The Media's Brain on Drugs: A Content Analysis of the News Media's Representation of the Opioid Crisis in British Columbia

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Abstract. The rapid increase in opioid overdoses since 2012 has created a public health crisis in Canada. This epidemic has been fueled by the emergence and widespread distribution of fentanyl, a drug 100 times more potent than morphine. The dramatic increase in overdose deaths has resulted in a surge of media attention, particularly in British Columbia—the province with the highest number of reported overdose deaths in the country. The current study provides a thematic content analysis of the news media's representation of the opioid crisis in British Columbia. One hundred thirty-two (132) articles from *The Vancouver Sun* were analyzed to identify the representation of overdose victims and the ways in which solutions to the opioid crisis were represented with respect to particular types of overdose victims. Findings from the study highlight three distinct typologies of overdose victims: *addicts*, *youth*, and *casual drug users*. Additionally, the study showed that certain solutions and responses to the opioid crisis were targeted more heavily towards particular victim typologies. Results from this study are relevant to future policies and programs aimed at reducing overdoses in British Columbia. Limitations and areas for future research are also discussed.

Introduction

Canada is in the midst of a major public health crisis. Fueled by the widespread distribution of fentanyl, a drug 100 times more powerful than morphine, opioid overdoses have increased dramatically throughout the country since 2012. The province of British Columbia—commonly referred to as "ground zero" for the opioid crisis (Tyndall, 2018, p. 35)—has experienced the worst of the crisis. In 2017 alone, 1,436 drug overdose deaths were recorded in the province, 1,156 (80.5%) of which were attributed to fentanyl (BC Coroners Service, 2017, p. 1). This statistic reflects an approximately 96% increase in fentanyl overdose deaths since 2012—the first year in which fentanyl-related deaths were recorded in the province (BC Coroners Service, 2017, p. 4). The steady increase in overdose deaths has resulted in a surge of media attention, which has placed pressure on health authorities and government officials to propose solutions. Growing pressure from both the media and the public led the Provincial Health Officer of British Columbia to declare a public health emergency in 2016. Solutions also have included an increase in the occupancy capacity of substance use treatment facilities, the advent of the take-home Naloxone program (i.e., making available opioid receptor antagonists to the public), and the introduction of official public advertising campaigns. Although these responses have garnered some support from the public, none have made a notable dent in the overdose rate, as numbers of overdose deaths continue to rise in 2018. Accordingly, the need for new evidence-based solutions is vital.

Given that the media has a powerful influence over the shaping of public perception and public policy, it is important to critically analyze the ways in which the media contributes to the discourse surrounding the opioid crisis. Previous studies on media representations of public issues have commonly focused on two aspects of media influence: *agenda setting* and *framing*. Agenda setting posits that emphasis placed by the media on particular aspects of issues directly correlates to the public's perception of the importance of that issue (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 11). Predicated on Goffman's (1974) notion of "primary frameworks" (p. 24), framing assumes that the ways in which the media depicts an issue directly shapes the public's understanding of that issue (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 11). An objective of the current study is, therefore, to identify media emphasis on particular aspects of the opioid crisis, and understand how the media frames the overall discourse surrounding the issue.

It is clear that framing and agenda setting have a substantial impact on the way in which an issue is perceived and understood by an audience (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007); however, it is also well-recognized that audiences are not passive. Each audience member brings a particular set of experiences, attitudes, and beliefs that interact with the message that the media portrays. Thus, "[media] representations of crime and justice are relative to the individuals who produce and consume them. There are no neutral, objective representations, hence notions of 'reality' and 'authenticity' are relative" (Mason, 2003, p. 2). The biases and experiences of the public interact reciprocally with the biases of the media to shape discourse about public issues. This complex interaction must be considered when interpreting the results from the current study, as well as any study on media representations of public issues.

The current study provides a thematic content analysis of the news media's representation of the opioid crisis in British Columbia. Specifically, 132 articles from *The Vancouver Sun* were thematically coded to identify the representations of overdose victims and the ways in which responses to the opioid crisis were tailored to particular victim typologies. The two main research questions that guide this study are: (1) "How does the media depict individuals who overdose from illicit substances during the opioid crisis?" and (2) "How are media representations of responses to the opioid crisis connected to representations of overdose victims?" Based on previous literature, it was hypothesized that the media's depiction of overdose victims would be consistent with common stereotypes about drug users. Additionally, it was hypothesized that representations of responses to the opioid crisis would be directly linked to victim typologies.

