How Portrayal of Child Sexual Abuse in the News Media Increases Fear of Crime Among Guardians: The Case of Greater Malé Area, Maldives

Mariyam Fahmy[1] and Fazeela Ibrahim[2]

Abstract

A review of the recent local news media shows that there has been a notable increase in the media reporting of child sexual abuse (CSA) in the Maldives. This increase has been particularly noticeable after the 16th of January 2020. This study addresses whether this increase in reporting has had any impact on the community. Specifically, if overexposure to CSA reports in the local news media has given rise to fear of crime. The objectives of this study are to, firstly, ascertain whether news media representation of CSA can induce a fear of crime among the public, and secondly, investigate whether news media reporting of CSA has affected the public's trust in social institutions. This study is characterised by a qualitative methodology with a phenomenological design and guided by cultivation theory, which stipulates that heightened exposure to crime media will increase fear of crime levels among the audience. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from 9 participants. The findings of this study indicate that participants experience heightened fear during the increased CSA reporting waves. Further, all participants expressed avoidance and protective behaviours for their dependents. It was also found that episodic framing of CSA and focus on institutional culpability along with failure to shed light on the social causes of crime such as living situation or poverty has affected the public's trust in social institutions. Parental neglect / family was also seen as a social institution that has failed to operate effectively to guard children against CSA. Hence this study has found that, in accordance with cultivation theory, increased exposure to CSA can increase fear of crime among the public.

Keywords: Cultivation Theory, CSA, Fear of Crime.

Introduction

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1   Mariyam Fahmy is doing her master's in criminology at University of Melbourne, Australia. She holds a Bachelor of Social Science with a Major in Criminal Justice from The University of Queensland and Postgraduate Diploma in Research Studies from Villa College. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Mariyam Fahmy, mail: mariyam.fahumy@gmail.com

2   Co-author: Fazeela Ibrahim, email: fazeela.ibrahim@villacollege.edu.mv

Decades of research show that the media can be considered a powerful agent of socialisation (Waymer, 2009). Specifically, scholars have found that the media is capable of influencing individuals' worldviews and their identities because it has become a significant gateway through which the world outside is experienced (Waymer, 2009). In this regard, Yusof, Hassan, Hassan and Osman (2013) maintain that the effects of the media are potent enough to construct particular realities by presenting exaggerated versions of the truth or by presenting only a particular viewpoint. Similarly, Lowry, Nio and Leitner (2003) argue that in some cases, individuals' constructed realities based on the media tend to overpower reality itself. In other words, the media has the tendency to distort reality and mislead the public by presenting selected and exaggerated versions of the truth (Callanan, 2012; Lowry et al., 2003). This is concerning because it means that public opinion is formulated on false realities generated by the media. Hence, the adverse effects of the media on public perception can beget negative consequences to the society, especially if the public thrives on a crime-media rich diet (Britto & Noga-Styron, 2014; Collica-Cox & Furst, 2019).

A review of the local news media, conducted by the author, between 3rd January 2020 and 18th February 2021 shows that there has been a notable increase in the media reporting of child sexual abuse (CSA) in the Maldives. On the 16th of January 2020, news of a CSA case in an island in southern Maldives (hereafter referred to as the catalyst case / island) was reported (Malsa, 2020). What was egregious about this particular CSA case was the age of the victim, age of the offenders, and the intrafamilial connection between the offenders and the victim. This case was the catalyst that incited multiple media reports, public strikes, and discussion on the state of CSA in the Maldives, by the public and social institutions alike. In other words, the media attention that was brought about by this case helped to bring CSA to the forefront of social issues facing the Maldives. This is evident in media reports on the 19th of January 2020, where it was reported that CSA is the biggest threat facing the Maldives (CNM, 2020). However, this particular report contradicts the crime statistics and other official data. According to the Maldives Police Service [MPS] (2020) and UNDP (2011), substance abuse remains the leading cause of offending and incarceration of individuals in the Maldives, making it one of the most pervasive social issues facing the Maldivian society. The issue with misleading and exaggerated media reports is that they aim to capture the attention of its consumers by reporting exaggerated versions of the truth. Wilczynski and Sinclair (1999) argue that it is commonplace for news medias to report CSA, focusing on the offender and highlighting the inept social institutions that fail to protect the children, but rarely is there any mention of the social causes of crime.

This was demonstrated in the Maldivian local news media as the narrative of the reports that followed focused on the number of cases, failure of institutions, support for more punitive measures including support for capital punishment for CSA offenders, and sensational headlines such as "Maldives; a paradise for paedophiles?" (Zalif, 2020). Additionally, it was noted that most reports regarding CSA within the observed timeframe was on the 18th of January 2020 when there were 11 articles relating to the catalyst CSA case. However, such a coverage was given to the sentencing relating to the case. As such, the news media's tendency to focus on egregious crimes, sensationalise violent crimes, and exaggerate the frequency of crime results in an amplification of public fear (Altheide, 1997; Wu et al., 2019). Backing these arguments is George Gerbner's *Cultivation theory* which stipulates that overexposure to crime saturated media, given that the focus is on egregious crimes and crime content is sensationalised, can result in undue fear of crime in the audience (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010; Sotirovic, 2001). This study sought to understand whether this spike in CSA-related news coverage in the Maldives has increased fear of crime in individuals who have dependents below the age of 18.

Media, Crime, and Fear of Crime

Decades of research indicate that a popular theme across all forms of mass media such as books, television, entertainment industry and the news media is crime (Callanan, 2012; Lowry et al., 2003; Nasi et al., 2021; Intravia, Wolff, Paez & Gibbs, 2017). It has been argued that the reason for the popularity of the crime genre in media lies within the fact that crime is a pervasive issue in all global communities which occurs outside the public view, and therefore actual crime rates or information about crime and the criminal justice system are not usually known to the public (Alitavoli & Kaveh, 2018; Pfeiffer, Windzio & Kleimann, 2005; Roberts, 1992).

News media reporting of crime is the most influential form of media that affects the public's fear of crime, with one study showing evidence that it holds more impact than direct victimisation (Jamieson & Romer, 2014; Wu et al., 2019). To illustrate, a poll conducted in the United States during the 1990s showed that one of the most important public concerns at the time was violent crime (Doyle, 2006; Romer, Jamieson & Aday, 2003). More specifically, the public was of the opinion that violent crime had hit record levels during 1994, and it had become the forefront issue that needed addressing. Astoundingly, both official crime statistics and yearly victimisation studies showed that violent crime had declined throughout the 1990s (Romer et al., 2003). Likewise, Kohm, Waid-Lindberg, Weinrath, Shelley and Dobbs (2012) found that similar to the situation

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in the United States, fear of crime among the Canadian public remained high even though crime statistics show that crime was declining, especially with regards to violent crime.

Why then would there have been mass hysterical claims that crime had peaked as it had never before in American and Canadian history despite the decline in crime trends? According to Romer et al. (2003), exposure to crime-saturated in the news media is the reason behind the public misconception regarding crime rates. In support, Britto and Noga-Styron (2014) argue that during this period in American history, news media coverage of crime increased as a result of cable news channels and 24-hour news programs. This notion is supported by Nasi et al. (2021), who explain that during this time period in the United States, over 100 news channels opened examined in a study reporting crime-related news. This trend has been witnessed in other western societies during this time period as well (Velasquez et al., 2020). As a result, whole populations were led to believe that violent crime was at an all-time high even though factually crime trends were declining (Romer et al., 2003). Decades later, this disparity between actual crime rates and public perception of crime rates, constructed on a constant diet of crime news media exposure, still stands true (Alitavoli & Kaveh, 2018).

