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Abstract

This present study aims to investigate whether news media coverage on Caroline Flack's arrest, in December 2019, showed characteristics of 'Trial by Media' (TBM) through identification of one-sided, unbalanced or predominantly negative, sensationalised or speculative news coverage. Caroline Flack's case has importance due to her 'media trial' potentially contributing to her mental health issues, and subsequent suicide two months after her arrest. This study also aims to assess how much this media coverage could have contributed to this. Forty news media articles were analysed from the 18-day period, starting from her arrest, using Media Framing Analysis (MFA; Giles & Shaw, 2009). MFA is a five-step analytic process that identifies the story, analyses the characters, narrative form, language (thematic analysis) and links to wider social context. The results of this study provide evidence to support Caroline being subjected to TBM, showing characteristics of sensationalisation of the crime, use of 'evidence' that would be inadmissible in court, negative portrayals of her character, one-sided (Vitelli, 2018) and speculative reporting (Greer & McLaughlin, 2012). This study also concluded that media coverage did contribute to her mental health issues, however there was much evidence in the data that suggested she had a history of mental health and that the Criminal Prosecution Service (CPS), media and public ignored this evidence. Links to the wider social context also suggested other potential contributors, such as her involvement with realty TV.

Keywords: News Media, Framing, Caroline Flack, Trial by Media, Media Framing Analysis, Reality TV, Mental health, Criminal Prosecution Service

Introduction

The news media play a huge role in modern society, with the freedom to write what they deem relevant, and equally the public have a right to be kept informed on current political, social, economic and cultural topics. Impartiality and objectivity is important to achieve this, which is becoming increasingly difficult due to tabloid journalism (Krishnan, 2018). 'Tabloid journalism' typically refers to 'poor quality content and techniques of unethical reporting' (Popović & Popović, 2014). The news media's influence goes back to the invention of the printing press (Krishnan, 2018) but technological developments have seen the emergence of more platforms, leading to lowered costs for new competitors (Lazer et al., 2018); commercialisation of the news media can be attributed to this pressure on publishers to push up sales (Greer & McLaughlin, 2012). News media can have a huge influence on the public, with the editor having unconscious power over the opinions of readers by projecting their own ideology into the content. When publishing speculative claims, this can be dangerous due to the general view of news media credibility (Krishnan, 2018) causing people to take the information they read as factual. Increased competition can also pose a danger, with journalistic norms more frequently being rejected (Lazer et al., 2018; Popović & Popović, 2014) and boundaries tested in an attempt to generate a bigger profit (Murdoch, 2006) with less fear of consequence (Krishnan, 2018).

Crime is a recurring theme throughout the media; research has demonstrated the influence of the media's crime content, with it affecting our perceptions of crime, such as the amount of criminality that we deem acceptable (Surette, 1985). Its prevalence in the media can be linked to the idea that we are 'biologically inclined' to be more interested in news media related to deviance (Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006; Shoemaker, 1996). Studies have also shown that emotional reactions, especially negative ones, make us more likely to engage with news media content (Coviello et al., 2014). Crime reporting can be beneficial in many ways with victim's families using the news media to seek justice for loved ones despite it being a high-risk strategy due to the inability to predict the stance the media will chose to take when reporting on criminal cases (Greer & McLaughlin, 2020). Coverage can also encourage further victims to come forward, help to generate new information or evidence (Molloy, 2020), and facilitate the reopening of cases (Krishnan, 2018). However, previous research has demonstrated that news stories about crime are typically skewed and often one-sided in assuming the defendant's guilt before trial; this can often be due to evidence coming from the police and prosecutors. In high-profile cases, defence attorneys of the accused are aware that the public opinion is against them and can be reluctant to divulge information outside the courtroom (Vitelli, 2018).

High profile cases that have invoked one-sided media coverage can result in a social phenomenon called 'Trial by Media' (TBM) which subjects defendant's to 'media trials' in which they are tried and sentenced in the 'court of public opinion' (Greer & McLaughlin, 2011; 2012). TBM is undue interference in the process of justice delivery and describes the impact the news media can have on a person's reputation through building a widespread public opinion of the defendant's guilt before a verdict in a court of law has been passed. Its inferential structure is 'guilty until proven innocent' (Greer & McLaughlin, 2011; Krishnan, 2018) and is comprised of a combination of hard evidence and speculation. Targets are diverse, with public

figures and celebrities being common (Greer & McLaughlin, 2012). The concept of 'media trials' is not new, with the media being accused many times of passing a 'verdict' before trials even begin, and even after the court passes a verdict, the media can still appear to sit in judgement over the sentence (Krishnan, 2018). TBM uses prejudicial information that is often inadmissible in court, including the accused's past (relevant to the case or not) and sensationalised descriptions of the crime. Research observed that more than 75 percent of newspaper coverage of capital crimes had a negative tone and used sensational descriptions of the crime (Vitelli, 2018). Headlines of articles are often garnished with interpretation or exaggeration and aim to attract and entertain a large audience to keep up with the increased competition while maintaining a projected image of objective neutrality (Surette, 1989). This contributes to the 'media courts' verdict being based on the speculative or sensationalised versions of the story, rather than whether they actually committed the crime. Providing their own verdict and punishment is an illegitimate use of the media's freedom (Krishnan, 2018), with premature publicity having far reaching consequences for the accused (Molloy, 2020) and defendant's often finding themselves rendered defenceless against the speculative or one-sided media coverage (Greer & McLaughlin, 2011).

