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# Perceptions of True Crime Media Portrayals of Offenders and Victims

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**Abstract.** *Objective:* The popularity of true crime media has increased in recent years, raising concerns about how offenders and victims are portrayed and how these portrayals shape public attitudes toward crime, justice, and violence. Existing research suggests that true crime narratives often glamourise offenders while marginalising victims, yet little is known about how audiences themselves interpret and negotiate these representations. The present study qualitatively explores individuals' motivations for consuming true crime media and their perceptions of offender and victim portrayals. *Method:* Ten adults from the UK general population participated in semi-structured interviews. *Results:* Using thematic analysis, three themes were generated: *Glamourised Offender vs. Peripheral Victim*, *Understanding Offenders and their Contradictoriness*, and *Real Entertainment vs. Educational Truth*. Participants described a consistent imbalance in which offenders were centred while victim stories were secondary or underdeveloped. Although participants valued understanding the psychological motivations underlying offenders' behaviour, they emphasised the importance of avoiding excusatory narratives. Participants also discussed the tension between entertainment and education, voicing concern over sensationalism, misinformation, and the ethical implications of profiting from real-world harm. *Conclusion and Implications:* These findings highlight the complex ways audiences engage with true crime media and underscore the need for more ethical, victim-centred, and balanced portrayals that avoid glamourising violence or retraumatising those affected.

**Keywords:** True Crime, Media Perceptions, Violent Offending, Crime Victims.

## Introduction

In recent years, there has been a surge of interest in true crime media, reflected in rising sales of “murderabilia” (items associated with notorious crimes and offenders; Schechter, 2023) and a proliferation of true crime podcasts, TV series, books, and online communities (Sarteschi, 2016; Sherrill, 2022). Indeed, in the United States, nine of the 10 most-watched documentaries in 2024 and eight of the 10 most-watched documentaries in 2025 were true crime documentaries (Flixpatrol, n.d.a.; Flixpatrol, n.d.b.). Central to this phenomenon are portrayals of young, male homicide offenders who are often framed as misunderstood, victimised, or even romanticised figures. The tendency to cast popular, attractive actors in these roles (e.g., Evan Peters in *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* and Zac Efron in *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile*) may contribute to audiences developing sympathetic attitudes toward violent offenders.

Consuming distorted, glamourised, and unrealistic portrayals of offenders can impact social attitudes, reduce victim empathy, and result in a misguided understanding of the justice system (Oleson & MacKinnon, 2015). Together, these patterns can also contribute to less punitive attitudes towards offenders (Sarteschi, 2016; Wiest, 2016). Strutz (2022) argues that depictions of serial killers in popular media are misleading and insensitive towards victims, minimising or neglecting their power in the narrative and increasing the audience’s tolerance of violence. Furthermore, familiar, enduringly popular cases such as Jeffrey Dahmer, Ted Bundy, and Richard Ramirez are repeatedly brought back into the spotlight through the increased interest in this form of media. This repetition may also increase fear of crime, as famous cases that provoked a strong response from the audience are continually revisited and re-contextualised, drawing more attention and perpetuating well-trodden themes (Dowler et al., 2006).

Contemporary fascination with true crime media has become a mainstream, profitable, and socially accepted form of entertainment. However, there can be a darker side to fan communities. Social media platforms like TikTok are rife with posts celebrating, praising, and even making declarations of love towards these violent offenders (Fathalla, 2022). Academic language and interest in forensic psychology is frequently used by fans to justify interest in true crime as intellectual and respectable. Meanwhile, engagement in online discussion boards normalises conversations about violence, crime, and being a victim. While this might serve a therapeutic purpose for some (i.e., camaraderie, trauma processing, and helping to understand abuse patterns), it could have a scarring effect for others, rehashing victims’ own or similar trauma and perpetuating stereotypes and victim-blaming narratives (Boling, 2023).

Indeed, true crime media’s focus on offenders often comes at the expense of victim narratives, often reinforcing stereotypes and victim-blaming attitudes such as rape myths, which remain commonly accepted despite strides made by modern-day feminist movements (Murray et al., 2023). Female victims are frequently objectified or portrayed as complicit

in their victimisation, transferring blame from the offender to the victim (Dowler et al., 2006; Slakoff, 2023). These narratives may not only undermine public empathy for victims but also deter survivors from reporting crimes or seeking psychological help (Boling, 2023). Moreover, the sensationalised retelling of traumatic events can exacerbate harm, for some victims and their families, who are re-traumatised through repeated media exposure (Slakoff et al., 2022). In an analysis of true crime podcasts about intimate partner violence, Slakoff (2023) found that violence-excusing themes such as difficult upbringings and mental health issues were frequently highlighted in the offenders' narratives, while their victims were portrayed as naïve, gullible, flirtatious, or otherwise to blame for their own abuse. Such narratives may lead consumers to sympathise with offenders, blame victims, and develop biased perceptions of serious crime (Hammond & Walkden, 2026).

