Journal Article

CMC

Crime Media Culture
1–20

DOI: 10.1177/17416590251371618
journals.sagepub.com/home/cmc
Sage

"What an invasion, an immense invasion": Examining the adverse effects of true crime media on co-victims

Kelli S. Boling[1] and Danielle C. Slakoff[2]

Abstract

Through in-depth qualitative interviews with 20 people who identify as co-victims (friends/family members of missing people, victims, and/or perpetrators) spotlighted in true crime productions, this study addresses growing concerns regarding the ethics of true crime media and how the genre can be retraumatizing for those featured. This study focuses on algorithmic media consumption, fandom culture, and participatory audiences to demonstrate how the media environment has changed, encouraging exploitation and sensationalism for capitalistic gain. Co-victims identified five main issues with the true crime genre: (1) inaccuracies, (2) the sensationalization of tragedy, (3) loss of privacy due to media attention, (4) uncomfortable interactions with true crime consumers, including online trolls, and (5) lack of control over how these stories are produced or edited, often resulting in further harm.

Keywords

true crime, qualitative, interviews, ethics, co-victims

Introduction

The Netflix series *Monsters* is described as a "true crime drama," which, by definition, is a dramatization of real events (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d, b; Netflix Official Site, n.d). The series focuses on well-known crimes–such as the serial killings perpetrated by Jeffrey Dahmer (season 1) and the Menedez Brothers case (season 2)–but has been criticized for sensationalization and inaccuracies (France, 2024; McGinley, 2024; Netflix Official Site, n.d; Vera, 2024). The ethics of the *Monsters*

[1]University of Nebraska-Lincoln, USA
[2]California State University, Sacramento, USA

Corresponding author:
Kelli S. Boling, College of Journalism and Mass Communications, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 200 Centennial Mall N, Lincoln, NE 68508, USA.
Email: kelli.boling@unl.edu

series and the true crime genre have been widely debated (Horeck, 2019b; Mallett, 2024; McIntosh, 2024), yet the series garnered 12.3 million views in the first 4 days after its season two launch (Hailu, 2024). The Menendez brothers and several co-victims whose portrayals were reenacted in both the Dahmer and Menendez brothers' seasons of *Monster* have been vocal in their criticism of the portrayals. They have pointed out inaccuracies, noted they had no say in the production, and expressed concerns about receiving no benefit from the profits generated by the retelling of their trauma (France, 2024; McGinley, 2024; Porterfield, 2023; Vargas, 2022; Vera, 2024).

While some may question how true crime productions can proceed without the consent of those portrayed, the case details are considered part of the public domain because they are factual and, as such, are not protected by copyright laws (Callihan, 2022). Most true crime productions include mugshots, case files, news reports, video evidence, and other materials collected during the investigation—none of which is subject to intellectual property protections or the right to publicity at the federal level (Callihan, 2022). Unfortunately for co-victims, defined as "friends or family members of the victim and/or perpetrator" (Slakoff et al., 2024: 304), their lives are impacted by the consumption and production of the genre (Chan, 2020; Peterson, 2019). Their trauma can be reproduced for decades, including inaccuracies, sensationalization, and reenactments with very few options for legal repercussions (Callihan, 2022; Chan, 2020).

The purpose of this study is to examine the negative impacts of true crime on co-victims, including those who have sought media attention and those who have attempted to avoid it. It is important to note that this study is focused on cases from the United States (U.S.) and centers co-victims based in the U.S. Importantly, however, some U.S. cases may be the center of international productions. Through 20 in-depth interviews with friends and family members of victims or missing people featured in true crime media, we address a gap in the literature regarding the impact of true crime on co-victims and larger society.

Literature review

True crime and co-victims

True crime media is a narrative retelling of a real-life crime in past tense (Punnett, 2018). Because the genre is constructed from actual crimes, material about the cases is available for producers in the public domain (Callihan, 2022). Legal scholars have argued that "in most cases, true crime capitalizes on the exploitation of individuals' personhood," yet those portrayed in true crime are left without legal recourse because the case details are publicly available and easily accessible (Callihan, 2022; Williams, 2020: 305). This creates a cycle of coverage where true crime media is based on details made public by traditional media, and both true crime and traditional media can retraumatize co-victims. Unfortunately, this cycle also perpetuates any inaccuracies from the initial coverage and may invite speculation, accusations, and intrusive behaviors from some media consumers in the audience (Chan, 2020; Kim, 2024; Mallett, 2024; Tron, 2022).

The relationship between co-victims and true crime media is complex. While true crime has helped to reopen cases (Chaudry et al., 2015; Pâquet, 2021), reverse convictions (Gilbert et al., 2019), and solve cold cases (Melley, 2021), it has also encouraged internet sleuthing, even "jurified audiences" (Anders and Kornfield, 2021; Pâquet, 2021: 421; Tait, 2021), and silenced co-victims who refused to participate in the production (Tait, 2021; Woods, 2016). The genre,

audience, and co-victims have been intertwined since the 1500s, and critics have described the genre as being sensationalized for centuries (Jared, 2024). Yet, the popularity of true crime remains (Naseer and Aubin, 2023).

Prior research has found the genre to attract audiences for several reasons: the desire to educate and protect oneself from similar situations (Vicary and Fraley, 2010), entertainment/boredom (Boling and Hull, 2018), seeing someone similar to yourself as a protagonist in a story (Vicary and Fraley, 2010), processing personal trauma by hearing similar stories (Boling, 2023), and the love of a good story/mystery (Boling, 2023). The genre also has strong online communities (Pavelko and Myrick, 2020) and has seen a resurgence across streaming services (Wilson, 2019).

For co-victims, the genre offers the opportunity to have their story covered by long-format, non-traditional media and potentially solve cold cases or find justice for those wrongly incarcerated (Melley, 2021; Slakoff and Boling, 2025). However, it can also retraumatize those involved and interfere with investigations (Tait, 2021; Tron, 2022). All true crime media is not made equally, and there is no one-size-fits-all solution for justice. As the media landscape becomes cluttered with documentaries, dramatizations, podcasts, novels, movies, and social media posts, those involved with the crimes often find themselves at the intersection of participation and abstention, neither of which guarantees accuracy or justice.

Fandom and participatory culture

The term "fan" is often associated with athletics. In that context, fandom is normalized because it is assumed that most people have a favorite team. However, in media culture, fandom is often trivialized, especially when the fandom is predominantly women (Coleman and Lyons, 2024; Ganguly, 2021). Media fans are often considered obsessed with particular media and are labeled with a group moniker (Vartan, 2022). For example, people who enjoy Star Trek are called "Trekkies," and they are known to attend conventions, dress as characters, and adopt vernacular specific to the shows (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d, a; Vartan, 2022). Similar fandoms exist for popular books (e.g. Harry Potter), musicians (e.g. "Swifties" are fans of Taylor Swift), and comic book characters (e.g. Marvel/ DC; Vartan, 2022). While these fan communities may be considered extreme and even mocked in popular culture, they are the ideal audience for media producers (Cullather, 2023). They buy merchandise, tell others about their support, and rabidly consume whatever is produced related to their fandom (Cullather, 2023). These communities are active audiences, engaging with the media in unique ways (Cullather, 2023; Jenkins, 1992).

