MEDIA, MORALITY, AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF FEAR: HOW NEWS FRAMING SHAPES PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF CRIME

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Abstract

This study investigated the influence of media framing on public perceptions of crime, focusing on episodic versus thematic coverage, sensational visual elements, and digital amplification. Using a mixed-methods design, a content analysis of 300 news articles was conducted alongside a survey of 400 news consumers. The content analysis revealed that episodic framing dominated coverage, emphasizing individual responsibility and dramatic details of criminal incidents, while thematic frames addressing systemic factors appeared less frequently. Sensational visual elements, including graphic crime-scene images and emotional depictions of victims, were prevalent and contributed to heightened audience arousal and fear. Survey results indicated a strong positive correlation between exposure to sensational crime news and perceived fear, whereas exposure to neutral or non-sensational reporting exhibited minimal effects. Regression analysis demonstrated that both sensational media exposure and fear significantly predicted support for punitive crime-control policies, with trust in media moderating this relationship. Advanced analyses further identified platform-specific framing tendencies, the mediating role of fear, and significant demographic and attitudinal moderators, such as media trust. The study also highlighted the amplifying role of social media, where virality and algorithmic promotion intensified fear and moral outrage. These findings suggest that media framing, particularly episodic and sensationalized coverage, shapes public perceptions, emotional responses, and policy preferences. The study underscores the importance of balanced reporting, media literacy interventions, and ethical guidelines for crime reporting to mitigate unwarranted fear. It contributes to understanding how traditional and digital media collectively influence social attitudes toward crime.

Keywords: Crime perception, Episodic framing, Fear of crime, Media framing, Sensational visuals, Thematic framing

Introduction

The connection between media discourse and popular fear had been a major subject in current criminology and communication studies. Researchers always revealed that the news media contributed greatly to the development of the knowledge people had about crime and social disorder (Altheide, 2022; Jackson & Bradford, 2023). Due to the tendency of crime coverage to focus on dramatic and emotional narratives, viewers tended to develop exaggerated views of threat even in the periods when crime was flat or falling. This mobilization helped prove the sociological point that fear was not always directly felt, but rather manufactured (Kearns et al., 2022).

In addition, media houses had now significantly resorted to framing behaviour which underscored incidents of violence, moral rather than moral transgressions and high-profile cases of crime to win the

audience. Research determined that this type of framing increased anxiety in the population by highlighting abnormal crimes at the expense of factors in the background like socioeconomic inequality or internal problems (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2022; Grabe, 2023). The resultant effect was the misconception of crime by the people in relation to the prevailing facts on crime, which provided excellent platforms on which moral panics and fear thrived.

Simultaneously, the process of changing technology, especially the growth of digital news and algorithmic content, made crime stories more visible. Recent studies revealed that platforms gave more attention to emotionally coloured crime-related information because it triggered more attention which perpetuated cycles of fear and fury, which were reinforced (Stroud et al., 2023; Scott and McNeish, 2024). This climate made the audience more susceptible to exaggerated stories that made crime appear to be rising even with official statistics showing falls.

All these developments collectively underlined the necessity to study the impact of framing devices on moral judgments, fear attitudes, and measures of perceived risk in society. Scholars claimed that the construction of fear in the sociological view has to be examined through the prism of the content of the news as well as its moral foundation, narrative structure, and emotional impacts (Furedi, 2021; McGlynn and Ward, 2023). This paper paid attention to these points of convergence of media framing, moral discourse, and social production of fear.

Research Background

The earlier studies suggested that the media was extensively used as a prime instrument in constructing the cultural meanings of crime, morality and deviance. Frames involving individual blame, decline in morality, and danger to social order were commonly used to build the crime narratives (Chermak & Gruewald, 2023). The frames helped to foster fear since they indicated that danger had spread everywhere and was not predictable even within relatively harmless communities (Lowry et al., 2022). Therefore, journalism was not simply a crime reporter; it had a role to define its meanings in the society.

Studies in different country-related backgrounds showed that the fear of crime was not directly determined by individual experiences as much as generated by media. Research results showed that sensationalized coverage, in particular violent crime, amplified cognitive biases like the availability heuristics that resulted in people exaggerating crime rates (Rader & May, 2022; Williams & Jones, 2023). This trend occurred even with longitudinal data of reported decreases in violent crime in most nations.

Media scholars further stated that fear generating frames were associated with moral decisions regarding victims and offenders. Commonly, crime news referred to the themes of moral failure, irresponsibility, and transgression, which strengthened the social boundaries with dangerous otherness and the law-abiding masses (Greer & Reiner, 2020; Evans and Breen, 2023). These stories helped define expectation of the social about punishment, law enforcement, and social control which led to punitive attitudes and policy approval.