#### The Current Research

Previous studies have illustrated the manner in which true crime media blurs the lines between fictional entertainment and factual crime reporting, and the impact this can have on public perceptions of crime and criminal justice proceedings (Boling, 2023; Dowler et al., 2006; Hammond & Walkden, 2026; Slakoff, 2023; Strutz, 2022). However, some viewers may experience complex or ambivalent reactions, and different offender-focused narratives may elicit varying effects on their audiences. While offender-focused depictions can contribute to the glamourisation of offending, they may also have positive, humanising effects that contribute to support for offender rehabilitation. As motivations, meaning, and perceptions are subjectively constructed, it is important to qualitatively examine the experiences of true crime consumers. This study therefore aims to explore individuals' motivations for consuming true crime media and how they perceive its portrayals of offenders and victims.

### Method

#### Design

A qualitative design was used to explore what draws people to true crime media and how they perceive offender and victim portrayals therein. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, and themes were developed from the interview responses using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As a contextualising method, thematic analysis examines participants' meanings and realities while considering the broader social context impacting their experiences (Tracy, 2012). Rooted in critical realist epistemology (Braun & Clarke, 2006), its flexibility and accessibility make thematic analysis a useful starting point for probing participants' opinions and experiences (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Our approach combined deductive and inductive methods: existing literature informed the research aim (deductive), while theme development helped to find meaning in the data (inductive) (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022). The analysis employed a semantic lens, describing participants' realities while theorising the

meanings and broader implications of themes (Tracy, 2012). The first author conducted the analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework: (1) familiarisation with the data through repeated reading, (2) data immersion through code generation, (3) grouping codes into themes, (4) refining these themes, (5) naming and defining them, and (6) contextualising them within the extant literature.

### **Participants**

Participants were recruited via social media platforms (Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter), SurveyCircle, and word-of-mouth for a separate quantitative study about engagement with true crime media. Inclusion criteria required participants to be aged 18 or older and fluent in English. At the end of the quantitative survey, participants were invited to indicate their interest in being contacted for an interview-based study on a similar topic. In line with suggested sample sizes for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017) and reflecting norms in qualitative interview studies (Brennen, 2012), ten participants were recruited for this qualitative study (eight female, two male). To protect anonymity, no further demographic information was collected.

### **Procedure**

After obtaining ethical approval from the College Research Ethics Committee at the researchers' institution, participants were recruited for the aforementioned quantitative survey. Participants who had expressed interest in a second study were emailed by the researcher and invited to participate in individual semi-structured interviews about their perceptions of true crime media. The invitation included the Participant Information Sheet and a consent form which they were asked to read, sign, and return via email. Interviews were scheduled via email and conducted, recorded, and transcribed online using Microsoft Teams. The full interview schedule is available in the supplementary materials. At the end of the interview, participants were asked to verbally re-affirm their consent for their data to be used in the study. They were then thanked and debriefed verbally and in writing via email. Average interview length was 15 minutes, 42 seconds.

### **Findings**

Three themes were generated from the dataset: Glamourised Offender vs. Peripheral Victim; Understanding Offenders and their Contradictoriness; and Real Entertainment vs. Educational Truth. These are discussed below, and additional extracts are provided in the supplementary materials.

#### ***Glamourised Offender vs. Peripheral Victim***

Participants described the oppositional portrayals of offenders and victims in true crime media, whereby the offenders are glamourised and their life stories thoroughly examined, while victims' portrayals were perceived to lack depth. Participants all agreed that true crime media was

primarily focused on offenders, who are portrayed as “flawed protagonists or antiheroes” (Participant G) and victims of their own background and upbringing. These offender-focused narratives were constructed by participants as “glorifying” (Participant I) and “romanticising” (Participant C), admonishing offenders of responsibility for their violence. This is reflected by Participant C, stating that a “glamourised cool version of the offender is impacting how people see them”, and Participant J, who argued that depictions needed “more nuance, as stories are not as black and white as it may seem”. Participant A also found that true crime media is “too focused on the offender and their development, and not so much on the impact that these people cause”. Participant E even believes that true crime media producers are “careful not to put too much emphasis that [the offender] is definitely a bad person”.

