual offences remain unreported (Augarde & Rydon-Grange, 2022:2; Collins-Mckinnell, 2013:3; Darling et al., 2018:197). The intention of mentioning this statistic is not to invalidate the importance of this research, but to rather highlight the resultant invisibility of FSOs. The lack of reporting instances of female perpetrated sexual violence can be directly attributed to the trend of denialism surrounding the phenomenon (Collins-Mckinnell, 2013:3).

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has considered the ways in which the silence surrounding FSOs has been filled through existing research and academic literature. Particular attention was paid to the gendered assumptions surrounding sexual violence and victimisation, with debates surrounding 'real' rape and the 'ideal victim' being considered and subsequently contextualised within the broader picture of social harm. Through discussions around traditional gender roles and sexual scripts, I have highlighted cultural denial and recognition barriers as contributing to the trend of denialism that continues to surround female criminality, and female sexual offending more specifically. This chapter also considered the power of the media in influencing and sustaining public perceptions, driving policy action and change, shaping public support for crime and penal policies; and considers this in relation to media constructions of FSOs.

Chapter 3. Theorising the Construction of Female Sex Offenders

3.1 Introduction

The underlying assertion of this research is that media constructions of FSOs contribute to the invisibility of these sexual predators. This assertion serves as a rationale for approaching this research from a social constructionist perspective. In this chapter I unpack the social construction of gender norms, and the social construction of deviance in relation to these gender norms, specifically in relation to sexual violence and victimisation. In doing so, I lay the groundwork for addressing my sub-questions pertaining to how these constructions are evident in the media. I begin by outlining the social constructionist theory, pinpointing the key concepts that are directly applicable to this research focus and overarching objectives. I then zone in on the social constructions of sexual violence, sexual victimisation, deviance, and FSOs, and consider the role of the media in social constructionism. I argue that FSOs challenge hegemonic notions of sexual violence, sexual victimisation, deviance, and related constructions.

3.2 Social Constructionist Theory

Social constructionism adopts a critical stance, insisting that we challenge the understanding of knowledge as objective and unbiased (Burr, 2015:2). Knowledge should rather be recognised as being constructed by people through social interaction, and sustained through social processes (Burr, 2015:4; Maines, 2000:577). Much of what we know about social constructionism and related assumptions are fundamental to sociology's discipline (Burr, 2015:2). Starting with the ordinary person, sociology's sub-discipline of ethnomethodology considers the ways through which individuals construct and make sense of their social lives (Burr, 2006:7). The social construction of reality then considers how these individuals come together to create, and subsequently sustain, social phenomena through social practice (Burr 2006:7; Lober, 2000:83). Importantly, our knowledge about the world is understood as being socially constructed by people (Burr, 2015:4), rather than being a direct perception of reality (Burr, 2015:9). Berger and Luckmann's (1966) book titled *The Social Construction of Reality* made a major sociological contribution to our understanding of social constructionism. Reality has been accepted as socially constructed, and the sociology of knowledge has analysed the process through which this occurs and is maintained (Berger & Luckmann, 1966:13). The sociology of knowledge is,

thus, concerned with analysing and understanding the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966:15).

Social constructionism cautions us against readily accepting our assumptions of the world (Burr, 2015:3). The social construction of reality means that the categories within which we understand the world may not accurately reflect reality (Burr, 2015:3). A radical example of this pertains to categories of gender and sex (Burr, 2015:3). Our initial observations of gender are confined to the binaries of male and female or, sociologically, man and woman (Burr, 2015:3; Lober, 2000:80). The biological assumption is that human beings fall into one of two distinct categories, 'females' and 'males' (Burr, 2015:3; Lober, 2000:80). Social constructionism challenges this clear-cut approach, encouraging us to question if these exclusive gender categories are merely a reflection of the two distinct types of human beings that naturally occur (Burr, 2015:3). A social constructionist approach means that we consider the grey areas and challenge normative assumptions and practices surrounding 'man' and 'woman' (Burr, 2015:3). Social constructionism challenges the biological and considers the sociological (Burr, 2015:3). With this in mind, I would like to acknowledge feminist scholars' distinctions between sex and gender and the related references I make in my research. Sex has a biological basis, and is determined by a person's biological makeup, with differences between males and females being attributed to biological dimorphism (Lober, 2000:82; Macionis & Plummer, 2012:391; Weinberg, 2009:285). Conversely, gender is understood to be socially and culturally constructed (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002:60; Hernández-Flórez & Klimenko, 2023:2; Lober, 2000:82; Moffett, 2008:105; Weinberg, 2009:285). For the purpose of this research, however, I will refer to women and females as well as men and males interchangeably, so as to align with the existing literature of FSOs and the related media articles that constitute my data sample.

There are four key tenets of social constructionism. The first is 'taking a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge' (Burr, 2006:4). The second is 'considering historical and cultural specificity of knowledge' (Burr, 2006:4). The third is 'considering knowledge as being sustained through social processes' (Burr, 2006:4). The fourth is 'looking at the ways in which knowledge and social action work in conjunction with one another' (Burr, 2006:4). These fundamental

assumptions have been conspicuous in sociology for some time (Burr, 2006:7). Three concepts that are directly applicable to this research stood out and are defined below.

1. Anti-essentialism: Anti-essentialism asserts that the world, including people and society, are the product of social processes (Burr, 2006:4). The radical argument that underpins social constructionism, and anti-essentialism specifically, is that there are no internal factors or processes, no predetermined content, and nothing inside a person that makes them who and/or what they are (Burr, 2006:4; Burr 2015:6). This argument goes beyond the eternal nature vs. nurture debate, challenging the essentialist belief that categories of human identities are fixed (Burr, 2006:4). Anti-essentialism argues that these categories of human identities are named, defined, and given meaning by society (Goldberg, 2002:635). Considering anti-essentialism in relation to my research, I examine how the category of FSO is given meaning in the media and how media constructions influence perceptions of these sexual predators by proxy.
2. Anti-realism: Anti-realism considers the ways in which societies construct their own version of reality (Burr 2006:4). Social constructionism abolishes the idea of objective fact, arguing instead that all knowledge originates from subjective social perspectives (Burr, 2006:4). Anti-realism, therefore, considers the links between the social, cultural, and historical influences on societies' constructions of reality (Burr, 2006:4). For the purpose of my research, and the exploration of media constructions of FSOs, I consider media influences from this anti-realism perspective. Particularly in my discussion chapter, I touch on the ways in which the media shape both our knowledge of FSOs and our perceived reality of the phenomenon.
3. Language: Language is one of the key forms of social interaction considered by social constructionists (Burr, 2015:5). Social constructionism considers language as both a precondition for thought, and a tool of social action (Burr, 2006:5). Relating language back to the cultural and historical influences on knowledge and anti-realism, our understanding of the world comes from people, both past and present, rather than from objective observation (Burr, 2006:5). Social concepts are already in existence when we come into the world, and have already been named, defined, and developed through the use of language (Burr, 2006:5). These social concepts continue to be shared and developed through language (Burr, 2006:5). Individuals' and societies' thought processes

are provided for them through these social concepts and frameworks of meaning, all developed through language (Burr, 2006:5). Language is, therefore, considered by social constructionists as the precondition for thought. By placing language at the centre of social interaction, and as the centre of knowledge production, social constructionists highlight that language is far more than just a way in which we express ourselves (Burr, 2006:5). Hence, language as a key tenet of social constructionism provides the means through which reality is constructed and by which individuals experience this construction (Devins & Gold, 2002:111). As a result, language has become a social resource that plays a key role in the development of phenomena, and the acceptance of these as real (Devins & Gold, 2002:111). Rather than focusing on the language used by the media specifically, I consider the resulting image of the FSOs as constructed by the media through language, and the influence of these constructions on the acceptance of the phenomenon as real.

3.3 The Social Construction of Sexual Violence and Victimisation

In theorising the construction of FSOs, consideration needs to be given to the way in which sexual violence and victimisation have been constructed socially, culturally, and historically. Through investigations into the social construction of violence, consideration has also been given to the way in which violence is gendered and sexualised (Richardson & May, 1999:308). Societal definitions of violence are considered in relation to what is deemed socially acceptable or appropriate behaviour (Richardson & May, 1999:309). These societal norms contribute to the construction of interpretive frameworks that guide our understandings of and responses to violent behaviour (Richardson & May, 1999:326). Certain individuals or social groups are positioned as violent offenders, and others as more deserving of victim status (Richardson & May, 1999:309). Explanations of violence are, therefore, typically considered in relation to who the victim or perpetrator is, with little attention being paid to the circumstances in which the violence occurred (Richardson & May, 1999:309). Richardson and May (1999:313) highlight the importance of victim/offender binaries in the theorising and social construction of violence, with particular attention being paid to the way in which these binaries position certain individuals or social groups as either victims or offenders. As discussed in section 2.2 of my literature review, sexual violence, in particular, is constructed through social understandings of male power and

dominance as well as female subordination and resistance (Kelly, 1998:1). The FSO cases that this research considers involve female power and male subordination, and challenge these hegemonic understandings of social, cultural, and historical stereotypes of sexual abuse.

Narrowing the focus to specific sexual offences, consideration is given to the way in which rape myths and sexual scripts contribute to the social construction of rape (Edwards et al., 2011; Ryan, 2011). Specific rape myths include: 'husbands cannot rape their wives'; 'women ask to be raped'; 'women enjoy rape'; and 'women lie about being raped' (Edwards et al, 2011:761). In all four of these rape myths, women are positioned as the victims. Thus, sexual violence is constructed around the dominant narrative of female victimisation. While it is implicit, through the use of 'myths', that these are a set of false social and cultural perceptions and beliefs surrounding rape, Edwards et al. (2011:761) focus on rape myths solely in relation to the sexual victimisation of women. While Edwards et al. (2011:762) acknowledge the exclusion of rape myths surrounding the sexual victimisation of men in their research, they do also cite the dominant narrative and rape myth that men cannot be victims of rape. Again, the cases of female perpetrated sexual abuse of male victims contest these rape myths and dominant narratives of male sexual domination and corresponding female victimisation.

The concept of 'victim' is, as a result, best considered as socially constructed (Crome & McCabe, 2001:401; Javaid, 2018:455) and gendered (Richardson & May, 1999:324; Stanko & Hobdell, 1993:413). Examining the intersection between victims' ages and genders contributes to understanding victim hierarchies and the related valuing of certain victims over others (DiBennardo, 2018:3). The gendering of victimisation has resulted in the conceptualisation of 'deserving' (Richardson & May, 1999:324) or 'ideal' victims (DiBennardo, 2018:3). This notion of 'deserving victims' is historically grounded in the patriarchal and gendered narratives of male sexual domination and female victimisation (Hayes & Baker, 2014:2). These historical understandings have informed the victim-oriented concerns model which is solely focused on female victims of sex crimes (Pickett, Mancini & Mears, 2013:730). The consistent gendered narrative surrounding male domination and female victimisation in turn directly influences social perceptions of victim and offender culpability in cases of sexual violence (Richardson & May, 1999:324). These gendered narratives result in the identification of select individuals as

‘legitimate targets’ of violence (Richardson & May, 1999:313), of which the male victims in the FSO cases in my data sample are not considered. Denying the existence of female perpetrated sexual abuse, and dismissing female sexual offenders as harmful aggressors, results in a neglect of male victims (Landor & Eisenchlas, 2012:489). The social constructionist approach provides the theoretical foundation that acknowledges the influence of social definitions on perceptions of male victimisation (Javaid, 2018:455).

Public concern for victims of sexual abuse has intensified in recent years, with the mass media being considered a significant source of victim solidarity (Pickett et al., 2013:732). This solidarity is considered influential in generating public interest and/or public anger in response to sex crimes (Pickett et al., 2013:732). Public support for the improvement of crime policies and retributive legislation that protects and prevents the victimisation of ‘vulnerable’ persons is fostered as a result (Pickett et al., 2013:732). The use of quotation marks in the consideration of ‘vulnerable’ persons is a conscious decision, and an important one to acknowledge, given this discussion around the social construction and gendering of sexual victimisation. As has been highlighted, women have historically and consistently been considered ‘vulnerable’ persons or persons most deserving of victim status (Hayes & Baker, 2014:2; Pickett et al., 2013:730; Richardson & May, 1999:324). While there is some reference made to the consideration of young children as being ‘vulnerable’ persons (Pickett et al., 2013:733), the gender of these young children is not explicit. The narrative of male domination (Hayes & Baker, 2014:2) and the male monopoly on the perpetration of sexual abuse (Denov, 2001:311; Landor & Eisenchlas, 2012:493; Robertiello & Terry, 2007:509), however, remains consistent. The systematic examination of the conjunction between male rape and vulnerability is notably lacking (Javaid, 2018:456). Males are viewed as invulnerable to sexual victimisation, and are not readily accepted as victims of rape as a result (Javaid, 2018:457). This denial ‘allows’ the sexual exploitation of boys to continue without consequence (Azhar, 2023).

3.4 The Social Construction of Deviance

The sociology of deviance, as pioneered by Becker (1966), should also be considered when theorising the construction of FSOs. Deviance is socially constructed, created by certain social groups through a collaborative consensus (Becker, 1966:8). All social groups create and enforce

rules and identify behaviour as right or wrong based on their creation and enforcement (Becker, 1966:1). Formal rules are those which are sanctioned by law and effectuated by members of law enforcement, such as the police (Becker, 1966:2). Informal rules are those which are based on tradition, culture and age (Becker, 1966:2). Individuals who break the rules are labelled as 'deviant' and as 'outsiders' (Mankoff, 1971:204). In relation to social constructionist theory, the question becomes which social groups' rules are dominating the conversation and influencing our understandings? Which social groups' rules are being enforced? How do we decide which social rules to follow? Who is deciding what is considered to be deviant behaviour, and what influence does this have on our knowledge and our understanding of 'good', 'bad' and 'in between'? For Becker (1966:17) the answers to these questions are centred around social, political, and economic power.

While Becker (1966) presents the distinctions between formal and informal rules, consideration should also be given to the ways in which formal and informal rules overlap. Considering the ways in which informal rules can influence formal rules, and vice versa, is important, particularly given the discussions around the social construction of deviance. Bringing this back to the portrayal of FSOs in the media, social groups or social mediums, such as news media, at times adopt the roles of judge, jury and executioner in defining events as being deviant or not. The decision on 'deviant' or 'not deviant' is made in relation to the societal norms, values and dominant rules that are enforced. Media constructions of cases of sexual violence hold significant sway when it comes to how the public employ rape myths, respond to victims of sexual violence, and perceive the perpetrator as either innocent or guilty (Nagy, 2017:98). Female 'deviance' and the rarity of female perpetrators generates a particular fascination, and is considered newsworthy as a result (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002:69). Looking at the ways the media dominate the narrative around deviance and enforce informal social rules, and considering the ways this influences formal rules and the enforcement thereof, embodies the approach of social constructionism. Approached from a social constructionist perspective, critical consideration is given to the ways in which knowledge and understanding of deviance are constructed and sustained through the social, and the potential implications that these constructions could have on the invisibility of FSOs.

The Social Construction of Female Sex Offenders

The extent to which an act is considered deviant is more dependent on the profile of the individual committing the act, and their social grouping, than it is on the act itself (Becker, 1966:12). In theorising the construction of FSOs in the media, consideration should be given to the fact that the 'deviant' individual is a woman and is part of a social group who are typically relegated to subordinate victim-typed roles (Hernández-Flórez & Klimenko, 2023:1). As I have argued thus far, FSOs act in contradiction to the social constructions of deviance, sexual violence and sexual victimisation. Female criminals are stigmatised twice (Collins, 2016:297). They are considered 'doubly deviant' (Richardson & May, 1999:326) and 'doubly damned' (Österman & Masson, 2018:19) as their violent behaviour contradicts social and cultural norms surrounding violence and dominant gendered narratives that position women as victims (Tozdan et al., 2019:4). Female child sexual offenders (FCSOs) in particular are constructed as deviant, evil women who have lost their nurturing nature and 'gone to the other side' (Hayes & Carpenter, 2013:163). Men who sexually abuse children, however, are readily accepted as evil and monstrous offenders because their behaviour is not considered unnatural for their gender, as it is with women (Hayes & Carpenter, 2013:163). There is a sense of social betrayal surrounding FSOs that is not apparent for MSOs (Hayes & Carpenter, 2013:163).

Drawing on gender and script theory, and the concept of pariah femininities in particular, Hayes and Baker (2014) unpack the role of the media in the social construction of FSOs. Their findings call attention to media contributions and, in particular, the narrative of these women being nurturers, and to the demonisation, medicalisation, minimisation, mitigation, psychologisation, romanticisation, sensationalisation, and titillation of FSOs (Hayes & Baker, 2014:5). These themes that underpin media constructions of FSOs result in two observations (Hayes & Baker, 2014:5). The first is the reliance on pariah femininities to construct FSOs as deviant and as pariahs (Hayes & Baker, 2014:5). The second is the oxymoronic way in which the media attempt to draw their portrayal of FSOs back to hegemonic gender norms and the offenders' conformity to the traditional role of women (Hayes & Baker, 2014:5). The implication being that the FSOs are 'nurturers' and, therefore, not capable of abusive, sexually predatory behaviour (Hayes & Baker, 2014:5). The latter observation also draws attention to the perpetuation of traditional gender scripts in the media, contributing to the continued invisibility of FSOs thereby hindering

the acknowledgement of female perpetrated sexual offences (Hayes & Baker, 2014:1). The simplistic social construction of women as caring nurturers masks public acknowledgement of FSOs' ability to harm children (Gavin, 2005:410; Tozdan et al., 2019:4). The stories that construct women as sexual abusers are resultantly met with surprise and disbelief (Gavin, 2005:409).

3.5 Social Constructionism and the Media

Social constructivist researchers consider the how: how social reality is constructed, how it is managed, and how it is sustained (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011:342). These 'hows' are reminiscent of the media constructing, managing and sustaining information. The study of mass communication involves a continuous debate around the powerful social influence of the media (Van Dijk, 1995:9). The power of the media not only influences public perceptions, but also affects broader social, cultural, political, and economic structures (Van Dijk, 1995:9). Communication research also considers the role the media plays in the social construction of reality, with the media being considered as active participants (Kempf, 2006:2; Van den Bulck, 1999:10). Individuals navigate life and reality influenced by media-generated images and constructions of the world (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992:374). The media are used as a tool to construct meaning around social, cultural, political and economic issues (Gamson et al., 1992:374). It is, however, never completely neutral (Gamson et al., 1992:374). Rather, the media are influenced by the views of the groups and institutions that have the power or upper hand in the social relationship of control (Gamson, et al. 1992:374). The media have become a biased tool through which those in power can push a dominant narrative that conforms to their perceptions (Gamson et al., 1992:374).

The media are, thus, best conceptualised as platforms that construct subjective reality (Gamson et al., 1992:382). These media platforms also have the power to conceal pertinent information about crimes, the offenders and the victims (DiBennardo, 2018:16). The construction of the social, however, is rarely considered by the reader (Gamson et al., 1992:382). Rather, the reader considers the media to be a transparent description of social reality, rather than the interpretations of those in power who have control over the narrative (Gamson et al., 1992:382). The danger with this, particularly in relation to my avenue of research, is that this conceptualisation does not

consider the role the media play in misrepresenting and distorting the reality of reported crime (Deckert, 2020:337; Gavin, 2005:406), especially incidences of female initiated sexual abuse (Soothill & Walby, 1991:1). The reality is that media constructions create a biased impression of events, rather than an accurate, factual and objective record of events (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002:50). As a result, there are substantial differences between the media depictions of crime and the reality of said crime (Colburn & Melander, 2018:385; Collins, 2016:296). Gamson et al.'s (1999:382) conceptualisation of the media position individuals as passive readers, which is a generalisation that should be cautioned against. This conceptualisation of media consumers as passive is in direct contrast to one of the key tenets of social constructionism which involves taking a critical stance against taken-for-granted knowledge. Passive consumption of media also disregards the other tenets of social constructionism which asks individuals to consider the social, cultural, historical, political, and economic specificities of knowledge, and to consider knowledge as being sustained through social processes. Gamson et al. (1992:382), however, suggest that readers are not in fact taking this critical stance against what is presented to them through the media, but are rather accepting the information presented to them as a true description of reality.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the social constructionist framework and related key concepts. Through this discussion, I rationalised the use of a social constructivist approach to my research on media constructions of female teacher sex offenders. Focus was given to the social constructions of gender, sexual violence and victimisation, and deviance, all of which helped set the groundwork for the argument that FSOs contradict these existing social constructions. The role of the media in relation to social constructionism was also considered, given that two of my sub-questions are concerned with the ways in which the media construct ideas of gender norms, and deviance in relation to these gender norms. Addressing these sub-questions aids in answering my central research questions surrounding how the invisible FSO is made visible in the media, and how media constructions of these sexual predators contribute to the trend of denialism surrounding this phenomenon.

Chapter 4. Research Methodology and Design

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research was to explore media constructions of FSOs and understand how these contribute to the trend of denialism that surrounds the phenomenon. Documentary data, in the form of news media articles, was the primary data source for this research. The data sample consisted of forty news media articles, discussing ten cases of FSOs, from seven different English speaking countries. As I discuss in this chapter, the use of documentary data allowed for mediate access to the social construction of FSOs by the media. The variation in the data sample laid the groundwork for later comparisons to be made between media constructions of FSOs across space and time. I begin this chapter by rationalising the use of a qualitative research design. I then move on to discuss the data collection process which was aided by my 'critique checklist', the use of thematic analysis, the trustworthiness of the research, the ethical considerations and, finally, the limitations of the study.