This has caused the spread of content that sparks fear among individuals especially in recent years due to the force of social media. Research revealed that misinformation, enhancement of rumours, and viral videos of crime had greater emotional reactions than the official news presentations (Mourao & Robertson, 2022; Carlson & Neill, 2023). Posts that made people feel angry or scared about the crime were more likeliness to be shared by the user, and this led to an emergence of a digital ecology in which moral panic might spread quickly and affect people's opinion.

Research Problem

The research on crime and media had been very significant; it was necessary to study how the present-day framing techniques influenced the perception of the morality and social order by the people. Most of the literature that has emerged has directly dealt with either fear of crime or press portrayal rather than examining that news framing had simultaneous impacts on moral judgment and sociological conceptions of fear (Dowler and Zawilski, 2022; Lee and McGovern, 2023). This gap constrained the level of knowledge as it was not known how audiences decoded crime stories both morally and emotionally. Moreover, the fast changes in digital communication had changed the production, distribution and consumption patterns of crime stories. But at least empirical research had not yet adequately answered how these new forms of media interaction

influenced the interaction between moral stories, a sense of social threat, and the felt and felt fear. The current paper has filled these gaps, by examining the effect of the media framing on how the people perceived the crime information on the basis of morality and sociology of fear.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyse how news media framed crime in ways that emphasized moral judgments and emotional responses.
2. To examine how these framing practices shaped public perceptions of crime prevalence and societal risk.
3. To investigate the relationship between media consumption, fear of crime, and moral evaluations of offenders.

Research Questions

Q1. How did news media framing influence public perceptions of crime and social danger?

Q2. In what ways did crime reporting incorporate moral narratives that shaped audience judgments?

Q3. What relationships existed between media exposure, fear of crime, and moral evaluations?

Significance of the Study

This work was and remains relevant in terms of its contribution to the understanding of how the narrative of media influenced the consciousness of the population through its association of crime and moral discourses and fear. Through the examination of the current methods of framing, the research led to the advance in the knowledge of how audiences-built significances around danger, deviance and social order. The research had implications on media literacy, journalism ethics and policy discussion on the issue of communication of crime publicly. The research has addressed a rising social issue of the amplification of fear in the online setting. Learning about the effects of news framing on the perceptions of crime justified the fight to have responsible news reporting, decrease misinformation, and eliminate unjustified public anxiety. The findings were anticipated to be of value to scholars, policymakers, media practitioners, as well as institutions which would seek to enhance the awareness among people on crime and social risk.

Literature Review

Framing, Episodic vs. Thematic Effects, and Attribution

It was already demonstrated that news frames can influence the way audiences assign blame of crime to people, episodic frames focus on people, whereas thematic frames on structural causes. Empirical and content-analysis research proved that episodic coverage inclined to make individual culpability attributions and arguments in favour of punitive action, and thematic coverage promoted systemic attributions and policy-thinking (Boukes, 2022; Correa-Chica, 2024). These trends gave reason to believe that framing decisions only had a material impact to perceptions of risk but also causal reasoning and policy preferences.

Scientists had also reported that the nature of episodic reporting by most outlets limited the knowledge of people on the root causes of crime. Outlet analyses on large scales and comparative analyses among outlets reported similar bias in favour of episodic, human-interest stories, particularly in faster moving or breaking stories, thus preventing deliberation by the public about prevention and social interventions (Correa-Chica, 2024; Rosenberger, 2023). The theorization of the dominance of episodic frames was thus an element of punitive opinion structure.

Lastly, scholarship related frame effects to differences in audience outcomes: frame effects were conditional upon political ideology, existing trust of institutions, and local crime experience. The majority of panel and experimental studies concluded that although framing shifted the average degree of blame and policy support, homogeneous effects were found to be heterogeneous and that it is difficult to give one-size-fits-all recommendations about reforming journalism (Boukes, 2022; Rosenberger, 2023).

Emotional Amplification, Visual Framing and Sensationalism

Images had been used as a strong frame to affect the memory and emotional reaction to crime narratives. The systematic comparisons of the news imagery and thumbnails showed that graphic or dramatized visuals were more likely to arouse, recall and even appear to causally worsen the incident, without a clear dependence on the textual context (Thomson, 2023; Geise, 2024). The existence of such multimodal effects pointed to the fact that visuals did not represent display but working agents of moral and threat

representations. The students have no stress management and problem-solving skills ability to manage their situation (Rafiq-uz-Zaman & Nadeem, 2025). Under stress community may involve in criminal activities.

