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Submitted
December 5th, 2022
Approved
June 6th, 2023

© 2023
Communication & Society
ISSN 0214-0039
E ISSN 2386-7876
www.communication-society.com

2023 – Vol. 36(4)
pp. 99-116

How to cite this article:
Casabó-Ortí, M. A. (2023). Where is the risk? Inter-reality comparison study of multiple-perpetrator rape assailants in Spain. *Communication & Society*, 36(4), 99-116.
doi.org/10.15581/003.36.4.99-116

Where is the risk? Inter-reality comparison study of multiple-perpetrator rape assailants in Spain

Abstract

This research paper aims to shed a critical light on the moral panic surrounding multiple-perpetrator rape (MPR) in Spain, by exploring the interplay between official statistics of this type of crime, and the depiction in the media. The concordance between media representation and the statistical reality of crime raises questions: (1) how multiple perpetrator assault and its assailants are represented in media narratives (content analysis) is examined, including the content, framing, and underlying themes within the media coverage, with a particular emphasis on the role of nationality, and (2) this representation is compared to official crime statistics (Ministry of Home Affairs report on crimes against sexual freedom and indemnity in Spain (detentions/accused) and the statistics of the sentences passed by various Spanish Provincial Courts between 2005 and 2020 from criminal justice data), and to what extent, they align. If they do not align, do news portrayals influence a moral panic? In conclusion, the idea of tabloid justice

(Fox *et al.*, 2001) is not present in the three largest Spanish daily newspapers from 2005 to 2021. There is a misrepresentation of non-Spanish nationalities having the highest rates, Romanians being underrepresented and the French being overrepresented. Media coverage perceives tourists as a certain danger, and is questioning the idea of certain non-Spanish immigrants as ‘folk devils.’

Keywords

Moral panic, folk devils, media representation, multiple perpetrator rape, content analysis.

1. Introduction

Group sexual assaults in Spain are not new, but due to the media coverage of the La Manada (“The Wolfpack”) case in 2016, awareness and knowledge about the scope and scale of the issue has risen. Consequently, since 2016, the appearance in the number of cases and the exposure of news about sexual assaults in the media in Spain has notably increased, specifically those sexual assaults committed by groups of perpetrators, also known by scholars as Multiple Perpetrator Rape (MPR) (Horvath & Kelly, 2009). According to De la Torre-Laso (2020), multiple perpetrator rape is a seldom investigated criminal offence in Spain.

There has emerged further discussion about this type of sexual crime and, in particular, whether this crime is committed by groups of non-Spanish assailants (Gonzalez *et al.*, 2021). In May 2022, the Secretary of State for Equality, Angela Rodríguez, appeared before the media

and called for calm because according to the crime reports from the Ministry of Home Affairs, there had been no increase in group rapes (*La Vanguardia*, 2022, May 2):

“The crime reports of the Ministry of Home Affairs do not speak of the increase in sexual assaults committed by more than two people,” the Secretary of State insisted.

For this reason, she has called for calm, has condemned each of the sexual assaults, but has said that there is no need to generate a state of alarm with this issue: “Sexual terror is a regime under which women cannot live,” she said.

This research paper aims to shed a critical light by exploring the interplay between official MPR statistics and media depictions to identify whether or not media magnification exists that upholds moral panic or an exaggerated perception that a specific group of people is perceived as dangerously deviant.

The specific objectives of this study are twofold: (1) to examine how multiple perpetrator rape and its assailants are depicted in media narratives, including the content, framing, and underlying themes within the media coverage, with a particular emphasis on nationality, and (2) to compare this representation to official crime statistics.

To address the aforementioned objectives, the research aims to explore the following key research questions:

RQ1 .How does the media coverage frame and represent sexual crimes? Are certain narratives or perspectives more prevalent than others?

RQ2.How does the portrayal of sexual crimes in the media coverage differ among individuals of different nationalities? Are certain nationalities disproportionately highlighted or underrepresented in media narratives related to sexual crimes?

RQ3.What are the potential discrepancies or alignments between official crime statistics categorized by nationality and the media depictions of sexual crime? Are there noteworthy variations in the attention, framing, or representation of sexual crimes involving individuals from different nationalities?

To answer these questions, a mixed-method approach will be employed, combining quantitative analysis of crime data and media coverage content analysis to identify potential disparities, themes, and biases in media representations.

We follow the strategy of a set of studies by Dixon and Linz (2000); Harkins and Dixon (2010); Dixon and Williams (2015); Dixon (2017) that used the comparison between depictions of crime and race on American television news to official crime report statistics, known as the inter-reality comparison technique. This technique is widely established, as well as in recent literature such as Klein and Hodges (2022) or Silcox (2022).

By exploring how media coverage frames and represents MPR, and the portrayal of the crime, we will shed light on this phenomenon and contribute to the understanding of sexual crimes from Cultural criminology and to the growing body of literature on media constructions of crime. Cunneen and Stubbs state (2016):

Cultural criminology provides useful insights into the construction of this symbolic world surrounding violence against women, but it cannot ignore the communications, which are closely connected to the construction of apparently cultural expressions (p. 97).