Methodology

Researcher perspective

Every researcher brings a unique set of experiences and perspectives to the research process. These experiences and perspectives ultimately shape and inform the research process and have a significant impact on the results of a study. With respect to content analysis specifically, themes from a content analysis will reflect both the perspectives of the researcher, as well as the perspectives of those whom the data is derived from (Leavy, 2000, para. 17). For this reason, it is crucial to be actively aware of the position one holds as a researcher and the interpretive power that accompanies that role. In Leavy's (2000) essay on feminist content

analyses, she explains that feminist researchers have an obligation to disclose to the reader why they have chosen to research a particular topic and what vantage point they begin their inquiry from (para. 18). Although the current study is not explicitly conducted from a feminist perspective, I hold this standard to this project.

From the beginning this research process, I was actively aware of the opinions I hold about the opioid crisis. My experience working as an addictions counsellor in the midst of the opioid crisis led me to form strong opinions about the causes, solutions, and overall discourse related to the crisis. These opinions have been largely informed by the relationships I developed with individuals who are active drug users, as well as by witnessing the tragedies that have resulted from the opioid crisis in the community I worked in. These experiences shaped and informed my opinions surrounding drug criminalization and drug treatment. Specifically, I recognize that my opinions align more strongly with the decriminalization model and harm-reduction discourse. Given that the objective of this project is to explore representations of the opioid crisis and the people affected by it, it was important that I remained actively aware of my beliefs and opinions throughout the research process. By acknowledging my opinions and beliefs throughout this process, I intend to contextualize and situate my research within the personal and political narrative I hold; from this perspective, I also aim to avoid making universal claims about the themes that emerge from the project.

Although being transparent about one's personal and political vantage point is an important aspect of conducting honest research, the reflexive process does not stop there. Reflexivity throughout every stage of the research process is a crucial strategy for maintaining the quality and integrity of the research (Berger, 2015, p. 219). Reflexivity requires an "on-going mutual shaping between researcher and research" that involves consciously "stepping *back*" from the research to gain perspective and insight, as well as "stepping *up*" to the research to become an active member of its development (Attia & Edge, 2017, p. 33). The reciprocal process of stepping back and stepping up were crucial to this project. Examples of strategies employed to achieve this goal involved keeping memos and notes throughout the coding process, conversing with colleagues about my interpretations of emerging themes, actively searching for disconfirming evidence, and taking time to step back from the coded content before analyzing it. Ultimately, these strategies helped me remain critical of my own biases, and forced me to consider how those biases impacted the research decisions I was making.

Data and sampling

The data source selected for this study was *The Vancouver Sun* newspaper. This source was selected based on its popularity in B.C. and its online accessibility. Using a set of terms designed to capture content about the opioid epidemic, a key word search was conducted using the *ProQuest Canadian Newsstream* database, an open-source database[1] containing full-text content of Canadian news sources from 1977 to present. The search was limited to capture only articles from the Vancouver Sun between the years of 2012 and 2017. The year 2012 was selected as the minimum value in this search parameter as it was the first year in which data on

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[1] Given that the data were from an open-source database (which has no reasonable expectation of privacy), the current study was exempt from ethics review under s. 7.3 of the Simon Fraser University *University Research Ethics Review.*

fentanyl overdoses were recorded in the provincial coroner's report. Accordingly, 2012 is widely considered to be the starting point of the current opioid crisis. 2017 was selected as an upper limit as it was the most recent year of full news coverage at the time of coding. Search terms included common names of relevant opioids (e.g., "fentanyl"), as well a series of terms closely related to the opioid crisis (e.g., "overdose," "drug addiction," and "opioid epidemic") (see Appendix for full list of search terms). Given these criteria, the sampling method employed can be best described as a criterion sample (Palys, 2008, p. 698). An initial key word search of over 1000 results required me to narrow my search parameters to include only articles that contained key search terms in their abstracts, as opposed to the full text. Including this filter resulted in an initial sample of 215 articles. After reading each article, 83 articles were excluded on account of either being a duplicate item or not relevant to the study (i.e., articles that contained a search term but were not related to the opioid crisis). This resulted in a final sample of 132 articles.

