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YOUTH AND ILLICIT DRUG REPRESENTATIONS IN CANADIAN PRINT MEDIA

Literature Review

The vast majority of literature on illicit drugs and the media does not comment, at length, on the representation of youth. However, there is some literature that focuses on the representation of youth in the media, outside the realm of illicit drugs. For instance, Faucher (2009) qualitatively examined the representation of youth offenders in the Canadian print media from 1900-2000. The most dominant narrative present in Faucher's study is that youth offenders are violent and to be feared by society. Bernier (2011) reviewed two Californian newspapers over a three-month time-period. Similar to Faucher (2009), the overall representation in these two newspapers was negative, with youth being portrayed as "troubled, troubling, and dangerous" (Bernier, 2011, p.158). In another study, Levinsen and Wein (2010) quantitatively examined the representation of youth in Danish newspaper articles over a fifty-year period, between 1953 and 2003. Overall, youth were portrayed with an emphasis on accidents and crime, but representations of youth remained more neutral than negative.

In addition to the literature on youth and the media, there are many existing studies on the representation of illicit drugs in the print media, and on the representation of drugs in the media overall. This literature was reviewed to create a model and context for my research.

Haines-Saah et al. (2014) use content analysis to examine the predominant themes in Canadian mainstream news media about marijuana, from the years 1997-2007. The authors found that marijuana is part of a "privileged normalization" (p. 47) discourse, where marijuana use is socially accepted for some privileged social groups (such as celebrities or athletes), but not for groups that are marginalized and lack power. Despite marijuana being normalized in most of the newspaper discourse, articles about drug use, youth, non-whites, and females were linked to deviant and negative representations.

Manning (2006) examines the symbolic frameworks which organize the representation of illicit drug use and abuse in UK national newspapers by comparing newsprint portrayals of volatile substance abuse (VSA) and ecstasy from 1993-2001. Manning found that negative representations of ecstasy were overrepresented in newspaper reports, whereas VSA was underrepresented. Manning points out that VSA users are constructed as the marginalized other, such as the homeless; whereas ecstasy use is symbolically framed in the media as a "threat to the innocent" that harms youth (2006, p. 60). There is much more concern over vulnerable youth using ecstasy, and little concern over the marginalized people who engage in VSA use, even though it is much more dangerous.

Boyd's (2002) article examines how media constructs illegal drugs, as well as those who use and sell them. Boyd examines the UK TV series *Traffik* and the American movie *Traffic* through the lens of race, class, and gender issues. Boyd found that representations of drug use and drug selling are portrayed as being more common and more violent than in real life. Youths, especially females, were often portrayed as victims of drug related crimes, such as drug gang related violence.

Lastly, Lilja (2013) uses categorical-content narrative analysis to examine the construction of youth drug use in Russia. Liljia found that young people were frequently the subject of articles about drug users. There was much panic in the articles about the "loss of a generation" of young people from drugs, or that young people would be "destroyed" by drugs (Lilja 2013, p. 1340). Similar to the other studies, Lilja (2013) suggests that drug use representations in the media are based in fear and sensationalization and not objective facts (Haines-Saah et al., 2014; Bernier, 2011; Faucher, 2009; Manning, 2006; Boyd, 2002). Despite the shifting legal and geographical contexts, illicit drugs are misrepresented all over the globe.

After reviewing the literature, there is a clear gap in the current research. The first gap is that all the literature examined the media before 2007, whereas this study examines more contemporary print news media from 2006 to 2015. Secondly, most of the existing literature is international, and given the

differences in drug policy world-wide, more Canadian research is needed. Finally, existing research lacks a focus on youth in the context of illegal drugs and the media. Few studies examining illicit drug representation in the media also discussed the representation of youth. Moreover, studies focused specifically on the representation of youth and illegal drugs in the media did not emerge in the literature searches. This leaves an obvious gap in research about the representation of youth and illicit drugs in the Canadian media.

