

Gender Differences in the Psychological Response to Violent Crime Media: A Statistical Case Study

Hieu Phan

Ph.D., Tiffin University, United States, phanj@tiffin.edu

Mary Mac

Tiffin University, United States, MacMJ@tiffin.edu

ABSTRACT: This study investigates the psychological and behavioral effects of crime-related television and film, with a particular focus on gender-based differences in perception, desensitization to violence, and behavioral responses across media subgenres. Specifically, the study examines how action-oriented crime content (e.g., heist-driven and deception-based narratives) and violent crime media featuring graphic depictions differentially affect male and female audiences within a university setting. A 2×2 factorial design was employed to analyze responses from 100 participants (50 male and 50 female) recruited from Tiffin University. Data were collected using two validated instruments—the Crime TV Impact Questionnaire (CTIQ) and the Violent Crime Questionnaire (VCQ)—which assessed psychological and behavioral responses through Likert-scale measures. The findings indicated no statistically significant differences across most experimental conditions. However, male participants exposed to violent crime media reported significantly higher VCQ scores than their female counterparts, suggesting greater psychological and behavioral responsiveness to violent content among males. These results underscore that the effects of crime-related media are not uniform and may vary by gender, particularly in relation to exposure to graphic violence. As a case study based on a university sample, the findings offer context-specific insights into media consumption and audience response patterns. Nevertheless, limitations related to sample specificity point to the need for broader demographic representation, methodological refinement, and more comprehensive measurement strategies in future research. This study contributes to ongoing scholarship in media psychology and gender studies by providing a focused analysis of media effects within a defined population while identifying avenues for further investigation.

KEYWORDS: Crime-Related Media, Media Psychology, Gender Differences, Violent Media Exposure, Behavioral Responses, Media Effects, Audience Perception, University Students

Introduction

Crime-related television programs and films remain one of the most pervasive genres in contemporary media, attracting broad audiences through narratives focused on criminal behavior, victimization, investigation, and justice. Beyond entertainment, these portrayals may shape public perceptions of crime, influence attitudes toward violence, contribute to desensitization, and potentially normalize criminal behavior. This study examines the psychological and social effects of exposure to both violent and nonviolent crime-related media. In addition to graphic and violent depictions, the study explores portrayals of less severe offenses, including deception-based theft, shoplifting, sympathetic stealing, and heist narratives. By examining a broad spectrum of crime-related content, this research seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how media representations influence audience perceptions, emotional responses, attitudes toward criminality, and the potential normalization of deviant behavior.

Literature Review

The Commercialization and Sensationalization of Crime Narratives

The sensationalized portrayal of crime in contemporary media often prioritizes entertainment over ethical responsibility, creating distorted narratives that can desensitize audiences and normalize violence (Cornett, 2024). The commercialization of true crime further encourages shock-driven content, shaping public perceptions while maximizing engagement. Depicting offenders as complex or sympathetic figures may reduce sensitivity to harm and implicitly normalize deviance (Kaur & Sharma, 2024). Scholars also highlight ethical concerns, including the marginalization of victims and the framing of crime as entertainment (Hickmon, 2024). This influence is evident in phenomena like the “I can fix him” mindset seen in cases such as Ted Bundy’s (Fathallah, 2022). Together, these patterns demonstrate how crime media functions not just as entertainment, but as a powerful socializing force with psychological and behavioral impacts.

Desensitization and Perceptual Distortion Following Violent Media Exposure

Exposure to violent crime media has been linked to increased desensitization and distorted perceptions of crime prevalence and severity (Delhove, 2021). Sensationalized true crime content may intensify these effects by prioritizing graphic narratives that heighten fear, normalize violence, and diminish emotional responsiveness (Myers, 2025; Cornett, 2024). Research further identifies gender-based differences, with males exhibiting greater desensitization and behavioral influence, while females tend to demonstrate heightened anxiety and risk awareness (Perchtold-Stefan et al., 2025). These differences may reflect distinct motivations for media consumption, as females often seek self-protective knowledge, whereas males are more likely to engage with action-oriented narratives that reinforce aggressive schemas (Price, 2023; Ivanov, 2023).