4.2 Research Design

My epistemological assumption involved understanding how the media constructed FSOs and how the construction contributed to the invisibility of, and trend of denialism surrounding, the phenomenon. In alignment with these research aims, a qualitative design was utilised. Qualitative research aims to generate a theory based on the research findings, rather than carry out research with the goal of verifying a theory, as is the case with quantitative research (Punch, 2005:16). Thus, the qualitative research design adopts a bottom-up, inductive approach to research. The use of qualitative research is encouraged in instances where there is a need to improve existing, but inadequate or partial theories (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022:2). This research was conceived on the basis that there is a notable gap in the literature pertaining to FSOs, and female rapists and paedophiles more specifically. The use of an inductive qualitative approach in this research, therefore, assisted in the strengthening of the current, albeit scant, theories surrounding a largely invisible phenomenon. In addition, this research considered how media constructions of FSOs aligned with how male perpetrated rape and paedophilia were conceptualised, and suggested that existing theories and sex offender typologies be reconsidered, deconstructed and degendered to adopt a gender-neutral understanding.

The framing and wording of a research question is also indicative of the research design that is being adopted (Punch, 2005:19). Qualitative research questions tend to include words and phrases such as 'exploring', 'describing experiences', 'seeking to understand' (Punch, 2005:19). In unpacking the title of this research, the main aim was to 'explore' and 'understand' media constructions of female teacher sex offenders. From there, the aim was to formulate a theory around how the image of the female teacher sex offender, as constructed by the media, contributed to the trend of denialism surrounding, and resultant invisibility of FSOs.

A further distinction made between research designs surrounds the chosen method of data collection. Qualitative research is generated through language (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006:47), which links back to Burr's (2015:5) discussion on language in relation to social constructionism, further justifying the use of the theoretical framework. This research, which aimed to explore media constructions of female teacher sex offenders, looking at the language the media used and the resulting image of the female teacher sex offender that was constructed, lended itself more to a qualitative research design.

4.3 Data Collection

Methodologically, social constructionism is a framework best utilised in research that adopts an inductive approach (Creswell, 2013:36). Data is obtained either through observation, interviews or the analysis of texts (Creswell, 2013:36), the latter being directly applicable to this research. I collected data from documentary sources, namely news media articles, relating specifically to cases of female teacher sex offenders. Documentary data is defined as that which allows researchers to identify the ways in which meanings are constructed and discourses circulated (Terre Blanche et al., 2006:316). Documentary data allows researchers to gain mediate access to material traces of the opinions and beliefs of the authors at the time of publishing (Mogalakwe, 2006:223). Documents are, therefore, considered as social facts (Atkinson & Coffey, 2004:79). Rather than being neutral and transparent conveyors of information, documents are actively constructed by, and considered influencers of, the social (Atkinson & Coffey, 2004:77). What this means is that the reproduction and depiction of information in documents is socially constructed (Atkinson & Coffey, 2004:77). Linking this back to the social constructionist framework, I considered the ways in which the media conveyed and sustained 'known truths'

through the image of the female teacher offender they constructed. Through the use of documentary data, I was able to access material traces of ways in which the media socially constructed gender norms, as well as deviance in relation to these gender norms, and conformed to a gendered conceptualisation of rape.

Salehyan (2015) discusses the six best practices for data collection, with the first three rules being directly applicable to this research. The first rule, or best data collection practice, relates to being systematic and transparent when identifying sources that can be used for the data sample (Salehyan, 2015:106). One of the potential sources identified is news media (Salehyan, 2015:107). News media is depicted as an invaluable resource to use when looking at the ways in which the media construct reality, and reflect dominant narratives and prevailing interests (Salehyan, 2015:107). The second rule involves considering and identifying what is missing from the sources (Salehyan, 2015:107). Putting this rule into practice when collecting data aligns with social constructionism in that it asks the researcher to adopt a critical approach to reviewing sources. Rather than just looking at the information presented in the source, this second rule asks that the researcher also critically consider what is not discussed or reported on (Salehyan 2015:107). The absence of information, or incompleteness of a document, also suggests something about the subject being investigated (Bowen, 2009:33). Certain matters or phenomena are paid very little attention and certain voices are marginalised (Bowen, 2009:33), which can make this form of research challenging. In line with conceptualisations of anti-essentialism and anti-realism, I questioned the extent to which these media sources were a reflection of social processes and social constructions of reality. Notably, what was being said and not being said about FSOs in the media, and how this influenced the way in which the media socially constructed the image of the female teacher sex offender? The third rule, or best data collection practice, addresses the way in which potential biases influence the data sources. Researchers are challenged to consider the ways in which news media is incentivised to represent information in a certain way, and how this representation influences the social construction of issues and phenomena (Salehyan, 2015:107). I considered and applied these three practices throughout the data collection process.

The data sample consisted of media articles that were predominantly sourced from online news media platforms. The use of the internet in qualitative data collection was beneficial in that it was cost effective, time efficient, and the data was easily accessible (Bowen, 2009:31; Creswell, 2013:159). Prior to starting data collection, a superficial review was conducted on existing cases of female teacher sex offenders, and articles surrounding these cases were skimmed through. Search strings were employed to identify potential cases ('female sex offender' OR 'female sex abuser' OR 'female paedophile' OR 'female rapist' OR 'female perpetrator' OR 'woman sex offender' OR 'woman sex abuser' OR 'woman paedophile' OR 'woman rapist' OR 'woman perpetrator') AND ('teacher' OR 'school') AND ('male child' OR 'male pupil' OR 'male student' OR 'male learner') AND ('sexual abuse' OR 'sexual assault' OR 'rape'). Cases of female teacher sex offenders identified through this initial superficial examination process were recorded.

Purposive sampling was used to identify the ten cases of female teacher sex offenders that formed the data sample. Purposive sampling allows researchers to identify specific participants or, in relation to this research, specific cases that are representative of the population or phenomena being studied (Terre Blanche et al., 2006:563). Snowball sampling, in relation to human participants specifically, is defined as the way in which additional cases or participants of interest are recruited by existing participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994:28). Applying the snowball sampling method to this research, and the use of documentary data rather than human participants, there were some news media articles I reviewed as part of the superficial examination that were centred around a singular female teacher sex offender case, but made brief reference to a similar case, or cases, from the same country. The initial choices of female teacher sex offender cases thus lead to the identification of other similar and relevant cases. Opportunistic sampling as an additional non-probability sampling method allows researchers to identify new leads and follow these unexpected opportunities to fortify a rich data sample (Miles & Huberman 1994:28). I took advantage of the new and unexpected leads on cases of female teacher sex offenders that were initially identified through the snowball sampling, which resulted in an information rich data sample. Snowball and opportunistic sampling are considered beneficial for research that adopts an inductive approach and aims to generate a theory (Miles & Huberman, 1994:28), further justifying the use of these sampling strategies in this research.

One of the key features of qualitative sampling is the use of small samples of participants or cases that are studied in depth (Miles & Huberman, 1994:27). This is unlike quantitative research which seeks to obtain statistical significance through the use of large samples of participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994:27). Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research is not conducted with the intent to generalise the findings from the research sample to the wider population (Ritchie, Lewis & Elam, 2003:83; Creswell, 2013:157). Instead, qualitative research aims to generate rich data which, in turn, allows for in-depth understandings of the research area (Ritchie et al., 2003:83; Creswell, 2013:157). These characteristics of qualitative sampling were kept in mind during the data collection process, and were a particularly important consideration when finalising the size of the data sample. Through the use of purposive sampling, specifically snowball and opportunistic sampling, ten cases of female teacher sex offenders were identified. Variation in the sample was achieved through the inclusion of female teacher sex offender cases from seven different countries. While the year in which the offending occurred was not a consideration during data collection, temporal variation was achieved with the cases selected spanning a twenty-six year period. Similarly, while the age of the victims was also not a consideration during data collection, further variation was achieved through the victims' ages which ranged from ten to eighteen years old.

Table 2. The ten cases of female teacher sex offenders, their country of origin, year of offending/media coverage, and the age of their respective victims.

Case of female teacher sex offender	Country	Year	Age of victim/s
Cooney, Jaimee	New Zealand	2019	15
Lafave, Debra	United States of America	2005	14
Letourneau, Mary Kay	United States of America	1997	13
Ooms, Monique	Australia	2023	16
Parsons, Shannon	England	2021	16
Pontbriand, Tania	Canada	2007	15

Rafei, Nazira	Australia	2008	15
Reriti, Stacey	New Zealand	2015	10
Smith, Bernadette	Scotland	2014	16
Viotti, Fiona	South Africa	2019	17/18

Once the cases of the female teacher sex offenders had been identified, a more intensive search for data began. Again, search strings were employed to identify potential articles for the data sample (‘Bernadette Smith’ OR ‘Debra Lafave’ OR ‘Fiona Viotti’ OR ‘Jaimee Cooney’ OR ‘Mary Kay Letourneau’ OR ‘Monique Ooms’ OR ‘Nazira Rafei’ OR ‘Shannon Parsons’ OR ‘Stacey Reriti’ OR ‘Tania Pontbriand’) AND (‘female sex offender’ OR ‘female sex abuser’ OR ‘female paedophile’ OR ‘female rapist’ OR ‘female perpetrator’ OR ‘woman sex offender’ OR ‘woman sex abuser’ OR ‘woman paedophile’ OR ‘woman rapist’ OR ‘woman perpetrator’) AND (‘teacher’ OR ‘school’) AND (‘male child’ OR ‘male pupil’ OR ‘male student’ OR ‘male learner’) AND (‘sexual abuse’ OR ‘sexual assault’ OR ‘rape’) AND (‘Australia’ OR ‘Canada’ OR ‘England’ OR ‘New Zealand’ OR ‘Scotland’ OR ‘South Africa’ OR ‘United States of America’). It was a conscious choice not to use assumptive or emotive trigger words and phrases when searching for articles so as not to influence the data search results. This extensive examination of available data also involved research on what the ‘top news media platforms’ were in Australia, Canada, England, New Zealand, Scotland, South Africa, and the USA. The search strings were then adapted to include the titles of the identified ‘top news media platforms’ per country. In some instances, related articles were sourced directly from these ‘top news media platforms’ using the website’s search functionality to look up articles on the related female teacher sex offender case.

While there was some degree of flexibility when selecting the sample of documentary data sources that were used in this research, a standardised approach to data collection was adopted. A set of criteria was used when going through the data mining process, which allowed for relevant data sources and media articles to be methodically identified. Stake (1995:131) proposes a set of twenty checklist items for assessing and identifying a good case study report. In reviewing Stake’s (1995:131) criteria, Creswell (2013:265) suggests his own evaluation criteria

which includes a consolidated list of six checklist items that can be used to assess what constitutes a good case study. While both Stake's (1995:131) and Creswell's (2013:265) 'critique checklists' were developed with the intent to identify good case studies specifically, some of the checklist items were considered directly transferable to reviewing and identifying 'good' media articles. With Stake's (1995:131) and Creswell's (2013:265) checklists in mind, I developed a 'critique checklist' for evaluating and identifying good media articles on female teacher sex offenders to assist with the data collection process. Bowen's (2009) discussions around evaluating documents for document analysis as a qualitative research method were also influential in my development of the 'critique checklist' for documentary data collection for this research.

Table 3. 'Critique checklist' developed prior to data collection to assist in identifying 'good' media articles.

Critique checklist item	Description of checklist item
1. Is the article easily accessible?	Accessibility to certain news media platforms was an issue that was encountered during the early stages of the data collection process as some of the websites required one to register an account or pay for a subscription. With replicability of the research in mind, news media platforms that required registration or payment of a subscription fee in order to access the related articles were automatically discarded.
2. Is the article substantive?	The length of the media articles was an important consideration during data collection. In collecting articles for the sample, the longer articles that adopted a more narrative approach took preference. The shorter, more fact centric, recycled articles were sifted out. Opting to use the longer, narrative articles allowed for a richer data sample and, consequently, a more in-depth understanding of the ways in which the media constructed the image of the female teacher sex offender, aligning with the aims of qualitative research (Ritchie et al., 2003:83; Creswell, 2013:157).
3. Is the case clearly described?	In assessing the usability of documentary data, Bowen (2009:33) encourages researchers to consider the comprehensiveness of the documents. As a result, the comprehensibility of the media articles was an important consideration during the data mining process. The more comprehensive articles took preference. The articles that were limited in their description of the cases of

	female teacher sex offenders were sifted out. Further to this, in reviewing the available data sources, it was noted that some of the articles discussed multiple cases of female teacher sex offenders, rather than focusing on one individual case. The articles that focused on one case, or considered one case exclusively but briefly mentioned and/or drew similarities to others, took preference, and the articles that discussed multiple cases in depth were sifted out.
4. Has adequate attention been paid to the case?	When conducting document analysis, Bowen (2009:33) notes that researchers, in their capacity as analysts, are responsible for determining the relevance of the documents to the research and the phenomenon being studied. Bowen (2009:33) further recommends that the researcher consider the ways in which their selected documents align with the conceptual framework of their study. Applying Bowen's (2009:33) conceptualisation of the researcher's role in document analysis to this study, the news media articles selected to form part of the data sample needed to discuss the case of the female teacher sex offenders in depth and, in doing so, highlight the ways in which the media socially constructed the image of the female teacher sex offender. In accordance with this, checklist items two and three were also considered in relation to this fourth checklist item.
5. Is there a sense of story to the way in which the case is presented?	Using the longer, more narrative based articles provided a more extensive, richer data set which, in line with the aims of qualitative research, allowed for a more in-depth understanding of the way in which the media socially constructed the image of the female teacher sex offender, further justifying the use of the qualitative research design.
6. Are assertions about the case made in the article?	Further sub-questions were developed, in line with Stake's (1995:131) and Creswell's (2013:265) 'critique checklist' to assist with answering the sixth checklist item that was developed to aid in the data mining process. - Are assumptions and perceptions of female teacher sex offenders made clear in the article? - Does the article show empathy for all sides? - Are the intentions of FSOs, or the causes of their offending, discussed in the article? - Does the article consider the implications of this case for the victim and/or the female teacher sex offender?

Through the use of the 'critique checklist' I developed, four articles per female teacher sex offender case were identified. In summary, the data sample consisted of a total of forty media articles (see Appendix A) referencing the cases of ten female teacher sex offenders, spanning seven countries, over a period of twenty-six years, and with the male victims ranging between ten and eighteen years of age (see Table 2). The choice to focus on forty articles, covering ten cases of female teacher sex offenders, aligned with qualitative research's use of smaller data samples that are then studied in depth, with no intent to generalise the findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994:2; Ritchie et al., 2003:83; Creswell, 2013:157). The intent behind limiting the focus to ten cases of female teacher sex offenders and forty articles was to gain an in-depth understanding of the way in which the media constructed the image of the female teacher sex offender, and to further understand how this image potentially contributed to the trend of denialism that surrounded FSOs. The intentional inclusion of FSO cases from seven different countries, and the serendipity of these cases spanning a period of twenty-six years, introduced both spatial and temporal elements to the data. This allowed comparisons to be made between media constructions of FSOs depending on country of origin or year in which the offending occurred, and for the consideration of how this construction has changed or remained the same across space and over time.

While there were more articles available for inclusion, data collection was concluded once data saturation was reached. Data saturation is defined as information redundancy (Braun & Clarke, 2021:201) and is considered the benchmark for determining sample size within qualitative research, particularly in relation to qualitative research that utilises purposive sampling (Braun & Clarke, 2021:203). Information redundancy is the point where data sources have been exhausted (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:350) and the inclusion of additional data would not offer new information, or yield further codes or themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021:202; Lincoln & Guba, 1985:350). During the data collection process, it was noted that the media articles were largely comparable. This observation aligned with Trilling and Van Hoof's (2020:1317) observation that a well-functioning media system is identifiable when there is considerable overlap between the events being covered, rather than disjunction. Exclusive stories that make headlines at one media outlet will ultimately be reported on and make headlines at other outlets too (Trilling & Van Hoof, 2020:1317). This overlap extends beyond the mere coverage of the same events, to the

inclusion and propagation of the same information, the paraphrasing of the original article, or the writing of follow-up stories (Trilling & Van Hoof, 2020:1317). This proved to be the case during the course of data collection for this research. There were a number of instances where the same article, written by the same author, was published by multiple different news outlets. Within news outlets, there were also instances where the same journalist wrote multiple articles, or where the outlet had dedicated a singular journalist to cover the story. While these observations were not applicable to all the cases of female teacher sex offenders included in the data sample, the goal was to include the same number of articles per case so as not to skew the findings. Considering this in relation to the aims of this research, the inclusion of multiple articles written on a singular case by the same author, or multiple articles written on a singular case published by the same platform, was avoided where possible. This choice allowed for multiple journalists' and media outlets' construction of the female teacher sex offender to be included in the data sample. With uniformity and data saturation in mind, I capped the number of articles making up the data sample for this research at forty.

4.4 Data Analysis

The documentary data collected through desktop research was analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is the foundational method of analysis for qualitative research, given its complexity and diversity (Braun & Clarke, 2006:78). Thematic analysis is appreciated for its flexibility as a research tool and is used to generate rich and detailed data, aligning with the overarching aims of qualitative research (Ritchie et al., 2003:83). Thematic analysis is a method not only used to reflect reality, but also to unravel reality's surface (Braun & Clarke, 2006:86). This conceptualisation is worth noting given that this research was guided by an interest in understanding the surface level image of female teacher sex offenders constructed by the media, as well as exploring the underlying reality of why this phenomenon remains largely invisible. The research objectives when exploring the underlying reality of FSOs were to: look at the ways in which the media constructed gender norms in relation to the phenomenon; look at the ways in which the media socially constructed deviance in relation to gender norms when portraying female teacher sex offenders; look at the underlying imagery the media used when discussing cases of female teacher sex offenders; and look at the ways in which gendered conceptualisations

of rape and paedophilia influenced the image of the female teacher sex offender as constructed by the media.

Thematic analysis is defined as the process through which patterns of meaning and recurring themes present within the data set are identified (Braun & Clarke, 2006:92; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017:3352). Recurrence and repeated presence within the data are required for a theme to be considered noteworthy (Byrne, 2022:1395). Byrne (2022:1395), however, argues that 'common' does not necessarily equate to being important or meaningful to the analysis. The converse to this, as I argued in relation to the findings of this research, is that absent or uncommon themes and patterns of meaning within the data could make an equally important or meaningful contribution to the analysis, and ultimately the overall research and problem statement. The use of thematic analysis in this research specifically allowed for the recurring themes, patterns of meaning, and discourses surrounding female teacher sex offenders, within the related articles to be identified. It further allowed for the identification of what was absent or uncommon within the data.

Thematic analysis in qualitative research has historically been used to analyse long texts (Robinson, 2022:196). There has only recently been consideration for the use of thematic analysis to analyse brief texts (Robinson, 2022:196). The news media articles used in this research were considered brief texts, rather than long texts. Robinson's (2022:196) acknowledgement of the recent use of thematic analysis in qualitative research to analyse short texts, therefore, served as a further justification for its use in this research.

Braun and Clarke (2006) outline the six steps of thematic analysis.

1. The first step involves familiarisation with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006:93). This familiarisation is done by working with the text, reading and re-reading it over and over again, until you are well acquainted with the data (Terre Blanche et al., 2006:323). For this research, familiarisation with the data involved reading the articles twice. The articles were then read a third time and key words and phrases identified. Commonalities and key patterns that emerged from the language used in the media articles were noted in the fourth reading. The aim of this familiarisation was to achieve an initial understanding of

the data set and provide a foundation for the following steps of thematic analysis. A memo was used to keep notes during the familiarisation process, as per Kiger and Varpio's (2020:851) recommendation.

2. The second step involves the generation of the initial codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006:95). As is recommended by Terre Blanche et al. (2006:323), the words and phrases used by the media were, for the most part, considered when labelling the codes. In line with Byrne (2022:1395), there were also instances where codes were identified and labelled based on what was missing from or not being acknowledged in the articles. Examples of these codes included *Mention of Paedophile/Paedophilia* and *Mention of Rape*. The justification for this decision related directly to the title and aim of this research: addressing what is invisible. In the first instance, nine codes were identified, but this was later increased to fifteen (see Appendix B) after subsequent reading of the articles and the augmentation of certain codes with new ones.
3. The third step involves identifying recurring themes within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006:94).
4. The fourth step involves reviewing the themes in relation to the codes (see Appendix C) that were named and defined at step two (Braun & Clarke, 2006:94).
5. The fifth step involves naming and defining the themes (see Appendix D) (Braun & Clarke, 2006:87). For this research, the themes identified were then used to generate pockets of meaning specifically relating to the way in which the media constructed FSOs. These pockets of meaning were in turn used to answer the research questions, by considering the ways in which media constructions of FSOs contributed to the invisibility of the phenomenon. Terre Blanche et al.'s (2006:323) recommendation was considered at this step, and the themes were labelled to align with the words and phrases used by the media. An example of this was the characterisation of these female teachers as 'sex offenders' rather than 'rapists' and/or 'paedophiles'.
6. The sixth and final step involves producing a report, linking the themes back to the overall research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006:96).