Henry Jenkins argues that "fans cease to be simply an audience for popular texts; instead, they become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meaning" (Jenkins, 1992: 24). These fans often appropriate texts, understanding and using them in ways media producers did not intend, leading to in-person conventions, meetings, and sometimes additional media produced to honor the primary source (Jenkins, 1992). Some fans will go so far as to integrate their fandom into their identity, permanently adopting characteristics belonging to book and show characters, celebrities, etc. (Whiteman, 2009). Many people engage with others in their fandom in online spaces (Sauro, 2017).

Fandom does not generally equate to unhealthy behaviors in media audiences, but that line is often blurred by parasocial interaction - when audiences have one-sided, non-reciprocal relationships with celebrities (Horton and Wohl, 1956). While initial studies on parasocial interaction

focused on non-reciprocal relationships in film and television (Horton and Wohl, 1956), recent research has questioned fandom that may border on parasocial interaction in podcasts (Soto-Vásquez et al., 2022; Vilceanu and Soto-Vásquez, 2023), social media influencers (Breves et al., 2021), and murder mystery game reality shows (Zhi et al., 2023).

Specific to this study, media consumers who identify as "fans" of true crime are often considered "creepy" because this fandom is societally categorized as "dark or controversial" (Fathallah, 2024). Although prior studies have found several reasons beyond the macabre that people may consume true crime (Boling, 2023; Boling and Hull, 2018; Vicary and Fraley, 2010), parasocial relationships have been part of the conversation surrounding true crime fandom because of the intensity of some audience activity (Pearson, 2022; Rutledge, 2021). For example, Gabby Petito's disappearance and murder went viral on social media (Rennex, 2021). One psychologist argued that "TikTokers become the storytellers, creating fan fiction by embellishing and furthering the narrative through the constraints and artifice of a three-minute video loop, speculation, projection, and fantasy" (Rutledge, 2021, para. 7). These storytellers feel like they own the story and have a working relationship with the Petito family because they are helping solve the case (Rutledge, 2021). These creators further feel this gives them license to scour through Gabby's online presence, visit places she had visited, and contact the family. Critics have echoed that sentiment more generally, contending that true crime influencers/creators intentionally cultivate parasocial relationships by making their audience "feel like family" (Pearson, 2022, para. 6).

Judith Fathallah describes true crime fandom as "absolutely mainstream, an endlessly profitable and sometimes respectable staple of the media landscape" (Fathallah, 2024: 2). Still, she argues that the audience "must constantly negotiate and police a boundary that separates them from a posited Bad Fan - the obsessive fan of a criminal" (Fathallah, 2024: 2). Fathallah argues that consuming the genre has become culturally acceptable because of its popularity. However, at the same time, it is also unacceptable to cross an invisible borderline into crime/criminal fandom (Fathallah, 2024).

Because of social media and streaming services, we now live in a participatory culture of media and consumers (Horeck, 2019a; Jenkins, 2019). There are communities on Facebook, Reddit, and other social media sites where media consumers gather to discuss episodes of their favorite television series, podcasts, etc. (Boling and Hull, 2018; Yardley et al., 2017). While this participatory culture creates a more interactive media environment, it can also allow audience members to connect directly with co-victims, which may be unhealthy or unwanted by those involved (Yardley et al., 2017). Media audiences "acting as self-appointed custodians of justice" can rationalize their actions, comments, and attitudes toward co-victims of true crime (Yardley et al., 2017: 488). These unhealthy or unwanted interactions between audiences and co-victims may go beyond participatory culture, fandom, and parasocial interaction into an invasion of privacy.

Moreover, consumers in the true crime space may engage in trolling behaviors with co-victims and others on the internet (Phillips, 2015), causing further harm to the people connected to crime. Phillips (2015) contends that although many people consider trolling to be inappropriate, it is deeply embedded within a media system that capitalizes on stories for profit. In other words, if the media system itself exploits tragedy for capitalistic gain, it should not be surprising that some "trolls" follow suit and mimic some of the same behaviors online.

Algorithmic media consumption

The quote "if it bleeds, it leads" is commonly used to describe what William Hearst believed to be true-stories involving tragic events garner the public's attention (Reis, 2023). The news value of salaciousness in today's economy translates into likes, shares, retweets, and potentially new subscribers. Notably, the repetitive broadcasting of the same crime is rarely questioned because of the profitability of the stories (Slakoff and Fradella, 2019; Weaver, 2022). The media industry is for profit, so shareholders expect a return on investment, and advertisers expect consumers to see their brands. Specific to true crime media, little oversight, and no clear ethical guidelines create an environment driven by capitalism, with co-victims being retraumatized regularly (Tait, 2021; Tron, 2022).

As consumers rely more on streaming services with proprietary algorithms to suggest what they should watch, true crime fans could find themselves scrolling through stories of trauma across television, podcasts, books, and social media feeds. Because of these proprietary algorithms, streaming services can tell exactly when someone starts watching a show instead of casually scrolling through channels (Gilbert, 2022; Horeck, 2019a). Then, they can reproduce "the hook" to keep viewers interested in and watching the same types of shows regularly (Horeck, 2019a). Without realizing it, consumers who make it to the "hook" episode might find themselves seeing other productions on the same crime, by the same producer, or tagged with any number of subgenre filters designed to "hook" them to the next series, documentary, or podcast (Horeck, 2019a). This type of media consumption can place consumers of true crime media in a never-ending loop of content, creating a market for exploitation and sensationalization. Importantly, the average media consumer may not realize that they have been sucked into the algorithmic loop.

This algorithmic consumption raises questions regarding the ethics of producers and streaming services. In this environment, streaming services can direct viewers toward less-than-ethical productions, and the audience may not even notice the shift from documentary to docudrama. But, of course, this ethical debate is not new. The ethics of true crime have been questioned for centuries (Henderson, 2022). In 2022, *Ethical Space* published a special issue examining true crime productions globally, exploring ethics in literature (Fogarty, 2022), podcasts (Boling, 2022b; Pâquet, 2022), and citizen investigations (Jones, 2022). Unfortunately, while these questions continue to be raised, there is no genre oversight to ensure that productions consider co-victims' rights, privacy, or mental health. To better understand how the genre is impacting friends and family members of victims and missing people, we spoke to co-victims of crimes that true crime media have covered.

Methods

Study participants & recruitment

For this study, the researchers conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 20 co-victims of crime, which we define as friends or family of victims or missing people. To participate, the interviewee's loved one had their story covered by true crime media (e.g. documentaries, podcasts, television shows, books, etc.). Participants were primarily recruited using snowball sampling, a method often used for populations that are not easily accessible (Naderifar et al., 2017).