Behavioral and Perceptual Impacts of Minor Crime Representation

Beyond violent crime, media portrayals of minor offenses — including petty theft and juvenile delinquency — produce complex emotional and perceptual outcomes among audiences. Such depictions frequently incorporate elements of skill, deception, and sympathetic motivation, contrasting sharply with the explicit brutality characteristic of violent crime narratives (IvyPanda, 2024). When glamorized through emphases on cunning and artistry, these portrayals risk cultivating empathetic orientations toward offenders while normalizing minor criminal conduct, a concern particularly salient for impressionable audiences (IvyPanda, 2024). Elaborate heist narratives and sympathetic theft portrayals prevalent in contemporary crime dramas further reinforce this dynamic by interweaving criminality with charm, intelligence, and defiance of institutional authority, functioning as vehicles for vicarious empowerment while complicating audiences' ethical evaluations of transgressive behavior (Leuven, 2024). Collectively, these portrayals suggest that media consumption does not merely reflect public attitudes toward crime but actively participates in their construction and recalibration over time.

Gender Differences in Fear of Crime

Gender-based differences in responses to crime have been consistently observed across diverse populations. Empirical research indicates that women generally report higher levels of fear of crime than men, a pattern that has important implications for behavior and decision-making in everyday contexts. These differences shape how individuals perceive and navigate their environments, often influencing routines, mobility, and engagement in public spaces. Notably, studies have found that international female students frequently express heightened

concerns regarding personal safety, reflecting the intersection of gender and situational vulnerability within unfamiliar environments (Mine Özaşçılar & Mawby, 2023; Xiong & Smyrnios, 2013).

Differential Susceptibility and Behavioral Reinforcement Among At-Risk Viewers

Crime-related media does not inherently promote criminal behavior; however, individuals with preexisting aggressive tendencies may experience reinforcement of existing cognitions and behavioral scripts through exposure to true crime content (Surette, 2022). Research identifies media type and gender as important moderators of psychological outcomes, with males exhibiting greater susceptibility to desensitization and related effects following exposure to violent crime media. Media framing also shapes public attitudes toward crime and punishment, often reinforcing punitive perspectives while influencing emotional responses and stereotypes (Gehring, 2025, p. 4, para 1; Silva & Silva, 2024). Although violent crime media is associated with increased fear and desensitization, particularly among males, nonviolent crime portrayals may foster empathy and blur moral boundaries through sympathetic depictions of offenders. Collectively, the literature suggests that crime media plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of crime and justice, highlighting the importance of continued research, media literacy, and evidence-based public education (Silva & Guedes, 2022; Sahinoglu, 2024).

Empirical Questions

The insights and observations gathered from the study generated several research questions that guided further scholarly inquiry:

1. How does frequent exposure to crime-related media influence levels of desensitization to violence among male and female viewers?
2. To what extent does consumption of crime media affect risk-taking behaviors or aggressive tendencies, particularly within male audiences?
3. How do portrayals of criminals as sympathetic or heroic figures influence the normalization or potential admiration of criminal behavior among viewers?
4. To what extent are individuals with pre-existing interests in violence more susceptible to influence from detailed media depictions of criminal activity?

These questions underscore key dimensions of gendered psychological responses to violent crime media that warrant further empirical investigation. The study examines how exposure to violent crime content shapes perception, desensitization, and behavioral tendencies across male and female viewers. By employing a quantitative, case study approach, the research seeks to clarify the extent to which gender functions as a moderating variable in emotional and cognitive responses to crime media. Ultimately, this study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of media effects and to inform evidence-based discussions surrounding media consumption, psychological impact, and audience susceptibility to violent content.