This kind of media exposure can affect the outcome of criminal trials and court proceedings by having the ability to bias juries (Krishnan, 2018). Impartial juries are a key feature of a fair trial and are becoming increasingly difficult in our media-saturated society (Vitelli, 2018; Bakhshay & Haney, 2018). Being subjected to 'naming and shaming', 'condemnation' and 'ridicule' can also have psychological implications for the defendant (Bakhtin, 1968) which can be amplified by the sensationalised and subsequent misinformation featured in these 'media trials' (Krishnan, 2018). The result of this 'remorseless and speculative coverage' (Greer & McLaughlin, 2020) can be deep and lasting damage, sometimes as devastating as actual criminal prosecution, to a person's reputation that is usually irreversible and irreparable; destroying careers and individual's credibility (Greer & McLaughlin, 2011; 2012; Krishnan, 2018). In this media age, reputation is a valuable asset and is a construct of other people's perceptions of you which you can influence but never have control over (Lickerman, 2010). We use it to inform ourselves about the people we interact with, which has a strong link to our social identities (Elmer, 2011). As well as affecting our social connections, damage to reputations can influence our psychological states; demonstrated by research from Pridmore & McArthur (2008) which explored the relationship between reputation damage and suicide. People who suffered actual or threatened reputation damage may be at a higher risk of suicide even if participants didn't have any evidence of previous mental disorder.

The damage caused by TBM is often impossible to measure (Vitelli, 2018). Even after the real trial, the media appears to sit in judgement over the verdict (Krishnan, 2018) and those who are considered to have evaded court justice can still be subjected to 'post-trial attack journalism'. A great example of a previous case of TBM is that of Kate and Gerry McCann. Greer & McLaughlin (2012) wrote about this famous case which involved the disappearance of 3-year-old Madeleine McCann in 2007. This story generated 24/7 global media coverage, due to the victim being one of the most vulnerable members of society, a young child (Greer & McLaughlin, 2012), making her an 'ideal victim' (Christie, 1986; Peelo, 2006). A key determinant in what media we consume are the emotional reactions the content creates and its

intensity (Luminent et al., 2000; Coviello et al., 2014), publishers knew this story would generate an emotional response. There was speculation throughout the case about potential suspects, each was scrutinised heavily by the media, with their personal lives being thoroughly examined. The McCann's became the targets of this speculation, and despite having their names cleared, there are still people who believe they are guilty. This case is evidence of the lasting effects of TBM and demonstrates good reason for inquiries into unethical reporting approaches (Greer & McLaughlin, 2012).

The research focus of this present study will aim to analyse the case of Caroline Flack around the time she was accused of assault in December 2019. Flack was a 40-year-old TV personality, best known for her role as presenter of the popular TV show Love Island; she was arrested and charged with assaulting her boyfriend Lewis Burton on the 13th of December which generated high media and public interest. Cases that involve high-profile figures usually mean that people are more interested and aware of the proceedings (Krishnan, 2018) through parasocial relationships; this describes the one-way relationship between media users and media figures - the media user feels as though they know the media figure (Giles, 2002). Research referenced by Brown et al. (2003) gave evidence for the idea that people who become more psychologically involved with popular media personalities are more susceptible to the media's persuasive influence (Basil & Brown, 1997). The general aim of this research is to explore whether media coverage on Caroline's arrest fits into patterns of TBM through identifying reporting styles such as speculation, sensationalisation, one-sided or predominantly negative media coverage; as well as use of 'evidence' that would be inadmissible in court (Vitelli, 2018; Krishnan, 2018). This study also aims to identify any psychological processes that could have affected the readers perception of the case, which could have increased the allegations perceived credibility and potentially amplified the damage to her reputation; along with the effects that the reporting styles and content could have had on Caroline's mental health.

TBM is an area of concern because the media has no right to be a judge and jury (Molloy, 2020) and to inflict its own punishment on the defendant in the form of reputational damage. If this case is consistent with previous TBM cases, it could highlight unethical reporting styles and a lack of journalistic boundaries shown by other 'media trials'. Previous cases have given strong evidence for the argument that the media isn't properly regulated by the courts surrounding reporting on criminal cases (Krisnan, 2018). The decision to study Flack's case was driven by the consequences that her potential 'media trial' had, as two months after her arrest on the 15th of February 2020, she committed suicide. There is a strong probability that the media attention she attracted around her arrest contributed to her evident mental health struggles (Molloy, 2020) and the outcome of TBM in Flack's case feeds into the debate of whether defendants should be named in media coverage of court cases. This case shows that it's more important than ever to find the balance between the publics 'right to know' and the rights of the defendant (Vitelli, 2018), as well as bringing attention to issues of mental health. The public and media need to be considerate of is said or written online and aware of how words can psychologically impact people.

The method used to analyse the news media articles is Media Framing Analysis (MFA; Giles & Shaw, 2009). Entman (1993) defined framing as the selection of 'some aspects of a perceived reality' and making 'them more salient in a communicating text'. Work by Tversky and Kahneman (1981) demonstrates the influence that frames and perspectives can have on decision-making, with frames working in a way that increases salience of specific aspects, making them more noticeable. When it comes to news media articles, it isn't always possible to evaluate a whole article as being framed 'positively' or 'negatively'; with most articles having elements of both. MFA was developed to take into account different perspectives, it acknowledges the importance of prior knowledge and its biases on interpretation of the text. It was created specifically for news media to try and 'understand the influence of news media in contemporary culture', building off work of Entman (1991; 1993) and Van Gorp (2007). In relation to 'media trials', it is evident that the perspective the media chooses, moulding various aspects of the case to create a certain public opinion (Surette, 1989).