Snowball sampling is influenced by the researchers' already established relationships and networks (Parker et al., 2019); in this case, the researchers knew some co-victims who had experienced true crime coverage of their loved one's case via their prior work on the impact of true crime. The study began by recruiting these primary contacts as a starting point. Once these primary contacts were interviewed, the researchers asked them if they knew of other co-victims willing to discuss the impact of true crime on their lives. This chain-referral method was used to recruit the majority of participants, and was an efficient way to contact hard-to-reach co-victims (Naderifar et al., 2017). In some cases, the researchers directly contacted co-victims of crime who publicly spoke about their experiences with the genre. All initial contact with participants occurred online via email or direct message on social media.

Study participants ranged in age from 28 to 73, with an average age of 48. Thirteen participants were women, and seven were men. Fifteen of the 20 participants were white, echoing prior studies which have noted that victims featured by true crime tend to be white (Slakoff and Duran, 2023). Almost every participant was an immediate family member of the victim or missing person, including the person's children, parents/stepparents, half/full siblings, or partners/spouses. One participant was the missing person's best friend. The vast majority of co-victims were connected to homicide cases, while three were connected to people who had gone missing under unnatural circumstances. Importantly, many of the crimes were domestic in nature and occurred within families. As such, some co-victims were also related to the perpetrator of the crime. Further, some co-victims were primary victims of the same perpetrator, making them both victims and co-victims of crime.

A primary concern of the researchers was avoiding retraumatizing the participants. We believe that the snowball sample was a critical part of this process, building trust with the researchers before the interviews even began. Participants were told at the beginning of the interview that they could skip any question they were not comfortable answering. Moreover, as part of the interview protocol, participants were given the number to the national suicide and crisis hotline after the interview.

Study design

The protocols for this study were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at both researchers' universities (IRB Numbers: Cayuse-22-23-178 & 20230522807EX). Using an interview guide, the researchers asked all participants the same primary questions (Taylor, 2005). Depending on participant responses, the researchers sometimes asked follow-up questions (Kallio et al., 2016). All interviews were conducted on Zoom, a video conferencing platform, from September to December 2023. All participants orally consented to their interview being recorded for transcription purposes. All participants were offered a $100 USD Amazon gift card as an incentive. The funding for this incentive came from the AEJMC Mass Communication and Society Faculty Research Grant. The interviews averaged 65.8 minutes in length.

At the beginning of each interview, each participant was provided the option to use a pseudonym or their real name for the write-up of results. Nineteen of 20 participants elected to use their real names in the study, and one participant preferred to go by their first name only. In line with participants' decision to use their names, the Findings section below includes the names of some participants. All named participants were provided with the first version of the manuscript

Table 1. Named participants.

Name of co-victim	*Relation to victim or missing person*
Jan Canty	Wife of homicide victim Alan Canty
Eric Carter-Landin	Brother of homicide victim Jacob Landin
Amy Chesler	Daughter of homicide victim Hadas Winnick
Jessika Gaehring	Fiancée of homicide victim Austin Utley
Kim Goldman	Sister of homicide victim Ron Goldman
Kiirsi Hellewell	Best friend of missing and presumed killed woman Susan Cox Powell
Diane Kloepfer	Half-sister of an unidentified girl killed by her father
Collier Landry	Son of homicide victim Noreen Boyle
Lawrence (*Requested Researchers Use His First Name Only*)	Lawrence's loved one was killed in an assault
Carmen Lodato	Daughter of homicide victim Ruthanne Lodato
Madison McGhee	Daughter of homicide victim John Cornelius McGhee
Julie Murray	Sister of missing woman Maura Murray
Terra Newell	Daughter of domestic violence victim Debra Newell; Direct survivor of the same perpetrator
John Palmer	Husband of Katie Palmer, who was fatally struck by a driver while out walking
Bill Thomas	Brother of homicide victim Cathleen "Cathy" Thomas

submitted to *Crime, Media, Culture*, and all signed a written Consent to Publish form explaining that their names would be used in the publication. The quoted material did not change after revision (Table 1).

All interviews were recorded on Zoom and transcribed via Rev.com. To analyze the data, the two researchers conducted a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Put simply, thematic analysis is the systematic process of identifying, organizing, and explaining the patterns within qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2012). To analyze the data, the researchers first separately read the transcripts multiple times and generated their initial codes and categories. Then, the two authors met and discussed the categorical findings. The two authors' categories were in agreement, and together they developed broader themes. The second author then re-read the transcripts to verify that all data was appropriately sorted into these broader themes. All told, five broad themes related to the negative impacts of true crime emerged from the interview data.

Findings: The Negative impacts of true crime on co-victims

When examining the data for the negative impacts of true crime, several common themes emerged, including that true crime (1) *contains inaccuracies* and (2) *sensationalizes tragedy*. Further, co-victims described (3) *a lack of privacy after the crime/disappearance occurred* and that they experienced (4) *uncomfortable interactions with true crime consumers*, including people sometimes engaging in trolling behaviors. Co-victims also noted (5) that *they cannot control whether true crime is produced, nor how it is edited*, which can cause further harm. Below, we describe each theme in turn.

True crime contains inaccuracies

A prevalent theme regarding the negative impact of true crime is that *true crime content is frequently inaccurate*. Several participants described consuming true crime and noticing incorrect information. Kiirsi Hellewell, best friend of missing and presumed killed woman Susan Cox Powell, argued that true crime "need[s] to be completely honest and truthful. They shouldn't be going off of rumors." She then described watching a television series about Susan's disappearance:

> I just watched it and we just sat there and we're like, 'Whoa, that's wrong, that's wrong, that's wrong, that's not true, that's not. . . Wow, this is really bad.' They shared her story, but they sure got a lot of details wrong.

Similarly, Jan Canty, wife of homicide victim Alan Canty, described a piece of true crime content about her husband's death: "It was much more superficial than I had hoped for. The flashbacks that they put into the storytelling were wildly inaccurate." Bill Thomas, brother of homicide victim Cathy Thomas, said, "Unfortunately, with a case like ours that's stretched on for 37 years and there's been a lot of coverage over the years, not all of it is accurate." Importantly, because much of the information regarding the case is in the public domain, co-victims are left with few legal options to correct inaccurate information, and the inaccuracies can persist across multiple productions (Callihan, 2022; Williams, 2020).

Two co-victims specifically mentioned mis- and dis-information. Eric Carter-Landin, brother of homicide victim Jacob Landin, noted that "if misinformation is being spread on a case, it can cause a lot of problems for the case." Julie Murray, sister of missing woman Maura Murray, said, "Until consumers and creators try to look at it with a little bit more empathy, we're going to continue to see the exploitation, the wild speculation, the misinformation, disinformation, and it's not helping the victims. . ." When asked a follow-up question about how inaccuracies impact co-victims, Julie Murray shared, "I liken it to sort of policing the internet. It's an impossible task. I could never correct all the misinformation. And if I tried to, then who would be looking for my sister?"

Several co-victims and convicted perpetrators have spoken out about the impact that inaccurate coverage can have on their lives and pending appeals (Kim, 2024; Tron, 2022; Vera, 2024). However, with few legal options and the amount of true crime content produced, these inaccuracies are often left unaddressed (Callihan, 2022; Williams, 2020). As Julie Murray reminds us, if the goal is to solve the crime or correct an injustice, the focus should stay on the victim or missing person. Unfortunately, while true crime consumers may assume the material is factual and correct, co-victims described true crime as being sometimes inaccurate.