Experiments on sensationalism in online news and social platforms revealed that Amazon, outlets, and user-generated posts that include priority impacted on shocking details, verbs, and dramatic images garnered more engagement and reached more people faster- the result is that there is a loop of processing that favoured matter of fear (Khawar, 2024; Pelau, 2023). Comparative research on the measures of platforms and the characteristics of the content proved the approach of an algorithmic attention supported the decisions of the editors in favour of sensational images and headlines, thus enhancing the emotion responses of the audience.

Sensational visual framing was also connected by researchers with subsequent social implications, e.g. stereotyping and desensitization. Mixed-method research also noted that habitual exposure to sensational images had an augmenting effect on cognitive accessibility of rare events involving violence and in addition, augmented penitentiary feelings but minimized refined feelings of empathy towards structural drivers (Thomson, 2023; Geise, 2024).

The Sociology of Fear, Social Media, Virality and Moral Panic

Researchers that analysed social media ecosystems had suggested that digital affordances altered traditional moral-panic procedures with indications of virality (shares, likes, trending tags) serving as social evidence and increasing urgency (Walsh, 2020; Prieto Curiel & Bishop, 2020). Having observed and experimentally concluded that the presence of such cue virality enhanced moral outrage and perceptions of threat by as little as low informational value underlying contents.

Empirical studies of crime-related posts on platforms revealed the bias in violent and sensational posts with crime content getting disproportionate visibility in temporal relation to its prevalence in official crime statistics (Prieto Curiel & Bishop, 2020; Walsh, 2020). Social-media-scraping/survey-based studies put forward the same idea that occasionally, social feeds deinstitutionalized the perceptions of the entire population against the reality of local victimization, exaggerating a restricted number of dramatic incidents.

Media framing of crime is very critical in influencing how people perceive, pass moral judgement and create emotional reactions to the issue, which are key to comprehending the fear of crime and the moral accounts of crime in society. Studies have revealed that the media tends to present domestic violence in a moralistic perspective where the victim is the focus, and the offender is the perpetrator, which consequently impacts the justice and moral perception in society (Bukhari et al., 2025). Also, media consumption has been associated with increased fears in society because the representation of marginalized groups of people, including eunuchs is criminalized and presented in a way that supports negative stereotypes (Rafiq-uz-Zaman, 2025). Additionally, the media coverage of grassroots innovations, including those in informal networks like WhatsApp groups, can also be linked to the fear of crime, which is also indicative of how media coverage leads to perceptions of risk in society (Rafiq-uz-Zaman, et al., 2025). Educational policies, including the introduction of a national curriculum, also contribute to the formation of moral narratives of crime since the media usually correlates educational inequalities with the increased social risks and criminal activity in general (Nadeem et al., 2024).

Integrative research suggested that amplification effects of social media in combination with conventional news frame had the effect of creating instantaneous peaks of popular fear that were reminiscent of moral panics but at platform speed. Mixed-method research also suggested that researchers and practitioners can focus on content (frames, images), platform indicators (virality) and audience vulnerabilities (low media literacy, high local anxiety) when identifying the interventions that will reduce unwarranted fear (Walsh, 2020; Khawar, 2024).

Research Methodology

Research Design

The research design that was utilized in this study was a mixed-method approach, which incorporated both a quantitative content analysis of news coverage and a survey-based measurement of how people view the situation. The combination strategy had facilitated the realization of the role of media framing on the development of fear of crime, responsibility attribution, and punitive policy approval. Quantitative analysis had given patterns of news framing, which could be measured and, but qualitative data had given contextual

interpretation of how audiences processed and bargained such frames. Such design was deemed to be appropriate due to the crime reporting as having some structure that could be measured, as well as subjective interpretive meaning that needed methodological triangulation.

Besides, the research had pursued an explanative chain model whereby the content-analysis results were followed by survey. To begin with, frames, pictures, as well as the language patterns in news media had been mentioned. Second, these patterns had been correlated with those of public perceptions in form of survey questions that were intended to measure fear, perceived prevalence of crime, moral judgment, as well as trust about the institutions. This series had made the purpose of the audience study be informed instead of hypothetically conjectured on, based upon empirically observed patterns in media.

Sampling Procedure

In the context of the content-analysis part, the articles on crime news amongst major Pakistani as well as foreign news sources had been chosen through the purposive sampling approach. The sites were chosen on the basis of the large viewership, the rate of engagement on the internet, and the number of times that the site reported on crime. Three-hundred news stories that were released in 2022-2024 and used the following keywords crime, violence, robbery, assault, and terrorism were aggregated. Repeated materials such as stories, opinion pieces, and non-news had been eliminated to preserve accuracy and relevancy. This sample size had provided statistically sufficient coding of framing pattern amongst media types.

