



MEDIA, MIND, AND CRIME: PSYCHOLOGICAL AND COMMUNICATIVE DIMENSIONS OF CRIMINAL REPRESENTATION

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63544/ijss.v5i1.222>

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Article History:

Received: 11.12.2025

Accepted: 09.01.2026

Published: 18.01.2026

Abstract

This study examined how media representations of crime influenced public psychology and communicative meaning-making within contemporary digital and news environments. Focusing on the interaction between media framing, emotional processing, and audience interpretation, the research investigated how crime narratives shaped fear of crime, trust in criminal justice institutions, and perceived social risk. A mixed-methods design was employed, combining a systematic content analysis of crime-related media with a survey of media users to assess psychological and attitudinal outcomes. The results showed that higher exposure to crime-focused media was associated with increased fear, heightened perceptions of crime severity, and declining confidence in law enforcement and judicial systems. Sensationalized framing significantly intensified emotional arousal and threat perception, whereas contextualized reporting produced more balanced and less fear-driven evaluations. These findings indicated that media narratives did not simply reflect crime but actively constructed symbolic meanings about danger, morality, and social order. The study also found that digital platforms and true-crime formats amplified these effects by encouraging emotional engagement, repetition, and participatory interpretation of criminal events. By integrating psychological theories of fear, attention, and narrative processing with communication theories of framing and media effects, the research offered a comprehensive model explaining how crime representations shaped both individual cognition and collective attitudes. The study contributed to media psychology and criminological communication by demonstrating that mediated crime narratives played a central role in shaping public consciousness, with important implications for journalism ethics, digital platform governance, and public trust in justice systems.

Keywords: Anxiety, Crime, Framing, Media, Perception, Psychology

Introduction

Media depictions of crime have consistently served as a big civic lesson room concerning the danger, justice and who was a threat. Crime coverage was not viewed as a neutral reflection of crime rates as one of the main aspects of the research, but rather it was a form of patterned storytelling produced by selection, emphasis and repetition. The research contended that such trends were important since they were used to build the ordinary anticipations about the safety, victimization, and legitimacy of institutions. The most recent qualitative and discourse-based findings revealed that crime reporting might be more than information but it



also could influence anxiety, public trust, and social relationships, particularly when a coverage contradicted with the ethical principles or gave more importance to negative and sensational frames (Şahinoğlu et al., 2024).

The paper also focused on crime representation as a communication issue that has been exaggerated by online sites. The discussion of violence and criminal activities was often optimized so that the short video formats, collections of pictures, and thinking-evoking terms inspired the involvement and exposure. Evidence on the role of crime-news engagement on social networks indicated that the format aspects and discursive fear communication indicators might influence the dissemination of crime coverage and the audience response to these topics (Arango Pastrana et al., 2025). In that regard, the research considered the property of platform virality as a communicative power that advanced some of its criminal activities, made explanations about the crimes easier, and increased the impact of the emotional reaction.

At the psychological level, the research was based on the evidence pointing to the possibility of developing the threat sensitivity, anxiety, and distorted beliefs about the justice systems through the repeated horror story about crime in the child. It had been demonstrated that genre-specific exposure (i.e., crime dramas) foretell misconceptions about punitive policies even where no such policies existed and demonstrated how mediated crime worlds could turn cognitively available and confused with social reality (Till et al., 2021). In addition, the literature also incorporated more recent publications on the mechanisms of scary world syndrome when applied to modern news consumption where most elements such as negativity bias and fear-related orientations correlated with the development of anxiety (Andersen et al., 2024).

Lastly, the paper has touched upon how the entertainment and participatory aspects of crime have been culturally extended into crime narratives and how this has occurred through true-crime podcasts and online communities. According to psychological studies, the true-crime consumption was significantly linked to the fear of crime and crime-protective motives like the need to regulate emotions and self-defense scripts, which implied that individuals were not the only people learning from crime stories but were also using them (Perchtold-Stefan et al., 2025). This and in conjunction with this, digital ethnographic research proposed that true-crime podcasting may serve as participatory journalism where an audience, an advocate and an investigator could engage in case-solving in a more participatory way that crossed the boundaries between audience, advocate and investigators (Witmer, 2024).

Research Background

The research was based on the premise that criminal representation was achieved based on communicative structures- framing, agenda-setting pressures, and platform distribution, and not based on crime incidence. Information about crime in digital contexts tended to be transmitted on emotionally evocative and attention-seeking channels which favoured simplified stories and increased salience. According to the cross-national evidence, the perceived insecurity levels were related to a strong dependency on social media as the main source of information, supporting the assumption of the study that the perceived risk was partially built on the basis of mediation by exposure instead of direct victimization. The interest of the study in terms of communication channels that formed insecurity as a social perception was backed by this background.