True crime sensationalizes tragedy

Another common theme across interviews is that true crime *sensationalizes people's personal tragedies*. Put differently, co-victims noted that true crime often focused on the most shocking details of their loved one's cases. Co-victims described true crime as "click-bait," "salacious," or "tabloidish." Eric-Carter Landin described the impact of sensationalism on families: "I think that salaciousness and speculation can cause additional trauma to the surviving family members and the people that are out there fighting for justice." When discussing the negative impacts of true

crime, Bill Thomas shared how hard it can be to share about your loved one's death multiple times. He then described the impact of sensational true crime media on family members:

> . . .when you step into if true crime media is not well done and not respectful, then you're left with the very uncomfortable reality that this media outlet has sensationalized your loved one's case or gotten details wrong or produced content that is disrespectful, sensationalized, distasteful, and may ultimately end up making you feel terrible about the whole experience.

Bill Thomas also noted that a focus on violent details comes at the expense of sharing other important information about the case, "Without that light touch, without that sensitivity, without that healthy dollop of respect, I think a lot of these things are lost because it's like, 'Well, let's make this big and slashy.'" He continued, "This isn't a slasher film. This isn't a work of fiction."

The issue of exploitation and sensationalism came up repeatedly in our interviews and stems from the "if it bleeds, it leads" mindset (Reis, 2023). In today's algorithmic media environment (Horeck, 2019a), many productions depend on social media conversations, viral posts, and earned media coverage, even if that coverage is negative (Westcott et al., 2024). Ryan Murphy, producer of the Netflix series *Monsters*, has made public comments about the Menendez brothers, some of which have been repeatedly replayed by media outlets (Lee, 2024). That coverage, while negative, keeps the show's name in the public conversation and draws additional viewers (Westcott et al., 2024).

Lawrence, who requested the researchers use his first name only, lost his loved one in an assault. He shared that season-long true crime can get into more depth about the victims, but that short true crime episodes cannot: "If you're just doing 45 minutes or an hour. . . then you just hit the sensational stuff and try to keep your audience engaged and sell laundry detergent." The media industry depends on subscriptions and advertising, and is designed to profit off of what is produced, even if it is factual news content. While it may seem callous, true crime productions are designed to generate revenue. Respect and profitability can coexist, but "if it bleeds, it leads" still appears to be the industry norm (Reis, 2023).

Carmen Lodato, daughter of homicide victim Ruthann Lodato, described that her relationship with true crime changed after seeing sensationalized content surrounding her mother's death: "I didn't really feel super strongly either way, but once I was on the other side of it and I lost my mom, and then there was a lot of sensationalizing of that, I was very against it." She continued, "And I am very vocal and I talk to my friends about it and talk to people I know about it and encourage them to do their research before just listening to something." Co-victims speaking out about sensationalization is a step toward awareness and change for true crime media, but it would take systemic, industry-level change to alter the current environment (Weaver, 2022).

Lack of privacy after the crime/disappearance

A common theme in co-victims' testimonies is that *they experienced an extreme loss of privacy after the crime or disappearance of their loved one.* In general, this lack of privacy came from outsized media attention, and co-victims spoke about both traditional and true crime media negatively impacting their privacy. Diane Kloepfer, half-sister of an unidentified girl killed by her father, said, "I think anybody that participates in these kind of true crime things should know that they're

giving up willfully the right to privacy and the right to personal peace. You're just giving it up." Carmen Lodato shared:

> Well, so when it first happened and my mom was killed, obviously it was such a loss and invasion of privacy from all of the local media. . ..And we were grieving, and we were so upset, and we just were like, 'We're devastated. We don't really have anything to say to the media,' the local media at first. And then once it started, the other documentaries and things like that started to come into play, we were like, 'We've been through enough.
>
> We've been through so much, and we don't really want to dig it up and deal with it all again.'

Jan Canty described that media coverage of her husband's death continued for 18 months after his homicide. She ultimately decided to leave her Detroit home: "I didn't want to go. I loved Detroit. It's where my relatives were, and my friends, and where I'd been educated." She continued, "I had just started my practice, which was just taking off. I had to abandon it all because the media was not going to leave me alone."

Amy Chesler described a similar experience with the media after her mother's murder. On her first visit back to her home, which she shared with her mother and was the scene of her mother's homicide, Chesler described a reporter taking her picture and asking her questions. She explained, "I'm nervous about just getting into my home where my mom was murdered, let alone having someone with a high-power camera taking pictures of me doing that. What an invasion, an immense invasion." Carmen Lodato, whose mom was killed inside her home, described media trying to get a good shot: "These people are driving by our house in a van with the door open with their camera, getting this weird rolling shot down the street. It's just, stuff like that just feels so invasive."

It is important to note that this invasion comes from traditional media first and directly violates the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) Code of Ethics (Society of Professional Journalists, n.d). One of the main tenets of the SPJ Code of Ethics is to "minimize harm," including "balanc[ing] the public's need for information against potential harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance or undue intrusiveness" (Society of Professional Journalists, n.d). Participants described incidents where traditional media (professional journalists) crossed the line into "undue intrusiveness" for photos and quotes. If the traditional media sets this example, it should not be surprising that true crime coverage follows suit.

Uncomfortable interactions with true crime fans

The outsized media focus on crime can lead to *uncomfortable interactions between co-victims and consumers of true crime*. Jan Canty described this connection between media attention and consumer behavior succinctly: ". . .it can lead to big intrusions of your privacy, especially from the fallout of crime junkies who like to come by, and spy, and steal stuff." Indeed, across interviews, several co-victims described true crime consumers forming unhealthy attachments to their loved one's cases or particular theories, sometimes leading to strange and harmful interactions. Julie Murray described how consumers of the genre have come to her family home:

> I've had people come to my home, in my family's home, and literally look in our windows, come to our back doors when we didn't answer the front, because there's this sense of entitlement with these people that become so obsessed and they think that they're onto something and they don't have the full set of facts, and they think that they're entitled to everything as if my missing sister is public property.

Jessika Gaehring, fiancee of homicide victim Austin Utley, described how some fans of the genre are overly passionate: "And it's like people get obsessive, and that's scary. That part is scary. They know who you are. They can look you up." Later in the interview, she noted, "I wish there was a way to control true crime fans, but there's really nothing that we can do about that. Maybe the media could also say, don't contact the families, be respectful."

This type of interaction is not necessarily parasocial (Horton and Wohl, 1956) but is clearly intrusive. A parasocial interaction involves an audience member believing that they have a relationship with a media personality (Horton and Wohl, 1956). As Julie Murray describes, some fans are armchair detectives who believe they can cross personal boundaries to try to solve the case. Because true crime media has become interactive, the audience may feel encouraged to help solve the case, justifying their intrusive behavior (Tait, 2021). In some cases, true crime producers have structured the content to seek justice with a "jurified audience," appealing to law enforcement and the court system to reopen cases based on popular demand (Pâquet, 2021: 425). This type of production can blur the line of justice for audience members and encourage intrusive behavior.

Several co-victims described media consumers reaching out to them on social media.