Analytic strategy

A thematic content analysis was used to investigate the media's representation of the opioid epidemic. In short, content analysis refers to the "the intellectual process of categorizing qualitative textual data into clusters of similar entities, or conceptual categories, to identify consistent patterns and relationships between variables or themes" (Julien, 2008, p. 120). Content analyses may provide numeric representations of qualitative data, but may also include a deeper and richer explanation of the content. The current study aimed to achieve the latter. In other words, the analysis employed in this study extends beyond the mere cataloguing of events and focuses more heavily on the larger discourse surrounding the opioid crisis in B.C.

The thematic analysis was conducted in two waves. First, data were sorted into four categories that previous research suggests are indicative of media influence over public opinion (McGinty et al., 2015, p. 405). The four categories included (1) *causes* of the opioid crisis, (2) *consequences* of the opioid crisis, (3) representations of *individuals* affected by the opioid crisis, and (4) *solutions and responses* to the opioid crisis. Although the first wave of coding was largely focused on these four domains, space was also given for new themes/categories to emerge that did not fit within the original coding scheme. After the initial round of coding was complete, an inductive coding scheme was employed to identify themes within each of the four categories. Each category was coded multiple times to ensure that all themes were coded across all articles. This process resulted in a total of 42 themes across the four categories.

I will analyze the data more fully when I have the luxury of more space and time, but for the present paper will focus solely on media representations of overdose victims, and the solutions and responses that are directed towards particular victim typologies. Although this was not the original objective of the study, it was decided that focusing on aspects of two connected domains (rather than four) would provide a better opportunity to understand the deeper meaning and discourse associated with the opioid crisis. Additionally, these two domains seemed to offer the most compelling insights into the opioid crisis. This iterative process of refining and redefining the research focus is one of the key strengths of a qualitative approach (Agee, 2009). Such an approach allows "our questions [to] change during the process of research to reflect an increased understanding of the problem" (Creswell, 2007, p. 43).

Accordingly, the change in the research trajectory of this study is viewed as one of its strengths, rather than one of its limitations.

Results

One of the overarching themes of this content analysis is the typology of victims that emerged. Specifically, three distinct groups were identified: the *addict*[2], the *youth*, and the *casual drug user*. These three groups were labelled based on the language and overall discourse presented about them in the media. Key findings about the three typologies are presented below. As will be argued further in the discussion, these generic classifications of overdose victims are problematic as they ignore individual differences between drug users and dismiss heterogeneity within groups. This oversimplification of user typologies not only contributes to "othering,"[3] but ultimately leads to overly-simplified responses to the opioid crisis. Rival arguments and disconfirmatory evidence are also presented throughout the paper.

The "addict"

The term "addict" was used throughout the sample to describe a particular type of individual (or rather, group of individuals) who uses illicit drugs. Specifically, 27% (*n* = 35) of articles in the sample used the term "addict," and there were a total of 84 references to the word throughout the sample. Given that the media source used for the study is a Vancouver-based newspaper, representations of addicts often were connected to the Downtown Eastside (DTES) of Vancouver. Representations of addicts in the DTES typically emphasize the prevalence of public injection drug use, the dismal conditions of the streets, as well as drug users' unwavering pursuit of drugs, despite potential health consequences. This is exemplified by the following passage which aims to describe a typical day in the DTES:

> It's not quite noon, and three people have overdosed after using drugs at an unsanctioned injection site set up inside a filthy alleyway, in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Next to a fixing table, under a portable canopy, a thin, middle-aged woman pitches forward and then slumps back in a chair. She has almost certainly injected herself with fentanyl, enough to kill her. She is today's alleyway overdose No. 4. There will be many more. (article 52, 2016)

This article goes on to describe an encounter with a "56-year-old cocaine addict" who states that he will continue to use fentanyl, regardless of the risk of overdose, because he has no other options. This portrayal of addicts is common throughout the sample. Addicts are represented as a group of individuals whose collective primary goal in life is the pursuit of drugs. They endure treacherous living conditions and risk their lives daily with the hope of achieving their next "fix." Accordingly, the conversation surrounding addicts in the media is one that focuses on the group, rather than the individuals within it.

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[2] I am acutely aware of the negative connotations attached to the word "addict;" however, the word "addict" will be used frequently throughout this paper as it was commonly used throughout the sample and is the most appropriate label for the media's representation of this victim/user typology.
[3] More information about "othering" is provided in the discussion section of this paper.

