



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

## Part Two: Literature Review

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## Literature Review

An important part of this analysis was understanding how strangulation is portrayed in media through a review of existing literature. As a starting point, a recent analysis of non-fatal strangulation in erotic fiction from the early-mid 20th century found that this was a time when novels and film began to eroticise sexual violence and simultaneously glamourise non-fatal strangulation[15], something which contradicts the lived experience (as shared with us by the survivor group at IFAS) of strangulation in the context of domestic abuse and sexual violence. In this analysis, the author, Mary, references Agatha Christie's 1924 novel *"The Man in the Brown Suit"*, in which the main female character, who is strangled twice by different men, discusses the attractiveness of manual strangulation with another woman. Research findings from a Sexual Assault and Referral Centre further contradicts this narrative, with over a third of victim/survivors of strangulation reporting that they thought they were going to die when being strangled[16]. Another contrasting perspective can be understood through recent UK on suicides following domestic abuse. In the year ending 2023, suicides following domestic abuse superseded intimate partner homicides, and 20% of those who took their own life had been subjected to strangulation in their abuse histories[17]. In Mary's[15] analysis, the inclusion of a film in which the female victim goes on to take her own life may therefore represent a more contemporary understanding of the impact of non-fatal strangulation, not reflected in Christie's *"The Man in the Brown Suit"*.

Mary conveys how audiences were invited to be thrilled by non-fatal strangulation as an act of male domination over women. She describes how scenes of non-fatal strangulation replaced scenes of sex and violence that at the time were censored[15]. This arguably normalised society's exposure to strangulation and trivialised its impact.

This was a time when novels and film were forms of media consumed on a large scale. One of the films included in Mary's analysis, *The Wicked Lady* (1945), was the highest grossing film of 1946 at the English box-office with an average weekly audience of 31.4 million[15]. Our exposure to strangulation through the media has therefore been in existence for the last century, the normalisation of it may therefore not be such a surprise.

In another recent content analysis, this time exploring true crime podcasts, the researcher found that although strangulation was not the most common form of abuse included, when it was, it was "sensationalised"[18]. The "fetishization" of noticeable bruising from strangulation was also observed and the researcher appropriately drew upon research on the often lack of bruising from strangulation [16, 19] and the risk that sensationalising these phenomena together can have on societal perceptions[18].

In Australia, a qualitative study exploring domestic violence practitioners' knowledge and experiences of strangulation found that practitioners perceived narratives in the media that it can be done safely, to be contributing factors to its normalisation in society[20]. The media is therefore a powerful instrument that can influence our understanding of strangulation, its risks and, arguably, prevalence in society.

Research from the United States indicated that one of the ways in which women learn about strangulation during sex was via online memes[21]. Subsequently, Herbenick et al.[4] completed an analysis of online memes. The findings mirrored the novels and film analysed by Mary[15], that the normalisation of strangulation is perpetuated through social tropes and cultural scripts that portray male violence and domination over women as something erotic and exciting[4]. It is clear that different forms of media convey strangulation as something women desire (reflecting the trope that women enjoy being dominated by men), that it can be done safely and that its seriousness is connected to visible bruising, something that research contradicts[16, 19].

Given the focus of this analysis, a closer look at news articles led us to previous research which analysed the media's representation of other new domestic abuse related offences such as coercive and controlling behaviour (CCB)[22]. In this analysis of online news articles exploring successful prosecutions of CCB, researchers found reports to adequately reflect the gendered nature of the offence as well as a move away from victim blaming and more of a focus on offender behaviour[22]. This appears to be progress given previous findings that the media often misrepresent intimate partner violence and intimate partner femicides as "couple problems", "relationship breakdowns" and include the victim's role in their death[5]. Monckton-Smith highlights the harm that romantic love portrayed by the media can have on our understanding and response to intimate partner violence generally. In her book *Murder, Gender and the Media*[5] Monckton-Smith references Jewkes's (2004) understanding of how the news has the ability to "subtly bend and distort" our view of the world. How strangulation is portrayed in the news again, therefore, is likely to have a societal impact. The lack of research focussing specifically on strangulation in the UK news indicates that this analysis is likely the first of its kind in the UK.

Although the current study focuses on strangulation in the context of domestic abuse and sexual violence, our literature review also brought up the role of the media, particularly social media and online articles, in suicide among children and young people (CYP)[23]. Additionally, the role of social media and the 'choking game' or 'blackout game' has also gained attention with recent deaths in the UK and USA[24]. It is described as a 'game' that CYP might participate in for social acceptance and experimentation but is one that poses grave risks with the use of ligatures and CYP participating alone[25]. Although the 'game' is not a new phenomenon, with school reports of it in the 1950s, the role of social media and CYP's exposure to videos of this behaviour increase the risk of participation[25].

It is important to highlight that online content has a role in signposting CYP, and anyone struggling, to help and support, something we wish to draw attention to through the current study.

A review of published literature in the UK and internationally shows how strangulation is portrayed in the media in different contexts (domestic abuse, sexual violence, intimate partner homicide, consensual sex, suicide, and unintended child deaths) and through different media (books, film, news, podcasts, internet memes and social media). Overall, the aim of this analysis is to understand how strangulation is being portrayed in online news articles in the UK since the change in legislation in 2022.



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