By presenting the public with crime-saturated news, the general public is misled into believing that crime is exponentially increasing whilst in reality there may not be any significant statistical increase in crime rates. In this regard, Lowry et al. (2003) noted that media coverage of crime is not affected by actual crime rates. It was found that while homicides accounted for only 0.2% of crime, they accounted for 29% of news coverage. In other words, news media allocates a disproportionate amount of time and/or space to presenting crime news.

In relation to the study at hand, with regard to the news media coverage of CSA in the Maldives and especially the constant coverage following the CSA case reported on 16th January 2020, it is important to investigate how the increased CSA media reports has affected the Maldivian society. In particular, it is relevant to see how the increased news media reporting of CSA has affected individuals living in the greater Malé area, even though only a handful of cases are localised to this area. The Greater Malé area was chosen for two reasons. Firstly, and mainly, to observe how news media reporting of a distant issue influences individuals who are exposed to CSA media. Secondly, this study was conducted during a global pandemic, and consequently there were travel restrictions implemented throughout the country which made travel to other parts of the country challenging.

CSA Portrayal in the Media

As is the case with crime and media, the media remains the main avenue of information regarding CSA for the general public (Latif, Sultana, & Khan, 2020; Mejia, Cheyne & Dorfman, 2012; Popovic, 2018; Weatherred, 2015; Weatherred, 2017). Hence, information, awareness, myths, causes, and solutions regarding CSA reach the public via the news media (Popovic, 2018). Therefore, the news media, being a powerful agent of socialisation, holds significant power in deciding which issues or cases of CSA are newsworthy enough to bring to the forefront in order to directly or indirectly affect policy formulation (Weatherred, 2015). This raises the question of how CSA is being reported in the news media, as the *framing* of this complex issue holds ramifications for the society on the macro and micro levels.

Review of the literature regarding CSA portrayal in the media reveals that news reporting of CSA has largely remained unchanged over time (Weatherred, 2015). Both dated and current literature indicate that the news media has the tendency to focus on the most egregious crimes and sensationalise them in order to capture audience attention, even within the child abuse subcategory (Lonne & Gillepie, 2014; Wilczynski, Young & Sinclair; 1999). A study conducted by Lonne and Gillepie (2014) which analysed how all forms of abuse against children that were reported in the Australian news media between 2008 – 2009 found that, while emotional abuse and neglect of children accounted for 66.67% of all child abuse cases, these cases were not given due attention by the media. Notably, whilst CSA cases remained stable during the observed timeframe, most of the news reports related to CSA (Lonne & Gillepie, 2014). As implied, emotional abuse and other forms of child abuse, while higher in incidence in the official crime statistics, were underrepresented in the media. Disconcertingly, this reflects the newsworthiness of CSA taking precedence over other forms of abuse against children in the eyes of journalists (Lonne & Gillepie, 2014).

In line with Lonne and Gillepie's (2014) findings, Wilczynski and Sinclair (1999) maintain that the media does not focus on the 'mundane' abuse cases, even though the majority of the cases can be included in this category. Rather, the media has been found to place emphasis on the most dramatic and egregious cases of abuse that are most likely to evoke feelings of disgust, horror, shock, and a host of other strong negative emotions, consequently making the reports 'newsworthy' and attention-grabbing (Cheit, 2003; Weatherred, 2015; Wilczynski & Sinclair, 1999). Mejia et al. (2012) corroborate these arguments by maintaining that only high-profile and newsworthy cases of CSA are reported in

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the media. Adding to this, Popovic (2018) reports that a study that undertook content analysis of CSA reporting in the United States found that media tends to focus on sexual crimes against children over sexual crimes against adults. It was additionally found that most CSA cases reported involved prominent or authority figures (such as politicians or teachers). Hence, when such cases surface, it results in a disproportionate representation of CSA in the media (Mejia et al., 2012). These features of CSA representation in the media have been found in the United States, United Kingdom, New Zealand, Ireland, Australia, and Pakistan (Latif et al., 2020; Lonne & Gillepie, 2014; Popovic, 2018). Unsurprisingly, this leads to a news media landscape that is over-saturated with the most atypical forms of abuse towards children, thus painting a picture of the respective society as a place where sexual predators are lurking on every corner (Mejia et al., 2012; Wilczynski & Sinclair, 1999).

Another characteristic of media reporting of CSA that was found across multiple studies, is that the reporting of high-profile cases is usually accompanied by a spike in CSA reporting in the media (Mejia et al., 2012; Weatherred, 2015). However, this coverage does not hold in the long run and is followed by a notable drop or lack of any coverage of CSA (Weatherred, 2015). One important implication of these bursts of media attention on this issue is that they do not highlight the importance of broader social issues that contribute to CSA or that by addressing these issues, the concerning bodies can address the issue upstream and work towards prevention instead of waiting to address it downstream when a child has been victimised and the only option left to combat CSA is incarceration (Mejia et al., 2012; Popovic, 2018; Doring & Walter, 2020). Rather, in this type of episodic framing of CSA, the media reinforces the notion that the cause of CSA lies only with the offender, in some cases another individual who was aware of the abuse but did not report it, or with government institutions (Mejia et al., 2012). In this regard, Lonne and Gillepie (2014) maintain that media focus on individual level factors undermine policy efforts targeted at societal level factors that can bring about long-term solutions to the issue of CSA. This is because the public is driven by the media to support more punitive measures against CSA as a consequence of media focus on individual level factors. Such notions perpetrated by the media do not help to address the root causes of CSA and only provide a short-term solution to an epidemic that is in reality rooted in societal causes (Lonne & Gillepie, 2014; Weatherred, 2017). In sum, these studies have found that the media place unwarranted emphasis on punitive measures and due emphasis is not given to social care responses to CSA.

Despite the above arguments, the media is capable of shifting how the public views CSA and can have a positive impact (Lonne & Gillepie, 2014). To elaborate, on one level media helps to bring attention to a significant problem. In this regard, Skovmand and Astrup (2015) reports that media attention to CSA can encourage individuals to come forward. This can help victims to get out of the abusive situation and may pave way for justice (Skovmand & Astrup, 2015). Another positive contribution by the media is that it has helped to instil the audience with moral repugnance towards CSA (Lonne & Gillepie, 2014). Moreover, the media has been found to shift public opinion regarding the seriousness of CSA (Lonne & Gillepie, 2014). As such, the media can be encouraged to thematically frame CSA in order to highlight the importance of the societal factors contributing to the issue instead of episodic framing which does not lead to long term solutions (Doring & Walter, 2020). Doing so can garner support from the public for policies that constructively address CSA in a society. Whilst there is great potential for the media to act as an agent to influence positive change in how CSA is addressed in the society, there is overwhelming evidence that, currently, the media focus is not aligned in this manner, as highlighted in the above paragraphs.