Methodology

Materials
This research analysed 40 news media articles from eight different online news publishers, from the 18-day period between the 13th and the 31st of December 2019. This was most likely the period of time when the story was attracting the most attention; if she was framed negatively by the media during this time, this could have amplified potential damage to her reputation and mental health. There were many articles that reported on her day-to-day life that were triggered by her arrest but not directly reporting on the incident. There were main news stories that featured in reports across multiple different publishers, during the analysis period in December 2019:

> *Friday 13th.* Initial arrest
>
> *Saturday 14th.* Lewis Burton announces he will not be pressing charges against Caroline.
>
> *Monday 16th.* She is seen for the first time since her arrest and defended by Lewis Burton.
>
> *Tuesday 17th.* Steps down as host of Love Island.
>
> *Saturday 21st.* Reports of Caroline undergoing 'intensive counselling'.
>
> *Monday 23rd.* Court hearing takes place in which she pleads not guilty to assault.
>
> *Tuesday 24th.* Nine-year-old tweet about a lamp goes viral after allegations spread that she hit him over the head with a lamp.
>
> *Sunday 29th.* Caroline leaves the UK.
>
> *Tuesday 31st.* Picture claimed to be bed covered in blood from the night of the assault emerges.

Analytic Procedure
MFA (Giles & Shaw, 2009) was the main framework used for analysis and is a five-step process, however it is important to outline epistemological standpoints of the

researcher as it could influence the interpretation of the data. A constructionist framework was taken, which understands meaning and experience as socially produced (Burr, 1995); it seeks to 'theorise the socio-cultural contexts, and structural conditions' that create the accounts given in the data. The approach taken to identify themes, specifically for the identification of language categories, is important. This study took a mixture of inductive and theoretical approaches to analysis. Inductive approaches are 'data-driven', processing data without trying to fit it into a coding frame based on the researcher's analytic preconceptions which was used to identify themes.

However, the opposite of this was the main approach to the analysis; theoretical approaches are driven by analytic interest and are analyst-driven to look for patterns of TBM. Use of both approaches allows this research to provide a rich analysis of the data but also detailed examination of specific aspects of the data. The level at which themes were identified was a mixture of is also important to define; this study used a mixture of both semantic and latent approaches, looking at surface level meanings of the text through a semantic level approach. Use of latent themes aligns more with the epistemological standpoint of the researcher in this study due to its views on broader assumptions and theorising the underpinnings of 'what is actually articulated in the data'. Latent themes look at the underlying ideologies and meanings of the data through interpretive work; this was more predominantly used (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The process of MFA's five steps is listed below with some of the findings as examples.

Identifying the story
The 'news peg' was searched for online to identify the story (Cooper & Yukimura, 2002), which was Caroline's alleged 'assault' and 'arrest'. The date was also searched for so that the results would be articles specifically from her initial arrest period. Some of the most popular online news media publishers were chosen, who had reported on her initial arrest and these were searched for the triggering event in their website search feature. This generated results for articles related to and triggered by the assault, which were sorted by date and ones during the 18-day period after her arrest were selected. In some articles, it was clear to see that the topic was the assault, however, some others that reported on unnecessary events were selected, such as Caroline being seen for the first time since her arrest or hearing. 'Unnecessary events' refer to content of articles that were not directly about the assault itself but were stories triggered by it.

Identifying characters
Using a narrative analytical approach the key protagonists of the stories were analysed to establish agency; essentially 'who is doing what to whom?' (Entman, 1991). This was helpful in identifying what content was most prevalent in each article with reference to characters related to Caroline's career, the legal process, and her relationship history. Some protagonists were often mentioned across many articles but others only featured in content once. The presence of characters can help readers navigate the story and interpret it based on their existing knowledge. The protagonists' influence will be greater when they are celebrities as the readers may have parasocial relationships with them and there is an abundance of information

about them online (Giles, 2002). Prior character analysis on key protagonists can help with understanding what pre-existing knowledge the readers had and what perceptions of the case this knowledge may facilitate.

Selective exposure bias (Lazer et al., 2018) theorises that we prefer information that confirms our 'precasting attitudes'; so if allegations align with what we know about her then we may be more inclined to take the information as true. Character analysis within the articles can either confirm or contradict this pre-existing knowledge and also be helpful with understanding how the article is framing the protagonist. This aids with reader identification in the third stage of analysis.

Narrative form and reader identification
After analysing the characters, the narrative form of the article needs to be analysed. This refers to whether the article follows a 'media template' (Kitzinger, 2000). In addition to this, news media articles that take the form of these 'stock stories' usually steer members of the audience to identify with specific characters; this is called reader identification. For instance, a lot of articles that were analysed either had very procedural content in that they asked you to identify with the legal process, whereas others fell under a 'fall from grace' narrative. This meant that they focused on how Caroline was at the height of her career and had it all; but the assault had potentially ruined her future and career in TV.

Analysis of language categories
Examination of the language content of articles is key in understanding the picture that the media is trying to paint of an event or a person. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to carry out a detailed examination of the news media articles and develop themes. After refining, core themes emerged, with 'procedural' language indicating how much of the articles actually focused on the legal process and reported objectively. Whereas 'vilification' language represented how much the media spoke negatively of or criticised her. The themes were identified using a mixture of a theoretical and inductive approaches, by looking for indications as to whether that the data fits patterns of TBM and extracting themes through data-driven analysis. Themes were specifically identified using a mixture of semantic and latent approaches, but predominantly the latter.

Generalisation
This is the final stage of analysis in which the story is linked to or placed in wider social and cultural contexts. Does the story explicitly or implicitly (Entman, 1991) reference broader narratives or debates? For instance, many articles in the analysis fed into the discussion of the duty-of-care provided to guests or contestants on TV shows such as The Jeremy Kyle Show and Love Island - which Caroline was heavily involved in. During this step it became apparent that findings in earlier steps were relevant in giving structure to these more in-depth theorisations; identifying these themes involves interpretation of what meanings the text is trying deliver to the audience.

