

What Do Drawings Reveal About People's Attitudes Toward Sex offenders?

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Public attitudes toward sex offenders are shaped by sociocultural narratives and affective responses that significantly influence policy and risk management practices yet remain inadequately understood at the level of implicit cognition and symbolic representation. Traditional survey methodologies, while effective for assessing explicit attitudes, are limited in accessing non-verbal, tacit dimensions of public perception. To address this gap, the present study employed an exploratory descriptive design utilizing the iSquare visual methodology with a sample of 50 adults in Southeast Queensland, Australia. Participants were instructed to draw a "sex offender," and their drawings were analysed through a hybrid thematic coding framework integrating inductive and deductive approaches. Results indicated that 78% of participants depicted male offenders, commonly invoking stereotypes such as "stranger danger" and advanced age. Notably, 33% included child victims despite no such prompt, reflecting a pronounced public conflation of sex offending with child victimization. Participants also reported intense negative emotions, particularly anger and disgust which correlated with endorsement of punitive policy responses. These findings highlight the value of visual methodologies as a complementary approach to conventional surveys, offering insight into implicit stereotypes, emotional underpinnings, and representational biases that may otherwise remain inaccessible. Future research should employ more diverse and targeted sampling strategies, including cross-cultural comparisons and key stakeholder groups such as policymakers to further clarify the complexities of public attitudes toward distinct categories of sexual offending.

Keywords: sex offenders, visual methodology, public attitude, emotions, iSquare

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1 Introduction

Public attitudes toward sex offenders are among the most punitive in criminal justice, driven by fear, disgust, and moral outrage (Harper, 2019; Olver & Barlow, 2010). These emotions sustain entrenched stereotypes of the predatory stranger, the irredeemable offender, the threat to children despite evidence of offender heterogeneity (Hanson et al., 2014; Rogers & Ferguson, 2011). Such misperceptions fuel demands for punitive policies registries, travel bans, mandatory sentencing justified through appeals to safety and morality (Díez-Ripollés, 2019; Sedlack, 2022). Yet the emotional, symbolic, and implicit foundations of these attitudes remain underexamined.

Traditional surveys (CATSO, ATTSO, PSO; Church et al., 2008; Harper & Hogue, 2014; Wnuk et al., 2006) capture explicit judgments but struggle to access unconscious biases, tacit imagery, or socially desirable masking, especially on morally charged topics (Guillemin & Drew, 2010; Pain, 2012). Visual methods offer a corrective: drawings externalize subconscious associations, emotional valences, and cultural

schemas (Gauntlett, 2007; Lyon, 2020; Mitchell et al., 2011; Marion & Twede, 2020). While interpretive challenges exist (Harrison, 2002; Sturdy, 2003), multimodal integration enhances rigor (Angell et al., 2015).

This study employs the iSquare method developed to elicit spontaneous, multimodal representations of abstract concepts (Hartel et al., 2018) asking participants to draw a sex offender and reflect briefly on their image. The approach reveals implicit cognitive-affective frameworks often inaccessible to verbal self-report. Public attitudes are also shaped by pervasive misinformation: inaccurate beliefs about crime prevalence and offender profiles intensify stigma, particularly toward child sex offenders (Bohm & Vogel, 2004; Davis & Dossetor, 2010; Indermaur et al., 2012; Kurus, 2014; Long, 2022; Lynch, 2002; Marsh et al., 2019; Roberts et al., 2012; Robinson, 2019;). Correcting these misconceptions is vital for evidence-based policy and public trust.

This paper reports Phase 2 of a multi-phase Australian study. Following a discourse analysis of parliamentary rhetoric amplifying fear and condemnation (Phase 1), it uses iSquares to explore public visual-narrative constructions of "the sex offender." Findings directly informed a national survey (Phase 3), enabling triangulation of visual, discursive, and quantitative

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data. Together, these phases advance understanding of the symbolic roots of penal attitudes and their implications for reform grounded in evidence, not emotion.

2 Visual Methodologies

Drawing has emerged as a powerful, though underutilized, tool in social science research capable of capturing emotions, trauma, identity, and complex cognition often inaccessible through verbal means (Guillemin, 2004; Leavy, 2018; McNiff, 2018; Mitchell, 2008; Mitchell et al., 2011). Increasingly employed in participatory and multimodal designs, it fosters engagement, enriches data, and complements other methods (Kortegast et al., 2019; Lyon, 2020; Mitchell et al., 2017; Rose, 2016; Sewell, 2011). It reveals implicit knowledge, observational reasoning, and contextual values (Adler, 1982; Lyon, 2020; Weber & Mitchell, 1996), mediated through embodied, sensory, and cognitive processes (Bullen et al., 2017; Maclagan, 2018).

Yet drawing as a method faces critique. It presumes emotions can be fully rendered visually a contested claim (Sturdy, 2003). While some assert children's drawings reveal trauma (Cantlay, 1996; Hope, 2008; Pope et al., 2018), others highlight insufficient empirical validation (Guillemin & Drew, 2010; Marion & Twede, 2020; Pain, 2012; Wakefield & Underwager, 1998). Social and contextual influences on production are often overlooked, cautioning against naïve interpretations as direct "windows" into inner states (Harrison, 2002). To mitigate this, integrating drawing with writing enhances validity, supports cognitive processing, and strengthens child-centred, multimodal communication (Angell et al., 2015).

Despite limitations, evidence affirms that drawings offer unique access to layered meanings enabling participants to express complex attitudes and emotions with minimal researcher interference or survey constraints (Katz et al., 2011; Marion & Twede, 2020).

2.1 iSquare Research Program

The iSquare Research Program was developed as an innovative approach to defining information within the field of information science. Central to the program are iSquares visual images paired with accompanying textual statements, where analysis focuses on the interplay between visual and verbal elements (Hartel et al., 2018). This method aims to explore how information is conceptualized, investigate variations in visual representations, and examine the relationship between visual and textual communication of information (Hartel et al., 2018, 2020). In its initial phase,

308 graduate students enrolled in the Master of Information program at the University of Toronto contributed by creating drawings that illustrated their personal conceptualizations of information (Hartel et al., 2018, 2020). The research design incorporated a modified draw-and-write technique, wherein participants in a classroom setting were given a small square of white art paper and a black pen. They were instructed to create a drawing responding to the prompt "What is information?" on one side of the paper, followed by a written response and basic demographic information on the reverse side (Hartel et al., 2018). This activity, encompassing the drawing and written response, was completed within ten minutes during regular classroom sessions. The short time frame for completing an iSquare was intentionally designed to encourage spontaneous and instinctive responses from participants. The time constraint reveals a methodological tension in arts-informed research, where the social sciences prioritize rigor and reliability, while the arts component emphasizes innovative methodologies and diverse forms of data representation. The result was a concise yet visually rich "information square" or iSquare data artifact versatile for use across different research paradigms (Hartel et al., 2018, 2020).