Theoretical Foundations

This research draws on Manning's (2006) symbolic framing theory, which is premised on the notion that depictions of illicit drugs are constructed in the media through symbolic meanings and representations (Haines-Saah et al., 2014; Manning, 2006). These meanings and representations are based in pre-existing social and historical inequalities. Therefore, drugs and their users are represented in symbolic framework "based on the social location of it's users" (Haines-Saah et al, 2014, p. 50). Accordingly, symbolic framing relates to this study as youth are a marginalized and vulnerable group who are often depicted negatively in the media (Haines-Saah et al., 2014; Lilja, 2013; Bernier, 2011; Faucher, 2009; Manning, 2006; Boyd, 2002). The negative representation by the media in terms of youth crime and illicit drugs may be explained by the social location of youth as a historically vulnerable and marginalized group (Offerdahl, Evangelides, and Powers, 2014).

Manning (2006) reviewed literature to discover the main symbolic frames before examining UK media representations. It was upon this literature that he drew his theoretical conclusions about the symbolic frames he would explore. Similarly, this research will focus on the existence of five possible symbolic frames, selected from common themes in the existing literature on youth or illicit drugs in the media (Haines-Saah et al., 2014; Lija, 2013; Bernier, 2011; Faucher, 2009; Manning, 2006; Boyd, 2002). The five frames include: (1) overall tone; (2) violence; (3) involvement with gangs; (4) drug use; and (5) drug dealing.

Below, are the hypotheses and variables explored for each symbolic frame:

1. **Youth and Overall Tone of Framing:** Articles mentioning youth will be more likely to be negative than articles that do not mention youth.

2. **Youth and Violence:** Articles mentioning youth will be more likely to mention violence than articles that do not mention youth.

3. **Youth and Gangs:** Articles mentioning youth will be more likely to mention gang involvement than articles that do not mention youth.

4. **Youth and Illicit Drug Use:** Articles mentioning youth will be more likely to mention illicit drug use than articles that do not mention youth.

5. **Youth and Illicit Drug Dealing:** Articles including youth will be more likely to mention illicit drug dealing than articles which do not mention youth.

Data and Methods

This analysis is a part of an exploratory study probing the representation of illicit drugs in the Canadian print media from the years 2006-2015. In total, 349 online print media articles were randomly selected from 20 local, provincial, and national newspapers. News articles were coded to discern the frequency of common symbolic frames found in the literature. Each variable explores a different symbolic frame, which may represent youth and illicit drugs in the print media.

Randomly Selecting the Newspaper Articles

To ensure that the articles selected for inclusion in this sample were publicly accessible, Google advanced search was used to find each article. Using the advanced search tools, keyword searches for "drug" and "drugs" were conducted only on the website of specific newspapers that were randomly selected. A random number generator (random. org) was used to select each article from the search results. This way, all articles had an equal chance of being selected. After the first article was selected, the same process was repeated to randomly select another article. If the article was in the 2006-2015 time-frame, and met the other search criteria related to illicit drugs, it was included in the final sample. Some prescription drugs and legal drugs may be included in the articles, but only if the use of the prescription drug or legal drug was illegal (such as selling of prescription, or use by a minor). This process was repeated until there were two articles from each year, and from each selected publication.

The types of newspaper articles included in the sample were: opinion pieces, editorials, letters to the editor, and articles reporting local, national, or international news articles. Classifieds or advertisements were omitted from the sample. Table 1 provides a listing of all the newspapers used for the analyses.

Table 1. Newspapers selected online by region and level of coverage.

Newspapers Selected by region*	Local, provincial, or national coverage
National	
The National Post	National
The Globe and Mail	National
Western Canada	
Pincher Creek Echo	Local
Central Canada	
The Community Press	Local
Atlantic Canada	
The Aurora	Local
Northern Canada	
Nunatsiaq Online	Local
National Capital	
Ottawa Sun	Provincial
British Columbia	
Times Columnist	Provincial
Alberta	
Metro Edmonton	Provincial
Saskatchewan	
Leader-Post	Provincial
Manitoba	
Winnipeg Free Press	Provincial
Ontario	
Metro Toronto	Provincial
Quebec	
Montreal Gazette	Provincial
New Brunswick	
The Telegraph & Sackville Tribune	Provincial
Newfoundland	
The Telegram	Provincial
PEI	
The Guardian	Provincial
Nova Scotia	
The Burnside News	Provincial
Northwest Territories	
The Yellowknifer	Provincial
Nunavut	
Nunavut News North	Provincial

*There were no freely available newspapers for Yukon Territory

After the articles were selected, each one was thoroughly read, summarized and coded. Key words or phrases in the article, as well as different types of drugs, were coded and entered as variables in SPSS. For this study, several additional variables were created including youth involvement, overall tone/frame, mention of violence, gender, illicit drug dealing, gang involvement, and illicit drug use. Table 2 provides an overview of the basic frequencies and percentages of the variables used in this paper. This table represents the entire sample.