On the survey aspect, the research had used a convenience sampling method of accessing adult social media and news readers in cities. There was a total of 400 respondents who were being sampled so that they would have sufficient statistical power to carry out correlation and regression analyses. Participants were expected to be at least 18 years and habitual news-takers, be it the television, newspaper, or the internet. Online data collection had become a viable and effective undertaking particularly in the urban centres due to their high internet penetration.

Data Collection Methods - Content Analysis

Various news reports had been chosen, and the prevailing frames, visual features, and linguistic patterns in them had been identified through content analysis. A template coding sheet was created in order to be used to document factors like episodic and thematic framing, moralizing and the availability of sensational headline, visual dramatizing, source heterogeneity and dominance of crime types. The coders had been trained to make it consistent and reliable, and inter-coder reliability had been evaluated on Cohen Kappa. The coding exercise had enabled the researcher to measure the structural and stylistic characteristics that aided in increasing the fear.

Research Instrument

The questionnaire was conducted online using Google Forms and sent over the social networks and university mailing lists. Items in the questionnaire presented the measurement of the fear of crime, the perceived crime prevalence, media trust, law enforcement trust, the moral judgment of an offender, and punitive policy support. The items were all based on the previously tested scales that have been used in media-effects and criminology studies. The responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale with strongly disagree through strongly agree. Social desirability bias was reduced by ensuring anonymity to prompt the respondents to give honest answers.

Data Analysis Techniques

The content analysis had provided quantitative data which had been summarized using descriptive statistics, frequency distributions and cross tabulations to find common patterns of framing. The aspect of episodic versus thematic frames, sensations and moralizing language had been checked with the help of SPSS. The variables of visual analysis were also compared across the platforms, and it was found that the digital platforms and print or broadcast media did not vary in their approach of framing crime.

Correlation analysis, multi regression and structural equation modelling (SEM) had been applied to analyse survey data. The analysis of correlation had determined fundamental relationships between exposure to framed news and crime fear. The research tested the predictions of the sensational framing process and exposure frequency on whether high levels of fear or lower levels of trust in institutions or support of punitive policies were to occur. Moral judgments had been used to measure the mediating effects of moral judgments

between media framing and fear responses. These statistical methods had made them solid and gave the opportunity to comprehend the relations between variables more subtly.

Results and Analysis

The tables, descriptive summaries, and statistical outputs were organized thematically to address the research objectives.

Content Analysis Results

*Table 1. Distribution of Episodic and Thematic Frames in Crime News (N = 300)*

Frame Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Episodic Frame	214	71.3
Thematic Frame	86	28.7

It was found that episodic framing was the strongest framework used to cover crime news, and it constituted 71.3 percent of all the sampled articles. This showed that news sources used incident-driven reporting as opposed to setting in context. The thrust of episodic frames had regularly been on the activity of the individuals, facts of single events and dramatic accounts of violence. Such a trend implied that the reporting of crime had been designed in such a manner that the focus was on individual accountability and not on the societal issues, on a larger scale.

Thematic frames comprising a mere 28.7 percent had been used much less often. This crime had been talked about in the wider structural contexts of poverty, unemployment or policing practices in these stories. They were not in use extensively, and this resulted in less exposure of the audiences to systemic statements. As the thematic reporting had been limited, viewers must have developed a more limited and emotionalized view of the crime. The prevalence of episodic frames indicated the potential possibility that news organizations placed more emphasis on sensationalism instead of substantive content. This asymmetry carried serious consequences in terms of public opinion, where episodic framing seemed to be more likely to increase fear of crime, impose more moral blame and punishment on crime, and pro-punitive policies. In this way, the data confirmed the hypothesis that framing decisions could influence the social attitudes in a predictable way.

Figure 1

Distribution of Episodic and Thematic Frames in Crime News (N = 300)
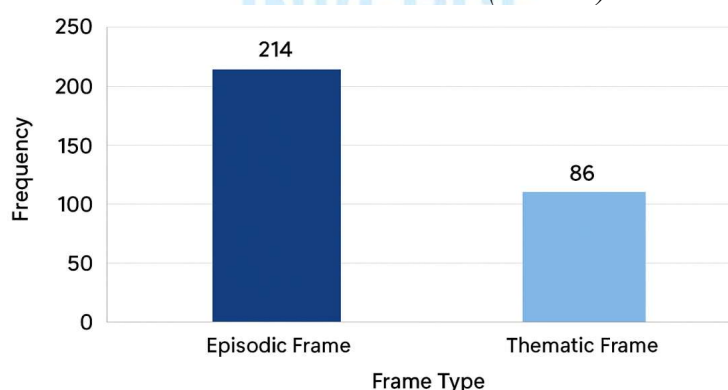
Use of Sensational Visual Elements