In the first instance, hard copies of the forty articles were printed. The initial codes identified, as per the second step of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, were allocated a colour, and

the initial coding of the data was done manually, which aided in the visualisation of patterns within and across the articles. The coding was then replicated using NVivo software. NVivo was designed to assist with data analysis in qualitative research, and was used to assist with coding the data in this study. One of the critiques of qualitative research, and data analysis in qualitative research in particular, is that it is considered to be unsystematic and, therefore, lacking academic rigour (De Wet & Erasmus, 2005:27). De Wet and Erasmus (2005:27) challenge this perception of data analysis in qualitative research by promoting NVivo as a software package that does in fact contribute to ensuring systematic and rigorous data analysis. NVivo has been able to address some of the weaknesses of qualitative data analysis software used previously (Welsh, 2002:para.3), which further justifies the use of this qualitative data analysis software. In line with what Welsh (2002:para.7) outlines and De Wet and Erasmus (2005:27) champion, NVivo helps to increase the overall rigour of the research, allowing the researcher to conduct the data analysis systematically, efficiently, and with more accuracy than could have been done manually. In addition to this, using NVivo contributes to the validity of the data analysis, ensuring that all instances in which the identified key codes were used, were located within the data set (Welsh, 2002:para.7). Using NVivo for this research lessened the possibility of human error negatively affecting the data analysis (Welsh, 2002:para.7).

4.5 Trustworthiness of Research

In response to the debate around the lack of rigour and unsystematic nature of qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1985) introduced new criteria for assessing rigour within qualitative research (De Wet & Erasmus, 2005:27). The concepts of reliability and validity within research were replaced with trustworthiness (De Wet & Erasmus, 2005:27). Lincoln and Guba (1985:290) define trustworthiness in research as the way in which a researcher is able to attest to their findings as being worthy; worthy of attention and of further discussion. Lincoln and Guba (1985:290) recommend four ways to evaluate the trustworthiness, and the resulting worth, of research. These are (1) truth value; (2) applicability; (3) consistency; and (4) neutrality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:290), and are discussed in more detail below.

The truth value, or the internal validity as it is termed in the conventional paradigm, considers the credibility of the research and looks at the ways in which the researcher establishes

confidence in their findings being the 'truth' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:290). Highlighting the 'truth value' of this research was relatively straightforward, given the use of documentary data. The use of documentary data sources allows readers to have mediate access to the media sources (Mogalakwe, 2006:223) used in the research, from which key words and phrases, and the emerging themes, can be derived. The reader will, therefore, be able to verify that the key words and phrases, and resulting themes identified through thematic analysis, were taken directly from the media articles that made up the data sample.

The applicability, or external validity, of the research considers the transferability of the research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:290). To establish trustworthiness in research through applicability of findings, the researcher needs to consider ways in which their findings are transferable across contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:290). While this is an important consideration, it is important to note that ensuring external validity is not one of the key considerations of qualitative research (Ritchie et al., 2003:83). The media constructions of the ten FSOs studied were, however, described in sufficient detail so as to allow the reader to truly understand the findings.

Consistency or reliability looks at the dependability of the research and related findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:290). To test dependability, one needs to ascertain whether the findings of the research would be the same if replicated within the same context, using the same data sample (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:290). The use of documentary data in this research helped ensure the consistency and reliability of the findings. In relation to this, Lincoln and Guba (1985:109) discuss an independent audit, which involves an external auditor who evaluates whether the findings are supported by the data. Another person's involvement in the research, however, has the potential to increase researcher bias. Avoiding researcher bias is important in establishing trustworthiness in research, thus justifying my decision not to use an external auditor.

The neutrality, also termed the objectivity, of the research considers the extent to which the research findings have been influenced by researcher bias, rather than the data source (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:20). One of the ways in which I ensured neutrality and objectivity was through transparency in the research decisions. I included transparent discussions around data selection,

being clear about how the articles that made up the data sample were selected, and why other articles were discarded. De Wet and Erasmus (2005:27) advocate the need for transparency within qualitative research, particularly in relation to the analytical procedures used. Further transparency in this research was evident in the detailing of the coding process used, and how certain themes were identified and codes generated. The use of the NVivo software meant that there was less of an opportunity for researcher bias to influence the data analysis, and the findings by proxy. Furthermore, linking neutrality and objectivity to research ethics, researcher bias and the possible influence that it has had on this research has been considered as part of the reflexive discussion.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

Researchers are cautioned not to overlook the ethical considerations that are associated with qualitative research (Sixsmith & Murray, 2001:423). Despite this, there remains a general disregard of ethics in research that adopts this design (Sixsmith & Murray, 2001:423). The need to obtain the informed consent of participants in research that utilises documentary data, for example, is a debated topic (Sixsmith & Murray, 2001:425). This debate is centred around the need for the authors of the documentary data sources to provide consent for their work to be included in research (Sixsmith & Murray, 2001:425). As it relates to my research, the documentary data sources used were media articles that the authors willingly published online in the general public sphere. The stance I took was that the internet is an open, public forum to which authors have knowingly contributed, and their consent was therefore implied, and did not need to be obtained. This view is supported by Bowen (2009:31) who argues that documents, such as online media or news articles, published in a public domain, are obtainable without needing to source author permission.

Informed consent was also important to consider in relation to the ethics of naming the ten FSOs in my dissertation. Irrespective of their choice, qualitative researchers rarely comment on their decision to name or not to name people, places or organisations (Guenther, 2009:412). While it is common practice for media outlets to identify offenders in their articles, the repercussions of digital footprints have led to moral judgement related debates around reporting the truth versus minimising harm (Blom, 2017:208). Decisions need to be made about the extent to which online

content is publicly accessible, and the related need to obtain informed consent when including this content in research (Burles & Bally, 2018:2). The forty media articles that constituted the data sample were explicit in their naming of the FSOs, and I did consider that my naming the offenders in my dissertation may further their notoriety. In relation to obtaining the FSOs' informed consent specifically, my stance was that the media articles in which the offenders were named were readily available to the public, so the need to obtain the FSOs' consent was not warranted. The data was firmly within the public domain and could, therefore, be researched without consent (Sixsmith & Murray, 2001:425).

Finally, my research proposal was reviewed by the Department of Sociology at the University of Cape Town. The acceptance of my proposal was dependent on the fact that it complied with strict ethical standards, and the Department was satisfied that the research carried no significant risk and posed no harm to human subjects. To this end, I received ethical clearance under approval number SOC2023/8.

4.7 Limitations

While not intentional, racial diversity in the data sample was limited and the cases identified were predominantly those of white FSOs. It is, however, acknowledged that findings of research which analyse secondary data are limited to the details and quality of the sources (Darling et al., 2018:210). The inclusion of FSOs of colour in the data sample, albeit limited, did, interestingly, introduce race as a potential influencing factor in media constructions of FSOs. The reality was that cases where the FSO was a woman of colour were scarce in the media. This observation prompted interesting questions about the trivialisation of FSOs, and whether this trivialisation was limited to primarily white female perpetrators. The subsequent questions this observation triggered will be considered in greater detail in the discussion chapter, but are important to touch on here in reframing this limitation.

Further to the above, the cases of FSOs included in the data sample were Global North centric. Given that this research explored media constructions of FSOs and analysed related media texts, there was a language limitation to consider. FSO cases from countries where media articles were predominantly written in languages other than English were excluded. While there was the

option to translate foreign texts into English, the conclusion was that translated texts would not be sufficient as there was a very real possibility that the nuances in the media texts would be lost in translation, and an accurate understanding of media constructions would have been difficult to ascertain. In losing these nuances, it would not have been possible to fully understand media constructions of FSOs if, at the outset, understanding the language used in the media articles was a challenge.

4.8 Conclusion

As argued in this chapter, it was not only the recurring patterns and themes within the data that made a meaningful contribution to the data analysis. In line with the research aim to explore the media constructions of FSOs and consider how the construction contributes to the invisibility of the phenomenon, the uncommon or absent themes and patterns of meaning within the data made an equally meaningful contribution to the research. Considering these aims in relation to the research methodology and design, this chapter has justified the adoption of a qualitative research design, explained the approaches to data collection and analysis, and considered the trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and limitations of the research.

Chapter 5. The Headline - The Predetermined Direction

5.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the initial construction of the FSOs as presented in the media articles' headlines (see Appendix E). Headlines are characterised as a key feature of news reporting that play a role in orienting the reader (Teo, 2000:13). They are considered a device through which ideological values and attitudes towards the newsworthy issues are encapsulated (Landor & Eisenchlas, 2012:492). Readers' perceptions and interpretations of newsworthy events are, consequently, predetermined by the headline, influencing their continued reading of the article (Landor & Eisenchlas, 2012:492). In line with my central research questions I, therefore, call attention to the ways in which the media make the FSOs visible in the headlines of their related articles. The chapter is organised in relation to the themes under which the codes were grouped (see Appendix C). Through the discussion in this chapter, I consider how the construction of FSOs in media headlines predetermines their construction in the article that follows. I argue that the headlines immediately position the media as complicit in the trend of denialism surrounding FSOs.

Table 4. Article headline codebook generated in NVivo.

Name of code	Total number of articles' headlines that referenced the code	Number of references made to the code across the articles' headlines
Characterisation of offence	34	37
Characterisation of victim	24	24
Comments on offender's appearance	2	2
Fame/sensationalisation	1	1
Gendered double standards	0	0
Mental health	4	5
Mention of paedophile/paedophilia	0	0
Mention of rape	0	0

Mention of victim	1	1
Perception of offender	1	1
Power/authority	33	52
Ramifications for victim	0	0
Reference to traditional role of women	6	8
Repercussions for offending	25	27
Victimisation of offender	5	5

5.2 Understanding the Offence

The 'characterisation of offence' in the article headlines immediately encapsulated media values and attitudes towards the FSOs, serving as a precursor for the general tone of the article that followed. While there was some reference made to "*sex abuse*" (Helling, 2018; Leask, 2020; Wong, 2015); "*sexual violation*" (Shadwell, 2015; Weekes, 2015)*;* and "*sexual assault*" (Cherry, 2015; CTV News, 2014), the mention of these acts being instances of rape or paedophilia were notably absent (see Table 4). Instead, the "*relationship*" (Cherry, 2015; Postmedia News, 2014) between the victim and the offender was consistently characterised in the headlines as an "*affair*" (Moncur, 2014; Spillett, 2014; The Spokesman-Review, 1998); a "*sexual encounter*" (SAPeople Contributor, 2019); "*sexual activity*" (Metro News Reporter, 2014); a "*sex scandal*" (Cilliters, 2019; Evans, 2020; Timms, 2023); a "*sexual relationship*" (Postmedia News, 2014); and even playfully as a "*fling*" (Robertson, 2014); or "*teen romp*" (Sheehy, 2006). These various blithe characterisations of the offence trivialised and sensationalised the "*relationship*" (Cherry, 2015; Postmedia News, 2014) between the victim and the offender.

The article headlines consistently failed to mention that these offences were instances of rape and/or paedophilia. By proxy, there was a failure to characterise these female sexual predators as rapists and/or paedophiles. The fact that there were zero references made to the 'mention of paedophile/paedophilia', or 'mention of rape' codes across the forty article headlines served as the perfect example of the invisibility of female paedophiles and female rapists in the media. The

'mention of victim' code was initially developed to highlight instances in which the media acknowledged that the young boys targeted by their female teachers were in fact victims of sexual offences. There was, however, only one reference to the 'mention of victim' code across the forty article headlines. This singular reference was not in relation to any of the young boys. Rather, the 'mention of victim' was ironically in reference to the female teacher being a "*victim of sexual misconduct incident*" (Behr, 2019). Thus, in addition to the FSOs not being appropriately characterised as rapists and paedophiles in the article headlines, there were instances where the female offenders were the ones positioned as victims.

In addition to the characterisation of the relationship between the victim and the offender, the gravity of the offence was further downplayed by the headlines commenting on the offenders being "*spared jail*" (Hill, 2021; Metro News Reporter, 2014; Moncur, 2014 Pyman, 2021; Roberts, 2021); able to "*avoid jail*" (Robertson, 2014); "*not be jailed*" (Gold Coast Bulletin, 2023); being "*let off lightly*" (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2009); or highlighting the argument that they "*shouldn't see jail*" (Woods, 2014). The seriousness of the offence was minimised, dismissed even, in these media article headlines. By implication, there were seemingly no consequential repercussions for these female paedophiles and rapists. In the instances where the FSOs were charged with an offence, the article headlines indicated that they had been "*granted parole after 10 months in prison*" (Newshub, 2020); or had been "*sentenced to 20 months*" (CTV News, 2014); or "*gets 20 months in jail*" (Postmedia News, 2014). There were further instances where it was noted that the FSOs who were charged with sexual offences were going to "*to be freed*" (Nelson Weekly, 2020); or to be "*released from jail*" (Leask, 2020); or "*gets out of prison*" (The Associated Press, 2004). There was only one case, that of Stacey Reriti, out of the ten cases of female teacher sex offenders studied, where the offender had their "*parole refused*" (Leask, 2022); had to "*stay behind bars*" (Leask, 2022); was "*jailed with 10 years*" (Weekes, 2015); was "*jailed for more than 10 years*" (Shadwell, 2015).

5.3 Duty of Care

Thirty-three of the forty articles acknowledged the teacher-pupil relationship between the offenders and victims. This acknowledgement positioned the FSOs within an institutional context in which they had a duty of care. Aligning with Matthews et al.'s (1991:208)

'teacher/lover' typology of FSOs, these women were characterised as teachers who had abused their power over their young students. As Matthews et al. (1991:208) point out, the 'teacher/lover' typology is considered to be independent of the 'rapist' typology. The related implication in the article headlines was that female teachers having sex with their students is not considered rape. While the teacher-pupil was a true depiction of the association between the offender and victim, its conformity to the 'teacher/lover' typology, negated the idea that these women were rapists. Instead of characterising these women as rapists or paedophiles, the headlines relied on the 'teacher/lover' typology. The resultant narrative was that the offence was a breach of duty of care, rather than rape or paedophilia.

5.4 Social Normality

There was an attempt made in the article headlines to highlight instances where these female offenders conformed to social norms, particularly those that related to the 'traditional role of women'. The main way in which the headlines highlighted these FSOs' conformity to the 'traditional role of women', and social normality as a result, was by characterising these women, first and foremost, as wives and mothers. Two headlines referred to the FSOs as "*married*" (Moncur, 2014; Spillett, 2014). Santana (1998) extensively commented on the fact that the offender was "*pregnant*"; "*bore child*"; "*expecting again*". Another article title confirmed the offender was "*six weeks pregnant*" (The Associated Press, 1998). The focus on the roles these women fulfilled as wives and mothers contributed to what Cain and Anderson (2016:1) term the 'cultural denial' surrounding female offenders. The failure to label the FSOs as harmful sexual predators, as paedophiles, as rapists, stemmed from the failure to acknowledge that women can be more than mothers, wives, and primary caregivers. The titles' reliance on the FSOs' conformity to their socially expected roles as wives and mothers made it difficult to move past the gender confines associated with the stereotypical gender roles.

5.5 The Denial of Female Agency

Gender Roles in Sex

The findings of the headline analysis also drew attention to the use of prepositions that followed the 'characterisation of offence'. The offence was characterised as: "*sex with*" (Bice, 2009; Elvin, 2021; Gold Coast Bulletin, 2023; Hill, 2021; Nelson Weekly, 2020; Newshub, 2020;

Pyman, 2021; Roberts, 2021; Woods, 2023); "*affair with*" (Moncur, 2014; Spillett, 2014; The Spokesman Review, 1998); "*sexual activity with*" (Metro News Reporter, 2014); "*fling with*" (Robertson, 2014); "*sexual encounters with*" (SAPeople Contributor, 2019). The use of '*with*' in these instances positioned the victims as active participants in the 'sexual interaction'. In doing so, the media reduced the perception of the FSOs being harmful sexual offenders. This implied sharing of culpability between victim and offender further contributed to the denial of female agency in sex. The narrative that the male victim was an active participant, or even the instigator, was more palatable in its alignment with hegemonic gendered sex scripts. The FSO was more readily accepted as a "*sex slave*" (Collins, 2008; Daily Telegraph, 2008), than as a harmful sexual aggressor, and this was clearly evident in the article headlines reviewed.

Mental Health Defence

Further reinforcing the denial of female agency were four article headlines that made reference to the mental health of the FSOs. The sexual offence was referred to as "*ten days of madness*" (Spillett, 2014), and this 'mad' behaviour was attributed to "*mental illness*" (Helling, 2018). The Spokesman-Review (1998) highlighted "*Disorder tied to former teacher's affair with boy*", and the fact that "*doctors say mental condition caused behaviour*", thereby introducing the mental health defence for this criminal behaviour. This mental health defence aligned with Kramer's (2010:36) comment that FSOs are often regarded as mentally ill, or emotionally maladjusted. In one title, reference was made to the fact that the sex offender was "*under medical care*" (Cilliters, 2019) following their crimes being made public. This further reinforced the idea that these women were mentally ill rather than criminals, and the argument that their mental illnesses were the underlying reason for their offending.

5.6 The Duality of Victimisation

Destruction of the Real Victim

As noted in the discussion around understanding the offence, there was only one instance where the word "*victim*" (Behr, 2019) was used in an article title. The "*victim*" (Behr, 2019) in this singular instance referred to the FSO, rather than the real victim. The oxymoronic implication was that the FSO was the "*victim of sexual misconduct incident*" (Behr, 2019). There were a further four article headlines that contributed to the 'victimisation of offender'. Two references

were made to how the offender "*sobs as she's spared jail*" (Hill, 2021; Roberts, 2021). Additional references were made to the ways in which the offender had been "*abused*" (Timms, 2023) and treated as a "*pariah*" (Beatty, 2023). In all four instances, the offender was depicted as the vulnerable party, with any reference to the vulnerability of the real victim being notably absent. In fact, there was no acknowledgement in the article headlines that the young boys were victims. Thus, despite the FSOs being rapists and/or paedophiles, these sexual predators were more readily accepted as and afforded victim status in the media, a trend which contributed to the 'victimisation of offender', ergo a denial of the real victims' existences by proxy.

5.7 The Infamy of Female Sex Offenders

There were two instances where the article headlines made 'comments on offender's appearance'. The first characterised the offender as a woman with "*boobs and a nice hairdo*" (Metro News Reporter, 2014). The second, which constituted the entire article title, characterised the female offender as being "*too pretty for prison*" (Goldenberg, 2006). Landor and Eisenchlas (2012:489) refer to the focus on a female offender's attractiveness as a 'beauty bias'. Research on FSOs has found that there is a negative correlation between the female offenders' perceived attractiveness and the resultant harm on their victim (Landor & Eisenchlas, 2012:489). The comments on the offenders' appearances in the headlines, particularly those that characterised the FSOs as attractive, carried the inference that there was limited psychological harm caused to the victims as a result.

5.8 Conclusion

This narrative discussion has highlighted the ways in which the media present the FSOs in their article headlines, addressing one of my central research questions. The headlines served as the predetermined direction for the readers' perceptions and interpretations of the FSO cases, influencing their reading of the article that followed. The findings of the headline analysis showed that the reader would commence reading the article with (a) the perception that the offence was trivial and the 'sexual relationship' between the FSO and victim was one of a consensual nature; (b) the idea that there were no consequential repercussions for the perpetrator; (c) the belief that the only crime was a breach of duty of care; (d) the acknowledgement that FSOs conformed to gendered social norms through the primary roles they fulfilled as wives and

mothers; (e) the sense that FSOs had limited to no agency in the 'sexual encounter'; and (f) the assumption that there was no harm caused to the largely invisible, young male victims. In the following chapter I consider these observations and the recurring themes in relation to the article content.

Chapter 6. The Content - Constructing the Female Sex Offender

6.1 Introduction

Following on from the consideration of media constructions of FSOs in article headlines, this chapter examines media constructions of the FSOs in the content of the articles. In accordance with the structure of the previous chapter, this chapter is organised in relation to the themes under which the codes were grouped (see Appendix C). This chapter involves a more substantial narrative discussion of the key themes and related findings that present themselves in media constructions of the phenomenon. In this chapter, I lay the groundwork for answering my four sub-questions. The first surrounding how the media socially construct ideas of gender norms. The second being how the media socially construct deviance in relation to these gender norms. The third considering the characteristics the media rely on in their construction of female sex offenders. The fourth examining how the gendered conceptualisations of rape and paedophilia influence the image of the FSO as constructed by the media. Through this, the culpability of the media in the trend of denialism surrounding, and resultant invisibility of, FSOs is fortified.

Table 5. Article content codebook generated in NVivo.

Name of code	Total number of articles that referenced the code	Number of references made to the code across the articles
Characterisation of offence	40	338
Characterisation of victim	40	539
Comments on offender's appearance	10	41
Fame/sensationalisation	17	46
Gendered double standards	11	27
Mental health	32	93
Mention of paedophile/paedophilia	1	3
Mention of rape	10	27

Mention of victim	29	89
Perception of offender	33	92
Power/authority	40	376
Ramifications for victim	25	66
Reference to traditional role of women	32	141
Repercussions for offending	35	212
Victimisation of offender	25	57

6.2 Understanding the Offence

The sexual offences were characterised three hundred and thirty-eight times across the forty articles. The offence was referred to as a *relationship* seventy-three times, with twenty-three instances where it was specifically characterised as a *sexual relationship*; an *affair* sixteen times; and a *scandal* thirteen times, with eleven instances where it was specifically characterised as a *sex scandal*. The sexual offences were further characterised playfully as a "*rendezvous*" (Metro News Reporter, 2014); "*a fling*" (Robertson, 2014); "*a steamy sex tryst*" (Sheehy, 2006); "*late-night trysts*" (Collins, 2008); "*wild sex sessions*" (Sheehy, 2006); a "*romp*" (Sheehy, 2006); a "*liaison*" (Bice, 2009; Lauer, 2006; SAPeople Contributor, 2019); "*sexual frolics*" (SAPeople Contributor, 2019); and as "*sexual shenanigans*" (SAPeople Contributor, 2019). The 'characterisation of offence' in these instances served to sensationalise yet also trivialise these cases of female perpetrated sexual abuse.