2.2 Interpreting Drawings

This research employed a combination of inductive and deductive approaches to analyze participants' drawings. The inductive component allowed themes and patterns to emerge directly from the data without reliance on preconceived categories or theories (Lyon, 2020). This approach facilitated an open exploration of participants' visual representations, enabling the identification of unexpected themes, symbols, and metaphors, including emotional expressions and aspects such as mental health status (Rose, 2016). In parallel, a deductive process was used to organize the data based on pre-existing research and conceptual frameworks. This structured approach ensured that key elements relevant to the study's focus on sex offenders were captured systematically. For instance, initial coding categories were informed by prior literature on public attitudes toward sex offenders and visual methodologies (Mitchell, 2008). These categories were then refined through iterative analysis to incorporate emergent themes identified during the inductive phase.

The combination of inductive and deductive strategies ensured a comprehensive analysis. To address concerns about interpretation validity and potential overinterpretation, the researcher examined both the visual content of drawings and participants' accompanying explanations (Lyon, 2020). Methodological rigor was further enhanced through intercoder reliability, with a secondary researcher independently analysing a subset of the data to reinforce consistency in interpretation.

The methodology for this research was derived from a literature review, which identified two key issues. Firstly, few studies have examined the complexity of the emotional underpinnings that give rise to the attitudes concerning sex offenders. Secondly, visual methodologies are an emerging field in criminology, and no research utilizes drawing techniques to capture attitudes about sex offenders.

3 Research Design

The research into drawing a sex offender utilized a grounded thematic reflexivity approach, which involved an exploration of the perspectives, attitudes, and emotions of participants involved in the study (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Braun et al., 2023). This approach allowed for a comprehensive and alternative understanding of the complexities surrounding the topic of sex offenders. This approach facilitated the identification of key themes and subthemes that emerged directly from the data, highlighting attitudes toward sex offenders. Integrating visual methodology alongside quantitative studies offered a more comprehensive perspective on public attitudes (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Braun et al., 2023).

3.1 Setting, Sampling, and Participants

A total of 50 adults participated in the study, aged between 18 and 77 years ($M = 46.9$, $SD = 16.32$), with the majority identifying as female ($n = 35$) compared to male ($n = 15$). Participants were recruited from around Australia through social networking sites (hereinafter SNS) and email lists. The aim was to increase diversity to enhance the generalizability of findings, although recruitment limitations affected the overall representativeness of the sample.

Given the sensitive nature of the topic, ethical considerations were central to the study design. All participants were aged 18 or older and provided informed consent after being informed that the study involved drawing a sex offender and might cause distress. Participants were not encouraged or expected to disclose any personal experiences of sexual abuse or assault. Participation was voluntary, with individuals free to self-select into the study or withdraw at any time. They were also reminded that they could opt out if they anticipated or experienced distress.

The use of self-selection via SNS likely introduced self-selection bias, whereby individuals with pre-existing interest in or strong opinions about sex offenders were more inclined to participate. This may have resulted in an overrepresentation of those with heightened emotional reactions, such as disgust or anger or ideological views on crime and punishment. Furthermore, the sample lacked sufficient demographic diversity, particularly in terms of age and gender. While ages ranged widely, most participants clustered within a mid-adult range, with limited representation from younger or older adults. The overrepresentation of female participants also limits the ability to generalize findings across genders. These limitations constrain the study's capacity to detect potential variations in attitudes and emotional responses across different demographic groups. Given that research indicates age and gender can influence perceptions of risk, punishment, and rehabilitation (Harper & Hogue, 2014; Rosselli & Jeglic, 2017).

3.2 Instrument

The iSquare instrument consists of a 15cm × 15cm square of heavyweight white art paper a deliberate expansion from the original 11cm format (Hartel et al., 2018) to provide adequate space for both visual expression and the added emotional

Figure 1: iSquare template as provided to participants

reflection component, without compromising methodological consistency or participant burden. On the front, participants are instructed to “draw a sex offender.” The reverse side is pre-ruled and prompts participants to: 1) describe their drawing, 2) identify the primary emotion representing their attitude toward sex offenders, and 3) provide basic demographic information (age, gender). This format leverages drawing as a uniquely affective research tool capable of surfacing emotional, embodied, and often unconscious responses that standardized surveys may overlook (Gauntlett, 2007; Guillemin & Drew, 2010; Pain, 2012). While public attitudes toward sex offenders have been extensively measured via psychometric scales (e.g., Community Attitudes Toward Sex Offenders [CATSO] and Perceptions of Sex Offenders [PSO]; Harper & Hogue, 2014), the application of visual methods, particularly drawing, to explore these attitudes remains underexplored. Figure 1 represents the template provided to participants.

3.3 iSquare Format and Materials

Visual data were generated using the iSquare method, which employs heavy white art paper and a standardized fine black pen to ensure consistency, legibility, and interpretive clarity (Hartel et al., 2018). The choice of monochrome medium minimized variability in line quality and avoided the interpretive ambiguities and logistical constraints associated with color including cost, completion time, and lack of universal theory for colour interpretation (Bowden et al., 2015; Weber & Mitchell, 1996).

Participants received minimal instruction: “Draw a sex offender and describe your drawing on the reverse side” (Hartel et al., 2018). This intentionally open-ended prompt avoids leading responses, encouraging authentic, self-generated visual and textual expressions grounded in personal knowledge and affect (Bogner & Landrock, 2016). The minimalist design aligns with principles of unobtrusive data collection, prioritizing spontaneous, independent reflection particularly suited to adult participants capable of abstract conceptualization (Hartel et al., 2018, 2020). Completed iSquares were submitted anonymously to preserve confidentiality and promote candour, yielding multimodal data that capture complex attitudes with minimal researcher interference.

