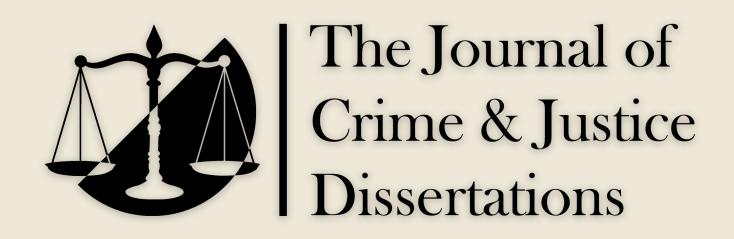# The Media, Gender-Based Violence & Women's Fear of Crime:

An Exploratory, Interview-Based Study.

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Acknowledgements

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Abstract

While the fear of crime in women has been researched, it is often reduced to a fear of the looming threat of sexual assault. There is insufficient research on the external factors that can affect the way women fear crime. Therefore, this study investigates whether media depictions of violence against women have any effect on the way they fear crime. Most types of media graphically depict violence against women, but they often misrepresent the realities of this type of violence. As such, this study aims to explore these depictions and their effects on women and their fear of crime. Seven semi-structured interviews with female university students between the ages of 20-30 were conducted for this study. Through the examination of these interviews, it is discovered that there is evidence that both graphic and non-graphic media depictions of violence against women have a negative effect on the way women fear crime. However, it was also discovered that forms of factual media, in conjunction with multiple other factors, such as race and distrust in law enforcement, have a large effect on the way females fear crime. Moreover, it is argued that depictions of violence on social media have a large impact on this age range. Further research is needed to thoroughly understand how other factors interact with media.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The fear of crime is a social phenomenon that affects everyone differently. Whether consciously or unconsciously, it affects people's daily choices. Fear of crime has been vastly studied and theorised. The literature argues that this phenomenon can be affected by multiple individual factors such as race, gender, and age. It has been shown that women, elderly people, and black people have a higher fear of crime (De Silva, 2023). Furthermore, empirical evidence shows that women report higher levels of crime than men, even though men are statistically more likely to be victimised (Fisher & May, 2009; Snedker, 2010). The literature argues that women have a higher fear of crime than men based on the threat of gender-based violence (GBV) against women, particularly sexual violence (Smith, 1988).

All types of media are known to depict graphic violence. This is no different with depictions of violence against women. Depictions of graphic sexual and physical violence against women can be seen in numerous popular television shows, such as 13 Reasons Why and Game of Thrones, as well as daily on factual media, such as social media and news outlets (Beddows, 2019). Additionally, there have been multiple studies that show that the consumption of media can affect the way individuals learn about and form opinions on different topics (Tsfati and Cohen, 2013). However, there is a lack of research on how media depictions of violence against women affect fear of crime.

As such, this research aims to explore how the media depictions of violence against women misrepresent the realities of the phenomena and how these misrepresentations affect female fear of crime. This research will specifically explore the fear of crime in cis-gender women. The purpose of this study is to fill the gaps in female fear of crime literature by examining potential external factors. This study will specifically look at the factors of media and media depictions of violence against women and if they have negative effects on female fear of crime. Furthermore, this study hopes to give women a space to freely speak about their thoughts and experiences. This study focuses on women aged 20-30 who are currently studying at a postgraduate or undergraduate level at university. All participants study some type of social science in university. This study will utilise semi-structured interviews to create an in-depth dialogue between the researcher and the participants. Semi-structured interviews were chosen due to their ability to collect meaningful and comprehensive data.

This study is divided into three main sections. Section one will explore and analyse relevant literature on GBV against women, depictions of GBV in the media, and female fear of crime. Section two will

discuss the methodology, ethics, and sample of this study. Additionally, in this section, the researcher reflects on the methodological process and its limitations. Section three discusses the significant findings from the interviews in the context of previous studies and any further studies that need to be conducted.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Gender-Based Violence Against Women

Gender-based violence (GBV) is common in our society and is deeply rooted in gender division and inequality. This type of violence can affect all genders, but GBV disproportionately affects women (United Nations, 1995). It is important to note that GBV affects both binary and non-binary genders. This dissertation will focus on GBV against cis-gendered women. In 1995, the United Nations identified GBV against women as a global issue. They defined it as 'any act that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life' (United Nations, 1995, pp. 48). The term 'gender-based' is used to describe these types of violence because of the role that status and society play in shaping these types of crimes (Russo and Pirolott, 2006). It is difficult to properly define GBV against women because it is impossible for one definition to include all the nuances of the phenomenon. Although many believe that GBV exclusively refers to sexual violence, such as rape and sexual assault, the term encompasses other types of crime, including reproductive violence (such as forced pregnancy and female genital mutilation), forced marriage, psychological violence, and other offences specifically committed against the victim because of their sex (DeKeseredy, 2011). However, not all crimes committed against women are considered GBV. If a woman is held at gunpoint while being robbed, this does not count as a GBV, as the crime is not contingent on the victim being a woman (Russo and Pirolott, 2006).

The literature on GBV establishes many causes contributing to GBV around the world; these include patriarchal, societal, and cultural gender norms and expectations, where the imbalance of gendered power relations is not only noted but fundamental to the creation and normalisation of GBV (Russo and Pirolott, 2006). Russo and Pirolott (2006) also observe that social structures with accompanying cultural norms assigned to men and women are significant factors in this imbalance and, as stated, determine how men and women should behave. They explain that societal gender roles and expectations often lead to male entitlement, sexual objectification, and discrepancies in power and status. It seems that these factors legitimise and perpetuate violence against women. Heise, Ellsberg, and Gottmoeller (2002) found that GBV against women is commonly seen and normalised in areas where gender roles and norms are rigid and enforced. The researchers noted that masculinity expressed by perceived machismo was deeply rooted in dominance and male honour, leading to an acceptance of violence against women considered to be acting outside of their role. Research has also found that GBV against

women is based on the imbalance of power between women and men. It is carried out to maintain the idea that women are inferior to men. GBV can be carried out by anyone: strangers, people close to the victim or even people who act on behalf of social institutions can be offenders of these types of crimes (Council of Europe, no date).

