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National University
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**The Impact of Crime Media on Peoples' Perceptions of Crime, Perpetrators and
Victims**

Barbara Szczepan

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Supervised by Dr Kevin Wozniak

Maynooth University
School of Law and Criminology

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Table of Contents

ABSTRACT & METHODOLOGY III

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION: THE ETHICS OF CRIME MEDIA..... 1

CHAPTER TWO: THE IMPACTS ON PERCEPTIONS OF CRIME 6

INTRODUCTION 6

SELECTIVE REPORTING IN CRIME MEDIA 6

IMPACTS ON PERCEPTIONS OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND THE POLICE 7

THE MEDIA’S CONTRIBUTION TO FEAR OF CRIME 11

CONCLUSION 14

CHAPTER THREE: THE IMPACTS ON PERCEPTIONS OF PERPETRATORS 16

INTRODUCTION 16

THE MEDIA AND STEREOTYPING 16

DIFFERENTIAL TREATMENT OF MINORITY PERPETRATORS AND ITS IMPACTS..... 19

WIDER IMPACTS OF MEDIA PORTRAYALS OF PERPETRATORS 21

CONCLUSION 24

CHAPTER FOUR: THE IMPACTS ON PERCEPTIONS OF VICTIMS..... 25

INTRODUCTION 25

TYPIIFICATION AND IDEAL VICTIMS IN MEDIA 25

DIFFERENTIAL TREATMENT OF VICTIMS 27

WIDER IMPACTS OF MEDIA TREATMENT OF VICTIMS 30

CONCLUSION 33

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION 34

BIBLIOGRAPHY 40

Abstract & Methodology

This dissertation aims to analyse the potential negative impacts of crime-related media on viewers' perceptions about crime, perpetrators, and victims. It will be completed using desk-based research as this is the most fitting and most practical method to answer the research question. Using desk-based research allows me to compare and contrast various perspectives on the same topic which will allow me to identify trends and patterns that will allow me to answer my research question.

To conduct research for this dissertation I used Google Scholar, Scopus and EBSCOhost as my main sources of literature. Initial searches of "crime media" found around 3 million results so I had to be more specific. Some of the search terms I used to utilise this search engine and database more efficiently included: "crime media AND ethics" (approx. 1.86 million results), "crime media AND fear" (approx. 1.7 million results), "crime media AND perpetrators" (approx. 270,000 results), "crime media AND police" (approx. 1.95 million results), "crime media AND race OR ethnicity" (approx. 870,000), and "media AND ideal victims" (approx. 440,000 results). Where appropriate, I also used both the American English and UK English spellings of certain words (such as 'sensationalization' and 'sensationalisation', or 'racialisation' and 'racialization') to maximise the efficiency of my searches.

Additionally, for the purposes of this dissertation I used some inclusion and exclusion criteria to narrow down my searches to best fit my research question. I included literature related to both fictional and non-fictional crime-related media; and media from various sources, including television, newspapers, and true crime podcasts and documentaries. When searching for literature I mainly limited myself to sources that were written within the last four decades. I also limited myself to literature written in English.

While reviewing the existing literature I gathered to help me answer my research question, I highlighted and took a note of the main findings of each relevant paper. This allowed me to observe and keep track of common themes that emerge from the literature in relation to this topic. These included: sensationalism in relation to ethics; biased reporting; selective reporting that it at odds with official crime statistics; stereotyping;

impacts related to police; impacts related to fear; differential treatment of minorities; and typifying legitimate victims. Biased reporting involved either the over-representation or underrepresentation of certain groups (Greer, 2007; Jewkes, 2015). Selective reporting involved the overrepresentation of certain types of crimes (Jewkes, 2015; Grosholz & Kubrin, 2007; Chermak, 1998; Greer, 2007), and victims and offenders (Grosholz & Kubrin, 2007); as well as a focus on newsworthiness to create stories most appealing to viewers (Dmitrieva, 2017; Greer, 2007). Stereotyping referred to stereotyping who criminals are (including racial stereotyping and the racialisation of crime (Colburn & Melander, 2018; Monk et al., 2007; Keating, 2002)) as well as stereotyping who victims are (Christie, 1986; Dukes & Gaither, 2017). Impacts relating to police involved more negative perceptions of police (Choi et al., 2020; Long, 2021); the impact of media on perceptions of police efficiency (Dowler, 2002) and legitimacy (Jewkes, 2015); and the link of perceptions of police to fear of crime (Choi et al., 2020). Impacts on fear of crime examined the extent to which this occurs (Greer, 2007; Grabe & Drew, 2007; Choi et al., 2020; Keating, 2002; Heath & Gilbert, 1996; Jewkes, 2015), including differences across racial/ethnic groups (Callanan, 2012; Dowler, 2002). It also examined whether media influences who one 'should' fear. Differential treatment of minorities examined the overrepresentation of minorities as offenders (Callanan, 2012; Colburn & Melander, 2018), as well as minority victims and offenders being treated or portrayed differently and more negatively (Dixon & Linz, 2002; Brennan & Vandenberg, 2009; Smiley & Fakunle, 2016; Long, 2021; Slakoff, 2018). The typification of legitimate victims focused on the perpetuation of Nils Christie's (1986) construct of 'ideal victims' in media (Long, 2021; Greer, 2007), and how legitimate and illegitimate victims are treated differently (Slakoff, 2018; Lewis & Hamilton, 2021; DiBennardo, 2018). These themes will be further elaborated on and explored throughout this dissertation.

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction: the ethics of crime media

Crime has been exploited for commercial entertainment since the dawn of cinema and it remains one of the most outstanding and enduring themes in television and shows, many of which mix fact, fiction and excitement (Jewkes, 2015). Evolutionary psychologists suggest that we are drawn to stories about crime as they have played a significant part in human society since our huntergatherer days; it is therefore potentially in our nature to be attuned to stories of criminal misconduct in order to discover ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘when’, and ‘where’ so that we can learn what makes criminals tick, to better protect ourselves or our loved ones, or to simply get lost in a good story (Spanner,). While consumption of crime-related media is not necessarily problematic in and of itself, the negative impacts on the perceptions of consumers that can result from media presentations of crime, criminals and victims, call into question the ethics of this type of media, as well as making one think what potential repercussions can stem from this. Previous research and commentary has brought this issue to light and has urged viewers to think critically about the media they are consuming, and as both fictional and non-fictional crime-related media is becoming increasingly prevalent in many different forms, this is the reason I chose to examine this topic in particular. Viewers should have the information that would allow them to work towards making more informed decisions about the content they consume and to avoid and criticise content that can cause harm to themselves or others.

This dissertation will examine what negative impacts crime-related media can have on consumer’s perceptions about crime, perpetrators, and victims. Crime-related media, both fictional and non-fictional, has become widespread and has piqued the interest of many; however consumers should be more aware of the harmful messages that can be perpetuated in this genre of media and the potential negative effects of their consumption. Media presentations can negatively skew perceptions and this can be problematic for individual viewers, crime-related policy-making, and society at large as it can lead to misinformation, misconceptions, bias and problematic stereotyping. I will use existing knowledge about the potential negative impacts of crime-related media on people’s perceptions about crime, perpetrators, and victims to inform potential consumers of issues they should be aware of while consuming this, admittedly, interesting and compelling genre of media.

Firstly, I will briefly discuss ethical dilemmas around crime-related media before focusing on the questionable or troublesome presentation of perpetrators, victims and crime in the media; and how this can negatively influence a consumer’s perceptions about these topics. I will discuss how

media presentations of crime can lead to misinformation, can contribute to increased levels of fear of crime, and can negatively impact people's views about criminal justice responses and professionals, such as the police. I will also examine the effects of the over-representation and under-representation of certain groups as offenders and victims, and how this can lead to problematic typification of perpetrators and ideal victims. The aim of this dissertation is to bring awareness to some of the potential negative impacts of crime-related media and to encourage consumers to keep these impacts in mind if they chose to consume this media.

The ethics of crime-related media have regularly been called into question due to the negative impacts this genre of media can have. In a study on desensitisation and media consumption, Mrug et al., (2015) found that desensitisation following media exposure can lead to diminished empathy and reduced emotional reactivity to real-life violence; and, though more limited, their findings also suggested evidences of physiological desensitisation to movie violence amongst participants exposed to high levels of televised violence. If media consumption leads to, or contributes to, desensitisation in the viewers, it can also result in apathy for the direct or indirect victims in these stories and their victimisation. Further contributing to this apathy, Willingham (2023) notes that there can be a lack of focus on victims in true crime media, and stories can instead centre the criminal. When offenders are given flashy memorable nicknames in stories written about them, it is easy for the victims to get lost. When stories are inspired or based on real events or people, there exists a risk of using trauma for entertainment which comes with the exploitation of those affected (Snail, 2022). The pain of victims and their families can be turned into entertainment in these stories and, especially if it is done without the consent of those affected, it can be re-traumatising (Ibid.). One notable recent example as of writing this dissertation is the 2022 Netflix series *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story*. Evidently from the title itself the show focuses on the serial killer rather than the victims and further evidence of this can be seen from the fact that the show was made without the approval of the families of the victims - many of whom have since expressed their dissatisfaction and hurt (Vargas, 2022). In addition to this, Evan Peters, a conventionally attractive actor, being cast as Dahmer in this series contributed to some viewers romanticising the killer (Montgomery, 2022). This is a pattern as the same reaction in some viewers can be observed following Zac Efron's casting as Ted Bundy in the 2019 film *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* (Moore, 2019). These castings as well as lexical choices (such as Ted Bundy being described as a 'handsome devil' in the 2019 documentary series *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes*) are intentional ploys to draw in audiences, and humanise and glamourise the killers that the plots of these stories centre around

(Lockwood, 2021); all of this can undoubtedly cause further psychological and emotional harm to surviving victims or their families whose lives were ruined by these offenders. Maercker and Mehr (2006), who examined the effects of victims' reading newspaper reports about their victimisation, concluded that media representatives need to take particular care when dealing with traumatised survivors due to an association between the level of PTSD symptoms and negative psychological reactions to media coverage. Crime-related media can also have negative impacts on consumers who have not necessarily been victimised themselves – in the next chapter of this dissertation I will analyse how crime-related media can contribute to an increased fear of crime in viewers.

Dehumanisation can also be an issue (Wright, 2020), and this can negatively impact both victims and offenders. Rai et al., 2017 argues that the dehumanisation of victims can increase instrumental violence (ie. behaviour that is aggressive or violent with the intention to achieve a goal). Victims may be less likely to receive help, or be less likely to be seen as 'deserving' of help if they are dehumanised (Vasiljevic & Viki, 2013). Vasquez (2014) found that describing a crime or perpetrator in an animalistic way can have an impact on the subsequent retribution towards the perpetrator and can induce a perception that they are more likely to continue engaging in violence. Dehumanisation of offenders can also contribute to the justification of their moral exclusion or negative treatment (Vasiljevic & Viki, 2013). I will elaborate on this further in my discussion about perpetrators. In later chapters in this dissertation I will also examine how race and gender interplay with the differential and preferential treatment of certain perpetrators and victims by the media and how this in turn has negative impacts on how they are treated or viewed by the media, its' consumers, and by society at large.

