



The Role of Crime Films and True-Crime Media in Normalising Fascination with Violent Offenders among Young Adults

Arya Arun Menon^{1*}, Shahnaz Sheibani²

^{1&2} School of Social Science, Arts & Humanities, Lincoln University College, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

DOI: doi.org/10.60072/ijeissah.2026.v4i03.006

***Corresponding author:** Arya Arun Menon, School of Social Science, Arts & Humanities, Lincoln University College, Malaysia

Corresponding author's e-mail:
menon.phdscholar@lincoln.edu.my

Received: 14 Jul 2026
Revised: 25 Jul 2026
Accepted: 27 Jul 2026

Crime films and true-crime media may shape how audiences attend to violent offenders, but interest must not be treated as approval of violence. This structured evidence review asks: How does engagement with crime films and true-crime media relate to fascination with violent offenders among young adults, and what evidence distinguishes curiosity or attraction from glorification and endorsement? A verification audit identified seven substantive sources cited by the manuscript: three empirical studies, one empirical analysis of online discourse, two reviews, and one field overview. The evidence was therefore synthesised by evidence type and theme rather than presented as 15 homogeneous empirical studies. Findings suggest associations between media engagement, morbid curiosity, offender-focused framing, and attention to offenders; however, the evidence is mainly cross-sectional, includes adult samples not restricted to ages 18–29, and includes one preprint. It does not establish that repeated exposure causes normalisation or endorsement. Victim marginalisation and offender glamourisation remain important ethical concerns. More longitudinal and experimental research with age-specific samples is needed.

Keywords: *Crime Films; Morbid Curiosity; Media Framing; PRISMA 2020; Structured Evidence Review; True-crime Media; Violent Offenders; Young Adults*

Background

In this regard, the rising popularity of crime films and other media genres depicting the truth behind crimes has changed how people consume media with elements of violence, criminal activity, and issues related to justice. This has been facilitated through the presentation of violent offenders as main characters in entertainment, including documentaries, films, podcasts, social media, and even streaming platforms. Even though many media products aim to inform their audience about criminal activity and the justice system, there is concern that they may portray violent offenders as intelligent or interesting characters (Ahsan, *et al.*, 2025).

For this review, young adults are defined as people aged 18–29 years. Five related concepts are kept analytically distinct. Fascination means sustained cognitive or emotional interest in offenders, including curiosity about their motives, biographies, or psychology. Normalisation means a shift through which such interest becomes familiar, routine, or socially acceptable; it does not by itself imply moral approval. Attraction means a favourable affective or interpersonal orientation towards an offender. Glorification refers to media framing that elevates an offender's status, charisma, intelligence, or notoriety while minimising the seriousness of the harm or the victim's experience. Endorsement means explicit approval, justification, support, or willingness to emulate violent conduct. These definitions prevent curiosity, attraction, and endorsement from being treated as interchangeable outcomes (White, 2025).

Existing research identifies morbid curiosity, fear regulation, entertainment, defensive vigilance, and the desire to understand criminal behaviour as motives for consuming true-crime media. What remains uncertain is whether offender-centred exposure changes young adults' attitudes over time, because much of the available evidence is cross-sectional, uses broader adult samples, or is secondary literature. The present review therefore evaluates evidence for association while avoiding causal claims that the available designs cannot support.

The review addresses the following question: Among young adults aged 18–29, how is engagement with crime films and true-crime media associated with fascination, attraction, perceived normality, glorification, or endorsement of violent offenders? A secondary question asks how offender-centred framing and victim representation shape those associations. The review distinguishes direct empirical evidence from contextual reviews and identifies gaps in age-specific, longitudinal, and experimental research.

Literature Review

Conceptual and Empirical Context

Crime films, documentaries, podcasts, streaming services, and social media now constitute a broad media environment rather than a single genre. The literature reviewed below provides conceptual context for the evidence synthesis; it should not be read as a second presentation of the review findings.

Psychological Motives

Research discussed by Perchtold-Stefan *et al.* (2025) describes morbid curiosity, defensive vigilance, thrill seeking, fear regulation, and attempts to understand dangerous behaviour as plausible motives for true-crime consumption. These motives concern why audiences engage with the genre; they do not demonstrate attraction to a particular offender or endorsement of violence.