Other factors that lead to GBV have been identified, including legal, economic, and political causes. Firstly, the Council of Europe explains that the legal factors of GBV are based on law enforcement practices. Although in many countries there are laws against violence, law enforcement often sides with the perpetrator and blames female victims. This leads to low levels of reporting and prosecution of violence against women (Council of Europe, no date). Secondly, economic factors are often due to the lack of economic resources given to women. This leads to women being increasingly vulnerable to patterns of violence (Kiss et al., 2012). Lastly, the political causes of GBV include the lack of policies against GBV and the lack of female representation in political spheres. The lack of female representation affects the way female voices are heard on a larger scale. Without proper female representation, women lack the accessibility to shape and change policies about GBV towards themselves (Wagner 2018).

Despite academics and governmental agencies working to quantify GBV against women, it is difficult to truly understand the extent and the effects of these crimes due to their hidden nature. The United Nations (UN) reported that intimate partner violence comprises the majority of GBV and that on a global scale, one out of three women are the victims of GBV, be it sexual or otherwise (United Nations, 2023). In 2000, while researching this area, the United States Justice Department discovered that women experience higher levels of intimate partner violence than men. In their study, they found that 22.1 per cent of women and 7.4 per cent of men reported that they were physically assaulted by a current or former partner in their lifetime. There have also been many reports about violence against women in the United Kingdom (UK). In 2020, the UK reported that, on average, one woman was killed by a man every three days. 92 per cent of these killings were committed by people known to the victim (Femicide Census, 2020). In 2021, it was reported that domestic abuse represented 18 per cent of the reported crimes in England and Wales. This is a 6 per cent rise from the previous year (Office for National Statistics, 2021). This rise can be attributed to COVID-19. Many international studies found a rise in GBV against women during the lockdown periods of COVID-19 (Ostadtaghizadeh et al., 2023; Mittal and Singh, 2020)

With the increase of women-centred movements in the late 20th century, GBV against women has been globally recognised as a health, economic, and human rights concern (Bencomo et al. 2022). While

there are many global strides to help bring awareness to this problem, women around the world are still experiencing GBV in their homes, schools, and the streets. Johnson (2002) argues that there is still a long way to go to end GBV against women. She states that to end this, gender equality needs to be promoted, as well as the following: holding offenders accountable to a larger degree and ending victim-blaming culture.

2.2 Portrayal of Gender-Based Violence against Women in Media

Media is important to how individuals and society see and react to certain phenomena. Crime is particularly prominent in the media. Whether fictional or factual representations, crime is heavily portrayed throughout all types of media. Beddows (2019) states that many people turn to media for information about social issues, particularly 'private' issues, such as sexual violence. Arias (2019) furthers this idea by suggesting that there are two distinct ways in which media can affect public perceptions and attitudes: Individual or direct effects and social or indirect effects. Social or indirect effects explain that individuals will more readily accept media information if they believe others have also accepted it (Arias, 2019). Individual or direct effects explain that media information about norms and rules may influence individuals to accept them.

Forms of factual media, such as the news, are often people's first exposure to certain topics and phenomena and are considered facts by many, who base their feelings and opinions on them (Tsfati and Cohen, 2013). In a study conducted in the United States, Dorfman and Schiraldi (2001) found that 76 per cent of those surveyed said they formed their opinions about crime based on what they watched or read in the news. Conversely, fictional media is understood as a means of entertainment. Based on Arias's earlier assertion, fictional media can also impact how a person sees a specific issue or problem. This media type can subliminally influence thoughts on social problems and politics (Arias, 2019). Beddows (2019) argues that over time, media consumption can cause the viewer to form views in real-life situations that resemble the portrayals in the media. Therefore, it seems opinions formed about GBV due to media portrayals people often see contribute towards the status quo that Arias and Beddows discuss.

It is well documented that crime content is a pronounced feature of mass media and distorts the reality of crime by disproportionately focusing on random violent crimes (Wykes and Welsh, 2009). Crime is often featured in both fictional and factual forms of media because the feelings of fear from viewing such media are guaranteed to attract a large audience (Wykes and Welsh, 2009). Hall (1978)

emphasises this point by stating that 'crime is news because its treatment evokes threats but also re-affirms the consensual morality of the society' (Hall et al. 1978, pp. 66). Crime news media content is carefully picked based on what attracts the most views (Wykes and Welsh, 2009). This means violent crime is disproportionately displayed in the media compared to lesser crime. So, rare events of violent crime, such as stranger rape or brutal murders, appear more frequently and normalised in contrast to its reality. Whereas more common crimes like domestic violence and sexual harassment are barely featured in the media (Wykes and Welsh, 2009). This causes misrepresentations of the realities of GBV (Gillespie et al., 2013; Richards et al., 2011). Sutherland et al. (2019) explain that there are several ways to promote an understanding of the deeper social construction of GBV against women within news coverage. This can be done by acknowledging underlying societal and gender-based factors that cause violence. However, this rarely happens within media reports. News reports tend to elicit individualistic views instead of societal attributions of responsibility (Scheufele, 2000), which obscure the audience from understanding GBV as a social problem.