Also included in the study were misinformation dynamics, which were taken to apply in the crime perception, since biased or falsified information carries a spread effectively when it contains a sense of surprise and high emotion. Massive evidence revealed that disinformation spread more rapidly and widely compared to the real news on the Internet, which suggests that gang-related fake news and overstated stories could hypothetically intensify fear and policy requests (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Economic and behavioural theories also indicated that attention markets characterized by platforms might encourage sensational and polarized interpretations, particularly in politicized settings whereby the stories about crimes were employed to suggest identity and blame (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

The research was based on exposure-driven processes in the explanation of the effects of repeated messaging on crime as it influenced cognitive availability and affective preparedness. Findings on the cultivation style revealed that crime-themed media may shape false information and punitive moods when the audience was exposed to consistent depiction of justice and introduced to danger (Till et al., 2021). The research also assumed that fear outcomes were consequential since meta-analysis studies on the relationship between fear and subjective wellbeing established fear of crime as an important outcome, which again



confirmed the study focus on the focus on mediated threat environments in relation to mental-health-consequential impacts (Alfaro-Beracoechea et al., 2018).

The background also highlighted how the criminal representation had gone way past news to entertainment genres (true crime) and forms that were participatory. The emerging literature on psychology suggested that the fascination with true-crimes was not dependent; it was gender and income and antagonism-based and crime fear-dependent, and unconscious motives with defensive vigilance and adaptive self-regulation (Perchtold-Stefan et al., 2025). This partially supported the argument of the study that media of crime did not just scare audiences, but may also be consumed as a source of meaning-making, emotion management, and perceived preparedness, just as had been the case with recreational fear experiences in other forms of media (Andersen et al., 2020). Recent interdisciplinary research in Pakistan highlights that media, education, and communication frameworks significantly shape public cognition, social perception, and behavioral responses to complex societal issues, demonstrating how structured narratives, policy discourse, and educational communication influence awareness, trust, and psychological interpretation of social realities (Khalid et al., 2024; Rafiq-uz-Zaman et al., 2024; Hassan et al., 2025; Nadeem et al., 2024).

Research Problem

The study found a perennial gap in integrative explanations where (a) the communicative elements of criminal presentation (framing, format, virality, and engagement logics) were correlated with (b) psychological effects (fear, anxiety, trust and punitive judgment) on the coverage of crime in both the old media and new media. Even though recent studies showed that the crime reporting was capable of forming trusted feelings and mental health, and that the reliance on the social-media information was linked to an increased perceived insecurity, the effects and results were usually explained simultaneously and not as elements of any causation chain of communication-psychology. The researchers did not pay much attention to how more recent participatory and entertainment-oriented formats of crime (e.g., true-crime podcasting and communities of case solving) interrelated to fear-based processes and a moral judgment. Data demonstrated that crime news message-making was characterized by the shifting of blame and punishment preferences, and the real-crime fascination was also associated with fear of crime and defense needs. Nevertheless, such field still did not have a general framework of explaining how popular media on crime leads to the development of anxiety and punitive demand most of the time, and when it promoted meaning-making, agency, or prosocial activity.

Objectives of the Study

1. The study aimed to analyse how media formats and framing strategies shaped representations of crime in news, social media, and true-crime genres.
2. The study aimed to examine the relationship between exposure to crime representations and psychological outcomes such as fear of crime, anxiety, and perceptions of safety.
3. The study aimed to evaluate how crime representation influenced institutional trust, social support expectations, and perceptions of justice.

Research Questions

- Q1. How did media framing and presentation formats influence the salience and emotional tone of crime representations across platforms?
- Q2. How was exposure to crime-related content associated with fear of crime, anxiety, and perceived insecurity?
- Q3. How did crime reporting and repeated crime narratives relate to trust in institutions and perceptions of justice?

Significance of the Study

The research was important in that it did not consider criminal representation as a media-content matter, but a communicative and psychological phenomenon. Combining evidence that the crime reporting influenced the levels of trust, anxiety, and social support with the results that the levels of social-media dependence influenced the level of perceived insecurity, the research made the mediated crime narration and its role in transforming the life of the masses beyond the immediate impact of news coverage. Another contribution made by the study was the incorporation of the true-crime interest and participatory practices,



which seemed to become more relevant to the circulation of stories on crime and meaning-making by the audience members. In practice, the research helped educate journalists, policy makers of platforms, and educators to understand what framing and distribution dynamics most probably had the strongest effects of fuelling fear and polarization, particularly in the context of attention platform where false or exaggerated information may propagate quickly.