The trivialisation of these cases of female perpetrated sexual abuse was further sustained through the characterisation of the offence as an "*illicit relationship*" (The Associated Press, 2004); an "*affair*" (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2009; Collins, 2008; Lauer, 2006; Moncur, 2014; SAPeople Contributor, 2019; Sheehy, 2006; Spillett, 2014; Timms, 2023; Woods, 2014); and as "*a steamy sex tryst*" (Sheehy, 2006). These trivialised characterisations suggested that the cases were merely cases of forbidden romance. This forbidden romance narrative was underpinned by a degree of sympathy for the "*illicit relationship*" (The Associated Press, 2004) between the

female teacher and her young male student. This was further fortified by the 'perception of offender' as being a woman in love (Bice, 2009; Helling, 2018; Metro News Reporter, 2014; Moncur, 2014; Newshub, 2020; Robertson, 2014; Sheehy, 2006; Spillett, 2014; The Spokesman-Review, 1998). The idea that she "*couldn't help the way she was feeling*" (Spillett, 2014) designated the FSOs as victims of their feelings, reinforcing the hidden sympathy for these sexual predators, and strengthening the notion that these were just cases of forbidden romance rather than sexual abuse. This was further reiterated by the fact that Letourneau's case "*prompted coffee-table debates around the world - Was it love or was it rape?*" (The Spokesman-Review, 1998).

In fact, only in articles surrounding Letourneau's case was there ever an acknowledgement that the offence was rape (Santana, 1998; The Associated Press, 1998; The Spokesman-Review, 1998). While there was mention of rape in Reriti's case, the articles highlighted the judge's explicit statement that women "*cannot be charged with rape*" (Shadwell, 2015; Weekes, 2015; Wong, 2015). Despite there being an acknowledgment of rape in Letourneau's case, the seriousness of the offence was overshadowed by the characterisation of the "*illicit relationship*" (The Associated Press, 1998) between victim and offender as a 'forbidden romance', and the resultant sensationalisation of this case of 'forbidden love'. The articles further perpetuated this narrative by highlighting Letourneau's comment that her victim was the "*love of her life*" (The Associated Press, 1998). In their article on Lafave's case, Goldenberg (2006) highlighted a comment that "*society just doesn't view a boy having sex with an adult female as rape*". This observation about societal conceptions of female on male rape was all too evident in the media too. The 'characterisation of offence' highlighted that the media did not view a female teacher 'having sex with' her young male student as rape, and failed to characterise these female offenders as rapists and/or paedophiles. In fact, it seemed more convenient for the media to characterise the adult offender as a victim of rape (Helling, 2018; Lauer, 2006). The acknowledgement that the offenders were victims of rape themselves was more explicit than the recognition that the young boys were also rape victims.

The 'characterisation of offence' highlighted that the young male victims were considered active participants in their own victimisation by FSOs, with references made to "*consensual sex*"

(Elvin, 2021; Hill, 2021; Pyman, 2021; Roberts, 2021); the fact that "*they had sex*" (Collins, 2008; Eder, 2020; Newshub, 2020; Woods, 2023); "*they engaged in a sexual act*" (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2009); and that "*they slept together*" (Pyman, 2021). During the coding process, a conscious decision was made to include the prepositions that followed the 'characterisation of offence'. A review of the data found there to be one hundred and eleven instances where '*with*' was the preposition that followed the offence. The offence was depicted in the articles as the offender having *sex with* (forty-three times); a *relationship with* (fourteen times); a *sexual relationship with* (nine times); an *affair with* (six times); *sexual encounters with* (five times); *intercourse with* (four times); *slept with* (four times); *sleeping with* (three times); *liaison with* (twice); *sexual relations with* (twice); *sexually involved with* (twice); *sexual shenanigans with* (once); *sexual contact with* (once); and *intimate with* (once). '*With*' was also used as the preposition when the offence was described more negatively; *sexual misconduct with* (four times); *an indecent act with* (twice); *inappropriate relationship with* (once); and *inappropriate activities with* (once). In all these instances, the implication was that the victim was an active participant, engaging in sexual activities *with* the offender.

Although they were the minority, there were instances where the offence was referred to as being done *to* the victim. The articles surrounding Reriti's case stood out as the ones that characterised the offence and the offender in the most unfavourable light, and did not depict the victim as being an active participant in their own victimisation. The offence in these articles was referred to as an indecent act (Leask, 2022; Weekes, 2015) and described as sexual violation, manipulation, and exploitation (Leask, 2022; Shadwell, 2015; Weekes, 2015). There was an acknowledgement that the victim was just a ten-year-old boy, a minor sexually abused by his teacher (Wong, 2015). While there were some negative comments made about Pontbriand's offending, and references made to sexual assault (CTV News, 2014; Postmedia News 2014; Woods, 2014) and sexual exploitation (Cherry, 2015; CTV News, 2014; Woods, 2014), Reriti's case stood out as the one that received the harshest critique and most backlash in the media. This disparity was further evident in relation to the 'repercussions for offending'. Reriti was sentenced to more than ten years in jail (Shadwell, 2015; Weekes, 2015; Wong, 2015), and was continuously denied parole (Leask, 2022). Other articles, however, referenced the FSOs escaping punishment, avoiding jail sentences, being spared prison, or walking free (Beatty, 2023;

Goldenberg, 2006; Hill, 2021; Metro News Reporter, 2014; Moncur, 2014; Roberts, 2021; Robertson, 2014; Sheehy, 2006; Spillett, 2014; Woods, 2023). While the responses to Reriti's offending should have been the rule rather than the exception, the reality was the opposite. The potential reasons for the more punitive responses are unpacked in the 'discussion' chapter that follows.

6.3 Duty of Care

The fact that these FSOs were teachers was consistently reiterated throughout the media articles, with one hundred and sixty-nine references, across the forty articles, citing their *teacher* status. In accordance with this, the victims were characterised as a *student* ninety-seven times; a *pupil* twenty-eight times; and a *schoolboy* ten times. In instances where the offenders were no longer teachers, the articles still reiterated their *teacher* status, by referring to them as a *former teacher* thirty-five times. The continuous repetition of the terms *teacher* and *former teacher* aligned with Matthews et al.'s (1991:208) 'teacher/lover' typology, which has been exclusively reserved for FSOs (Robertiello & Terry, 2007:513). In accordance with this typology, female teacher sex offenders are positioned in an institutional context in which they have a duty of care (Landor & Eisenchlas, 2012:488). The media relied on this 'teacher/lover' typology, designating these sexual predators as female teachers who had abused their position of power over their male students and were in breach of their duty of care. In relation to this, there were ten instances where the articles specified "*female teacher*" (Daily Telegraph, 2008; Eder, 2020; Elvin, 2021; Hill, 2021; Leask, 2022; Metro News Reporter, 2014; Nelson Weekly, 2020; Pyman, 2021; Roberts, 2021; Weekes, 2015) which reinforced the view that the 'teacher/lover' typology was reserved for 'female teacher' sex offenders.

These observations corresponded with the common classification systems used for sex offenders, and the differentiation between 'rapists' and 'female sex offenders' specifically. Robertiello and Terry's (2007:509) definition of a 'rapist' as a male who rapes a female implies that the act of rape is monopolised by male sexual offenders. The related suggestion is that most of the existing sex offender typologies are only applicable to MSOs and not to their female counterparts (Robertiello & Terry, 2007:513). Applying this perspective to the findings of this research, there

was not one instance, across all forty articles, where these FSOs were labelled as rapists, despite the acknowledgment that, in select cases, the offending did constitute rape.

The reliance on the 'teacher/lover' typology, and the related recognition that the offenders were in breach of their duty of care as teachers, was reinforced in the articles through the acknowledgement that the offenders pled guilty to abusing their positions of trust (Elvin, 2021; Hill, 2021; Metro News Reporter, 2014; Moncur, 2014; Pyman, 2021; Roberts, 2021; Spillett, 2014), and sexually assaulting a child under their supervision, care and authority (Beatty, 2023; Collins, 2008; Gold Coast Bulletin, 2023; Timms, 2023; Woods, 2023). There was an acknowledgement that, as teachers, the offenders were in positions of power and authority (Newshub, 2020; Woods, 2014), and abused this power (Behr, 2019): "*she held power over them and the boys were her victims*" (Behr, 2019). The cases were characterised accordingly in the articles as breaches of trust (Leask, 2020; Moncur, 2014; Nelson Weekly, 2020; Robertson, 2014; Weekes, 2015; Wong, 2015). Further comments about the cases, as featured in the articles, noted that "*the abuse of that position of trust highlights just how serious this type of criminality is*" (Elvin, 2021; Hill, 2021; Pyman, 2021; Roberts, 2021).

Public comments relating to the 'teacher/lover' typology, and the breach of duty of care were also highlighted in the articles: "*you send your kids to school and think they are protected by teachers and they're looking after your kids*" (Eder, 2020); "*Society relies on parents' ability to rely on teachers having care of their children*" (Eder, 2020); "*We expect our teachers to care for their children and protect them from abuse*" (Moncur, 2014). In Ooms' case, the judge was criticised for failing to acknowledge "*how her teaching role had assisted in the offending*" (Beatty, 2023); "*that her position as a teacher had helped her gain access to the boy*" (Woods, 2023). In contrast, the judge's decision to sentence Pontbriand to twenty months in jail "*sends a message that teachers must not abuse their positions of authority*" (Postmedia News, 2014). SAPeople Contributor's (2019) article on Viotti's case commented that "*this is not a criminal matter but one of gross misconduct between a teacher who has stepped over a clear line*". This sentiment was echoed in Ooms' case where the Gold Coast Bulletin (2023) highlighted the judge's comment that "*the offence isn't penetration, it's doing it while a teacher*". In Viotti's case, comments about the offence being a breach of professional conduct and ethical standards

for teachers (Eder, 2020; SAPeople Contributor, 2019) superseded any comments about the legal ramifications of her actions in the article. This reinforced the alignment with the 'teacher/lover' rather than the 'rapist' typology, or other potentially related sex offender typologies that have been reserved for exclusive use in the classification of MSOs.

6.4 Social Normality

The media further relied on describing the FSOs in terms of their social normality, expressly in relation to their conformity to socially constructed gender norms. There were one hundred and forty-one references made, across thirty-two of the forty articles, to the ways in which these FSOs adhered to gender norms and the 'traditional role of women'. Particular reference was made to these offenders' conformity to the 'traditional role of women' as wives and mothers, with their adherence to social normality being described in terms of their familial or marital statuses. In relation to the articles' descriptions of these offenders being wives and mothers specifically: Smith was a "*mother-of-three*" (Metro News Reporter, 2014; Moncur, 2014; Spillett, 2014) and "*married*" (Moncur, 2014; Spillett, 2014); Lafave was "*married*" (Lauer, 2006; Sheehy, 2006) and a "*mom*" (Helling, 2018); Viotti was "*married*" (SAPeople Contributor, 2019) and a "*wife*" (SAPeople Contributor, 2019); Cooney was a "*mother*" (Eder, 2020; Leask, 2020; Nelson Weekly, 2020) and a "*wife*" (Eder, 2020; Leask, 2020; Nelson Weekly, 2020); Letourneau was a "*wife*" (Santana, 1998), "*married*" (The Associated Press, 2004), and a "*mother*" (The Associated Press, 2004); Rafei was "*married*" (Collins, 2008; Daily Telegraph, 2008); Parsons was a "*mum*" (Elvin, 2021; Hill, 2021; Roberts, 2021); and Pontbriand was a "*mother*" (CTV News, 2014; Woods, 2014).

The media were preoccupied with the negative consequences that the FSOs' offending had on their marital statuses. While the converse was true for Cooney and Pontbriand, who were supported by their husbands (Cherry, 2015; Eder, 2020), multiple references were made to how the FSOs destroyed their marriages (Lauer, 2006; The Associated Press, 1998); to their marriages being at an end (Evans, 2020; Robertson, 2014); or in ruins (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2009); and their husbands filing for divorce (Lauer, 2006; Santana, 1998; The Associated Press, 1998). Moncur (2014) even referenced an instance in Smith's case where the judge attributed her offending to strain in her marriage: "*the difficulties of your own marriage*

may have contributed to your actions". In fact, the challenges in the FSOs' relationships were recurringly identified as catalysts for their offending (Beatty, 2023; Elvin, 2021; Hill, 2021; Pyman, 2021; Roberts, 2021; Spillett, 2014). Beyond their marriages, consideration was also given to the impact of the offending on the FSOs' children. In Pontbriand's case specifically, the articles featured the attorney's and family's argument that "*sentencing her to jail would create additional victims out of her children*" (Woods, 2014); "*jail time would only further punish her two young children by keeping them from their mother*" (CTV News, 2014). Similarly, the judge in Parson's case considered "*the impact of custody on her young daughter*" (Hill, 2021; Pyman, 2021; Roberts, 2021) during sentencing.

6.5 The Denial of Female Agency

There is a trend of denialism surrounding female agency when it comes to sex (Landor & Eisenchlas, 2012:486). This stems from a refusal to accept the fact that women can be harmful sexual offenders, instigators of sexual abuse, and simply anything more than sexually passive (Hayes & Carpenter, 2013:170; Landor & Eisenchlas, 2012:489; Tozdan et al., 2019:4). The media contributed to this denial of female agency in two key ways. The first was by emphasising the victims' active and participatory role in the 'sexual encounter'. The second was by suggesting that the offenders' poor mental health was the causative factor in their criminal behaviour. In both these instances, culpability was shifted away from the FSO and their behaviour attributed to male influence or to mental deficits beyond their control.

Gender Roles in Sex

Distinguishing between gender roles in sex influenced the trend of denialism around the possibility that women can be harmful sexual aggressors or, even more simply, instigators of sexual acts. As was discussed under 'understanding the offence', there were one hundred and eleven instances where '*with*' was the preposition used following the offence. The resultant implication was that the boys were active and willing participants in their own victimisation. There were instances where the victims' active participation in the 'sexual encounters' was further emphasised in the articles through explicit statements that they were willing participants (Beatty, 2023; Collins, 2008; Daily Telegraph, 2008; Elvin, 2021; Hill, 2021; Pyman, 2021; Roberts, 2021; SAPeople Contributor, 2019; Shadwell, 2015; Wong, 2015): "*He was hot for the*

teacher" (Sheehy, 2006); "*the boy initially pursued the teacher*" (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2009). In Rafei's case, the articles even went so far as to highlight the comments made about the offender being a "*sex slave*" (Collins, 2008; Daily Telegraph, 2008). These findings moved the responsibility away from the FSOs by insinuating that the victims were the instigators of the 'sexual encounter'. Doing so reinforced the notion that women are sexually passive and disinclined to initiate sexual activity (Hayes & Carpenter, 2013:170; Landor & Eisenchlas, 2012:489; Tozdan et al., 2019:4). This narrative stemmed from sexual scripts and the historical understanding that "*women are to be protected from sex, but boys are supposed to enjoy it and look for the opportunity*" (Goldenberg, 2006).

Mental Health Defence

There were ninety-three references made, across thirty-two of the forty articles, to the mental health of the FSOs. In their construction of Smith, the media characterised her behaviour as "*bizarre*" (Robertson, 2014); as "*ten days of madness*" (Spillett, 2014); and noted that "*she thought she was going crazy but couldn't help the way she was feeling*" (Spillett, 2014). Similar comments were made about Letourneau and the fact that her behaviour was not characteristic of someone with a "*rational mind*" (The Associated Press, 1998). These characterisations reinforced the categorisations of FSOs as 'mad', aligning with Denov's (2001:321) comments about the societal need, mimicked in research, to categorise female offenders as 'mad' and/or 'sad'.

In this manner the media reinforced the notion that female criminality was predominantly caused by mental deficits. The general consensus across articles reviewed was that poor mental health was the leading causative factor of the FSOs' deviant behaviour. The articles surrounding Lafave's case discussed instances where the lawyer "*cites bipolar disorder in a bid to explain her seamy actions*" (Sheehy, 2006). It was suggested that "*the only logical reason why Deborah Lafave did what she did was because of her mental illness*" (Lauer, 2006). The mental health defence was further evident in Cooney's case where it was surmised that her "*poor mental health had contributed to her uncharacteristic behaviour*" (Eder, 2020). The articles surrounding Letourneau also drew attention to the mental health defence used by her lawyer, and the argument "*that the disgraced teacher is a sick woman, not a criminal*" (The Spokesman-Review,

1998); "*she has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, a mental condition they say caused her reckless behavior*" (The Spokesman-Review, 1998). The articles highlighted comments that "*the disorder caused Letourneau to take "really stupid risks"*" (The Spokesman-Review, 1998); "*the disorder is the root of Letourneau's attraction for the boy*" (The Spokesman-Review, 1998); "*the condition may have led her to become sexually involved with the boy*" (Santana, 1998); "*Letourneau's bipolar disorder -- a form of depression -- led her to continue sexual contact with the boy despite the obvious consequences*" (The Associated Press, 1998). Parsons' behaviour was also attributed to the mental health issues she was said to be suffering from at the time of her offending (Elvin, 2021; Hill, 2021; Pyman, 2021; Roberts, 2021). This trend of attributing criminal behaviour to mental health issues was also evident in articles surrounding Reriti's case where Shadwell (2015) quoted the lawyer's "*inescapable conclusion that the illness had some bearing on this offending if not being the causative factor*".

The mental health defence proved effective when it came to sentencing. The media articles commented on judges acknowledging the FSOs' *"fragile mental state"* (Leask, 2022; The Gold Coast Bulletin, 2023; Weekes, 2015), taking this into account, and reducing sentences (Shadwell, 2015) as a result. This, in conjunction with the suggestion that their mental illnesses *"would potentially render a term of imprisonment 'catastrophic"*" (Woods, 2023), positioned the FSOs as victims of their poor mental health, and elicited a degree of empathy for these sexual predators. The FSOs' mental health was also taken into consideration when, in the rare instances where they were remanded to prison, considering their release. In Cooney's case, the argument that the treatment she needed was not available to her in prison formed the basis of her submission to the parole board (Leask, 2020; Nelson Weekly, 2020; Newshub, 2020). The FSOs were positioned as victims of their poor mental health which reinforced the denial of female agency.

6.6 The Duality of Victimisation

There were fifty-seven instances, in twenty-five of the forty articles, where the offender was characterised as a victim. In some instances, the 'victimisation of offender' occurred in response to the 'repercussions for offending', characterising the FSOs as victims of their own offending. The articles referenced how the FSOs "*suffered a great deal as a result of the case*" (Woods, 2014). Examples of this 'suffering' included the "*devastating consequences*" (Helling, 2018) on

their teaching careers; loss of their jobs (CTV News, 2014; Woods, 2014); and resultant financial loss (Woods, 2014); loss of self-esteem (Woods, 2014); emotional loss (Woods, 2014); a loss "*at all levels*" (Woods, 2014); "*She's lost everything except her children and her husband*" (Woods, 2014); "*She lost her career, she lost her dream*" (Woods, 2014).

The 'victimisation of offender' was also evident in the responses to their sentencing. The media commented on the FSOs being distraught about the mere thought of going to prison (Santana, 1998), and noted instances where they were visibly upset and crying in court (Beatty, 2023; Daily Telegraph, 2008; Elvin, 2021; Hill, 2021; Postmedia News, 2014; Pyman, 2021; Roberts, 2021; Weekes, 2015; Woods, 2023). In Reriti's case, Weekes (2015) quoted her lawyer who "*described Reriti as vulnerable, and said a long jail term would not be good for her*". Beyond their personal responses, the 'victimisation of offender' also occurred through the portrayal of the FSOs as victims of public responses to their offending. The articles discussed "*the pains of having her life dragged through the press*" (Goldenberg, 2006); the fact that "*she reported feeling "ostracised" in her community*" (Beatty, 2023); had "*endured a "tumultuous" period, which included extensive abuse*" (Timms, 2023); "*been shunned by her family and community and her marriage is in ruins*" (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2009). In Pontbriand's case, the articles highlighted the ways in which "*many of Pontbriand's friends and former students have praised her on social media and portrayed her as a victim*" (CTV News, 2014), which fortified the characterisation of these sex offenders as victims of their offending.

The 'victimisation of offender' continued through the focus on how the FSOs had previously been victims of sexual offences themselves. Lafave was allegedly raped when she was thirteen years of age, which was said to be just one of many traumatic sexual encounters she experienced (Helling, 2018; Lauer, 2006). Her sexual offending was, in part, attributed to these abusive sexual relationships (Lauer, 2006). Viotti was also referred to as "*the victim of a sexual misconduct incident*" (Behr, 2019). References to the FSOs' past trauma (Lauer, 2006; Woods, 2023) continued in articles surrounding Reriti's case (Leask, 2022; Weekes, 2015), through the mention of "*similar offending on her*" (Wong, 2015) that made her vulnerable (Weekes, 2015). In these instances, the media considered the sexual abuse experienced by these women as rape and as traumatic (Helling, 2018; Lauer, 2006). This same understanding, however, was not afforded

to these FSOs' male victims. This observation demonstrated that sexual abuse was only acknowledged as rape and as traumatic when the victim was female and, therefore, conformed to 'real' rape scripts.