Within the overall discourse surrounding addicts, two distinct paths to funding personal drug use emerged: crime, and income assistance. Articles in the sample connect street crime to drug use, either implicitly, by emphasizing the problem of crime in the DTES, or explicitly, by including statements from citizens or stakeholders in the community (e.g., "…and what they do after they've shot up is break into your car to feed their habit" (article 24, 2012)). Emphasizing the connection between drug use and crime ultimately presents the idea that addicts fund one illegal activity through another, and thus are not contributing members of society. Additionally, the media's representation of addicts often included reference to income assistance, presenting the idea that addicts use government funds to feed their existing drug habits. These claims were often supported by quoting front-line workers or experts in the field, as exemplified in the following quote by an addictions worker in Surrey, B.C.: "You've got welfare Wednesday coming up on the 27th ... all the intravenous drug users are going to be all moneyed up, ready to go again" (article 116, 2016). Ultimately, these representations contribute to the already prominent stereotypes surrounding individuals who use drugs.

Although the stereotype of addicts being criminals or "lousy choice make[ers]" (article 24, 2012) was a dominant theme throughout the sample, a sympathetic portrayal of addicts was also evident (albeit less so). One way that articles demonstrated a sympathetic portrayal of addicts was by highlighting positive contributions that individual drug users made to their communities:

> Nickerson, reportedly, is homeless and a crystal meth user. In the circumscribed world of Surrey's drug strip, he enjoys some celebrity. He's known as "Little Doug" - due to his stature - and since the press release came out he's been interviewed by just about everybody. The reason for this? Nickerson always carries a naloxone kit and administers it to anyone he finds overdosing. (article 6, 2017)

Another way that the media portrays addicts in a positive light is by reinforcing the notion that "nobody wakes up in the morning and decides to become an addict," and that instead, drug users are simply "human beings…suffering from a legitimate, complex, life-threatening chronic health condition" (article 80, 2017). Instead of contributing to the dominant stereotypes associated with addicts, this discourse presents a more sympathetic portrayal of individuals who use drugs and diverts focus towards the larger political and systemic issues surrounding the opioid crisis. Instead of focusing on how to "deal with" addicts, this discourse is focused on the larger underlying question: "[Why have] so many people…become reduced to such a state of despair that they are willing to risk killing themselves through self-medication[?]" (article 1, 2017).

Within the general typology of the addict, emerged a distinct subgroup: *addicts with complex needs*. Whereas the overall representation of an addict is primarily focused on drug use alone, addicts with complex needs are typically represented as individuals experiencing a multitude of physical, mental, and emotional health problems in addition to drug abuse. This representation challenges the group-level assumptions of the overall addict discourse by highlighting the individual differences between people who struggle with addiction. Additionally, this discourse brings attention to the complex underlying problems behind

addiction. This is often accomplished by featuring the voices of addiction experts and front line workers in the field:

> The majority of addicts - 60 per cent - have one or more co-occurring mental health issues. So you may see the addiction very prominently, but what's hidden are all kinds of disorders co-occurring that need to be addressed immediately. (article 9, 2012)

Whereas the discourse surrounding the broader typology of addicts varies with respect to individual responsibility attributed to personal drug use, the discourse surrounding addicts with complex needs is more sympathetic towards drug users. Instead of seeing individuals as responsible for their life circumstances, attention is turned towards the larger systems that have historically neglected their needs. As a result, the conversation surrounding addicts with complex needs is one that is focused on a needed change at the governmental level.

The youth

A second distinct typology of victims that emerged from the sample is *the youth* (also referred to as "young drug users" throughout). To identify this victim/user typology, all articles mentioning, or alluding to, drug users under the age of 25 were grouped together and coded inductively. The age 25 was selected as a cut-off point based on Fraser Health Authority's definition of a youth. Approximately 17% (n = 22) of the articles in the total sample fit this criteria, and the resulting analysis presented three distinct themes related to youth: motivations for drug use, level of perceived victimization, and the unpredictability of overdose.