Cultivation Theory

Over the course of its rich history, the academic discourse surrounding mass media has naturally resulted in a multitude of theories and studies on how it affects individuals that are entwined with other disciplines such as criminology, psychology, and politics (Alitavoli & Kaveh, 2018; Velasquez et al., 2020). Amongst these theories, the theory that will inform the current study is George Gerbner's cultivation theory. Since its inception, and even more than four decades later, Cultivation theory has been one of the three most cited theories in its field with well over six hundred research studies attributed to it as of 2015 (Jamieson & Romer, 2014; Morgan, Shanahan & Signorielli, 2015; Potter, 2014).

In its most simple form, cultivation theory posits that increased media consumption can directly influence fear of crime levels in individuals (Shi et al., 2019). Put in other words, cultivation theory maintains that individuals who consume more television are more prone to media messages in comparison to individuals who consume less television (Alitavoli & Kaveh, 2018; Collica-Cox & Furst, 2019). Additionally, Gerbner argued that heavy exposure to violent television would cultivate a baseless fear of crime in the audience (Jamieson & Romer, 2014). This means that the social reality constructed by this media exposure is mostly misaligned with reality. However, even though there is a discrepancy between reality and individuals' perception of reality, Gerbner

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argues that increased exposure to violent television media is capable of blurring this distinction for its viewers (Intravia et al., 2017). Hence, this theory maintains that heavy consumers of television are more likely to believe that they might be victimised, thereby holding a fear of crime as engendered by the media (Ditton, Chadee, Farrall, Gilchrist & Bannister, 2004). According to Gerbner (as cited in Collica-Cox & Furst, 2019, p. 2072), "television can create a world that appears more problematic and more violent than what is true in everyday life".

Numerous empirical studies conducted with the tenets of cultivation theory as its basic premise has found support for this theory (Alitavoli & Kaveh, 2018; Dolliver, Kenney, Reid & Prohaska, 2018; Intravia et al., 2017; Jamieson & Romer, 2014; Nasi et al., 2021; Williamson et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2019). In a study conducted by Nasi et al. (2021), that investigated the effects of different types of media consumption on levels of fear of crime among Finnish citizens, it was found that the results resonated with past research indicating that there is indeed a connection between higher exposure to news media consumption and fear of crime. Further, it was highlighted that in the timeframe in which the study was conducted, crime statistics indicate that crime was in significant decline in Finland, indicating the discrepancy between actual reality and perception of reality based on media perpetrations (Nasi et al., 2021). Additionally, they reported that along with traditional sources of news media (television / newspaper), it was found that sources of digital news media were also capable of influencing fear of crime levels. This implies that, as mentioned above, sources other than television are capable of cultivating a fear of crime among individuals (Nasi et al., 2021). In another study, conducted by Wu et al. (2019), which investigated cultivation effects in Shanghai, China with a sample of 1050 participants, found support for this theory. To elaborate, it was found that similar to other studies, participants with higher media consumption levels reported higher levels of fear of crime. Interestingly, it was also found that digital news media sources had the most impact on Chinese fear of crime (Wu et al., 2019). An additional remarkable finding of this study was that Wu et al. (2019) found evidence that government propaganda along with the censoring of sensationalist crime news was associated with a reduction of fear of crime levels and a more positive view of the government. This is an indication that cultivation can also work to engender positive views and reduce fear of crime. In a similar vein, Williamson et al. (2019), who studied the phenomenon of interest in the Australian context, report cultivation of fear can vary not only between the type of news media accessed but how this access is initiated. This is to say, they found that cultivation effects are stronger if media sources are actively accessed rather than passively accessed (Williamson et al., 2019). Adding to this, Dolliver et al. (2018), who conducted a study in the United States

to extend cultivation theory's premises, found that greater exposure to crime media can indeed increase fear levels and in turn this increase in fear translates for support by the public for increased punitive measures. This finding highlights that fear of crime does not necessarily stop at individual levels, but can be seen to have societal level implications as well (Dolliver et al., 2018). In another study conducted in the United States, by Jamieson & Romer (2014), analysing the effect of exposure to popular violent television dramas, found that crime rates remaining constant, exposure to violent television media can affect fear of crime levels. Similarly, Alitavoli and Kaveh's (2018) study undertaken in the United States examining media's contribution to the rising fear of crime among its general public in spite of falling crime rates, found that in accordance with Gerbner's theory, the media is capable of socially constructing a crime-ridden society that does not resonate with actual reality. Consequently, public opinion is driven to prioritise crime and justice system reformations based on these perceptions (Alitavoli & Kaveh, 2018). In this manner, Intravia et al.'s (2017) study, which tested Gerbner's theory in relation to social media's capability to cultivate fear of crime, found that consumption of social media can significantly affect fear of crime levels.

Conceptual Framework

There is no one universal theory that brings together news media, fear of crime, and CSA. As such, George Gerbner's cultivation theory, bringing together two out of three components, have been deemed to be most appropriate for this study. Other studies have used this theory to discern the levels of different forms of media influence on fear of specific crimes such as terrorism, burglaries, and theft (Williamson et al., 2019; Intravia et al., 2017). As such, this provides the literary support that cultivation theory's versatility will allow to be adjusted for the purposes of this study, as argued above. Therefore, this study will use cultivation theory, which stipulates that heightened exposure to crime media will increase fear of crime levels among the audience, to determine how the increased coverage of CSA in the Maldivian media in the aftermath of 16th January 2020 has affected news media consumers.
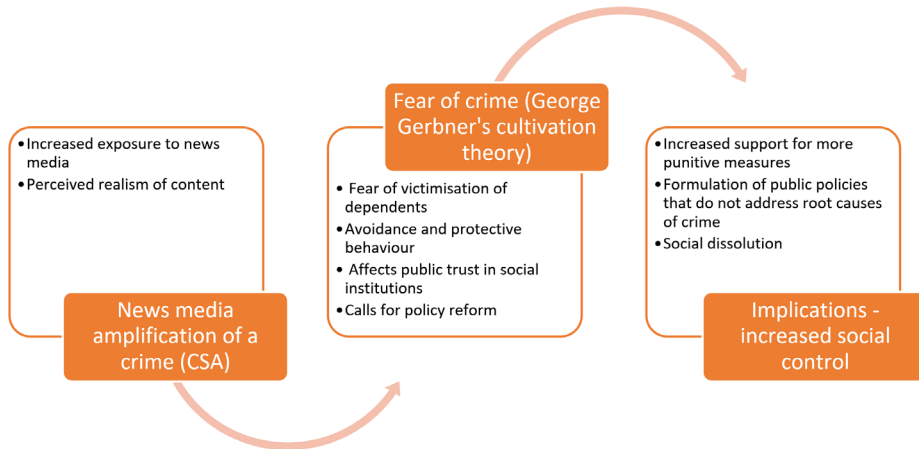
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Figure 1: Conceptual framework

In this conceptualisation, it can be seen that increased news media exposure of CSA may induce a fear of crime amongst guardians of children which in turn may result in a host of other issues. Further, as mentioned earlier, most of the news reports observed were related to CSA cases in the Atolls and not in the greater Malé area. As such, this study seeks to understand if such reports may influence fear of crime levels by engendering a view that CSA is widespread in the greater Malé area. It should be noted that Greater Malé area was chosen for to observe how news media reporting of a distant issue influence individuals who are exposed to CSA media.