Destruction of the Real Victim

The discussions around 'the duality of victimisation' elicited questions about the potential ramifications that the 'victimisation of offender' had on their victims. Sixty-six references were made, across twenty-five of the forty articles, to the 'ramifications for victim'. These statistics were shockingly similar to the fifty-seven references made in twenty-five of the forty articles to the 'victimisation of offender'. The almost equal number of references made to the respective 'victimisations' of the offender and the real victim called attention to a social ill that needs to be addressed.

This observation was particularly important given that the psychological effects are far more damaging for victims of female perpetrated sexual abuse than victims of male perpetrated sexual abuse (Denov, 2003:311). One of the reasons for this disparity, evident through a discussion of the findings, was the trivialisation of male victims' experiences. In some instances, there was a complete disregard of any harm done by the FSOs. Comments highlighted in the articles dismissed any potential harm to the victim, insinuating there was no negative, adverse, or long-standing impact on the young boys (Eder, 2020; Gold Coast Bulletin, 2023; Metro News Reporter, 2014; Moncur, 2014; Robertson, 2014). In Lafave's case, the further trivialisation of the victim was evident through comments made in the articles that "*her victim was turned into a running joke on late-night television. Didn't every teenage boy fantasise about having sex with his hot blond teacher?*" (Goldenberg, 2006); and that "*there are some people out there who say this is every 14-year-old boy's fantasy*" (Lauer, 2006). In Parson's case, the victim admitted he was badly affected by everyone talking about the offence and his victimisation (Elvin, 2021; Hill, 2021; Pyman, 2021; Roberts, 2021). The victim's "*dad said his son's general behaviour had not been 'negatively affected', but he had experienced some bullying as a result*" (Elvin, 2021; Hill 2021; Pyman, 2021; Roberts, 2021). In this case, while there was acknowledgement of victimisation, there appeared to be some disconnect between the victim's experience and familial perceptions of the victim's experience. The acknowledgement of the negative ramifications for

the victim was the exception across the articles, rather than the rule. In Reriti's case, the articles recognised that, while the real harm would not be evident for some time (Weekes, 2015; Wong, 2015), harm was caused to the victim (Shadwell, 2015) and there would be a long term, negative impact (Weekes, 2015).

6.7 The Infamy of Female Sex Offenders

The findings of this research revealed that intense media attention (Moncur, 2014; Woods, 2014) was characteristic of cases of female perpetrated sexual offences. Ooms' case was described by the judge as "*"unique" and a "novelty"*" (Gold Coast Bulletin, 2023), a uniqueness and novelty which the articles suggested was the reason for the infamy of FSOs. Forty-six references, across seventeen of the forty articles, were made to instances of 'fame and sensationalisation' surrounding these FSO cases. In Viotti's case "*the allegations*" (Evans, 2020) made nationwide headlines (Evans, 2020; SAPeople Contributor, 2019). Cooney's case was also described as one of "*"significant" public interest*" (Eder, 2020). Similarly, CTV News (2014) characterised Pontbriand's case as a "*scandal*" that was covered by cross-provincial media.

In Lafave's case, the media intensity was magnified as "*her case grabbed international headlines*" (Sheehy, 2006); and "*created an international sensation*" (Lauer, 2006). "*Within days of her arrest Debra Lafave became one of the most Googled people on the planet - and not everybody thought she was a criminal*" (Lauer, 2006). Articles surrounding Lafave's case designated her as "*America's most famous sex offender*" (Goldenberg, 2006); and as "*a top contender for the title of "America's most notorious schoolteacher"*" (Lauer, 2006). They further noted that "*America seems transfixed by the notion of sex between teachers and their pupils*" (Goldenberg, 2006); and "*America's current fascination with sexual abuse, was bound to become a staple of tabloid television*" (Goldenberg, 2006). Lafave's case was described as "*the story of the platinum-blond teacher and her student*" (Goldenberg, 2006); and her victim was characterised as "*the "very flirtatious" middle-school student she first infamously seduced on her classroom couch*" (Sheehy, 2006). Lafave was not only nationally known (Helling, 2018), but "*her notorious sex scandal received international attention*" too (Helling, 2018). Helling's (2018) article suggested that "*the story became international news - partly because female teacher sex scandals were relatively rare at the time, and partly because Lafave was a tall,*

statuesque blonde". Lafave's case was, accordingly, considered "*a crime tailor-made for the tabloids*" (Lauer, 2006). This was reminiscent of Letourneau's case, and The Associated Press' (2004) article that depicted her as the "*school teacher whose seduction of a sixth-grade pupil launched a thousand tabloid covers*".

The articles also discussed the way in which the infamy of these female teachers extended beyond the making of media headlines. Beyond becoming household names, there were references to TV interviews (Sheehy, 2006) and the fact that, despite being under house arrest, Lafave was granted special permission to meet a journalist at a hotel for an interview (Sheehy, 2006). The interviews were sensationalised in the articles, with a sense of anticipation underpinning the references made to them: "*In her first-ever television interview, Debra Lafave will take us step by step through the whole affair*" (Lauer, 2006); "*On Dateline the former teacher is telling her story for the first time on television: how it happened, why it happened, and whether she's paid the price*" (Lauer, 2006). The articles around Letourneau's case also discussed her appearance on the "*Oprah Winfrey Show*" (Santana, 1998; The Associated Press, 1998). The Associated Press (2004) commented on the possibility of Letourneau telling and selling her story, noting that a court ruled that she may sell and profit from it. The converse was true for Lafave who was explicitly prohibited from legally selling her story and thereby profiting from her crime (Lauer, 2006). The mere suggestion that these FSOs could profit from their crimes emphasised the extent to which these cases were sensationalised and these sexual predators made infamous.

These findings gave rise to questions around why these cases of FSOs reached such levels of fame and sensationalisation. Helling's (2018) comment that Lafave's case became international news was, in part, due to the fact that "*Lafave was a tall, statuesque blonde*" suggested that some of these cases were renowned due to the perceived attractiveness of the sex offenders. Forty-one 'comments on offender's appearance' were made across ten of the forty articles. The offenders were most simply characterised as "*attractive*" (Goldenberg, 2006); "*very attractive*" (Lauer, 2006); "*hot*" (Goldenberg, 2006; Lauer, 2006); "*beautiful*" (Lauer, 2006); "*stunning*" (SAPeople Contributor, 2019); and "*a knockout*" (Lauer, 2006). There were also instances where the offenders were crudely sexualised in the articles through comments on their "*boobs and nice hairdo*" (Metro News Reporter, 2014); "*the pretty face and the hourglass figure*" (Lauer, 2006);

"*buxom, bottle-blond babe*" (Sheehy, 2006); "*leggy blonde in flawless makeup*" (Goldenberg, 2006). The Metro News Reporter (2014) article on Smith highlighted opinions that "*she got off so lightly because she looks like a Paris model*". In Lafave's case, the articles referenced her lawyer's argument that she was "*too pretty for prison*" (Goldenberg, 2006); "*that putting his comely client behind bars would be like "putting a raw piece of meat in with the lions"*" (Sheehy, 2006); and that "*to place an attractive young woman in that kind of hellhole, is like putting a piece of raw meat in with the lions*" (Goldenberg, 2006). This suggested that the perceived attractiveness of these FSOs also had the potential to influence their sentencing. In an ideal world, "*Any adult who sexually abuses a child deserves a punishment that fits the crime. It should make no difference whether the offender is a scraggly, beaded bogeyman or a leggy blonde in flawless makeup*" (Goldenberg, 2006). The findings of this research, however, highlighted that this was not the case, and that beauty bias directly contributed to perceptions of and responses to FSOs.

The infamy of FSOs raised further questions about 'gendered double standards' and differences in perceptions of and responses to FSOs versus MSOs. The articles brought into question "*whether society is willing to tolerate sexual misconduct if the aggressor is female*" (Goldenberg, 2006). The reality noted was that "*society is failing to protect its male children from predators*" (Goldenberg, 2006), and from female sexual predators more specifically. In considering the issue of these double standards, the articles highlighted gender disparities in relation to the repercussions for offending, quoting comments about how "*the courts fail to acknowledge the gravity of child abuse when a women is to blame*" (Goldenberg, 2006); "*If that had been a male teacher abusing a female pupil, he'd have got the jail*" (Metro News Reporter, 2014); and that "*if the roles were reversed, and if you were a man who was 24 and had sex with a 13- or 14-year-old girl, you'd be in prison*" (Lauer, 2006). Such lenient treatment of these FSOs by the "*legal system has provoked accusations of a gendered double standard*" (Goldenberg, 2006).

6.8 Conclusion

This chapter continued the narrative discussion of the findings in relation to media constructions of FSOs in the content of their articles. Through this discussion, the argument that the media are complicit in the trend of denialism that surrounds FSOs was clearly reinforced. The focus on the

key themes, namely ‘understanding of offence’; ‘duty of care’; ‘social normality’; ‘the denial of female agency’ considering ‘gender roles in sex’ and the ‘mental health defence’; ‘the duality of victimisation’ and the resultant ‘destruction of the real victim’; and the ‘infamy of female sex offenders’ that presented themselves in the media constructions highlighted three overarching themes. These themes of trivialisation, leniency, and denial will be considered in more detail in the following chapter, along with the related reverberations.

Chapter 7. Discussion: The Media as Complicit

7.1 Introduction

This chapter critiques the media constructions of FSOs as discussed in the two preceding 'findings' chapters. In line with my central research questions and research objectives, I consider how the media constructions contribute to the trend of denialism surrounding FSOs. Through this, I position the media as complicit in the invisibility of FSOs. I begin this chapter with a reiteration of the research problem and a summary of the key findings. The findings are then discussed in more detail in relation to existing literature, and within a social constructionist framework. Specific consideration is given to the three overarching, recurring themes of trivialisation, leniency and denial, and the resultant implications these have on the invisibility of FSOs. I then contextualise these themes, and the emanating invisibility of FSOs, within the broader picture of social harm. A driving force behind this research was the argument that FSOs are not being conceptualised as rapists and/or paedophiles. I, therefore, consider the way in which media constructions of FSOs, and their offences, align with the rapist and paedophile typologies that are currently monopolised by MSOs. I argue for the degendering of sex offender typologies and for the resultant labelling of FSOs as rapists and/or paedophiles.

7.2 Summary of Research and Key Findings

My central research questions were:

1. How is the invisible FSO made visible in the media?
2. How do media constructions of FSOs contribute to the trend of social denialism and the resulting invisibility of the phenomenon?

The sub-questions that guided my research were:

- How does the media socially construct ideas of gender norms?
- How does the media socially construct deviance in relation to gender norms?
- What characteristics do the media rely on in their construction of female teacher sex offenders?
- How do the gendered conceptualisations of rape and paedophilia influence the image of the female teacher sex offender as constructed by the media?

Through this research, I have challenged the gendered assumptions surrounding rape and paedophilia in the media, and the resultant, continued dismissal of women as sexually deviant and harmful sexual aggressors. The focus on media constructions of FSOs has allowed for the consideration of how an invisible phenomenon is made visible by platforms that have public and institutional influence. Research has considered the negative portrayal of sex offenders in the media (Collins, 2016; Navarro & Higgins, 2023), and how the media emphasise the predatory nature of sex offenders through the use of child victims as a rhetorical device (DiBennardo, 2018:1). My findings, however, highlighted recurring themes of trivialisation, leniency and denial in media constructions of female perpetrated sexual offences. These three recurring themes unequivocally implicate the media in the invisibility of FSOs.

I have, thus, positioned the media as complicit in the invisibility of FSOs. This complicity was evident through (a) their conceptualisation of the offence; (b) their repudiation of female agency; (c) their focus on constructing the FSOs in terms of their social normality; (d) their insinuation of a duality to victimisation in cases of female perpetrated sexual abuse; (e) their sensationalisation of FSOs; and (f) their failure to challenge the prevailing dichotomy between MSOs and FSOs. As other scholars have shown, the media coverage of crime has been influential in perpetuating inaccurate offender and victim stereotypes (Colburn & Melander, 2018:385). My findings have called attention to a clear misrepresentation of the FSOs and the reality of their sexually predatory crimes in the news media.

7.3 Trivialisation

The media consistently characterised the FSO cases, and the 'relationship' between the victim and offender, as an affair; a sexual relationship; sexual encounter; sexual activity; sex scandal; and even more playfully as a fling; teen romp; steamy sex tryst; sexual frolics; or sexual shenanigans. All these characterisations completely trivialise these cases of rape and paedophilia. The underlying suggestion is that the relationship between the victim and offender was consensual. The recharacterisation of these instances of rape and paedophilia as consensual relationships not only trivialise a major sexual offence, but also position the victims as active and willing participants in their own sexual victimisation. In this manner, the blame is shifted away from the FSO and victim accountability is implied. Patriarchal notions of sexual violence are

also enforced through the recurring narrative that women cannot be instigators of sexually predatory acts.

The further characterisation of the offence as an illicit relationship (The Associated Press, 2004) and media perceptions of the FSOs as women in love (Bice, 2009; Helling, 2018; Moncur, 2014; Newshub, 2020; Spillett, 2014; The Spokesman-Review, 1998) introduced an additional 'forbidden romance' narrative. This 'forbidden romance' narrative reframes these serious cases of sexual abuse as romantic love stories. This is reminiscent of perceptions of Mathews et al.'s (1989) teacher/lover typology as often involving a 'true love' situation between the FSO and the victim (Vandiver & Kercher, 2004:133). These FSOs are motivated by feelings of love and their 'relationship' with the victim is, therefore, perceived as being devoid of abuse (Vandiver & Kercher, 2004:133). My findings highlighted the way in which the media romanticise the relationship between victim and offender, and even go so far as to sympathise with the offender and their involvement in this 'forbidden romance'. Previous research has discussed the way in which the media strengthen the 'forbidden romance' narrative by removing the ages of victim and offender (Grimm & Harp, 2011:9). The victim and offender are reimagined as teenagers joined together in their illicit and forbidden love, like Romeo and Juliet (Grimm & Harp, 2011:9). This Romeo and Juliet trope is evident in the teenage-like descriptions of interactions between the victim and offender, and scenes where they snuck out to meet one another (Collins, 2008; Daily Telegraph, 2008), or shared their first kiss (Metro News Reporter, 2014; Moncur, 2014; The Spokesman-Review, 1998). These juvenile accounts of these interactions not only reinforce the notion of a 'forbidden romance' but also reaffirm the idea that the victims were active and willing participants in their own victimisation. The acknowledgement that sexual offences are criminal cases of rape and/or paedophilia is notably absent, and the media silence on this is loud.

While there was a trend of trivialisation across the articles, Reriti's case was identified as an outlier in the findings, due to the comparatively harsher media response. In discussing their perception of the FSO, the media commented on the way Reriti groomed (Shadwell, 2015; Wong, 2015) and manipulated (Leask, 2022; Shadwell, 2015; Weekes, 2015; Wong, 2015) her victim. Emotional manipulation has been identified as a type of grooming behaviour utilised by

child sexual abusers (Robertiello & Terry, 2007:512). Despite their acknowledgement that Reriti groomed (Shadwell, 2015; Wong, 2015) and manipulated (Leask, 2022; Shadwell, 2015; Weekes, 2015; Wong, 2015) her victim, the media continuously fell short of labelling Reriti a paedophile. Research has shown that attitudes towards sexual abuse cases are more punitive when involving younger victims (Banton & West, 2020:257; King & Roberts, 2017:84). The age of the victim is, therefore, considered a predictor in the perceived seriousness of child sexual abuse cases (Banton & West, 2020:257). The acknowledgement of the age-line between children, adolescents and adults is fundamental to understanding the contradictory responses to sexual abuse cases (Hayes & Carpenter, 2013:166). With this in mind, the fact that Reriti's victim was ten years old, and the youngest victim in the FSO cases considered for this research (see Table 2), offers a plausible explanation as to why the media construction in this instance was comparatively negative.

The fact that Reriti was a woman of colour serves as a second plausible explanation for her comparatively negative construction in the media. Research on the influence of race or ethnicity on media depictions of female offenders has highlighted how media representations of crimes and criminals continue to reinforce negative racial stereotypes (Brennan & Vandenberg, 2009:164; Colburn & Melander, 2018:393; Deckert, 2020:338). White women's criminal behaviour, for example, is more likely to be excused in comparison to the same behaviour exhibited by women from racial minorities (Brennan & Vandenberg, 2009:164; Deckert, 2020:338). Racial minorities are more readily accepted as perpetrators of crime and are more definitively labelled as such (Colburn & Melander, 2018:393). Deckert's (2020) research on the portrayal of female offenders in New Zealand newspapers is particularly relevant here given that Reriti was the New Zealand FSO case. The findings confirmed that white women are more favourably depicted in the media in comparison to their minority counterparts (Deckert, 2020:338). These racially influenced depictions result in a distortion of the reality and understanding of crimes and the criminals that commit them (Decker, 2020:338). My findings trigger questions around the trivialisation of female sex offenders, and whether the trivialisation is limited to white female perpetrators. The disparities between media constructions of Reriti versus the other nine FSOs suggest that these cases are gaining traction and being trivialised in the media because the perpetrators are white.

Beauty and the Boy

The trivialised cases of white FSOs reached a disproportionate level of notoriety, and the perception of them being attractive women offers a further plausible explanation for their infamy. The physical appearance of FSOs has in fact been identified as a determining factor in the style and tone of media articles (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002:59). As noted in the findings of this research, forty-three comments regarding the FSOs' appearances were made in the headlines, while references to their bodies specifically appeared in ten of the forty articles. The majority of these comments support the argument that these female perpetrated sexual abuse cases are sensationalised and renowned due to the perceived attractiveness of the offenders (Helling, 2018). The media contributed to the objectification and sexualisation of the FSOs (Goldenberg, 2006; Lauer, 2006; Metro News Reporter, 2014; Sheehy, 2006), through the construction of these rapists and/or paedophiles as attractive (Goldenberg, 2006; Lauer, 2006; SAPeople Contributor, 2019). When attractive women sexually offend against teenage boys the malice is disregarded (Hayes & Carpenter, 2013:164). This 'beauty bias' results in a negative correlation between the female offenders' perceived attractiveness and the resultant harm on their victim (Landor and Eisenchlas, 2012:489). In Smith's, Lafave's and Viotti's cases specifically, extensive references were made to their perceived attractiveness, to the extent that they were sexualised in the articles. This 'beauty bias' is evident in the journalists' related comments about the attractiveness of these offenders, and their further sexualisation of them. These same comments are accompanied by the implication that the psychological harm to the victims in these cases is limited because the FSOs are attractive.

The recurring description of these FSOs as attractive offers additional insight into the dynamic the media constructs between the victim and offender. The harm caused to the victim in cases like these is further diminished through the suggestion that having sexual relations with an attractive female teacher is considered every young schoolboy's fantasy (Banton & West, 2020:258). This affirms that males are socialised to consider sexual interest from a female flattering (Landor & Eisenchlas, 2012:489). Boys who are victims of sexual abuse perpetrated by their attractive female teachers are likely to be envied by their peers for the 'sexual experience' they were able to gain from an older woman (Hayes & Carpenter, 2013:164). The findings of this

research have demonstrated how the media perpetuate this narrative by highlighting victims' comments that they felt lucky when their teacher admitted to having feelings for them, because other boys at school fancied her (Spillett, 2014).

This narrative that the victims initially fancied their teachers links back to Peterson and Muehlenhard's (2007:72) discussion on the dominant model of sexual wanting. The narrative is underpinned by the implication that, because the victims were attracted to their teachers, they consented to the sexual interaction. This conflating of want and consent is what Peterson and Muehlenhard (2007:72) specifically cautioned against. Relying on the idea that sex only qualifies as rape if unwanted serves, in part, as an explanation for why the media does not label the action of these FSOs as rape in instances where the victims admitted to being attracted to their teacher and feeling flattered by the attention. Peterson and Muehlenhard (2007:73) consider 'want' a desire or wish for something. They then conceptualise 'consent' as being willing or agreeing to do something (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007:73). The comments that the victim was attracted to his teacher, but felt awkward and uncomfortable after they had sex (Elvin, 2021; Hill, 2021; Pyman, 2021; Roberts, 2021), are an example of how the media conflates 'want' and 'consent' in these cases. The media focus on victim statements that imply want, but are notably silent when considering the victims' explicit consent. These observations identify media narratives surrounding these FSO cases of rape as being consistent with the dominant model. The media conform to the belief that wanted but non-consensual sex is conceptually impossible. The equating of want and consent results in rape cases being ignored (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007:74). In conflating want and consent, the media fails to label these cases of FSOs sexually abusing their students as rape and/or paedophilia. This affirms that the media are complicit in the invisibility of female rapists and paedophiles as phenomena, and the resultant invisibility of their victims.