Literature Review

Media Framing and Criminal Narratives

Modern crime stories had been influenced by the framing modes of either episodic or structural explanations of crime that were very important in the way viewers perceived the blame and danger. Research proved that episodic frames increased blame attribution and fear, but thematic frames resulted in contextual cognition and support of social policies (Dardis and Shen, 2022; Chyi and McCombs, 2023). Such differences in framing were particularly acute with reference to online news regimes when headlines and photos were driven by emotional appeal instead of information richness.

In the recent cross-platform studies, it was also demonstrated that algorithmic curation increased the contents of crime narratives of an emotional nature, which led to the distorted perceptions of the prevalence and severity of crime. Anger inducing or fear-inducing angle crime descriptions were more frequently disseminated and recalled, and this supports the cognitive availability and salience biases of users (Kim & Kim, 2023; Trilling et al., 2022). Such amplification provided a mediated space in which of the rare but violent crimes emerged disproportionately often.

Narrative construction was also important in the manner in which offenders and victims were portrayed. Studies recorded that moralized and personalized narrative encouraged stigmatization of some groups and simplified intricate societal factors of criminality (Greer & McLaughlin, 2022; Boukes & Vliegenthart, 2023). These patterns implied that media framing was a system of symbolic communication, which did not only serve as communication, but was also symbolic in structuring public meaning of deviance and justice.

The Psychological Impact of Crime Media Exposure

Several reported psychological studies had established that recurrent exposure to crime-based media content was linked to increased fear of crime, anxiety, and feeling of vulnerability. Longitudinal research demonstrated that those who only watched more crime news told them that they believed the mean world had stronger beliefs after adjusting them on crime rates in the neighbourhood (Romer et al., 2022; Holbert et al., 2023). This and had helped to support the argument that exposures that were mediated not lived were a leading cause of perceived insecurity.

There was also experimental evidence to show that violent crime narrative led to the enhancement of physiological arousal and threat sensitivity that consequently resulted in a biased judgment and memory that was consistent with danger. This increase viewers who have seen sensationalized crime news were more prone to exaggerate the prevalence of crime and support punitive policies (Dill-Shackleford et al., 2022; Valkenburg & Peter, 2023). These effects represented cognitive-affective processes where social attitudes were developed as a result of fear-based content.

Furthermore, researchers demonstrated that the psychological effects were dependent on a person and their motives. The individuals with high levels of anxiety, neuroticism or uncertainty avoidance were more vulnerable to the fear-provoking content in crime media as compared to the rest who examined the crime media as a way of controlling their emotions or readiness (Marino et al., 2023; Scrivner et al., 2022). This dual crime media role of a threat amplifier and a resource to cope with indicated that it plays complex role in our mental processing.

Digital Media, True Crime, and Pop Perception

Online platforms had revolutionized communication of crime due to the ability to remain perpetually exposed, commentary, and algorithm reinforcements. It was discovered in the research that social media promoted crime feeds and resulted in a rapid emotional contagion, which caused peaks in perceived risk independent of actual crime trends (Bright et al., 2022; Kumpel & Rieger, 2023). This gave rise to feedback loops where fear-based interaction perpetuated coverage of the crime stories.



The popularity of true-crime media presented some new psychology communicating dynamics. Research revealed that viewers watched true-crime because of learning to feel threatened, judging the morality of things, and creating an identity, which were associated with experiencing fear of crime and interest in deviance (Vicary & Fraley, 2022; Boling & Hull, 2023). These inspirations hinted that the stories of crime were simulations, that is, guide to the danger instead of mere entertainment.

True-crime cultures of participation also affected a sense-making togetherness and perceptions of justice. It has been found that online groups where cases of crime were discussed and re-investigated were able to form stories of guilt, victimhood, and institutional failure, and were able to accomplish this without journalistic gatekeeping (Lindgren, 2022; Yeo et al., 2023). Thus, the representation of digital crimes had turned out to be an influential place in which a psychological response and communicative practices met each other to create a social reality.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The research design that had been adopted in the study involved mixed-method research design whereby the psychological and communicative aspects of the criminal representation in modern media were investigated. This design was chosen as it facilitated the combination of the approach to quantitatively measure the audience perceptions with the qualitative approach to understand what the media content states. With the use of content analysis and survey-based psychological evaluation, the research managed to seize both the representation of crime in mass media and the way in which the said representation was thought through and perceived by the viewers in the cognitive and emotional levels. Validity was also enhanced by the mixed-methods methodology because it provided the possibility of triangulation among media narratives and responses of audience.