Victims, on the other hand, are perceived as “peripheral” (Participant F) side characters—pawns in someone else’s story, only existing within the narrative to make villains more interesting. They are constructed to be “innocent” (Participant J), vulnerable casualties without a (life) story of their own to tell. True crime media is perceived as “uncaring about victims’ feelings” (Participant C) and the possible re-traumatising effect of the re-telling of the story. Participant I agreed that “victims’ families are not being taken into account” when portraying victims as “weak and submissive characters” (Participant H). This disparity of power is structured as a contrast between interesting vs. “boring” (Participant G), larger than life vs. marginal, and notoriety vs. oversight. Participant H constructs this to “undermine the system and undermine the victim”, as it may result in victims not being taken seriously by the criminal justice system and wider public.

Participant F recounts their experience of learning about the offender’s background when consuming true crime media:

...sometimes there are, you know, stories of sort of really poor childhood experiences, aren't there, and which can, I guess, lead you to maybe try to understand why they might have turned out the way that they did and but I, I find that one a little bit difficult as well ...

And so, you know, I can't help but to think that whatever happened to them, they're making a conscious effort to do some terrible things.

Participant F constructs childhood experiences as a factor that might help the audience understand why the offender acted a certain way; at the same time, they believe the offending was underpinned by a “conscious effort”, rendering the childhood experiences as merely excuses. Their narrative emphasises that offenders are often portrayed as deserving of understanding and forgiveness, using their past experiences to justify their offending.

In contrast, Participant G shares her experience of victims’ portrayals, expressing a belief that victims’ lives are only a secondary element of the storytelling:

Generally, there's less focus on the victims and they're like, you don't hear much about the life story of victims. They'll be kind of quite quickly kind of filled in with a few details, whereas like the criminal, you will hear like everything about them, focus is really on them and it's kind of like they're bigger than life character, whereas like the victim is quite boring, really. Or kind of only exist to kind of make the villain more interesting.

Collectively, participants considered this disparity in offender and victim portrayals as an essential contributor to how such portrayals influence their opinions of offending. Even when participants did not mention this inequality in representations, they were influenced by the excess of information provided about the offenders and the dearth of information about the victims: they could name several infamous offenders while acknowledging they knew very little, if anything, about their victims. Participants B, F, and J indicated this, with Participant F stating that people “always remember the name of the offender; they never remember the names of the victims”.

### ***Understanding Offenders and their Contradictoriness***

In this theme, participants emphasised the need to understand offenders, their motivations, and their offending in order to inform strategies for avoiding future re-offending. The “curiosity” (Participant C) to understand offenders and why they committed their offence(s) was constructed by the majority of participants as a main driver of their consumption of true crime media. For example, Participant F “wants to understand what [the offenders] are getting out of it and what the right responses are”, but Participant I makes it clear that “understanding them would not excuse what they did”. In general, humanising offender portrayals were constructed as positive, “because they need help” (Participant C). Meanwhile, psychological terms like “traits” or “risk factors”, and unofficial diagnoses like “psychopathy” or “narcissism”, were framed by participants as bringing an illusion of professionalism to true crime and provoking sympathy from the audience. Indeed, participants indicated feeling sorry for offenders who had experienced trauma, childhood abuse, or mental health issues. When an offender is presented as “lonely, confused, or mentally unwell” (Participant D), participants perceived them as deserving of pity, understanding, and support. Participant D believes that such offenders often “should have had help a long time ago”, and Participant C reported feeling “kind of bad that [offenders] ended up in that situation”. Even though most participants constructed offending as a “conscious choice” (Participant F), the reasons influencing this choice were often described in a positive tone and believed to illustrate the emotional difficulties offenders face.

However, understanding was not unanimous. This quote highlights Participant B’s experience of not understanding offenders’ motivations:

I think it's, it is because it is just so opposite to me in anything that I would even think about or consider doing. So it is again, it's the psychology side for me, of why do you do it? How could you do something like that? Because a lot of them are violent things, I just ... I just have no general concept of how. Why you would even think to do it?

Participant B's repeated questioning remarks show their confusion and efforts to make sense of offenders' actions. By mentioning "the psychology side", they construct their feelings in a professional discourse, constructing the motivations to be understood scientifically. Their inquisitive terminology gives the impression that true crime media is consumed to facilitate learning and understanding, and to lessen the uncertainty they feel about crime. By using "how?" and "why?", they present both the act itself and the motivation behind it as important factors in committing a crime; therefore, both must be understood.