The distinction is important because interest may serve informational or emotion-regulation functions. Familiarity with an offender can coexist with moral rejection of the offence, and the available evidence does not justify treating consumption frequency as proof of admiration.

Accordingly, fascination is treated here as an attentional or psychological outcome, while attraction, glorification, and endorsement are evaluated separately.

Media Framing and Victim Representation

Offender-centred narratives frequently foreground biography, motives, intelligence, or psychological complexity. Such framing may aid explanation, but it may also make offenders more salient than victims. Bui and Deakin (2021) provide contextual discussion of how vulnerability narratives can blur the boundary between explanation and excuse, while Geier and Mooney (2024) directly examine audience perceptions of glamourised offenders and peripheral victims.

The ethical issue is therefore not that every explanatory account glorifies an offender. Glorification is present only when narrative or promotional choices elevate the offender while diminishing harm, responsibility, or victim experience. This operational distinction guides the synthesis.

Digital Circulation

Streaming, podcast, and social-media environments can increase the availability and repetition of offender-focused material. Shah and Kaushik (2025) discuss this process in a literature review, but the manuscript's source set contains no direct platform-level experiment demonstrating that recommendation systems cause fascination among 18–29-year-olds.

Digital repetition is therefore considered a plausible exposure mechanism rather than an established causal pathway. Claims about algorithmic amplification should be tested using platform data, exposure measures, and longitudinal or experimental designs. The empirical question is narrower than the broader theoretical concern: whether measured engagement with crime media is associated with defined audience outcomes, and whether those outcomes amount to fascination, attraction, glorification, or endorsement. More broadly, empirical evidence demonstrates that engagement with social media can influence users' experiences and outcomes across different contexts (Udam & Mohammed, 2023)

Table 1. Verified Evidence Inventory

Source	Evidence type	Population/material	Relevant contribution	Verified limitation
Ahsan et al. (2025)	Primary; cross-sectional survey	321 Pakistani young adults, aged 18–26	Crime media, villain glorification, moral perceptions, aggressive attitudes.	Association does not establish causation.
Geier & Mooney (2024)	Primary; mixed-methods preprint	Survey: 66 adults; interviews: 10 UK adults	Engagement predicted attraction; interviews identified glamourised offenders and peripheral victims.	Not peer reviewed and not age specific.
White (2025)	Primary; qualitative online-discourse analysis	Reddit discussions about women's true-crime consumption	Identifies beliefs about consumption motives.	Does not directly measure young adults' attraction, normalisation, or endorsement.
Bui & Deakin (2021)	Secondary; narrative review	Youth crime and vulnerability literature	Context for explanation versus excuse.	Not a primary audience study of true-crime consumption.
Perchtold-Stefan et al. (2025)	Secondary; psychological review	Literature on true-crime fascination	Synthesises motives and correlates.	A review, not a 307–571-participant study in this review.
Shah & Kaushik (2025)	Secondary; literature review	Violent media, technology, digital culture	Context for digital circulation and copycat concerns.	Does not directly test young adults in this review question.
Hughes et al. (2023)	Contextual overview	True crime and crime fiction scholarship	Introduces prevalence and social relevance.	No empirical study included.

Table 1 accounts for every substantive source used in the review. Page et al. (2021) and Moher et al. (2010) are reporting-method references and are not included as topic evidence. The inventory confirms that the evidence base is heterogeneous and substantially smaller than the previously claimed 15 empirical studies.

Methods

Review Design and Reporting Status

This manuscript was revised as a structured evidence review with a documented verification audit. PRISMA 2020 is a reporting guideline rather than a guarantee of methodological quality (Page et al., 2021). Because the manuscript files did not contain a dated search log, database-specific search strings, screening decisions, a protocol registration, or records for 15 included studies, the earlier PRISMA claim and numerical flow were removed rather than reconstructed retrospectively.

The review combines direct empirical evidence with secondary and contextual literature because the narrowly defined evidence base is limited. Evidence types are labelled separately in Table 1, and conclusions are weighted accordingly. Primary studies inform statements about observed associations or reported perceptions; reviews and overviews are used only for conceptual and contextual interpretation.

Evidence-set verification began with all nine references in the manuscript. Two methodological references (Moher et al., 2010; Page et al., 2021) were excluded from the topical evidence set. The remaining seven sources were checked against their titles, publication records, abstracts or full text, study designs, samples, and publication status. All seven are reported in Table 1; none is represented as one of an undocumented set of 15 studies.