Data Analysis

Participants/Demographic

The study sample consisted of 100 participants (50 male and 50 female) recruited from a small Midwestern university, allowing for cross-analysis by gender and media type. All participants completed two validated instruments: the Crime TV Impact Questionnaire (CTIQ), which assessed responses to general and action-oriented crime content (e.g., shoplifting, heists, and deceptive theft), and the Violent Crime Questionnaire (VCQ), which measured reactions to true crime and media depicting graphic or violent criminal acts. This

dual-instrument approach enabled within-subject comparisons across distinct crime media categories. The balanced gender distribution further supported the examination of potential differences in perceptions of crime, desensitization to violence, and behavioral influence between male and female participants across both media types.

Methodology

Research Design/Data Collection

This study employs a 2 × 2 factorial, non-repeated measures design to examine the psychological and behavioral effects of crime-related media exposure. The independent variables include gender (male and female) and type of media exposure, operationalized through two distinct self-report instruments. The first, the Crime TV Impact Questionnaire (CTIQ), assesses responses to general and action-oriented crime media characterized by deception-based and nonviolent offenses, such as heists, shoplifting, and other forms of covert theft. The second, the Violent Crime Questionnaire (VCQ), measures responses to violent and true crime media featuring graphic or gruesome depictions of criminal acts.

Both instruments were designed to evaluate three dependent variables: perception of crime, desensitization to violence, and behavioral influence. The study tests three primary hypotheses: (1) exposure to differing forms of crime-related media produces significant differences in perceptions of crime and levels of psychological influence; (2) male and female viewers exhibit distinct responses to crime media exposure; and (3) an interaction effect exists between gender and media type, influencing reported levels of desensitization and behavioral change. The use of two differentiated measurement tools enables a more precise assessment of the distinct psychological effects associated with varying genres of crime media, thereby strengthening the study’s ability to isolate content-specific and gender-related variations in audience response.

Table 1. Study Conditions by Gender and Media Type

Gender	General/Action Crime Media (CTIQ)	True Crime/Violent Media (VCQ)
Male	Male–CTIQ	Male–VCQ
Female	Female–CTIQ	Female–VCQ

Procedures

The materials for this study consisted of two structured questionnaires designed to assess the psychological and behavioral effects of exposure to crime-related media. The first instrument, the Crime TV Impact Questionnaire (CTIQ), evaluated responses to general, action-oriented crime content involving nonviolent, deception-based offenses such as heists, shoplifting, and fraudulent schemes. The second instrument, the Violent Crime Questionnaire (VCQ), measured responses to media depicting graphic and violent criminal acts, including content commonly found in true crime documentaries and dramatizations of serial offenses.

Both instruments were administered to all participants and utilized the FOSO (Feelings, Opinions, Sensations, and Outcomes) scale, a six-point Likert-type measure ranging from “Strongly Disagree” (1) to “Strongly Agree” (6). The absence of a neutral midpoint encouraged more definitive responses, enabling a more nuanced assessment of participants’ perceptions of crime, levels of desensitization, and potential behavioral influences.

Materials

The materials utilized in this study consisted of two instruments: the Crime TV Impact Questionnaire (CTIQ) and the Violent Crime Questionnaire (VCQ). A total of 200 questionnaires were prepared and distributed, including 100 CTIQs and 100 VCQs, ensuring that each of the 100 participants (50 male and 50 female) completed both measures. All participants were provided with informed consent form prior to data collection, which outlined the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and assurances regarding confidentiality and anonymity. Completed questionnaires and consent forms were systematically organized and securely stored in a designated research file to maintain data integrity and participant privacy.

Scoring

Participant responses from both the Crime TV Impact Questionnaire (CTIQ) and the Violent Crime Questionnaire (VCQ) were quantified using the FOSO scale, which assigns numerical values ranging from 1 (“Strongly Disagree”) to 6 (“Strongly Agree”). Higher scores reflected stronger agreement with statements indicative of increased perceptions of crime prevalence, greater desensitization to violence, and heightened behavioral influence from crime-related media. Each instrument included a balanced set of items assessing three primary constructs: perception of crime, desensitization to violence, and behavioral influence. Subscale scores were computed by averaging responses corresponding to each construct, while aggregate scores were used to examine patterns across gender and media type. The scoring procedures were applied uniformly across all participants to ensure consistency, thereby supporting the reliability and validity of subsequent comparative analyses.