In the subsequent sections of this paper, we will delve into the relevant theoretical frameworks, review existing literature, present the methodology, and discuss the contributions of this research.

2. Moral panic: Theorizing the “Wolfpack” sexual assault fear

The term ‘moral panic’ was first used in Stanley Cohen’s *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1972), and has had a significant influence on studying deviant behaviors in the context of communication. He investigates how societal responses, the media, and public figures all play

a role in amplifying and exaggerating perceived social threats. Cohen's features match the pattern of the newly developed focus on Spanish MPR.

Other notable authors who have extensively researched the idea of moral panic are Goode and Ben-Yehuda in *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance* (1994). By adopting the step analysis of Goode and Ben-Yehuda¹, we can affirm that there is nowadays a heightened level of concern of being sexually assaulted by a group, especially non-Spanish nationals, in contemporary Spain:

There is a *heightened level of concern*, measurable through statements by high-ranking politicians that used the words *state of alarm* and *sexual terror*, such as seen when the Secretary of State for Equality (Ministry of Equality), Ángela Rodríguez, when referring to MPR in May 2022 (*La Vanguardia*, 2022, May 2).

In this sense, there is hostility toward the perpetrators of MPR, especially in open spaces because women's greatest fear is being victimized by strangers in public places. This inability of women to choose with whom they interact and communicate profoundly affects their sense of security in public. The Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS), in the survey *Social perception of sexual violence* (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas –CIS–, 2017), stresses the role of this fear, which is perceived to occur more frequently in parties and festivals (45.5%) and public spaces (streets, parks, etc.) (17%). Rodo-de Zarate *et al.* (2019) examine fear as one of the most important limitations of women's access to public spaces and state that the link between aggression, crime, and fear of men is more widespread among foreigners and migrants in Spain. The authors showed the social perception for those responsible for violence and criminal acts through racialization, identifying people of foreign origin as perpetrators of violence.

From Cohen (1972, 2011), different critical research studies (Reiner, 2002) have highlighted the relationship between moral panic, often demonstrating the disproportionate nature of panic reactions in *folk devils*. This has been studied recently by Molla (2021), or in a Spanish context by Cuadrado *et al.* (2021), which measured prejudice toward Moroccan immigrants. In this way, Moroccan nationality, as can be seen in different surveys, is always the group most rejected by the population of the Spanish autonomous regions (Cea D'Ancona & Vallés Martínez, 2015; Rincken *et al.*, 2009), since it is more often associated with problems such as crime or drug trafficking and consumption (Moreno Márquez, 2012).

In a paper entitled "Influence of Spanish newspapers in creating stereotypes against Moroccan immigrants between 2008 and 2016," González *et al.* (2021) analyzed "Common crimes" and found the existence of an axis that transmits a negative image of the Moroccan community, associating them with daily crimes such as murders or rapes (p. 135, 146). Unaccompanied Migrant (or asylum seeker) Children (MENA) have been broadly discussed among political and social actors in several Spanish autonomous regions due to their difficulties in their transition to adulthood. Although minor and specific, these events have led to the apparent stigmatization of the entire group, mainly because of a minority with a series of added problems. In this vein, there is a popular opinion of non-Spanish nationals assailants who may be wandering the streets as shown in De Pablo 2021, March 6; *La Razón*:

"There is fear in the Canary Islands: it is a question of security" The arrest of four Maghreb men accused of group rape in a tourist area of Gran Canaria triggers social alarm and stigma toward immigrants.

Added to this, due to public concerns about safety in their communities, crime is a long-standing political issue that candidates for political office often address in a search for culprits becoming what is called *moral entrepreneurs* by Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994). New populist parties were boosted by the ideological and electoral crisis of some of the most established

¹ Where they established heightened level of concern, hostility, volatility and disproportionality as criteria.

post Franco parties (Ferreira, 2019). This hostility has polarized opposing ideological blocs and, what is even more consequential, internally divided previously more homogeneous left and right spaces (Arango *et al.*, 2019, p. 69). These politicians collectively establish an ideological discourse, using exaggerated images and demanding measures that discipline *folk devils*. Due to the tension between the advance of globalization and the resistance of the nation-state, one can glimpse hostility towards immigration as the main political issue.

Due to recent migration waves in Spain, crime has not become associated with a race/ethnic issue, but a visual representation of nationality. A denomination of non-national *superpredators*² has arisen in some public debates by politicians focusing on MPR. In the study by Ribera Paya and Martínez (2021, p. 422), they state “Vox [populist party] also equates migrants to criminals, and constantly discusses the threat of illegal immigration, turning immigration, broadly understood, into a security issue.” In line with the moral entrepreneur, Becker (2017) describes the “moral crusader,” which adds credence to their moral advocacy, as there is an identification of expertise that comes through repeated speaking when stigmatizing those groups. At this point, it is worth mentioning that Vox became the third political force in Spain after the general elections of 2019. The ultranationalist party doubled the number of seats it had won in the Parliament in the earlier elections. Their leader, Santiago Abascal, when interviewed on public television channel (TVE)⁶ reiterated a controversial news report that he had already used during the 2019 electoral campaign: “69% of the sex offenders who commit group rape in Spain are foreigners,” showing that populist party leaders have deployed rhetoric that emphasizes the fear of foreigners. These movements have increased the will of “populist punitive attitudes” (Bottoms, 1995) toward criminal policy.