Some of the interactions were kind on the surface but felt uncomfortable for co-victims. For example, Carmen Lodato described how "random people on the internet think it's okay to write to me on Facebook and be like, 'I saw your mom's story on the ID channel. I'm so sorry for your loss.'" Lodato continued, "I don't know why people think that that's appropriate. . .I don't want any contact from anybody." Diane Kloepfer, whose half-sister was killed by her father, said she sometimes receives social media messages about her dad: "Some people try to be encouraging and say, 'Oh, you're not like him,' blah, blah—got it. I already know. Thank you." Kloepfer also mentioned being contacted by what she called "web sleuths" and others, noting that people "think because they saw you share your story that they can just reach out to you for no reason at all." Again, this is not parasocial interaction (Horton and Wohl, 1956) because having a relationship with the co-victim is not necessarily the goal of the audience or producers—for some, the goal is to get credit for solving the case and/or to become a known influencer in the true crime environment.

Other co-victims described consumers over-sharing with them. Madison McGhee, daughter of homicide victim John Cornelius McGhee, described interactions with true crime fans: "People think that they know me and want to hang out with me, or message me all the time, or trauma dump on me their thing. And you lose all sense of boundaries." Kim Goldman, sister of homicide victim Ron Goldman, noted a similar interaction with consumers: "People are still so heated and emotional about [my brother's case], and if I put myself in any kind of a public space that gives them free rein to just verbal diarrhea all of it on me, both positive and negative."

Several co-victims also described "trolling" behavior by people in online spaces. Specifically, it seemed some folks were purposefully trying to upset or antagonize co-victims. Collier Landry, son of homicide victim Noreen Boyle, described one such incident:

> People were trolling me, saying that I was responsible for my mother's death because I told my mother about my father's affair, and if I had just kept my mouth shut, she would still be alive. And I would engage with these people. And it was just to no avail, because of course, they then say more and more infuriating things or incendiary comments just because they're, again, looking to get a reaction for whatever reason.

One co-victim described people commenting on her blog about her weight and saying that she was using the tragedy for "15 minutes of fame." John Palmer, husband of Katie Palmer, who was killed by a driver while out on a walk, said that while 99.5% of interactions with media consumers were positive, there were still some negative ones, too: "It's been a very small amount, but you'll get those that will send you messages. Those that are just trolls that are just seeking some kind of negative response." In sum, it was clear that co-victims often experience uncomfortable interactions with consumers of the true crime genre, including unwanted conversations and interactions and, sometimes, trolling behaviors. These interactions are notably different from parasocial relationships (Horton and Wohl, 1956) but seem to cross into "Bad fan" territory (Fathallah, 2024). Indeed, there is a clear tension between true crime fans who are concerned citizens and those who overstep and cause discomfort.

Co-victims cannot control whether true crime is made (or what the end product looks like)

Another common theme across co-victim interviews is that *co-victims cannot control whether true crime is made, or what the end product looks like*. Several co-victims described that they could not control the creation of true crime content because their loved one's stories are public record. For example, Carmen Lodato shared:

> All of that stuff is public, and even if you don't participate, they can make some series and put it on Hulu or put it on Netflix or wherever, and there's nothing you, as the family member can do about it. And I think a lot of people just don't realize who's involved, or the fact that the families are not consenting for this to all be brought back up again.

Julie Murray explained the issue similarly, saying that sometimes families will ask true crime not to be made, to no avail: "Even when families say no, they still do it sometimes." Kim Goldman noted, "I can't stop [media] from telling the story because it's court records. So at what point do I have an ability to say, 'Stop, I don't want this anymore.'" Lawrence described a writer coming to him about his loved one's case and asking for his participation. The person told Lawrence, "We're going forward without you, so we don't need your consent, and you're not going to be compensated or anything like that." Terra Newell, daughter of domestic violence victim Debra Newell and survivor of the same perpetrator, described that one of the negatives of true crime is that "you find out something's being made, you have no idea, and then it re-triggers you altogether."

Some co-victims described participating in media interviews and then having their words edited down or misconstrued. Lawrence succinctly said, "I don't get to choose how it's told if somebody else is telling it." Kim Goldman described the family's lack of control over the end product, saying:

> I have no control over how it gets produced. I have no control over who else they're inviting to participate. I have no control in what they ask. I can control how I answer, but I don't know how that's going to get edited down and misconstrued or taken out of context, and so why?

Julie Murray described how this puts co-victims in a vulnerable place: ". . .you really are going into it with blind faith. You're trusting these people to have your best interest, the victim's best interest." She continued, "But then, when the final product is released, there's so much that's altered and edited to evoke a certain emotion from the viewer. That stuff isn't explained to families and participants in these types of productions." This editing can cause further harm or foster distrust between the media and the family members.

Other co-victims described feeling forced to participate in interviews because the media would be made with or without their input. For example, Jessika Gaehring said, "If you want to tell your side of the story, if you want your loved one talked about in the right way or the right things shared, then you're forced to talk and tell your side." Kim Goldman described creating her podcast, and how her participants will tell her that they feel they have to participate in media productions: "Well, if I don't talk, what are they going to say? And I always want to be able to talk about my loved one, but that ends up on the cutting room floor."

Since facts are in the public domain and co-victims have very few legal options regarding media productions (Callihan, 2022), they are dependent on professional journalists following the SPJ Code of Ethics (Society of Professional Journalists, n.d) and independent citizen sleuths adhering to a moral code that does not include exploitation.

Discussion and conclusion

Research to date has not focused on co-victims' experiences with the true crime genre (Slakoff et al., 2024). Since co-victims have no legal recourse against true crime productions, even if they are inaccurate (Callihan, 2022; Williams, 2020), many have taken to the media to voice their concerns and attempt to correct inaccurate coverage (Kim, 2024; Tron, 2022; Vera, 2024). As we have demonstrated in this study, without legal repercussions, there is very little that can be done to protect co-victims and prevent retraumatizing them for the sake of capitalism (Callihan, 2022; Williams, 2020). Indeed, systemic change is needed (Weaver, 2022). Even though fans of the genre may not be able to distinguish between true crime and traditional crime coverage, this study shows that the media industry (both traditional media and true crime) is sometimes retraumatizing co-victims. Participants reported that traditional media sometimes violated the SPJ code of ethics in their coverage by engaging in "undue intrusiveness" (Society of Professional Journalists, n.d), leading to inaccuracies, loss of privacy, and further traumatization.

In addition to issues within the media industry, the current social media environment contributes to retraumatization (Westcott et al., 2024), with influencers and content creators capitalizing on popular cases. The motivations of these "jurified audiences" (Pâquet, 2021) may be altruistic, but that does not justify the intrusive behaviors reported by co-victims (Tait, 2021). While this is not parasocial interaction (Horton and Wohl, 1956), lives are being impacted, sometimes to the extent that co-victims move to protect themselves and their families from fans (Chan, 2020; Peterson, 2019). One of the downsides of social media–and the internet in general–is how easily people can contact co-victims or upload content without consent.