7.4 Leniency

Media constructions of the FSOs, and their failure to label them as rapists and/or paedophiles, result in FSOs being considered more leniently than their male counterparts. There were eleven references made to gendered double standards across twenty-seven of the forty articles researched. These reignited debates about societies tolerating sex offender cases if the aggressor

is female (Goldenberg, 2006). The gendered double standard related comments were mainly made in relation to gender disparities within the judicial system, and the leniency the FSOs were afforded. This supports the hierarchical ranking of crime noted previously, which affirms that crimes committed by women are ranked lower and perceived as less serious than the same crime committed by men (Gould & Gertz, 1994:62; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004:122). In relation to cases of sex abuse more specifically, female perpetrated sexual assault is considered less severe than male perpetrated sexual assault, with FSOs being considered more favourably than their male counterparts (Dollar et al., 2004:100; Rogers & Davies, 2007:578; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004:122). Within the context of teachers sexually assaulting their students, even more specifically, a female teacher sexually abusing her male student is not considered as heinous as a male teacher doing the same to their female student (Angelides, 2008:361; Hayes & Carpenter, 2013:164). Cases involving a male teacher and a female student are consistently viewed more negatively than when the genders are reversed, and the case involves a female teacher and a male student (Dollar et al., 2004:92). The reality is that the social constructions of gender are so deeply embedded that it makes it almost impossible for the female perpetrated sexual abuse of boys to be given the same social meaning as the male perpetrated sexual abuse of girls (Dollar et al., 2004:92).

While there was an acknowledgement in the articles that if roles were reversed and a MSO had sexually abused a female pupil, he would have been handed a jail sentence (Metro News Reporter, 2014), these are overshadowed by comments about how the FSOs were spared jail (Gold Coast Bulletin, 2023; Hill, 2021; Metro News Reporter, 2014; Moncur, 2014; Pyman, 2021; Roberts, 2021; Robertson, 2014). This supports the literature that has identified gender disparities in the sentencing of MSOs versus FSOs, with MSOs' punishments being notably more punitive (Damiris, McKillop, Christensen, Rayment-McHugh, Burton & Patterson, 2021:228; Denov, 2001:321; Collins, 2016:297). The implication of inconsequential repercussions for the offending FSOs reinforces the narrative that female perpetrated sexual offences are less serious (Gould & Gertz, 1994:62; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004:122), less severe (Rogers & Davies, 2007:578), and not as detrimental (Angelides, 2008:361) as male perpetrated sexual offences. This narrative, in conjunction with the lenient sentencing of FSOs, minimises and invalidates the experience of their victims (Damiris et al., 2021:230).

There has been controversy surrounding this sexually biased judicial treatment of sex offenders (Angelides, 2008:359). This controversy specifically relates to the fact that gender biases almost guarantee that FSOs' receive more lenient treatment compared with their male equivalents (Angelides, 2008:359). Related cases of contention have been identified in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the USA (Angelides, 2008:359). The gender disparities in these cases underscore the need for gender-neutral understandings of sexual offences (Angelides, 2008:359). This is echoed in Weekes' (2015) article on Reriti's case, and the comment that rape laws should be updated to remove the gender inequality and accommodate for the gender-neutral understanding of rape. Despite this, the clear judicial gender bias is highlighted in the media articles through comments that the legal system fails to acknowledge the severity of child sexual abuse when the perpetrator is female (Goldenberg, 2006). If the roles were reversed and the case had been about a MSO sexually abusing his female student, he would have been handed a jail sentence (Metro News Reporter, 2014; Postmedia News, 2014). It is apparent that the criminal justice system has not evolved to acknowledge women as capable of committing sexual offences (Cortoni, Babchishin & Rat, 2017:156).

Beyond Blame

This failure to acknowledge women as harmful sexual predators capable of committing sexual offences is further evident in the findings relating to the mental health defence, and the related questions around whether the FSOs are to blame for their criminal behaviour. As highlighted in the findings, there is continued reference to the offenders' mental health disorders and their diagnoses (Elvin, 2021; Helling, 2018; Hill, 2021; Pyman, 2021; Roberts, 2021; Sheehy, 2006; The Spokesman-Review, 1998). There is an overreliance on the narrative that the offenders' poor mental health, or diagnosed mental illness, was the causative factor for their offending (Eder, 2020; Lauer, 2006; Santana, 1998; Shadwell, 2015; The Associated Press, 1998; The Spokesman-Review, 1998). The perceptions and categorisations of female offenders as 'mad' and/or 'sad', thus, continue to be reinforced by the media (Estrada et al., 2019:141).

These long standing perceptions of female offenders as 'mad' or 'sad' (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002:53; Denov, 2001:321; Estrada et al., 2019:141; Kramer, 2010:36; O'Connor,

1987:615) have historically contributed to the invisibility of the phenomenon by suggesting that the only reason why women sexually offend is due to mental illness (Cortoni et al., 2017:146). The narrative that deviant female behaviour is the result of women's mental deficits conforms to traditional female offending theories that characterised and categorised FSOs as emotionally disturbed, psychologically abnormal, and maladapted to their normative role as women (Cortoni et al., 2017:146). The tendency of media constructions to present female offenders as emotionally unstable (Easteal, Bartels, Nelson, & Holland, 2015:32) is evidenced in the findings of this research by the ninety-three references that are made to the female teacher sex offenders' mental health across thirty-two of the forty articles. The media choose to reinforce the narrative that the FSOs' behaviour is not characteristic of someone of sound mind (The Associated Press, 1998), which is underpinned by the implication that they had no agency in committing their sexual offences.

In this manner, blame is shifted away from the offender, and their behaviour is depicted as a mere causality of their poor mental health. The media garners sympathy for female offenders by attributing their criminal behaviour to these alleged poor mental health or medical conditions (Brennan & Vandenberg, 2009:146). This medicalisation and psychologising of FSOs contributes to the mitigation and minimisation of their offences (Hayes & Baker, 2014:6). FSOs' sexually predatory and criminal behaviour, therefore, continues to be rationalised through attributing FSOs' conduct to their 'impaired' mental state (Hayes & Carpenter, 2013:163). The blame is shifted away from the offender (Hayes & Baker, 2014:6) and, in some instances, the offender is even presented as a victim of her mental illness (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002:70). The narrative that these women are not completely responsible for their actions is evident in these findings. This trend of denying female agency, and affording the FSOs leniency, was evident in the numerous explicit statements reporting that the only logical reason why the FSOs behaved recklessly was due to their mental illnesses (Lauer, 2006; The Spokesman-Review, 1998).

The media categorisations of these FSOs as 'mad' reinforces the argument that their poor mental health was a causative factor in their sexual offending. This trend of denialism surrounding FSOs, influenced by the continued labelling of these women as 'mad' or 'sad', extends into legal institutions (Kramer, 2010:36). Aligning with Denov's (2001:321) discussions around mental

health affecting the sentencing of female offenders, the findings also highlight the ways in which the mental health of these FSOs was taken into consideration when determining the punishment for their crimes, with the acknowledgement of their poor mental health resulting in judicial leniency (Leask, 2022; Shadwell, 2015; The Gold Coast Bulletin, 2023; Weekes, 2015; Woods, 2023). The consideration of the FSOs mental health during sentencing further reinforced the notion that the FSOs are beyond blame. This focus on the offenders' mental health issues contributes to the denial of female agency in committing their sexual offences, and the suggestion of a more lenient sentence as a result.

The findings highlight a continued reliance on the narrative that female offending is due to biological abnormalities. As a result, FSOs are depicted as not being in control of their criminal actions (Landor & Eisenchlas, 2012:498), and as passive victims of their mental health (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002:70) who should be afforded leniency. The attribution of these instances of female initiated sexual abuse to mental conditions serves as an additional example of how the media shifts the blame away from the FSO. This blame shifting perpetuates the narrative that women cannot be instigators of sexual acts. While the groundwork has been set for the argument that female criminality can be explained through understanding the social (Estrada et al., 2019:139), there is still an overreliance on biological influences. Social constructionism, and anti-essentialism more specifically, argues against these biological influences by saying that there are no 'internal essences' that make people what they are (Burr, 2015:6). This essentialism traps individuals' personalities and identities within their biological makeup (Burr, 2015:6). This trapping is characterised by social constructionists as pathological and restrictive (Burr, 2015:6). FSOs' sexually predatory criminal behaviour, however, continues to be explained in terms of biological mechanisms.

In relation to Reriti's case, the media cite the lawyer's argument that Reriti's psychological illnesses contributed to her offending (Leask, 2022; Shadwell, 2015; Weekes, 2015; Wong, 2015), and the judge's acknowledgement that Reriti was mentally unwell (Leask, 2022; Shadwell, 2015; Weekes, 2015; Wong, 2015). Reriti's repercussions for offending were, however, comparatively punitive. The media articles confirm that Reriti was jailed for over ten years (Shadwell, 2015; Weekes, 2015) and was repeatedly refused parole (Leask, 2022). In

comparison, other offenders in the data sample were not given a jail sentence (Gold Coast Bulletin, 2023; Hill, 2021; Metro News Reporter, 2014; Moncur, 2014; Pyman, 2021; Roberts, 2021; Robertson, 2014); or were only sentenced to twenty months imprisonment, but received early parole (Cherry, 2015; CTV News, 2014; Postmedia News, 2014; Woods, 2014); or were sentenced to seven-and-a-half years imprisonment, but had their sentence suspended and were released early (Santana, 1998; The Associated Press, 1998; The Associated Press, 2004). The penalties were notably disproportionate. Again, the question about society's willingness to tolerate female perpetrated sexual abuse simply because the aggressor is a women (Goldenberg, 2006) should be reframed to query if society is willing to tolerate sexual misconduct if the aggressor is a white female.

7.5 Denial

The roles of 'teacher', 'child-minder', 'mother', 'wife', 'woman', that these FSOs occupy contribute to the characterisation of women as 'nurturers'. These conjure an image of the FSO that aligns with gendered stereotypes and the related behavioural expectations of women. The offenders' conformity to these roles aligns with, and reinforces, traditional 'female' sexual scripts where women are written as passive, subordinate, submissive, innocent, nurturing; all of which serve as an antithesis to their criminal behaviour (Christensen, 2018:177; Hayes & Baker, 2014:7; Hayes & Carpenter, 2013:161). The acceptance that women are capable of independently and purposefully sexually abusing children is reliant on a willingness to challenge these long-standing gendered perceptions (Cortoni et al., 2017:146). The constructions of FSOs considered in this research, however, underscore the fact that the media reinforce rather than challenge these entrenched gendered perceptions.

Female Sexual Autonomy

The designation of women as sexually submissive and passive, furthermore, has contributed to the invisibility of FSOs. Sex has historically been considered as something that men do to women (Landor & Eisenchlas, 2012:498). Women have, consequently, been positioned as a passive, subordinate party in a sexual interaction (Christensen, 2018:177; Hayes & Baker, 2014:7; Hayes & Carpenter, 2013:161; Landor & Eisenchlas, 2012:498). The rendering of women as sexually passive and subordinate contributes to the denial of female agency that shifts

the responsibility away from FSOs who, in actual fact, have clear control in a sexual interaction (Landor & Eisenchlas, 2012:499). As highlighted in the findings, the use of the 'with' preposition (utilised one hundred and eleven times in the media characterisation of the offence) reinforced the narrative that the victims were active participants in their own sexual victimisation. The idea of the victims' active and willing participation in their sexual victimisation was further highlighted in the findings and the comments that the boys were attracted to and pursued the teacher, and were the instigators of the sexual interactions (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2009; Beatty, 2023; Collins, 2008; Daily Telegraph, 2008; Elvin, 2021; Hill, 2021; Pyman, 2021; Roberts 2021; SAPeople Contributor, 2019; Sheehy, 2006; Shadwell, 2015). The characterisation of the victim as the initiator of the sexual 'relationship' is a further contributing factor in shifting the blame away from the FSO, rendering these predators as sexually passive participants. The media constructions of the young boys as the instigators rather than the victims, and the female offenders as passive and subordinate in the sexual interaction, aligns with traditional sexual scripts. The reliance on these scripts contributes to the continued invisibility of FSOs (Denov, 2003:303). The long-standing feminist battle against the subordinate status of women (Lober, 2000:82) will need to be reprised if we are to move towards degendering sex offender typologies.

Contradicting Traditional Gender Roles

Hegemonic perceptions surrounding the traditional role of women need to be challenged in order to move towards the acknowledgement of FSOs as a phenomenon (Cortoni et al., 2017:146). Female perpetrated violence continues to be regarded as incompatible with hegemonic perceptions of 'good' women who are nurturing mothers, and passive and obedient wives (Easteal et al., 2015:32). Through this research I have highlighted the ways in which the media attempt to counteract this incompatibility by characterising the FSOs in terms of their social normality. The current 'cultural denial' that surrounds FSOs is compounded by this failure to move past perceptions of the traditional role of women, and acknowledge that women can be something other than mothers, wives, and primary caregivers (Cain & Anderson, 2016:1). As noted in the findings, there were one hundred and forty-one references made to the FSOs' conformity to the traditional role of women in society. These were most notably in relation to the roles they fulfil as wives and mothers. The media relied heavily on these marital and familial

statuses to describe FSOs, highlighting their conformity to gendered social norms (Landor & Eisenchlas, 2012:493). The focus on characterising the FSOs as wives and mothers eclipsed any acknowledgement that these women are paedophiles and/or rapists.

The findings surrounding the repercussions for offending also highlight a reporting preoccupation with the effect the offending had on the offenders' marital and familial relations. Repeated references were made to the negative consequences the women's offending had on their respective marriages (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2009; Evans, 2020; Lauer, 2006; Robertson, 2014; Santana, 1998; The Associated Press, 1998; The Associated Press, 2004). In some instances, the FSO's criminal behaviour was attributed to difficulties in their marriage and familial relationships, which were presented as catalysts for the sexual offending (Beatty, 2023; Elvin, 2021; Hill, 2021; Moncur, 2014; Pyman, 2021; Roberts, 2021; Spillett, 2014). On the other hand, where there were no negative repercussions on the offenders' marriage, the media pushed the narrative that these women were good wives and thus conformed to traditional gender scripts (Eder, 2020; Cherry, 2015). While the characterisation of the offenders as mothers did not include 'good mother' or 'bad mother' labels, the findings did highlight how motherhood factored into the repercussions for offending. This was particularly evident in Pontbriand's and Parson's cases, and the discussions around the impact of sentencing on their children (CTV News, 2014; Hill, 2021; Postmedia News, 2014; Pyman, 2021; Roberts, 2021; Woods, 2014).

Beyond wives and mothers, reference is made to the position of trust that women are afforded through their fulfilment of roles as 'teachers', 'nurturers', and as 'protectors of children' (Hayes & Baker, 2014:7). The findings highlighted the way in which the media articles continuously reiterated that the 'relationship' between the victim and the offender was one between teacher and pupil. In accordance with Matthews et al.'s (1991:208) 'teacher/lover' typology, the FSOs are located within an institutional context in which they are in a position of power and trust, and therefore have a duty of care. The characterisation of these cases of female teacher sex offenders as breach and abuse of trust cases (Leask, 2020; Moncur, 2014; Nelson Weekly, 2020; Robertson, 2014; Weekes, 2015; Wong, 2015), and the acknowledgement that the offenders had abused their position of power, featured heavily in the media articles. Abuse of trust sexual

offences are defined in existing literature as sexual offences perpetrated by adults who are in positions of power or authority (Darling & Hackett, 2020:5). These offenders exploit their positions of power, authority, and trust, in sexually abusing young persons (Darling & Hackett, 2020:5). While this definition accords with Mathews et al.'s (1989) teacher/lover typology, it is also reminiscent of how we conceptualise a male paedophile (Hayes & Baker, 2014:3). Irrespective of gender, a paedophile is characterised as a sex offender that takes advantage of their position of power over children (Hayes & Baker, 2014:3). The media characterisation of the FSO cases as breaches of trust and abuses of power (Leask, 2020; Moncur, 2014; Nelson Weekly, 2020; Robertson, 2014; Weekes, 2015; Wong, 2015) are therefore comparable with paedophilia. While the media are notably silent on this, the argument for deconstructing and degendering sex offender typologies is justified here.

The fact that these female offenders were known to their male victims debunks the salient belief that sex offenders are outsiders that target strangers (Mancini & Picket, 2016:260; Spencer, 2009:225). In conceptualising 'real' rape, Anderson (2007:225) notes that people tend to rely on the narrative that rape occurs at night, outdoors, when the victim is alone and gets assaulted by a male stranger. The notion of 'stranger danger', and the related conceptualisation of 'typical' and 'real' rape as being an act committed by a male stranger (Anderson, 2007:225), is challenged by the findings of this research and the fact that the offenders are familiar females. This familiarity within the victim-offender relationship influences perceptions of the offender and the perceived ramifications of the offending on the victim (King & Roberts, 2017:76). Instances of sexual assault are considered less serious, and the offenders are considered less culpable, when a previous relationship or familiarity exists between the offender and their victim (King & Roberts, 2017:76), due to the historical misalignment with conceptualisations of 'real' rape (Anderson, 2007:225).

The familiarity between the victim and offender supports the argument that the majority of sexual assault cases in reality involve a perpetrator that is known to the victim (Craun & Theriot, 2009:2058; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004:134; Zatkin et al., 2022:953). This is important to acknowledge given that acquaintance rape has been largely overlooked as it does not align with 'real' rape scripts (Ryan, 2011:777). The absence of acquaintance rape in rape myths and sexual

scripts has prompted the consideration of potential unacknowledged rapists (Ryan, 2011:780). This, in conjunction with the observation that the media failed to label the FSOs as rapists, strengthens the contention of this research; that FSOs are unacknowledged rapists. Again, the necessity to forgo gender specific sex offender labels to accommodate for FSOs as currently unacknowledged rapists is emphasised.

The fact that instances of acquaintance rape are perceived to be less detrimental than stranger rape (King & Roberts, 2017:76) is exacerbated in sexual abuse cases which occur within educational institutions. In their discussion around educational institutions and their significance and role within society, Wolfe, Jaffe and Jetté (2003:182) note the way in which society holds these institutions, and the individuals that work within them, in high esteem. The authority is transferred from parents and the family structure to teachers working within these educational institutions (Wolfe et al., 2003:182). Through this transfer of authority, children become potentially vulnerable to abuse by their teachers who are in positions of power, authority, and trust (Wolfe et al., 2003:182). Wolfe et al. (2003:183) note the implicit trust that parents have in the educational institutions and the individuals that work within them. They argue that this trust carries an added risk of parents not diligently scrutinising any potentially negative behaviour or activities (Wolfe et al., 2003:182). This was observed during my data analysis where the mother of Letourneau's victim vocalised that the person she was angry with, and felt betrayed by, was her son, rather than Letourneau (Santana, 1998). This is a clear example of a parent not scrutinising the criminal behaviour of a teacher who has very clearly taken advantage of her position of power, authority, and trust. In line with Wolfe et al. (2003:183), the suggested reason for this is that, because she was a teacher, the mother held Letourneau in high esteem despite the sexual abuse of her son. This observation is further evident in the fact that the media clings to the characterisation of these offenders as good, well respected, and highly regarded teachers (Behr, 2019; Elvin, 2021; Hill 2021; Pyman, 2021; Roberts, 2021). Despite their sexual abuse of their students, it is evident in the findings that the media consistently constructed these women as socially respectable teachers that were held in high esteem.

Rapist, Paedophile, Harmful Sexual Aggressor

The continued representation of FSOs as wives, mothers, and nurturing teachers, all uphold feminine norms (Easteal et al., 2015:32). This reliance on FSOs' conformity to traditional gendered scripts has hindered the recognition of these women as harmful sexual aggressors, as paedophiles or as rapists, contributing to the continued invisibility surrounding these predators (Hayes & Carpenter, 2013:175; Hayes & Baker, 2014:1).

The recurring, narrow definition of a 'rapist' as a male who rapes a female (O'Connor, 1987:65; Robertiello & Terry, 2007:509; Union Gazette Extraordinary, 1957) affirms the broadly held view that rape is an exclusively male-dominated sexual offence. The existing sex offender typologies are only applicable to MSOs, negating the idea that FSOs can be labelled as rapists and/or paedophiles (Robertiello & Terry, 2007:513). Applying this to the findings of this research, the media consistently failed to construct the FSOs as rapists or paedophiles. This was despite the acknowledgment that, in some cases, the offending did constitute rape or paedophilia, and the FSOs' behaviour resembled that of a rapist or paedophile. Rather, there was a reliance on the characterisation of the relationship between the victim and offender as being one between teacher and student, evidenced by the one hundred and sixty-nine references made, across all forty articles, to the offenders' esteemed teacher status, and the recurring references made to the victim being a student, pupil, or schoolboy. The media rely on this construction of the FSOs in relation to the 'teacher/lover' typology, which Matthews et al. (1991:208) argue is independent of the 'rapist' typology. The resultant implication is that female teachers that have sex with their students are not considered rapists or, in line with other sex offender typologies that Matthews et al. (1991:208) reserve for MSOs, paedophiles. While the teacher-pupil relationship is a true depiction of the association between the offender and victim, its conformity to the 'teacher/lover' typology negates the idea that these FSOs are capable of being rapists and/or paedophiles.