Results

Data Analysis

Participants’ psychological responses to crime-related media exposure were assessed using the study instruments designed to measure perceptions of crime, desensitization to violence, and behavioral influence. Responses were collected using Likert-type scales that captured varying levels of agreement with statements related to emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions to crime media content. Lower scores reflected stronger endorsement of media influence and heightened psychological responsiveness, whereas higher scores indicated lower perceived influence and reduced emotional or behavioral impact. These scores were subsequently analyzed to examine variations in psychological responses across gender groups and media exposure conditions within the 2×2 factorial framework.

Consistent with the study’s focus on gender differences in responses to violent crime media, statistical comparisons were conducted to determine whether male and female participants differed significantly in their levels of desensitization, perceptions of crime, and reported behavioral influence following exposure to different forms of crime-related media content.

Descriptive Statistics

This study investigated whether gender and type of crime-related media exposure influenced perceptions of crime, desensitization to violence, and behavioral influence. Overall, analyses revealed few statistically significant differences across gender groups and media exposure conditions. The sole significant finding emerged within the violent crime media condition, as measured by the Violent Crime Questionnaire (VCQ).

Results indicated a statistically significant gender difference among participants exposed to violent and true crime media, with male participants reporting significantly higher

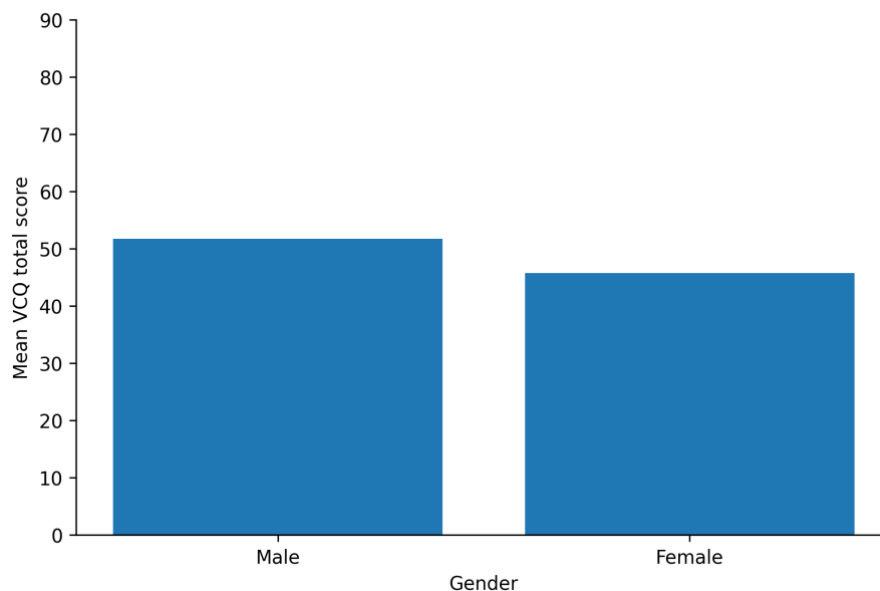
VCQ scores than female participants. Independent samples *t*-test results demonstrated significant group differences ($t = 2.17, p = .016$), while variance testing further supported this relationship ($F = 0.569, p = .020$). Because higher scores reflected greater psychological responsiveness to crime-related media, these findings suggest that male participants may experience stronger effects associated with violent media exposure, including greater perceptual influence, emotional desensitization, and behavioral responsiveness. Importantly, this was the only statistically significant relationship identified across study conditions, indicating that gender-specific differences may be more pronounced in response to violent crime media than to crime-related media broadly.