Disproportionality in moral panics, generating and disseminating numbers is important and justifies the inter-reality analysis of this paper. According to this theory, “politicians and the media cannot fabricate concerns where none existed initially,” and moral panics must therefore be based on genuine public concern. Since actual crime rates cannot be known with certainty, they must be approximate or derived from some measure.

Continuing with Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994), we will analyze whether moral panics are founded on genuine public concern (grassroots model) when comparing media coverage and the Ministry of Home Affairs report on crimes against sexual freedom and indemnity in Spain (detentions/accused) (López Gutiérrez *et al.*, 2020) and the statistics of the sentences passed by various Spanish Provincial Courts between 2005 and 2020 from General Council of the Judiciary (Consejo General del Poder Judicial) data.

3. Literature review

The study of crime and communication is an intersection that has garnered remarkable attention. In this literature review, we explore two distinct yet interconnected types: mass communication and criminological theories to provide a foundation for understanding the sociocultural context within which media representations of crime operate.

3.1. Literature on Communication

In “Journalism faces the challenge of immigration,” van Dijk *et al.* (2006) study the Spanish context on immigration at length. More specifically, they state:

Although it must be remembered that it is not that the media represent immigration as they see fit, but that their story is part of a historical discourse that is rooted in the collective imagination of a society (p. 40).

By building upon established theories such as agenda-setting, framing, cultivation, and the spiral of silence, we will delve into representation of MPR assailants and the potential impact on public opinion.

² As used by Gilliam Jr and Iyengar (1998).

The agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) contends that the media can influence how the public views reality by emphasizing some problems and dismissing others. To increase the salience of specific events or concerns in the public's awareness, the media magnifies them. It is important to mention that news pieces on MPR before 2016 were almost non-existent, with just one single appearance from an Indian MPR case (Jha, 2013).

In Spain, there has been a long debate about the importance of revealing the nationality of the accused in reporting crime. Entman (1993) linked increased punitiveness to the internal structural emphasis of crime stories or "framing" in the Framing theory. The media frames stories when it selects some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation.

Framing is significant because it activates some ideas, feelings, and values more than others, thus encouraging particular trains of thought and leading audiences to reach certain conclusions. As they tend to highlight certain aspects of an issue and omit others, news stories can increase viewers' fear of crime because they only get one side of the story (Entman & Rojecki, 2000). In addition to framing, racial priming is another vehicle through which the media can shape attitudes and views about significant events. Priming is a mental process that refers to the activation of specific associations in memory when people make political and social judgments (Price *et al.*, 1997).

Fear is at the heart of the social construction of *folk devils*. Culturally produced exaggerated fears are therefore an important cornerstone on which the social construction of *folk devils* is maintained. This journalistic framing creates an impression of the saliency of these assailants and the minds of many people, and this meaning "translates" into frequency.

In a context of sexual violence, Cultivation Theory explains how the media can influence the way people perceive reality and their relationship with it. We are interested whether there are any stereotypes or if they cultivate a certain vision. Constant exposure to representations of violence and sexuality in the media –most research has focused on the television consumption model– can contribute to the acceptance and normalization of sexual aggression as an acceptable or justified behavior in certain situations.

To determine what is obviated or not in the news and why, the Spiral of Silence Theory suggests that people tend to hide their opinions if they feel they are in the minority or unpopular. Noelle-Neumann (1995, p. 226) states that if people do not find habitual, frequently repeated expressions in favor of their point of view, they become mute. This theory suggests that some people may not speak out on racial issues, even if they believe they have the right to do so, for fear of being labeled racist or xenophobic.

These theories provide insights into how media channels, messages, and content influence public perceptions of crime, shape attitudes, and impact social responses.

Jaehnig *et al.* (1981) stated that fear of crime was more related to the newspaper's emphasis on violent crime than to actual crime statistics. To study these reasons for moral panic, based on the proposal by Reinerman (1994)³, we will apply his *media magnifications* methodology. Studying how the media cover these representation phenomena –over or under-representations– of the deviant "Other," we can shape the diffusion of criminal justice. It is important to understand the relationship between media portrayals and crime and the prevalence of fear of crime (Hollis *et al.*, 2017; Dolliver *et al.*, 2018). Media coverage of MPR awakens awareness; providing data on the context of rape and those involved and drawing attention to competing narratives that created the production of "folk devils."

³ According to Reinerman (1994), the construction of drug alerts and repressive anti-drug laws contain seven basic principles: a kernel of truth, media expansion, political-moral entrepreneurs, professional interest groups, historical context or conflict and linking a form of drug to a "dangerous class" and moral failure.

3.2. Literature on Criminology

The relationship between the media, the representation of crime, and moral panics has been a notable area of study within Criminology.