Portrayals of gender-based violence are common in fictional media. This type of media often depicts both physical and sexual violence against women, where depictions of GBV are dramatised and often made to be graphic and unsettling to make them more 'captivating' and 'entertaining' (Lopez, 2018). Beddows (2019) states that these depictions continue to get more graphic and common as the viewership of shows and movies grows. Extremely popular shows, such as Law and Order: SVU and Game of Thrones, both illustrate long and graphic depictions of rape against women. Additionally, soap dramas such as Eastenders and Coronation Street have both featured storylines of gendered violence and abuse. While these shows have been criticised for their depictions of GBV, they continue to produce violent content as viewership rises (Beddows, no date).

Nevertheless, not all depictions and portrayals of gender-based violence in the media are necessarily negative. Beddows (2019) argues that some media depictions of such violence can raise awareness of this issue, as well as have a meaningful impact on the victims of these crimes. Kitzinger (2001) argues that mainstream media representations of GBV can help raise awareness as it shows 'private' issues such as domestic violence and sexual assault to audiences who may have no knowledge or understanding of these issues. Easteal, Holland, & Judd (2015) explain that without seeing representations of their experiences on screen, victims may not feel comfortable or secure enough to seek help after their victimisation. Conversely, they explain that a careful balance needs to be considered when depicting these experiences so victims are not 'triggered' or negatively impacted.

2.3 Female Fear of Crime

Fear of crime affects both individuals and society. Whether consciously or subconsciously, it affects one's behaviour and interactions with their surroundings. While trying to define and conceptualise fear of crime, many researchers have debated whether it should be conceptualised as a type of emotion or a way to help measure risks (Rader, 2017). Ferraro (1995), along with many others, argues that fear of crime should be defined as a measure of fear or how likely a person is to become a victim of crime. However, Mesch (2000), along with Rader et al. (2007), disagree, arguing that fear of crime is instead the emotional response one has towards potential victimisation. These definitions of fear of crime can often be understood in conjunction with each other. For example, if someone believes the risk of becoming a victim is likely, it may influence how afraid they are of said victimisation and, therefore, their behaviour, which is also closely linked with fear of crime. Fear of crime may lead a person to take precautionary measures, such as installing advanced security systems, restricting when they leave their home alone, or owning a weapon (Rader, 2017). Liska et al. (1988) argue that precautionary measures may increase a person's fear of crime. They state that by taking precautionary measures, a person would be prone to think about crime more often. Rader (2017) explains multiple factors why people fear crime, including gender, race/ethnicity, age, and social class.

It has been a long-standing belief that exposure to media depictions of crime can influence fear of crime and victimisation. Most studies indicate a correlation between media consumption and the fear of crime (Babiak and Hagan, 2017; Sacco & Kennedy, 2013). De Silva (2023) explains this can be attributed to the media's tendency to focus on sensationalised and dramatic crime. However, empirical evidence regarding the relationship between fear of crime and the media is inconsistent. Several studies have found a negative correlation or no relationship between the two, citing desensitisation and a sense of heightened awareness among the audience (Chadee & Ditton, 2005; Hale, 1996). One of the most prevalent theories of the effects of media on fear of crime is 'cultivation theory'. According to this theory, exposure to media content that heavily depicts crime or violence can lead to individuals overestimating the prevalence of crime in society and creating a greater fear of crime (Gerbner et al., 1980; Hale, 1966; Boda and Szabó, 2011). Many studies have found that the relationship between media and the fear of crime is prominent for individuals who perceive themselves to be at a higher risk level of victimisation (Chiricos et al., 1997; Skogan & Maxfield, 1981). The media portrayals of crime disproportionality affect those who already feel vulnerable (De Silva, 2023). Few studies have explored the intersection between other factors like race/ethnicity or socio-economic status and gender and how they may interact regarding the effects of media on fear of crime.

A consistent predictor of fear of crime is gender. In the literature, there seems to be a consensus that women report higher levels of fear than men, even though men are statistically more likely to experience crime, with the exception of sexual assault (Fisher & May, 2009; LaGrange & Ferraro, 1989; Snedker, 2010). In 2021/22, England and Wales reported that 3.3 per cent of males experienced some type of personal crime, whereas only 2.9 per cent of women experienced personal crime (Ministry of Justice, 2021). Regarding the 2.9 per cent statistic, Smith (1988) argues that this is misinformation caused by the failure to capture and understand the experiences of women's sexual and physical violence. Stanko (1992) claims that conventional criminology and law enforcement tend to focus on street crimes and not the crimes that happen in private and between non-strangers, thereby undermining the detection of crimes against women.

Women's fear of crime is often labelled as 'irrational' due to being statistically less likely to be victimised (Gilchrist et al., 1998). However, these statistics can be attributed to the underreporting of GBV. Palermo et al. (2014) state that GBV is vastly underreported around the world, which leads to the underestimation of these crimes. Warr (1985) suggests that women are not irrational, but they report more fear due to the intersection of their general fear of crime and their fear of sexual assault. He suggests that women and men fear crime differently, as well as fearing different types of crimes. Keane (1995) theorises a dual nature to female victimisation: concrete fear and formless fear. He explains concrete fear as the fear that is associated with specific types of crime. Some crimes elicit more fear than others. On the other hand, formless fear is more generic and not tied to a specific type of crime.