The media can often be motivated by the concept of newsworthiness or marketability above all else; though the extent to which the media is driven by these motivators depends on the medium – for example television crime news can depart more widely from reality than that in newspapers (Viano, 1995). Some examples of these news values include: risk, sex, involvement of celebrities or high-status persons, proximity, violence, graphic imagery, children, and conservative ideologies (Jewkes, 2015). However, accounts that are newsworthy do not necessarily present reality, but rather they forge it (Viano, 1995). Many authors bring up the issue of sensationalisation. Examples of this include graphic descriptions of grief or anguish, victims in gruesome, bloody or embarrassing (eg. nude) situations, graphic imagery (eg. blood, body bags), publishing unnecessary details, and selective emphasis in headlines (Ibid., 44). The glorification

of real peoples' stories can also occur; this is made even more problematic when the stories are not well-researched (Wright, 2020; Noe 2022). The accuracy in crime-related media has rightfully been a cause for concern; especially since research suggests a strong correlation between media reliance and prejudice, mediated by factual knowledge (Wright & Ross, 1997). Errors in the facts of crime-related stories, especially in newspapers, may also lead to erroneous opinions about the defendant's guilt (Ibid.) The media has a tendency of focusing on the most atypical crimes and presents them in a sensationalistic way (Jewkes, 2015). Consequently, on one hand, perceptions of equalness in the potential of becoming victims (ie. The media can say 'this could have happened to anyone') may result in an obsessive fascination in such narratives; on the other hand, certain groups (particularly women and the elderly) can become socialised into fear and can become over-sensitised to their role in avoiding becoming victims (Ibid.). Throughout this dissertation I will examine how the media can distort viewers' perceptions about crime and the negative impacts that can stem from this misinformation, which includes increased fear, and problematic stereotyping and bias.

Crime-related media can be fictional or non-fictional and comes in various forms; this includes eg. television or radio news, television shows, newspapers, magazines, books, true-crime documentaries, and podcasts. Ethical concerns arise about the potential of biased reporting in this content, especially if it is a main source of information for consumers. The media plays a role in setting the agenda for public debate about crime; the implementation of criminal justice; and the notions of 'enemies within' – these in turn shape public perceptions about their likelihood of becoming victims and about who they should fear (Jewkes, 2015). Among other authors, Greer (2007) argues that groups and individuals can be over-represented, underrepresented, and mis-represented in media. This, and the negative impacts that this can have on consumers, will be analysed in later chapters of this dissertation. Not all victims, offenders, and crimes are treated equally in the media, and this can distort and manipulate public perceptions (Jewkes, 2015). Selective distortion in media can lead to false narratives about crime, stereotyping, bias, and oversimplification of facts (Ibid.).

All of these issues, if they are present in crime media, rightfully call for ethical concerns. Viewers and readers have control over the content they consume. They can therefore make an effort to think more critically about the content they see and avoid content that can cause ethical dilemmas and cause further harm to those affected, and to themselves. However, negative impacts of crime-related media are also in the direct control of the producers of this types of

media; and these impacts go beyond mere ethical concerns. They are not only unethical, but can also negatively impact viewer's perceptions of crime, victims, and perpetrators; this in turn has negative implications for how some victims of crime and perpetrators are treated, as well as for society at large as it can increase support for problematic crime policy. Viewer perceptions about crime can be negatively influenced by biased or selective reporting as well as stereotyping in the media. Perceptions about victims and perpetrators can also be negatively influenced by stereotyping along with the differential treatment of minorities and the typification of 'legitimate' victims. These issues will be discussed further throughout this dissertation.

CHAPTER TWO: The impacts on perceptions of crime

Introduction

Crime-related media has the ability to lead to misguided perceptions about crime. It can shape perceptions of the 'crime problem' and guide our emotional responses to it (Jewkes, 2015). The majority of public knowledge about crime and criminal justice derives from media consumption and perceptions about victims, criminals and law enforcement officials is largely determined by their portrayal in the media (Dowler & Zawilski, 2007). In this chapter, I will examine the negative impacts of selective reporting in the media on consumers' perceptions about crime. I will also examine how the media can influence peoples' attitudes towards criminal justice as well as the police. Finally, I will analyse the extent to which crime-related media can contribute to increased levels of fear of crime.

Selective reporting in crime media

The media's tendency to concentrate on the most unusual or serious offences (Jewkes, 2015), can have a negative impact on those that consume this content. Characteristics of crime in the media can often represent the opposite of patterns suggested by official crime statistics (Grosholz & Kubrin, 2007). This can also be true for fictional crime media, such as reality TV crime shows (Monk-Turner et al., 2007). Keating (2002) argues that distortion of crime in media appears in the representation of the extent of crime, the types of crime one should be concerned about, and in the representation of typical criminals. The media has the power to leave out details, or focus on what they deem would be most appealing to the consumer; this contributes to statistically rarer cases appearing more frequently in the media (Dmitrieva, 2017). Fictional and non-fictional crime media coverage focuses overwhelmingly on the most serious examples of crime and victimisation (Greer, 2007). Media portrayals of crime are often motivated by sensationalism and newsworthiness. This results in depictions of gruesome or violent cases being covered more, and Chermak (1998) identified that the number of victims and the type of offence are factors that affect the amount of space and attention given to newspaper crime stories. Studies from the United States and the United Kingdom suggest that crime reporting in the press has become increasingly prevalent, and that interpersonal crimes (especially violent and sexual crimes) are consistently over-represented in relation to official crime statistics (Jewkes, 2015). Crime reporting institutions, including the media and police, play an integral role in any crime wave – crime waves may not necessarily be a function of 'real' crime increases but rather may be a function of media and/or police crime-reporting practices (Baker et al., 1983). All of this is

important to keep in mind when consuming this type of media as our beliefs about actual levels of crime come from a) direct observation of reality, and b) indirect channels, such as the media (Mastrorocco & Minale, 2018). If people have little or no direct experience with crime in reality, their perceptions could easily get skewed if they over-rely on media for factual information.

Impacts on perceptions of criminal justice and the police

There is a widespread idea that the crime rate is continuously spiralling and that the criminal justice system is overly lenient; these public perceptions often reflect the views that are propagated by much of crime-related media (Jewkes, 2015). This may not be generalisable for all parts of the world, however, according to the House of Commons Justice Committee's survey in 2023, 71% of respondents felt that the criminal punishment in the United Kingdom is too lenient (Chen, 2024). Additionally, according to a Gallup poll, the majority of Americans think that the United States is 'not tough enough' on crime as 58% of respondents (this increased from 41% in 2020) stated that they believe the criminal justice system to be too soft; and this change in public opinion coincides with growing fears about allegedly rising crime rates in the US (Brenan, 2023). In Ireland, public confidence in the effectiveness of the criminal justice system was at 50% (which was an increase from 45% in 2021); however, in 2022 public confidence in the Irish Prison Service and Probation Service was only at 30% and 24% respectively (Irish Penal Reform Trust, 2023). Prior research suggests that the distortion of crime in the media which contributes to increased fear can also contribute to increased support for authoritarian measures of control (Greer, 2013). Fearful individuals end up losing confidence in the ability of local governments to solve problems; and when people believe that the government cannot control crime, it becomes a political issue and a basis for voting officials and administrations out of office (Baker et al., 1983). Exposure to crime dramas can also increase the salience of crime as a political problem (Holbrook & Hill, 2005); both surveys (Holber, Shah & Kwak, 2005) and experiments (Mutz & Nir, 2010) have demonstrated that it can affect policy attitudes, particularly by making them more punitive (Donovan & Klamn IV, 2015). In relation to crime, tougher action on the part of the police, courts and prisons is seen as an appropriate response to the substandard state of affairs; this is a shared opinion amongst politicians and the media (Jewkes, 2015). This can result in the media constructing crime and violence in a way that encourages populations to accept increasingly repressive forms of social control (Ibid.). The media can create support for measures such as the three-strikes, the death penalty, stand your ground, and open carry laws; and this impact of the media is often amplified by a fear of crime (Dolliver et al., 2018). Donovan and Klahm IV (2015) also found that conservatives were less likely to

believe that the police are successful at lowering the crime rate; their greater focus on protection-oriented services, such as the military or police, can make conservatives have higher expectations for the police than liberals. The media may also create support or tolerance for problematic behaviour on the behalf of criminal justice professionals. Crime media can depict the police as committing civil liberty violations and this may be portrayed in a positive light, for example as a necessity to bring offenders to justice. Donovan and Klamn IV (2015) argue that watching crime dramas can contribute to viewers believing that force used by the police is usually necessary for arrests. A common theme in crime-related reality shows is that aggressive law enforcement is required due to the increasing dangerousness and prevalence of crime; this may result in viewers believing that society needs to have tougher crime control and that due process and civil rights may be a hinderance to this (Dowler & Zawilski, 2007). The media may normalise an 'ends justify the means' mentality and that police use of force or misconduct can be warranted, which is obviously problematic as this can translate into the justification of rights violations in real life. Eschholz et al., (2004: 173) argues that '[t]he casual use of civil rights violations with no repercussions may prime viewers to believe that this is how policing is and 'should be done''. Community and problem-oriented policing are rarely shown and may be perceived as unnecessary considering how effective fictional police can be at traditional, reactive policing (Donovan & Klahm IV, 2015). In addition, given that offenders are usually portrayed as personally responsible for crimes and are committing them for psychological or pathological (rather than sociological or situational) reasons, viewers may believe that proactive policing is less or not necessary nor effective (Ibid.).

The police are a widely covered profession in the media in both fictional and nonfictional representations. However, media portrayals of policing are juxtaposed with both positive and negative representation, resulting in a complex relationship between media consumption and public attitudes towards the police (Dowler & Zawilski, 2007). The media's potential power to alter perceptions is known amongst the police. The police can use social media to promote the social image of policing they wish to convey to the public they serve (Hu et al., 2018). The media-police relationship can be mutually beneficial as the police have an interest in preserving a positive public image, while reporters require quick, reliable sources of crime news (Dowler & Zawilski, 2007). Following serious crimes, the police can also engage in selective reporting in press releases in order to reduce the creation of an unfavourable impression of policing (Jewkes, 2015). Public relation strategies endorsed by the police can present proactive police activity which builds the image that police are effective and efficient investigators of crime (Dowler & Zawilski, 2007).