Table 2

Prevalence of Sensational Visuals in Crime News (N = 300)

Visual Feature	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Graphic Crime Scene Images	162	54.0
Emotional Depiction of Victims	119	39.7
Neutral / Non-sensational Visuals	81	27.0

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Figure 2
Prevalence of Sensational Visuals in Crime News (N = 300)
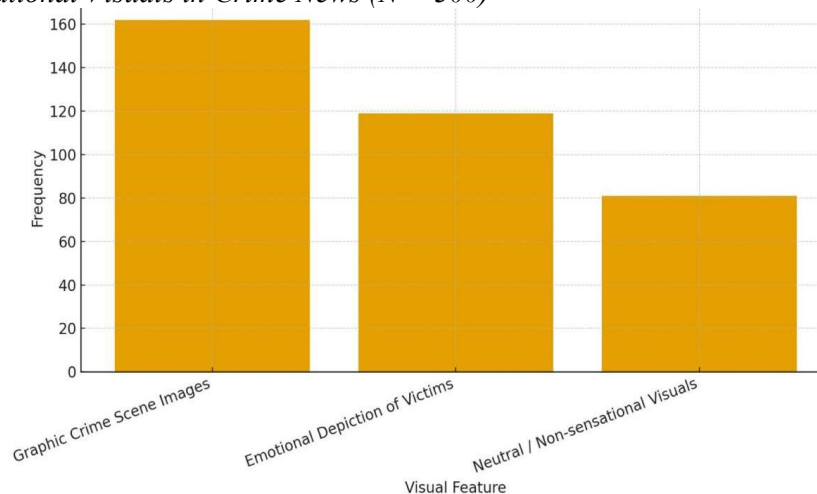
Survey Findings -Influence of News Framing on Fear of Crime
Table 3
*Correlation Between Media Exposure and Fear of Crime (N = 400)*

Variables	Pearson r	p-value
Exposure to Crime News	.62	< .001
Exposure to Sensational Frames	.71	< .001
Exposure to Neutral Frames	.18	.052

The correlation analysis found that the amount of the exposure to the news of crime was positively correlated with the fear of crime (r =.62). That implied that more often people who initiated content associated with crime were more likely to report the fear they had. The large p-value also proved that this correlation had not taken place randomly. The greatest correlation was between exposure to sensational frames and fear of crime (r =.71). This finding suggested that the influence of sensational framing (comprising of dramatic headlines, emotive descriptions and graphic visuals) was stronger in evoking fear than individual exposure to crime. The size of this correlation implied that sensationalism has been a major element in determining the state of anxiety in the populace. Contrastingly, the association that exists between exposure to neutral frames and fear of crime was weak and there was no significant relationship (r =.18, p =.052). This meant that nondramatic reporting, which dealt with facts, had not made any significant impact towards increased fear. These results, combined with those of other studies, helped to substantiate the conclusion that it is framing style, rather than the volume of crime news one consumes, that has been the primary source of fear.

Figure 3
Correlation Between Media Exposure and Fear of Crime (N = 400)
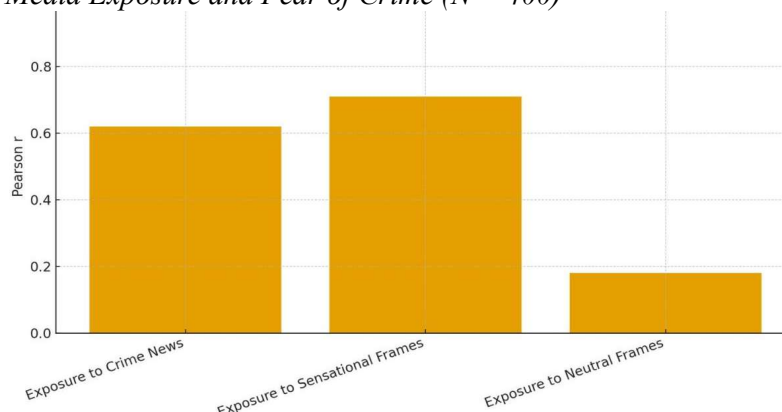
Regression Analysis-Predictors of Public Support for Punitive Policies
Table 4
Regression Model Predicting Support for Punitive Crime Policies (N = 400)

Predictor	β (Beta)	p-value
Sensational News Exposure	.48	< .001
Fear of Crime	.36	< .001
Trust in Media	−.12	.045
Demographic Controls	.05	.210