Table 2: The Revised Eligibility Framework

Evidence category	Include	Exclude / qualification
Primary direct	Empirical study of crime/true-crime media with a relevant audience outcome; ages 18–29 preferred.	Broader adult or online samples retained only with an explicit indirectness limitation.
Publication status	Peer-reviewed article or clearly labelled preprint.	Preprints must not be described as peer reviewed.
Secondary context	Review or overview relevant to motives, framing, victims, or digital circulation.	Used for interpretation only; not counted as primary empirical evidence.
Other	English-language source with verifiable bibliographic information.	Methods/reporting references and unrelated or unverifiable records excluded from topical evidence.

The eligibility framework distinguishes evidence used to answer the review question from evidence used only to interpret it. This resolves the previous contradiction between an empirical-only criterion and the inclusion of reviews and a preprint.

Eligibility and Evidence Classification

Direct empirical evidence was eligible when it examined crime films, true-crime media, offender portrayals, or closely related crime-based content and reported an audience outcome relevant to fascination, attraction, perceived normality, glorification, endorsement, moral perception, or aggressive attitude. Samples centred on ages 18–29 were considered directly age-relevant; broader adult samples and online-discourse studies were retained but explicitly marked as indirect for the age-specific question. English-language peer-reviewed studies and clearly labelled preprints were eligible. Secondary reviews and field overviews were retained only as contextual evidence and were not counted as primary studies.

Sources were excluded from the topical evidence set when they were methodological reporting papers, lacked a meaningful connection to crime media or offender perception, did not provide sufficient publication information for verification, or duplicated another record. No language, date, or database restriction is claimed beyond what could be verified from the manuscript's reference set.

The synthesis was narrative because designs, populations, exposures, and outcomes were too heterogeneous for meta-analysis. Data were organised first by study and evidence type (Table 1), then into three themes: psychological motives and audience outcomes; offender framing and victim marginalisation; and digital circulation. Theoretical interpretation followed the evidence synthesis. No formal risk-of-bias tool had been applied in the original review; publication status, sample fit, design limitations, and causal constraints are therefore reported explicitly.

Discussion

Study-level findings are presented in Table 1. Among the directly relevant sources, Ahsan et al. (2025) surveyed 321 Pakistani young adults aged 18–26 and reported relationships among crime-based media, villain glorification, moral perceptions, and aggressive attitudes. The cross-sectional design supports association, not temporal or causal inference. Geier and Mooney (2024) reported that true-crime engagement predicted attraction towards violent offenders in a 66-adult survey and identified three interview themes in a separate ten-adult sample, including 'Glamourised Offender vs. Peripheral Victim'. Because this work is a preprint and its adult samples were not restricted to ages 18–29, it should be treated as provisional and only partly age-specific.

White (2025) analysed Reddit users' beliefs about women's true-crime consumption. This source contributes evidence about public explanations of consumption, but it does not establish respondents' ages or directly measure attraction or endorsement. The remaining four substantive sources are secondary or contextual. Bui and Deakin (2021) discuss vulnerability framing in youth-crime narratives; Perchtold-Stefan et al. (2025) synthesise psychological perspectives on true-crime fascination; Shah and Kaushik (2025) review violent media, technology, and digital culture; and Hughes et al. (2023) provide an overview of the prevalence and social power of true crime and crime fiction.

Theme 1: psychological motives and audience outcomes. Across the evidence set, morbid curiosity, threat understanding, fear regulation, defensive vigilance, and entertainment are recurring explanations for consumption. These mechanisms are compatible with fascination as sustained interest, but they do not demonstrate endorsement. Only Ahsan et al. (2025) directly centre a young-adult sample, and only Geier and Mooney (2024) directly measure attraction towards violent offenders.

Theme 2: offender framing and victim marginalisation. The strongest recurring concern is that offender biography, charisma, and psychological complexity may receive more narrative attention than victim experience. Geier and Mooney's interview findings directly support this theme; the reviews provide contextual support. The evidence does not show that all explanatory portrayals glorify offenders. Glorification should be inferred only where elevation of the offender coincides with minimisation of harm, responsibility, or victims.

Theme 3: digital circulation. Streaming, podcasts, social media, and recommendation systems can make offender-centred narratives repeatedly available. However, no included primary study experimentally isolates algorithmic exposure among 18–29-year-olds. Digital amplification is therefore a plausible mechanism requiring direct testing, not a demonstrated cause of normalisation.