Media portrayals can also inform perceptions about the police and can produce a sense of legitimacy (or illegitimacy) for the institution of policing (Jewkes, 2015). Print and broadcast media tend to characterise the police as ineffective or incompetent, while reality police shows and tabloid news programs often present them as heroes who fight evil (Surette, 2007). Crime dramas can lead viewers to believe that the police are successful at lowering crime rates, use force only when necessary, and that misconduct does not typically lead to false confessions (Donovan & Klahm IV, 2015). Fictional officials in crime can be often portrayed as highly successful and accurate and, though they engage in it frequently, the use of force is often portrayed as necessary or justified (Ibid.). Research suggests that positive representations of police can create unrealistic public expectations about the police and real policing, and disappointment when police do not perform like they do in these media portrayals (Perlmutter, 2000). Crime-related media also often exaggerates the proportion of successful arrests and crimes that are solved; this portrays the police as more effective than official statistics would show (Dowler & Zawilski, 2007). This can create a false impression regarding the successfulness of police activity in reality. For example, Eschholz et al., (2004) found that the success rate among criminal justice officers in crime dramas was much higher than that in reality – the arrest rate in the 1999-2000 seasons of *NYPD Blue* was 78%, and the conviction rate in *Law & Order* was 61%, whereas the actual New York Police Department clearance rate for violent crimes in 1999 was 29%.

Choi et al. (2020) argue that confidence in the police can be negatively impacted by perceived incivilities and fear of crime, and that those who frequently consume crime-related media can be more inclined to perceive the police in a negative way. Weitzer and Tuch (2004) found that citizens who report hearing or reading about incidents of police misconduct on TV or in newspapers also are more likely to believe that misconduct is more prevalent than those with less news media exposure. They also find that fear of crime is significantly related to levels of confidence in the police (Ibid). Additionally, Dowler (2002) argues that television watchers are more likely to perceive the police as ineffective, and that even viewing crime drama can relate to this perceived ineffectiveness – though prior police contact can be an enhancing or mitigating factor. For example, in an experimental study, Wozniak et al., (2021) tested whether exposure to news images depicting law enforcement affected public attitudes – they found that respondents who had been recently stopped by the police and saw a picture of a friendly interaction between officers and civilians perceived more frequent police misconduct than those where were not recently stopped. These findings indicate that brief exposure to images of police in media does not independently affect opinions about their performance, rather people’s opinions about the police are shaped by multiple factors such as their own beliefs, prior experiences, and cumulative,

self-selected media consumption (Ibid.). Dowler and Zawilski (2007) found that heavy television viewers with previous police contact were more likely to have negative attitudes towards the police. Perceived problems in the neighbourhood, and fear of crime, was also significantly related to perceived police effectiveness (Dowler, 2002). Dowler and Zawilski (2007) also argue that repeated media exposure to police abuse can increase viewers' beliefs regarding the necessity of police misconduct. Weitzer and Tuch (2005) add that exposure to police misconduct in the media can increase perceptions about bias against minorities within the police.

Race also plays a role in all of this as race and experience with the criminal justice system are significant predictors of attitudes towards police and police misconduct (Dowler & Zawilski, 2007). Those who are not treated as typical victims can experience racial re-victimisation and can develop an altered perception of the police, particularly as being untrustworthy (Long, 2021). White people also tend to have more confidence in the police than Non-White which in turn means that Non-Whites can be more fearful due to the interconnectedness of fear and confidence in the police (Baker et al., 1983). Dowler and Zawilski (2007) found that minority viewers that frequently consumed network news can be more likely to believe that Whites receive better treatment by police; and frequent viewers of police dramas tend to believe that wealthy people receive preferential treatment from the police. Studies that focused specifically on local TV news found that viewers, especially minorities, may also hold more negative attitudes towards the police in wake of highly publicised incidents of police misconduct (Weitzer, 2002). Succar et al., (2024) also found that media coverage of police brutality could be a key factor in driving negative public sentiments towards the police, whereby increased media coverage of police brutality affects the volume of public discourse on social media, namely Twitter. This is in line with the findings of Miller et al., (2004) who found argue that media coverage of police routine has a limited effect on public opinions towards the police, in contrast with the reporting of misconduct and vicarious experiences of police abuse which do shape views about law enforcement.

The relationship between media consumption and the police is evidently complex and multi-layered. One factor that may also influence discrepancies in the findings is the degree to which respondents receive information about the police from other media sources (Donovan & Klahm IV, 2015). It is evident however that, on one hand, negative portrayals of the police can lead to increased negative viewer perceptions about the police; or positive portrayals can lead to higher expectations than what might be met in reality. On the other hand, arguably negative portrayals that depict problematic behaviour and rights violations on behalf of the police can be distorted in a way that makes them appear positive. Crime-related reality shows can portray

criminal justice in a way that can lull the public into thinking that the police are not biased and treat all criminals the same (good or bad), regardless of race; however, it is important to acknowledge that these representations are easily manipulated by producers to appear more balanced, fair, unbiased and more palatable (Donovan, 1998; Dowler & Zawilski, 2007).

The media's contribution to fear of crime

The media plays a part in exaggerating public fears of crime and in orchestrating moral panics (Keating, 2002). The media plays a key role in the production of knowledge about crime for many people; this is why media distortion is so important to be wary of as it can have negative impacts on consumers. Crime-related media consumption can contribute to an increased fear of crime and incivility (Greer, 2013; Choi et al., 2020). Though media exposure may not be a primary route to the development of a fear of crime (Chadee et al., 2019), the media can be a contributing factor towards a fear of crime and victimisation for many people. Baker et al., (1983) argue that perceptions about crime rates and confidence in the police are integral components of fear.

Much of the complexity about the fear of crime is that evidence suggests that the vast majority of people's fears are unrelated to actual risk of victimisation, and that perceptions drive the fear of crime rather than objective measures of risk (Collins, 2016). Jewkes (2015) notes that the groups who become most concerned about their risk of victimisation are the same groups whose victimisation is over-reported and over-sensationalised in the media. Similarly, Baker et al., (1983) found that a crime wave in Arizona in the 1980s had a powerful impact that was almost a mirror image of what would have been predicted by crime literature – that the demographic groups that are usually most fearful (ie. women and the elderly) were least affected, while the groups thought to be least fearful were most affected. Chadee et al., (2019) also find that a perceived risk of victimisation is related to fear of crime. While certain groups, for example women and the elderly, may have genuine reasons for increased levels of anxiety about victimisation and crime, this anxiety is often reinforced and perpetuated by the media which recognises violent crimes against these groups as being newsworthy (Jewkes, 2015). Vicary and Fraley (2010), for example, found that women were more likely than men to be drawn to true crime books that contained survival information and tips on how to defend oneself from victimisation; and for this reason women may also be more drawn to true crime books featuring female victims.

Prior research also yields mixed results regarding who is most likely to be afraid, who they are afraid of, and why – some suggest that on average women have greater fear than men (eg. Hilinski et al., 2011); some suggest men have a greater fear of crime (eg. Sutton & Farrall, 2005); and some say men and women have equivalent levels of fear of crime (eg. Gilchrist et al., 1998). Mixed results also appear in literature on respondents' race, local racial composition of their community and fear of crime levels (eg. Chirios et al., 1998). Whether or not the fear of crime is in accordance with actual risk of victimisation, fear can have attitudinal consequences as well as having the potential to elicit avoidance behaviour, which can inhibit routine social interaction and alter lifestyles (Baker et al., 1983; Hartnagel, 1979; Wilson, 1975). Consumers should be conscious of these potential consequences for their own wellbeing.

The extent to which the media contributes to the cultivation of perceptions or fears about crime can vary depending on the type of media. Moreover, same types of media may also vary depending on, for example, the channels – Grabe and Drew (2007) find that news media channels vary in the extent they can cultivate a fear of crime. Differences in the impact of crimerelevant media can also be seen across racial/ethnic groups. Factors such as age, race, or income can be aggravating or mitigating factors in relation to fear of crime (Dowler, 2000). However, despite these differences, they all the potential of having negative impacts on consumers. Grabe and Drew (2007) find that there is little evidence of cultivation effects as a result of televised crime drama, but they can occur due to non-fictional forms of media. Callanan (2012) finds that realistic television content related to crime has greater influence on consumers' perceptions and responses to crime than fictional accounts or newspapers. Perceived realism of the media content plays an important factor, and sometimes television crime-related reality shows can be more impactful on perceptions about neighbourhood crime than newspapers or crime drama (Ibid). Similarly, Chadee et al., (2019) add that television realism contributes to a perceived risk of victimisation. Callanan (2012) also noted that local television can elevate perceptions and fear of crime irrespective of race or ethnicity. Ferraro and LaGrange (1987: 73) argue that fear of crime is 'both an effect and a cause in its relationship to judgements of risk'. Other factors which can impact levels of fear of crime and perceptions about risk are physical incivilities in the local neighbourhood such signs of social disorder (ie. littering, graffiti or abandoned buildings) (Covington and Taylor, 1991); and collective efficacy (or lack thereof) – this involves the ability of neighbourhoods to realise common values of residents and maintain effective social control (Sampton et al., 1997).

In accordance with cultivation theory, higher levels of crime-related media consumption can result in increased fear of crime and victimisation (Dolliver et al., 2018). This is significant as

this heightened fear can translate into greater support for potentially problematic punitive or defensive criminal justice policies (Ibid.). In a natural experiment, Mastroianni and Minale (2018) measured the effect of media persuasion on the perceptions that individuals hold and how this can also impact voting behaviour; they found that reduced exposure to channels characterised by high levels of crime reporting decreased individual concerns about crime – in short less exposure to channels with high levels of crime coverage can decrease individual concerns about crime.

It is important to recognise that the relationship between the media and a fear of crime is complex and not a simple 'cause and effect' (Heath & Gilbert, 1996). Jewkes (2015) identifies factors outside of media which influence public anxiety, these include: actual risk of victimisation; previous experiences of victimisation; environmental conditions; ethnicity; and previous contact with the police and criminal justice system. Additional factors to consider include: sensationalism; randomness; the location of the crime; the proportion dedicated to crime coverage; the type of programming (fictional vs non-fictional); the credulity of the viewer; the extent of justice displayed at the end of the program; and the level of apprehension about crime before viewing (Heath & Gilbert, 1996).

The last point is particularly noteworthy, namely due to the potential of selection bias in research. Selection bias occurs when a researcher does not observe a random sample of a population of interest – this lack of independence from the outcome variables leads to biased inferences about social processes (Winship & Mare, 1992). This form of bias is important to consider when examining the impacts of crime-related media consumption on its consumers. Prior belief in the reality of what is reported in the media, and prior apprehension about crime victimisation, will affect the relationship with the fear of crime (Heath & Gilbert, 1996). The estimated negative effects of the media on viewers' concerns about crime are often higher for those who spend more time watching television while also consuming other media (such as the internet, radio, newspapers etc.) less frequently. It is important to recognise that inferences or conclusions should not be drawn too quickly from research considering the complexity of the relationship between the media and the viewers. It would be inappropriate to definitively conclude that one thing causes another – they may be linked but surrounding factors should not be ignored and not all samples can be generalisable. Research should be examined critically and researchers should keep in mind other factors that may be at play before coming to conclusions. Hale (1996) notes that the fear of crime as a construct is difficult to operationalise which results in researchers defining or theorising it differently which then shapes the direction of the studies. Collins (2016) writes about how the ways in which fear of crime are measured can also affect the

result; this is also noteworthy. This idea is also echoed by Ferraro and LaGrange (1987: 70) who argue that fear of crime is an area where measurement problems afflict a wide variety of research issues and 'hinder the process of cumulative development of scientific knowledge'. For example, changes in the wording of questions, or possible responses, can alter who seems most afraid – binary questions can lead to false positives and the phrasing of fear of crime questionnaires can also make a difference in the trends that are observed (Ibid.).