Research Methods and Ethics

A Phenomenological design has been chosen to explore how news media reporting of child sexual abuse cases increase fear of crime in individuals who have dependents below the age of 18 in the greater Malé area. According to Creswell (2014), the purpose of phenomenological research is to understand how individuals experience a certain phenomenon and capture the essence of these experiences. Further, in this kind of research, a small number of participants are selected to collect in-depth data in order to establish patterns and associations (Creswell, 2014). Unlike ethnography, where researchers immerse themselves in their study, in phenomenological studies, the experience of the researcher is set aside so that the experiences of the participants can be prioritised and better understood (Creswell, 2014). With regard to this research design, Rudestam and Newton (2015) explain that this approach has progressed in nature to encompass research studies that examine the routine lived experiences of participants and how they perceive

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their world. In relation to the current study, it means that this research design will allow the researcher to analyse how consumption of CSA news media by the participants can increase fear of crime by how they perceive their reality. This notion is supported by Moores (2009), who argues that in order to study the influence of media in the day-to-day life of individuals, a research study adopting a phenomenological design is well-suited because of how it focuses on participants' experiences and perceptions. In addition to this, Jensen (2002) has highlighted phenomenology as one of the three traditions of research that focuses on the social constructivist nature of media. He further elaborates that phenomenology is used in media research to investigate how the media influences the way people perceive their realities and attach meanings. In a nutshell, it boils down to how the media collectively acts as a medium that can socially construct a reality that is independent from the objective truth. Therefore, it can be argued that there is evidence in the literature that justifies the use of this research design to carry out the current study. Another reason why phenomenology was chosen for this study is that it will allow the researcher to use data collection techniques such as semi-structured interviews allowing for flexibility that will encourage free flowing conversation resulting in detailed description of the phenomenon (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). Consequently, this may allow the researcher to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon of interest, which is how the Maldivian news media's portrayal of CSA can increase fear of crime amongst guardians. Based on these arguments, it is believed that the use of phenomenology as a research design for this study is justified.

Since this study aims to explore how news media reporting of CSA increases fear of crime in individuals who have dependents below the age of 18 in the greater Malé area, it has been decided that the population most vulnerable to fear of crime, as a result of CSA reporting in the Maldivian news media, will be individuals with underage dependents. This notion is also backed by the literature, as it has been found that individuals are more concerned that their significant others or children might fall victim to crime than they are concerned with personal safety (Heber, 2009). Furthermore, most empirical studies conducted in this field have found that fear of CSA is most prominent amongst parents. (Tulloch, 2004).

The sampling method chosen for this study is convenience sampling, and nine participants were selected to carry out the research. Inclusion criteria for the participants, in addition to living in the greater Malé area, is that they are regular followers of local news media and that they have dependants below the age of 18. The selection of participants did not discriminate between gender

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so long as they are a guardian. Participants were excluded from the study if (1) they fail to meet the inclusion criteria, (2) if potential participants fail to return signed informed consent or (3) if for any reason they wish to withdraw from the study. Furthermore, individuals under the age of 18 were not considered for the study. The instrument used to collect data in this study is an interview schedule. The instrument was chosen in line with the data collection method of semi-structured interviews. Although all interviews were semi-structured, the manner in which the interviews were carried out varied between face-to-face and video call or over the telephone. On average, each interview lasted between 15 to 30 minutes.

To gain approval from the Villa College Research Ethics Committee, ethical principles of the American Psychological Association (APA) were followed (American Psychological Association [APA], 2017). Listed below are how the five ethical principles were followed in this current study.

Beneficence and Nonmaleficence

Utmost care was taken to avoid causing grief or harm to the participants of the study. As this study concerns a sensitive topic such as CSA, a trigger warning was issued in the information sheet presented to the participants of the study. As is clear from the previous sections, CSA itself is not the focus of the study and hence care was taken to frame questions in a manner that does not seek to explore the crime itself. Hence it was unlikely that participation in the study may cause revictimisation and as such no reports were made by the participants that they had experienced a negative impact, emotional or otherwise, as a result of participating in the study.

Fidelity and Responsibility

To achieve this principle, the researcher developed a working relationship with the participants that is built on trust. Participants were contacted prior to actual data collection to build rapport and trust. Additionally, care was taken to uphold professional standards befitting a researcher and to take responsibility for all actions taken by the researcher.

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Integrity

Research participants were not deceived in any manner. During the initial approach to recruit potential participants, the researcher made clear the intentions of the study. That is to say, upon initial contact, the researcher conveyed that the researcher is undertaking a research study and the role of the researcher was conveyed. Further, the rights of the participants were explained, and assurance was given that the researcher would not infringe on these rights. In addition, participants were made aware that the research results would be reviewed by Villa College. Hence, the participants had full knowledge that parties other than the researcher would have access to the results of the study. However, assurances were given that confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained. If participants wished, they were given the option to stayed informed about the research findings.

Justice

All participants were treated equally and fairly. To elaborate, all participants were treated in the same manner and the same order of procedures were followed. For example, rapport building efforts and the manner in which consent forms and other explanations were made, were done in the same sequence and participants were given the same treatment.

Respect for People's Rights and Dignity

During initial contact, participants were given the informed consent form. This form (and the researcher) assured the participants of their rights and communicated these clauses in Dhivehi to clear any doubts participants may have had. Further, care was taken to protect the privacy of the participants by safeguarding their identities. To do this, interview transcripts did not include names or any defining characteristics/information relating to the participants. Also, the consent forms did not include any names but were marked as P1, P2, P3 and so on. Additionally, interview transcripts and recordings of interviews were kept as password secured files only accessible to the researcher on a computer that is also inaccessible to other parties. Hardcopies of transcripts were not made.

With these principles taken into consideration, it is believed that this research study upheld ethical values and has worked to benefit the community and cause no maleficence.

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Findings and Discussion

All questions in this study (main research question and sub-question), were answered by using the same form of data sources and types of data, as semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. As such, the chosen method of data analysis was content analysis. The sequence of analytical activities is as follows. Firstly, interviews conducted with participants were transcribed and translated. In line with prior assumption, most participants were comfortable in being interviewed in Dhivehi. Unexpectedly, however, most participants used a mix of both languages. This was advantageous in a manner because some important sentiments conveyed by the participants were in English, which meant that the true essence of what was being said by the participants has been captured in their entirety. The translations were taken as the interview transcripts that became the textual body ready for analysis. Secondly, the transcripts were coded. Next, these codes were categorised into themes or labels. After categorisation, six main themes emerged from the data. These primary categories were then refined under five broad themes. These five themes are 1) media sources, 2) opinions and preferences regarding local news, 3) CSA and the media, 4) attitudes towards institutions, and 5) fear of CSA.

Media Sources

Five out of the nine interview participants report that they rely on social media, namely Facebook, as the primary method of getting local news. Of the remaining four participants, three stated that they prefer to visit the news websites directly to read the daily news. Only one participant reported that they preferred television news as their primary news source. It should be noted here that the participants who rely on social media and participants who rely on news websites were referring to the same media outlets. To elaborate, the participants who reported social media / Facebook as their primary source of local news, went on to explain that they had 'liked' certain news pages on Facebook so that news from those outlets would appear on their 'timelines'. This is illustrated by the following statement:

> Interviewee 5: "I get news from social media mostly...I've liked news pages on Facebook, like "Mihaaru" and "Vaguthu"."

The media outlets mentioned by the participants who prefer social media align with the outlets favoured by the participants who choose to access news websites directly. The difference between these participants is in how they

accessed the news. The interviewees who preferred social media as a way to stay informed on local news report that they prefer this platform because it is more convenient since they already spend time on that platform. For example:

> Interviewee 1: "Facebook. Yes, normally I get news from Facebook. I use it because it's convenient as I use Facebook a lot."