Most studies find that higher levels of fear of crime from women mostly have to do with the fear of sexual assault (Warr, 1985; Snedker, 2010; Ferraro, 1996; Warr 1984). Feminist academics have suggested that women routinely face the threat of sexual and physical violence in everyday life, at work, at home, and even on the streets (Stanko 1990). Junger (1987) suggests that women suffer low-level victimisation regularly from men. This takes the form of sexual comments and unnecessary minor physical violations. Moreover, Stanko (1995) argues that the female fear of crime is largely caused by a fear of men. This fear of men mirrors a woman's 'place' in a gendered world. She states that confronting a woman's fear of crime means confronting the danger that women face at the hands of their male partners, coworkers, and acquaintances in and out of their homes. Another factor related to women's higher levels of fear that is regularly discussed in the literature is the socialisation of women. It is argued that women are socialised into a fear of public spaces, strangers, and unknown men. They are also socialised into a position of responsibility for any offences committed against them. This often takes the form of victim blaming (Sacco 1990). Fox and Cook (2011) explain that victim blaming is a

phenomenon where victims are blamed or held accountable for their victimisation. Furthermore, they explain that victim blaming happens more when the victim is seen to behave in an 'atypical' mP6r. For example, when female victims don't fight back or are wearing clothes that can be considered revealing. Burt and Estep (1981) explain that this type of socialisation causes women to have less control over their personal and public space, leading them to fear more.

Throughout this literature review, it has been shown that the threat of GBV affects the way women behave and fear. Moreover, it is a prominent media topic, but the media misrepresents the realities of GBV by dramatising and glamorising it to increase viewership. While there is extensive research on the effects of media on the fear of crime, there is little research on the effects on women. Women's fear of crime is generally only understood in the context of fear of sexual violence. However, the literature lacks an understanding of external factors on the effects of female fear of crime. This dissertation aims to help fill the gaps in the literature surrounding the external effects of violent media depictions and whether they specifically affect the way women fear crime.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Research Strategy

Qualitative research is the study of the specific nature of phenomena, specifically social relations. It includes the different manifestations of these phenomena and the different contexts in which they appear and are perceived (Busetto, Wick, and Gumbinger, 2020). Qualitative research strategies include focus groups, interviews, and participant observation. These types of research strategies use words instead of numbers to create a deeper and more in-depth understanding of first-hand human experiences, thoughts, feelings, and opinions. Silverman (2000) states that qualitative research methods provide a deeper understanding of social phenomena than quantitative research methods can do. This type of research addresses the 'why' and 'how' of understanding the social world and how its participants interact with and interpret it (Crowther-Dowey and Fussey 2017). Qualitative research helps to give participants an active voice and role in the process. This is especially present in participants whose views are rarely heard, such as women and racial minorities (Busetto, Wick, and Gumbinger, 2020). Qualitative research is advantageous to this study because this research project is based on the thoughts and feelings of women and focuses on giving women a way to vocalise these views.

One of the main goals of this study is to focus on the feelings and thoughts of women concerning crime and media. As such, this study will follow a feminist methodology. Feminist methodology is informed by feminist epistemology and focuses on knowledge about women's lives, advocacy for women, and the implications of excluding women's thoughts and experiences on the social construction of knowledge (McHugh, 2014). As explained in the literature review, crime is often explored and understood through a male or masculine lens, and the understanding of the fear of crime is male-dominated; as such, female points of view are often ignored and underrepresented. Feminist methodology is ideal for this study as it is specifically concerned with how knowledge about social life can be connected to the realities of women instead of the male-dominated understandings of social life (Landman, 2006).

For this research project, the researcher chose to do semi-structured interviews because they offer an open dialogue between the researcher and the participants (Wincup, 2017). Interviews actively attempt to involve the participant in the deepest way throughout the process. Interviews are the best method for this study, as they allow participants to express their perceptions and beliefs openly and freely. The researcher chose to do semi-structured interviews, as they offer a more fluid and flexible structure

because they are framed to encourage the participant to provide more in-depth answers rather than a simple yes or no response. Semi-structured interviews also allow the interviewer to ask follow-up questions when appropriate (Wincup, 2017). Although this type of research method gives far more freedom to participants to answer as they see fit, it still gives the researcher some control over how the interview goes (Crowther-Dowey and Fussey, 2017). The open-ended questions during a semi-structured interview allow participants to express their perspectives and thoughts without being stifled (Ryan et al., 2009). This facilitates a richer data collection and a deeper understanding of the participants. This cannot be as easily obtained through structured interviews. Although semi-structured interviews are the best research method for my study, there are many limitations to using this method. When conducting a study with interviews or any other qualitative research method, the findings of your study are not generalisable, and they cannot be extended to the broader population at the same level of certainty that quantitative research can. A further limitation of semi-structured interviews is that interviews are time-consuming. Once you get ethical approval, it takes time to recruit participants and conduct interviews. Additionally, the transcription and analysis of each interview take extensive time and can be particularly complex (Denscombe, 2021).

3.2 Sample

The sample for this study consists of seven females aged 20 to 30. This age range guarantees that all the participants are adults, a consideration given the sensitive nature of this study and 'digital natives'. 'Digital natives' is a term popularised by Prensky (2001) to describe the generations who grew up fully immersed in technology and are technologically literate and engaged (Bennett, 2012). The research believed this to be important due to the digital nature of this study. Additionally, the participants were all enrolled in either an undergraduate or postgraduate course. As this study talks extensively about media depictions, the researcher believed it was important to have participants who had regular access to digital content. The researcher contacted possible participants through various forms of social media and in-person contact with university peers. After making the first contact, the researcher outlined the topic and content of the research project as well as the role that the participants would have in the project.

The researcher reached out to fifteen potential participants. Of these, nine responded with interest in participating in the study. However, only seven were able to meet with the researcher face to face, either in person or over Zoom. All participants were given an information sheet that explained the research study and what they would have to do as participants, as well as a consent form to sign before the interviews began. The participants were also reminded before and after the completion of the

interviews that they were able to withdraw from the study at any time until their data was anonymised and included within the larger data set of the dissertation.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

When conducting a research project, ethics are established to protect the participants from any harm during and after the duration of the study. It also helps the researcher consider their participants' needs and interests. As such, the British Society of Criminology (2015) has outlined a code of ethics that must be followed while conducting any criminological research. This code of ethics aims to guide researchers in the criminology field about their responsibilities while conducting research and to promote the highest level of ethical standards for all criminological research (British Society of Criminology, 2015). The researcher understands their responsibility to uphold these ethics and ensure all participants' physical, social, and psychological safety. The main ethical considerations that had to be accounted for while undergoing this research project were avoiding harm to participants, informed consent, and confidentiality.