Next, the variables were examined descriptively by running frequencies and testing several bivariate associations with youth involvement. Using SPSS, cross-tabulations and Chi-Square statistics were calculated and interpreted to discover how the Canadian print media tends to represent youth and illicit drugs.

Table 2. Frequencies and percentages for relevant measures.

Variable	Frequency (n=349)	Percent
Youth Involvement with Drugs		
Yes	57	16.3
No	292	83.7
Tone of Framing		
Positive	15	4.3
Neutral	146	41.8
Negative	188	53.9
Gender		
Female	19	5.4
Male	167	47.9
Other	163	46.7
Violence		
Yes	111	31.8
No	238	68.2
Illicit Drug Use		
Yes	155	44.4
No	194	55.6
Drug Dealing Mentioned		
Yes	247	70.8
No	102	29.2
Gang Involvement		
Yes	94	26.9
No	255	73.1

Independent Variable

Frequencies and percentages for the independent and dependent measures are reported in Table 2. The following provides a descriptive overview of the operationalization of each measure used in the analysis.

Youth Involvement

The variable "youth involvement" was operationalized to measure if youth were involved in the article or not, pertaining to the subject of illicit drug use. Youth involvement was indicated as "Yes" only if the youth in the article were involved directly with drugs, or with a drug user. Articles that did not discuss youth and drugs were categorized as "No". Articles were also included if they expressed fear over youths engaging in drug use, or the article discussed how drug users had harmed or targeted children. In total, 16.3% of the articles mentioned youth, and 83.7% of the articles did not.

Dependent Variables

Tone of Framing

This variable was created to discern if the overall framing of the article was negative, neutral, or positive. To account for researcher bias, justification for each article was recorded. Specifically, if the article used unflattering language to describe the drug use or person using the drug, it was classified as negative. Articles which endorsed punitive measures for drug use were classified as negative. Articles which described the dangers of drugs based on moral panic or moral objection, were classified as negative. Out of 349 articles, 188 were classified as negative, or 53.9%.

Articles classified as neutral were those that reported the information and did not present a negative or positive bias to the subject matter. Those which presented two sides to a drug issue were classified as neutral. Also, articles which discussed drug harms based on scientific fact and evidence, were classified as neutral. Of all the articles, 146 out of 349 were neutral, or 41.8% of the articles.

Articles which portrayed illicit drugs or illicit drug use in a positive or light-hearted manner, were classified

as positive. Articles which supported legalization or harm reduction models, were classified as positive. For all articles, only 15 out of 349 were classified as positive, representing 4.3% percent of the articles.

Gender

The variable for gender was classified by the gender of the person who is portrayed in the article as a drug user or a drug dealer. Gender was not classified by the author of the article. If the person portrayed was female, the article was classified as "female", and if the person portrayed was male, they were classified as "male". If drug users or dealers of both genders were mentioned, or if gender was not specific or not applicable, it was classified as "other". Exclusively, females were underrepresented covering only 5.4% of the articles, whereas 47.9% of the articles discussed males, and 46.7% of the articles discussed "other".

Violence

The violence variable was created to discern if the article mentions violence in any way. Articles including reports of suicide, murder, shootings, assaults, sexual assaults, or those that expressed fear over any type of violence or danger were classified as "yes". Articles that did not discuss violence or any fear of violence were classified as "no". In total, 68.2% or 238 of the articles did not mention violence. The remaining 31.8% or 111 of the articles, mentioned violence or the fear of violence.