The questions of "how" and "why" are also reflected in this quote by Participant C:

I'm very intrigued as to how and why, but also because we can learn from it because a lot of... uh, I don't wanna say they're preventable, but like, there were things that could have been done to try and redirect a path. Like if there was some undiagnosed illness or just because the times were different, that would have been things that, you know, you could have done to change the course of someone's life that would have stopped them doing these things. So it's quite... It is just very intriguing to know what got them there.

Here Participant C emphasises factors in the offenders' backstories that are perceived to impact offending. The phrases "redirect a path" and "change the course of someone's life" construct offending as a life-course trajectory. Thus, understanding an offender and "learning from it" as a society is framed as an essential part of engaging in true crime media. In this way, Participant C suggests that certain factors could have influenced the offender to desist. They highlight the need to know about risk factors and protective factors to learn how to avoid future (re-)offending, borrowing terminology from medical discourse like "preventable", "undiagnosed", and "illness", thereby adding professionalism and a sense of credibility to their perceptions.

Indeed, this theme is often presented using professional discourse in the form of psychological and medical terminology, which can legitimise interest in true crime media as something useful, rather than purely for entertainment purposes. Participants seem to try to justify their interest as wanting to help offenders and victims. Helping offenders avoid re-offending, or preventing others from engaging in offending in the first place, were constructed by participants as important reasons to learn about offenders' "motivations, their upbringing, and factors that could influence their offending" (Participant I). According to Participant B, true crime

media positions the “offenders’ versions of events as a valid opinion” to understand their justifications for their behaviour.

#### Real Entertainment vs. Educational Truth

This theme captured the participants’ understanding of how the reality of the portrayed crimes is contrasted by the commercial need for entertainment through sensationalism. The juxtaposition of offenders being real, “ordinary people” (Participant F) while committing horrifying crimes is constructed by participants as both disturbing and bleak. For instance, Participant I points out that such offenders “could be living around them”: the reality of living in proximity to violent offenders is positioned as a thrilling but scary factor. Participants placed a strong focus on the struggle between entertainment and education, understanding that media has to be entertaining to be commercially successful. Participant B argues that crime stories are “made into films to make money, and not just to show the truth of the situation”. Furthermore, Participant F understands that true crime media is “what people want to watch”, while Participant D thinks it is “all about what sells in the media”. Although the truth might be more educational than its dramatisation, the reframing in true crime media is constructed as “depressing” (Participant E), sad, and hurtful. Media that uses multiple versions of events, actual evidence, and interviews with individuals involved is perceived to be the most “accurate” (Participant B) and reliable source of information; this format is therefore viewed as preferable, particularly when it lacks sensationalism. Participants were worried about receiving “misinformation” (Participant E), wanting the presentation of the story “to show the truth of the situation” (Participant B), and to be made aware of “what is entirely true” (Participant E). After all, “true crime needs to be true” (Participant I); it is “not just a story” (Participant B).

In this extract, Participant E explores their feelings about real people being affected by the crimes portrayed in true crime media:

It makes me feel a little bit scared that this is actually happening in the actual real world. Compared to a drama, [where] I can just go: Ah, someone invented this. This is actually real life. ... I probably feel worse after watching a true crime thing. Thinking ohh yeah, the world is actually horrible and full of terrible things. ... Yeah, I feel like, and obviously another human being of which I am one of them has done something awful. And so I think uh, that's that makes me a little bit ashamed to be a human being.

Participant E describes their negative feelings after having consumed true crime media, constructing crime as a “horrible” but authentic fact of reality. When they construct offenders as well as themselves as “human beings”, connecting themselves with offenders through this generalisation, they show their understanding that offenders are real people doing “terrible things”, coexisting in their world. However, by describing their feelings as being “ashamed”, it is evident that they want to separate themselves from offenders and their crimes, implying they feel uncomfortable with being

human in this context. The participant's narrative underlines the importance of feeling detached from offenders, not belonging to the same group as them, even though in reality, offenders may be virtually indistinguishable from the general population. Participant E presents themselves as being aware of the division between "the actual real life" and drama. By repeatedly using the adjective "actual", they reiterate their perception of true crime media being real.