Whereas habitual intravenous drug-use was linked intrinsically to the lifestyles of addicts, recreational drug use was presented as a primary characteristic of young drug users. Stories covering youth overdoses typically discuss casual drug use and emphasize the use of specific types of "party drugs," such as cocaine and ecstasy. Additionally, youth are typically represented as being naïve drug users, unfazed by the potential risk of overdose. The following description of a 19-year old male who (non-fatally) overdosed in Vancouver, BC in 2016 illustrates this point:

> Cody and his buddies called a local dealer that night - someone they considered a friend - and he delivered straight to their home. "I got it for free actually because I hadn't seen my friends in a long time," Cody later recalled. The fentanyl risk had crossed his mind and on more than one occasion he says he spoke to his friends about it. But after watching his buddies snort lines without any problems, he decided to join in. "I was thinking about (the risks). I just wasn't smart enough to not do it." (article 10, 2016)

Accordingly, articles addressing youth drug use often emphasize the increased risk of drug overdose that youth face as a result of the prevalence of fentanyl in the drug market. Ultimately, the main message arising from this discourse is that recreational drug use of any kind, including cannabis use (see article 96, 2015), can lead to overdose.

In addition to being labelled as naïve recreational drug users, youth are also typically represented as true victims of the opioid crisis (i.e., completely undeserving of

overdose deaths). The portrayal of youth as true victims was often accomplished by emphasizing the positive attributes of young overdose victims, as well as the promising lives they left behind. This was typically communicated via statements of family members and friends of the victim, as is exemplified in the following excerpt:

> I didn't know Beth very well but I did know that she could play some musical instruments and was an honour student before she got led astray these past six months or so. I knew she was sweet, loved blowing bubbles, swimming and laughing (article 63, 2016).

Here, the youth is represented as a gifted student with a promising future ahead of her. Instead of focusing on her *decision* to use drugs, this quote describes the young drug user as being briefly "led astray" and suffering tragic consequences as a result. Additionally, by including the victim's name and age, as well as comments from the victim's family and friends, the article personalizes the overdose event, leading the reader to connect more strongly to it. In doing so, this article highlights not only the death of the young victim, but her life as well. This differs markedly from representations of overdoses of addicts, which rarely contain detailed personal information about the victims and commonly group multiple overdoses together in a single story.

What also arose from the discourse surrounding young drug users was an emphasis on the unpredictability of overdose. Again, this is often accomplished by providing case examples of youth who unexpectedly died from, or became addicted to, opioids. Many of these case examples highlight the ordinary features of the youth, suggesting that the risk of overdose and addiction is imminent for all young people who use drugs. This is exemplified in the passage below:

> Dylan was a 21-year-old art student at Capilano University. Battling anxiety, he bought some Oxy-Contin that he did not know was laced with fentanyl. He fell asleep in his father's North Vancouver condo and never woke up (article 117, 2017).

A number of points are worth noting in this passage. First, the identity of the victim is linked to his role as a student, suggesting that he was typical youth in the early stages of formulating a life/career path. Secondly, by highlighting that the youth was "battling anxiety" (a common mental health issue experienced by young people), the article demonstrates that one does not need to be addicted to opioids to be at risk of overdose. Finally, this case example brings attention to the fact that the youth died in his father's home in North Vancouver, an area known for its wealth and family-friendly neighbourhoods. Mentioning the victim's place of residence reinforces the normalcy of his life, suggesting that any other typical youth could experience the same fate. In other words, these representations demonstrate that "overdoses do not discriminate" (article 57, 2016), and suggest that a youth's first time using drugs could be their last. Accordingly, representations of young drug users suggest that all youth, and those connected to youth, must be hyperaware of overdose risk.

The casual drug user

Distinct from the addict and the youth, the typology of *the casual drug user* includes overdose victims who do not fit the stereotypical profile a drug user. By definition, the majority of individuals in society who use drugs fit within this typology. In the current study, the casual drug user typology was operationalized as adults who are typically middle- or upper-class, are employed, have housing, and often have families. The following passage gives a description of an individual who may fit the casual drug user typology:

> The person with the drug problem is not necessarily a teenager shooting up in a dark alley or snorting cocaine at an all-night party…It may be a woman turned out in an elegant suit and flawless makeup, who carries an attache case as she clicks her way down an office hallway in stiletto heels to attend a meeting (article 9, 2012).

The characteristics of the casual drug user typology were discovered inductively in the second round of coding. Of the total sample, 14% of articles (*n* = 18) made references that contribute to the casual drug user typology.