3.4 Validity and Reliability

Measures were taken to eliminate risks to validity and reliability, including intercoder reliability and a systematic qualitative coding analysis. This analysis involved identifying themes, concepts, and patterns within the drawings (Budzise-Weaver, 2016). A reflexive thematic analysis was used,

characterized by an inductive approach that allowed for the organic development of codes and themes from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This flexible framework enabled iterative modifications to the coding process, allowing for adjustments, removals, and additions as the analysis progressed, ensuring that the coding remained responsive to evolving insights from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2023).

To enhance the analysis's credibility, initial themes underwent review and refinement (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Dawadi, 2020). Collated data extracts within each category were assessed for consistent patterns. Intercoder reliability was established, with another researcher coding 10% of the data independently. The coders' agreement was measured using Cohen's Kappa, resulting in a score of 0.74. This score indicated a strong agreement beyond chance for multiple observers. It assessed the categorical data consistency while accounting for chance agreement (McHugh, 2012; Warrens, 2015).

3.5 Thematic Analysis Process

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns of meaning within participants' drawings and accompanying narratives (Budzise-Weaver, 2016). Guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, the process began with data familiarization through repeated reading and initial notetaking. Systematic coding followed, with data segments labelled and often linked to multiple codes to reflect thematic complexity. Reflective memos ensured analytical transparency. Codes were clustered into preliminary themes, supported by illustrative extracts and visual mapping tools. Themes underwent iterative refinement, including intercoder reliability checks (*Cohen's* $\kappa = 0.74$), confirming substantial agreement beyond chance. Continuous supervisory consultation and an inductive approach ensured alignment with research aims. NVivo facilitated data organization and synthesis, while a conceptual framework visually mapped thematic relationships in the final report. Reflexivity was central, and researcher assumptions were critically examined to enhance trustworthiness. While expert art interpretation might have enriched analysis, the simplicity of the drawings mitigated this limitation. The resulting six themes offer a grounded, participant-centred understanding of societal attitudes toward sex offenders, supported by methodological rigour and transparency. The six themes were: 1) Gender and appearance (participants depicted sex offenders as male, female, or ambiguous figures with varying appearances that included elements like race); 2) Objects (items such as computers, phones, or sweets appeared, reflecting participants associations with offenders); 3) Victims (many drawings explicitly included a victim within the scene); 4) Environment (settings like houses, schools, or

parks indicated where offenders were imagined to be); 5) Stereotypes (common societal narratives, such as the “stranger danger” trope and perceptions of offenders as irredeemable males, were evident); and 6) Affect (emotional tones varied, ranging from positive to negative or neutral, based on visual and textual cues). These themes collectively highlight the complex ways in which participants conceptualize sex offenders, incorporating diverse visual, social, and emotional elements. Their existence highlights the complexity of public perceptions, shaped by personal associations, cultural narratives, media influence and affective responses.

4 Results

4.1 Age and Physical Appearance

Participants perceived the typical sex offender as older ($M = 46.9$, $SD = 13.31$ years). Commonly described physical traits included poor hygiene, dishevelled appearance, overweight build, and social isolation ($n = 23$). Explicit racial identification was rare, only four participants specified race (Caucasian $n = 2$; Indian $n = 1$; Egyptian $n = 1$), with most drawings omitting racial markers potentially reflecting either deliberate prioritization of other traits or the normalization of whiteness as default, given the predominantly Caucasian sample (Blair, 2019). A minority associated offenders with alcohol use or mental health issues ($n = 6$). Occupational descriptors were sparse ($n = 4$: two teachers, one priest, one “professional”). Notably, two participants depicted mobile phones as symbolic offenders, citing digital anonymity as central to modern offending. Eight participants explicitly rejected stereotypical profiles, asserting that offenders “could look like anyone” emphasizing the danger of visual

profiling and unconscious bias. One submitted a blank page labelled “They are just normal people,” reinforcing the view that offenders lack distinguishing features and may blend seamlessly into society. These responses highlight that sexual offending transcends age, gender, race, class, or occupation with Figure 2 providing an example of a typical image.

4.2 Gender

In the drawing and writing task, ($n = 33$) visually depicted a male figure when asked to draw a sex offender, while a smaller number ($n = 7$) indicated that the offender could be either male or female. Ten participants described the sex offender as potentially being “anyone” or did not assign a gender, with one participant drawing a mobile phone and stating, “I think today this is the main offender, and you can’t see who or what the offender looks like.” This latter response is particularly noteworthy as it signals a shift in how some members of the public conceptualize sexual offending in the digital age, where the offender may be anonymous, mediated through technology, and not easily identifiable by traditional demographic markers such as gender or appearance.

Interestingly, among the ten participants who verbally expressed that a sex offender could be “anyone,” three produced drawings that depicted a male figure but then wrote on the reverse side that the offender could be “anyone.” This visual and verbal dissonance reveals a tension between explicit beliefs and implicit representations, suggesting that while some participants may consciously endorse the idea of offender gender diversity, their visual depictions remain anchored in dominant stereotypes. This contradiction may reflect implicit bias, where deeply ingrained societal narratives about male perpetration, particularly in relation to child victims, continue

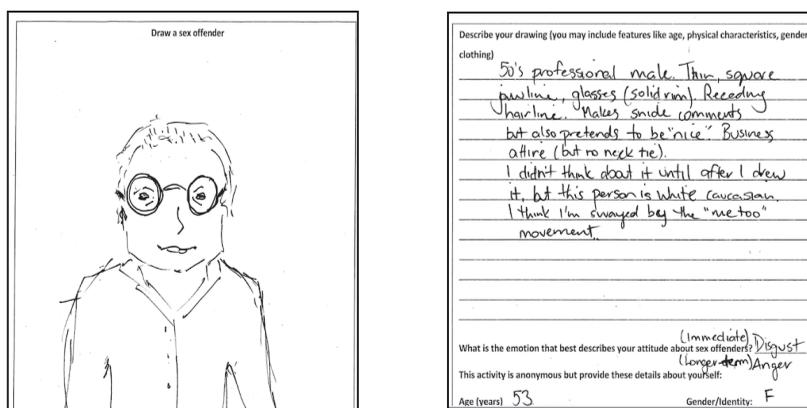


Figure 2: Example of an image focusing on the appearance of a sex offender

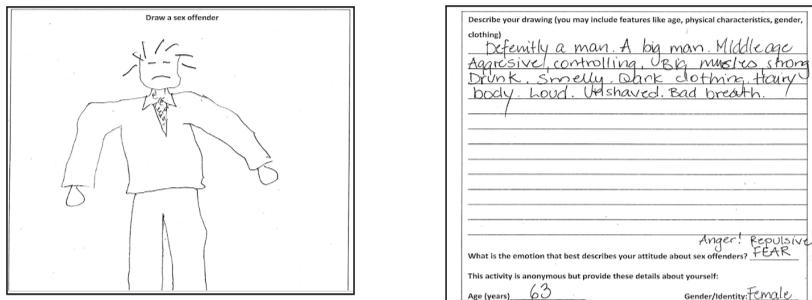


Figure 3: Example of an image focusing on the male representation of a sex offender