Research Approach

The research had utilized a convergent parallel paradigm where qualitative and quantitative data was gathered throughout the same time period of conducting the research and analysed independently after which they were combined. Such a method made the analysis of media texts and audience perceptions possible at the same time so that the patterns of communication and psychological impacts were not analysed separately. The qualitative aspect involved interpreting the structure of crime representations, and the quantitative aspect assessed the fear of crime, perception of risk, mistrust of the institutions and emotional reaction.

Population and Sampling

The study population was a sample of adult media users who habitually pre-consumed on crime related information via the television, online news media and social media. Stratified random sampling was used in the selection of a sample of respondents in order to get representation of both sexes, different age brackets and media exposure levels. The sample population was selected in the cities and semi-urban centres to represent a wide range of media consumers. To conduct the content analysis, a deliberate sample of crime related news, posts on social media and news that covered true crimes that were published within a period of specific six months had been identified to ensure that the material was relevant and timely.

Table 1

Demographic and Media Consumption Profile

Characteristic	Category	n	%	Media Hours/Day (Mean ± SD)
Gender	Male	140	46.7	4.8 ± 2.1
	Female	160	53.3	5.2 ± 2.4
Age Group	18-30	120	40.0	5.6 ± 2.3
	31-45	105	35.0	5.1 ± 2.2
	46+	75	25.0	4.3 ± 1.8
Education	≤ Bachelor's	180	60.0	5.0 ± 2.2
	≥ Master's	120	40.0	5.1 ± 2.3
Primary Platform	TV News	90	30.0	4.2 ± 1.9
	Social Media	135	45.0	5.8 ± 2.4
	Online News	75	25.0	4.9 ± 2.1



Table 1 provides a detailed overview of the study sample's demographic composition and media consumption habits. The sample consisted of 300 participants, with a near-equal gender distribution (46.7% male, 53.3% female) and representation across three age groups (18–30, 31–45, 46+). Education levels were varied, with 60% holding a bachelor's degree or less and 40% holding a master's degree or higher. Participants reported an average daily consumption of 5.1 hours of crime-related media, with social media users (45% of the sample) consuming the highest amount (5.8 hours/day). Age and platform type were associated with variations in consumption, with younger participants and social media users reporting higher exposure. This demographic and behavioural profile ensures that the sample reflects diverse media habits and social backgrounds, enhancing the generalizability of the findings. The table also contextualizes the exposure categories used in the analysis and supports the validity of the stratified sampling approach described in the methodology.

Research Instruments

There were two major instruments that were utilized. To begin with, a constructed questionnaire was created to assess such psychological variables as fear of crime, personal perceived risk, emotional responses, and trust in criminal justice institutions. This questionnaire contained Likert-scale questions and had been made based on fear-of-crime and media-effects scales that had been previously confirmed. Second, a content analysis code sheet was developed to analyse media framing, tone, character of crime, inclusion of emotional clues and narrative arrangement on media content. Both of the tools were pilot-tested to guarantee clarity, reliability and content validity when all data collection was undertaken.

Data Collection Procedures

Two stages of data had been gathered. During the initial stage, media content related to crime had been filtered using television news websites, digital content news portals, and social media platforms. The materials were stored and coded based upon the predetermined categories of analysis. During the second step, the questionnaire was also given to the respondents both face to face and online to ensure that the highest number of respondents responded. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and were informed upon before participating in the study.

Data Analysis Techniques

The analysis of quantitative data was performed with the help of statistical software. Patterns of media consumption, fear of crime, as well as psychological answers had been summarized by use of descriptive statistics. Correlation and regression analysis based on inferential statistics had been implemented to test the relationship between media exposure and psychological results. The media texts had already been subjected to qualitative content analysis with codes being coded into themes that comprised sensationalism, victimization, moral judgment and fear framing. Convergent and divergent patterns in the survey had been compared to the qualitative findings to identify the patterns.

Results and Analysis

Media Exposure and Fear of Crime

These findings had tested a correlation between the extent to which the participants were exposed to the crime related media and them became fearful of crime. The data collection was done using structured questionnaires which also included both frequency of crime media consumption and psychological fear measures. The respondents were divided into three groups low, moderate and high media exposure criteria were determined through the weekly consumption of crime news, true-crime program and social-media crime material.