Due to the area of research, the researcher understood it was essential to maintain a level of sensitivity towards any participants. As this research discusses fear of crime as well as graphic depictions of violence against women, the researcher recognized that it may be upsetting or distressing to participants. As such, the researcher wanted to create a safe environment for the participants to openly discuss their thoughts and feelings. Informed consent plays a large role in helping to avoid any unnecessary harm to the participants. The term informed consent refers to the participants fully knowing and understanding the risks and benefits of participating in the study. The participants must know their participation is voluntary (Flick, 2018). To minimise any potential harm to participants, all participants of this study were given a consent form that outlined the context and content of this study to ensure informed consent. The interviewees were also informed that they could stop the interview at any time and would be able to pull out of the study for any reason before or after the interview. To further protect the participants, all information given through the interviews was protected by substituting codes for any identifiable information about the participants in order to protect their confidentiality and anonymity. To achieve this, all participants were given a random pseudonym to identify them throughout the study. The researcher also kept all recordings and transcripts in a secure area to which only the researcher had access

3.4 Reflections

Semi-structured interviews were the most appropriate research strategy for the aims of this study. The interviews succeeded in getting in-depth answers from the participants, which greatly helped the researcher gain helpful insight into the participant's thoughts and feelings. Nevertheless, this does not mean that they didn't come with some challenges and limitations. Because of their nature, interviews are a very time-consuming process (Denscombe, 2021). Due to the time constraints of this study, the researcher was only able to conduct and transcribe seven interviews within the timeframe. The findings of this study cannot be generalised to the larger population with a large level of certainty (Denscombe, 2021). Furthermore, finding participants who had time in their schedule to meet with the researcher for the interviews proved difficult.

The researcher, being a female within the sample age range, helped to create a comfortable and safe environment for the participants to express themselves. As the participants were peers of the researcher, they felt more comfortable sharing their thoughts, feelings, and experiences which led to more meaningful conversations. This type of insider research helped the researcher gain a more in-depth and well-rounded understanding of the topics discussed. Moreover, it helped the research contextualise the experiences and feelings discussed throughout the interviews. However, insider research comes with a multitude of challenges, particularly the threat of bias. The researcher had to be cognisant of her possible biases due to her connection to the participants and how this may affect their interpretations of the data (Hewitt-Taylor, 2002). The researcher was aware that being a woman led her to have her own opinions on the fear of crime and how media affects said fear of crime. As such, while completing data collection and analysis, she had to be conscious of any affects her options might have. While being conscious of any biases, the researcher was able to focus solely on the data from the interviews.

Chapter 4: Analysis & Discussion

4.1 Introduction

The seven interviews conducted for this research provide comprehensive accounts of women's feelings and thoughts in relation to their fear of crime and the media depictions of violence against women that they consume. Throughout the interviews, the researcher identified three main themes: attitudes towards media, depictions of violence against women in the media, and influences on fear of crime. The researcher will use these three themes to identify and discuss the significant findings of this study.

4.2 Attitudes Toward Media

The participants were all asked a series of questions about their media consumption and attitudes towards what they see in the media. All participants stated that they consumed some sort of media frequently. The main form of media used by participants is social media, namely TikTok and Instagram. Six out of the seven participants stated that they use social media daily, whereas only four participants stated that they watch movies and television often. In a study conducted by Tirocchi (2024), it was discovered that digital platforms, specifically social media, are the most used by younger generations (i.e., Generation Z and Millennials) since it is a space in which people can engage in realities that might not otherwise be accessible. Additionally, it's a space where people can construct identities and reinterpret social meanings. Tirocchi also explores the increasing use of TikTok in recent years. She explains that TikTok can be used as a means of entertainment and an educational tool. She further explains that the quick insights seen through TikTok can help fill information gaps that formal types of education cannot.

> P1: A lot. Um, my screen time isn't as bad as it used to be. It's like three or four hours a day now (…)

> P2: Um, I think in terms of like, overall numbers, I probably consume media about two to three hours per day.

> P3: I would say pretty much every day and also a lot every day. Unfortunately.

Tsfati and Cohen (2013) argue that many people believe that media depictions of certain phenomena are fact. This theory is in line with a study conducted by Dorfman and Schiraldi (2001), which found that

76 per cent of those surveyed formed their opinions about crime based on the media they consume. However, this is not true for the results of this study. When asked if they believed what they saw in the media reflected reality, none of the participants answered yes or no. Most participants expressed belief that the media shows a form of reality, which is a slightly altered or dramatised reflection of said reality. Many participants also mentioned they are more inclined to believe that the media reflects reality if it is factual media, such as social or news media, instead of fictional media. In a study conducted by Pew Research Centre (2022), it was found that most 18-29-year-olds trust the information they get from social media to some extent. This belief seemingly stems from an understanding that fictional media is specifically meant for entertainment and is mainly based on fake situations. Arias (2019) explains that media can subliminally affect people's thoughts about certain issues. However, this cannot be confirmed through this study. Further study would be needed to confirm whether people are subliminally influenced to believe the media.

> P1: (...) Definitely. It's not real, it's more of just like an illusion of something that is real, or like a simulation of it. But that doesn't mean that it can't be reflective of real things. Like, I like to think what I put out on social media is like reflective of who I am as a person, even though it's not my faults. It's not like you're meeting me and talking to me, you're just seeing these like little pieces of me. But I wouldn't say that's not really me. If that makes any sense. It's not real, but it's (...)