Theoretical interpretation and implications. Social Learning Theory suggests that attractive, rewarded, or

consequence-free portrayals may provide models for attitudes or conduct; nevertheless, the reviewed evidence does not test imitation and should not be used to claim observational learning occurred. Cultivation Theory offers a plausible account of how repeated messages may shape perceived social reality, but longitudinal exposure data are absent. Both theories therefore organise hypotheses rather than proving effects. The practical implication is to balance offender explanation with victim-centred context, avoid promotional framing that confers celebrity status, and strengthen media literacy. Research should preregister protocols, report reproducible searches, distinguish curiosity from approval, and use longitudinal or experimental age-specific designs.

Conclusion

The verified evidence suggests that crime-media engagement can be associated with fascination, attraction, moral perceptions, and concern about victim marginalisation, but it does not establish that media exposure causes young adults to normalise or endorse violent offenders. Fascination is best understood as sustained interest; attraction is favourable affect; normalisation concerns familiarity or social acceptability; glorification is an offender-elevating media frame; and endorsement is explicit approval or support. Conflicting these outcomes would overstate the evidence.

The principal limitation is the small, heterogeneous evidence set: only one verified study directly centres a young-adult sample, one directly examines attraction but remains a preprint with broader adult samples, and several sources are reviews or contextual discussions. Future systematic reviews should retain complete search exports and screening records, apply an appropriate appraisal tool to each design, provide a PRISMA flow diagram based on auditable counts, and synthesise primary and secondary evidence separately.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate: This article is a review of previously published studies and does not involve any new experiments with human participants or animals. Therefore, ethics approval and consent to participate are not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: Not Applicable.

Acknowledgement: The author would like to acknowledge the contributions of researchers whose work has been reviewed in this article. No external funding or assistance was received for the preparation of this manuscript.

References

- Ahsan, B., Akhtar, A., & Akhtar, U. (2025). Glamorizing crime: The influence of crime-based content regarding aggressive attitudes of young adults in Pakistan. *Qlantic Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 6(3), 14-33. <https://doi.org/10.55737/qjssh.vi-iii.25381>
- Bui, L., & Deakin, J. (2021). What we talk about when we talk about vulnerability and youth crime: A narrative review. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 58, 101605. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2021.101605>
- Geier, V., & Mooney, R. (2024). A mixed-methods investigation of attraction towards violent offenders and perceptions of true crime media portrayals. <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/7gbkf>
- Hughes, B., Edwards, M., Hardesty, C., Keeler, R., & Holmberg, H. (2023). Smooth Criminals: An Introduction to the Prevalence and Power of True Crime and Crime Fiction in Society. *Digital Literature Review*, 10(1), 6-12. <https://doi.org/10.33043/DLR.10.1.6-12>

- Moher, D., Liberati, A., Tetzlaff, J., Altman, D. G., & Prisma Group. (2010). Preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses: the PRISMA statement. *International journal of surgery*, 8(5), 336-341. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijsu.2010.02.007>
- Page, M. J., McKenzie, J. E., Bossuyt, P. M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T. C., Mulrow, C. D., ... & Moher, D. (2021). *The PRISMA 2020 statement: an updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews*. *bmj*, 372. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n71>.
- Perchtold-Stefan, C., Rominger, C., Ceh, S., Sattler, K., Veit, S. V., & Fink, A. (2025). Out of the dark – Psychological perspectives on people’s fascination with true crime. *British Journal of Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.70038>
- Shah, B., & Kaushik, P. (2025). Copycat crimes: Exploring the intersection of violent media, technology, and digital culture on criminal behavior. *Discover Global Society*, 3(1). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44282-025-00226-0>
- Udam, M. U., & Mohammed, L. A. (2023). Impact of social media on science teacher’s effectiveness in secondary schools in Cross River State. *International Journal of Emerging Issues in Social Science, Arts and Humanities*, 2(1), 89–100. <https://doi.org/10.60072/ijeissah.2023.v2i01.010>
- White, M. (2025). Anxious, Stressed, and True Crime Obsessed: Reddit Users’ Beliefs About Women’s True Crime Consumption. *Journal of Integrated Studies*, 16(1). <https://jis.athabascau.ca/index.php/jis/article/view/434>