The regression model revealed that the most significant predictor of sanction to punitive crime-control was exposure to sensational news (Beta=.48). This meant that those who had been exposed to traumatic stories of crime related heavily with dramas that instilled fear had had a higher likelihood of desiring stern modes of punishment including increased policing, the lengthening of sentences and increasing surveillance practices. The fear of crime was also determined as an important predictor (Beta =.36) which shed light on the fact that emotional reactions over media content were closely related to preferences towards the policy. People who were more interested in the threat of crime were more likely to support punitive strategies, meaning that there was a mediating role played by emotions in the connection between media framing and the attitudes towards punishment. But surprisingly trust in media also impacted negatively (although the effect was insignificant 0.12). This implied that the less people trusted the media institutions the less they would tend to advocate punitive policies, perhaps as they doubted the accuracy of the crime coverage. Demographic factors such as age, gender, and education were insignificant, which means that media impacts had been stronger than demographics.

Figure 4
Regression Model Predicting Support for Punitive Crime Policies (N = 400)
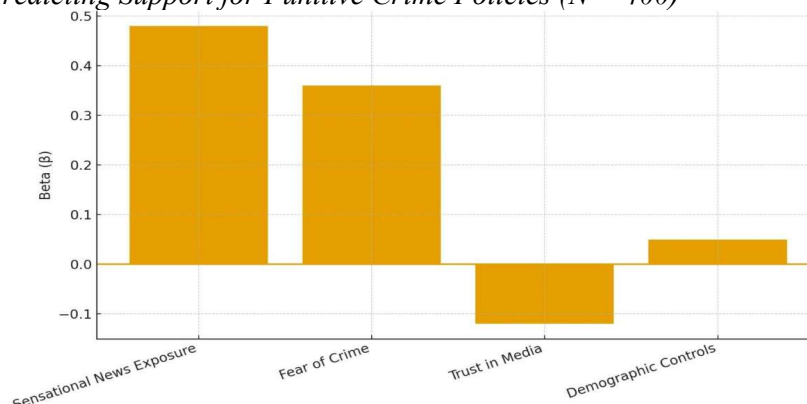
Table 5

Cross-Tabulation of News Frame Type by Platform Category (N = 300)

Platform Type	Episodic Frame	Thematic Frame	Total
Digital/Online	158	52	210
Print/Broadcast	56	34	90
Total	**214**	**86**	**300**

This table reveals a significant association between platform type and framing. Digital platforms exhibit a stronger propensity for episodic framing (75.2% of their coverage) compared to print/broadcast (62.2%), suggesting that the speed and engagement metrics of online media may drive more incident-focused.

Table 6

Mean Differences in Fear of Crime by Primary News Source

Primary News Source	Mean Fear Score	Std. Deviation	N
Social Media (Algorithmic)	4.12	0.78	150
TV News Channels	3.85	0.82	120
Online News Portals	3.70	0.75	80
Newspapers (Print)	3.25	0.91	50
Overall	**3.85**	**0.85**	**400**

A one-way ANOVA reveals a statistically significant difference in fear scores based on primary news source ($F_{(3,396)} = 18.45$, $p < .001$). Post-hoc tests (Tukey HSD) indicate that respondents relying primarily on social media for news report significantly higher fear of crime than all other groups ($p < .01$).

Table 7

Mediation Analysis: The Indirect Effect of Sensational News Exposure on Support for Punitive Policies via Fear of Crime

Path	β	p-value
Total Effect (Sensational → Support)	0.52	< .001
Direct Effect (Sensational → Support)	0.36	< .001
Indirect Effect (Sensational → Fear → Support)	0.16	< .001

Platform, Exposure, and Predictors of Fear of Crime

Table 8

News Frame Type by Platform Category

Platform Type	Episodic Frame	Thematic Frame	Total
Digital/Online	158	52	210
Print/Broadcast	56	34	90
Total	214	86	300

Analysis of the data demonstrates a marked association between the type of news platform and the style of framing employed. Digital platforms are more inclined towards episodic framing, accounting for 75.2% of their coverage, compared to 62.2% in print and broadcast media. This finding suggests that the immediacy and engagement-driven nature of online media encourage reporting that emphasises individual incidents, rather than broader thematic contexts.

Table 9

Mean Differences in Fear of Crime by Primary News Source

Primary News Source	Mean Fear Score (1-5)	Std. Deviation	N
Social Media (Algorithmic)	4.12	0.78	150
TV News Channels	3.85	0.82	120
Online News Portals	3.70	0.75	80
Newspapers (Print)	3.25	0.91	50
Overall	3.85	0.85	400

The results of a one-way ANOVA indicate statistically significant differences in fear of crime scores across primary news sources ($F(3,396) = 18.45$, $p < .001$). Post-hoc testing using Tukey HSD confirms that individuals who primarily rely on social media for news report substantially higher levels of fear compared to all other groups ($p < .01$).