The interviewees who prefer to directly access news websites appear to be individuals who do not use social media / Facebook frequently. This is demonstrated by the following:

> Interviewee 6: "I get news from online papers straight from their website. I don't use social media to read news. But, for example, when I do go on Facebook, if there's a headline someone has shared, which I hadn't seen when I read the news in the morning, then I might read it. If not, I don't use social media as a news source.... I prefer "Mihaaru" because they have the most experience in the news industry. But if I need to know some news immediately, I read "Vaguthu"."

Consequently, it was evident that eight out of the nine participants favoured the news outlet "Mihaaru" over others. Nonetheless it should be noted that this outlet was not their only source of local news; though some participants reported that while "Mihaaru" is their primary and most trusted form of news, they sometimes read news from other outlets or watch the news on television. Two participants overtly conveyed that although they preferred "Vaguthu" when looking for breaking news, they do not trust the details provided by them unless it is corroborated by "Mihaaru" or from another source.

Theoretical statement: social media is a convenient way to access news as prominent news media outlets are accessible on platforms such as Facebook. The "Mihaaru" news outlet is the most trusted source of news, with participants citing the outlet's experience.

It was found that, with one exception, all participants relied on a common news outlet to stay informed about local news, with eight of the nine participants opting to gather news from online sources, citing convenience as a governing factor for their preference (five participants via social media, three participants via news websites). The standalone participant reported that they preferred to access the news via television. It is believed that age of the participants may play a role in governing preferences in media sources. That is, the eight participants who preferred the common news outlet (thus relying on digital news media

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sources), were below 45 years of age, while the participant who preferred the traditional media source (television news) was above 50 years of age. Hence, it is likely the elder participant was more comfortable with the media they were used to relying on from before social media proliferation. Among the eight participants who shared common news media, the "Mihaaru" news outlet was highlighted as the most trustworthy and heavily relied on news outlet. This finding demonstrates that there is a rise in digital news sources as a primary source of information gathering. This notion was also put forth by Alitavoli and Kaveh (2018), who further argued that both digital news sources and television formulate their reports based on information from common sources. Another significant implication of this finding is that the participants' reliance on digital news sources indicate that they perceive local news from social media and news websites to be realistic and hence a form of media to be trusted. Since it appears that participants no longer give precedence to traditional forms of media such as television or newspapers, it can also be inferred that they do not believe that traditional news media is more trustworthy as compared to digital news sources. Additionally, participants self-reported that the main reason they relied on digital news media sources is because of convenience. Since the news outlet relied on by the participants, "Mihaaru", can be accessed digitally, it may have led to the decrease in demand for actual printed news since accessing news digitally is more convenient. Hence, it can be said that social media is seen as a convenient way to access the news. as prominent news media outlets are accessible on platforms such as Facebook.

Furthermore, as the majority of participants in this study preferred digital news sources, the findings of this study in relation to fear of crime, CSA and the media, has reviewed the cultivation effects of social media. In other words, it can be maintained that this study has demonstrated how fear of crime (CSA) can be cultivated via digital news sources. From a literature standpoint, this is significant because cultivation theory has mostly been used to review the effects of television consumption on individuals' fear of crime, with calls for more research that review the effects of cultivation through other forms of media (Chadee & Ferguson, 2019; Jamieson & Romer, 2014).

Although findings related to fear of CSA will be discussed shortly, it is important to highlight here that participants reliance on digital news sources may be a factor for the increase in fear of CSA. This finding is in line with a study conducted by Intravia et al. (2017), which tested Gerbner's theory specifically in relation to social media's capability to cultivate fear of crime, which found that consumption of social media can significantly affect fear of crime levels. However, this finding is in contradiction to another study, undertaken by Hollis

et al. (2017). In the aforementioned study, it was found that traditional forms of news media such as newspapers and television were more influential in cultivating fear of crime as compared with social media or digital sources (Hollis et al., 2017). It can be argued that this discrepancy between the current study and the study conducted by Hollis et al. (2017) lies with participants' personal preferences regarding media sources. Hollis et al's (2017) study consisted of participants who preferred traditional media sources over digital media. Hence it can be argued that, if participants prefer social media news sources and perceive news from social media and news websites to be realistic (perceived realism), these news sources also can cultivate fear of crime in the same manner as television or newspapers.

Opinions and Preferences Regarding Local News

There was consensus among the interviewees that local news is important. Four out of nine participants expressed views that the reason they give importance to local news is because they want to stay updated and know what is happening in the society. Another common view held by the interviewees is that they have a distaste for political news and as such did not give it much importance. Additionally, two participants expressed the view that they had a specific interest in crime-related news. For example, participants voiced:

> Interviewee 2: "Yes, local news is very important to me. I mostly give preference to crime news, like murder cases."

> Interviewee 3: "Yes, some local news is important to me. News that is actually news. Political news is not important to me. News related to schools, education, and news from local islands. But most of the time I give attention to murder cases, accidents. Crime-related news actually."

When the interviewees were inquired about which sort of news catches their attention the most, participants unanimously stated that local news regarding CSA catches their attention the most or that CSA is the news they give most attention to. As put forth by interviewees:

> Interviewee 1: "I give attention to CSA news too as I have children and since it's something that happens frequently these days."

> Interviewee 5: "The type of news that mostly catches my attention is abuse. CSA especially."

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Four participants referred to one specific case of CSA which took place on the 16th of January 2020. This case has been referred to in the first section of this paper as the CSA case that incited multiple media reports, public strikes, and discussion on the state of CSA in the Maldives, helping to bring CSA to the forefront.

> Interviewee 2: *"The news that caught my attention recently is that CSA news where a grand-father and father abused their child. That cannot be forgotten."*

> Interviewee 3: *"And that news last year that grandfather-father CSA case was something that really caught my attention. This kind of news concerning children really catches my attention."*

Another CSA case that was specifically highlighted by the participants was another case that was egregious in nature. One participant stated:

> Interviewee 9: *"The most shocking news I read recently was that news about a 13-year-old boy who was sexually abused, murdered, and put into a suitcase."*

Theoretical statement: local news is important and knowing what is going on in the society and staying up to date was the reason why importance is given to the local news. Crime news was seen as a genre of local news that holds interest. CSA is given special attention by the participants because it is seen as something that is commonplace in the society. CSA cases that are egregious in nature appear to leave a lasting impression on individuals, with individuals citing cases with explicit details.

Waymer (2009) claims that the media plays a salient role in the lives of individuals because, more often than not, it remains as the singular means by which they can observe events that occur outside their immediate view. Accordingly, this argument aligns with findings from this study. Participants unanimously voiced that the local news is important to them. Additionally, some participants explained that the reason for giving local news importance is because they prefer to stay updated and be informed about what is happening in society. Hence, it is evident that similar to findings from cross-cultural literature, participants rely on the news media to keep them informed on events / topics that occur outside their immediate observation.