Illicit Drug Use

This variable measured if illicit drug use was mentioned or discussed in the article. An article was classified as "yes" if drug use was discussed explicitly, if the article discussed legalizing recreational drug use, if the article discussed someone being arrested and charged with possession, or if the article discusses the drug use of any person. Some articles were classified as both drug use and drug dealing, if both were present. If someone was charged with simple possession of drugs, this was classified as drug use. Articles which discussed the public intoxication of someone on illicit drugs was also classified as drug use. There were 155 articles (44.4%) that referred to drug use, whereas 194 articles (55.6%) did not.

Illicit Drug Dealing

This variable measures if the article refers to drug dealing or trafficking. An article was categorized as referring to drug dealing if: the article discusses police arresting and charging people for drug trafficking; police bust of a marijuana grow operation or home drug lab; fear or worry expressed about drug trafficking; and anything else where drug dealing and trafficking is mentioned. Most articles, 70.8% referred to drug dealing, and 29.2% of articles did not refer to drug dealing.

Gang Involvement

The variable for gang involvement measures if gangs are referred to in an article. Articles in which gangs are discussed were indicated as "yes", and articles in which gangs were not discussed were indicated as "no". For the purposes of this study, a specific definition of gangs was not used, but rather, if the article used the word "gang" or mentioned gangs in anyway (such as by the name of a gang like Hell's Angels), it was included in the "yes" category. Approximately 73%, or 255 articles, did not refer to gang involvement.

Results

The results from the cross-tabulations are presented in Table 3, while the bivariate associations are reported in Table 4. Both tables appear at the end of the results section.

Youth and Tone of Framing

The Chi-Square tabulations reveal a statistically significant correlation between youth involvement and tone of framing, at p=0.005. When youth are mentioned, the tone of the articles was overwhelmingly negative. In total, 70.2% of the articles mentioning youth were negative. Only 7% of the articles that mentioned youth were positive, and the remaining 22.8% of the articles were neutral in tone. In comparison, 50.7% of the articles that did not mention youth were negative in tone. To further contextualize these results, the frequency tables for tone revealed that only 53.9% of the entire sample was negative in tone, 41.8% of the sample was neutral in tone, and 4.3% of the sample was positive (refer to Table 2 for results for the entire sample). Therefore, my hypothesis was proven

correct: articles mentioning youth in Canadian print media are more likely to utilize a negative tone.

Youth and Gender

Youth involvement with drugs was also statistically significant, with an alpha value of p=0.001. Out of articles that mentioned youth, 14% discussed females, 31.6% discussed males, and the majority, 54.4%, fell into the "other" category. In articles that did not discuss youth, only 3.8% of the articles discussed females, 51% discussed males, and 45.2% fell into "other". This indicates that female representation is slightly higher for articles which discussed youth. The "other" category is higher for youth articles, whereas the male category is lower for the youth articles than non-youth articles. Articles which mentioned "other" gender were the most likely to be represented in articles about youth. This finding may be because there are restrictions in Canadian media about reporting on youth crimes, so any identifying information, such as gender, is usually supressed or presented in a way that readers cannot easily identify youth involved in crime.

Youth and Violence

The association between youth involvement and violence is not statistically significant (p=0.372). When youth were mentioned in the story, only 36.8% of the articles also mentioned violence. Out of the articles that did not refer to youth, 30.8% mentioned violence. This is slightly higher than the presence of violence in all the articles overall, which was at 31.8%. This indicates that there is a slight increase in articles which mention both youth and violence. However, this difference did not prove to be statistically significant. My hypothesis was proven incorrect, violence was not more likely to be portrayed with youth involvement, despite a slight increase in the cross-tabulation percentages.

Youth and Drug Use

Chi-Square tabulations for youth involvement and drug use were statistically significant at p=0.000. In total, 77.2% of articles involving youth also discuss drug use. Only 38% of the articles which do not discuss youth, mention drug use. Additionally, the frequency for all articles which discussed drug use for the entire sample was 44.4 %. This indicates that

articles which discuss youth were much more likely to discuss drug use than articles that did not discuss youth. My hypothesis was correct, as drug use is more likely to be discussed when youth are mentioned in the article.