Nonetheless, Participant D suggests that true crime media has to have entertainment value, although this is positioned to have negative effects:

As sad as it is, it's very entertaining and it's all about what sells in the media. So if they're telling it right, I'm gonna watch it. And that's—or listen to it, I guess—and that's kind of sad because it's all like victims are affected and it's hurt a lot of people and it's the way of the new world and how media portrays people. So yeah, unfortunately it's entertaining. And that's the saddest part about the whole thing.

Participant D constructs a situation where commercial gain, "what sells in the media", is the driving factor for true crime media producers. They perceive this as an issue that "affected" and "hurt" victims and audiences. Their generalisation of "all victims" and "a lot of people" extends their statement beyond their personal experience. Their negative tone suggested awareness of the negative impact true crime media might have on victims and audiences, but they construct a certain hopelessness as the "way of the new world" is perceived as inevitable.

This theme exemplifies the ambivalence participants are experiencing, underlining the importance of a clear distinction between truth and fiction. The negative terminology used to describe their emotions while thinking about the reality of true crime media illustrates the emotional turmoil experienced by the participants, with Participant J describing it as a "guilty pleasure". Participants discussing videos, tapes, interviews, and other tangible evidence suggests they feel a need for more factual reporting. At the same time, participants indicate their interest in entertainment is a driving factor in their media consumption; balancing this disconnect between dramatisation and reality is highlighted as a challenge many true crime media producers have yet to master.

### **Discussion**

This research highlights the critical role of true crime media in shaping audience perceptions of offenders and victims, demonstrating the complex interplay between media portrayal and societal attitudes. Our analysis revealed three themes which highlight the way audiences perceive true crime media as both educational and sensationalised, helping them understand why some people become violent offenders while acknowledging that this form of media relegates victim stories to the background. These are discussed below.

### **Glamourised Offender vs. Peripheral Victim**

Participants consistently observed an imbalance in how offenders and victims are portrayed in true crime media. While offenders are often depicted as charismatic masterminds, victim stories are overlooked and minimalised (Strutz, 2022; Wiest, 2016). This imbalance can promote the shifting of audience sympathy from victims to offenders, with participants criticising how offenders' mental health issues and past trauma or abuse are framed as justifications for their actions. Such narratives risk diminishing offender accountability and encouraging misplaced sympathy (Sarteschi, 2016; Sherrill, 2022; Slakoff, 2023). This aligns with evidence from Oleson and MacKinnon (2015) and Strutz (2022), who showed that overrepresented and distorted offender portrayals influence social attitudes and reduce victim empathy.

The minimalistic portrayals of victims contribute to the participants' perceptions of victims as peripheral, boring, and unimportant, which can contribute to society's tendency towards victim-blaming (Strutz, 2022) and the devaluation and normalisation of violence (Dowler et al., 2006; Strutz, 2022). Participants expressed dissatisfaction with this bias, advocating for more equitable storytelling that emphasises victims' lives and humanity. By doing so, true crime media could shift audience focus to victim support and education, equipping vulnerable populations with strategies for prevention and survival. This could, however, inadvertently shift responsibility onto victims, which underscores the need for broader societal change to address victim-blaming proactively.

### **Understanding Offenders and Their Contradictoriness**

One of the main motivations for participants' true crime consumption was understanding offenders' psychological and behavioural motivations. This aligns with prior research indicating that audiences use true crime media to explore the complexities of criminal behaviour, often framed through psychological or medical discourse (Fathalla, 2022). Participants were interested in the emotional difficulties offenders face, while simultaneously trying to avoid coming across as excusatory, emphasising that offenders have agency and have made choices. Thus, while participants acknowledged the importance of humanising offenders to support rehabilitation and prevent re-offending, they emphasised the importance of maintaining a clear distinction between understanding and excusing criminal behaviour (Shreesta et al., 2022). The findings suggest a need for media to balance accurate, empathetic portrayals of offenders with ethical storytelling that preserves accountability for offenders.

While understanding offenders in order to prevent (re-)offending is seen as a positive outcome of true crime media engagement by the participants, engagement with offending partners can lead to the opposite. Indeed, offending behaviour has been shown to be influenced by peers, partners, and family (Gurian, 2013; Pettigrew, 2019). This is problematic,

as true crime media consumption could operate as a gateway to sympathy or even adoration for offenders which could eventually lead to engagement in (co-)offending. However, in this study, none of the participants indicated being inspired to offend. On the contrary, participants often tried to position themselves as opposite of and distinct to offenders.