From the Criminal Law and Criminology field, the media has been considered as a social agent that generates the perception of crime (Silva, 2001; Díez Ripollés, 2004; Fuentes, 2005; Arán *et al.*, 2008; Tavosnanska *et al.*, 2015; González *et al.*, 2018; etc.).

Cohen (1972) was an early pioneer with the concept of moral panics and how media coverage of specific crimes or deviant behaviors can amplify societal concerns and contribute to the creation of moral boundaries.

Hall is a key researcher in this field. *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (1978) explores how the media portrays some social groups as threatening and abnormal, such as black teenagers. He emphasizes the influence of the media, particularly regarding racial narratives, on public perception and policy responses to crime.

More recently, other authors such as Jewkes (2015) have explored how media narratives, often driven by sensationalism and exaggeration, can lead to the amplification of social anxieties and the targeting of specific groups or issues as threats to social order. Greer (2016, 2017) conducted research on how media representations influence public perceptions of crime and the criminal justice system and Moore (2009, 2013, 2017) has made significant contributions in the study of the media and its connection to moral panics, such as classifying media coverage of drug-facilitated sexual assault and introducing “cautionary tales” signals whereby women are held at least partially responsible for their own sexual victimization.

4. Methodology

The methodology employed in this study aims to investigate and analyze the research questions and consists in monitoring the situation of moral panics of MPR in Spain. In doing so, an inter-reality comparison between mass media MPR coverage and the official statistic of this crime is carried out.

The discovered inconsistencies may support outdated beliefs, prejudices, or stigmatizations.

A first step is the mass media content analysis and the parameters definitions.

4.1. Source of the news

For this study, we have selected the digital editions of three national daily newspapers: *El País*, *El Mundo*, and *Diario ABC*. This selection affords a variety of ideological viewpoints and guarantees a fair depiction of the media debate. They were selected as the most read paid-for national newspapers in Spain⁴ that have already been used in different content analysis studies (Canel Crespo, 1999; Benaissa, 2018; García, 2013; Parratt Fernández *et al.*, 2020).

The selected time span was from 2005 until 2021. It is noteworthy that there is only one case of MPR in the agenda-setting before 2016, related to a case from India on August 24, 2013, that shocked the world⁵, committed against a young photojournalist.

4.2. Search engine and keywords

Factiva database, a specialized search engine, was used to identify the news items and collect the data. It enabled us to identify all the texts containing the terms (in Spanish): *delitos sexuales, España, nacionalidad, violación grupal* (sexual crimes, Spain, nationality, group rape). Using these keywords, 81 articles were obtained from these national daily newspapers, with the following breakdown: 31 from *Diario ABC*, 29 from *El Mundo* and 21 from *El País*. Regarding

⁴ Using (González *et al.*, 2021, Graphic 1), *ABC*: Conservative ideology, Non-sensational press; *El País*: progressive ideology, Non-sensational press; *El Mundo*: Progressive ideology, Sensational press.

⁵ Jha (2013). *BBC, Great stories of 2013: the gang rape that shocked India*, 2013, December 16.

https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2013/12/131120_grandes_historias_2013_violacion_india_yv

authorship, in *El País*, 95% are attributed, *El Mundo*, 58% are attributed, plus 24% from an agency, compared to 51% for *ABC* that are unattributed.

4.3. Definitions of parameters

Multi-perpetrator rape (MPR): The crime, multiple-perpetrator rape (MPR), is probably the most serious sexual assault, and its characteristics have been studied in depth by Harkins and Dixon (2010) and Morgan *et al.* (2012), who proposed the terminology. MPR was originally defined by Horvath and Kelly (2009, p. 94) as “any sexual assault which involves two or more perpetrators” adding sexual intercourse without consent using violence or intimidation. Other studies have used similar terms: gang rape (Ehrhart & Sandler, 1986), collective rape (Green, 2004), sexual offending in groups (Lindsay *et al.*, 2006) or multiple perpetrator sex offending (Harkins & Dixon, 2010).

Nationality: The RAE⁶ defines nationality as the “legal link of a person with a state, which attributes the condition of the citizen of that state based on the place where they were born, the nationality of their parents or the fact of having been granted naturalization.”

In less than a quarter of a century, there has been a large increase in the non-national population and immigration in Spain. It is currently the ninth most important issue facing Spain⁷. According to data from the National Institute of Statistics (INE), non-nationals registered in Spain have increased from 1.37% of the population in 1996 to 11% in 2019.

However, Spanish is still far from other countries where the previously developed migratory phenomenon lead to a greater participation at social and political relevance of the foreign population (Godenau *et al.*, 2017). Among non-Spanish nationals, there is an important distinction between migrant workers (much of the segmentation is based on education), displaced persons (such as asylum seekers and/or MENA⁸ and tourists, but on nationality. Due to Spanish idiosyncrasy and the lack of particular minorities, we have to talk about nationals and non-Spanish nationals (or immigrants), more than about racial or ethnic issues⁹.

4.4. Coding multiple perpetrators

A content analysis was conducted and is defined as “the systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics” (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 1). Kort-Butler (2016) expresses how “content analysis appraises the meaning and messages within the media sources themselves.”