Youth and Drug Dealing

When interpreting the Chi-Square tabulations, the relationship between youth involvement with drugs and drug dealing were statistically significant at p=0.000. In total, 50.9% of the articles mentioning youth also mentioned drug dealing, whereas 49.1% of the articles discussing youth did not. Comparatively, 74.7% of the articles that do not discuss youth mentioned drug dealing, with only 25.3% of the articles not discussing youth or drug dealing. The entire sample considered, 70.8% of the articles mentioned drug dealing. In this context, articles which discuss youth, are less likely to mention drug dealing. My hypothesis was incorrect, articles that did *not* mention youth appear to be more likely to mention drug dealing, than articles that involve youth.

Youth and Gangs

In this sample, there is no statistically significant association between youth involvement and gang involvement (p=0.155). In 80.7% of the articles which included youth, gangs were not mentioned. Conversely, 19.3% of the articles mentioning youth also mentioned gangs. Gangs were mentioned less frequently alongside youth than the results for gang involvement for all articles in the sample, where 73.1% of articles did not mention gangs. My hypothesis was not correct, as the cross-tabulations suggest, youth involvement is less likely to be framed with gang involvement; moreover, the association is not significant statistically.

Table 3. Descriptive frequencies and percentages for different measures by youth involvement in media representations of illegal drugs.

Variable	Frequency (n=349)		Percentage	
	Youth (Y)	Youth (N)	Youth (Y)	Youth (N)
Tone of Framing				
Positive	4	11	7%	3.8%
Neutral	13	133	22.8%	45.5%
Negative	40	148	70.2%	50.7%
Gender				
Female	8	11	14%	3.8%
Male	18	149	31.6%	51%
Other	31	132	54.4%	45.2%
Violence Mentioned				
Yes	21	90	36.8%	30.8%
No	36	202	63.2%	69.2%
Illicit Drug Use				
Yes	44	111	77.2%	38%
No	13	181	22.8%	62%
Drug Dealing Mentioned				
Yes	29	218	50.9%	74.7%
No	28	74	49.1%	25.3%
Gang Involvement				
Yes	11	83	19.3%	28.4%
No	46	209	80.7%	71.6%

Table 4. Bivariate statistics for youth involvement in media representations of drugs in the media.

	Pearson Chi-Square	Degrees of freedom	P-value/Sig.
Youth and tone	10.431	2	.005*
Youth and gender	13.866	2	.001*
Youth and violence	.797	1	.372
Youth and drug use	29.653	1	.000*
Youth and drug dealing	13.038	1	.000*
Youth and gang involved	2.018	1	.155
*Significant at p<0.05			

Discussion

The most significant finding is that youth in news articles concerning illicit drugs are more likely to be framed in a negative tone. The overall negative tone confirms the work of Haines-Saah et al. (2014), Lilja (2013), Faucher (2009), Manning (2006), and Boyd (2002). This is significant in the context of this study, as it suggests the overall symbolic frame for articles discussing youth is negative, which may impact the public's perception of youth and drugs more generally. Yet, youth articles are not as serious in terms of violence, drug dealing, and gang involvement.

As explained by symbolic framing theory, this may be due to the vulnerable and low social location of youth in society (Haines-Saah et al., 2014; Manning, 2006). Since youth are a vulnerable and marginalized population, the media creates more negativity surrounding their drug use and drug activity, as opposed to the rest of the population.

Additionally, articles which mentioned youth were more likely to discuss drug use, as opposed to drug dealing, which may be arguably more serious. Applying symbolic framing theory to this finding, it could be suggested that another symbolic frame in regards to youth and illegal drugs is that of drug use. The drug dealing variable provided an interesting contrast to the drug use variable. Youth are not more likely to be mentioned with drug dealing. In fact, youth were more likely *not* to be discussed in the context of drug dealing. This is illuminating, because it demonstrates that youth may be more likely to be represented as using drugs, but not with dealing illicit drugs.

The extent to which youth drug use was framed as problematic is difficult to tell, based on the quantitative nature of this project. However, when examining the study's results, discussions of youth were more likely to utilize the symbolic frames of both drug use and negative framing. Together, these results suggest that there may be a negative frame surrounding youth drug use specifically. The symbolic frame of negative youth drug use was also mirrored in much of the literature on this topic (Haines-Saah et al., 2014; Lija, 2013; Manning, 2006; Boyd, 2002). More qualitative analysis is needed to discover the exact nature of negative representations of youth and drug use.