Results and Discussion

The high media interest in Caroline's case was evident through the number of articles available and also content mentioning the 'significant number of media reports' on the case. One of the language categories and narrative forms that presented itself was 'procedural'; this refers to content about the legal process and was a good indicator of objective and impartial reporting. This language category wasn't the largest, but even in heavily procedural articles, the news media could still be conveying false information. Media coverage of Caroline's hearing mentioned the prosecution claiming that she was 'manipulative' towards Lewis. Despite the lack of evidence to back up these claims, publishers such as the BBC quoting these allegations could cause people to be more inclined to take the information as true, due to the public generally viewing the BBC's content as accurate and reliable (Ofcom, 2011). Police statements were also common in highly procedural articles, this has similar effects on readers due to their advantage in establishing dominance over the 'inferential structure' (Lang & Lang, 1955) in crime media due to their higher position in the 'hierarchy of credibility' (Becker, 1967; Greer & McLaughlin, 2011).

Overall, the media's reporting styles were not procedural; content varied from speculative news coverage to sensationalisation of the assault itself. Aspects of reporting were highly intrusive and her every move was scrutinised; evidence of this was observed throughout the themes. Speculative reporting was used as an indicator of non-objective content; making claims without solid evidence (Gordon, 2020). Often, allegations will be made in the media without proper credibility checks due to the competitive nature of the industry. Other publishers will then issue the same information, therefore increasing its perceived credibility due to the familiarity bias (Tversky & Kahnman, 1974; Lazer et al, 2018). This bias refers to how repeatedly viewing information or misinformation can make it more familiar, and therefore more likely to be accepted as true (Swire et al., 2017).

The media showed lots of signs of heavy scrutinisation of Caroline; this was recognised by Caroline's lawyer, who stated that the 'case has been scrutinised' by the media. Due to the high media interest in her at the time, she was being examined very thoroughly by the media, with Caroline saying that the media 'documented' her 'every move' including on a day out with friends. Photographers and news publishers teased her with captions such as 'feeling better?' and 'what did you get?', providing evidence for the press intrusion into her personal life. This was also visible from photos and language such as 'mobbed' and 'scrum' used by the media to describe the photographers outside court in the day of her hearing. Other language indicated intrusion, as press waited outside the homes of Caroline and Lewis with articles saying that she was 'spotted outside of her home' and 'seen for the first time' since her arrest. Flack also decided to leave the UK because she didn't want to return to her flat due to the press documenting her 'every move', and when she tried to leave the UK to 'escape' the press, she was accused of fleeing the country,

News media is emotionalised through methods such as sensationalisation; with journalists moving away from their job of evaluating the story to sensationalising it. Due to the competition of tabloid news media (Psychology Today, 2012), publishers embellish aspects of these cases to attract readers. Some news media publishers sensationalised more than others, but it was found in abundance throughout the analysis. 'Fall from grace' narratives play into this sensationalisation, creating a story

rather than an objective report. Language helped to create this story narrative through the use of capital letters at the beginning of the article to create drama; for example, both Caroline and Lewis 'DENIED' the allegations against her. This induces an emotional response; similarly, some reports used dramatised headlines to catch the reader's attention, such as 'CAROLINE WHACK'. Emotional reactions are induced by these catchy titles, that are garnished with exaggeration and interpretation (Krishnan, 2018; Coviello et al., 2014; Keib et al., 2016). Research also demonstrates that people respond quicker to negative words (Stafford, 2014), which when put in capital letters can draw in readers and create an increased and faster emotional response. These reporting styles run through all of the following themes identified and represent some of the characteristics of 'media trials', along with negative portrayals of her character, use of her past and interviews (Vitelli, 2020; Greer & McLaughlin, 2012).

Theme One - Reality TV
This theme was identified through an inductive approach to analysis, with its prevalence being evident through the size of the language category developed during the fourth stage of analysis. 'Fall from grace' narratives were observed in over half of the articles analysed, mostly focusing on Caroline's 'career high' and how her arrest had 'derailed' it. There was a prevalence of content that focused on what the assault meant for her career, with articles stating that her arrest would 'affect her schedule' and 'hosting role'. Her arrest was portrayed as an inconvenience for ITV with the situation being referred to as an 'absolute nightmare' for the show 'so close to the start of the series'. At first, she remained positive that she would keep her job, but she then 'stepped down' as host on the 17th, not wanting to 'detract attention' from the upcoming series. This portrayed her character as considerate, especially as content highlighted that she had wished the team a 'fantastic series'. News media content highlighted the public's involvement, due to the media's concern over what Flack's arrest meant for Love Island, and consequently us as viewers. Consistently throughout the analysis, there were questions about who would be her replacement, almost framing the topic as a competition with articles stating the public's favoured celebrity to take her place at that point in time.

Another article made reference to our unconscious involvement in her life, through the influence we as the audience can have over her career; one article highlighted that Caroline was 'dropped after one series' after she was widely criticised by 'the viewers at home' on social media. Aside from this, Caroline was portrayed as good at her job such as through language saying that her replacement Laura Whitmore had 'big boots to fill'. Flack's effect on the show being described as turning it into a 'cash cow' reflects the shows priority of revenue. ITV also made implications that the door was still being left open for her possible return in 'future series', saying they 'may bring her back' and calling the new host, Laura Whitmore, a 'stand in'. TV shows such as Love Island have a tendency to exploit the participants, which the contestants are often aware of to some extent (Marsh, 2019); this is reflected by the media referring to them as a 'batch of singletons'. They are treated as objects for our entertainment to 'boost revenues'.