Publication bias is also an issue as both authors and journals tend to publish significant results while studies that did not 'work' (or produced statistically insignificant effects) remain unpublished (Rosenthal, 1979). Existing levels of fear of crime prior to media consumption should be examined before definitively concluding that media causes increased fear for all consumers. The type of media consumed and whether it is the consumer's sole source of information (ie. whether they also consume any other type of media), should be examined before concluding that a particular type of media has negative impacts on all consumers. For example, the conclusion that readers of newspapers (ones that report crime in a sensationalised and salient way) having the highest levels of fear of crime may be influenced by factors outside of the media, such as the fact that this fear may reflect the readers' actual risk of victimisation as readers of tabloid newspapers are often concentrated in lower socio-economic areas which also exposes them to greater levels of risk of crime (Jewkes, 2015). This population would therefore not necessarily be generalisable. In addition, viewers of, for example, crime dramas may watch these shows because they reinforce their pre-existing beliefs, so it would be disingenuous to definitively conclude that crime dramas *cause* all viewers to have these negative beliefs. It is important to recognise when something is a link rather than conclusively inferring causation. All that being said however, the point that I am trying to make is that the media can have negative impacts on the perceptions of at least some consumers, and consumers should be made aware of these so that they can make a more informed decision about whether or not they wish to consume this type of media.

Conclusion

Since the emergence of the modern media industry, it is often taken as an indisputable fact that society has become more violent (Jewkes, 2015). However, media depictions of crime are not always accurately representative of reality. If the media is used as a primary source of information, it has the ability to misleadingly skew consumers' perceptions about crime. This can potentially in turn can have other negative impacts on unsuspecting viewers. Research suggests that these effects can occur from both entertainment media and non-fictional accounts and news

programming (Donovan & Klahm IV, 2015). Media depictions of the crime can lead to increased support for potentially problematic authoritarian forms of crime control. While prior police contact can be an aggravating or mitigating factors, media depictions of the police have the potential to contribute to people viewing them as untrustworthy, or less effective as they may not meet higher expectations influenced by the media. Crime-related media also has a complex but interesting relationship with the fear of crime. It is important to acknowledge selection bias when analysing the relationship between media consumption and public attitudes or perceptions. I have utilised examples of experimental studies in my analysis (ie. Wozniak et al., 2021; Mastrorocco & Minale, 2018) as experiments are the strongest research design to overcome selection bias. While the media cannot be said to be solely to blame for instilling a fear in crime in its' consumers, nor for instilling this fear equally for all, a link between the two exists. Frequent consumption of crime-related media can exacerbate levels of fear in some viewers, especially those with pre-existing fears about crime and victimisation. Fear of crime is a more widely experienced phenomenon than actual victimisation and consumers should be weary of this impact the media can have when choosing what content they consume, and how much of it they consume.

CHAPTER THREE: The impacts on perceptions of perpetrators

Introduction

Apart from the ability to negatively impact consumers' perceptions about crime more generally, crime-related media also has the ability to potentially impact consumers' perceptions about perpetrators. Similarly to that for crime, characteristics of criminals in media representations can represent the opposite of what is suggested by official crime statistics (Grosholz & Kubrin, 2007). In this chapter, I will discuss how media portrayals of perpetrators can be problematic and how this can negatively impact consumers' perceptions as well as potential wider implications. I will focus in particular on how the media can create or reinforce stereotypes of who typical criminals are, and the differential treatment of perpetrators depending on race or ethnicity in crime-related media.

The media and stereotyping

The over-representation of certain groups as criminals in the media can lead to problematic stereotyping and the racialisation of crime - simplistic stereotypical representations of criminals can reinforce popular notions about who criminals are, and the racialisation of crimes can lead to moral panics and the criminalisation of certain groups (Keating, 2002).

Messages that reinforce stereotypes arise in various forms of media including nonfictional news media but also television and film entertainment (Entman & Gross, 2008). Online news platforms have unique characteristics that traditional-based media lacks – such as the ability to engage with the news and information by for example: commenting, posting, sharing; the ability to have global access to a variety of content and viewpoints; and to have the option to search, control, and select information one wishes to consume (Metzger, 2009). Online media sources also have the ability to cultivate attitudes and beliefs among consumers, though it may do so differently to traditional media due to these unique characteristics (Intravia & Pickett, 2019). Racial elements of crime, for example, may not be portrayed in the same manner on internet sites compared to traditional news formats (Ibid.).

While a lot of the public's perceptions of typical perpetrators are consistent with existing literature and official statistics, disparities also suggest that the media and other sources of information also play a vital role in creating or perpetuating these ideas (Kennedy, 2018). Crime-related media can contribute to the idea of 'dangerous classes' which distorts general fears as well as potentially influencing viewers about who to perceive as a threat (Keating, 2002). A

generalised belief about a particular group can create an 'us' and 'them' mentality (Becker, 1963), and the way in which society forms collective opinions can become warped and lead to stereotyping (Kennedy, 2018). Stereotypes in the media often consist of reoccurring messages that associate minorities and/or people of colour with traits, behaviours, and values that are undesirable, inferior or dangerous; in the context of crime media in the United States for example, there exists considerable evidence that the media tends to portray Black people and Latinos as criminal and violent (Entman & Gross, 2008). These types of portrayals matter as they are a central component in the perpetuation of racial and ethnic misunderstandings and antagonism which in turn can also influence criminal justice processes (Ibid.)

The media can play a role in perpetuating racism by attributing criminality to certain demographics (Van Dijk, 2012). The use of race, particularly of blackness, as a proxy for criminality and dangerousness is not a new idea (Rose, 2002), but the media can play a role in its perpetuation – this can also therefore lead to the creation or reinforcement of stereotypical ideas about perpetrators. Many authors have argued that there is an overrepresentation of African Americans as criminals in news programs (Dixon and Linz, 2000a, 2000b; Gordon & Rosenberg, 1989). Fictional crime media, such as television crime shows, can also perpetuate crime myths and reinforce stereotypes relating to gender and race – particularly about Black men as offenders (Monk-Turner et al., 2007). Intravia and Pickett (2019) found that social media news consumption was positively related to racially typifying African Americans as criminals, that television news programs overrepresent African Americans as criminals, and are more likely to depict Whites as victims and law enforcement officers. In their study, when comparing official statistics, Dixon and Linz (2000a) found that African Americans made up 21% of arrests but were portrayed in 37% of local television crime news stories. Dixon (2017) also found that African Americans comprised of 24% of criminal and 27% of homicide arrests, compared to being 27% of criminal and 31% of homicide perpetrators portrayed on local television news. Callanan (2012) adds that the constant portrayal of Black male offenders in the news may contribute to a hegemonic construction of young Black men as dangerous, which reinforces existing problematic racial stereotypes. Heavy consumption of media that racialises crime may activate or reinforce stereotypes about African Americans as criminal or violent, which ultimately heightens levels of fear and increases support for punitive crime policies (Intravia & Pickett, 2019). Overexposure, Holt (2013) argues, has the dual effect of causing many to conflate violence with being Black, and increasing the belief that committing crime is a natural tendency for Black people. Peffley, Shields and Williams (1996) found that even short exposure to images of a Black man in handcuffs can activate the 'Black criminal stereotype' – a belief that Black

suspects are more likely to be criminals, guilty of committing the crimes for which they are charged, and deserving of harsher sentences than Whites charged with the same crime; it also invoked feelings of fear and loathing. Studies of media content consistently find that Black suspects are portrayed more frequently and more menacingly than White suspects in television news stories (Peffley et al., 1996). In an experimental study, Peffley et al. (1996) investigated the impact of these kinds of portrayals on White viewers' attitudes. They found that even a brief visual image of a Black male suspects in televised crime stories was capable of activating racial stereotypes which in turn heavily biased Whites' evaluations of the suspect along racial lines (Ibid.). White participants in this experiment who endorsed negative racial stereotypes were more likely to view the Black suspect as guilty, more deserving of punishment, more likely to reoffend, and view them with more fear and loathing than a similarly portrayed White suspect (Ibid.). Stereotype endorsers are more likely to find suspects most threatening when they are depicted as African American or are left unidentified (Dixon, 2008). In addition, Dixon (2016) found that internet news consumption was associated with assuming that a hypothetical, race-unidentified suspect was African American. Similarly, Dixon (2007) finding that race-unidentified perpetrators were rated as having a high likelihood of being Black also shows the effects of stereotyping and overrepresentation in the media. Researchers, psychologists and other scholars have argued that exposure to mass media imagery may have an impact on viewers' constructions of social reality (Gerbner, 1990) – this has often been termed as the 'cultivation effect' and the general notion of cultivation can be applied to stereotyping, crime news, and beliefs about racial groups (Dixon, 2007). It can be reasonably argued that the overrepresentation of Black people in crime media as criminals is done to such an extent that the cognitive association between Black people and lawbreaking is perpetually reinforced (Ibid.) and this in turn can reinforce stereotypical perception of consumers.

Several studies show that the media can activate or exacerbate racial stereotypes (Holt, 2013). It is noteworthy however that racist sentiments do not necessarily stem entirely from the media and may be linked to other institutions, including the education system (Kennedy, 2018) – so while bias in the media is not necessarily a direct cause of bias for all consumers who have these beliefs, it can contribute to them or perpetuate these ideas. Intravia & Pickett (2019) also add that there is evidence that the association between online media consumption and engagement varies by race and political ideology – this suggests that the media might be contributing to pre-existing problematic ideologies rather than causing them. This is important because, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, it is important to acknowledge when something is linked rather than immediately ascribing causation. Nevertheless, this does not mitigate the fact

that the media has the potential to have this negative impact for at least *some* consumers. Additionally, selective exposure theory proposes that individuals will choose to consume media that aligns with their beliefs or predispositions. Prior research (eg. Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2008) shows that characteristics such as race, gender, and political affiliations can influence the type of news content the individual consumes. A causal link between media consumption and negative perceptions cannot be said to be generalisable for all consumers – the relationship should not be oversimplified and it is important to acknowledge that the media may be contributing to negative perceptions rather than singlehandedly causing them. However, either way consumers should be aware of this potential impact that the media can have on their perceptions.