4.5. Content measures reliability

At the heart of this paper’s content analysis, there is a content analysis protocol or codebook: number of perpetrators, name of the location of the crime, age of the victim when a teenager was involved (13–18), age of the perpetrators (13–19 and 20–60), the influence of drugs and/or alcohol and characteristics of the assault such as social class, “tourist status” or asylum seeker.

The observations recorded for each case were divided into two levels of analysis: perpetrator level and crime level.

1. Perpetrator level: nationality of the perpetrators, social class, *age*, the influence of drugs and/or alcohol.
2. Crime level: if specified, the number of perpetrators, location and crime scene, age of the teenage victim (13–18).

⁶ <https://dle.rae.es/nacionalidad>

⁷ The Standard Eurobarometer conducted by European Commission and Directorate-General for Communication (2021) (EB94) March 2021, about Public opinion in the European Union, “Immigration” had a similar percentage to the rest of Europe, 6% in Spain to 7% in the UE-27.

⁸ Acronym of “Menores de Edad No Acompañados” o “Unaccompanied minors”.

⁹ Research that distinguishes immigrant status from racialized status has found important differences based on immigrant vs. native-born status, country of origin, and length of settlement.

5. Police reports and criminal justice outcomes: monitoring the situation in Spain recorded in official statistics

Official crime statistics drawn from the records that are kept by the police have come under increasingly critical scrutiny from academics, policymakers, politicians, and the media (Morgan *et al.*, 2012, p. 206). Moreover, we have to take the *dark figure* that exists into consideration –the fear that victims have when reporting (Young, 2009, p. 58).

We present a descriptive analysis of the most relevant figures from the Spanish official statistics. As already stated, these are based on the Ministry of Home Affairs report and the sentences from the General Council of the Judiciary criminal justice data. Although these statistics are limited, they provide the best available estimates for the breakdowns required in the ensuing analysis of this paper.

5.1. Police reports

The Spanish Government provides a comprehensive overview of current knowledge about the incidence of sexual crimes perpetrated by one person, two people, and three or more people (nationality is not mentioned), in the section called *Sexual crimes committed by two or more people*. Table 1 presents a summary of the number or crimes of sexual abuse and assault, with/without penetration.

In the Spanish Police Crime Statistics in *Reports of crimes against sexual freedom and indemnity in Spain from 2016 to 2020*, we can derive from the last three rows of Table 1 that the number of group cases remains below 5% and with a steady trend among the years studied. In sexual assault with penetration, we see that the highest percentage is by one person with figures above 90% average. We can conclude that most rapes are perpetrated by a single individual and not by a group.

Table 1. Criminal offences reported between June 2016 and May 2020.

CRIMES	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total
SEXUAL ABUSE	4,393	4,592	5,809	6,559	5,413	21,353
Sexual crimes perpetrated by one person	4,273	4,439	5,619	6,357	5,248	20,688
Sexual crimes perpetrated by two people	75	102	127	132	113	436
Sexual crimes perpetrated by three or more people	45	51	63	70	52	229
SEXUAL ABUSE WITH PENETRATION	538	713	996	1,159	1,110	3,406
Sexual crimes perpetrated by one person	511	678	964	1,112	1,069	3,265
Sexual crimes perpetrated by two people	19	24	28	37	34	108
Sexual crimes perpetrated by three or more people	8	11	4	10	7	33
SEXUAL ASSAULT	1,603	1,725	1,855	1,985	1,595	7,168
Sexual crimes perpetrated by one person	1,487	1,610	1,726	1,850	1,483	6,673
Sexual crimes perpetrated by two people	74	78	79	95	79	326
Sexual crimes perpetrated by three or more people	42	37	50	40	33	169
SEXUAL ASSAULT WITH PENETRATION	1,203	1,307	1,591	1,751	1,518	5,852
Sexual crimes perpetrated by one person	1,095	1,226	1,477	1,652	1,421	5,45
Sexual crimes perpetrated by two people	63	54	86	63	70	266
Sexual crimes perpetrated by three or more people	45	27	28	36	27	136
TOTAL ABUSES AND SEXUAL ASSAULTS	7,737	8,337	10,251	11,454	9,636	37,779
Sexual crimes perpetrated by one person	7,366	7,953	9,786	10,971	9,221	36,076
Sexual crimes perpetrated by two people	231	258	320	327	296	1,136
Sexual crimes perpetrated by three or more people	140	126	145	156	119	567

Source: Own elaboration using data from the Ministry of Home Affairs report on crimes against sexual freedom and indemnity in Spain (detentions/accused) 2020.

The *Perpetrators' profile section* of that report mentions the nationality of the offenders and there has been an upward trend in the number of sexual crimes committed by non-Spanish nationals. In 2019, 65% of those responsible are Spanish nationals. Regarding those of foreign nationality, Table 2 shows that those from Morocco and Romania present the highest figures.

Table 2. Nationality breakdown of individuals under detention, investigation or prosecuted.