The media alluded to her arrest as 'drama' and 'gossip', feeding into the idea that celebrities and contestants of reality shows are seen as entertainment. The reason that we may be so interested in these shows may have a similar psychology to why

crime reporting is so prevalent in the media. One article mentioned that Love Island is a show that often delivers 'bad news to contestants', which could be implying that we enjoy these shows for the same reason we are driven to consume negative news media (Trussler & Soroka, 2014). It could also be explained by social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954; Bauer, 2020); watching people being delivered bad news and humiliated may make us feel better about ourselves, providing us with a sense of relief in our own lives (Harrell, 2014). Another explanation is that it induces an emotional response (Bhattacharya, 2020) and gives us a chance to practice social strategies without having to actually experience the situations we view on screen (Ryan-Christensen, 2020), living vicariously through the contestants (Bhattacharya, 2020). Links were also made to issues of sexualisation and objectification caused by these shows through the fifth stage of analysis, generalisation. The data mentioned that Love Island often used 'slow motion shots' of contestants; this emphasis on appearance can have a profound effect on its participants and viewers (McNally, 2019). Being in the public eye and publicly scrutinised can cause confidence and self-esteem issues, rises in stress responses and anxiety (Zatat & Evans, 2018). Caroline referred to Love Island as being her 'world', and despite never being subjected to active scrutinisation by the show, she still could have been affected in these ways. The psychological support offered by these shows is covered in the theme of mental health.

The impact Reality TV can have on viewers is evidenced through research showing that viewing unrealistic bodies of cast members may leave younger, and more impressionable viewers vulnerable to unhealthy body management practices (Pope et al., 1999). Reality TV has been associated with higher levels of self-objectification, body dissatisfaction and lowered self-esteem (Vandenbosch et al., 2015; Furnham et al., 2002; Webster & Tiggemann, 2003; Suplee, 2014). Articles made reference to the economic gap between us and celebrity culture, with pictures of her on a 'luxury yacht' and mentioning her '£15k-a-WEEK retreat'. The public have a growing fascination in watching people they see as better than them doing regular things; it stems from and feeds our 'desire to fantasise about the prospect of easily acquired fame' (Harrell, 2014).

Theme Two - Social Media Involvement
Social media use, specifically use of Instagram and Twitter, was referenced heavily throughout the data. This theme was developed through an inductive analysis approach using predominantly language analysis and links between the story and wider social context. Caroline had 2.3 million 'followers' on Instagram; a platform on which people can share support, but which is also often used to share criticism. As mentioned in the Reality TV theme, this use of social media can have an influence over celebrities', such as Caroline's, career. Other instances of the public's use of social media, are that stories are driven by shares and likes on these platforms (Keib et al., 2016); publishers use this to figure out what is of public interest. Twitter users also discovered a 'nine-year-old post' about a lamp which, due to allegations that she 'hit him over the head with a lamp', went 'viral'. The public were responsible for finding the 'historic tweet' and sharing it '1.1K times in a matter of hours'. This then potentially becomes an issue with familiarity bias (Tversky & Kahnman, 1974; Lazer et al, 2018; Swire et al., 2017), as members of the public made repeated

connections between Caroline and a lamp, potentially giving the allegations increased perceived credibility.

The couple made it clear that they wanted to deal with matters out of the public eye, however, in the weeks analysed, they both continued to use social media extensively. This may have been due to one-sided reporting that didn't represent Carolines potentially different version of events. Caroline was unable to defend herself in the media due to 'legal reasons', so her use of social media was primarily to share with her followers that 'matters were not as reported' and that it would be a 'relief' when she could share her side. Flack was scrutinised heavily in regards to her social media use; some content of articles focused heavily on her liking a 'shady tweet', slamming the show as 'orgy island', just hours after stepping down as host of Love Island. The same tweet also stated that the public probably hadn't heard Caroline's side of the story, which could have been her reason for liking the post. However, this was glossed over and the media focused on the negative outcome (Davey, 2012), in regard to the show, making her out to be bitter over the loss of her role as host; this was identified through character analysis. Lewis also used Instagram to confront the public and media's attitude and treatment of Flack, stating that he was 'tired of the lies and abuse' aimed at his girlfriend.

Through the fifth stage of MFA, links to wider social context were made alongside the Reality TV narrative. Caroline acknowledged that Love Island was 'not about love', through liking the 'shady tweet' just mentioned, stating that the show was about 'fake boobies and sunscreen'. Many contestants participate in the show to become 'influencers'; these are people who attract large followings on social media, posting pictures of their idyllic lifestyle, to which 'their followers can only inspire' (Marwick; 2015). They often post pictures of their bodies which predominantly fit the ideal; this has been linked to negative body image (Grabe et al., 2008; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; Bauer, 2020), increased appearance comparisons, and body dissatisfaction (Levine & Harrison, 2009; Vartanian & Dey, 2013). The influence of these ideals can be partially explained by social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) through viewers evaluating their body image through comparing themselves to these 'influencers'. Social comparisons are more commonly made when the person being compared to is perceived to be similar and women see themselves as more similar to Instagram 'influencers' than celebrities (Chae, 2018). The ability to edit photos also affects appearance comparison, as people on Instagram can show an idealised version of themselves (Fardouly et al., 2018; Manago et al., 2008; Bauer, 2020; Oakes, 2019).

Theme Three - Relationships
This theme was developed through an inductive approach to analysis using the character identification analysis, alongside the assessment of language categories. This analysis expected to find data about Flack's relationship at the time with Lewis, as this was directly related to the assault. However, at least half of this content was related to her relationship history. Caroline and Lewis remained a couple throughout the legal process, making efforts to potentially down play the assault. They both referred to the incident as just a 'lover's tiff' and a 'silly drunken row that got out of hand'; Lewis also mentioned that arguments happen in every relationship, possibly trying to portray that they are no different from anybody else. The media indicated

that they had a history of following and reporting on Caroline's love life by labelling their relationship as her 'latest' one and stating that her 'love life hit the headlines again'. Media's interest in celebrity love lives could be due to readers seeking a form of escapism, living vicariously through their experiences, and learning from their mistakes without actually having to make them (Yuko, 2018). News coverage on this content can affect readers through negative portrayals of relationship scandals, which are common among celebrities, deterring them from wanting to get into relationships. Cultivation theory states that heavy media consumption (Gerbner et al., 1994) can facilitate low expectations for what a relationship should involve (Yuko, 2018; Banjo, 2002).