Three hypotheses were examined within this investigation. The first hypothesis proposed that exposure to different forms of crime-related media—general/action-oriented content measured through the Crime TV Impact Questionnaire (CTIQ) and violent crime content measured through the VCQ—would produce differences in audience responses. This hypothesis was not supported, as analyses revealed no significant differences across media categories within the overall sample.

The second hypothesis predicted gender differences in responses to crime-related media and received partial support. Significant gender variation was observed exclusively within the violent crime condition, where male participants demonstrated greater responsiveness to violent content relative to female participants.

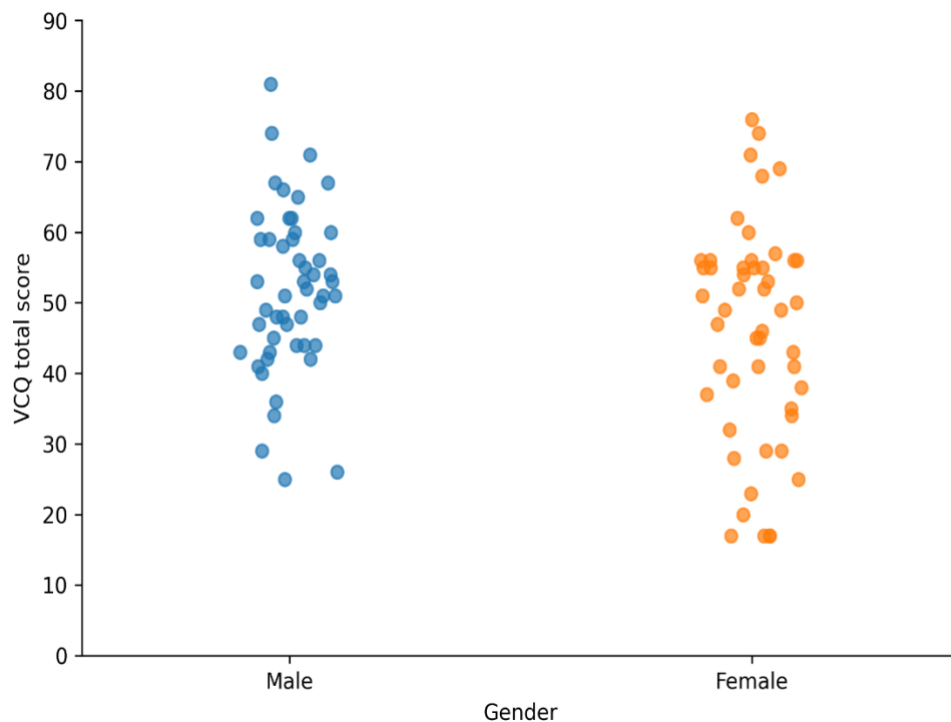
The third hypothesis proposed an interaction between gender and media type in influencing behavioral outcomes and desensitization. This hypothesis also received partial support, as evidence of interaction effects emerged only within the violent crime media condition. Collectively, these findings suggest that violent crime media may exert differential psychological effects across gender groups, whereas responses across other media conditions remained relatively stable.

Figure 1. Gender Differences in Mean VCQ Scores Following Violent Media Exposure



Note. Male participants obtained higher mean VCQ scores ($M = 51.72$) than female participants ($M = 45.76$). An independent-samples *t* test revealed that this difference was statistically significant, $t = 2.17, p = .016$, indicating that male participants reported significantly higher levels on the VCQ than their female counterparts.

Figure 2. Distribution of VCQ Total Scores by Gender



Note. Dots represent individual Violent Crime Questionnaire (VCQ) total scores by gender. Female participants exhibited greater variability in VCQ scores ($s^2 = 238.68$) than male participants ($s^2 = 135.84$). An F test comparing group variances indicated that this difference in score dispersion was statistically significant, $F = 0.569$, $p = .020$, suggesting that VCQ scores were significantly more variable among female participants than among male participants.

Implications of Findings

This study provides an initial contribution to understanding the psychological and behavioral effects of crime-related media; however, further research is needed to enhance generalizability and depth of analysis. Future studies should recruit more diverse samples across academic, cultural, and community contexts to determine whether observed gender differences—particularly in response to violent media—persist across broader populations.