	Male	Female	Unknown	Total	% of total
1.- SPANISH	5174	166	1	5341	67.1%
2.- FOREIGNERS	2514	104	0	2618	32.9%
AFRICA	768	14	0	782	9.8%
Morocco	528	8	0	536	6.7%
Algeria	59	1	0	60	0.8%
Rest	181	5	0	186	2.3%
AMERICA	1054	59	0	1113	14.0%
Colombia	239	23	0	262	3.3%
Ecuador	169	1	0	170	2.1%
Bolivia	100	1	0	101	1.3%
Peru	94	2	0	96	1.2%
Venezuela	86	3	0	89	1.1%
Dominican	65	1	0	66	0.8%
Other	301	28	0	329	4.1%
EUROPEAN UNION	455	18	0	473	5.9%
Romania	236	14	0	250	3.1%
Bulgaria	49	0	0	49	0.6%
Italy	40	1	0	41	0.5%
Portugal	28	0	0	28	0.4%
France	22	0	0	22	0.3%
Germany	20	1	0	21	0.3%
Belgium	9	1	0	10	0.1%
Other	51	1	0	52	0.7%
ASIA	156	7	0	163	2.0%
Pakistan	60	0	0	60	0.8%
China	30	7	0	37	0.5%
Other	66	0	0	66	0.8%
OTHER COUNTRIES	81	6	0	87	1.1%
TOTAL	7688	270	1	7959	100%

Source: Own elaboration using data from the Ministry of Home Affairs report on crimes against sexual freedom and indemnity in Spain (detentions/accused) 2020.

According to a recent study by Perez Ramirez *et al.* (2020) published by the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Civil Guard publication, "Sexual offenders with an unknown victim," group sexual assaults in Spain are characterized by:

the aggressors in group sexual assaults being younger than those not done in a group, with a greater presence of foreign aggressors (Morocco and Romania), but the offenders

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have no police records and if they have, they are not for sex crimes [...]. Assaults are often committed on the weekend (Saturday), on public roads or spaces open or around a leisure area, making greater use of vehicles.

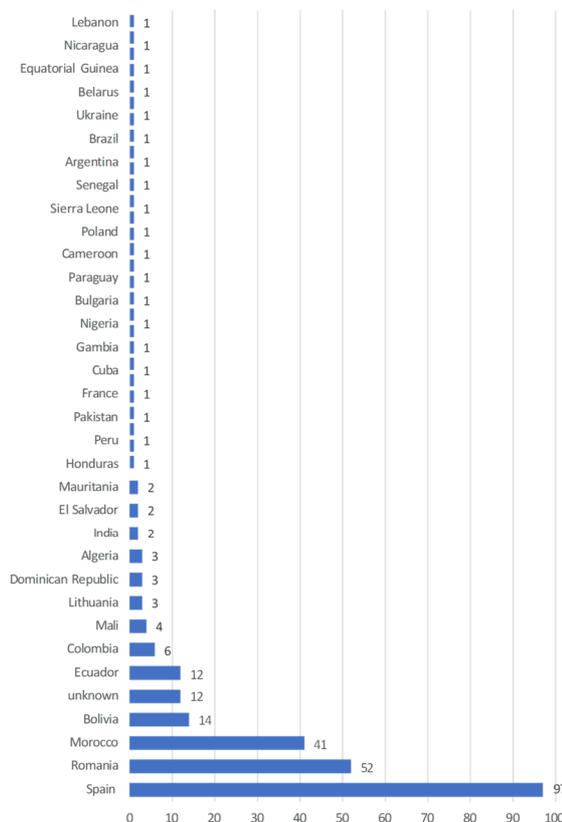
The results of the police reports show that 67% of perpetrators are Spanish nationals and 32.9% are non-nationals. The majority of the latter come from Latin America (14%), with Colombia leading the table. The third origin of perpetrators is Africa with 9.8% and Morocco is the highest with 6.7%. The number of cases from European countries is comparatively low, with only 5.9% of the total. We should not forget that this compilation of figures is on all types of sexual assaults and abuses. The number of sexual assaults committed individually is increasing.

5.2. Criminal justice outcomes

The study by Cazorla (2021), based on convictions data from the General Council of the Judiciary¹⁰, revealed important findings on the nationality of 273 convicted perpetrators.

Figure 1 presents the breakdown of the nationality of people convicted of MPR. The largest share is Spain with 97 individuals, representing 19.78% of the sample. However, there are two groups of foreign perpetrators with large figures: Morocco (41) and Romania (52), which represent a share of 12.82% and 16.48% respectively. The combined share of these three countries represents about 50% of cases. In comparison, the rate of European offenders was under-represented among convicted people; Poland (1), France (1), Bulgaria (1), and none from the UK or Germany.

Figure 1. Number and country of origin of perpetrators convicted of MPR.



Source: Own elaboration using data from Cazorla (2021).

¹⁰ Website Consejo General del Poder Judicial (CENDOJ): <https://www.poderjudicial.es/search/indexAN.jsp>

In conclusion, in criminal decisions, Spanish, Romanian, and Moroccan perpetrators represent nearly 50% of the condemned population, whereas the rate of European offenders was negligible, with no British or German cases.

