



Strangulation in the UK media – An analysis of online article titles

Part One: Introduction & Methodology

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**Institute For
Addressing
Strangulation**

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Acknowledgements

Funded by the Home Office, the Institute for Addressing Strangulation (IFAS) was established in 2022 to raise awareness of strangulation and suffocation. This includes highlighting the associated risks and dangers, and establishing best practice for professionals working with victims, survivors and their families.

IFAS would like to acknowledge the input of the lived experience group at IFAS and the hard work and input of the team including; Professor Cath White, Harriet Smailes, Marianne McGowan, Bernie Ryan, and Thaira Mhearban.

Report by Marianne McGowan
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Introduction

In January 2021, strangulation made the news[1] when it was discussed in the House of Lords as part of the then pending Domestic Abuse Bill (which became the Domestic Abuse Act 2021[2]). At that point, it was reported that ministers felt strangulation was adequately covered by current legislation, but by March 2021 reports confirmed that a standalone offence would be introduced[3].

The presence of strangulation in mainstream media takes many forms, from TV and film (for example *Lady Chatterly's Lover* (2022) and *Euphoria* (2019)) to popular music (*Lovin on Me* by Jack Harlow) and internet memes[4].

Mainstream media is well documented as an instrument that shapes how society thinks and responds to societal issues[5]. The national news articles referenced above shone a light on strangulation in the context of domestic abuse and had the potential to impact societal perceptions on the dangers of strangulation. These pieces were, however, published at a time when conflicting articles on 'choking' (strangulation) during sex had been shared and continued to be shared. For example, *"Savage Love: Heed the proper etiquette whilst choking someone"* (2017)[6], *"Safe Choking 101"* (2018)[7] were just some of the articles published prior to the change in legislation and articles titled *"Here's Why You Like Being Choked During Sex"* (2022)[8] and *"Everything You Need to Know About Erotic Asphyxiation"* (2023)[9] were published following the change in legislation. Our research brought up a YouTube video titled *"How To Choke Your Partner (and not kill them)"* (2022)[10]. Although these articles are perhaps not as mainstream as national news source, the BBC, they are easily accessible and sites such as Healthline and YouTube have 355.9 million users per month and 4 billion users per year respectively[11, 12].

The conflicting narratives around strangulation, safety and risk, raise questions about how the general public might perceive the act of strangulation and the associated legislation.

The use of language such as 'choking' rather than strangulation, to us, can be seen as a method of minimising the act or differentiating between the act in different contexts. However, regardless of the context, the health risks remain the same.

Following the introduction of strangulation as a standalone offence in England & Wales in June 2022, our organisation – the Institute for Addressing Strangulation (IFAS) – was established to raise awareness of, and conduct UK-based research on, strangulation. Given the attention the change in legislation received from UK news sources, we began, as a team, sharing media reports of arrests and convictions when they made the news. Quickly we became aware that news articles on the strangulation were common; in the first two months of our existence, we gathered 16 news articles from England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

At IFAS we co-ordinate a group of survivors, those with lived experience of strangulation who meet to gain a sense of community and who share their experiences to help other victim/survivors. Aicha[13], a survivor from our lived experience group, wrote a blog in 2024 which relays the experience of being strangled in an abusive relationship and then observing its presence in film, TV, music and everyday 'humour'. Through discussion with the group the way in which survivors experience the media directly was considered. Survivors in the group shared mixed experiences of engaging with the media (for example using their experience as a case study for a news report) prior to coming to IFAS. Past experiences included feeling well listened to and supported by journalists and the process, only to have their piece pulled because on the day it was due to make the news, Boris Johnson, the then prime minister, resigned. Some survivors felt that journalists wanted a certain 'type' of story or victim, for example stating in an article that the victim wanted to remain anonymous for their safety, when the victim had consented to being named. When nothing came from an initial conversation with a journalist, they were left feeling that their experience was not newsworthy.

From our organisational experience of engaging with the media recently, we have received more interest in strangulation as part of consensual sex than strangulation in the context of domestic abuse and sexual violence. At IFAS, we are curious as to why this might be. Regardless of the context in which strangulation is being discussed, the sensitivity and nuance around the topic must be upheld, and victims/survivors who are contacted or approached by journalists to provide their experiences must feel heard and supported. It is important to acknowledge that the media is a gatekeeper in deciding what information reaches the masses so with this power must come scrutiny to ensure that the messages being delivered are accurate, nuanced (in that not all experiences are the same) and respectful. This is the basis for the media review we have conducted.

Through reviewing existing literature and guidelines for journalists alongside a content analysis of 294 online articles, the aim of this research is to understand and evaluate how strangulation is presented in mainstream media through online news articles in the UK. In addition, we hope to provide tangible guidance for the reporting of strangulation in the media moving forward.

Methodology

Between November 2022 and November 2024, the IFAS team obtained online news articles using search terms: *strangulation UK*, *choking UK*, *strangulation legislation UK*. Searches were carried out regularly over this time period and articles shared with us by other professionals or on social media were added to the dataset. At the end of the two-year period, we had a sample of 294 online articles – dated between August 2022 and October 2024 – from UK sources, relating to strangulation.

The development of this research project was organic, which means there are limitations to the methodology which could not be rectified by the time we realised the value and importance of the study.

For example, it is important to acknowledge that our data collection over the two years began by sharing news articles between the IFAS team following the change in legislation and the inception of IFAS. Initially, this was in response to us coming across news articles and overtime became a more concerted effort to record as many online news articles related to strangulation as possible.

Sources included traditional press such as national and local news websites and tabloids but also local/independent sources and trade publications such as those from police force websites, universities and law magazines. These were included as they serve as public sources of messaging outside of the category of social media. The vast majority of our sources were from local media outlets. Findings from a recent survey by Ofcom (2023) found that 92% of UK adults use local news, 89% of which access this online^[14]. This suggests that the articles obtained for the purposes of this analysis are those that would reach the general public in the UK. We do not suggest that these represent the entirety of UK-based articles on strangulation during this time period but nonetheless reflect a large data set of online articles to be analysed.

As a starting point, we recorded the dates, publishing sources and geographical location of the published articles. We then categorised the articles according to whether they related to fatal or non-fatal strangulation. Given the size of the dataset, we decided to complete an initial content analysis of the titles of the articles in the two main categories: fatal strangulation and non-fatal strangulation. We then chose a selection of article titles from both groups to use as examples of where titles both failed and succeeded in upholding the existing media guidelines.

The titles of online articles are important in the 'click bait' era of online news, and they can inform us about how the media present online articles about strangulation that would capture or grip the audience. The existing media guidelines reviewed in Part three encourage respect, sensitivity, gender equality, the naming of VAWG, the use of official and correct terminology and accountability. These were some of the standards we analysed the titles of these online articles against.

This is the first report in what could be a series of specific analyses using the dataset obtained. We would welcome any researcher keen to explore the media representation of strangulation further to get in touch for open access to the data set.



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