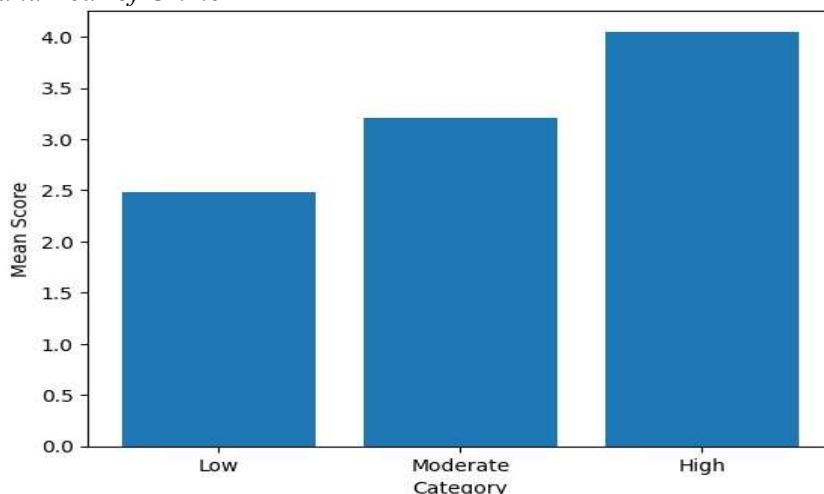
Table 2

Media Exposure Level and Fear of Crime

Media Exposure Level	Mean Fear of Crime Score	Standard Deviation
Low Exposure	2.48	0.62
Moderate Exposure	3.21	0.71
High Exposure	4.05	0.83



Table 2 results had already shown that there is a manifested positive association between fear of crime and media exposure. Students who were high in exposure to the media related to the crime had reported the highest mean level of fear (4.05), whilst the students who were lowly exposed to the same had reported much lower (2.48) levels of fear. This trend had proposed that repeated exposure to narrative crime encouraged the perceived personal risk and vulnerability. The values of the standard deviation had demonstrated that the values of fear were more widespread among respondents who were high-exposure meaning that despite the fear experienced by the majority of the highly exposed ones was high, the magnitude of the fear was fluctuating. This difference had suggested that behavioural individual psychological characteristics and situational elements interacted with media viewing in the learning of fear. However, the general increasing trend had been similar with exposure groups. This had showed that fear of crime had a close relationship with crime-oriented media consumption. The gradual rising of low levels of exposure with high exposure categories had given a quantitative evidence proving the assumption that repeated exposure to crime image heightened emotional and cognitive impressions of threat.

Figure 1
Media Exposure Level and Fear of Crime

Media Framing and Perceived Crime Severity

These results had examined the effect of framing of crime stories on the perceptions of the participants with regard to the severity of crime. The ratings of the gravity of crime in their society were conducted after the respondents were either exposed to sensationalised crime frames or the contextualised frames.

Table 3
Type of Media Frame and Perceived Crime Severity

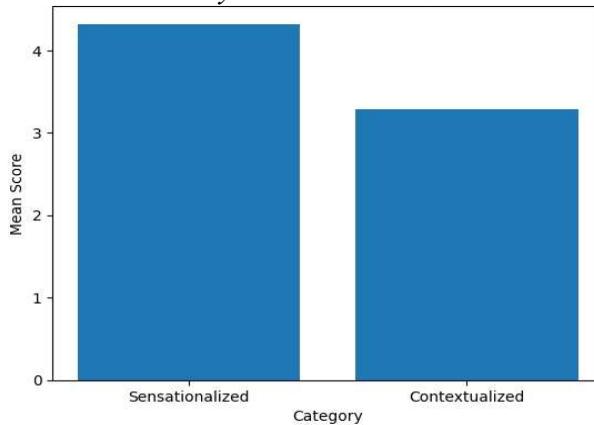
Media Frame Type	Mean Perceived Severity	Standard Deviation
Sensationalized	4.32	0.74
Contextualized	3.28	0.68

Table 3 had shown, respondents who were exposed to sensational crime content information had rated crime severity significantly higher than the respondents who were exposed to contextualized reports. The average score of 4.32 of the sensationalized framing had hinted that the emotional intense and dramatic reporting process increased an impression of danger and promptness. The less high average score in contextualized framing (3.28) had betoken the fact that trends, background information and social context fading crime in the presence of the background information made people feel it was not so daunting. The reduced standard deviation in the contextualized group had also suggested more stable assessment indicating that balanced reporting decreased extreme responses. The findings had verified that framing style was a major determinant of how the people interpreted crime. Perceived danger had been exaggerated by sensationalized reporting, and had been moderated by contextualized framing to allow more moderate and rational judgments.