Fathallah (2024: 2) argues that true crime is mainstream, profitable, and "sometimes respectable," but contends that fans can become obsessive to the point that they are "Bad Fans." Her definition of a Bad Fan is when someone crosses the line of fandom into being a fan of the criminal. We argue that this definition should be extended to fans who cross the line and intrude on the privacy of co-victims, even if their motives are seemingly altruistic.

The co-victims in this study identified five core concerns regarding the true crime genre: it contains inaccuracies, it sensationalizes tragedy, there is a lack of privacy after the crime/disappearance occurs (often led by traditional media), and uncomfortable interactions with true crime consumers sometimes happen. Co-victims also noted that they cannot control whether true crime is produced or how it is edited.

In sum, these findings point to the exploitation and powerlessness of co-victims and their loved ones. While co-victims may depend on the media to bring attention to their loved one's case (Slakoff and Boling, 2025), that does not invite sensationalism driven by capitalism into their lives without end. Indeed, true crime producers benefit from telling these stories in sensational and sometimes inaccurate ways, and the media is a for-profit industry. Co-victims' are also legally powerless to stop it (Callihan, 2022; Williams, 2020). Even when co-victims participate and consent to create the content, they have no control over the end product or whether their words will be edited, misconstrued, or removed altogether, potentially adding further trauma to an already painful life experience.

With a lack of control over the end product, co-victims may feel used and exploited. Furthermore, co-victims' loss of privacy after the crime/disappearance–alongside uncomfortable interactions with true crime consumers–can magnify their pain and make them feel helpless in the face of intense media and public scrutiny. Put bluntly, in the current true crime media landscape, with little to no oversight and no widely adopted ethical standards, co-victims are sometimes exploited and harmed by true crime producers. While traditional media outlets typically follow industry ethical standards, there is no general oversight for true crime production and therefore, no repercussions for a breach of ethics or harming co-victims. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly to co-victims, their loved one's stories may be framed in sensationalistic and inaccurate ways, causing harm to investigations and sullying their loved one's memory. Additionally, when co-victims choose to speak out on behalf of their loved ones, they then may experience negative feedback about *themselves* by true crime consumers.

Limitations and future research

As a qualitative study, this research is not meant to be generalizable, either to co-victims or fans of the true crime genre. However, this study does shed light on the lived experience of people connected to—and sometimes featured in—true crime media. In future work, the sample size could be expanded, and surveys or focus groups could be used to understand co-victims' experiences further. Although every co-victim interviewed had experienced their loved one's story being covered within the true crime genre, the researchers did not account for the impact of coverage intensity (i.e. the amount and scope of coverage). Future researchers may wish to examine the impact of coverage intensity on co-victims.

Another notable limitation is that this study focuses on cases from the U.S., and therefore primarily focuses on U.S. news and the American true crime genre. The U.S. supports a free press, but some networks and productions have been accused of sensationalizing stories (Mallett, 2024).

While these sensationalized productions may not be the norm globally, they are a normalized portion of the true crime genre in the U.S. (although, this is not true of the entire genre). Future researchers could focus specifically on true crime media from other countries or interview co-victims who have primarily experienced their loved one's case being covered by non-American productions.

Conclusion

We live in a true crime media environment driven by algorithms and capitalism, where sensationalism dominates, following the principle that "if it bleeds, it leads" (Reis, 2023). While many have questioned the ethics of true crime (Boling, 2022b; Fogarty, 2022; Henderson, 2022; Jones, 2022; Pâquet, 2022; Slakoff et al., 2024), a deeper interrogation of the capitalist environment that sustains and encourages the retraumatization of co-victims is also warranted. This study found that both traditional media and true crime media can and do exploit victims, which leads to concerns regarding respect and privacy in our judicial system and the broader media industry.

While some co-victims are speaking out about their experiences (Kim, 2024; Tron, 2022; Vera, 2024), it will take industry-level change for empathy and respect to become the norm within the crime media industry (Weaver, 2022). As we have demonstrated, both traditional and true crime media are currently harming co-victims with unnecessary intrusiveness into their lives for the sake of profit. Indeed, true crime productions often serve to invite the audience to become part of the investigation, blurring the line of privacy and encouraging intrusive behavior. Respect and factual accuracy can co-exist with media profitability and justice, but producers must be more intentional about how stories are told and what the benefit is for the audience and the victims' families. Moreover, when creating true crime media, producers should consider the human impact of sensationalistic, inaccurate, and/or ambiguously edited coverage on co-victims. While issues of sensationalism may not be new, social media (and the explosion of true crime content creation) has exacerbated the issue. All told, both the criminal justice system and the media need to better protect victims' families and work to prevent retraumatizing co-victims. A good place to start is by listening to co-victims' experiences and recognizing how the media can cause harm.

Acknowledgements

None.

ORCID iDs

Kelli S. Boling https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1236-8761
Danielle C. Slakoff https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6174-4802

Ethical considerations

IRB Approval from California State University, Sacramento: Cayuse-22-23-178
IRB Approval from University of Nebraska, Lincoln: 20230522807EX

Consent to participate

Each participant gave verbal consent to participate at the beginning of each interview.

Consent for publication

A draft of the final manuscript was sent to all participants quoted, noting the page numbers where they were quoted and asking for written consent to publish. As of 12/12/24, all participants quoted have submitted signed consent forms for publication.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Funding for this research was provided by the Faculty Research Grant from the Mass Communications and Society Division of the Association of Education in Journalism and Mass Communications.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data availability statement

The participants in this study have agreed that the included quotes can be published; therefore, the full transcripts of the interviews are not available for public use.

References

Anders C and Kornfield M (2021) A throng of Internet sleuths are on the Gabby Petito case. Why has it sparked so much interest? *Washington Post*, 18 September. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/09/18/gabby-petito-case-tiktok-sleuths/ (accessed 15 October 2024).

Boling KS (2022b) "I'm not a journalist. I don't think that I necessarily fall under the same rules that they do.": Journalistic ethics in true crime podcast production. *Ethical Space* 19(3/4): 44–51.

Boling KS (2023) "It's that 'there but for the grace of god go I' piece of it": Domestic violence survivors in true crime podcast audiences. *Mass Communication & Society* 26(6): 991–1013.

Boling KS and Hull K (2018) Undisclosed information—Serial is my favorite murder: Examining motivations in the true crime podcast audience. *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* 25(1): 92–108.

Braun V and Clarke V (2012) Thematic analysis. In:Cooper H, Camic PM, Long DL et al. (eds) *APA Handbook of Research Methods in Psychology, Vol 2: Research Designs: Quantitative, Qualitative, Neuropsychological, and Biological*. American Psychological Association, pp.57–71.

Breves P, Amrehn J, Heidenreich A et al. (2021) Blind trust? The importance and interplay of parasocial relationships and advertising disclosures in explaining influencers' persuasive effects on their followers. *International Journal of Advertising* 40(7): 1209–1229.

Callihan L (2022) Infringement, she wrote: The intellectual property rights of victims in true crime craze. *The University of Cincinnati Intellectual Property and Computer Law Journal* 6(2): 1–13.

Cambridge Dictionary (n.d, a) Trekkie. Available at: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/trekkie (accessed 4 October 2024).