to shape visual imagination despite more progressive verbal attitudes. Furthermore, the incidence of stereotypical visual portrayals, despite verbally expressed openness to offender diversity, also validates the use of visual methods as a tool for uncovering implicit biases but also contributes to broader debates in social psychology and criminology regarding the limits of knowledge-based interventions in reshaping deeply held social attitudes.

The overwhelming association of sex offending with male figures aligns with broader research indicating that public perceptions are often shaped by media portrayals and cultural archetypes that frame male sex offenders as predatory, deviant, and dangerous (Harper & Bartels, 2017; King & Roberts, 2017; Sanghara & Wilson, 2006). These findings support the notion that visual methods can surface attitudes and biases that may not be fully articulated through verbal or written responses alone, making them particularly valuable in the study of stigmatized populations and socially sensitive topics. Figure 3 provides a drawing illustrating appearance representation.

4.3 Object Identified

A small group of participants (n=5) depicted objects linked to the offender's methods or actions, revealing how public perceptions are shaped by both stereotypes and emerging realities. One participant drew a lollipop, symbolizing grooming or enticement tactics, reflecting a widely held but oversimplified stereotype of sex offenders as strangers who lure victims with sweets. This misconception, frequently perpetuated by media and popular culture, distorts public understanding of offending behaviors (Borhart & Plumm, 2015; Marsh et al., 2019; Sanghara & Wilson, 2006). Other participants depicted phones (n = 2) and a man behind a computer, highlighting technology's role in facilitating offences such as online grooming and exploitation. This aligns with research documenting the rise of internet-facilitated sexual abuse, which enables offenders to operate in less visible ways (Martellozzo et al., 2010).

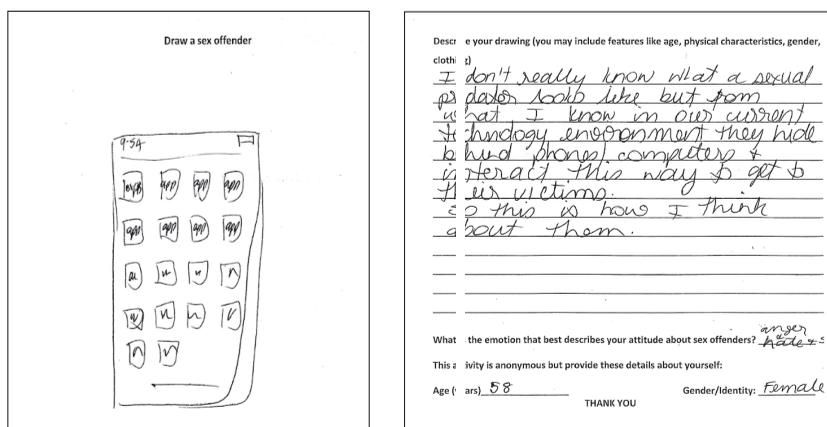


Figure 4: Example of an image focusing on the theme of technology of a sex offender

Another participant's drawing of a puppy may symbolize offenders' use of trust-building strategies to engage victims. Despite the documented increase in technology-facilitated offences, this theme was underrepresented in the drawings, suggesting that public perceptions may lag evolving offence modalities or remain anchored in traditional stereotypes. This gap between public perception and current offending trends reflects broader findings that stereotypes about sex offenders often persist despite empirical evidence to the contrary (Borhart & Plumm, 2015). Figure 4 presents a sample drawing that illustrates an object-related representation.

with a "child sex offender." This emphasis on the presence of a child in the drawings highlights the recognition among participants that sexual offences perpetrated against children hold distinctive societal concerns. Sometimes, victims were not explicitly drawn but rather alluded to. For instance, one participant depicted a male standing in a park with the accompanying comment, "[T]he drawing is of an overweight unkempt male. The person is standing in a park." One participant's drawing depicted a victim within a familial context, and the relationship was indicated. In such cases, the implied presence of a child, though not visually represented,

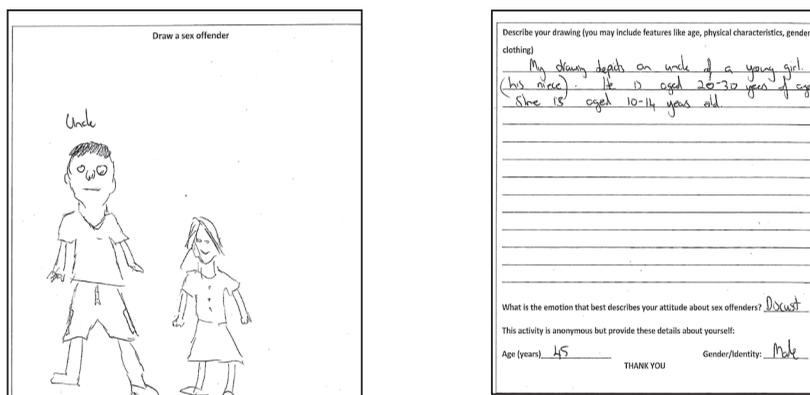


Figure 5: An example of an image depicting the familial representation of a sex offender

4.4 Identification of Victim

In the analysis of the participants' drawings, it is noteworthy that a considerable proportion of the participants ($n = 18$) incorporated a depiction of a victim within their drawings or in the accompanying narratives explaining their drawings. Among these ($n = 15$) were explicitly identified as children or indirectly alluded to as children. These findings indicate that many participants acknowledged victims' presence when representing the sex offender. The emphasis on child victims suggests a heightened awareness of the vulnerability of children within the context of sexual offences. Even in cases where the depictions were implied rather than explicitly illustrated, including these victims highlights the participants' perception and understanding of what constitutes a sex offender.