The results testing the relationship between gangs and youth also adds an interesting dimension to the representation of youth and illicit drugs. While youth are symbolically framed negatively overall, they are not framed in terms of more serious forms of drug issues. Youth articles were less likely to be represented alongside gang involvement, as compared to articles which did not mention youth. Additionally, the correlation between youth and violence was not significant. These representations are more accurate portrayals of youth, as most youths who are involved in drug use do not become involved with drug dealing, gangs and violence (Bennetto and Todd, 1997).

The fact that youth were portrayed mostly as drug users and were less likely to be portrayed with gangs, violence, or drug dealing, further points to drug use as a major symbolic frame for youth in this study. From these findings, it appears youth are portrayed more as drug users, and not as those involved in the more serious or violent crimes that are often associated with illicit drugs. In this way, the results suggest that youth

are being symbolically framed as illicit drug users. This is somewhat contradictory to the vast majority of the literature, which demonstrated that youth drug use was problematized more than non-youths due to their marginalized social location (Haines-Saah et al., 2014; Lija, 2013; Bernier, 2011; Faucher, 2009; Manning, 2006; Boyd, 2002). Despite my initial hypotheses being incorrect, realistic framing may be promising for the Canadian media, suggesting that representations are becoming more realistic and less problematic. Qualitative work is needed to further explore the context behind symbolic framing for these initial findings.

The relationship between gender and youth proved to be statistically significant, with articles about youth more likely to discuss females than articles not involving youth, while articles discussing males were seemingly more common for non-youth involved articles. The "other" category proved to be the most relevant for understanding the differences between youth and non-youth articles. The finding that females were more represented and males less represented may be in part explained by Boyd (2002) and Haines-Saah (2014), who found that girls were more likely to be discussed as victims of the war on drugs. The "other" category is difficult to disentangle, as there may have been females and males in these articles. Moreover, it may be a reflection of media restrictions surrounding articles involving youth and crime.

Despite the relationship between youth and gender being statistically significant, there was not an overwhelming large disparity when comparing female representations between articles mentioning youth and articles that do not explicitly mention females. The extent to which the representation of girls was problematic or victimized is unknown, and could be further explored in a qualitative analysis of this data. Since so much of this variable is unexplored, gender is not named as a symbolic frame in the study.

In conclusion, the three most significant symbolic frames demonstrated in this study were: (1) a negative tone which framed the majority of youth articles; (2) youth are symbolically framed as drug users in Canadian print media; and lastly, (3) the symbolic framing of youth was more realistic as compared to other literature, as youth involvement was not associated with violence, gangs, and drug dealing.

Limitations, Future Directions and Conclusion

Since the articles were coded and operationalized by only one researcher, personal bias may affect the classification of the articles. This may influence the determination of tone, and possibly the other variables as well. Attempts were made to limit this bias by justifying the classification for the articles and by using criteria to classify their tone, as outlined in previous sections.

An additional limitation is that only 16.9% of the sample discussed youth drug involvement. This may have been improved by selecting a sample which dealt exclusively with youth. However, by including both articles which do and do not discuss youth, this paper has the advantage of being able to compare the representation of both groups.

In the context of this study specifically, the inclusion of qualitative content analysis to further examine frames would help to support the quantitative results. Although quantitative analysis is helpful for identifying general frequencies and patterns behind the representations. A qualitative analysis may further illuminate the symbolic frames that were discussed in this article.

This study adds to the literature of youth representations in the Canadian print media. As mentioned previously, there is limited existing literature discussing the media's representation of youth and illicit drugs, in both the international and Canadian contexts. This paper attempts to fill a portion of this gap and begin the conversation about media representations of youth and illicit drugs. More contextual analyses, both quantitative and qualitative, are needed to better understand the relationship between the representation of youths and illicit drugs in the print media. Deconstructing the representation of youth in terms of illicit drugs is important in understanding how the consumers of media may, in turn, view youth.

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