> P2: Yes and no.

> P4: I'm very much aware that the media portrays certain people and characteristics, and they have this tendency to be overdramatic in certain situations. So, I kind of I guess you could say take media with a pinch of salt.

> P5: I don't think it is. Most of it is not the truth. I mean, I can get tripped up so a lot of the time I'll read or watch something, and I'll think oh. But then I'm like remember, it's not actually necessarily like that, but I definitely... it's very easy to be trapped into that kind of thing... but life is not necessarily that way.

The interviews show that although media is consumed often, it does not necessarily affect the way people see and understand reality. The participants believed that social media and news media reflect some truth and have more merit than fictional media, but they understood that the truth had been slightly altered due to media dramatisations. It can be argued that the participants have a somewhat

above-average knowledge of media and its critical appraisal due to their field of study, mainly criminology and adjacent courses.

4.3 Depictions of Violence Against Women (VAW) in the Media

Multiple studies have examined the prevalence of VAW in the media (Eastel et al., 2015; Sutherland et al., 2019; Kinzinger, 2008). Consistent with previous studies, this study found that most participants frequently see VAW while consuming media. P1 mentioned that she sees both graphic and subtle depictions of VAW in the media. She continues by mentioning that the subtle depictions are normally in the form of misogynistic opinions and rhetoric, specifically on social media. Many other participants also mentioned witnessing more violence through social or news media than fictional media. Duncombe (2020) argues that we are in an age of 'social witnessing', which makes it easier for people to spread and witness violence. She explains that social media is the main form of media used to spread graphic photos and depictions of violence without the restrictions and laws that formal types of media have.

Furthermore, when asked about media depictions of VAW, most participants stated that these observed depictions are mainly committed by men. They specifically cited true crime and the depictions of male serial killers brutally assaulting and killing women. Moreover, multiple participants mention media content that is part of the so-called 'manosphere' and how viewing it increases both their fear of crime and men. Haslop et al. (2024) explain that the manosphere is a term used to refer to an online community that surfaced around 2022, which promotes anti-feminist and misogynistic ideals. The content of this community includes the promotion of rape and physical abuse of women and celebrations of female mass murders (Sugiura, 2021). Although this type of content does not normally show graphic depictions of violence against women, its perpetuation of violence against women can have the same, if not worse, effects on the way women fear both crime and men.

> P1: Oh there's definitely a distinction between, like major scale violence, but I think violence against women is kind of intrinsically woven into that like a, a piece of everything. You can't have humanitarian violence unless you have misogynistic violence playing a role in it. I think it's just something that, unfortunately, comes along with the territory. But like, true crime, violence, I feel like is almost always centred around women and women's safety and violence against women, which is really upsetting. And when you get into kind of like manosphere content, like really

heavily misogynistic, or, what's another word, aggressively, icky, male gaze, kind of the sides of social media or media that deal with that, or, like platforms that talk about that kind of violence, it's more of like a subtle perpetuation of violence against women. But I would say that's just real and as alarming, even if it's not like, you know, a physical assault or a murder or something. It's still, like quite a heavy emotional and political violence against women and that is probably the most prevalent on media, besides true crime.

P2: (...)I was talking about how I follow people who like talk about serial killers, the main victims of serial killers are women, and in very horrific ways. We talked about Gaza, and the stuff I've seen about that, you know, everyone's being affected over there with it. But actually, a lot of it is women and children, especially, who can't protect themselves as much. So, in terms of like, overall violence, I will say a lot of it is directed towards women, or at least some proportion of it directed towards women is much more horrific and horrendous, then it is towards men.

P4: I would say definitely, I see more violence against women. I also feel like personally, I tend to look out for that more and retain that information more just because I'm aware of how... how prevalent it is in today's society.

It is also important to mention the effects of global wars and crises and their effects on the way the media displays violence. At the time of writing this, the Israel-Palestine conflict is a very prevalent topic in the media. Graphic depictions of this conflict and its casualties have become a common sight in news and social media. Nguyen (2023) states that since the beginning of this conflict, the world has been exposed to graphic images of violence and human suffering without respite. Five participants of this study mentioned that the volume of depictions of violence has gone up significantly since the beginning of the conflict. They mentioned seeing graphic images of the conflict as well as hearing about violence against women and children that is taking place in conjunction with this conflict.

When asked how viewing media depictions of VAW made them feel, participants expressed exceedingly negative emotions. P6 expressed feelings of horror and fear while consuming media that portrays this type of violence. Additionally, P7 shared that she experiences a range of emotions when she sees these depictions. Specifically, she stated that she felt angry when she saw or heard about violence against women in the media. She explained that this anger stemmed from the fear that such violence could happen to her or someone she cares about. While there is a lot of research on the societal effects of

media depictions of VAW, there is limited research on the effects that these depictions of violence have on the feelings of women.

> P6: Really icky and horrified and sickened (…) There's definitely a fear that comes from that, that makes you feel afraid (…)

> P7: I get really angry, like, especially at True Crime things like it's upsetting because the figures are often like one in three and like, obviously that for me, that's me and my sisters, but like, we all know, you know, every woman knows, you know, has enough friends that you'd be like, it's gonna happen to one of us, like, and how could you not be angry at that? But also, like, there's a mistrust and then a fear of men in power positions, but also men that you could fall in love with, or you know, if you happen to be attracted to men, like you could trust someone. And then throughout the years, you could get to a point where they're then physically harming you and that's acceptable behaviour. And that's terrifying. Like the thought of that.