Different from both the addict and the youth, representations of the casual drug user highlight the prevalence of covert drug use in society. Representations of the casual drug user often stress that drug abuse is not exclusive to public settings such as alleyways in the DTES. Instead, attention is brought to the fact that most overdose deaths "happen inside, most often in private homes" (article 117, 2017). By illuminating this trend, these stories remind readers that drug use is a problem that occurs in all neighbourhoods and social settings. Ultimately, the representation of the casual drug user calls readers to consider themselves and their loved ones in the context of the opioid crisis, and perhaps reshape their understanding of what a typical drug user looks like.

Similar to youth, the casual drug user is represented as a true victim of the opioid crisis. This is accomplished by the use of similar mechanisms to those used in stories about youth overdoses. Articles about overdoses of casual drug users typically include short biographies on the victims that emphasize the positive contributions they made to society, and the loved ones they left behind. A passage from an article released in 2015 illustrates this point:

> Hardy and Amelia[4], both in their early 30s, were found dead in their North Vancouver home on July 20…The couple leaves behind a two-year-old son. A donation page has been set up to help the child at youcaring.com.

Mentioning the family members of the deceased, particularly their children, is a common theme across stories that cover the deaths of the casual drug users. Doing so clearly emphasizes the tragedy of the event to the reader and reinforces the normalcy of the lives of the deceased. This, once again, reminds the reader that overdoses "[are not] confined to the back alleys of the Downtown Eastside" (article 17, 2016); they can happen to anyone, anywhere. It is also worth noting that the given example features a campaign to donate to the family of the victims. No examples of this occur in any stories covering the overdoses of individuals who fit within the addict or youth typologies.

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[4] Last name removed

Solutions to the crisis

Given that individuals of all demographics and social statuses are affected by the opioid crisis, the media's representations of proposed solutions to the crisis are often targeted towards particular victim/user typologies. This is unique to the opioid crisis as most previous drug crises have disproportionately affected high-risk lifetime drug users (e.g., the 1980s crack-cocaine epidemic). The wide scope of the opioid crisis has resulted in a range of responses and proposed solutions, many of which compete with the interests of each other. The way in which the media frames these responses and solutions has a substantial impact on the public's understanding of the opioid crisis as a whole. Although covering the media's representation of all responses to the crisis is beyond the scope of this paper, the major solutions associated with each victim/user typology are discussed below.

Solutions for "addicts"

Responses targeted towards individuals who fit within the addict typology are largely focused on harm reduction. Examples of commonly reported harm reduction approaches include supervised injection sites, needle exchanges, and opioid replacement therapy programs (i.e., prescribing methadone or suboxone as a replacement for heroin/fentanyl). News media coverage of these initiatives often features supporting evidence from official statistics or experts in the field. The inclusion of such evidence works to legitimize the presented solution and situate it within the broader scope of evidence-based practices. Although the majority of articles in the sample presented a discourse that favoured harm reduction, a number of articles presented evidence that opposed it. Articles that challenged the harm reduction approach also drew from official statistics and expert opinion to substantiate their claims. Such claims are typically predicated on the idea that harm reduction does not address the underlying causes of drug use. The following passage exemplifies this point:

> Calls for better access to supervised injection sites, the overdose-reversal drug naloxone and a newer opioid replacement suboxone - itself an opioid - are "Band-Aids," said Fischer, a senior scientist with the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto. "They're all reactive to the problem. ... This is not going to address the root causes" (article 82, 2016).

Although the given sample contains a larger number of articles supporting the harm reduction approach (n = 29) than those that challenge it (n = 7), the overall discourse surrounding harm reduction is clearly still divided.

The media's representations of solutions directed towards addicts with complex needs are typically more specialized and nuanced than those directed towards addicts in general. Emphasis on addressing the underlying problems associated with substance use was a common theme across articles that addressed solutions for addicts with complex needs. Of the underlying problems discussed in the articles, the most common included mental health disorders, physical health problems, poverty, and housing. Given that the discourse surrounding addicts with complex needs considers a complex combination of risk-factors, proposed solutions typically involved a full continuum of care models. The following passage from an

article covering a small pilot project in the DTES in 2015 illustrates the types of services that are targeted towards addicts with complex needs:

> It is likely that most people will walk into the clinic looking for drug treatment, but doctors hope once inside they will use some of the services there - such as a pharmacy, methadone dispensing, and basic medical assistance - and can eventually be linked to all sorts of support that could stabilize their lives, such as housing, counsellors, psychiatric services, social workers, HIV-AIDS care and other health professionals. (article 30, 2015)

These articles also commonly highlighted the importance of removing barriers in the public health system that prevent individuals from accessing treatment. A common strategy to address this concern involved "bring[ing] health services to the people, instead of asking vulnerable patients to go to hospitals or doctor's offices" themselves (article 30, 2015).