Evidence of speculative and sensationalised reporting was shown by the generalisations and assumptions made by the media around paparazzi shots of the pair having what was called a 'furious argument' on holiday. They concluded that their relationship was 'on the rocks' over what they knew to be one argument. The lack of media fact checking was shown through multiple articles stating different months that the couple started dating. In regards to the assault itself, character analysis helped to identify her portrayal as a paranoid and 'jealous' girlfriend who went through Lewis' phone while he was sleeping. This was made through media allegations, stating that she found 'flirty' messages exchanged between Lewis and one of his clients, which 'she interpreted' as him cheating. Other character portrayals were made through her dating history being described as 'rocky, 'colourful', and full of 'heartache and controversy'. Caroline was labelled as a 'cougar' by the media and Lewis her 'toyboy', with content relating to her past love life focusing on her ex-boyfriends ages, stating that she had a 'penchant for dating younger men'. Caroline acknowledged this portrayal of her as an insult and stated that, despite it being something she was 'supposed to be ashamed' of, she was taking control of that narrative and wearing it as a "badge of honour".

The media's influence it had over her love life was highlighted with her relationship with Harry Styles being mentioned in the data. The pair dated in 2011, which 'sparked controversy' and they split up soon after their relationship 'went public' with the media coverage on their romance leading to members of the public harassing Caroline in the street. She also had a 'short-lived' romance with Prince Harry, which was called off 'when the press found out'. Allegations made by Flack's ex-fiancé were also prevalent in the coverage analysed, with him accusing her of being abusive towards him during their relationship in 2018. This could have been an example of the positive effects of crime reporting with, Brady only coming forward with his allegations against her when the story broke headlines. Her alleged history of abuse was potentially confirmed by an interview with Caroline's neighbour that was triggered by her arrest. He stated that he often heard 'noisy arguments' between the pair around the time of their relationship. These allegations will be expanded on more in the theme of vilification.

Theme Four - Vilification
Caroline was vilified throughout the data; this theme was identified through a theoretical approach to see how negatively she was framed by the media. Most vilification was observed through character analysis and the development of language categories. As mentioned in the relationship theme, she was portrayed as

being a 'jealous' girlfriend with no consideration that Lewis could have acted in a way to make her think that he was cheating. An interview with her neighbour, portrayed her character as inconsiderate, due to noisy parties that she 'never apologised for'. Selective exposure bias (Lazer et al., 2018) could have increased perceived credibility of these allegations, due to them fitting with the media's past portrayal of her as a party girl. The prosecution also made speculative claims about why Lewis didn't want to press charges, saying that she was 'clearly manipulative' towards him. Despite the lack of evidence to support these claims, the fact that they came from the prosecution may lead reader to take the information as true, due to their higher position in the 'hierarchy of credibility' (Becker, 1967). The more these claims are reported on might also create familiarity bias (Tversky & Kahnman, 1974). Caroline was also vilified by the Criminal Prosecution Service (CPS), saying that she 'flouted' her bail conditions almost immediately and they refused to remove this ban on the pair's contact, stating that she still posed a risk to him. Flack's injuries were glossed over, the lacerations to her left wrist were made out and assumed to be an accident.

This was backed up by a picture of the 'bloodied bed' that was leaked in the media, which was claimed to be her bedroom on the night of the assault. The blood in the picture was assumed to be Lewis's, however, it was later released that the blood was Caroline's and The Sun claimed that the CPS knew this. This would imply that Caroline's injuries were more serious than reported and maybe more serious than Lewis's, despite his being the only ones referred to as 'significant' in media coverage. If this is true then the assault was framed as more violent than it may have been. People also tend to look at pictures faster and for longer (Ulloa et al., 2015), and they deliver emotional frames which, as mentioned in the introduction, are important in determining what news media we consume (Keib et a., 2016; Coviello et al., 2014). This can create issues due to the readers also making assumptions that the blood in the picture was Lewis's through connecting the picture with the headline of Caroline assaulting Lewis. Without reading the rest of the article and finding out that Lewis denied it being his blood, readers will be led to believe the assault must have been violent. The framing of a violent 'attack' was also reinforced by one police officer who sensationalised the crime, likening the scene to that of a 'horror movie'. Flack's defence team suggested that the CPS made Lewis's injuries out to be worse than they were, with her lawyer saying that his injuries were not 'significant in the way the prosecution submit'. Other vilifications of Caroline were the prevalence of content on the allegations made by Andrew Brady about her potential abusive patterns, liking the 'shady tweet' and her relationship history.

Theme Five - Gender Narratives
This theme was identified mainly through character analysis, development of language categories and generalisations, which presented clear links to gender narratives. Andrew Brady made his abuse allegations through posting on Instagram saying '#abusehasnogender', pushing forward the conversation of domestic abuse and gender. Were the CPS trying to make an example of her as a female perpetrator of domestic violence? When the perpetrator is female, this is a crime that is less reported and prosecuted, possibly as men are hesitant to come forward as victims due to the fear of being judged by police, and having their masculinity challenged (Campbell, 2010; Huntley et al., 2019). Lewis stated that he was 'upset and embarrassed' about the incident ending up in the public domain, he could have felt

as though this would be seen as less masculine if he admitted to being assaulted; was this why he didn't want to press charges?