Cambridge Dictionary (n.d, b) Drama. Available at: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/drama (accessed 10 October 2024).

Chan M (2020) The human cost of our true crime obsession. *Time*, 24 April. Available at: https://time.com/5825475/true-crime-victim-families/ (accessed 4 October 2024).

Chaudry R, Miller C and Simpson S (2015) Undisclosed Podcast. The State v. Adnan Syed. Available at: https://undisclosed-podcast.com/episodes/season-1/ (accessed 15 October 2024).

Coleman R and Lyons A (2024) Stereotypes in media representations of boy bands and their fans. *Journalism* 25(8): 1717–1735.

Cullather CS (2023) Supersonic fandom: How to capitalize on today's fan-obsessed culture. Available at: https://www.nasdaq.com/articles/supersonic-fandom-how-to-capitalize-on-todays-fan-obsessed-culture (accessed 4 October 2024).

Fathallah J (2024) 'Being a fangirl of a serial killer is not ok': Gatekeeping Reddit's True Crime Community. *New Media & Society* 26(10): 5638–5657.

Fogarty RC (2022) Women's empathetic interventions in true crime storytelling. *Ethical Space* 19(3/4): 4–13.

France LR (2024) Erik Menendez says Ryan Murphy's 'Monsters' is full of 'blatant lies.' Available at: https://www.cnn.com/2024/09/23/entertainment/erik-lyle-menendez-monsters/index.html (accessed 10 October 2024).

Ganguly S (2021) The trivialisation of female fans: Addressing gender stereotypes around fandoms. Available at: https://feminisminindia.com/2021/10/27/the-trivialisation-of-female-fans-addressing-gender-stereotypes-around-fandoms/ (accessed 4 October 2024).

Gilbert A (2022) Algorithmic audiences, serialized streamers, and the discontents of datafication. *Global Storytelling: Journal of Digital and Moving Images* 2(1): 6.

Gilbert C, Mann D, Tungekar R et al. (2019) Curtis flowers wins appeal at U.S. Supreme Court. *Episode 14: The decision*. Available at: https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2019/06/21/curtis-flowers-wins-scotus-appeal (accessed 15 October 2024).

Hailu S (2024) Netflix top 10: 'Nobody wants this' debuts at No. 2 with 10.3 million views as Menendez series leads TV chart for second week in a row. *Variety*, 1 October. Available at: https://variety.com/2024/tv/news/netflix-top-10-nobody-wants-this-monsters-menendez-1236161834/ (accessed 28 August 2025).

Henderson B (2022) True crime ethics: A timely interrogation. *Ethical Space* 19(3/4): 2–3.

Horeck T (2019a) *Justice on Demand*. Wayne State University Press.

Horeck T (2019b) True crime: it's time to start questioning the ethics of tuning in. Available at: http://theconversation.com/true-crime-its-time-to-start-questioning-the-ethics-of-tuning-in-125324 (accessed 26 April 2023).

Horton D and Wohl RR (1956) Mass communication and para-social interaction. *Psychiatry* 19(3): 215–229.

Jared S (2024) *Why are we fascinated by true crime?* UNC-Chapel Hill. Available at: https://www.unc.edu/posts/2024/01/11/why-are-we-fascinated-by-true-crime/ (accessed 10 October 2024).

Jenkins H (1992) *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*. Routledge.

Jenkins H (2019) *Participatory Culture*. Polity Press.

Jones B (2022) Websleuthing, participatory culture and the ethics of true crime content. *Ethical Space* 19(3/4): 52–59.

Kallio H, Pietilä AM, Johnson M et al. (2016) Systematic methodological review: Developing a framework for a qualitative semi-structured interview guide. *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 72(12): 2954–2965.

Kim J (2024) Erik Menendez says Netflix show is full of 'blatant lies' about him and his brother. *NPR*, 27 September. Available at: https://www.npr.org/2024/09/23/nx-s1-5123898/menendez-brothers-comment-netflix-monsters (accessed 18 October 2024).

Lee S (2024) Ryan Murphy Isn't Afraid of the Controversy Surrounding Monsters. Available at: https://www.netflix.com/tudum/articles/monsters-ryan-murphy-interview (accessed 18 October 2024).

Mallett X (2024) Netflix's Monsters is 'murder porn' at its worst. It comes at a cost to real victims – and the truth. Available at: http://theconversation.com/netflixs-monsters-is-murder-porn-at-its-worst-it-comes-at-a-cost-to-real-victims-and-the-truth-239596 (accessed 10 October 2024).

McGinley C (2024) Menendez brothers reporter slams 'Monsters': 'Fictionalized' inaccuracies. Available at: https://www.newsweek.com/menendez-brothers-netflix-monsters-case-lyle-erik-parents-1963308 (accessed 10 October 2024).

McIntosh S (2024) What is the controversy around Netflix's Menendez drama? Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c20mzd788n3o (accessed 10 October 2024).

Melley B (2021) How a shy podcaster helped police crack Kristin Smart case. Available at: https://www.recordnet.com/story/news/crime/2021/04/16/kristin-smart-case-how-your-own-backyard-podcast-helped-police/7261075002/ (accessed 15 October 2024).

Naderifar M, Goli H and Ghaljaie F (2017) Snowball sampling: A purposeful method of sampling in qualitative research. *Strides in Development of Medical Education* 14(3): 1–4. DOI: 10.5812/sdme.67670.

Naseer S and Aubin C (2023) *True crime podcasts are popular in the U.S., particularly among women and those with less formal education*. Pew Research Center. Available at: https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/06/20/true-crime-podcasts-are-popular-in-the-us-particularly-among-women-and-those-with-less-formal-education/ (accessed 15 October 2024).

Netflix Official Site (n.d) Monsters. Available at: https://www.netflix.com/title/81665094 (accessed 9 October 2024).

Pâquet L (2021) Seeking justice elsewhere: Informal and formal justice in the true crime podcasts trace and the teacher's pet. *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal* 17(3): 421–437.

Pâquet L (2022) A police-run true crime podcast: A comparison of justice in State crime command - investigations, Bowraville, and Phoebe's Fall. *Ethical Space* 19(3/4): 14–20.

Parker C, Scott S and Geddes A (2019) Snowball sampling. In: Atkinson P, Delamont S, Cernat A et al. (eds) *Sage Research Methods Foundations*. SAGE Publications. DOI: 10.4135/9781526421036831710.

Pavelko RL and Myrick JG (2020) Muderinos and media effects: How the my Favorite Murder Podcast and its social media community may promote well-being in audiences with mental illness. *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* 27(1): 151–169.

Pearson A (2022) At what point do we question the consequences of true crime media? Available at: https://www.thestate.com/opinion/article269076957.html (accessed 17 October 2024).

Peterson B (2019) Victims, families and America's thirst for true-crime stories. *Washington Post*, 30 July. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/magazine/wp/2019/07/30/feature/victims-families-and-americas-thirst-for-true-crime-stories/ (accessed 4 October 2024).

Phillips W (2015) *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*. MIT Press.