> P3: As a woman like shit (…) Yeah, because it is true. Having also been a woman and having a lot of women friends. I will say I hear about violence a lot. And it does make me feel bad (…)

From these statements, it can be determined that VAW plays a large role in the media. The interviews show that media depictions of VAW are prominent throughout all types of media. But depictions of VAW seemingly happen more throughout forms of 'factual' media, with depictions of VAW being mainly perpetrated by men and having misogynistic undertones. Duncombe (2020) agrees that violence is displayed more throughout social and news media than in fictional media. Additionally, Easteal et al. (2015) state that these types of media are inherently political and are inclined to have patriarchal and misogynistic undertones. Furthermore, the interviews confirmed that exposure to these depictions has negative emotional effects on women, leading to feelings of anger and fear. As stated before, there is a lack of research to support this finding so, further research is needed to thoroughly understand the effects of these depictions on the psyche and emotional well-being of women.

4.4 Influences on Fear of Crime

Several studies have found that there is a significant disparity in the fear of crime experienced across genders. These studies show that women have higher rates of fear of crime than men (Fisher & May,

2009; Snedker, 2010). All seven participants were asked about their fear of crime. Consistent with previous research, most participants answered that they did fear crime to some extent. Both P2 and P3, mentioned that being women is the reason they fear crime. Furthermore, P3 expressed that she knew being a victim of crime was inherently possible based on her gender. In multiple interviews, the participants also mentioned fear for their female friends and family members. This finding is supported by Warr (1992) and his explanation of altruistic fear. He explains that women experience altruistic fear, which is caused by emotional reactions to the possibilities of victimisation of themselves and their loved ones. Furthermore, when they were asked about the crimes they feared most, all participants stated they feared or were more cautious of forms of sexual or physical violence, specifically from men. This finding is supported by Ferraro's (1996) shadow of sexual assault hypothesis. This hypothesis asserts that the reason women report a higher level of fear of crime is due to the looming threat of sexual assault.

> P6: Yes. All the time (…) I'm definitely scared of the potential of crime.

> P2: (…) So yes, I do fear crime. I am a woman and I know that I am a target (…)

> P7: Yes.

> P3: Again, yes, as a woman, I do fear crime because it is, I think, statistically true,
> that crime can potentially happen to me at some point or another. And I just don't
> know, when is it going to happen is it going to be today it's going to happen to me
> is it going to happen to a friend of mine?

The other three participants stated that they are not necessarily afraid of crime but are more aware of the possibility of crime or violence happening to them. Darcy and P5 explain that they are aware that they can be the victims of crime at any time, but they try not to let this affect them and create a sense of fear. Moreover, P4 explains that she takes precautions against crime but doesn't believe taking precautions comes from a place of fear instead, it comes from a place of personal protection. These observations are similar to the findings in a study conducted by Chadee and Dittion (2005). They explain that a lack of fear of crime can be caused by desensitisation and a heightened sense of personal awareness.

> Darcy: Not too much, but I am definitely aware, like when I go out.

P4: Um, no. I feel like... I don't know it's weird since moving to London. I've experienced more crime firsthand than what I did where I live back at home. But that doesn't make me necessarily fear crime. I feel like I just... I don't put boundaries up but I'm just more aware of crime and aware of when to take myself out of situations or when to... when to avoid certain areas at certain times of the day. I wouldn't say that comes from a place of fear. I would say that comes from a place of protection of myself.

P5: Um, not really. I think I've got more of a mindset of if it's going to happen, it's going to happen because it can't actually physically control certain aspects of things (...).

It is important to note that throughout multiple interviews, men were mentioned in conjunction with a fear or awareness of crime and being victimised. Multiple participants mentioned a fear of male violence as well as the precautions they take to prevent it from happening to them. As stated earlier, the participants specifically mentioned a fear of sexual and physical violence from men. The precautions discussed include avoiding specific areas, not walking alone at night, and carrying some sort of protection. Similar findings were discovered in a study conducted by Smith (1988). In this study, they discovered that most women have a generalised fear of male violence, especially in public places. Moreover, they found that this fear of men causes them to take multiple precautions while in public. There are multiple further studies that have also found that many women fear crimes committed by men.

As stated previously, all participants stated that, to some extent, they see some form of VAW in the media. Furthermore, when asked if these depictions in the media affect their fear of crime, most participants expressed that depictions of violence in the media do negatively affect their fear of crime. Research is split on whether media affects individuals' fear of crime. Chadee and Ditton (2005) found no correlation between media and fear of crime. However, Babiak and Hagan (2017) and Sacco and Kennedy (2013) did find a correlation. This study's results align with those of Sacco and Kennedy (2013) and Babiak and Hagan (2017). Both P2 and P7 explain that they believe depictions of violence against women in the media increase their fear of crime because it brings crime to the forefront of their minds and causes them to think about the possibility of it happening more often. P3 similarly expressed that media makes her fear crime more. However, she also explains that she thinks she would still fear crime to some extent without the media's depictions of VAW because of her lived experience.

P2: I think people are cautious, right? You know, I think a lot of people like oh, I see that on TikTok, or Instagram or on a TV show, and that could never happen to me. But I'm always thinking of what could happen to me. So, I'm like, oh, this person got serial killed in that way. Not going to do what they did. You know, it makes us a little bit cautious, makes me a little more alert of my surroundings (…)

P7: I think it brings it more to my awareness. So, the fear is more prevalent because the fear button has been pressed more because it's been mentioned more and I'm in that state more. And so, because it's more at the forefront of my mind, I'm then fearing it's going to happen to me, even though statistically, it's kind of unlikely. Um and it definitely makes me fearful of relationships and being intimate with men specifically, but like anyone generally, because anyone who loves you could do that, essentially (…)

P3: I would… a lot… a lot. I would think that if I didn't consume, the media that I consume or did not consume media at all. I will probably fear crime to a certain degree, because of the places that maybe I grew up in in general, and the experiences I've lived

All participants were asked if they believed that any factors other than the media influenced their fear of crime. Throughout the interviews, two main factors were disscussed: race and distrust in law enforcement.