Research suggests that racialised news events receive a lot of media attention and therefore consuming racialised crime news stories through selective exposure may reinforce prejudiced beliefs and influence consumers' judgements about stories involving race and crime (Dixon, 2006). It is also important to highlight that forming stereotypes may be beyond the conscious control of the individual (Greenwald and Banaji, 1995) – hence why it is important to be mindful of the content you are consuming. For example, Bargh, Chen & Burrows (1996) found that both low- and high- prejudiced White people had less favourable reactions to photos of Black people than that of Whites, and these reactions, they asserted, were unintentional (especially for the less prejudiced individuals) but they reflect that even subconscious biases can impact attitudes, behaviours, and perceptions. In addition, once activated, stereotypical beliefs are brought to mind quicker, especially if they mix with pre-existing beliefs (Holt, 2013). In addition, Okken's (2018) study (which looked at the media providing ethnic characteristics of terrorist attack perpetrators and whether this leads to the formation of stereotypes of Muslims or Middle Eastern people and anti-Arab attitudes) concluded that a news article involving stereotypic information does not influence people's attitudes towards members of certain groups, which is contrary to much of prior research. This suggests that exposure to only one news article is not enough to influence attitudes (Ibid.), but this again means that people should be mindful of the content they habitually consume as repeated exposure to stereotypical or racialised crime media can have an impact on consumers and their perceptions.

Differential treatment of minority perpetrators and its impacts

The overrepresentation of certain groups needs to be examined critically due to the subconscious messages viewers can gain from this.

The media has been accused of perpetuating racism or bias against ethnic and racial minorities by ‘othering’ those deemed as ‘alien’ and culturally separate to other citizens (Saeed, 2007). Due to the existence of the idea of ‘ideal victims’ (I will discuss this further in the next chapter of this dissertation), research has also come to include the idea of an ‘ideal perpetrator’ (Ortiz, 2024). The ideal perpetrator is described by Christie (1986: 28) as the ‘other’; a ‘dangerous man coming from far away; ‘the ideal offender is a distant being. The more foreign, the better. The less humane, the better’. This early portrayal already has links to more modern portrayals in the media where perpetrators are often othered and/or racialised. Evidence of minority perpetrators being differentiated and treated differently can be further seen in Ortiz’s (2024) study in Sweden where there was two distinct portrayals of perpetrators – the ideal foreign perpetrator and the ideal Swedish perpetrator. The ‘us’ and ‘them’ mentality that can stem from othering allows for blame to be placed on this ‘otherness’ for acts such as gender-based violence or honour violence – blame can be placed on perceived cultural beliefs of minority groups to the extent that minority groups can be perceived as an ‘imported problem’ (Alinia, 2019, cited in Ortiz, 2024). This might contribute to stronger support for problematic right-wing ideologies and anti-immigration policies. Ortiz (2024) found a correlation between how the media presents and frames the issue of men’s violence and minority cultures and that blame is perpetuated on individuals from non-Swedish backgrounds – most attention is on cultural differences rather than focusing on other factors, such as mental instability. The ideal foreign perpetrator is racialised to the extent that the problem is distanced and identified as a result of ethnic practices that are distinct from the hegemonic culture and values (Ibid.) This differential treatment in the portrayal of minorities subsequently leads to differential treatment of minority and non-minority offenders. Ortiz (2024) found that the ideal foreign perpetrator’s personhood was destroyed to further validate the victimhood of the victim, whereas the worst dehumanisation that the Swedish perpetrator faced was being called an ‘outcast’.

Dixon and Linz (2002) argue that minority defendants are more likely to be presented prejudicially in the media. Brennan and Vandenberg (2009) found that stories about White female offenders were more likely to contain excuses or neutralisers for their alleged or actual offences, and these stories were more likely to take an overall favourable tone than those about minority female offenders. Minorities are also often over-represented in crime story images and, notably, there is often a difference in the type and quality of images depending on the race or ethnicity of the person involved (Colburn & Melander, 2018). Minorities are more likely to be shown with mugshots, which in turn may send a subconscious message to viewers about this person as well as the group they belong to, which is problematic (Ibid.). In addition to this, in a

study conducted in the US, Cavior and Howard (1973) found that participants examining photographs associated darker skin with criminality. Entman and Gross (2008) also found that Black defendants were more likely to be shown in mugshots and were twice as likely than Whites to be shown under some form of physical restraint by the police; in addition to this, young men of colour are often portrayed in ways that associate them with extreme threat and less-than-human traits – narratives routinely use words such as ‘savage’ or ‘wild’. Images like this also matter as, for most people, acts such as arrests connote guilt because they believe (perhaps at least partially due to television crime shows) that officials take these actions only after accumulating strong evidence (Ibid.).

Additionally, traditional news media is more likely to depict African Americans in a negative or stereotypical fashion, such as criminal, intimidating, threatening, and associated with poverty (Dixon & Linz, 2000a). Turk et al., (1989) also found that, in newspapers, Latinos were more likely in comparison to Whites to dominate news stories involving crime and other problem issues. Josey (2015), who examined the portrayal of race in top 10 traditional and nontraditional internet news sites, found that African Americans were twice as likely to be portrayed with negative stereotypes compared to counter-stereotypes; and that ‘popular’ or ‘top’ stories often portrayed minorities in more stereotypical ways. Entman and Gross (2008) also found examples from prior research of the varied and subtle ways in which television and print news treat minorities, particularly Black people and Latinos, differently in crime coverage. Black people and Latinos are more likely to be portrayed as lawbreakers than Whites, particularly when the news is focusing on violent crime (Ibid.). Black people and Latinos appear less frequently outside of the crime-related news context – their frequent portrayal in criminal roles rather than socially positive roles is also linked to newsworthy values (Ibid.). Chiricos and Eschholz (2002) examined three weeks of local news programming in Orlando and found that 1 in 20 Whites were portrayed as criminals compared to 1 in 8 Black people and 1 in 4 Latinos. Racialised crime coverage coupled with a lack of positive and non-criminal portrayals perpetuates the link between racial/ethnic minorities and crime.

Wider impacts of media portrayals of perpetrators

The media can contribute to the idea of ‘outsiders’ posing a threat, and this concern is perceived as sufficiently troubling to legitimate and justify the demonisation and othering of certain individuals and groups on the basis of age, ethnicity, style, or other visible indicators; and to justify their repressive surveillance (Jewkes, 2015). Not only can stereotypical portrayals of crime perpetrators lead to problematic ideas and bias against certain groups, Dixon (2008) finds that

stereotype endorsers are more likely (than stereotype rejecters) to endorse punitive crime policy. Crime-related media's portrayals of perpetrators is also particularly noteworthy due to the negative impacts that this can have on consumers' perceptions of guilt. Wright and Ross (1997) found that newspaper and television consumption is positively correlated to perceptions about guilt; and individuals who rely on television as their source of knowledge can be more inclined to judge defendants' characters more negatively. The vast reach of media should also not be undermined. Jurors who are exposed to media coverage of crimes can also form biases against defendants (Ibid.). This can be particularly problematic as it may interfere with the defendant's right to a fair trial, which would be controversial irrespective of whether this person is guilty or not. The media also further contributes to perceptions of guilt as crime news often exhibits prosecution bias. Entman and Gross (2008) find that, when crimes receive sustained media attention, they are likely to contain information that can be considered prejudicial – journalists may rely on law enforcement officials' views, downplay the defence perspective, and minimally acknowledge the presumption of innocence.

The racialised perceptions of criminality and dangerousness that are portrayed and perpetuated in the media can have real life consequences for both consumers and the groups being stereotyped (Girgenti-Malone, 2019). Prior research highlights many ways in which crime media typically reinforces stereotypes about African Americans and other non-Whites (particularly Latinos) and contributes to more generalised racial antagonism (Entman & Gross, 2008). Racial stereotypes that are perpetuated by the media might become conscious or unconscious motivators for the shifts in consumers' behaviour or attitudes towards certain groups – for example, consumers may adopt racially motivated self-protective behavioural changes such as avoiding particularly young Black men when walking alone in urban areas at night (Kennedy, 1996: 15). Racial stereotypes in relation to offenders results in race being used as a factor in the determination of suspiciousness; this in turn can result in more problematic social control strategies and the policing of minority populations, such as increased surveillance of certain populations and racial profiling (Rose, 2002). In addition, due to stereotyping, Black males are more likely to be disproportionately targeted in police stop and searches due to their stereotypical association with street crime (Waddington et al., 2004).

Goldstein et al., (1984) suggested that there exists a general perception of what perpetrators look like and that individuals tend to assume that specific (criminal) occupations correlate with certain physical appearances, to the extent that this has the potential of biasing juries. Girgenti-Malone (2019) finds that due to the othering of minorities, White jurors may see Black defendants as more worthy of more punitive sanctions. Dixon (2006) also finds that, after

exposure to a majority of Black or unidentified suspects in a newscast, stereotype endorsers were more likely than stereotype rejecters to support the death penalty; viewers with heavy exposure to television news with a majority of Black suspects were more likely than light viewers to perceive the world as dangerous and view race-unidentified suspects as guilty of their offence. Girgenti-Malone (2019) argues that empirical research has demonstrated that racial prejudice and stereotypes are more likely to be applied to individuals with more stereotypical Black features. For example, Eberhardt et al., (2006) also found that Black male defendants in capital murder cases who were thought to be more stereotypically Black (including dark skin, wide noses, and thick lips) were more likely to receive death sentences. Conscious or unconscious bias can influence decision-making. Bowers et al., (2004) argues that if a juror holds racial stereotypes they might be more inclined to favour the death penalty. The perception of Black dangerousness can lead to tragedy and this is evident due to the deaths of Micheal Brown, Eric Garner, Freddie Grey, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, Beonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Sonya Massey (just to name a few) at the hands of police officers in America (Girgenti-Malone, 2019).

Stories that dehumanise criminals reinforce problems in the real world. An example of this is that, even though many denounce cruel punishments, many stories still perpetuate the idea that prisoners are evil people deserving of death; this attitude fosters cruelty, mistreatment, and negligence that can lead to the death of real prisoners, especially in the United States (Winkle, 2022). Additionally, when very serious offences are committed, the evil nature of the act is projected onto perpetrators – if perpetrators are constructed as evil monsters or subhuman beasts their complexity can be denied (Jewkes, 2015). The demonisation or dehumanisation of perpetrators can also have set backs in relation to their potential resocialisation and reintegration into society. The portrayal of perpetrators as evil or subhuman shows that the media does not engage in reintegrative shaming and results in (re)labelling them as criminal. The theory of reintegrative shaming separates the act and actor; it occurs when the ‘expressions of community disapproval [...] are followed by gestures of reacceptance into the community of law-abiding citizens’ (Braithwaite, 1989: 55). When this does not occur, the perpetrator can feel stigmatised and isolated which then inhibits them from accepting responsibility and joining others in denouncing the wrongness and harm caused. The treatment of perpetrators in this way also be connected with labelling theory – as members of society treat these individuals on the basis of their labels, the individual begins to accept and internalises the labels themselves (Jenkins, 2015). The lack of reintegrative shaming means that perpetrators are not encouraged to stop the behaviour without labelling and stigmatising them; this then does not reduce crime (like reintegrative shaming would) but rather it essentially increases it by encouraging future deviance

(Ibid.) This is also in line with the findings of Schram (2018) who also writes that dehumanisation and negative responses towards ex-offenders make reintegration processes more difficult, and that humanisation has a large impact on how ex-offenders are viewed and treated.