Solutions for youth

The media discourse surrounding responses to youth overdoses focuses predominantly on education. The responsibility to educate youth on the risks of drug use is typically directed towards parents and educators, especially during the months leading up to the summer holidays. Within these articles, the importance of drug education is often reinforced through the testimonies of police officers and other professionals in the field:

> As summer holidays approach for elementary and high school students in B.C., RCMP in Surrey are urging parents to keep kids safe and to speak with them about easily available and deadly drugs….[A] safe summer depends on caregivers understanding the risks linked to illicit drugs. (article 93, 2016)

Moreover, media representations of education-based responses often emphasize the lethal effects of fentanyl and other opiate analogues. Consistent with the framing of the youth typology in general, the discourse surrounding drug education is predicated on the idea that "your first time [using drugs] could be your last" (article 63, 2016). From this perspective, the best solution for young people to avoid overdose is to "[just] say no to drugs" (article 13, 2016).

Solutions for casual drug users

Similar to solutions directed towards youth, public awareness and education is the most common solution directed towards casual drug users in the media. What differs between education-based responses for casual drug users and youth is the intended outcome of the education efforts. Rather than claiming that casual drug users need to "just say no" to drugs, the underlying goal of this approach is to make casual drug users "more aware of what they're ingesting" (article 112, 2015). For this reason, solutions targeted towards casual drug users are similar to those targeted towards addicts as both assume that individuals will continue to use drugs, regardless of the risks. Accordingly, education-based solutions for casual drug users aim to prevent overdoses, rather than prevent drug use altogether. The framing of education-based solutions for casual drug users, therefore, fits more appropriately under the umbrella of the harm reduction perspective, rather than prevention. Some of the methods presented in the media to achieve this goal include community forums (e.g., article 103, 2016) and official advertisement campaigns (e.g., article 12, 2016).

Discussion and Conclusion

Previous studies have demonstrated that the media represents illicit substance use in a way that reproduces, and reinforces, dominant social and political ideologies (McKenna, 2011, p. 457). Results from the current study support this claim. The emergence of distinct user typologies across the sample demonstrates that not all drug users are represented in the same light, and instead drug users are categorized based on sociopolitical factors such as income, age, and social status. With such categorization comes a division in the level of sympathy and support directed towards drug users. This is demonstrated by the level of victimization associated with particular victim typologies in the news media. Whereas youth and casual drug users are overwhelmingly portrayed as true victims of the crisis (i.e., undeserving of overdose), addicts are not always portrayed as true victims. This division in victimization may be connected to the level of social desirability of each group, as addicts are often portrayed as criminals while casual drug users are often portrayed as contributing members of society. Ultimately, representing drug users based on aggregate trends and dominant stereotypes further stigmatizes drug use in society and results in misdirected programs and policies.

The notion of "otherness" is central to the discussion surrounding the representation of drug users in the media. Otherness refers to "the condition or quality of being different or "other," particularly if the differences in question are strange, bizarre, or exotic" (Jupp, 2006, p. 587). Research in the social sciences has long demonstrated that individuals who exhibit behaviour that deviates from mainstream social norms are considered as "others" in the dominant social and political discourse (e.g., Becker, 1963; Chambliss, 1964; Cohen, 1955). Becker's (1963) study, which showed that cannabis users were labelled "outsiders" (i.e. "others") as a result of their drug use, is a particularly relevant example of this. Additionally, recent studies on media representations of mortality and victimization demonstrate that the news media uses the tool of "the other" to distance viewers from the event being portrayed (Florea & Rabatel, 2011). In doing so, the news media creates a barrier between the viewer and the victim, allowing viewers to continue to consume media without feeling directly targeted by the event being portrayed. This notion of otherness is particularly evident in the discourse surrounding the addict typology, as it largely focused on generalizations about the group rather than the individual experiences of members within it.