Protagonists' appearances were also mentioned consistently throughout the analysis, and was content that didn't inform the public about the assault in any way. Mentioning that Lewis was '6ft 5in' tall, as well as calling him 'hunky' and 'handsome' may reinforce the male beauty standard of height; a survey of women suggested they wouldn't want to date a man shorter than them (Pertschuk & Trisdorfer, 1994). One article referred to Caroline as 'stunning' and her 'famous legs', strengthening the ideal that long, slim legs are 'desirable' and subconsciously sending the message to some readers that they may be seen as undesirable. The news media shamed Caroline for having an extensive relationship history, calling it controversial, and labelling her as a 'cougar' as an insult. The media's reporting on this reinforces sexual double-standard's; research has shown that frequent sexual activity was more expected and rated more positively for men (Endendijk, 2019). Caroline's defiance to taking 'cougar' as an insult contradicts these attitudes.

Theme Six - Mental Health Issues
Mental health presented itself as a prominent theme, highly identified through a theoretical approach due to the researcher wanting to assess the influence that media coverage could have had on Flack's mental health. It was observed mainly through character analysis, language category development and generalisations. As mentioned in the introduction, media coverage can cause mental health issues through reputation damage. Rumours can also be mentally damaging; they are information that hasn't been verified as true (Jones et al., 2017) and the lack of verifying information was evident throughout the analysis. Rumours can destroy self-confidence, self-esteem and lead to depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts (Gordon, 2020). Caroline's bail conditions meant that she was banned from seeing Lewis over Christmas and alongside Seasonal Affective Disorder (American Psychological Association, 2014) which can affect anyone, this could have amplified or contributed to any existing mental health issues. SAD is usually caused by the shorter and darker days in winter and the CPS could have taken into account that this time of year is when mental health is often at its worst. Caroline stated that she was 'suffering from loneliness' and her pleas for the bail conditions to be lifted were denied by the Judge, potentially also showing a disregard for her evident mental health issues.

Flack showed signs of mental health issues throughout, saying that 'she would kill herself' in police custody on the night of the assault. This was first observed in the analysis of one article from the 23rd of December; due to the seriousness of what she said, this could have been reported on more heavily. Caroline also shared on Instagram that it was the 'worst time of my life' and that she didn't know 'where to go'; there were also talks of her 'struggling to cope' and undergoing a 'course of intensive counselling'. Flack's injuries from the assault were also implied to have been an accident and glossed over. Considering what she said in police custody, this could have been taken more seriously and as a potential deliberate result of her mental health struggles. In regard to prosecuting her, there was no risk assessment done on whether pressing charges would put her life in danger in the same way that Lewis' safety was assessed when deciding not to lift bail conditions. Lewis called the

media out for their disregard for Caroline saying that this was not a 'witch-hunt' and that it was 'someone's life'. This potentially implies that he knew of her mental health history and that her life may have been at risk. Caroline had an evident history of mental health, with her family and friends stating that she has a tendency to 'hit self-destruct mode'.

Links to wider social context were made through the mental health effects of shows such as Love Island, a theme that made up most of the news coverage content. Reality TV had an evident effect on its contestants through the suicides of Sophie Gradon and Mike Thalassitis; as well as Caroline in 2020. Previous contestants have warned people not to apply for the show and have highlighted the lack of aftercare (Houghton, 2019). In one article, the death of a Jeremy Kyle guest was referenced directly in relation to the amount of psychological support provided by these shows and the changes to aftercare made by ITV as a result of these suicides (Marsh, 2019; 2020; Zatat & Evans, 2018). Before 2019, there were psychological pre-assessments in place but no official rules on what aftercare to provide. The changes made were provisions of social media training and mental health counselling (Houghton, 2019) for a year after the show. Aftercare for contestants is important because these shows open the contestants up to public scrutiny, criticism and judgement, which can often be overwhelming and cause issues with self-esteem, anxiety and sometimes depression (Zatat & Evans, 2018). Caroline wasn't a contestant, however she did say that the show was her 'world' so, even though the show didn't subject her to scrutiny, the effects and lack of aftercare provided could have had a similar outcome. The mental health of viewers can also be affected. Exposure to 'ideal' bodies on these shows leading to increased body dissatisfaction (Bearman et al., 2006; Bauer, 2020) and lowered self-esteem (Furnham et al., 2002; Webster & Tiggemann, 2003) anxiety, depression (American Psychological Association, 2007) and eating disorders (Kim & Lennon, 2007; Algars et al., 2010; Barker & Galambos, 2007; Suplee, 2014).

Theme Seven - One-sided Media Coverage
This section was identified mainly through language category development to see if it the pattern of TBM and of news media coverage of crimes being predominantly one-sided against the defendant (Vitelli, 2018). Language category identification mainly enabled the development of this theme. Lewis's injuries were the only ones to be portrayed as 'serious' and the cuts on Flack's wrist were assumed to have been an accident. There was never any question over whether her injuries could have been deliberate, even when mentioned alongside her saying that 'she would kill herself'. The assault was portrayed as down to her being paranoid and 'interpreting' texts as him cheating, without any consideration that Lewis could have acted in a way that led her to believe this; however, this would then count as speculative reporting. In the theme of social media, one-sided reporting was indicated by Caroline feeling as though she hadn't been able to give her 'side of the story'. Even though she was restricted from defending herself due to 'legal reasons', the news media never considered a different version of events in their reports. The only time this was seemingly considered, was when the media reported on what the couple had posted on Instagram, saying that 'matters were not as reported'. Lewis also took to social media to say he was 'tired of the lies and abuse' aimed at his girlfriend and that it was not a 'witch-hunt', indicating that the media were treating her unfairly.

Similar to the seriousness of their injuries, in regard to the picture of the 'bloodied bed' that was leaked, the media failed to represent the equal possibility that the blood was hers. It later emerged that the blood was mostly hers and Caroline's defence team at her hearing stated that his injuries were not 'significant in the way the prosecution submit', which suggests that CPS had contributed to the exaggeration of his injuries. If all of this was the true narrative, then the assault was framed as more 'violent' than it may have been. News coverage of the hearing mainly focused on the prosecution rather than giving her defence equal coverage and there was no mention her injuries.