Conclusion

It is important to think critically about media portrayals of crime perpetrators as they can contribute to the perpetuation of damaging racial stereotypes (Colburn & Melander, 2018). The majority of serious academic research reveals a consistent bias against African Americans, both in the coverage of crime and more generally (Entman & Gross, 2008). Racial stereotypes portrayed repeatedly in media can contribute to negative perceptions of viewers about perpetrators and to a stereotypical association between minority groups, criminality, and guilt, which also in turn can influence evaluations and behaviour (Ibid.). These messages can contribute to animosity and stronger support for punitive criminal justice policies. Prominent examples of the differential treatment of minorities and the racialisation of crime have elicited media attention, protests and public outrage, however conscious or unconscious bias that can be exacerbated by media presentations can still impact decision-making; this is particularly problematic when this also reaches juries. Research suggests that society's perceptions about perpetrators was narrow and greatly racialised, however more recently people have become more educated about crime and who criminals are (Kennedy et al., 2018). This is a step in the positive direction so it is important that viewers acknowledge the media's potential to negatively influence their views and further contribute to misguided or biased perceptions.

CHAPTER FOUR: The impacts on perceptions of victims

Introduction

As well as having the potential to negatively skew peoples' perceptions about perpetrators, crime-related media can also have negative impacts on how consumers view or treat victims of crime. Drawing upon Nils Christie's (1986) concept of 'ideal victims', in this chapter I will examine who is normally typified as ideal victims in the media. Furthermore, I will examine how 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' victims are treated differently, and the media's contribution to this. I will finish by examining the wider impacts of the portrayals or perceptions about victims and how the media can contribute to these.

Typification and ideal victims in media

In addition to a tendency to focus on certain types of crimes, crime-related media can tend to focus most of its attention on a certain type of victim (Willingham, 2023). The same biased or selective reporting that motivates this selectiveness in crime reporting also can be used by the media when deciding what types of victims to focus on; this in turn results in the overrepresentation or under-representation of certain individuals or groups (Snail, 2022; Greer, 2007). The focus is often on the portrayal of victims who come within the horizon of 'newsworthiness' (Greer, 2007). Newsworthy victims are those who are perceived as warranting more media coverage and wider public attention, or are 'commercially exploitable' (Chen, 2024; Goulandris & McLaughlin, 2020). In relation to the newsworthiness of victims, two primary theories are at play: rarity theory and devaluation theory (Jeanis & Powers, 2017). Rarity theory proposes that victims who are 'ideal', stories that are unusual, or stories that involve multiple victims are considered newsworthy; and devaluation theory argues that the media portrayals of victims of crime as White feeds into preexisting perceptions of the exaggerated fear of victimisation for Whites (Ibid.). Characteristics of victims that are popularised in the media can also represent the opposite of patterns suggested by official crime statistics (Grosholz & Kubrin, 2017). There is an over-representation of White people as victims in the media and an underrepresentation of racial or ethnic minorities (Dukes & Gaither, 2017). A hierarchy of victimisation exists in the media which classifies victims seen as vulnerable, sympathetic, and innocent as worthy of the most attention (Jeanis & Powers, 2017). This hierarchy places more 'ideal' victims at a higher status and more newsworthy than less ideal victims (Greer, 2007; Christie, 1986). The media also contributes to the perpetuation of a victim hierarchy that deems certain victims as blameless or undeserving of their victimisation; this is, in part, due to the

simplistic binary categorisation in news media of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ when depicting victims (Brandon et al., 2024).

An ‘ideal victim’, as described by Nils Christie (1986), is a person or category of individuals who embody a number of venerated characteristics (including weakness, age, respectability and blamelessness) and therefore, when they are affected by a crime, they are most readily given the legitimate status of a victim (Duggan, 2018; Schwobel-Patel, 2015). These features of victims are typified and build a stereotype of who an ‘ideal victim’ is (Christie, 1986). These victims are then seen as deserving of sympathy, are perceived as ‘true victims’, and are consequently placed on top of the victim hierarchy (Ibid.). The framing of victims in this way perpetuates the notion that there is a singular proper way to be a victim, and encourages continued unequal treatment of victims (Craig & Sailofsky, 2014). The idea of ‘ideal victims’ is rooted in social stereotypes and falsehoods (Fohring, 2018). Ideal victims are, however, more likely to catch a readers’ attention and are more likely to receive media coverage; on the other hand, victims who are seen as part of the ‘underclass’ or the ‘other’ are seen as non-ideal and therefore undeserving of news coverage (Bouchard et al., 2020). Contemporary discourse about ‘ideal’ or legitimate victims would also likely include levels of intoxication, apparel, sexual history, and failure to fight back as additional reasons to incite blame or withhold victim status (Fohring, 2018; Grubb & Turner, 2012).

The idea of ‘ideal’ victims, despite being criticised, is still prominent today and continues to be perpetuated by the media. This can be seen in which victims the media chooses to focus on, and the ways in which victims are treated differently depending on whether or how well they fit this ideal. For example, Lundman (2003) found that news about murders is the product of journalistic assessments of newsworthiness that are firmly grounded on long-standing gender and race typifications; previous research also shows that journalists select newsworthy events using typifications that reflect existing social structures, appear logical in terms of commonsense understandings of how the world operates, and merge easily with existing stereotypes, including those grounded in systems that reflect and perpetuate race and gender stratifications (Tuchman, 1978: 211-217). Lundman (2003) argues that, therefore, homicides involving Black perpetrators and White victims are more newsworthy as they can be scripted using stereotypes grounded in racism and White fear of Black crime; and homicides involving male perpetrators and female victims are more newsworthy as they can be scripted using sexism, emphasising male aggression and female submission. Chen (2024) also finds that victims of sexual violence that are deemed to be ideal (and therefore newsworthy) by Chinese journalists are expected to be vulnerable, timid, traumatised, and preferably virginal or chaste. Gender stereotypes evidently play a role in

whether someone is awarded ideal or legitimate victim status. Hanson and Lysova (2023) find that male victims of female perpetrated intimate partner homicide are often blamed for their victimisation and are represented as non-ideal or illegitimate victims in the media.

While severe violence and crimes are arguably justifiably newsworthy, young, elderly, and White female victims receive disproportionate levels of attention (Dowler, 2004). Bjornstrom et al., (2010) argue that women and Whites are over-represented as victims of crime in the news in comparison to national crime averages. White female victims embody stereotypes about victims the most as White women and girls are most often portrayed as 'ideal victims' (Ibid.). Wanzo (2008) finds that missing White women and girls are often described in the media as 'perfect', 'ideal', 'angelic' and 'golden'. Moscovitz and Durvall (2011) suggests that demographic characteristics, such as gender and class, interact with the circumstances surrounding the incident and influence the extent of media coverage. The victimisation of defenceless, vulnerable or 'innocent' people is perceived as a greater threat to the community; Holcomb et al., (2004) finds that this results in a larger number of death sentences in cases involving female victims. The over-representation of White people, particularly women, as victims normalises White people as archetypal victims (Dukes & Gaither, 2017). Some portrayals and understandings about victims diminish the 'right' to victimhood for some and elevate the victim status of others (DiBennardo, 2018). Legitimate victim status is influenced by social divisions, including class, race, ethnicity, gender, age, and sexuality (Greer, 2007). Legitimate victim descriptions closely align with Christie's concept of 'ideal victims' as, for the allocation of legitimate victim status, the focus is often on innocence, vulnerability, experiencing harm, and helplessness (Lewis & Hamilton, 2021). Sympathy-laden language is used in legitimate victim descriptions while 'illegitimate' victims fail to be 'true victims' and are viewed as 'phonies' (Ibid.). This is significant as the ability to portray victims with sympathetic characteristics in turn also influences the extent of media coverage.

Differential treatment of victims

The typification of victims and over-representation of certain groups in media reporting is problematic as it may paint a picture of which types of victims are most deserving of the victim status which, in turn, impacts how they are treated by the media, the justice system and society at large. Like perpetrators, victims of crime are also negatively impacted by the racialisation of crime news. Previous research explores the disproportionate representation of marginalised victims through lenses of racism, sexism and classism, and it shows that this disproportionate representation reproduces hegemonic values and upholds dominant ideologies by deciding

whose lives are deserving or worthy of media coverage (Jiwani, 2014a, 2014b). Long (2021) writes that the process of becoming (un)victim is mediated through the intersection of race with gender, masculinity, class and migrant status. Racial and ethnic minorities are less likely to be depicted as ‘ideal victims’ and therefore are less likely to be readily given legitimate victim status when crime are committed against them. Hayes and Luther (2018) argue that Black, Hispanic, and/or working class people are often depicted in the media as criminals and therefore are less appealing as an ‘ideal victim’. Our understanding of sympathetic victims is contextualised through a lens of characteristics that make individuals ‘deserving’ or ‘undeserving’ victims – this conceptualisation stems from the perception of victims who are similar to us, and juxtaposed with perceptions of the ‘other’ (Bouchard et al., 2020; Jiwani, 2014b). Bouchard et al., (2020) argue that the differential inclusion of victim characteristics in the news creates a dichotomy between a prototypical ‘White’ victim or who is a sympathetic victim (ie. the ‘us’), and the depiction of those who are dangerous to the moral order or who is an unsympathetic victim (ie. the other); this therefore also has an impact on how these victims are treated. Ortiz (2024) also argues that minority victims need to be understood as part of the dominant culture (as one of ‘us’) in order to fit into the framework of an ideal victim. If they do not fit into this framework, they are not offered legitimate victim status – these findings show the impact of one’s nationality when determining victimhood status and how the portrayal of ideal victims exemplifies the influence of ‘othering’ in news reporting (Ibid.).

Prior research shows that minorities are underrepresented as victims in crime coverage, and are more likely to be subjected to negative pre-trial publicity (Entman and Gross, 2008). Smiley and Fakunle (2016) find that, when depicted as victims, racial minorities can be dehumanised, demonised or criminalised; and media depictions of Black male victims in particular can contain microinsults or microinvalidations. Long (2021) also argues that Black and Black mixed race men are more likely to be treated as ‘ideal offenders’ rather than ‘ideal victims’. Girgenti-Malone (2019) argues that Black male victims are often stereotyped and are least likely to be perceived as helpless or innocent. This shows that the negative racial stereotypes, that can often be perpetuated by the media, that negatively impact Black defendants also can negatively impact Black victims (Ibid.). Racist stereotypes, rooted in slavery and misogynoir¹, also effectively

¹ Coined by scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality was initially defined as the unique forms of oppression faced by Black women – now the term has become more mainstream and conceptualises experiences faced by those with intersecting identities. Misogynoir is a newer term, coined by Moya Bailey, that describes ‘the specific hatred, dislike, distrust, and prejudice directed towards Black women’ (Gassam Asare, 2022; Crenshaw, 2013; Bailey, 2021)

deny Black women access to ideal victimhood descriptions (Craig & Sailofsky, 2024). Black men and women can be negatively impacted due to being portrayed with victim characteristics that

provoke feelings of contempt which can result in them being seen as more deserving of severe punishments, and less deserving of sympathy and protection (Barak et al., 2007). Dixon (2008) finds that the over-representation of Black perpetrators and White victims can have a psychological effect on viewers – participants of the study were more likely to find a suspect culpable after viewing news stories containing White victims and Black perpetrators.