The Uses-and-Gratifications Theory (UGT; Katz et al., 1973) may aid in explaining participants' attempts to distance themselves from offenders as a different category of person altogether. According to the UGT, individuals choose media based on their psychological and social needs, including entertainment, information, and companionship. They then evaluate them based on the extent to which they are perceived to gratify their needs (Deng et al., 2023). As such, true crime media consumers may seek out this type of content for entertainment or informational purposes precisely because they feel they cannot relate to the thoughts, feelings, and behaviour of violent offenders without the aid of narrative devices and contextual explanations for their actions. In this way, consumers gain a more nuanced understanding of a group of individuals they may otherwise have dismissed as unknowable. True crime media may therefore serve an important and satisfying purpose for viewers wishing to broaden their perspectives.

### **Real Entertainment vs. Educational Truth**

Participants struggled with the dichotomy of true crime media operating as both a source of factual information and entertainment. The tension between sensationalism and authenticity was a recurring concern, with participants noting that dramatised portrayals often distort reality for commercial appeal (Oleson & MacKinnon, 2015). While audiences appreciate engaging narratives, participants prioritised factual accuracy, such as case evidence, interviews, and legal outcomes, which enhance trust and perceived educational value (Dowler et al., 2006; Slakoff, 2022).

Participants also described the emotional challenges of consuming true crime media, particularly when reconciling their empathy for victims with their desire for entertainment. Several participants expressed discomfort with their own engagement with true crime content, including feelings of guilt and shame after consuming the real-life pain of victims and their families packaged as entertainment. The participants insinuated that in this balancing act between securing commercial success while retaining respect for victims, true crime producers often lean towards glamourisation and entertainment. While most participants were aware of their own need to be entertained, they also emphasised that the educational truth needs to be in the forefront of the narrative, expressing a preference for media that provides factual insights into criminal justice processes, offender rehabilitation, and victim advocacy. This finding confirms emerging evidence from Dowler et al. (2006) and Slakoff (2022) that evidence like case files, interviews, and recordings are seen as favourable and contribute to certain true crime media being perceived as truthful, honest, and reliable.

This also aligns with evidence suggesting that true crime audiences, particularly women, often seek practical knowledge to enhance their safety and prevent victimization (Boling & Hull, 2018; Sarteschi, 2016; Vicary & Fraley, 2010).

### **Limitations & Future Directions**

This research has some limitations. First, the skewed gender distribution in our study means that our findings primarily reflect women's experiences, with limited representation from men and none from other genders. Given gender dynamics such as higher endorsement of rape myth acceptance among men than women (Weng See, 2017), our findings may have differed with a more gender-balanced sample. Likewise, a self-selection bias may have been present, whereby participants who volunteered for this follow-up study after completing the initial survey may differ from those who did not. Second, most participants in this study reported that TV and films were their preferred formats of true crime media, resulting in an inability to capture the experiences of consumers of other formats (e.g., podcasts, YouTube videos, TikTok reels). Compared to the longer format of limited series and films, the short video format utilised on TikTok and similar social media platforms may render it difficult to accurately portray complex cases such as found in the true crime arena. Audiences of short-form content may subsequently process and respond to case information differently than those who prefer more in-depth coverage from long-form videos. Exploring platform-specific effects and the influence of digital communities on audience perceptions could provide valuable insights in future research. Lastly, as we did not explicitly recruit participants with a strong interest in true crime, our findings may not align with the experiences and perceptions of avid fans of this genre. Future research would benefit from a more targeted recruitment approach to develop a deeper understanding of the perspectives of self-identified true crime fans.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

This research underscores the need for ethical and balanced portrayals in true crime media. Participants highlighted their desire for more emphasis on education without glamourising the offender or depicting the victim as collateral damage in the hero's journey. It is important that true crime media producers work towards a better balance, depicting offenders in a manner that promotes rehabilitation without diminishing their responsibility for their offences, eliciting unwanted adoration or sexualisation, or (re-)traumatising victims. By prioritising ethical storytelling, true crime media can contribute positively to public discourse, fostering a more nuanced understanding of offenders and greater sensitivity toward victims and their loved ones.

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No financial support was received for this study.

### **Availability of Data and Material**

Supplementary materials from this research are publicly available on the Open Science Framework at:

[https://osf.io/prsha/overview?view\\_only=f442e47d27e447faadf1ea9f5b9a23ba](https://osf.io/prsha/overview?view_only=f442e47d27e447faadf1ea9f5b9a23ba)

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

### **Ethical Approval and Informed Consent**

This study received ethical approval from the University of Derby College of Health, Psychology and Social Care Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection (Ref: ETH2324-1152). All participants provided their informed consent before taking part.

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