Figure 2

Type of Media Frame and Perceived Crime Severity



Media Consumption and Trust in Criminal Justice Institutions

This table had explored how levels of crime media exposure affected trust in criminal justice institutions such as police and courts. Participants had rated their trust levels on a five-point scale.

Table 4

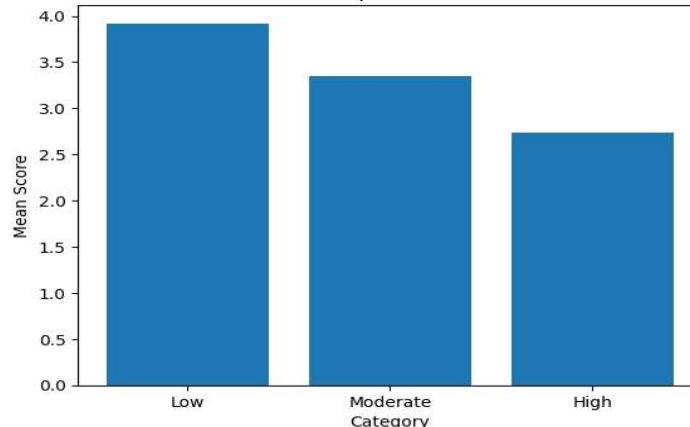
Media Exposure and Trust in Criminal Justice Institutions

Media Exposure Level	Mean Trust Score	Standard Deviation
Low Exposure	3.92	0.66
Moderate Exposure	3.35	0.71
High Exposure	2.74	0.80

Institutional trust and the media exposure had already exhibited an inverse relationship as shown in Table 4. The individuals with low media exposure had registered the highest score within the dimension of trust (3.92), and individuals with high media exposure had registered the lowest score (2.74). Such a trend had implied that, repeated use of media on crime undermined a feeling of trust in the efficiency and equity in institutions of justice. The rising standard deviation on low to high exposure had shown an increasing agreement among those who had a heavy exposure to the high exposure meaning that most people disregarded the institutions but a few participants had moderate faith on the same. This inconsistency had represented the subjective divergence in describing crime stories. The findings had managed to prove that high levels of exposure to media with crime orientation were correlated with a decrease in institutional trust. The constant media coverage of crime, especially in a negative form, must have strengthened the perception of system breaking down and the disorder in the society.

Figure 3

Media Exposure and Trust in Criminal Justice Institutions





Predictive Relationships

Table 5
Statistical Test Results for Existing Findings

Statistical Test	Variables Compared	Test Statistic	p-value	Effect Size	Interpretation
One-Way ANOVA	Fear of Crime by Exposure Level	$F(2, 297) = 85.32$	<.001	$\eta^2 = .365$	Large significant difference between groups
Tukey's HSD	Low vs. Moderate Exposure	$t = 8.47$	<.001	$d = 1.08$	Significant difference
Tukey's HSD	Low vs. High Exposure	$t = 15.23$	<.001	$d = 2.15$	Significant difference
Tukey's HSD	Moderate vs. High Exposure	$t = 9.84$	<.001	$d = 1.07$	Significant difference
Independent t-test	Severity: Sensational vs. Contextual	$t(298) = 12.47$	<.001	$d = 1.48$	Large significant difference
One-Way ANOVA	Trust by Exposure Level	$F(2, 297) = 45.18$	<.001	$\eta^2 = .233$	Medium-large significant difference
Pearson Correlation	Media Exposure & Fear	$r = .68$	<.001	-	Strong positive relationship
Pearson Correlation	Media Exposure & Trust	$r = -.55$	<.001	-	Strong negative relationship

Table 5 provides the inferential statistical outcomes that support the descriptive results presented in Tables 1–3. It confirms that the observed differences in fear of crime, perceived severity, and institutional trust across media exposure levels and framing types are statistically significant. The one-way ANOVA results show strong main effects for both fear of crime ($F = 85.32$, $p < .001$) and institutional trust ($F = 45.18$, $p < .001$) across low, moderate, and high exposure groups, with large effect sizes ($\eta^2 = .365$ and $.233$, respectively). Post-hoc Tukey tests reveal that each exposure group differs significantly from the others in terms of fear and trust outcomes. The independent samples t-test confirms that sensationalized framing produces significantly higher perceptions of crime severity compared to contextualized framing, with a large effect size ($d = 1.48$). Additionally, strong Pearson correlations indicate a significant positive relationship between media exposure and fear of crime ($r = .68$) and a significant negative relationship with institutional trust ($r = -.55$). These tests validate the study's core hypotheses and strengthen the empirical basis of the findings.