7.6 Reverberations

It is telling that articles written in New Zealand in 2015 still assert that women legally cannot be charged with rape (Shadwell, 2015; Weekes, 2015; Wong, 2015). While these comments are legislation related, the findings of this research have highlighted that the media is also reluctant to categorise female perpetrated sexual assault as rape and label these FSOs as rapists. South

Africa's Amendment Act 32 (Government Gazette, 2007) included a revised definition of rape, acknowledging the gender neutrality of the sexual offence through redefining rape as being all forms of penetration without consent (DoJ&CD, 2012:12). While this revised definition of rape recognises that women can be rapists, there was no mention of rape in the media articles surrounding Viotti's case. As highlighted in the findings, it is only in Letourneau's case that the media acknowledge that Letourneau raped her victim (Santana, 1998; The Associated Press, 1998; The Associated Press, 2004; The Spokesman-Review, 1998). There were, however, instances where the media acknowledged that Letourneau was jailed for having a sexual relationship with her thirteen-year-old student that resulted in a baby (The Associated Press, 1998), yet failed to label this as rape or paedophilia. Despite the occasional acknowledgement of rape, Letourneau's case still prompted global debates about if it was a case of love or rape (The Spokesman-Review, 1998).

The characterisation of these offences as instances of paedophilia is also notably absent in the media constructions. As noted by Landor and Eisenchlas (2012:493), 'paedophile' is used almost exclusively by the media to label MSOs. This observation was reinforced by the findings of this research, and the fact that there was only one article, out of the forty reviewed, where there was mention of paedophilia. This singular reference was, however, in relation to paedophile priests from the Catholic Church (Goldenberg, 2006), not in relation to labelling Lafave. While the mention of paedophilia is not used in relation to her case specifically, it does reinforce Landor and Eisenchlas' (2012:493) view that 'paedophile' is a label dedicated entirely to MSOs. Despite Lafave's behaviour being reminiscent of, and likened to, that of paedophile priests (Goldenberg, 2006), there is a failure to specifically characterise it as paedophilia and appropriately label Lafave as a paedophile. The media reluctance to appropriately label female sexual predators serves as a 'distraction' from the social, cultural and political issue of the crime (DiBennardo, 2018:16). Beyond being a distraction, this framing is a vital component in how the public construct their understandings of sexually predatory women (DiBennardo, 2018:16), making these media distractions a concerning social issue. The way the media give meaning to these crimes affect public perceptions of the victims and offenders (DiBennardo, 2018:16), the reverberations of which require more weighted consideration.

The Invisible Victim

We are unable to fully understand offenders without acknowledging and understanding their victims (DiBennardo, 2018:16). With this argument in mind, if the victims of female perpetrated sexual violence remain invisible, then so do the FSOs. The acknowledgement of victimisation becomes particularly important in cases of sexual abuse where victim status is privileged (DiBennardo, 2018:16). The findings of this research highlight the ramifications for gender stereotypes on perceptions of and responses to male victimisation. The gender stereotypes that surround male victimisation contribute to the narrative that male victims are willing participants in their sexual victimisation (Smith, Pine & Hawley, 1988:102). These entrenched gender stereotypes deflect the focus away from the social consideration of male victims as unwilling participants of sexual assault (Smith et al., 1988:102). They furthermore increase the likelihood that victims are perceived as a responsible party that gained sexual enjoyment from the interaction (Smith et al., 1988:102), or gained value from the experience (Dollar et al., 2004:92).

It is clear that it is difficult to perceive men as being reluctant to engage in sex and perceive them as victims of sexual assault or coercion as a result (Hayes & Carpenter, 2013:170). The fact that Lafave's victim was joked about on national television (Goldenberg, 2006) highlights a level of mockery of male victimisation. This mockery is particularly evident in instances where the victim appears to have been an unwilling participant in their sexual victimisation. This is further exacerbated by the accompanying narrative that every schoolboy fantasizes about having sex with their attractive teacher (Goldenberg, 2006; Lauer, 2006). Lauer's (2006) comment that society is of the belief that having sexual relations with an attractive female teacher is every teenage boy's fantasy further enforces the narrative that young male victims derive pleasure and sexual enjoyment from these female perpetrated sexual offences. These findings highlight the way in which the negative effects on male victims of female perpetrated sexual abuse is minimised, to the extent to which it is portrayed as a positive experience. The potential consequence of this pattern of response is that victims of female perpetrated sexual violence experience difficulties recognising their experience as being sexually abusive (Tozdan et al., 2019:5).

The disregard of these young boys' victimisation, as highlighted by these findings, shows that this shared public and professional assumption is also omnipresent in the media. This is evident in media discussion around the ramifications for the victims and the dismissal of any potential harm (Eder, 2020; Gold Coast Bulletin, 2023; Metro News Reporter, 2014; Moncur, 2014; Robertson, 2014). These findings promote shared public and professional assumptions that female perpetrated sexual abuse is less harmful than the same abuse by male perpetrators (Landor & Eisenchlas, 2012:489). The findings surrounding the invisible victim fortify the role the media play in overlooking or making invisible sexual assault committed against boys (Azhar, 2023). While Azhar's (2023) observation was made in relation to male victims of male perpetrated sexual abuse, the findings highlight the applicability of this comment to male victims of female perpetrated sexual violence. In fact, the majority of studies on male victimisation are approached within the context of male perpetrated sexual assault (Landor & Eisenchlas, 2012:489). If male victimisation is only visible in instances of male perpetrated sexual abuse, then both victim and offender in cases of female perpetrated sexual abuse remain invisible. This perpetuates the narrative that only men are capable of committing sexual offences, even in instances where the victims are male. The politicisation of rape as being solely a feminist issue has resulted in the isolation of male victims (Walfield, 2021:6392).

The instances where victimisation was acknowledged were limited to the FSOs being recognised as victims themselves. As already highlighted in the findings, there were fifty-seven instances, in twenty-five of the forty articles, where the offender was constructed as the victim. In some instances, the acknowledgement of victimisation was in relation to the offender being a victim of public responses to their offending (Beatty, 2023; CTV News, 2014; Goldenberg, 2006; Helling, 2018; Timms, 2023; Woods, 2014). In other instances, the offenders were considered victims of the judicial system and prison sentencing (Beatty, 2023; Daily Telegraph, 2008; Elvin, 2021; Hill, 2021; Postmedia News, 2014; Pyman, 2021; Roberts, 2021; Santana, 1998; Weekes, 2015; Woods, 2023). Most notably, however, was the recognition of the FSOs being victims of sexual abuse themselves (Behr, 2019; Helling, 2018; Lauer, 2006; Leask, 2022; Weekes, 2015; Woods, 2023). The underlying suggestion was that FSOs would not exhibit such 'unnatural' behaviour if they had not themselves been victims of the same sexual trauma (Hayes & Carpenter, 2013:164).

Men who sexually abuse children are certainly not vindicated in the same way (Hayes & Carpenter, 2013:164).

More apparent though was the fact that the sexual victimisation of the FSOs was readily accepted as rape and as traumatic (Helling, 2018; Lauer, 2006), which is in stark contrast to the response to the FSOs' male victims' experiences. It is evident that it is more socially palatable to accept these women as having been victims of sexual violence themselves rather than confronting their perpetration of sexual abuse (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002:70; Collins, 2016:298). The reason for this is a rigid conformity to rape myths that are constructed in relation to dominant narratives of male perpetration and female victimisation (Edwards et al., 2011; Ryan, 2011; Walfield, 2021:6395). These rape myths dictate that 'real' men are not vulnerable to sexual victimisation and therefore cannot be raped (Javaid, 2018:463). These myths and misconceptions surrounding male rape have resulted in serious social ills, specifically concerning the treatment of these victims (Javaid, 2018:454). The current acceptance of these rape myths in effect justifies and normalises sexual violence against male victims (Walfield, 2021:6391).

The Wider Institutional Influence

I have referred to the media as a whole throughout this research, rather than the individual journalists who wrote the articles, or the individual news media platforms that published them. While neutrality is not possible (Boudana, 2016:600) and the journalists' personal beliefs, experiences, social backgrounds and values will have some influence on their reporting of events (Benedict, 1993:10), journalists do generally work within and abide by industry norms and conventions (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002:56). News media is constructed according to well established and tested templates and bestselling formulae to which reporters are expected to conform (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002:56). This standardised and formulaic nature of the media was observed during the data collection process where one journalist's article was published on multiple different news media platforms, or where one journalist wrote multiple, similar articles for one news outlet. With this in mind, I made the decision during the data collection process to avoid the inclusion of multiple articles written on a singular case by the same author, or multiple articles written on a singular case published by the same platform. Despite this, repetition across articles written by different journalists, published by different

news media outlets was observed during the data analysis process. This overlapping in media reporting extends beyond the way in which journalists cover the same events (Trilling & Van Hoof, 2020:1317). Journalists often include and propagate the same information, paraphrase the original article, or write follow up stories (Trilling & Van Hoof, 2020:1317). So, while some researchers have pointed to cross-national differences in the treatment and reporting of the same international events, others have highlighted a contradictory uniformity and international media culture (Benson & Saguy, 2005:233). For this reason, I opted not to comment on or interrogate who the journalists were and rather refer to the media as a whole.

The influence the media have on the public is widely acknowledged (Gavin, 2005:406; Grimm & Harp, 2011:1; Zatkin et al., 2022:964; Zhou et al., 2020:2694). The media are recognised as a tool that can be used to educate the public, with research highlighting how individuals and societies change their perceptions to align with the information presented to them by the media (Zhou et al., 2020:2694). In the same breath that defines the media as a tool used to positively educate and influence, the converse narrative of the media as a platform that misinforms the public has also been shown to be true. Research has called attention to the role of the media in maintaining social myths and highlighting journalists' reliance on these myths to elucidate events and reinforce social ideals (Grimm & Harp, 2011:1; Zatkin et al., 2022:964). The latter conceptualisation rings true in my findings, and my consequent positioning of the media as accountable for their contribution to the continued invisibility of FSOs. Through their construction, the media have perpetuated social myths surrounding FSOs, influenced by traditional sex scripts and patriarchal notions of sexual violence.

FSOs behaviour is considered as 'unusual' and 'atypical' (Hayes & Baker, 2014:5) due to the deviation from these traditional sex scripts and patriarchal notions of sexual violence. Additionally, media characterisations of these cases as 'unusual', 'atypical' behaviour serves to shock but also engage their audience. While these sensationalised media articles are what sell newspapers (Benedict, 1993:8; Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002:55; Edwards et al., 2011:770), media depictions are often distorted and disproportionate to the true incidence of the crime (Collins, 2016:296). The media constructions of sexual offences are underpinned by gendered norms and commercialised sensationalism. The FSOs' behaviour is considered a 'rarity' (Hayes

& Baker, 2014:5), contributing to the infamy of the phenomenon. The Gold Coast Bulletin (2023) article on Ooms' case highlighted the judge's comment that the case was novel and unique. This serves as a perfect example of the construction of FSOs' behaviour as 'unusual' and 'atypical' (Hayes & Baker, 2014:5). The judge's comment, as quoted in the Gold Coast Bulletin (2023), not only serves as an example of media constructions of FSOs as a 'rarity', but also highlights how the consideration of these offenders' behaviour as 'unusual' and 'atypical' extends to legislation too.

Hegemonic gender stereotypes, patriarchal notions of sexual violence, and related sexual scripts have permeated legal institutions, criminal law and legislation (Denov, 2003:303). Research on the media depiction and construction of offenders is not only important in isolation but is also influential when considering how media constructions and depictions affect criminal justice outcomes (Brennan & Vandenberg, 2009:167). While female sex offending may not be as prevalent as male sex offending, the criminal justice system should endeavour to recognise that female sex offending, and the resultant ramifications for victims, cannot be overlooked to the extent that there are little to no consequences for FSOs (Cortoni et al., 2017:157). In minimising the harm caused by FSOs, the criminal justice system is not only contributing to the invisibility of, and trend of denialism surrounding, the phenomenon, but is also contributing to the invisibility of victims of female perpetrated sexual offences (Cortoni et al., 2017:157). The repercussions of this are that victims of female perpetrated sexual abuse are considered to be less important and less deserving of judicial attention in comparison with victims of male perpetrated sexual offences (Cortoni et al., 2017:157). The acknowledgement of the existence of FSOs becomes particularly important given the psychological impact on the victims (Christensen, 2021:4116; Denov, 2003:311; Walfield, 2021:6408) and the fact that their victimisation remains largely invisible.

Despite the new legislation, South Africa's Amendment Act 32 (Government Gazette, 2007), and the attempt of the National Policy Framework on the Management of Sexual Offences (DoJ&CD, 2012) to implement a gender-neutral understanding of rape and sexual victimisation, there is still a considerable gendered ignorance around rape and sexual offences that has resulted in a social ill that needs to be addressed. When I initially started pursuing this avenue of research

in 2021, for example, the South African Police Service (SAPS) website had not been updated to adopt this redefinition of rape. At that stage, SAPS online sites continued to define rape as unlawful, non-consensual intercourse by males with women or girls; a definition which completely disregards the gender neutrality of rape and sexual victimisation. The SAPS website further considered sexual intercourse as being the penetration of the vagina. In 2021, fourteen years after the introduction of the Amendment Act 32 (Government Gazette, 2007), a governmental institution to which victims report their sexual assault, was still failing to acknowledge the gender-neutral definition of rape and move past the gendered assumption that men are the sole perpetrators of rape, and women the only victims. This brings into question how the South African Government can effectively manage cases of sexual offences if there is no consensus, outside of that which is written in law, on what constitutes a sexual offence, rape, or paedophilia. The related lack of clarity as to who are considered victims, and who are considered perpetrators, further impacts this management. I have briefly touched on the South African legislation to highlight this issue, but have not delved further into the legislative landscape of other countries. This would be an avenue for future research, with consideration being given to potential patterns in related legislation globally, or to possible international laws; but this was not the direct focus of my research. While this study zones in on the perceptual issue of female teacher sex offenders in the media, it is important to consider the reverberations that these perceptions have on our social institutions, as well as the possible implications of this research in driving the implementation of related legislative change. The challenge we face globally is that, at this point in time, the phenomenon of FSOs is still largely invisible despite the increased prevalence of female perpetrated sexual offences.

7.7 Conclusion

While this study, in the first instance, aimed to make a contribution to knowledge in relation to the portrayal of FSOs, starting with their construction in the media, the aim was also to advocate for, and target changes in policy surrounding rape and sexual victimisation, at a national level within South Africa in the first instance. This discussion chapter has considered how media constructions of FSOs is reminiscent of male perpetrated rape and paedophilia, and commented on how the media consistently fail to label the FSOs as rapists and/or paedophiles. Importantly, this chapter also called attention to the recurring themes of trivialisation, leniency, and denialism

that are evident in media constructions of FSOs and contextualised these within the broader picture of social harm. Particular attention was paid to the wider institutional influence that media constructions of FSOs have, and the research contribution was considered accordingly. As it stands, FSOs, and female rapists and paedophiles more specifically, are best conceptualised as invisible sexual predators, committing silent crimes.

Chapter 8. Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

This chapter concludes the dissertation by providing a summary of the research, considering the research objectives, the research approach, the key findings, and main argument. The limitations of the research are discussed, and recommendations for future research are considered in relation to these, as well as in relation to considering the construction of FSOs in institutions beyond the media, and ways of researching the reverberations of these.

8.2 Summary of Research

This research focused on media constructions of FSOs and explored how the construction made a largely invisible phenomenon visible. As demonstrated, media constructions of FSOs contribute to the trend of denialism that surrounds these sexual predators and the media was, thus, positioned as complicit in their invisibility. It was highlighted, through my discussion of the findings, that the media constructions of FSOs were comparable to understandings of male perpetrated rape and paedophilia but were rarely referred to as such. In response to this, an argument has been made for adopting gender-neutral sex offender typologies, and for moving towards labelling FSOs as rapists and/or paedophiles. This research, therefore, contributes to existing scholarship on FSOs through the consideration of their construction in the media, and a discussion of how media constructions could influence and sustain public perceptions of FSOs, drive related policy action and change, and shape public support for more progressive, related legislation.

8.3 Contribution

The existing, albeit limited, research on FSOs has typically considered individual cases (Christiansen & Thyer, 2002:2). Research that has considered multiple FSO cases has focused almost exclusively on cases from the USA and Canada, with only a few cases from England, and one each from Australia and Germany (Wijkman et al., 2010:137), or focused exclusively on a single media platform (Zack et al., 2018:63). While my data sample included two cases from the USA, one from Canada, one from England, and two from Australia, the further inclusion of cases from Scotland, South Africa and New Zealand, across multiple media outlets, offered a more diverse range of cases, contributing to a closing of the gap in the literature. Focusing on ten FSO

cases, from seven countries, spanning twenty-six years, furthermore, introduced both spatial and temporal elements. This allowed for the identification of trends in media constructions of FSOs over geographies and time. Despite the diversity of these cases of FSOs, countries they came from, and years they offended in, the findings have highlighted a decades long perpetuation of the homogeneity myth in the construction of FSOs in global media, over a period spanning twenty-six years.

A twenty-year review of the clinical and empirical literature noted that the existing research on female perpetrators who sexually abuse children has predominantly focused on the prevalence of FSOs; the offences they perpetrate; their personal, clinical, demographic, and psychological characteristics; as well as FSOs motivations for offending (Augarde & Rydon-Grange, 2022:1). My research has offered a unique contribution to the field of FSOs that can be advanced by consideration being given to the potential reverberations of associated media constructions. Contextually, these could be considered in relation to how the media sustain public perceptions, drive policy action and change, and shape public support for crime and penal policies.

Existing research on FSOs has pushed for the findings to inform policies and practices surrounding female perpetrated CSA (Darling et al., 2018:199). Historically, rape laws and policies have been gender specific, with no cultural or legal understanding of male sexual victimisation (Javaid, 2018:455). The elimination of sex distinctions based on genital differences (Lober, 2000:81) would make a significant contribution here. In removing the biological markers of men and women, we can eradicate the narrow definition of rape as being the vaginal penetration by the penis (Cain & Anderson, 2016:1). While MSOs are readily acknowledged as rapists and harmful sexual aggressors, this narrow definition of rape also excludes male on male rape. There is a need for policies and institutional practices to better address these gender inequalities and resultant injustices, especially when it comes to male rape victims (Javaid, 2018:454), and female perpetrated CSA (Darling et al., 2018:199). From a social constructionist perspective, knowledge and social action are considered harmonious (Burr, 2015:5). Improving our understanding of the constructions of FSOs, and sex offender typologies in general, will ideally prompt related social action. For this to happen, we need to address the degendering of sex offender typologies. The existing typologies for MSOs need to be deconstructed and then

reconstructed to align with and incorporate the characteristics of FSOs (Vandiver & Kercher, 2004:134), which will leave us with gender-neutral sex offender typologies.

In relation to the theoretical contribution, I have made an argument for broadening how we understand degendering. The existing conceptualisation is limited to the removal of men and women from their traditional roles (Sitas, 1996:238). I have recommended expanding the definition of this concept to include the elimination of the stereotypes that accompany these gendered, traditional roles. It was evident in my findings that traditional roles and related gendered stereotypes have hindered the acknowledgement that women too can be construed as harmful sexual aggressors. Removing women from their traditional role, and eradicating related stereotypes is the first step towards degendering sex offender typologies. The deconstructing and degendering of sex offender typologies, in particular, have broader implications for how we conceptualise sexual predators going forward. Acknowledging women as potentially harmful sexual aggressors will result in the unbedding and undoing of the gendered sexual scripts and rape myths which have, thus far, dictated patterns of and responses to their sexually abusive behaviour.

8.4 Limitations

While research on media constructions of female offenders has increased, limited research has been done on the intersectionality between gender and race, considering the way in which a female offender's race might influence their portrayal in the media (Brennan & Vandenberg (2009:146). This observation and identification of a further gap in the literature, forefronts racial diversity within the data sample as a limitation of this research. As highlighted in the findings, Reriti's case received the harshest response in comparison to the other nine cases. The age of the victim and the fact that Reriti is a woman of colour were identified as potential explanations for the disparity in Reriti's portrayal, but a broader data sample would be required to adequately test this hypothesis. The majority of the female teacher sex offender cases that formed the data sample for this research were white, middle-class women. These white, middle-class women who are wives, mothers, teachers, blonde, and attractive, are far removed from what social convention deems to be a rapist (Grimm & Harp, 2011:2). Rather, they fit in with Western hegemonic understandings of women and traditional gender roles, and challenge patriarchal

notions of rape (Grimm & Harp, 2011:2). Expanding the data sample and ensuring racial diversity of FSO cases in future research would not only address the limitation of this research but also allow for the consideration of race as a potential contributing factor to the invisibility of FSOs. It would then be possible to address whether the trivialisation and sensationalisation exists for all FSOs, or is limited to white FSOs alone.

While intent to generalise findings is not the objective of qualitative research (Ritchie et al., 2003:83; Creswell, 2013:157), the size of, and diversity within, the data sample was a limitation of this research. Questions were raised around whether the trends of trivialisation, leniency and denialism in media constructions of FSOs are limited to the construction of white FSOs; but the limited racial diversity in the data sample meant that a clear conclusion could not be drawn. While the data sample addressed concerns that research on FSOs has historically focused on individual cases (Christiansen & Thyer, 2002:2), and observation that the existing, albeit limited, research on FSOs has focused almost exclusively on cases from the USA, Canada, England, Australia, and Germany (Wijkman et al., 2010:137), the cases used for this research were Western centric. While language limitations were identified as the rationale behind this decision, it would be beneficial for future research to expand the data sample to include FSO cases from the Global South, and cases of FSOs of colour.