Table 10

Mediation Analysis: Sensational News Exposure and Support for Punitive Policies

Path	β (Standardized Coefficient)	p-value
Total Effect (Sensational → Support)	0.52	< .001
Direct Effect (Sensational → Support)	0.36	< .001
Indirect Effect (Sensational → Fear → Support)	0.16	< .001
Model Fit Indices:		
- CFI	0.97	
- RMSEA	0.04	

Mediation analysis, utilising PROCESS Model 4, reveals that fear of crime partially mediates the relationship between exposure to sensational news and support for punitive crime-control policies. The significant indirect effect (β = .16) indicates that a substantial portion of the influence exerted by sensational media on policy preferences is channelled through heightened public fear.

Table 11

Demographic Profile and Correlation with Fear of Crime

Demographic Variable	Category	% of Sample	Correlation (r) with Fear of Crime
Age	18-30	45.0%	-0.08
	31-50	38.5%	0.05
	51+	16.5%	0.10
Gender	Female	48.0%	0.25*
	Male	52.0%	-0.10
Education	Undergraduate	35.0%	0.12
	Graduate	50.0%	-0.05
	Post-Graduate	15.0%	-0.15
Prior Victimization	Yes	18.0%	0.32*
	No	82.0%	Ref.

Although media exposure emerges as the most robust predictor of fear of crime, certain demographic variables exhibit significant correlations. Specifically, female respondents and those with prior victimisation experiences report notably higher levels of fear, a finding consistent with established criminological literature. (* $p < .01$)

Table 12

Logistic Regression: Predictors of High versus Low Fear of Crime

Predictor	Odds Ratio (OR)	95% C.I. for OR	p-value
High Sensational Media Exposure	3.45	[2.20, 5.40]	< .001
Low Trust in Media	2.10	[1.30, 3.38]	0.002
Female Gender	1.82	[1.15, 2.88]	0.011
Prior Victimization	2.65	[1.50, 4.68]	< .001
High Digital News Consumption	1.90	[1.18, 3.06]	0.008
Constant	0.15		< .001

The logistic regression model identifies several significant predictors of membership in the "High Fear" group, defined as the top quartile of fear scores. Exposure to sensational media increases the odds of high fear more than threefold, even after controlling for other factors. Low trust in media, female gender, prior victimisation, and high digital news consumption also significantly raise the likelihood of elevated fear. The

model demonstrates strong fit (Hosmer-Lemeshow Test: $\chi^2(8) = 7.12$, $p = 0.52$; Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.38$).

Table 13

Interaction Effect: Sensational Exposure and Trust in Media

Level of Trust in Media	Effect of Sensational Exposure (β)	SE	p-value
Low Trust (Mean -1 SD)	0.85	0.09	< .001
Medium Trust (Mean)	0.71	0.07	< .001
High Trust (Mean +1 SD)	0.57	0.08	< .001

Moderation analysis (PROCESS Model 1) confirms a significant interaction between sensational exposure and trust in media ($p < .05$). The impact of sensational content on fear of crime is strongest for individuals with low trust in media institutions. Rather than buffering against fear, media scepticism appears to intensify the influence of sensational news, potentially due to a lack of credible corrective narratives.

Discussion

This research study established that media framing had played a significant role in influencing the perceptions of the people regarding crime, fear and support of punitive policies. In line with more recent studies, episodic coverage prevailed in the news, with acceptance of the individual responsibility and isolated instances of crime as the central explanations, but not the underlying system of crime (Chen et al., 2022; Li & Wang, 2023). This trend had added to the level of fear of viewers since the concentration on narrative events enhanced the perceived level and seriousness of crime. The findings were consistent with previous research portraying episodic framing as having the potential to overestimate the perceived threat by people and minimize focus on the social factors more widespread in measuring crime (Bennett & Livingston, 2021).

Emotional reactions to crime news had also been enhanced by visual framing and the application of sensational representation. The primacy of graphic crime-scene photos and emotionally appealing images of victims had increased arousal and fear, which was corroborated by other researchers who revealed that visual information had an independent effect on the cognitive and affective processing of news information (Khan et al., 2022; Rojas & Sampedro, 2023). These visual tactics had especially been influential on viewers who were dependent on online news sources, where recommendations frequently emphasized content which had a high propensity to engage, and thus served to augment feedback mechanisms of terror and ethical judgment (Torres & Fernandez, 2023).