The effects of "othering," are also displayed in responses and solutions directed towards particular victim typologies. For example, responses targeting addicts typically discussed providing treatment and programs *for* addicts, rather than working *with* addicts to generate solutions to drug-related problems in their communities. Accordingly, solutions presented from this perspective were often short-term, and involved moving drug users through the health care system in the most efficient way possible. Although there is no question that efficiency of treatment practices is a key factor in responding to any public health crisis, the lack of input from the individuals who use drugs is of notable concern. Not only does this approach minimize the agency of individual drug users, but it also neglects potential opportunities to fill gaps in the system and improve treatment practices. Including the voices of drug users in this broader conversation may lead us to step away from viewing addicts as a collective problem, and

towards viewing addicts as individuals who are experiencing an array of complex problems, one of which is drug use.

The notion of "otherness" is not as prevalent in the news media discourse surrounding youth and casual drug users. Instead of representing overdoses of youth and casual users in a way that distances the public from the event (as is often done in stories covering overdoses of addicts), the news media more commonly represents youth and casual users in a way that connects the public to the victim. In other words, instead of othering the youth or the casual drug user, the news media capitalizes on the similarities between the overdose victim and the public. By doing so, the media instills an awareness, and arguably fear, in the public that "anyone using illicit drugs is at high risk for overdose" (article 21, 2017). Although awareness of overdose risk is an important step in reducing the "seemingly unstoppable" (article 22, 2017) rate of overdoses in B.C., instilling panic in the public can also contribute to misguided and hastily implemented policies. Some have argued that the fear-based discourse presented by the news media has already led to a lack of control over the quality of care being administered throughout the province, effectively resulting in a "Wild West" approach to addiction treatment (article 25, 2015).

Previous studies on media coverage of drug use have claimed that "both media coverage and policy direction are disproportionately aimed at specific stereotypes of drug users" (Taylor, 2008, p. 369). This claim is consistent with the results of this study as responses to the opioid crisis were clearly targeted towards particular user typologies. Although there is certainly merit to directing education, intervention, and treatment efforts towards particular groups of individuals, neglecting within-group differences results in overly simplified responses to drug use in society. With respect to the opioid epidemic, this is particularly evident in the media's representations of responses directed towards the addict typology. Given that the news media largely frames addicts as persistent drug seekers who will not change their level of drug consumption, regardless of potential consequences, responses targeting the addict typology typically neglected to consider those who *do* wish to change their level of drug consumption. This assumption is harmful, both to individual drug users and to society, as it sacrifices nuanced and holistic treatment responses for responses that are overly simplistic or myopic. Accordingly, programs and policies directed towards all drug users should include a multitude of treatment options along the full continuum of care.

The findings of the current study, and the resulting discussion, should be interpreted in the context of several limitations. Firstly, the sample was derived from one data source (i.e., the *Vancouver Sun*), making the findings specific to the *Vancouver Sun*'s depiction of the opioid crisis, rather than the news media in general. However, given that the *Vancouver Sun* is one of the largest media corporations in British Columbia, it offers a sufficiently important sample to study. Additionally, like any content analysis that uses article databases, the sample used in this study was dependent on the parameters placed upon the search engine. Specifically, it is recognized that articles related to the opioid crisis could have been missed as a result of the particular search terms used in the initial sampling stage. Lastly, the interrater reliability of the study is limited as only one coder thematically coded the sample. However, given that the coding scheme used was predominantly inductive, using multiple coders would not have been an appropriate reliability check for this study.

Despite the mentioned limitations, the current study contributes to the literature and has key policy implications. The results suggest that responses to the opioid crisis have been largely reactive, and are targeted towards particular conceptions of drug users. Accordingly, policy makers must be acutely aware of the media's framing of the opioid crisis to ensure that policies are evidence-based, rather than fear-driven. Additionally, given that not all individuals who use drugs fit within a particular victim/user typology, future policies and programs should consider a range of interventions along a full continuum of care for all drug users. To better inform future policies and programs, future research should consider analyzing a broader range of news media sources. Examining the differences between news media discourses across cities and provinces in Canada may illuminate key trends that the current study could not address. Additionally, future studies should consider measuring public attitudes towards the opioid crisis in order to directly speak to the influence of the news media on public opinion. Each of these research directions provide key opportunities to strengthen public health policy and ultimately reduce the number of opioid overdoses in British Columbia.

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