6. Findings

This section presents the findings and analysis derived from our research and we have gained valuable insights into the intricate dynamics at play.

Related to RQ 1 about how media coverage frames and represents sexual crimes, several factors are framed and prioritized. From our content analysis, the most important items and figures in the news are summarized in Table 3. We find that the number of perpetrators is cited in almost 60% of the news and is a remarkable statistic. It highlights the presence of group dynamics and potential coordination in committing sexual crimes, which can shape public perception and raise concerns about safety and prevention strategies.

Table 3. Salient items on MPR coverage.

Number of perpetrators	59.7%
Name of the location of the crime	41.7%
Age of the teenage victim (13-18)	31.0%
Age of the perpetrators: teens (13-19)	20.9%
Age of the perpetrators: adults (20-60)	13.4%
The influence of drugs and/or alcohol	8.9%
Social class “tourist status”	8.9%
Asylum seeker	1.5%

Source: Own elaboration based on content analysis study.

It is also interesting to mention how the prominence of the location (41.7%) provides contextual information about where the incidents occurred. Consequently, it helps identify geographical patterns and potential hotspots of sexual crimes, influencing discussions about local safety. Particularly relevant is when it happened in a tourist location. It explains the fear of sexual violence in a party environment. Most tourist places cited (Benidorm, Salou, Ibiza, etc.) explained a vacation context. When the focus was on the actions and accountability of the perpetrators, tourists were over-represented as perpetrators, with 8.9%. Their condition was known through expressions such as “they were on vacation.”

With a substantial percentage when the victim is a teenager (13-18) (31%), it is evidence that raises concerns about the vulnerability of this age group, consent issues, and the need for healthy relationships.

The presence of teenagers (20.87%) –compared to 13.43% of adult perpetrators (20-60)– in perpetrating sexual crimes highlights the significance of addressing youth crime. It shows the vulnerability of age with hormonal changes, peer pressure, identity creation, or identity crisis. These elements may have an impact on how people make decisions and see interactions and relationships, especially sexual ones, and raise questions about how the justice system handles cases involving young offenders.

The presence of drugs and/or alcohol (8.9%) in MPR signifies a connection between substance abuse and perpetration or vulnerability to such crimes, underlying factors contributing to the criminal behavior. They are considered to have a large influence on sexual desire, as seen in Dickson-Gomez *et al.* (2017).

The relatively lower percentages of “tourist status” and asylum seekers (8.9% and 1.49% respectively) indicate that the involvement of these factors in sexual crime coverage might not be as prevalent. Nevertheless, in media narratives, tourists were treated differently, such as “La Manada de la Alameda: the gang rape at the hands of posh French guys” (Tubio 2021, September 5) and even names were cited:

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Sacha, Lucas, Artur and Lucas Cesar had chosen Seville to spend a few days on vacation. With a comfortable economic position, the four young French people could afford much more than a hostel, much frequented by their generational companions.

When referring to the characteristic of Asylum Seekers (or MENA) while some politicians consider them to be the *folk devils*, the media cited them only in 1.49% of cases.

From our results, media coverage perceives tourists as a certain danger, questioning this idea of a poor immigrant as the *folk devil* stated by politicians.

Increasing attention has been given to the contextual point understanding the factors contributing to such behaviors.

Regarding RQ 2, the portrayal of individuals of different nationalities, if disproportionately highlighted or underrepresented, in the depiction of the content analysis, the most prominent nationality is Spanish with 12.35%, followed by French (8.64%) and Moroccan (7.41%). Romanians are in eighth place with 1.23%. A comparison of all nationalities is shown in the first column of Table 4.

Table 4. The nationality featured in the media and the crime rates by its convictions.

	Media coverage	MPR Convicted
Spanish	12.35%	19.78%
French	8.64%	0.37%
Moroccan	7.41%	12.82%
Ecuadorian	4.94%	7.69%
Algerian	2.47%	1.10%
Bulgarian	2.47%	0.37%
Peruvian	2.47%	0.37%
Romanian	1.23%	16.48%
German	2.47%	0.00%
British	1.23%	0.00%
Russian	1.23%	0.00%
Not mentioned in media	53.09%	–
Other nationalities in sentences	–	41.02%

Source: Own elaboration based on media content analysis and condemned sentences in criminal justice from Cazorla (2021) data.

At 53.09%, the category “Not mentioned in the media” indicates a lack of coverage or reporting on the nationality of the assailants. This limitation may be due to various factors that can vary and may include ethical guidelines, or the reporting practices of the journalists.

The omission of nationality could be due to the recommendations of the Code of Ethics of the Confederation of Associations of Journalists of Spain:

7. Journalists must maximize their professional zeal in respect for the rights of the weakest and those who are discriminated against. For this reason, they must maintain special sensitivity in cases of information or opinions that may be discriminatory in content or likely to incite violence or degrading human practices.

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- a) They must therefore refrain from alluding, in a derogatory or prejudiced way, to the race, color, religion, social origin or sex of a person or any disease or physical or mental disability that they suffer.
- b) They must also refrain from publishing such data, unless it is directly related to the information published.