Porterfield C (2023) Dahmer Victim's Mother Blasts Netflix Series After Actor Wins Golden Globe—Latest Family Member To Speak Out. Available at: https://www.forbes.com/sites/carlieporterfield/2023/01/12/dahmer-victims-mother-blasts-netflix-series-after-actor-wins-golden-globe-latest-family-member-to-speak-out/ (accessed 10 October 2024).

Punnett IC (2018) *Toward a Theory of True Crime Narratives: A Textual Analysis*, 1st edn. Routledge. Available at: https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9781351180474 (accessed 28 August 2025).

Reis J (2023) If it bleeds, it leads: Crime reporting. Available at: https://ic4ml.org/blogs/if-it-bleeds-it-leads-crime-reporting/ (accessed 8 October 2024).

Rennex M (2021) TikTok's exploitation of gabby petito highlights everything wrong with true crime culture. *Junkee*. Available at: https://archive.junkee.com/gabby-petito-tiktok-true-crime/309337 (accessed 11 June 2025).

Rutledge P (2021) Gabby Petito: True-crime rubbernecking on social media. *Psychology Today*. Available at: https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/positively-media/202109/gabby-petito-true-crime-rubbernecking-social-media (accessed 17 October 2024).

Sauro S (2017) Fandom and online interest groups. In: Thorne SL and May S (eds) *Language, Education and Technology*. Springer International Publishing, pp.131–142.

Slakoff DC and Boling KS (2025) "Media pressure is what makes law enforcement move": Insights from co-victims about the positive impacts of true crime media attention. *Mass Communication and Society*. Epub ahead of print. Available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15205436.2025.2549719 (accessed 28 August 2025).

Slakoff DC, Boling KS and Tadros E (2024) "I just couldn't cope with it, you know? I just couldn't believe that she was gone": The portrayal of Co-victims' grief in true crime podcasts about missing (but presumed killed) women. *Journal of Family Violence* 39: 303–313.

Slakoff DC and Duran D (2023) A new media frontier, or more of the same? A descriptive analysis of the "Missing White Woman Syndrome" in top true crime podcasts. *Race and Justice* 1–23. Epub ahead of print. DOI: 10.1177/215336872311992.

Slakoff DC and Fradella H (2019) Media messages surrounding missing women and girls: The "Missing White Woman Syndrome" and other factors that influence newsworthiness. *Criminology, Criminal Justice, Law and Society* 20(3): 80–102.

Society of Professional Journalists (n.d) SPJ code of ethics - Society of Professional Journalists. Available at:

https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp (accessed 22 October 2024).
Soto-Vásquez AD, Vilceanu MO and Johnson KC (2022) "Just hanging with my friends": U.S. Latina/o/x perspectives on parasocial relationships in podcast listening during COVID-19. *Popular Communication* 20(4): 324–337.
Tait A (2021) The rise of 'citizen sleuths': the true crime buffs trying to solve cases. *The Guardian*, 2 October. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2021/oct/02/the-rise-of-citizen-sleuths-the-true-buffs-trying-to-solve-cases (accessed 17 October 2024).
Taylor MC (2005) Interviewing. In: Holloway I (ed.) *Qualitative Research in Health Care*. McGraw-Hill Education, pp.39–55.
Tron G (2022) 'I Lived It': Sister of Jeffrey Dahmer victim speaks out. Available at: https://www.oxygen.com/true-crime-buzz/rita-isbell-sister-jeffrey-dahmer-victim-errol-lindsey-speaks (accessed 4 October 2024).
Vargas RA (2022) Mother of Dahmer victim condemns Netflix series: 'I don't see how they can do that.' *The Guardian*, 10 October. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/oct/10/dahmer-victim-tony-hughes-mother-condemns-netflix-series (accessed 10 October 2024).
Vartan K (2022) The best — And most inventive — Celebrity fandom names. *Entertainment Weekly*, 1 August. Available at: https://ew.com/celebrity/best-celebrity-fandom-names/ (accessed 4 October 2024).
Vera K (2024) Erik Menendez calls' monsters' full of 'blatant lies' about his parents' murders. Available at: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/erik-menendez-criticizes-monsters-series_n_66f18d69e4b02f84278bad42 (accessed 10 October 2024).
Vicary AM and Fraley RC (2010) Captured by true crime: Why are women drawn to tales of rape, murder, and serial killers? *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 1(1): 81–86.
Vilceanu MO and Soto-Vásquez AD (2023) Performing culture and problematizing identity through "Anything for selena". *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* 30(1): 28–50.
Weaver J (2022) Do we really need another show about Jeffrey Dahmer? *CBC News*, 8 October. Available at: https://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/jeffrey-dahmer-netflix-1.6610931 (accessed 8 October 2024).
Westcott K, Arbanas J, Loucks J et al. (2024) Impact of social media on entertainment. *Deloitte Insights*. Available at: https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/technology/digital-media-trends-consumption-habits-survey/2024/online-creators-and-the-impact-of-social-media-on-entertainment.html (accessed 18 October 2024).
Whiteman N (2009) The De/Stabilization of identity in online fan communities: Article. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 15(4): 391–410.
Williams A (2020) Shockingly evil: The Cruel Invasive appropriation and exploitation of victims' rights of publicity in the true crime genre. *Journal of Intellectual Property Law* 27(2): 303–327.
Wilson L (2019) True crime viewers would kill for more streaming content. Available at: https://civicscience.com/true-crime-viewers-would-kill-for-more-streaming-content/ (accessed 17 October 2024).
Woods B (2016) Serial case: Victim's family offers rare statement before hearing resumes. *The Guardian*, 7 February. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/feb/07/serial-case-hae-min-lee-statement-adnan-syed-hearing-baltimore (accessed 15 October 2024).
Yardley E, Wilson D and Kennedy M (2017) "To ME ITS [SIC] REAL LIFE": Secondary victims of homicide in newer media. *Victims & Offenders* 12(3): 467–496.
Zhi L, Fan F and Jiang W (2023) Enjoyment of murder mystery game reality shows: The influence of affective disposition, suspense and parasocial interactions. *Journal of International Communication* 17: 6335–6354.

Author biographies

Kelli S. Boling (Ph.D., University of South Carolina) is an Assistant Professor in the College of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Her research focuses on audience reception and representation in the media, especially genre-specific media and traditionally marginalized audiences based on gender or race, and has been published in Mass Communication & Society, Feminist Media Studies, Journalism Studies, and Journalism History, among others. Her research on women in podcast audiences has

also been cited by traditional media outlets such as TIME magazine and The Washington Post. She has also been interviewed about her research by broadcast media such as Scripps News, the ACLU At Liberty podcast, and Rolling Stone.

Danielle C. Slakoff, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Criminal Justice at California State University, Sacramento. Her research examines media representations of the criminal legal system, gender, race/ethnicity, and domestic violence. Her work can be found in journals such as Violence Against Women, Feminist Criminology, and Race and Justice, and her commentary on how the media portrays the criminal legal system has been featured in The New York Times, The Washington Post, Time Magazine, PBS NewsHour, and on the Tamron Hall Show, amongst others. You can find her on Twitter/X and Instagram: @DSlakoffPhD