The iSquare activity did not ask participants to nominate a victim, however, including a victim figure in the drawings emerged as an aspect of understanding participants' perspectives on sex offenders. Including a child or reference to a child or children in the drawings indicated the association

still shaped the narrative and context of offending, highlighting the association between sex offending and child victims is in public perception. Figure 5 presents a sample drawing that illustrates victim relationships.

4.5 Environment

In analyzing the participants' drawings ($n = 13$), participants nominated specific environments or locations associated with the sex offender. The selected locations included the street ($n = 2$), a beach ($n = 1$), schools ($n = 2$), churches ($n = 2$), workplaces (with the explanation that certain professions attract sex offenders due to access) ($n = 2$), parks ($n = 2$), and familial settings i.e., home ($n = 2$). The depicted environments reflect the participants' perceptions of where sex offences may occur. Interestingly, only two of these nominated locations align with statistical evidence, indicating that sex offenders are likelier to be a family member, or someone known to the victim and occur in the home environment, with one Australian survey suggesting that 68% of sexual assaults occur in residential locations and often the home of the victim (Australian Bureau of Statistics,

2017). Including these specific environments suggests that participants were aware of the potential risks associated with

offences committed by individuals within close relationships or familiar settings. The range of nominated environments in the participants' drawings highlights the diverse locations where sex offences may take place. Figure 6 provides an example of the environment.

Describe your drawing (you may include features like age, physical characteristics, gender, clothing)

Men of Death - Male Gender
 Preying on Young Vulnerable People
 Who think they are doing the right
 thing.

What is the emotion that best describes your attitude about sex offenders? Angry

This activity is anonymous but provide these details about yourself:
 Age (years) 50 Gender/Identity: M

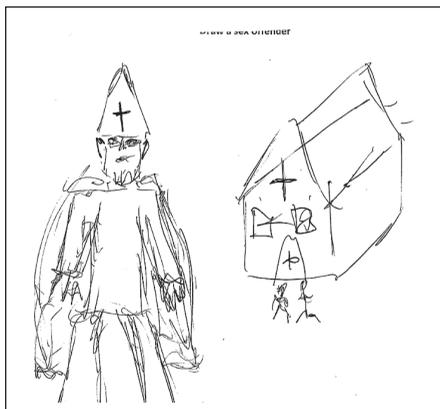
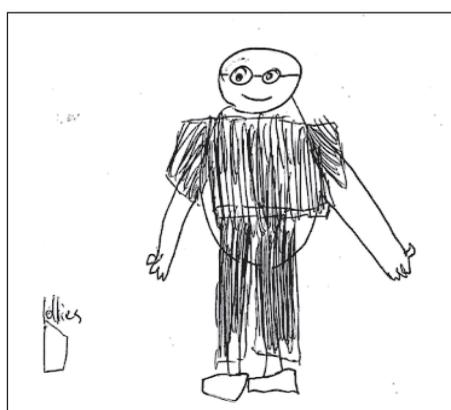


Figure 6: Example of an image-focusing environment or location of the offence

4.6 Stereotypical Aspects

In analysing the participants' drawings ($n = 20$), participants nominated stereotypical aspects of a sex offender. Some participants used multiple stereotypical elements in drawings and narratives, like stranger danger and older males. The stereotypical features included stranger danger ($n = 7$), sex addict ($n = 1$), socially awkward ($n = 3$), learned from parents ($n = 1$), older male (over 50) ($n = 8$), and use of a puppy or lollies ($n = 2$). Public attitudes toward sex offenders are frequently influenced by stereotypes (Borhart & Plumm, 2015; Sanghara & Wilson, 2006). These stereotypes often involve viewing sex offenders as strangers to their victims or characterizing them as "dirty old men" and/or "loners" (Borhart & Plumm, 2015). In this research, the stereotype of the "dirty old man" and "loner" characteristics persisted. Notably, 38% of participants associated sex offenders with older individuals, and 14% attributed these traits to loners or socially withdrawn people. These stereotypes can be inaccurate and overgeneralized, but they can also resist new information (Borhart & Plumm, 2015). Public attitudes towards sex offenders can be more negative than attitudes towards other criminals; however, the complexity of public attitudes towards sex offenders depends on the type of questions asked and the amount of information provided to respondents. For example, when people are given details and information about a specific offence, attitudes tend to vary is important to measure public attitudes towards sex offenders to gauge how accurately these individuals are perceived and how these attitudes can influence



Describe your drawing (you may include features like age, physical characteristics, gender, clothing)

Short stocky male, glasses, middle age
 short sleeve shirt, 5 quarter pants.

What is the emotion that best describes your attitude about sex offenders? disgust

This activity is anonymous but provide these details about yourself:
 Age (years) 35 Gender/Identity: Male

THANK YOU

Figure 7: An example of the use of stereotypical objects like lollies to attract a child

personal reactions, policies, and legislative decision-making (King & Roberts, 2017). Figure 7 refers to the stereotypical use of confectionary as an example.

4.7 Affect

The literature on emotions and affect broadly encompasses emotions, moods, and feelings (Berkowitz, 1999). Emotions contain the entire spectrum of physiological, action impulses, and behavioural aspects (Berkowitz, 1999; Power & Dalgleish, 2007). Affect-as-information is an approach that has received contributions and refinements from multiple researchers, making it a robust and adaptable explanatory framework for various phenomena, including the depiction of sex offenders (Gasper & Garvin, 2001; Wang et al., 2020). Its foundation lies in the principle that the subjective experience of emotions influences the cognitive effects of affective states (Gasper & Garvin, 2001; Wang et al., 2020). This perspective views emotional experiences as conveying important information that guides judgment, decision-making, and information processing. Additionally, the emotional experiences of public attitudes, including their emotions, moods, and feelings, play a crucial role in shaping their perceptions and attitudes toward sex offenders. Their emotional experiences can impact their judgment, decision-making, and overall information processing related to understanding and interacting with individuals labelled as sex offenders (Lowe & Willis, 2020).