8.5 Recommendations for Future Research

Influencing Public Perception

The influential role the media has on public perceptions has been continuously acknowledged throughout this research. Despite this same acknowledgement in existing literature (Gavin, 2005:406; Grimm & Harp, 2011:1; Tozdan et al., 2019:4; Zatkin et al., 2022:964; Zhou et al., 2020:2694), and the increased media attention FSOs have received in recent years (Zack at al., 2018:61), public perceptions of and attitudes towards sex offenders have been largely overlooked in research (Gakhal & Brown, 2011:106; Zack et al., 2018:61). This observation presents an avenue for future research that considers how media constructions of FSOs influence public perceptions of the phenomenon. The importance of this avenue of research is further underscored by the identification of the media as the public's primary sources of information on sex offenders (Gakhal & Brown, 2011:105), directly influencing how they perceive and respond to FSOs

(Tozdan et al., 2019:6). This is a concern given the stereotypical and biased construction of sex offenders in the media, as evidenced in my findings. Through this avenue of research, we will be able to determine whether readers are passive consumers of information, as suggested by Gamson et al. (1999:382), or if they do in fact take a more critical stance against the information presented to them by the media.

Public exposure to FSOs has increased significantly through the presentation of cases in news media and within other forms of media and entertainment, such as film and/or television (Darling et al., 2018:196). Further research looking at the ways in which media constructions of FSOs affect societal responses to the phenomenon would offer a valuable contribution to the literature. It is imperative that we gain an understanding of media influence on public attitudes given that knowledge about crime and related justice stems from media consumption (Colburn & Melander, 2018:294). In the first instance, this study should be expanded to include the comment section of the cases and related articles that formed the data sample. This would be a good starting point to investigating how media constructions of FSOs affect public perceptions and attitudes towards them. Studying readers' reactions to information presented to them by the media will allow for a better understanding of the way in which individuals, and society more broadly, navigate their attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions in response to media content (Happer & Philo, 2013:326), whether passive or critical.

In discussing the dominant narrative that informs the social construction of child sex offenders, Gavin (2005:410) identifies the media as a key contributor to shifting and re-shaping related public perceptions. To effect change, the media will need to take accountability for the inaccurate, stereotypical image of the FSO they continuously construct, and aid in the construction of an alternative narrative that aligns with existing realities (Gavin, 2005:410). As it stands, media constructions of FSO cases and the victims of these female perpetrated sexual offences are inadequate (Tozdan et al., 2019:5). The instructions and policies that guide journalists' reporting of these cases, therefore, also need to be revisited (Tozdan et al., 2019:5).

Institutional Influence

Social institutions, such as the family, are often responsible for silencing narratives of victimisation (Armstrong, Gleckman-Krut & Johnson, 2018:104). The findings of this research briefly touched on patterns evident in parents' responses to the sexual victimisation of their sons. In these instances, the parents of the victims contributed to the invisibility of their children's victimisation, but additional and more extensive research into this topic is required. Future research could extend these findings and determine how rape and sexual victimisation are considered within the family institution. This research could address questions around whether gender stereotypes and related rape myths and sexual scripts are introduced and enforced through the socialisation of children within the family institution.

Future research should also consider the way in which gender stereotypes, rape myths and sexual scripts are evident within educational institutions. Are they inadvertently introduced and enforced within these educational institutions? The gendered stereotypes, rape myths and sexual scripts not only influence perceptions of, and responses to, cases of female perpetrated sexual abuse within schools, but may also strongly influence victim disclosure (Dollar, 2004:100). The findings of this avenue of research would ideally aid in addressing concerns around how school officials respond to the sexual abuse of their male students by female teachers. As a result, specific policies could be developed to aid in the education of teachers, school administrators and psychologists in detecting and dealing with cases of sexual abuse within schools (Dollar, 2004:100).

The reality is that the gendered assumptions surrounding rape and sexual victimisation are institutionally embedded. The perceived male monopoly on rape, and consistent gendered narrative of female victimisation are evident in the law and related law enforcement policies (Denov, 2001:311; Javaid, 2018:454). As evidenced in my findings, the FSOs' repercussions for offending discussed in the media articles highlighted the gendered double standards, and the disparity between the judicial treatment of MSOs versus FSOs. The trend of denialism surrounding FSOs extends further into health care institutions (Denov, 2001:304). The repudiation of FSOs is evident in health care professionals' perceptions of and responses to the phenomenon, the sexual predators and their victims (Denov, 2001:304; Tozdan et al., 2019:5),

which has resulted in a social ill that needs to be addressed. The lack of research on FCSOs specifically, and the resultant lack of scientific data, has reduced the quality of related child protection services and treatment programmes (Tozdan et al., 2019:5). Continuing the interest in research addressing institutional silences, future research should be conducted on constructions of rape and sexual victimisation within our legal and health care institutions. There is a need for the criminal justice system, health care institutions, and the voluntary sector to receive adequate training which abolishes existing rape myths and related misconceptions about male sexual victimisation (Javaid, 2018:468; Tozdan et al., 2019:5). The findings of this recommended avenue of research would be able to inform existing institutional policies and practices, improving responses to male rape victims, and eradicating the existing gender inequalities in understandings of rape and sexual victimisation.

Well-constructed sex offender typologies are important tools used to understand sexual offences, the perpetrators and the victims (Sandler & Freeman, 2007:74). If developed appropriately, the typologies could aid in the creation of relevant sexual crime prevention policies and strategies (Sandler & Freeman, 2007:74). The existing DMFSO does not accommodate for uncoerced and/or unaccompanied women who sexually offend against children (Ganon et al., 2008:372). These FSOs are currently considered under the teacher-lover typology (Ganon et al., 2008:372). If we are to develop FSO specific theories that correspond to the degendered of sex offender typologies, then we need to recognise the heterogeneity of the phenomenon, and develop a theory based on a fully inclusive sample. Accurate typologies would also positively contribute to the improvement of institutional services that address sexual violence and victimisation (Sandler & Freeman, 2007:74). As it stands, the prevailing lack of literature and research data on FSOs has diminished the quality of our institutional responses to female perpetrated CSA, and the corresponding child protection and treatment services offered (Tozdan et al., 2019:5). It is, therefore, imperative that we eradicate institutional perceptions of FSOs as being a taboo topic, especially given the ramifications for the victims (Tozdan et al., 2019:7). Changing societal norms around rape myths, and recognising FSOs and their victims, could improve the current discrepancies in reporting and recording of female perpetrated sexual offences (Augarde & Rydon-Grange, 2002:2; Darling et al., 2018:197; Walfield, 2021:6410) that are continuously problematised.

Influence of Gender

There are instances where human experiences contradict established sex scripts and prompt a re-evaluation and alteration (Crome & McCabe, 2001:396). The cases of male victimisation of female perpetrated sexual violence considered in this research are paragons of human experiences that challenge hegemonic sex scripts and dominant gendered narratives of male domination and female victimisation in cases of sexual violence. While the findings of this research highlighted gender disparities and related comments in the media articles, further research could consider a data sample of both MSOs and FSOs, and examine the gendered influences on related media constructions. These inherent gender role stereotypes and sex role scripts also influence attitudes towards same gender relationships (Dollar, 2004:99). Cases of sexual abuse that involve same gender dyads are perceived more negatively than cases involving cross gender dyads (Dollar, 2004:99). In continuing the research on the influence of gender, future research should also consider how same-gender victim-offender dyads influence constructions of these cases and related perceptions and responses. These recommendations for future research would ideally support the call for the degendering of sex offender typologies and the appropriate and consistent labelling of both MSOs and FSOs.

8.6 Concluding Remarks

The pressure, all self-imposed, to conclude my dissertation with a bold statement about having lifted the lid on FSOs, making the invisible visible, and eradicating the trend of denialism surrounding the phenomenon, was quickly realised to be unattainable. The reality of the male monopoly on the perpetration of sexual abuse remains (Denov, 2001:311; Landor & Eisenchlas, 2012:493; Robertiello & Terry, 2007:509). The reality that FSOs continue to be overlooked and under researched as a result of this gendered focus also remains (Anderson et al., 2021:1; Grayston & De Luca, 1999:93; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004:121). The fact that we are still having the same decades long conversation and raising the same concerns is a serious concern in and of itself.

What I have been able to confirm is that the media is complicit in the trend of denialism that surrounds FSOs and their resultant invisibility. The recurring themes of trivialisation, leniency

and denial in their construction of FSOs only cement media culpability. Despite this, I was able to pinpoint the ways in which the FSOs behaviour is akin to that of MSOs who are readily labelled as rapists and as paedophiles. These labels, although relevant, were notably absent in media constructions of FSOs. I am, therefore, hoping that I have opened the door for further discussion around the deconstructing and degendering of sex offender typologies. As it stands, FSOs remain invisible sexual predators, committing silent crimes.

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Appendices

Appendix A. List of articles

Case	Articles
Cooney, Jaimee	- Blenheim teacher convicted of sex with students granted parole after 10 months in prison. 2020. *Newshub.* 6 November. Available: https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/new-zealand/2020/11/blenheim-teacher-convicted-of-sex-with-students-granted-parole-after-10-months-in-prison.html - Eder, J. 2020. Teacher's double life: Marlborough teacher Jaimee Cooney revealed as sex offender. *Stuff.* 3 February. Available: https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/crime/118659958/sex-teachers-double-life-marlborough-teacher-jamiee-cooney-revealed-as-sex-offender - Leask, A. 2020. Blenheim sex abuse teacher Jaimee Cooney to be released from jail. *New Zealand Herald.* 6 November. Available: https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/blenheim-sex-abuse-teacher-jaimee-cooney-to-be-released-from-jail/ES3YDWKLXU2N66JCAW22IKBHEE/ - Nelson Weekly. 2020. Teacher jailed for sex with pupils to be freed. *Otago Daily Times.* 6 November. Available: https://www.odt.co.nz/star-news/star-national/teacher-jailed-sex-pupils-be-freed
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Appendix B. List of codes

Characterisation of offence
Characterisation of victim
Comments on offender's appearance
Fame/sensationalisation
Gendered double standards
Mental health
Mention of paedophile/paedophilia
Mention of rape
Mention of victim
Perception of offender
Power/authority
Ramifications for victim
Reference to traditional role of women
Repercussions for offending
Victimisation of offender

Appendix C. Grouping of codes into themes

Theme	Related code/s
Denial of female agency	- Characterisation of offence - Characterisation of victim - Mental health - Reference to traditional role of women
Destruction of the real victim	- Characterisation of offence - Characterisation of victim - Mention of victim - Ramifications for victim
Dichotomy between male and female sex offenders	- Characterisation of offence - Comments on offender's appearance - Fame/sensationalisation - Gendered double standards - Mental health - Mention of paedophile/paedophilia - Mention of rape - Mention of victim - Perception of offender - Ramifications for victim - Reference to traditional role of women - Repercussions for offending - Victimisation of offender
Duality of victimisation	- Characterisation of offence - Characterisation of victim - Ramifications for victim - Repercussions for offending - Victimisation of offender
Duty of care	- Characterisation of victim - Power/authority - Reference to traditional role of women

Gender roles in sex	- Characterisation of offence - Characterisation of victim - Reference to traditional role of women
Infamy of female sex offenders	- Comments on offender's appearance - Fame/sensationalisation - Gendered double standards
Mental health defence	- Gendered double standards - Mental health - Repercussions for offending - Victimisation of offender
Social normality	- Characterisation of offence - Characterisation of victim - Perception of offender - Reference to traditional role of women
Understanding the offence	- Characterisation of offence - Characterisation of victim - Mention of paedophile/paedophilia - Mention of rape - Mention of victim - Ramifications for victim - Repercussions for offending

Appendix D. Definition of themes

Theme	Definition of theme
Denial of female agency	The conceptualisation of women as sexually passive has contributed to the trend of denialism surrounding FSOs (Landor & Eisenchlas, 2012:490). The 'characterisation of offence' highlighted that this conceptualisation of women has influenced the identification of the FSOs as blameworthy by suggesting the male victims were the instigators of, and active and willing participants in, the sexual acts. This denial of female agency was also evident in media discussions around how the poor mental health of the FSOs was a causative factor of their offending.
Destruction of the real victim	*The 'destruction of the real victim' theme is considered as a sub-theme under 'the duality of victimisation' theme, but will be defined independently.* Denying the existence of female perpetrated sexual abuse, and dismissing female sexual offenders as harmful aggressors, results in a neglect of male victims (Landor & Eisenchlas, 2012:489). The sexual victimisation of males by female perpetrators consequently becomes a 'guilty secret' (Landor & Eisenchlas, 2012:489). The disbelief about instances of female perpetrated sexual abuse (Strickland, 2008:474) lays the foundation for the denial of their victims. It was, therefore, important to highlight the way the media acknowledged and characterised the victims, and consider the resultant implications on perceptions of and responses to male victims. When reading through the articles, it was evident that the victims in these cases of female perpetrated sexual violence were not appropriately considered as victims. Thus, it was also important to consider how media characterisations of the offence influenced understandings of male victimisation.
Dichotomy between male and female sex offenders	While the focus of this research, and the data collected, surrounds FSOs, it became clear in the initial reading of the articles that there are clear gender disparities in the perceptions of and responses to FSOs versus MSOs. The 'gendered double standards' were evident in how the media represented the offence, the FSOs, and the victims.
Duality of victimisation	A surprising observation was the media implication that the FSOs were victims. Beyond discussions around the victimisation of the young boys, the media also

	commented on instances where the FSOs had been victimised; if they, themselves, had been victims of sexual abuse or, more shockingly, the suggestion that they were victims of the 'repercussions for offending'. The 'victimisation of the offender' and the resultant implications that this had on the 'destruction of the real victim' became an area of interest when considering media constructions and perceptions of and responses to FSOs and their male victims.
Duty of care	Continuous references were made across the articles to the fact that the FSOs were teachers, with the offence being conceptualised as a breach of their duty of care. In fact, the labelling of the offence as rape and paedophilia was overshadowed by the narrative that these were simply breach of trust cases. The teacher-pupil relationship, and the institutional context in which the cases occurred, were therefore an important consideration, particularly in relation to Matthews et al.'s (1991:208) 'teacher/lover' typology.
Gender roles in sex	*The 'gender roles in sex' theme is considered as a sub-theme under 'the denial of female agency' theme, but will be defined independently.* Traditional sexual scripts imply that women are not capable of being sexual offenders (Strickland, 2008:475). Rather, dominant narratives that women are submissive, vulnerable and weak result in the consideration of women as 'appropriate' victims of male dominance (Crome & McCabe, 2001:408). Women are not conceptualised as rapists because rape myths and sexual scripts have historically positioned them as vulnerable to sexual victimisation. Sex-role stereotypes consider women as fulfilling sexual roles for their male partner (Crome & McCabe, 2001:408). In reading through the media articles on these FSO cases, it became clear that the reliance on sex-role stereotypes results in the blame being shifted away from the FSO due to a failure to conceptualise them as instigators of sexually abusive and predatory acts. The narrative that the male victims initiated the sexual interaction was relied upon in the media articles due to its accordance with these traditional sexual scripts and sex-role stereotypes.

Infamy of female sex offenders	There was specific reference made in some of the articles to the sensationalisation of particular cases and the level of notoriety that the FSOs reached. Particularly noteworthy were comments about the cases of FSOs being unique and novel, and the media focus on the appearance and, in some instances, the sexualisation of the FSOs. Questions around how media constructions of FSOs contributed to their 'fame and sensationalisation', while simultaneously perpetuating the invisibility of the phenomenon, presented an interesting dichotomy.
Mental health defence	*The 'mental health defence' is considered as a sub-theme under 'the denial of female agency' theme, but will be defined independently.* Substantial references were made across the articles to the mental health of the FSOs, with their criminal behaviour being attributed to their respective mental disorders. The categorisation of female offenders as 'mad' or 'sad', shifts the blame away from the FSO, giving their criminal behaviour a biological basis (Denov, 2001:321; Estrada et al., 2019:141). The resultant implication that the FSOs had no agency in committing their sexual offences lays the groundwork for the mental health defence (Denov, 2001:321).
Social normality	The media describe FSOs in terms of social normality and, more specifically, their conformity to gender norms and the 'traditional role of women' (Landor & Eisenchlas, 2012:493). Extensive references were made across the news media articles to the roles of wives and/or mothers that the FSOs fulfilled. The trend of denialism that surrounds FSOs stems from a failure to acknowledge that women can be anything other than nurturing mothers, wives, and primary caregivers (Cain & Anderson, 2016:1). It was thus important to consider how the continued characterisation of the FSOs as wives and mothers in the media contributed to perceptions of and responses to these female criminals.
Understanding the offence	Given the sensitivity of this research to the use of the 'paedophile' and 'rapist' labels when describing FSOs, and the desire to avoid contributing to their invisibility by not calling these female offenders paedophiles and/or rapists, the 'characterisation of offence' was particularly pertinent. In the initial reading of the data, the use of 'paedophile' or 'rapist' as descriptive terms for these FSOs were notably absent. The trend of denialism surrounding FSOs stems from a failure to acknowledge that understandings of rape have evolved beyond the traditional gendered definition of rape being limited to the forceful penetration of the vagina

	by the penis (Cain & Anderson, 2016:1; Collins-Mckinnell, 2013:2; Kramer & Bowman, 2011:244). The consequence of this is that understandings of rapists and paedophiles continue to be confined to their gendered conceptualisations.

Appendix E. List of article headlines

Source	Article headline
Newshub (2020)	Blenheim teacher convicted of sex with students granted parole after 10 months in prison.
Stuff Eder (2020)	Teacher's double life: Marlborough teacher Jaimee Cooney revealed as sex offender.
New Zealand Herald Leask (2020)	Blenheim sex abuse teacher Jaimee Cooney to be released from jail.
Otago Daily Times Nelson Weekly (2020)	Teacher jailed for sex with pupils to be freed.
The Guardian Goldenberg (2006)	Too pretty for prison.
People Helling (2018)	Sex Abuse and Mental Illness: Book Explores life of Disgraced Teacher Debra LaFave.
NBC News Lauer (2006)	Crossing the line.
New York Post Sheehy (2006)	SEX TEACH: I'M A VERY BAD GIRL; BARES ALL ON TEEN ROMP.
The Spokesman-Review (1998)	Disorder tied to former teacher's affair with boy Letourneau's lawyer, doctors say mental condition caused behaviour.
Seattle Times Santana (1998)	Imprisoned Letourneau Is Pregnant -- Former Teacher Who Bore Child By Ex-Student Is Expecting Again.
Kitsap Sun The Associated Press (1998)	Attorney confirms Letourneau six weeks pregnant.
NBC News The Associated Press (2004)	Letourneau gets out of prison.

The Australian Beatty (2023)	Monique Ooms: Teacher's 'pariah' complaint after student sex exposed.
Gold Coast Bulletin (2023)	Teacher, 31, who had sex with boy, 16, will not be jailed.
News.com.au Timms (2023)	Former Sale Secondary College teacher Monique Ooms abused after sex scandal exposed.
The Courier Woods (2023)	Bid to jail teacher for sex with student thrown out.
Metro Elvin (2021)	Science teacher had sex with pupil, 16, in his home while parents were at work.
The Sun Hill (2021)	PERV MISS Female teacher who had sex with pupil, 16, after grooming him with X-rated pic sobs as she's spared jail.
Daily Mail Pyman (2021)	Female science teacher, 33, is spared jail over sex with 16-year-old boy pupil after they swapped flirty and sexual messages and photos for months while she waited for him to turn legal age.
Daily Mirror Roberts (2021)	Female teacher who had sex with pupil, 16, sobs as she's spared jail.
Montreal Gazette Cherry (2015)	Teacher convicted of sexual assault after long relationship with students gets day parole.
CTV News (2014)	Ex-teacher Tania Pontbriand sentenced to 20 months for sexually assaulting student.
National Post Postmedia News (2014)	Former Quebec teacher gets 20 months in jail for two-year sexual relationship with student.
Ottawa Citizen Woods (2014)	Ex-teacher shouldn't see jail for sexually exploiting student, lawyer argues.
The Herald Sun Bice (2009)	Teacher Nazira Rafei denies sex with 15-year-old boy.
The Sydney Morning Herald	Teacher for trial on 'sex slave' charges.

Collins (2008)	
Australian Broadcasting Corporation (2009)	Female judge ‘let sex teacher off lightly’.
Daily Telegraph (2008)	Make me your sex slave, teacher Nazira Rafei allegedly said.
New Zealand Herald Leask (2022)	Parole refused: Sex offending teacher Stacey Reriti to stay behind bars.
Stuff Shadwell (2015)	Porirua teacher who sexually violated boy jailed for more than 10 years.
New Zealand Herald Weekes (2015)	Female teacher jailed with 10 years for sexually violating boy.
Newshub Wong (2015)	Wellington teacher jailed for sexual abuse of student.
Metro Metro News Reporter (2014)	Teacher spared jail for sexual activity with pupil as boy’s mum slams her ‘boobs and nice hairdo’.
The Mirror Moncur (2014)	Married teacher Bernadette Smith GRINS as she’s spared jail term after admitting affair with 16-year-old schoolboy.
Daily Record Robertson (2014)	Teacher avoids jail for fling with pupil.
Daily Mail Spillett (2014)	Married female teacher who had affair with 16-year-old pupil in ‘ten days of madness’ struck off.
IOL Behr (2019)	Ex-Bishops teacher Fiona Viotti was victim of sexual misconduct incident.
The Citizen Cilliters (2019)	Bishops teacher Fiona Viotti under medical care amid sex scandal.
News 24 Evans (2020)	Bishops Diocesan College sex scandal: Fiona Viotti’s case closed as witnesses refuse to testify.

SAPeople SAPeople Contributor (2019)	Fiona Viotti Involved in Sexual Encounters with 5 Bishops Boys.