Expanding participant diversity in age, occupation, and sociocultural background may offer greater insight into how contextual factors shape media responses. Methodological refinements, including improvements to the CTIQ and VCQ and the incorporation of qualitative measures, could strengthen analytical precision and capture more nuanced audience experiences. Additionally, examining media exposure frequency may clarify dose-dependent effects on desensitization, emotional responsiveness, and behavioral attitudes. Collectively, these directions support a more comprehensive understanding of how crime-related media influences perceptions, emotions, and behavior across diverse populations.

Limitations

Although this study offers valuable insights into the psychological and behavioral effects of crime-related media exposure, several limitations should be noted. Data collection was restricted to students at Tiffin University, primarily those enrolled in MBA and forensic psychology programs, which may have influenced baseline perceptions due to prior exposure to relevant concepts. Data were gathered during scheduled class sessions, enabling efficient

participation but limiting sample diversity across disciplines, age groups, and sociocultural backgrounds. This relative homogeneity constrains the generalizability of the findings to broader populations, including non-students and working professionals. Accordingly, results should be interpreted within the context of a university-based sample of educated young adults. Despite these constraints, the study provides meaningful, context-specific insights into how academically engaged populations respond to crime-related media. Future research should prioritize more diverse participant samples across academic, occupational, and cultural populations while examining potential moderating factors, including socioeconomic status, frequency of media consumption, prior exposure to crime, and cultural influences, to strengthen external validity and improve understanding of media-related effects.

Discussion

The findings indicate that the effects of media type and gender on perceptions of crime, desensitization, and behavioral tendencies were largely nonsignificant across most conditions, suggesting that crime-related media does not exert uniform psychological effects across audiences. However, a significant gender-specific pattern emerged: male participants scored higher on the Violent Crime Questionnaire (VCQ), indicating greater susceptibility to the influence of graphic crime content. This partially supports the second hypothesis and highlights gender as a moderating factor. Despite this difference, the results provide limited evidence that crime media broadly promotes admiration for offenders, reduces moral sensitivity, or increases risk-taking. The absence of consistent interaction effects between gender and media type further suggests that media influences are not predictable or universal.

Overall, these findings underscore the complexity of media effects, emphasizing that responses vary based on content and individual characteristics rather than reflecting a generalized pattern. The heightened responsiveness among males exposed to violent media highlights the importance of subgroup analysis. Future research should incorporate more diverse samples and additional moderating variables, such as age, media exposure, and cultural context, to better understand the conditions under which crime media influences psychological and behavioral outcomes.

Conclusion

The increasing prevalence of crime-related media underscores the need for sustained scholarly examination of its psychological, emotional, and behavioral effects. Distinguishing between violent and nonviolent portrayals highlights the complexity of media influence on perception, emotional processing, and moral judgment. Prior research indicates that repeated exposure may distort perceptions of crime prevalence and severity while contributing to desensitization and shifts in attitudes toward criminal behavior. However, these effects are not uniform and vary according to media content characteristics and individual differences, underscoring the conditional nature of media influence.

Comparative findings further indicate that violent crime depictions are more likely to intensify emotional responses and desensitization, whereas nonviolent or sympathetically framed narratives may subtly reshape moral boundaries and perceptions of deviance. Consequently, audience responses are best understood as the result of an interaction between media content and viewer-specific factors rather than exposure alone.

This study highlights the importance of differentiating among types of crime media while acknowledging variability in audience responses. It also draws attention to the ethical considerations inherent in crime media production and its role in shaping public perceptions of crime and justice. Future research should extend these findings across more diverse populations to better understand the broader and long-term societal implications.