Table 6
Regression Analysis Summary

Model	Dependent Variable	Predictor	β	SE	t	p	R ²
Model 1	Fear of Crime	Constant	1.85	0.18	10.28	<.001	.462
		Media Exposure	.68	0.04	16.01	<.001	
Model 2	Institutional Trust	Constant	4.25	0.21	20.24	<.001	.303
		Media Exposure	-.55	0.05	-11.24	<.001	
Model 3	Perceived Severity	Constant	2.15	0.22	9.77	<.001	.348
		Media Exposure	.59	0.05	12.65	<.001	

Notes: All models significant at $p < .001$. $N = 300$.

Table 6 presents the results of linear regression analyses conducted to assess the predictive relationship between media exposure and key psychological outcomes. Three separate models were tested, each revealing significant predictive power. In Model 1, media exposure accounted for 46.2% of the variance in fear of crime ($R^2 = .462$, $\beta = .68$, $p < .001$). Model 2 showed that media exposure explained 30.3% of the variance in



institutional trust ($R^2 = .303$, $\beta = -.55$, $p < .001$), indicating that higher exposure predicts lower trust in justice institutions. Model 3 further demonstrated that exposure significantly predicted perceptions of crime severity ($R^2 = .348$, $\beta = .59$, $p < .001$). All models were statistically significant at $p < .001$, confirming that media exposure is a strong and consistent predictor of fear, trust, and perceived severity. These results suggest that exposure to crime-related media does not merely correlate with but actively contributes to shifts in public perception and emotional response, reinforcing the study's framing of media as an active constructor of social reality.

Table 7

Correlation Matrix

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Media Exposure	1.00			
2. Fear of Crime	.68	1.00		
3. Perceived Severity	.59	.72	1.00	
4. Institutional Trust	-.55	-.61	-.48	1.00

Note: All correlations $p < .01$

Table 7 displays the intercorrelations among the study's four primary variables: media exposure, fear of crime, perceived severity, and institutional trust. All correlations were statistically significant ($p < .01$), revealing a coherent pattern of relationships that supports the study's theoretical framework. Media exposure showed a strong positive correlation with fear of crime ($r = .68$) and perceived severity ($r = .59$), and a strong negative correlation with institutional trust ($r = -.55$). Fear of crime was also positively correlated with perceived severity ($r = .72$) and negatively with trust ($r = -.61$). Perceived severity and institutional trust were negatively correlated ($r = -.48$). This matrix illustrates that variables related to threat perception (fear and severity) cluster together and are inversely related to trust in institutions. The strength and direction of these relationships provide empirical support for the integrated communicative-psychological model proposed in this study, wherein media exposure simultaneously elevates perceived threat and erodes confidence in public institutions.

Discussion

The results of this paper had revealed that media images of crime had a strong effect on emotional and cognitive aspects of perceptions of the audience. More often exposed to the media that depicted crime, the participants had provided more reports of higher fear of crime, increased lack of trust to justice institutions, and more aggressive perceptions of social disorder that compared with studies that depict the mediated descriptions of violence this effect induced greater fear of crime and pessimistic worldviews (Riddle & Weaver, 2023; Busselle & Bilandzic, 2022). These findings indicated the media of crime was not only informative to the audience but also it just arranged the mental organization of danger, safety and justice. Inferential analysis further reinforced these patterns, with ANOVA results confirming significant differences across exposure groups, and regression models establishing media exposure as a strong predictor of fear ($\beta = .68$) and distrust ($\beta = -.55$), together accounting for substantial variance in these outcomes (Table 5). This indicates that exposure is not merely associated with, but actively contributes to, the cultivation of a threatened worldview.

The impact of sensationalized framing, which was very intense, further substantiated how emotionalized storytelling influenced the overall perception of crime severity amongst people. The findings had suggested that those subjects who perceived dramatic and personalized crime stories perceived crime to be more serious and widespread as compared to those who perceived crime in a contextualized manner. This was in line with framing and narrative transportation theories, which said that emotionally engaging messages were better in memory, arousal, and persuasion which then raised perceived realism and urgency (Green et al., 2022; Tal-Or et al., 2023). The strong effect size observed ($d = 1.48$) underscores the potency of sensationalized framing as a psychological magnifier, capable of transforming exceptional violent cases into symbols of pervasive social danger. The correlation matrix further illustrates how these perceptual variables are interwoven, with perceived severity strongly linked to both media exposure and fear of crime.