Drawings and narratives were coded as “negative,” “neutral,” or “positive” based on the words used to describe them. Among the analysed drawings, only ($n = 1$) provided a positive description, while most ($n = 27$) were coded as neutral, devoid of emotive words with no positive or negative connotations. However, a subset of participants ($n = 22$) provided “negative” comments, including expressions that portrayed a dehumanizing perspective towards individuals labelled as “sex offenders.” Such dehumanization is significant in public perception and can affect social stigma, and reintegration (Harper & Harris, 2017; Quinn et al., 2004). This highlights the need for interventions addressing both knowledge gaps and emotional barriers to promote informed discussion and better risk management strategies.

4.8 Emotion

On the reverse side of the iSquare, participants ($n = 50$) were asked to nominate the emotion that best reflected their attitude toward sex offenders. The responses were dominated by disgust ($n = 19$) and anger ($n = 18$), which together accounted for 74% of all emotional nominations. Other emotions were infrequently selected: rage ($n = 1$), sadness ($n = 1$), and sickened ($n = 2$). This distribution

indicates a pronounced convergence of public sentiment around morally charged, negatively valenced affective responses. The overwhelming emphasis on disgust and anger suggests that attitudes toward sex offenders are shaped less by empathy or concern for rehabilitation and more by visceral rejection and moral condemnation. The narrow emotional repertoire expressed in the data underscores the intensity and homogeneity of negative affective framing in public perceptions of sex offending. The full distribution of nominated emotions is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Nominated emotions

Emotion	Number	Percentage
Disgust	19	38
Anger	18	36
Sickened	2	4
Curious	1	2
Depressed	1	2
Dislike	1	2
“Hang them”	1	2
Misunderstood	1	2
Rage	1	2
Sadness	1	2
Terrible	1	2
Uncomfortable	1	2
Hate	1	2
Not stated	1	2

Discrete emotions carry distinct evaluative and behavioral implications. Post-9/11 experiments ($n = 1,000$) showed anger increased support for military retaliation, while fear amplified generalized risk perception illustrating how affect shapes policy (Clore & Huntsinger, 2007). In the context of sex offenders, anger motivates punitive, retributive responses (Carver & Harmon-Jones, 2009; Fischer & Roseman, 2007), while disgust a core finding here drives moral condemnation, avoidance, and resistance to rehabilitation (Giner-Sorolla & Russell, 2019; Stevenson et al., 2015). These emotions, though psychologically potent, often misalign with evidence-based offender management. Policies fuelled by anger or disgust risk overestimating threat, stigmatizing offenders, and endorsing ineffective, harsh measures (Harris & Socia, 2016; Levenson et al., 2007).

Neurocognitively, disgust and anger differ, disgust targets specific objects (Miller, 1997; Oaten et al., 2009), activates the anterior insula and behavioural immune system (Curtis

& Biran, 2001), and elicits revulsion, contagion fears, and avoidance signalled by a universal facial expression (Davey, 2011). Anger, responsive to harm and intentionality, triggers approach-oriented aggression (Dewi & Kyranides, 2022; Fischer & Roseman, 2007). While both respond to moral violations, disgust links to purity breaches, anger to justice violations. Critically, both emotions fuel dehumanization denying offenders full humanity a key mechanism in extreme prejudice (Leyens et al., 2001; de Ruiter, 2023; Lynch, 2002; Ricciardelli & Spencer, 2017; Spencer & Ricciardelli, 2017). Disgust may reduce vengefulness but intensifies social exclusion (Hutcherson & Gross, 2011; Richman et al., 2014), while anger drives punishment and public shaming (Carver & Harmon-Jones, 2009). Public responses are often uniformly punitive, regardless of offence severity shaped by fear, anger, and retributive desire, and reinforced by stereotypes of offenders as inherently violent and predatory (Douard, 2007).

5 Discussion

The aim of this study was to ascertain how members of the Australian public perceive and define a sex offender while also investigating the emotional underpinnings associated with these attitudes and definitions. Enhancing knowledge about attitudes towards sex offenders' aids in identifying optimal approaches for implementing well-received and effective risk management strategies. To achieve this, the study employed both drawings and subsequent narratives using the iSquare methodology. A purposive sampling method was used to recruit 50 adult participants from various SNS, including Facebook, Instagram, and email lists. The analysis revealed that many participants associated sex offenders with strong negative emotions, particularly disgust and anger. Interestingly, over half of the participants depicted sex offenders with neutral emotional expressions in their drawings and written descriptions, despite verbally expressing feelings of anger and disgust when reflecting on the topic. The representations of sex offenders in both drawings and narratives consistently depicted them as older males with stereotypical elements. This research provides valuable insights into adults' perceptions and emotional responses toward sex offenders, emphasizing the prevalence of negative emotions while highlighting some neutral responses. The findings suggest a separation between neutral depictions and the use of strong emotive words, which is a novel contribution to the research. The consistent portrayal of sex offenders as older males with stereotypical elements indicates the impact of societal perceptions on participants' representations.

This study focused on the definition and perception of sex offenders by the public and the dominant emotions

experienced when considering the topic of sex offenders. The study aimed to explore the public's understanding of and attitudes towards sex offenders, as well as the emotional responses that arise when engaging with this offender type. This study supports both hypotheses: first, that iSquare drawings and accompanying narratives would reflect predominantly negative and stereotypical perceptions of sex offenders with a marked emphasis on child sexual offending, reinforcing the archetype of the predatory stranger. Second, that the data would reveal a prevalence of primary negative emotions particularly fear, disgust, and anger, highlighting the affective underpinnings of public judgment.

Beyond confirming these expectations, the findings highlight significant variation in how the public conceptualizes this heterogeneous group, while simultaneously exposing the emotional scaffolding, which is often visceral and moralized that shapes societal attitudes, policy preferences, and stigmatizing responses. These emotional and representational patterns not only reflect ingrained cultural narratives but also constrain more nuanced, evidence-based understandings of sexual offending.