However, this recommendation is related to the use in a derogatory or prejudiced way. We understand that this lack of attention is more due to the decision of the journalist, based on the Spiral of Silence theory of Noelle-Neumann (1995), to hide an unpopular opinion for fear of harming their reputation. This theory suggests that some people, fearing being labeled racist or xenophobic, may not take a stand on racial issues, even though they believe they have the right to do so. Olmos (2020, p. 13) argues that “if we dig a little deeper into this logic of how racism works, we see that this interest in denial/concealment is mainly a question of political correctness.”

From a methodologic approach, we agree with the problem that Dixon and Linz (2000, p. 144) stated as imprecision whether sought or arrested on television news, were compared to arrest rates. This news was analyzed at all stages of the judicial process (sought, arrested, or convicted), and the same perpetrators may be repeated several times. Nevertheless, we analyze the prominence of facts in the news, to check whether or not it is a grassroot that justifies moral panic.

Answering RQ 3, potential discrepancies or alignments between official crime statistics categorized by nationality and the media depictions of sexual crimes are analyzed.

We find an alignment between press coverage and criminal sentences with Spanish assailants of 12.35% in the press and 19.78% in criminal sentences, indicating a relatively consistent portrayal in both domains.

Nevertheless, there is a discrepancy between press coverage and criminal sentences: On one hand, there is an overrepresentation of French assailants, which did not show alignment with 8.64% coverage in the press and 0.37% in criminal sentences. In 2019, the INE stated that the main tourist source countries were the United Kingdom (18.3%) and France (12.9%)¹¹. The UK's Foreign Office states: Personal attacks, including sexual assault, are rare, but they do occur and are often carried out by other British citizens¹². Nevertheless, there is no presence of UK citizens found guilty in Spain. Several nationalities, such as German, British, and Russian assailants, have minimal or no representation in the press, suggesting that their involvement in assault cases might be overlooked or not highlighted.

On the other hand, surprisingly under-represented are Romanian assailants, with press coverage of only 1.23%, but a higher representation in criminal sentences at 16.48%. Likewise, Moroccan assailants have a lower coverage in the press (7.41%) compared to criminal sentences (12.82%). Similarly, Ecuadorian assailants have a lower press coverage (4.94%) compared to criminal sentences (7.69%). From the Cultivation theory perspective, certain types of offenders are depicted to not show the involvement of prominently non-Spanish nationalities to avoid unfair generalizations but which leads to a distorted social reality. In doing so, the idea of tabloid justice (Fox *et al.*, 2001) is not present in the three most important Spanish daily newspapers from 2005 to 2021. We can state there is no statistically significant magnification or sensationalization of non-Spanish nationals who have been convicted. The finding is that many MPR-related concerns are conceptualized in terms of nationality neutrality. The media redirect social reaction away from critical issues of moral panic that warrant public debate.

¹¹ <https://www.ine.es/daco/daco42/frontur/frontur1219.pdf>

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/spain/safety-and-security>

7. Conclusions

In this paper, we have analyzed moral panic as the fear of being sexually assaulted by a group (MPR) in contemporary Spain. To begin, we studied the concept of moral panic from Cohen (1972) (who introduces the idea and investigates how societal responses, the media, and public figures all play a role in amplifying and exaggerating perceived social threats) to the adoption in this research of the step analysis from Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) in a Spanish context. We have reviewed literature from Mass communication (Agenda-setting, Framing, Cultivation theory and Spiral of Silence) to Criminology theories from Cohen, Hall, Jewkes, Greer or Moore, that have given the theoretical foundation to this research.

The research is focused on how MPR assailants are depicted in Spain, on how it is constructed, and on whether or not there is a media magnification. To answer the Research questions, a mixed-method approach was employed, combining quantitative analysis of crime data and media coverage content analysis (Dixon and Williams' 2015 inter-reality comparison) to identify potential disparities, themes, and biases in media representation.

Answering RQ₁, from our results, the framing of MPR shows increasing attention toward contextual factors to understand the factors of such behaviors, such as the age of both victim and assailant, or the presence of alcohol and/or drugs.

Related to RQ₂, the portrayal of assailants differs among individuals of different nationalities. Spanish is at the top, followed by French, Moroccan, Ecuadorian and Bulgarian. The category "Not mentioned in the media" comprises the majority (53.09%) of assailants, indicating a lack of coverage or reporting on their nationality.

In addressing RQ₃, our analysis revealed compelling evidence of potential discrepancies between official crime statistics categorized by nationality and the media depictions of sexual crimes: the nationality of one of the highest number of convicted perpetrators was invisible in the headlines, specifically those from Romania.

Media coverage perceives tourists as a certain danger, questioning this idea of a poor immigrant as the *folk devil* stated by some politicians.

In conclusion, the results demonstrate that the phenomenon of penal populism, particularly targeting non-Spanish nationals, cannot be attributed to media coverage, as there is no statistically significant amplification of negative portrayals of these individuals. The absence of such amplification indicates that media reporting does not contribute significantly to the stigmatization or sensationalization of non-Spanish nationals involved in criminal activities.

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