The resulting decrease in institutional trust by high media consumers had significant social cohesion



and governance implications. The constant coverage of crimes, particularly that stressed failure, injustice or corruption, probably had added to cynicism about police and courts. These were supported by recent findings indicating that negative crime stories decreased institutional legitimacy and augmented belief in punitive or extra-legal measures especially when viewers incorporated ineffective authorities (Murphy et al., 2023; Pickett et al., 2022). This erosion of confidence was not uniform across the sample; demographic analysis reveals that younger participants and those reliant on social media, groups with the highest media consumption reported the lowest trust scores. This demographic alignment between high exposure and low trust suggests that platform-specific narrative ecosystems may be particularly effective in undermining institutional legitimacy.

It is possible that the psychological mechanisms of these effects may be elucidated by emotional arousal, attentional bias and heuristic processing. Crime content was threatening in nature and hence it drew attention better than neutral information thereby resulting in deeper encoding and recollection. The study in affective news processing services has shown that fear and anger impaired analytical reasoning and enhanced an ataxic attitude toward mental shortcuts, which supported an overestimation of risks and a polarized stance (Lecheler et al., 2023; Soroka et al., 2022). The regression models provide empirical support for this cognitive-affective pathway, demonstrating that exposure explains significant variance in both emotional (fear) and evaluative (trust) outcomes. The strong intercorrelations between fear, perceived severity, and distrust suggest these outcomes operate as a mutually reinforcing psychological syndrome, rather than isolated effects.

These dynamics were further complicated by the true-crime and digital participatory crime media. Although preparedness and learning were pinpointed as reasons why some audience could have been reading crime stories, heavy reading had also been linked to increased vigilance, rumination and anxiety. It was demonstrated that people who regularly followed true-crime content tended to believe that they were potential victims and see ambiguous situations as such (Vicary & Fraley, 2022; Boling et al., 2023). This implied that even the entertainment-oriented crime stories might strengthen a defensive stance towards the social world particularly in conjunction with real time news and social-media crime feeds. The demographic profile of high consumers disproportionately young and social media-reliant, suggests that these participatory and algorithmic formats are driving exposure among populations already experiencing elevated perceptions of risk and institutional alienation.

Simultaneously, the results also suggested that media of crime did not influence all the audiences equally. The effect of exposure to crime had also been probably moderated by individual variance in personality, prior victimization and the media literacy. It had been shown that higher anxiety sensitivity or less trust in institutions made one more prone to fear-based media effects, and the opposite: people with critical media skills were more able to ensure that they put sensational stories in perspective (Marino et al., 2023; Nyhan & Reifler, 2023). While the current analysis demonstrates robust main effects, the variance in scores within high-exposure groups points to meaningful individual differences in psychological response. Future research should investigate how demographic and psychological moderators shape susceptibility to mediated crime narratives.

It was already indicated by the study that criminal representation could not be merely a response to criminality but rather a strong social and psychological impact. With framing, repetition, and emotionalization the media discourses had created a kind of mediated reality whereby crime seems to be everywhere, and institutions seem to be powerless. These portrayals had affected the way people perceived their safety, perceived offenders and victims as well as judging the validity of the justice system. The statistical evidence presented in this study, from group differences and effect sizes to predictive models and correlational structures, collectively confirms that crime media operates as an active social-psychological force. It does not merely reflect social reality but constructs a mediated one characterized by amplified threat and eroded trust, particularly among digitally immersed demographic segments. The findings thus emphasized the need to be more responsible in publicizing crimes and educate society more on the effects of mediated crime scripts to change perception and behaviour.

Future Directions

The longitudinal effects of crime media exposure should also be addressed in future studies to gain a



clearer insight into how fear and trust and risk perception changed over time. Comparative analysis in terms of various society of culture and media systems might also show how crime narratives operated in various kinds of societies. Besides that, it is necessary to pay more attention to the new formats short-form video, true-crime podcast, and interactive communities involved in crime, because these platforms were becoming the means of experiencing and interpreting the crime. The combination of neuroscientific and behavioural practices with communication studies would also advance the comprehension of how crime accounts influenced emotion and cognition and decision making during the digital era.

Authors Contributions

All the authors participated in the ideation, development, and final approval of the manuscript, making significant contributions to the work reported.

Funding

No outside funding was obtained for this study.

Statement of Data Availability

The corresponding author can provide the data used in this study upon request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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