Another significant similarity between the current study and other research studies conducted in this field is that the crime genre is a popular theme amongst participants. Participants voiced that they give special attention to crime-related news, and more specifically CSA news, because it is seen as something that is commonplace in society. However, as explained in section 2 of this article only a handful of CSA cases were covered by the media as having occurred in the greater Malé area (a review of media reports from archive.mv between 18th February 2021 to 3rd January 2020 by the author shows that out of roughly 48 cases of CSA reported, only 4 cases were from the greater Malé area). This raises the question of why the participants hold a belief that CSA is a common occurrence in their society. An explanation put forth by Kort-Butler and Hartshorn (2011) may hold the answer. According to by Kort-Butler and Hartshorn (2011, p.39), sensational headlines miles away from the individual can engender fear of crime as the narrative and exposure can make a "distant issue more proximal to the viewer". The premises of this explanation fit the findings of this study. Another explanation that warrants attention is by Boda and Szabo (2011) who argue that media is not the sole influencing factor that shapes public opinion, but rather a more substantial role is played by opinion leaders. To elaborate, opinion leaders are individuals with privileged access to information, and hence public opinion is formed through an interplay of media messages and dissemination of information by these opinion leaders. Relating these arguments back to the finding of this study, where participants believed that CSA has a high rate of incidence in the greater Malé area in the absence of news media reports pertaining to the geographical location, it can be said that this belief may have been reinforced by opinion leaders. As is mentioned in the limitations of this study, information on the actual incidence of CSA in the greater Malé area is not available. As such, it is also a possibility that participants' sentiments regarding the incidence of CSA in their society may closely mirror the reality, even though these notions are not present in the news media itself.

It was also observed that CSA cases that are egregious in nature leave a lasting impression on individuals with individuals citing cases with explicit details. This finding resonates with findings from other studies such as Callanan (2012) and Nasi et al. (2021), which found that deliberate focus on egregious content by the media can capture audience attention.

CSA and the Media

When participants were asked about their opinions on whether they believe there is an increase in CSA compared to five years or so ago, all nine participants

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voiced that CSA has increased in some form. For instance, some participants believe that the actual incidence of CSA has increased:

> *Interviewee 5: "Yes, I believe that CSA is increasing. It's obviously increasing."*

> *Interviewee 9: "I think CSA has increased in our society… In this society, in the Maldivian society, the issue of CSA is increasing at a rapid rate. CSA is very common in our society now."*

Whilst others are of the opinion that it is victim reporting, and news reporting of CSA that has increased as a result of the CSA case reported on 16th January 2020 and other high-profile cases reported in the media. For example:

> *Interviewee 2: "I think there's an increase in CSA reporting recently, both by victims and in news reporting… I think what started all this was the grandfather-father case. Plus, there was this other case where this girl was vocal about her CSA by a brother-in-law who's a politician or someone high profile…I think these high-profile cases empowered others to speak out about CSA and to report it."*

> *Interviewee 3: "I have noticed that there's an increase in CSA…We notice it as increasing now because it is being reported more in the news…I noticed after this grandfather-father CSA case, there was a lot of CSA reporting in the news media. There was a very noticeable increase. I really noticed that they were reporting similar CSA cases during that time."*

> *Interviewee 7: "I think after that grandfather-father case is when CSA really became a prominent topic in the media."*

Although participants were divided in their opinion of whether it is the incidence of CSA that has increased or the reporting that has increased, there was unanimous agreement that CSA is a prevalent social issue facing society, with some participants voicing that it is the most common issue facing society:

> *Interviewee 3: "This is a very big issue in our society. This is the most common and biggest issue facing our society."*

> *Interviewee 5: "I believe that this is a very big issue in our society, and so*

much fear since it involves children."

Interviewee 6: "I believe CSA is a huge issue facing our society given its population."

Three participants also expressed their views and observations regarding media reporting of CSA. These participants held the opinion that high-profile CSA cases are accompanied with an increase in CSA reporting.

Interviewee 2: "I think cases or news reporting increases with a high-profile case. Because after a high-profile case I have noticed very frequent reporting but then it goes down again, and something else happens and people start talking about it again. CSA is reported in the news a lot, especially if the victim needs to be hospitalized or if the government is at fault and a negligence is there."

Interviewee 6: "I have always noticed that CSA reporting increases in waves. Like, for example, if there is one high-profile CSA case reported in the media, then a lot of similar reporting will follow in the coming time-period."

Interviewee 7: "I have noticed that journalists report news in waves...if it's CSA it's all CSA. It comes in waves, that I have noticed in the media."

Participants were also of the opinion that the news media fail to provide necessary details when reporting CSA. For example, some participants voiced opinions on what they believed to be some social causes of crime, such as the living conditions in the greater Malé area and maintained that the news media does not bring to attention any of these issues when they report CSA. For example:

Interviewee 6: "In most media coverage of CSA, they don't highlight on the social causes of crime...when the news media covers these stories, the narrative is completely different or there are no details."

Interviewee 9: "I think this is social issue that has risen due to difficult circumstances (living situation) as Maldivians...specially in Malé...that we face. For population of this size, in Malé, I think CSA is at a crisis level. I haven't seen any of these reasons mentioned in the news media, as social causes of CSA. They only say this child has become a victim of CSA

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and so and so. No one highlights on the root cause of the problem. The news always says, "Here is another case of CSA!"."

One participant believed that the local news lacked details regarding CSA cases because they did not have any information to report. This participant was also of the opinion that media coverage for CSA cases increases if it is egregious in nature, or if there is negligence by the public institutions:

Interviewee 2: "CSA is reported in the news a lot, especially if the victim needs to be hospitalized or if the government is at fault and a negligence is there. But for other CSA cases, the reporters don't bother with details. Specially because they don't have anything to report on. The news media is just after flashy headlines, it's what they want."

Interviewee 6: "There are other more worthier headlines for reporters like news about politics, so the reporters won't be making an effort to go after the details of these cases. But I think maybe if the reporters made an effort to cover CSA responsibly, it might speed up the justice process too."

Theoretical statement: It is believed that CSA has increased in the society both in incidence and reporting of CSA by victims and the news media. Local news media coverage of a high-profile CSA case is accompanied with the spike in reporting of CSA, with reporting seen as occurring in waves. It was also observed that the local news media did not include information such as social causes of crime when covering CSA and instead focus is directed towards 'news-worthy' cases (which also lack helpful information).

The findings pertaining to this theme mirrors those of cross-cultural studies conducted in this field. Firstly, local news media coverage of a high-profile CSA case is accompanied by a spike in reporting of CSA, with reporting seen as occurring in waves. This characteristic of CSA reporting was found across different studies (Meija et al., 2012; Weatherred, 2015). There are two possible reasons why a spike may accompany high profile CSA cases. One reason, outlined by Weatherred (2017), is that the news media outlets consciously place continuous focus on the most egregious CSA cases highlighting individual blame. Hence, the news media plays an active role to keep the momentum of the CSA wave, possible to increase readership / viewership. Giving strength to this argument, participants declared that there are dormant reporting periods where CSA is not given coverage by the media, the spike / wave returns with another high-profile case. Further, participants were also of the opinion that

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ultimately, the news media is after "flashy headlines" and fail to give this issue media coverage if there are "worthier headlines". There is cross-cultural evidence that this is the case in other societies as well (Meija et al., 2012).

A more positive explanation for the spike had been put forth by Skovmand and Astrup (2015). They argue that media attention to CSA can encourage individuals to come forward, empowering victims to escape the abusive situation. Since it was observed by the participants that CSA has increased in the society, both reporting of CSA by victims and the news media, it implies that the increased news media coverage of CSA has empowered individuals to report this crime. Therefore, based on the study findings and backed by literature, it can be said that increased local news media reporting of CSA empower victims to report the crime, thereby contributing to the spike in CSA coverage.