5.1 Negative Perception of Sex Offenders

This study corroborates extensive literature documenting pervasive negative public attitudes toward sex offenders (Gidycz et al., 2008; Giner-Sorolla & Russell, 2013; Olver & Barlow, 2010; Rosselli & Jeglic, 2017; Willis et al., 2010). iSquare data revealed predominantly negative, stereotypical portrayals, overwhelmingly focused on child sexual abuse, neglecting offence diversity. Public perceptions are shaped by gender, personal experience, media, and stigma (Church et al., 2008; Fitzke, 2009). Though this study did not investigate causes of negativity, prior work identifies key drivers; limited knowledge correlates with harsher views, while education can foster more positive attitudes (Kernsmith et al., 2009; Rosselli & Jeglic, 2017). Conservative ideologies intensify negativity and moderate the knowledge-attitude link (Rosselli & Jeglic, 2017). Media stereotypes amplify hostility, whereas exposure to specific offence details can mitigate it (Biteus & Tuiskunen, 2018). Severity also matters, rape elicits stronger negativity than harassment, and misconceptions, especially about recidivism and rehabilitation fuel punitive sentiment despite evidence questioning efficacy (Biteus & Tuiskunen, 2018; Rosselli & Jeglic, 2017).

Despite intervention efforts, negative stereotypes remain entrenched. Legislative change requires confronting the dominant and inaccurate image of the "typical" offender as a predatory stranger targeting children. Humanizing offenders through counter-stereotypical exemplars can reduce

dehumanization and shift attitudes (Harper & Bartels, 2017; Harper & Harris, 2017). Ultimately, replacing reactive stigma with evidence-based discourse may foster more constructive societal and policy responses.

5.2 Primary Emotions Towards Sex Offenders

The iSquare data revealed disgust and anger as the dominant emotional responses toward sex offenders, even when accompanying narratives were neutral, suggesting deep-seated affective reactions (Giner-Sorolla & Russell, 2013, 2019). This aligns with prior research identifying these emotions as central to public perceptions of sexual offending (Hancock, 2019; Kang et al., 2022). Disgust, however, is not monolithic. Royzman et al. (2014) argue it may comprise distinct subtypes, such as core (physical contaminants) and moral (ethical violations) reflecting separate psychological mechanisms. Their work challenges the notion of disgust as a unitary emotion, though it does not delineate its specific facets. This complexity necessitates further research to disentangle how each subtype shapes attitudes, judgments, and behavior, particularly in moral and political domains. Anger, by contrast, often motivates justice-seeking: it can fuel collective action, enhance moral urgency, and drive support for policy reform (Lerner et al., 2013). Disgust, conversely, tends to promote avoidance and social exclusion. The prevalence of both emotions in participants' drawings may thus reflect not only personal affect but broader societal stigmatization with implications for how emotion influences legal and public responses, both rationally and irrationally.

5.3 Child Victims

Although participants were not asked to include victims in their iSquare drawings, ($n = 18$) depicted them, predominantly as children and often portrayed as strangers. This visual tendency reflects and reproduces the pervasive narrative of the predatory "stranger danger" offender, which disproportionately associates sex offending with crimes against unfamiliar minors. Such representations align with dominant media and legal discourses that frame child sexual abuse, particularly by unknown perpetrators, as the archetypal sex crime, reinforcing its perceived severity and moral abhorrence (Shackley et al., 2014; Snyder, 2000). The frequent inclusion of child victims, despite no prompting, highlights how public imagination is shaped by stereotypical schemas that marginalize the more common, yet less visible, realities of intrafamilial or acquaintance offending (Redlich, 2001; Ringle, 1997). These findings suggest that public perceptions are not neutral reflections of empirical patterns but are instead structured by deeply embedded moral and symbolic frameworks that elevate certain victim-

offender configurations, particularly those involving children and strangers, within the collective consciousness. This selective visibility has significant implications for policy, risk assessment, and support for adult and adolescent victims, whose experiences remain underrepresented in both public discourse and legal response.

5.4 Technology and the Environment

The limited depiction of objects and technology in participants' drawings indicates that public awareness of the role technology plays in contemporary sex offending may be insufficient or incomplete. Despite the significant use of digital platforms in grooming and abuse, these tools are not prominently reflected in the visual representations, signalling a gap between the realities of offending behaviors and how they are commonly perceived (Ali et al., 2023). This disconnect may have important implications for prevention and education efforts, as overlooking the technological aspects of offending could lead to misunderstandings about how such crimes occur and hinder the development of effective interventions.

In contrast, the spontaneous inclusion of various environments, such as schools, parks, and churches, without explicit instruction reveals that participants naturally associate sex offenders with a broad array of familiar, everyday settings. However, this focus on public or unfamiliar spaces may contribute to the misrepresentation or under recognition of familial or acquaintance abuse, which often occurs in private settings and is less visible in public discourse despite its prevalence (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). This skewed perception can lead to a lack of awareness and inadequate attention to the risks posed by offenders known to the victims. Granting participants the freedom to express their ideas openly allows for the emergence of these diverse contextual associations, which offers a more comprehensive understanding of the social spaces linked to offending in the public imagination. Consequently, these findings emphasize the value of research designs that encourage open-ended responses, as they can capture a richer and more complete picture of how complex social issues are conceptualized by the public.

5.5 Stereotypical Sex Offenders

The iSquare drawings frequently depicted sex offenders as older males even among participants who verbally acknowledged offender diversity revealing a dissonance between explicit beliefs and implicit visual stereotypes. This suggests entrenched gendered assumptions, where cultural narratives override conscious recognition of heterogeneity (Barlow & Lynes, 2015). The persistent "stranger danger" motif

further reinforces dominant public archetypes: offenders as unknown, predatory males targeting victims in public spaces (Katz-Schiavone et al., 2008).

These visual tropes align with established research: public perceptions are consistently shaped by stereotypical offender profiles (Fiske et al., 2002; Harris & Socia, 2016; King & Roberts, 2017), which correlate with more punitive and negative attitudes. Such stereotypes also influence parental behaviour, 68% report heightened supervision, 60% restrict children's outdoor play (Gallagher et al., 2002; Hillman, 1993) and contrast sharply with professional understandings (Klein & Cooper, 2019). Individuals with direct experience of offenders score higher on empathy measures (Hogue, 1993, 1994), while broader public responses remain predominantly emotional and negative (Harper et al., 2017; Klein & Cooper, 2019; Shackley et al., 2014; Tewksbury, 2012).

The current results align with previous studies suggesting that public responses to sex offenders are predominantly emotional and negative (Harper et al., 2017; Klein & Cooper, 2019; Shackley et al., 2014; Tewksbury, 2012). However, there remains limited research on how attitudes vary depending on the specific type of sexual offence committed. The literature also lacks comprehensive examination of how knowledge of offences influences public attitudes (Cullen et al., 2000).