References

- American Psycho (2000) *IMDb*. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0144084/plotsummary/>
- Cornett, M. R. (2024). *Capitalizing on Crime Stories: Unveiling the Connection between Sensationalism and Commercialization in True Crime* (Honors Capstone Project). Honors College, University of Alabama. <https://louis.uah.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1877&context=honors-capstones>
- Delhove, M., & Greitemeyer, T. (2021). Violent media use and aggression: Two Longitudinal Network Studies *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 161(6), 697-713. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2021.1896465>
- Fathallah, J. (2022). Being a Fangirl of Serial Killer is Not Ok: Gatekeeping Reddit's True Crime Community. *New Media & Society*, 26(10), 5638-5657. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146144482211387>
- Fight Club. (1999) *IMDb*. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0137523/plotsummary/>
- Gehring, J. (2025) *Crime Stories: How True Crime Podcasts Shape Public Perception of Criminality and the Justice System*. University of Twente.
- Hickmon, N. (2024). *The impact of true crime podcasts on unsolved homicide cases: The evolution of true crime media* (Master's thesis). Grand Valley State University. ScholarWorks. <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/theses/1124>
- Ivanov, B. (2023) *Why men tend to enjoy films which glorify violence*. Medium. <https://medium.com/@greengamer306/why-men-tend-to-enjoy-films-which-glorify-violence-c97b2dd997b2>
- IvyPanda. (2024). *The Effects of Mass Media Glorifying Crime and Criminal Lifestyle*. <https://ivypanada.com/essays/the-effects-of-mass-media-glorifying-crime-and-criminal-lifestyle/>
- John Wick (2014). *IMDb*. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2911666/plotsummary/>
- Kaur, K., & Sharma, P. (2024). Effect of crime thriller shows on crime and criminal justice system: A survey-based study. *YMER*, 23(9), 77–91.
- Leuven, E.V. (2024). *Entertainment or exploitation: The ethics of true crime media*. The Arbiter. <https://arbiteronline.com/2024/09/30/ethics-of-true-crime/>
- Myers, L. (2025). *The Influence of Media on Public Perception of Crime*. Northwest Career College. <https://www.northwestcareercollege.edu/blog/the-influence-of-media-on-public-perception-of-crime/>
- Özaşçılar, M., & Mawby, R. I. (2024). Explaining fear of crime among university students: A comparison between national and international students in Istanbul. *International Review of Victimology*, 30(3), 425–442. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02697580231218020>
- Price, A. (2023). *Am I a Future Murderer? Explaining the Cultural Obsession with True Crime*. Highlander. <https://ruhhighlander.org/home/2023/2/22/am-i-a-future-murderer-explaining-the-cultural-obsession-with-true-crime>
- Şahinoğlu, B., Saygılı, N., Muhtarogulları, A. et al. (2024). Implications of media reports of crime for public trust and social support: a conceptual analysis of individuals' psychological wellbeing. *Humanit Soc Sci Commun* 11, 329 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-02848-2>
- Silva, C., & Guedes, I. (2023). The Role of the Media in the Fear of Crime: A Qualitative Study in the Portuguese Context. *Criminal Justice Review*, 48(3), 300-317.
- Silva & Silva. (2024). *The Impact of Media on Public Perception of Crime and the Criminal Justice System*. SLM Law APC. <https://www.silvalegal.com/the-impact-of-media-on-public-perception-of-crime-and-the-criminal-justice-system/>
- Perchtold-Stefan, C., Rominger, C., Ceh, S., Sattler, K., Veit, S. V., & Fink, A. (2025). *Out of the Dark – Psychological Perspectives on People's Fascination with True Crime*. 10.17605/OSF.IO/PHX9D.
- Surette, R. (2022). *Copycat crimes and copycat criminals*. <https://www.riennner.com/uploads/623e31e77784b.pdf>
- Xiong, L., & Smyrnios, K. X. (2013). Social, cultural, and environmental drivers of international students' fear of crime: A cognitive behavioral perspective. In Y. Kashima, E. S. Kashima, & R. Beatson (Eds.), *Steering the cultural dynamics: Selected papers from the 2010 Congress of the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology*. International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology. <https://doi.org/10.4087/DQXL4182>