Another similarity to other research found in this study was that the local news media did not include information such as social causes of crime when covering CSA and instead the focus is directed towards 'newsworthy' cases (which also lack helpful information). To explain, media reporting is framed in an "episodic" manner, where the blame and solution to CSA were seen to lie with the offender or a guardian as opposed to a "thematic" manner, where social causes of CSA are highlighted thus providing insight into social conditions behind this issue. This episodic framing of CSA has been found in multiple studies conducted in this field and has been linked to an increase in fear of crime (Mejia et al., 2012). Mejia et al. (2012, p. 471) explain: "...*the unrelenting episodic coverage contributed to dramatic fears about crime along with support for and enactment of stringent public policies*".

Attitudes toward Institutions

With one exception, all participants were in general agreement that, overall, the public institutions are not operating in an effective manner to address the issue of CSA in the society.

Interviewee 2: "I don't believe that the institutions are operating effectively. I mean, there's no cooperation between these institutions."

Interviewee 5: "No, I don't believe that the public institutions are doing a good job. Like I said, when we protested also, they reacted very badly. I know that the government does not care at all."

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The reason for the ineffectiveness of public institution seemed to vary between participants. Whilst some were of the opinion that parental neglect also contributes to CSA, the consensus was that the ineffectiveness lies chiefly in the investigation and court processes (namely, offender release and punishment). In this regard, the law is viewed as something arbitrary that works in favour of individuals with political connections or individuals who belong to a prominent family. For example:

Interviewee 2: "Yesterday also they released a CSA offender, and the victim was even pregnant...I think this offender was someone with connections because people were commenting that this person was someone that the police wanted to release on a technicality, possibly a member of a prominent family."

Interviewee 4: "There's no punishment here for the offenders, so they are free to continue abusing children...I talk to a lot of NGOs about this...but they also don't know what happens after the CSA cases go to the court."

Interviewee 6: "And, when locking up the offenders, the police also seem to fail in upholding their responsibility, I think what happens is that politicians influence their decision. I remember there was a CSA case concerning a teenager where the offender was a politician, they pardoned him...So, I believe that in most cases the public institutions have failed to deal with CSA responsibly."

Interviewee 9: "The government institutions are not able to take action against the offenders properly, they are not punished properly, I don't believe they are being taken action against. The law is there, but the offenders do not face proper punishment."

Only one participant held the belief that the public institutions were operating in a more effective manner. It can be said that this participant held a contrasting view because they work within the justice system, and as such has a better understanding of the system as compared to the layperson. This participant voiced:

Interviewee 7: "I think government institutions are doing a bit better since they passed that new law concerning children. I think it can be said that they are fairly dealing with these offenders and that they deserve the punishment they receive under the new law."

However, this participant also reaffirmed the notion that the law can be arbitrary, and offenders are released into society:

> *Interviewee 7: "But of course, it depends on the case too. Sometimes when CSA offenders appeal, they get released into the society... I think there is a lot of problems in the investigation process and offenders get away on a technicality."*

Apart from CSA increasing in society, another significant by-product of public institutions' failure to operate effectively was seen to be failure to get justice for the victims. It was expressed this way:

> *Interviewee 2: "Personally, I feel that the victims are not getting the justice and closure they deserve."*

> *Interviewee 5: "I don't understand why, because the people at these institutions are now educated people, but they aren't doing anything to get justice for these children."*

> *Interviewee 7: "But there are lot of cases that don't make it past the investigation stage, there's no justice for the victims of these cases."*

> *Interviewee 8: "I don't think that these cases end with victims getting justice or that they even make it to court... victims do not get justice."*

Theoretical statement: Public institutions are not operating effectively to address the issue of CSA in the society. The courts and arbitrary laws (political influence) were seen to be the most accountable for this ineffectiveness. Due to this, offenders are not subjected to due punishment, and are released back into the society. Parents/ family was also seen as a social institution that has failed to operate effectively to guard children against CSA. An important consequence of this ineffectiveness is failure to get justice for the victims.

This study has found that participants' perception of social institutions (namely government institutions and family as a social institution), has been heavily affected by news media reporting of CSA. Participants hold the belief that public institutions are not operating effectively to address the issue of CSA in society. Further, the criminal justice system (specifically the courts) and arbitrary laws (political influence) were seen to be the most accountable for this ineffectiveness. Moreover, participants do not believe that offenders are

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subjected to due punishment, and that the criminal justice system continuously releases offenders back into society. This finding is backed by literature, as Wilczynski and Sinclair (1999) argue that it is commonplace for news media to report CSA focusing on the offender and highlight the inept social institutions that fail to protect the children, but rarely is there any mention of the social causes of crime. Similarly, findings were reported in a study conducted by Weatherred (2017), where an overwhelming 230 samples of media coverage listed institutional failure as a societal cause of CSA. Consequently, punishing institutional leaders was seen as the solution for CSA (Weatherred, 2017). These sentiments are apparent in the case of this study, where both participants and media coverage echo these opinions. For instance, it has been observed by Jackson (2006) that government bodies have opted to punish institutional leaders to pacify the public at the expense of actual crime prevention. As is evident in the case of the Maldives, change of institutional leaders does not appear to affect the level of CSA in the society (whether actual incidence or news media reporting characterised by reporting waves). Nonetheless, such reactions to these CSA waves continue. An explanation for why institutional culpability is so prominent might be dependent on the news media framing of CSA. As already mentioned, episodic framing of CSA does not shed light on the social causes of crime such as living situations or poverty. In local news coverage of CSA, the episodic framing focuses on individual level blaming and blame on government institutions. Institutional culpability is especially highlighted in the Maldivian media as already discussed. Therefore, news media framing of CSA, with failure to highlight the social causes of crime, has seeded the notion that social institutions are ineffective in addressing CSA. An important consequence of institutional culpability is failure to get justice for the victims.

Additionally, parents/ family was also seen as a social institution that has failed to operate effectively to guard children against CSA. This finding is an outlier in that it cannot be corroborated with cross-cultural studies. As emphasised before, there are only a limited number of studies concerning CSA in the media and fear of crime (Weatherred, 2015). It can be argued that parental neglect as a social cause of CSA has not been found in existing studies owing to cultural differences between western societies and the Maldivian society.

Fear of CSA

One participant maintained that while CSA is a prominent issue in society, they did not hold a fear of CSA because they are always with their child. In the participant's own words:

Interviewee 4: "I always stay with my child, so I don't have a fear."

Although the participant did not fear CSA, it was observed that they were not trusting of the people in their environment and as such took measures to safeguard their child, in a manner that can be viewed as precautionary. For example:

Interviewee 4: "But I never leave her with anyone else, not even a maid or anyone. I cannot trust anyone. In our house there are a lot of men, so I don't leave her alone, I take care of her on my own. I don't even leave her alone with my husband. So, there is no chance of this happening to my child. I have that guarantee."

In contrast to Interviewee 4, the remaining eight participants overtly expressed fear of CSA. Interestingly, these eight participants also conveyed that they did not trust individuals in their environments. For instance:

Interviewee 1: "Yes, I have a big fear that my children may be abused. Whether it's at school or even from family...I cannot trust anyone because of how these people behave."