5.6 Theoretical and Practical Implications of Visual Methodologies

Practically, incorporating visual data into policy research enhances the communication and interpretation of complex, emotionally charged attitudes. Visual representations translate abstract and multifaceted sentiments into tangible forms that policymakers and communities can more readily understand and discuss. This increased clarity can facilitate more effective dialogue around contentious issues like sex offender management by exposing social and psychological barriers to reform. Moreover, visual data can guide the development of public education initiatives by concretely illustrating common misconceptions and emotional reactions, enabling targeted strategies to reduce stigma and foster more informed public engagement.

Importantly, results from visual methods such as drawings can also inform the design and focus of subsequent surveys. Insights gained from analysing these visual data help identify key themes, emotional responses, and areas of public concern that may not emerge through conventional survey questions alone. This integration allows researchers to tailor survey instruments with more relevant and diverse questions, improving the precision and depth of

data collected on public attitudes. Using visual findings to shape surveys thus facilitates a more comprehensive mixed-methods approach, combining the richness of qualitative visual data with the generalizability of quantitative survey results. Lastly, incorporating longitudinal visual studies into policy evaluation enables tracking shifts in public sentiment over time in response to legislative changes or educational campaigns. Comparing visual data gathered at multiple points provides a dynamic view of evolving emotional and symbolic responses, complementing traditional survey measures. This approach supports adaptive policy development by supplying a more textured understanding of societal acceptance and resistance, enhancing efforts to engage communities and addressing sensitive social issues effectively.

Furthermore, longitudinal visual data facilitates bridging abstract attitudes with concrete social realities by capturing the evolving narrative of public sentiment in a highly accessible form. Visual materials can communicate complex emotional landscapes to stakeholders and communities more intuitively than text-based reports, fostering greater engagement and understanding. Overall, the integration of longitudinal visual methods strengthens policy evaluation by providing a comprehensive, temporal perspective on how social attitudes develop and respond within fluid sociopolitical contexts.

5.7 Limitations and Areas of Future Research

This study's use of visual methods (iSquare) faces known constraints, participants with limited drawing skills may struggle to convey meaning, or may revise concepts for aesthetic reasons, potentially distorting intent. Discrepancies between drawings and written narratives further complicate interpretation, mitigated here by clear task instructions, but warranting methodological caution. Self-selection bias may limit generalizability, as participants likely held pre-existing or heightened views on the topic. The absence of demographic analysis (e.g., by cultural background) also restricts insight into how identity shapes visual representation. While thematic analysis provided robust insights, future work could integrate multimodal methods, such as the Draw, Write and Tell approach to deepen interpretive validity by triangulating visual, textual, and verbal data.

Future research should explore; how educational interventions shift public attitudes; the influence of media portrayals on perception; and how communication strategies shape public opinion and policy. These lines of inquiry are vital for understanding the interplay between emotion, stigma, legislation, and social representation of sex offenders.

6 Concluding Remarks

This study highlights that public perceptions of sex offenders are not neutral reflections of reality but are shaped by powerful visual and emotional schemas that prioritize myth over evidence. By using the iSquare method, this research reveals how stereotypes, of the predatory stranger, the child victim, and the irredeemable offender, are actively reproduced in everyday imagination. These representations stand in contrast to the empirical reality that individuals categorized as sex offenders are a highly diverse group, varying significantly in age, offence type, victim relationship, risk level, and potential for rehabilitation. The conflation of all sex offending with predatory acts against children obscures this heterogeneity and fuels support for blanket policies that apply uniformly across vastly different cases. These findings caution against penal strategies driven by symbolic fears and affirm the value of visual methodologies in exposing the hidden dimensions of public judgment. Effective reform of criminal justice responses therefore requires not only attention to empirical risk and recidivism, but also to the entrenched imagery and moral emotions that underline public demands for punishment.

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Kaj razkrivajo risbe o odnosu ljudi do spolnih prestopnikov?

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Odnos javnosti do spolnih prestopnikov oblikujejo sociokulturne pripovedi in afektivni odzivi, ki pomembno vplivajo na politike in prakse obvladovanja tveganj, vendar ostajajo na ravni implicitne kognicije in simbolne reprezentacije nezadostno razumljena. Tradicionalne metodologije anketiranja so sicer učinkovite pri ocenjevanju eksplicitnih stališč, vendar imajo omejen dostop do neverbalnih, tihih dimenzij javnega dožemanja. Da bi zapolnili to vrzel, je bila v študiji uporabljena raziskovalna deskriptivna zasnova z vizualno metodologijo iSquare na vzorcu 50 odraslih v jugovzhodnem Queenslandu v Avstraliji. Udeležencem je bilo naročeno, naj narišejo »spolnega prestopnika«, njihove risbe pa so bile analizirane s hibridnim tematskim kodirnim okvirom, ki združuje induktivne in deduktivne pristope. Rezultati so pokazali, da je 78 % udeležencev upodobilo moške prestopnike, pri čemer so se pogosto sklicevali na stereotipe, kot sta »nevarnost neznanca« in visoka starost. Omeniti velja, da je 33 % udeležencev kot žrtve vključilo otroke, čeprav ni bilo takšnega poziva, kar odraža izrazito javno enačenje spolnih prestopnikov z viktimizacijo otrok. Udeleženci so poročali tudi o intenzivnih negativnih čustvih, zlasti jezi in gnusu, ki so bila povezana s podporo kaznovalnim političnim odzivom. Te ugotovitve poudarjajo vrednost vizualnih metodologij kot dopolnilnega pristopa h konvencionalnim anketam, saj ponujajo vpogled v implicitne stereotipe, čustvene temelje in reprezentativne pristranskosti, ki bi sicer lahko ostale nedostopne. Prihodnje raziskave bi morale uporabljati bolj raznolike in ciljno usmerjene strategije vzorčenja, vključno z medkulturnimi primerjavami in ključnimi deležniki, kot so oblikovalci politik, da bi dodatno pojasnili kompleksnost odnosov javnosti do različnih kategorij spolnih prestopnikov.

Ključne besede: spolni prestopniki, vizualna metodologija, odnos javnosti, čustva, iSquare

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