Multiple participants mentioned how race is another factor that affected fear of crime. Both P2 and P3 spoke about their fear of crime being higher due to their racial identity as black women. Fear of crime literature consistently indicates that race is a significant factor in differences in fear of crime (Ortega and Myles, 1987; Chadee, 2003). Rader (2017) explains that this fear is based on the vulnerability of minorities, specifically in their social location. She explains that black people are more likely to live in areas in which crime is more prevalent, so they are more likely to be either victims or offenders. However, P2 and P3 did not fear crime based on living in a high-crime area. Instead, they both specifically cited a fear of hate/race crimes due to living in majority-white areas. The literature is extremely limited on the fear of hate crimes felt by black communities.

P2: Yeah, I think this I just was thinking about. So, there's another type of crime that I think I do fear a lot, which is hate crimes, like any time that like lynching and things

like that. And I think that past, like violence itself, just discrimination and a culture of intolerance for other cultures, really made me think about, you know, whether I'm safe or not my neighbourhood, so like, my neighbourhood is majority black, which is very nice, because I feel a lot safer there. But I do think about that when I go home, and I'm in majority-white neighbourhoods, where I know they have less of a culture of tolerance. So, I think the culture of tolerance, which is like kind of separate from media but can be embedded in media. We see it in you know, presidential speeches these days, and TikTok's. And insert, you know, can also be a really big factor that doesn't have to directly do with crime.

P3: Oh yeah. apart from being a woman, I'm also very much black. So, growing up in a white country, like Italy, being the only black girl in my class, most of the time. Race crimes would be at the top of my list.

Another factor discussed through multiple interviews was distrust in law enforcement systems. P6 explained that her lack of trust in the systems meant to help, such as law enforcement, affects the way she fears crime. She further explains that she would feel far safer if she had trust in these systems. Furthermore, P4 explains that her distrust of people in power positions, namely the police, affects the way she fears crime. She specifically mentions that the case of Sarah Everard (2021) affected her trust in police officers and men in higher-power positions.

P6: I mean, definitely, yeah. Like I said earlier, like systemic reliability is a huge factor. I think. If you feel supported by the society that you live in, and the structures that are put in place to protect you, I imagine that you would feel a lot safer than if you don't feel that support (…)

P4: Yeah, I would say any kind of power position. So, I will say gender as one that we spoke about, ages definitely one as well as… I think especially looking at the Sarah Everard case it kind of makes you question power positions in occupations and also like makes you second guess if everyone's intentions within power dynamics are pure and honest.

These influences can also be understood in conjunction with each other and media consumption of violence. In many cases, the way the media depicts violence can be based on external factors such as race or trust in law enforcement. Conversely, media depictions can affect the way people see law

enforcement and different races. In 2020, when George Floyd was killed by a police officer in the US, the footage of his death was widely shared and was accessible to view on most media platforms. This event shows the intersection between media, race, and distrust of the police. The circulation of this video led to increased fear and outcry from black communities and other minorities, as well as negatively affecting the trust people had in law enforcement and governmental systems (Brantingham et al. 2022). Furthermore, in 2021, when Sarah Everard was raped and murdered by a police officer in the UK, it was heavily reported, which led to a rise in female fear of crime as well as a decline in trust in law enforcement (End Violence Against Women, 2021). In both cases, the violence was heavily reported on, which arguably exacerbated the fear of crime felt around the world.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The literature presented within this research project demonstrates that media representations of violence against women misrepresent the reality of the phenomena, as well as exploring why women report a high fear of crime. This study aimed to explore if media depictions of crime had any effect on the way women fear crime. The findings of this dissertation propose that consuming media depictions of violence against women negatively affects women's fear of crime. Which leads to a rise in their fear of crime. The researcher identified three main themes relating to media depictions and fear of crime, which are attitudes towards media, media depictions of violence against women, and influence on fear of crime. The findings show that women between 20-30 do not automatically believe what they see in the media as reality but recognise that what the media depicts is a dramatisation of said reality. It can be argued that this understanding stems from an ability to critically appraise information due to the participants being in higher education. However, the findings of this study demonstrate that although the media often misrepresents violence against women, that does not necessarily stop women from fearing this type of violence. This study found that the media depictions of violence against women have negative emotional effects on women, with the main emotions being fear and anger. Furthermore, the participants show a large connection between the way different types of media depict violence against women and a rise in women's fear of both crime and men. However, this fear does not only stem from graphic depictions of crime but also subtle perpetuations of violence against women that can be seen through misogynistic opinions and rhetoric spread through media.

Although the findings of this dissertation show that media depictions of violence against women affect female fear of crime, evidence from the interviews shows that the relationship between media consumption and fear of crime is far more complex and is influenced by numerous other factors. The researcher identified two other major factors that affected women's fear of crime: race and distrust in law enforcement. These factors can affect women's fear of crime on their own but also in conjunction with the media and how it depicts violence. As previously stated, although the literature does acknowledge that women report the highest levels of fear of crime, it is often written off as irrational because of a lack of empirical evidence that shows the levels at which women are victimised. This is often caused by the lack of recognition of private and domestic forms of crime, which undermines the knowledge of crimes against women. Acknowledging the nuanced factors that cause a rise in women's fear of crime is crucial in understanding crimes against women and how they affect the wider social group. To gain a complete understanding of the factors that contribute to female fear of crime, further

research is necessary. The research should focus on identifying the various external factors that impact women's fear of crime and how these factors interact with media. Additionally, research should be conducted to determine the types of media that have the greatest effect on women and the reasons behind this effect.

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