Interviewee 2: "Yes, I have concern for my kids. Even at home, when we get into the elevator with neighbours, some people will tickle the kids and that really makes me uneasy."

Interviewee 3: "Yes, I have a fear of CSA because I have children. I always tell them to be careful wherever they go, whether it's on the road or at school. I have a very big fear of CSA, it scares me a lot. I am hesitant to send the kids alone in the elevator. I have told them they shouldn't use the elevator by themselves, I don't send them alone. Even if I am busy, I don't send them alone, I take them in the elevator. I don't trust the people who might be using the elevator since other people also live in the building. I don't feel safe at home also."

Interviewee 8: "I am very very afraid that something might happen. It makes me concerned and worry about my daughter. It could be anyone right? I wouldn't know. I trust people, but at the back of my mind I keep thinking CSA is something that could happen. That's why I have this fear of CSA."

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Interviewee 9: "Obviously, I have a fear of CSA. I don't know if my children are safe from CSA. I keep my children well-protected; I am with them 24/7 and I don't even send them alone with friends even if they ask… The fear is in my mind. Even with the people I trust, the fear and worry are always at the back of my mind that something might happen. I am parenting with fear now… It is the biggest fear I have. Consequentially, I am hesitant to trust people these days because of this."

Another interesting observation, as can be seen from the above excerpts, is the consideration that even the elevator is an unsafe space.

Apart from the participant who stated that they did not fear have a fear of CSA, all other participants were asked if they observed an increase in fear of CSA after being exposed to the spike in news media reporting of CSA. Three participants emphasised that they have always had a fear of CSA, however, they went on to explain that when they are exposed to CSA in the local news media, it increases their fear:

Interviewee 3: "But my fear is not because of the increase in news reporting, I've always had this fear because people always talk about CSA. When I hear news about CSA, as a mother it scares me."

Interviewee 7: "I've always had this fear since I had children, not just because I read it in the news. But now I feel the fear is somehow more intense or magnified…maybe because I hear it so often these days. I have so much fear that it gives me anxiety if I have to send them anywhere. Even at home…I cannot trust people."

Interviewee 8: "I have always had this fear since I became a parent, but when you see it in the news continuously the fear becomes real. It was there always, but now it is more intense since I see it so frequently."

The remaining five participants did not highlight a pre-existing fear of CSA, but only that they observed an increase in fear of CSA after being exposed to news media reporting of CSA:

Interviewee 6: "Yes, I have a fear of CSA, especially when there is an increase in media coverage of these stories."

Interviewee 9: "I even talk to my children about it when news reporting

of CSA increases... My fear and anxiety really increase when I see CSA in the news frequently, it really does."

Theoretical statement: There is in an increase in fear of CSA when news media reporting increases. This fear has led to a breakdown of trust between people in the society which has consequently led to over-vigilance and protective behaviour.

Participants confirmed that when news media reporting of CSA increases, it engenders a fear of CSA. Some participants reported that such news waves increased their anxiety and stress. Further, participants exhibited mistrust of strangers and sentiments such as "...it could be anyone right?" Based on the findings of this study, it can be inferred that news media / digital news media overexposure of CSA news can increase fear of crime among individuals who have dependents below the age of 18 in the greater Malé area. This finding is consistent with numerous empirical studies conducted with the tenets of cultivation theory as its basic premise (Alitavoli & Kaveh, 2018; Dolliver, Kenney, Reid & Prohaska, 2018; Intravia et al., 2017; Jamieson & Romer, 2014; Nasi et al., 2021; Williamson et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2019). Although George Gerbner's theory was formulated to investigate the effects of television in cultivating a fear of crime, current research studies in this field have focused on other forms of media (Nasi et al., 2021). In this regard, both Intravia et al. (2017) and Wu et al. (2019) have investigated how digital news media sources can increase fear of crime. These studies concluded that much like other forms of media; consumption of digital news media can increase individuals' fear of crime. It is important to note here that the present study did not seek to review how digital news media can increase fear of crime, rather the premise was to investigate across the forms of media preferred by the participants. As eight out of nine participants preferred digital news media sources over traditional sources, the findings of this study have gravitated towards digital news media's cultivation of fear of crime.

Increase in the fear of CSA has led to a breakdown of trust between people in the society which has consequently led to over-vigilance, and avoidance and protective behaviour. Participants expressed that they do not feel that their children are safe in their own homes, common spaces such as elevators, roads and even at schools. Consequently, they engage in over-vigilance by being with their children constantly and engage in avoidance and protective behaviour by restricting the movements of their children. These findings are also evident in the literature. For example, Zhao et al. (2015) and Collica-Cox and Furst (2019) explain that fear of crime can foster in individuals a sense of

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mistrust and increase levels of anxiety. Adding to this argument, Kohm et al. (2012) report that fear of crime may cause harmful social outcomes such as individuals restricting movement and limiting their social movements. These protective behaviours can threaten individuals' level of life satisfaction (Kohm et al., 2012).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The results of this study have the potential to steer the news media discourse concerning CSA towards a more fruitful direction. In other words, as this study provides evidence of how news media reporting can increase fear of CSA, relevant institutions may choose to ensure responsible journalism and initiate media literacy programs. The framing of CSA in a thematic manner as opposed to the current framing, which is episodic, can allow for a more positive media impact. Such a shift in framing can reduce individual blaming and institutional culpability as thematic framing of CSA can bring the social causes of this issue to the forefront. Thus, media focus on societal causes may satiate the public's need to hold institutions accountable, thereby allowing policymakers and these institutions to appropriately address CSA by focussing on the root causes.

The research landscape in the Maldives provides ample opportunities for future research, especially where crime and media are concerned. Future studies are advised to first establish the actual incidence of crime, if possible, before exploring the effects or socialisation process of the media. As explained before, being aware of the incidence of crime will allow researchers to discern whether fear of crime is warranted. It is also advocated for quantitative studies to be conducted in this field. Quantitative studies will aid in determining if a causal relationship exists between crime and media. Moreover, quantitative studies can be replicated in different settings so that researchers may be able to compare findings between islands or atolls in the Maldives. For quantitative studies to be carried out in this field, it would be helpful if victimisation surveys can be conducted nationwide, so that researchers will have a self-reported robust measurement of crime in the absence of official statistics. Expanding on the previous point, even if official crime statistics are made available to future researchers, a victimisation survey can account for the dark figure of crime providing researchers with a snapshot of incidence of crime in the society that is closer to reality. Furthermore, it is encouraged for future studies to explore the gender dimension of fear of crime along with a wider age distribution. Finally, it is also recommended that future research to consider the human agency dimension of media socialisation. One helpful theory in this regard is Paul Lazarsfeld's two-step flow model which can be used as a theoretical

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framework.

This research sought to explore how news media reporting of child sexual abuse cases increases fear of crime in individuals who have dependents below the age of 18 in the greater Malé area. This study found that an increase in news media reporting of CSA can increase fear of crime among guardians. Furthermore, this exposure has led to a breakdown of trust between people in the society which has consequently led to over-vigilance, and avoidance and protective behaviour. It was also found that institutional culpability is prominent among guardians with the belief that institutions are not operating effectively to address the issue of CSA. The results of this study will bridge a gap in the Maldivian literature in the field of crime and media. In addition, the findings of this study have the potential to drive news media reporting in a positive direction, thus changing the course of policy formulation from reactive to proactive.

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