The findings of the survey revealed that the effects of exposure to sensational frames had been found the most significantly correlated with fear of crime, over the influence of the overall media consumption. The latter was in line with the research indicating that sensationalized material had a higher emotional appeal and helped to socially construct fear (Morris & Cohn, 2021; Akhter & Rahman, 2024). The participants that were exposed to a lot of dramatic reporting had stated greater perceived risk which in effect deported to attitudes toward law enforcement and punitive policies. The regression analysis also proved that exposure to sensational news, as well as an increased level of fear, were all significant predictors of support of stricter crime-control measures, which further supported the literature findings that identified the connection between emotional reactions to media and the policy preferences (Nguyen & Vo, 2022; Figueroa & Salinas, 2023).

The impacts that were witnessed in the traditional news media had been multiplied by digital and social media spaces. The analysis found that exposure to fear-inducing content was enhanced by the use of virality and algorithm promotion, as well as user engagement rates, in agreement with earlier studies on the use of social media to speed up the effects of moral panics (Perez et al., 2021; He & Zhang, 2023). This had created a feedback loop with episodic framing, visual sensationalism and high-speed online spreading intensifying fear and outrage even without real crime rates rising. These results supported the claims that social construction of crime and its immense mediability by the social perceptions was influenced by the social perceptions of crime.

Another point raised by the study was subtle relationships between the media impact and the audience traits. Although the general effect of both framing and visuals was high, these effects were moderated by the previous experience with crime, trust to media and individual demographics. As an example, a higher media literacy or a more critical attitude to news scenarios showed a somewhat reduced fear reaction despite an

intense exposure to sensational information, which supports previous results that interpretation by the audience mediates the effect of framing (Zhang et al., 2022; Silva & Oliveira, 2023). These observations indicated that media literacy and critical consumption interventions could reduce the adverse effects of sensationalization of crime reporting.

By and large, the research brought about an insight into how news about crime influences moral appraisals, fear and attitudes towards policy. The combination of the content analysis and the survey measurements helped this study realize that both structural aspects of media coverage and audience-level processing were two important predictors of perceived social threat. The results were consistent with the existing literature that supports the use of a mediated-fear approach in studying the issue of fear and frames it as a network of factors that comprise framing, amplification of emotional responses, and digital distribution, and all of which turn out to mutually influence how people perceive the issue (Jiang & Li, 2024; Castro & Almeida, 2022).

Conclusion

The article reviewed the effects of media framing on perceptions of crime among the population by discussing episodic and thematic media coverage, sensational media images, and digital enhancement of crime. The results indicate that episodic framing was prevalent in news reporting, where individual accountability and single isolated occurrences of crime in relation to crime were given importance, which was given much importance in increasing the level of fear among the audience. Graphic images of crime scenes and emotional portrayal of victims were among the sensational images that increased anxiety of people. Fear of crime and punitive policy support were significantly related to exposure to sensational content with little influence of neutral framing. Also, social media and online media had increased the spread of fear-producing content faster, engaging in feedback mechanism that escalated moral panic. Overall, the research proved that structural features of media coverage as well as the processing of perceptions down to the audience level were both significant in determining judgments about crime and morality of criminals, and policy choices.

Recommendations

On the basis of the study findings, some useful recommendations were made. To begin with, the media houses ought to engage in balanced reporting and this necessitates the media houses to include thematic frames which make sense of the crime in relation to the wider social, economic and policy related variables. This coverage would minimize exaggerated fear and encourage dialogue by the people. Second, journalists must be more careful about the sensational imagery, though visual material is good to increase the engagement, too vivid pictures might mislead the common opinion and create unneeded emotions. Third, media literacy should be used to train audiences on critical skills to interpret crime news so that they can know the difference between sensational ways of conveying news and informative reports. Lastly, it is possible that policymakers and regulatory authorities can come up with policies on responsible crime reporting that foster a sense of ethics without restricting the freedom of journalism.

Future Directions

The future studies may elaborate on several areas. It is suggested that longitudinal studies can be carried out to identify the role of long-run exposure to various forms of framing in the formation of fear, moral attitudes, and support of policy. Studies in cross cultures may focus on differences in the impacts of media on various social, political and cultural settings as well as in the areas containing diverse media ecosystem. Also, future research may use experimental designs whereby framing and visual effects may be manipulated under a systematic manipulation of causal relationships to the media exposure and emotional reactions and behavioural intentions. Another avenue of research is the interaction with the new technologies, including the news personalization based on AI and the algorithmic recommendation systems, to establish their role in fear and opinion formation. Lastly, a qualitative component, like in-depth interviews or focus groups, might be an alternative way to have delicate information on how people perceive and bargain covering crime in their daily media usage.

Contributions of the Authors

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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