Slakoff (2018) argues there are also differences in the representation of female victims depending on their race or ethnicity. She found that there were more front-page stories about White female victims than Black and Latina female victims; White female victims were more likely to receive national or international coverage; and stories about White female victims were more likely to contain sympathetic themes (Ibid.).

When studying homicide coverage in printed media, Sorenson et al., (1998) also found that victims that are younger, White, female, and of higher socioeconomic status received more coverage than Black or Hispanic victims. When examining missing persons cases that did or did not receive media attention, Jeanis and Powers (2017) found disparities in coverage based on race and age. White female victims, in particular, receive significantly more media attention in printed and television news in comparison to Black female victims (Ibid.). Missing persons cases in which the victim was identified as female also received, on average, higher word counts than those involving male victims (Taylor et al., 2013). The racial disparities in missing persons media coverage have been widely acknowledge to the extent that this resulted in the social phenomenon being coined the ‘missing white woman syndrome’ (Jeanis & Powers, 2017); as well as concurrently resulting in movements such as the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women movement (Romano, 2024; Zhou, 2023). This movement aims to bring to light the police inadequacies when it comes to the racial and socioeconomic gaps between ‘perfect’ victims and forgotten ones, as well as the disproportionate levels of victimisation of Native women (Ibid.). Zhou (2023) mentions various studies and reports that have shown that Indigenous women experience high levels of physical and sexual violence compared to White women, as well as high numbers of Native women have been murdered or have gone missing. Johnstone et al., (1994) also found that White murder victims have a higher chance of being presented in news reporting than African Americans or Hispanics. In addition, Weiss and Chermak (1998) find that defendants who murder White victims are significantly more likely to receive the death penalty than those who murder Black victims; this also shows that White victims are more valued.

Wider impacts of media treatment of victims

Besides the questionable ethics of prioritising some victims over others, the differential treatment and typification of victims also has wider impacts. Criminal cases that involve victims who are deemed to be pure, innocent, or vulnerable, often receive more media attention, a wider scope of this attention, and more detailed coverage (Jeanis & Powers, 2017). This selection bias can be problematic for consumers as well as for victims themselves.

The disparities and differences in media coverage for certain victims has real life impacts. For example, in a study of missing persons coverage in Canada, Gilchrist (2010) found that missing women identified as White receive more articles, headlines, words, positive and emotional phrasing, and more prominent placement in newspapers compared to Aboriginal women. Slakoff (2013) also analysed over 300 randomly selected news articles covering missing persons and found that over 76% of them exclusively discussed only White victims. Disparities in the media result in repeated and skewed narratives which can alter consumers' perceptions about reality and further delegitimise minorities as victims and reinforce Whites as quintessential victims (Dukes & Gaither, 2017). In addition, Mason (2014) argues that there exists a judgemental hierarchy of victimisation which narrowly defines which groups count as legitimate victims of hate crimes and hence deserving of the legal protections these laws are meant to offer. This hierarchy is deeply rooted in notions of worthy and unworthy victims and results in some victims being left out in the cold despite their victimisation (Ibid.).

Equivalently to how the ways in which crime is portrayed in the media can shape consumers' perceptions about crime, the ways in which victims are portrayed in the media can shape perceptions about victims and potentially shape consumers' beliefs about entire groups of people (Jeanis & Powers, 2017). The typification of victims and perpetuation of the idea of ideal victims within media stories can shape understandings and attitudes about who victims are and should be (Lundman, 2003). The disparities and stigmatising narratives about crime victims in turn have the potential to impact the resources allocated to finding victims, the psychological recovery of victims, and how their offenders are handled by the criminal justice system (Jeanis & Powers, 2017). The inclusion or exclusion of certain information from stories in the media can influence the interest levels, the interpretation, the emotional responses from consumers, and the action taken by authorities (Bouchard et al., 2020). Bouchard et al., (2020) argue that their findings reflect a statistically significant relationship between victim characteristics and prominent placement in news articles – disproportionate reporting of marginalised victims contributes to, reinforces, and reproduces further marginalisation in society and by law enforcement. The idea that some victims are 'worthy' and others are 'unworthy' contributes to disparities in coverages,

and this in turn further perpetuates social exclusion and (conscious or unconscious) marginalisation (Ibid.). The media's tendency to create a distinction between types of victims reinforces the idea that some are more 'worthy' of legitimate victim status than others and that some are less important or less valued by society (Ibid.). This can then also create the impression that the public does not need to be concerned about certain types of victims (Ibid.). As the media downplays or neglects what it perceives as 'non-ideal' victims, consumers may increasingly perceive only 'ideal' victims as rightful recipients of social and media support (Chen, 2024). All of this is significant considering how these media representations may infiltrate the thoughts and attitudes of consumers and the general public towards marginalised victims, influence and shape the dominant discourse about victims, and impact decision-making in the criminal justice system (Jiwani, 2014a). The media influences the topics that consumers think about and how they feel about them (Brandon et al., 2024); and cultivation theory proposes that the media influences consumers perceptions to the extent that their opinions may come to match those most frequently portrayed in the media (Weitzer & Kubrin, 2004).

As mentioned in previous chapters, the vast reach of the media cannot be underestimated and its negative impacts can also influence jurors and their decision-making. Victim characteristics can influence juror's sentencing decisions (Girgenti-Malone, 2019). Girgenti-Malone (2019) argues that Black male victims and their families receive least empathy from jurors. She argues that it is possible that legal case characteristics become racialised and/or gendered in such a way that they form a juror's perspective – cases involving White female victims are seen as most deserving of death penalties, and cases involving Black male victims are least deserving of this (Ibid.). This could at least in part stem from the perpetuation of the idea of ideal victims and that minority victims often fail to be afforded legitimate victim status and are deemed non-ideal. This results in the devaluation of the lives of minorities. This is especially true for Black victims - news organisations perpetuate the general public's devaluation of crimes involving Black victims by providing less attention to them (Weiss & Chermak, 1998). Ralph et al., (1992) argue that the victim's race is a primary extra-legal variable that affects sentencing decision in capital cases. Girgenti-Malone (2019) also argues that jurors seem to be more likely to feel distant from Black male and female victims and their families, compared to White male and female victims, which may allow their potential prejudices (even subconsciously) to cloud their judgement regarding punishment decisions. The media's over-representation of White victims and under-representation of minority victims, as well as minorities being more likely to be seen and treated as ideal offenders rather than ideal victims, could also be a contributing factor to this.

White female victims in particular are often likely to be afforded chivalrous behaviour by decision-makers within the criminal justice system (Ibid.) – this reflects the fact that White female victims are most likely to embody the ideal victim typification and therefore are most likely to be readily given legitimate victim status.

With all of this being said, it is not hard to see why victims themselves can also be harmed by perceptions and attitudes about victims (ones often perpetuated by the media) and may want to distance themselves from the victim label because of this. They may also want to avoid secondary victimisation and further psychological distress (Fohring, 2018) – crime media can also contribute to these due to sensationalisation and lack of consideration for how media portrayals may affect victims. Most ‘real’ victims of crime would find it difficult to meet the ideal victim requirements or expectations and therefore default into the category of non-ideal victims (Ibid.), which impacts how they are treated and perceived. This is particularly true considering, for example, the ‘victim-offender overlap’ which is discussed in much of criminological research on victimology which shows that there is a strong empirical and theoretical relationship between victimisation and the perpetration of crime and delinquency (Reingle, 2014). There exists a false dichotomy where individuals are categorised into binary typologies of either victims (presumed to be non-offenders) or perpetrators (presumed to be non-victims) (Ibid.) Despite the inaccuracies of this, victims who were previously offenders would likely immediately fall into non-ideal victim descriptions. Deviations from the ideal may result in blaming, derogation, cruelty, and injustice (Ibid.). Denial of victim status can have severe long term consequences for victims who need help and recognition as legitimate victim status is linked to receiving many benefits and resources such as legal aid, compensation, access to justice, medical care, and counselling (Ibid.); simply being believed can be key to feeling supported, further engagement with the criminal justice system, and longer term mental health (Jordan, 2004).

The media may also engage in victim-blaming but frame it as something that is necessary for the protection of the public from victimisation – such as by framing the stories as cautionary tales (Jeanis & Powers, 2017). Cautionary tale framing often focuses on vulnerable populations as victims (such as women) and intends to provoke fear in the consumer (Moore, 2014); this may make consumers believe that they or others were responsible for their victimisation, or that they should adopt certain behaviours or alter their lives to avoid victimisation (Jeanis & Powers, 2017). The media also often fails to acknowledge that some victims have strong adverse feelings about the word ‘victim’ and actively try to avoid any association with it (Fohring, 2018). Prototypical characteristics of victims as weak or helpless are in contrast to values in modern society where individualism and strength are revered; however, victims who seek to distance

themselves from victimhood reject the entrenched social norms surrounding the ideal victim and therefore become the epitome of the non-ideal (Ibid.). This also has negative societal impacts as rejection of the victim label, or being rejected victim status, contributes to the dark figure of crime which has ramifications for the criminal justice system and research surrounding crime (Ibid.). However, despite the harms caused by the typification of victims and the idea of ideal victims, for survivors or anyone who has been victimised framing their victimisation in ideal victim terms can be seen as a rational response if they are seeking justice or adequate attention as themselves survivors probably notice the benefits victims that are deemed 'ideal' receive over others (Strobl, 2004; Slakoff & Brennan, 2019). So there is a vicious cycle of needing to move past the often unrealistic ideal victim expectations and needing to play into these expectations to benefit from them, but this continues to perpetuate these problematic standards.

Conclusion

Most people use some form of the 'ideal victim' construct to think about and judge victims (Lewis & Hamilton, 2021). However, when someone is not deemed as an 'ideal' or 'legitimate' victim this often results in problematic differential treatment. The media continues to perpetuate the problematic idea of ideal victims through its focus on certain kinds of victims over others. The idea of ideal victims also continues to be perpetuated due to the media's differential treatment and coverage of victims, particularly minority victims. It is important to think critically about who is most often portrayed as 'ideal victims'. Media portrayals of victims can perpetuate problematic ideas about who is 'worthy' of our attention, sympathy, and resources (Bouchard et al., 2020). The media's contribution to this is significant as it can positively or negatively skew viewers' perceptions about certain groups or individuals when they are victimised. Media portrayals of victims continues to uphold a victim hierarchy which is problematic as it can shape consumers' understanding and attitudes about victims, and it continues to harm victims themselves, especially if they are lower down on this hierarchy.