Conclusions

Characteristics of TBM were identified throughout the analysis; 'media trials' are said to be comprised of a mixture of hard evidence and speculation (Greer & McLaughlin, 2012), using information that is often inadmissible in court. This information often includes examples of the defendant's past and sensationalised descriptions of the crime. Media coverage of crime is also often one-sided and framed negatively towards the accused using character statements (Vitelli, 2018). Even though most of the themes identified in this analysis may not have been directly linked to this on surface level observation, many of these media reporting styles ran through them. Sensationalisation was seen through the prevalence of 'fall from grace' narratives, which were often seen in articles with high content coverage on her career and the narrative of Reality TV. Sensationalisation was also seen in relation to Lewis's injuries with a lot of disagreement being seen across articles over their seriousness, along with Caroline's defence team stating that the prosecution had also exaggerated their significance. The leaked picture of the bloody bed was also assumed to have been Lewis' blood which works alongside the exaggeration of his injuries to portray the assault as a 'violent attack' perpetrated by Caroline.

The relationship theme indicated the use of her past as evidence in her 'media trial', with references to her 'controversial' love life and high media coverage on allegations that she was abusive to her ex-fiancé. These were speculative claims due to the lack of evidence to suggest that there was any 'physical violence in their relationship'. The news media admitted to not being able to 'verify' the pictures 'authenticity', but it was used anyway, making it somewhat speculative at the time of publishing. The media also speculated about her (then) current relationship with Lewis, making assumptions that the couple were having problems after one argument being documented by photographers. The prosecution also stated, with no evidence, that Caroline was 'manipulative' towards Lewis. One-sided media coverage was also prevalent throughout, with Caroline using social media platforms to make it known to the public that 'matters were not as reported'. Media coverage of her hearing predominantly covered the prosecution; the CPS also treated her unequally with no risk assessment being carried out as to whether prosecuting would pose a risk to her life in the same way that Lewis's vulnerability was assessed. This was despite stating that she would commit suicide in police custody which was first observed in the analysis of one article on the 23rd. Vilification and relationship themes also fed into the evidence that media coverage framed her more negatively through character statements. The prevalence of the relationships theme was a huge indicator of content that wasn't informing the public on the assault, but assisted

hugely in making these portrayals of her character; such as labelling her as a 'cougar' and portraying the assault as being down to her jealously and paranoia.

An interview with Caroline's neighbour potentially confirmed her pre-existing party girl image, as well as the allegations made by Caroline's ex-fiancé. This would have been inadmissible in trial (Vitelli, 2018), an attempted use of her past and a portrayal of her character to convey a guilty verdict in the 'media court'. Psychological processes were identified throughout the analysis that may increase the perceived credibility of the allegations. These include familiarity bias (Tversky & Kahnman, 1974), selective exposure bias (Lazer et al., 2018), emotional responses induced by pictures (Keib et al., 2016), and statements from people with higher positions in the 'hierarchy of credibility' (Becker, 1967). The increased perceived credibility of the allegations against Caroline in the media through these psychological processes could increase the damage done to her reputation along with the impact of her 'media trial' on her mental health. The publics involvement through social media could also amplify the impact the allegations had on her psychologically. The news media report on issues that they think the public are interested in through what we share and like on these platforms (Keib et al., 2016), almost in the same way that we vote for contestants on reality shows. Information and misinformation on social media may have less perceived credibility than the news media, but its circulation is uncontrollable and each new post is often embellished with new opinions (Molloy, 2020). Objectivity on these media platforms would be harder to regulate in the same way that the news media are through reporting restrictions. The lack of this objectivity and added opinions to the already sensationalised and speculative news coverage may extend the reaches of the story and therefore its effects. Part of the aim of this research was to assess to what extent the media contributed to her evident mental health issues. The effect of reputation damage on mental health was explained in the introduction, but as already mentioned the perceived credibility of allegations could have increased the psychological effects of reputation damage.

There were many other factors that could have affected Caroline psychologically; identified and discussed in the theme of mental health. Her huge involvement with the Reality TV industry and history of mental health could have been significant factors contributing to her evident struggles. The researcher's personal bias may have been projected onto the results and analysis; prior knowledge of Caroline's psychological distress could have meant that the theme of mental health issues and red flags were easier to identify than it was for the media and public at the time the reports were being published. However, many direct statements were made by Caroline herself about her mental state, and this study concludes that despite the red flags potentially being more obvious due to hindsight, her public pleas for help were ignored by the CPS, the media and the public. This analysis hasn't been able to achieve its full potential due to one major factor, publishers taking articles offline after Caroline's death. Media coverage after her passing, highlighted and provided evidence for this, with some articles even being removed from public access during the analysis. This could indicate that they didn't want to receive backlash for the content of the articles which will remain unknown to this study. This emphasises the lack of accountability taken by the media for their actions and the harm caused by their reporting. Other researcher bias that could have influenced the results was the view that she was hounded by the media prior to analysis, with the researcher

potentially overlooking some positive frames produced by the media in search for negative ones.

This study highlights the media treatment of celebrities and the need for more journalistic restrictions when it comes to crime reporting, due to the damage that this type of media coverage can cause. Her death prompted further conversations about and changes to the duty-of-care regulations provided to people involved in the Reality TV industry. However, many former contestants complained that they still weren't up to sufficient standard (Butterworth, 2021). This case showed TBM characteristics but the extent to which the media coverage contributed to her mental distress will remain unknown. However, due to the psychological effects TBM can have, it is highly likely that it contributed to her mental health issues.

Future work
A suggestion for future research would be to look at the news coverage on Caroline Flack's assault charge in the weeks leading up to and after her death, comparing the two time periods. This could attempt to explore media coverage around the time that her mental health was probably at its worst and possibly identify what exactly caused her to commit suicide.

Acknowledgements

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