CHAPTER FIVE: Discussion

The majority of public knowledge about crime and justice is often derived from media consumption as many people have little to no direct experience with it. This means that for many people their perceptions about crime, perpetrators and victims are determined or shaped based on their portrayals within the media. Information about crime, perpetrators and victims that is portrayed in the media can often be at odds with official statistics. If the media is used as a primary source of information it can contribute to, or exacerbate, misinformed or skewed perceptions about crime, perpetrators and victims, which in turn can have negative impacts on consumers themselves as well as having wider societal impacts. For those with pre-existing problematic or misguided beliefs or ideas, these can be exacerbated or upheld by media portrayals, including due to selective exposure.

Blumer and Katz (1974) write that while the media entertains its' audience, it also serves as an important tool of cultural transmission that is employed to teach individuals about hegemonic values of the state, interpersonal relationships, individuals and collective identities, and the identities of the other(s). It is important for consumers of crime-related media to think critically about the content they are consuming and to not always take information therein at face value. Consumers must be aware that media reporting is often not an unbiased retelling of events. Rather, the selection of stories is made using deliberate and selective decision-making processes and much of crime-related media is motivated by the concept of 'newsworthiness' which may mean that the depictions are not entirely accurate to reality and that certain things can be over- or under-represented. The media also has the power to leave out details and focus on aspects that it deems to be most appealing for consumers or most commercially exploitable. The coverage of an event is dependent on socially constructed criteria and values (Bouchard et al., 2020). All of this can contribute to the perceptions of viewers about crime, perpetrators and victims being distorted. The framing of a topic shapes the newsworthiness of the story by focusing on certain aspects – the framing of news stories can shape perceptions and invoke fear, it can also affect the emotions of the viewers which in turn may impact the degree of media attention and viewer involvement.

The construction of crime-related media shows that crime news can be framed in accordance with a specific agenda or set of values by prioritising certain stories over others and thereby creating the perception that a particular issue is (or is not) a problem (Jewkes, 2004). All of this

also means that the media, in the production and distribution of stories, could be paying little or no attention to the needs and wants of those directly impacted by these events, or their families. Consumers of crime-related media should be aware of the secondary victimisation that can result from media that sensationalises or glorifies the events or people involved. Consumers should also be aware that both fictional and non-fictional media could be exploiting the trauma of real victims and their families for entertainment. Crime news media can also have strong political influence and may aid policymakers in determining which issues should be on the political agenda (Slakoff et al., 2020). The media plays a role in agenda-setting for public debate about what and who the public should be concerned about and this in turn can impact the ways in which the criminal justice system functions, such as increased punitive crime policies, racialised ideas about crime and perpetrators, and the differential and preferential treatment of certain victims. Due to the media having the power and control to decide what and who becomes the news, it has the ability to construct a reality that favours what they deem to be ‘newsworthy’, and frame stories in such a way that reinforces stereotypes and facilitates an amplification that suits hegemonic values (Jiwani, 2014b). All of this can be true for both non-fictional and fictional crime-related media. Similarly to non-fictional media, Surette (2007: 108) argues that the end result of the construction of crime and justice in reality TV programs for example, is that crime control is applauded; due process is disparaged; individual causes of crime are portrayed; the presumption of innocence is downplayed; and an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ idea dominates.

In this dissertation I have examined various negative impacts that can occur on viewers’ perceptions about crime, perpetrators and victims that can be contributed to by the media. Whether there exists a direct causal link or whether these things are simply related does not change the fact that crime media has the potential to impact at least *some* viewers’ perceptions, beliefs, and (conscious or unconscious) biases; and consumers of this media should be aware of these potential impacts when choosing to consume this content.

As a society, perceptions about the frequency, types, and threats of crime are largely shaped by the media (Greer, 2007). Both fictional and non-fictional crime-related media can distort perceptions about the extent of crime, the types of crime to be concerned about, and who typical criminals are. Distorted perceptions about crime can contribute to increased fear as well as increased support for potentially problematic authoritarian or punitive crime control measures. The relationship between the fear of crime and media consumption is complicated, especially considering selection bias, so further research is definitely needed for a more comprehensive

understanding. However, setting aside whether this fear of crime is directly caused, or contributed to, by the media, either way it can have negative impacts on consumers, such as attitudinal changes and avoidance behaviours which can alter lifestyles and inhibit routine social interaction (Hartnagel, 1979; Wilson, 1975) – consumers should be aware of the potential negative impacts of crime-related media consumption for their own wellbeing. Consumers should be recognise if the media they are consuming, and their fascination with it, is beginning to affect and inhibiting their lives. Crime-related media can also influence people’s attitudes towards the criminal justice system, including in relation to the efficacy and trustworthiness of the police. The media plays a role in shaping race perceptions as it can craft messages that accentuate racial stereotypes (Holt, 2013). These stereotypes arise in both fictional and non-fictional crime-related media (Entman & Gross, 2008). Repeated exposure to racialised crime content can promote or reinforce negative racial stereotypes (Ibid.). Empirical evidence suggest that racial resentments can also be associated with White peoples’ support of punitive crime policies (Ibid.).

The over-representation of certain racial or ethnic groups as criminals in the media can contribute to misguided perceptions about perpetrators of crime, problematic stereotyping, and the racialisation of crime. Virtually all serious academic research shows a consistent bias against Black people, both in the coverage of crime and more generally (Ibid.). It is important for consumers to be aware of the damaging racial stereotypes that can be perpetuated by the media they consume. Racialised messages about crime stereotype the minorities featured in them but also contribute to stereotypical associations between minorities, criminality, and guilt, which can influence consumers’ evaluations and behaviour (Ibid.). Repeated exposure to media that overrepresents certain groups as criminals can play a part in activating, reinforcing, or exacerbating racial stereotypes and conscious or subconscious bias in consumers, particularly for those with pre-existing biased beliefs. The racialisation of crime and the criminalisation of certain groups can perpetuate antagonism and fear and it can influence criminal justice processes. Ethnic and racial minorities are more likely to be treated as ‘ideal perpetrators’ in the media. Minority perpetrators are often treated differently and less favourably in media portrayals and stories written about them compared to White perpetrators – this can impact public attitudes and lead to othering; stereotyping; stronger support for punitive crime policies; and problematic social control strategies, such as racial profiling. The ways in which the media portrays perpetrators can also negatively skew consumers’ perceptions of their guilt and can make them more inclined to judge them negatively. This is particularly problematic considering the media’s vast reach which means that potential jurors and their sentencing decisions can also be impacted, which may in

some cases lead to miscarriages of justice. The demonisation and dehumanisation of perpetrators, such as their construction in the media as evil or inhuman, can also be problematic as in the long run it can contribute to set backs regarding their potential reintegration into society, which is not ideal of anyone.

Crime-related media can influence how consumers view and treat victims of crime. The underrepresentation of certain types of victims of crime is a prevalent occurrence in the media just like the over-representation of crime (Bouchard et al., 2020). By focusing its attention mostly on certain types of victims, crime-related media can perpetuate problematic and unrealistic ideas about what and who counts as a legitimate or 'ideal' victim deserving of our attention, sympathy and support. This in turn means that those who do not fall under this ideal (and many do not) are not readily given legitimate victim status and therefore receive different treatment from the media, the criminal justice system, and society at large. The idea of 'ideal victims' (Christie, 1986) can be further embedded in public consciousness by the media where we should really be striving to move past these ideas. In an ideal world, the idea of 'ideal' victims would not affect the care and support victims receive following their victimisation (Fohring, 2018), however the conceptualisation of 'ideal victims' continues to be prevalent today (Craig & Sailofsky, 2024) which causes further harm to victims that do not fit these standards; this is especially true for racial or ethnic minorities who are less likely to be seen as ideal victims compared to White victims. The media's perpetuation of these often unrealistic standards therefore needs to be acknowledged and criticised. The under-representation of racial/ethnic minorities as victims compared to White victims, coupled with their over-representation as perpetrators, leads to the devaluation of the lives of these groups when they are victimised and apathy towards their victimisation – this is especially true for Black victims.

Despite its flaws, crime-related media is not going anywhere and is likely to continue to increase in salience and popularity. By writing this dissertation I am not trying to put non-consumers of crime-related media on a moral high ground. I am not trying to make anyone feel bad or ashamed for consuming or enjoying this genre of media. I simply want to point out that those who do wish to consume this type of media should be aware of the potential negative individual and societal impacts that frequent consumption of this genre of media can have, so that they can make more informed decisions about the media they chose to interact with. I want people to be able to recognise media that can cause harm to themselves or others.

Our interactions with crime-related media can further encourage this genre to continue to perpetuate messages that can be harmful to audiences and society at large. Attention on social media also acts as a key indicator of the perceived newsworthiness of a story; as such, social media grants consumers opportunities to exert influence in the production and proliferation of news stories (Peterson-Salahuddin & Diakopoulos, 2020). As consumers we may not have direct control over how crime-related media is produced and framed, but we do have control over what content we chose to consume and interact with – we should make an effort to be mindful of the content we see and avoid content that creates ethical dilemmas and/or causes further to those features in these stories and ourselves. Less attention or more criticism from us could show the producers of this media what we do and do not want to see, which in turn could facilitate change. It is crucial that viewers think critically about the media they are consuming and the messages perpetuated therein.

Researchers and consumers have become more critical and mindful of the media they consume – for example in the discussions surrounding the ‘ideal victim’ label and its incongruence with ideals of strength and independence (Fohring, 2018) as well as being more educated about crime and who seems more likely to commit particular offences (Kennedy et al., 2018) whereas before the much of the public believed that criminals were mostly Black males (MacLin & Herrera, 2006; Madriz, 1997). Terms like ‘missing white woman syndrome’ and ‘missing and murdered indigenous women’ have also appeared to encompass a range of police inadequacies and public attitudes when it comes to racial gaps between victims (Romano, 2024). Many articles have been written pointing out the exploitation of victims and/or their families, as well as the glorification or romanticisation of offenders, in true crime media. Real life consequences of the racialisation of crime and criminality, such as deaths at the hands of the police, have elicited media attention, national protests, and public outrage; and researchers (eg. Girgenti-Malone, 2019) bring attention to racial biases that are still prevalent in courtrooms which can affect decisions about guilt and even life and death. If it was not for previous scholars and researchers justifiably criticising media portrayals of crime, victims and perpetrators, and previous works examining the negative impacts crime media consumption, I would have not been able to write this dissertation. All of this shows that work is being done in this area and that progress in the right direction is possible, however, in order to facilitate this progress, as consumers we must be mindful of the media we are consuming and the potential that the media has to negatively influence and impact us and contribute to biased or misguided perceptions about crime, perpetrators and victims. Future research could examine how our changing attitudes and more informed perspectives shape the

further portrayals of crime, perpetrators and victims in the media. It would be interesting to see whether changing attitudes facilitate meaningful changes in this area. It would be interesting to see if current issues within crime-related media improve over time, or if they will be replaced with different issues. It would be interesting to see what, if any, changes occur in what the media and the public deem to be newsworthy and how this shapes the media in the future.

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