

**Dehumanizing Murder Trauma in True Crime Podcasts: Investigating Representations of
Black Women**

By

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DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to the women whose voices were silenced and whose stories were told without their consent. In recounting their murders and disappearances, I have been deeply moved and motivated to contribute to reshaping the narrative surrounding women, especially women of color, in true crime storytelling. To the podcast hosts who have used their platforms to advocate against abuse and domestic violence, I commend your efforts. Thank you for bringing these stories to light and for standing up for justice when it mattered most.

Through this research, I aim to honor the victims by examining how their stories are framed, with the hope of nurturing a deeper understanding of the importance of representation. It is my aspiration that this work will contribute to the broader conversation on protecting the dignity of victims, ensuring that their stories are told with care, and advocating for equal crime coverage free from harmful stereotypes. These women deserve more than sensationalism; they deserve respect, justice, and recognition of their humanity.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the portrayal of Black women in true crime podcasts, with a specific focus on how these media narratives often perpetuate harmful stereotypes and contribute to the dehumanization of marginalized victims. Using framing theory as a foundation, the research investigates five popular true crime podcasts, analyzing the language, narrative techniques, and framing devices used to depict cases involving Black women. Through qualitative textual analysis, this study identifies recurring themes of victim-blaming, sensationalism, and the reinforcement of negative racial tropes. By focusing on the intersection of race and gender, the research highlights the ways in which true crime media underrepresents or misrepresents Black women, often framing them through lenses that diminish their humanity and complexity.

Additionally, the study examines the use of sound and narrative style in shaping audience perceptions, emphasizing how auditory cues contribute to the dramatization of violence. The findings reveal a troubling pattern of media bias, demonstrating the need for more ethical and equitable portrayals of marginalized victims. This thesis contributes to broader discussions about media representation, racial and gender biases, and the role of podcasting in shaping public perceptions of crime and justice.

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Dehumanizing Murder Trauma in True Crime Podcasts: Investigating Representations of Black Women

True crime podcasts, once a niche interest, have quickly evolved into a cultural phenomenon, captivating millions of listeners around the globe. Their rise in popularity reflects a significant shift in how we consume media, with audio storytelling becoming an accessible and engaging format for exploring complex narratives. True crime podcasts are worthy of analysis due to their growing popularity and ability to center diverse voices and stories (Vrikki & Malik, 2019). As audiences continue to flock to true crime content, they are drawn to the unique blend of narrative intrigue and real-life drama. In many ways, true crime stories share similarities with other narrative forms; they begin by inviting the audience into an intriguing situation and guiding them toward a path of discovery and resolution. However, true crime podcasts offer distinctive features that set them apart.

First and foremost, they present storytelling through an audio format. This auditory medium invites listeners to engage their imaginations, allowing them to visualize events as they unfold (Boling, 2023). As a result, the experience of consuming true crime podcasts is not merely passive; it requires active participation from the audience, which creates a deeper connection to the narrative and its complexities.

To understand the significance of true crime podcasts, it is essential to define what constitutes “true crime.” True crime is a genre of media that investigates and narrates factual accounts of criminal events, focusing on the circumstances, people involved, and the societal impact of these crimes. True crime narratives reflect societal fears and fascinations while also helping audiences confront and process the complexities surrounding the crime (Rafter, 2006). This genre often emphasizes the moral and psychological aspects of crime, inviting audiences to

engage with questions about justice, morality, and the human condition. As such, true crime can be seen as a lens through which we examine societal values and norms, making it particularly relevant in discussions about crime and justice in contemporary society.

According to research (Vicary & Fraley, 2010), women are more attracted to this genre than men, motivated by a desire to learn about worst-case scenarios and avoid becoming victims. This trend speaks to a broader societal concern about safety, and the very real fears of crime are very prevalent. These shows offer everything from deep dives into serial killer cases to the mystery of unsolved crimes, all delivered with a combination of suspense, detailed storytelling, and a format designed to pull audiences into the role of the investigator. The allure is clear: the stories are gripping, filled with cliffhangers and intricate details that feed a fascination with the darker sides of human behavior. Yet, as these podcasts continue to dominate popular media, critical questions have emerged about the ethical dimensions of the genre.

As true crime podcasts have gained immense popularity, their commercialization has also come into play. With millions of listeners tuning in, many shows have become profit-driven enterprises, relying on advertisement revenue and listener subscriptions. The most financially successful podcasts have a steady flow of advertising revenue, are promoted across platforms, and integrate outside media deals, such as book deals and live performances (Umbro, 2020). For instance, the Netflix Original *Tiger King*, released in 2020, showcased the ethically questionable world of big-cat breeding and reached a staggering 34 million unique viewers in just the first 10 days, rivaling the third season of *Stranger Things* (Chan, 2020). This financial incentive has also led to an increase in sensationalism, with podcasters often choosing stories that are more likely to capture attention and generate emotional reactions. In doing so, some podcasts may prioritize

dramatic storytelling over ethical considerations, particularly when it comes to how victims, especially those from marginalized communities, are portrayed.

Are true crime podcasts simply vehicles for entertainment, or are they also subtly influencing our perceptions of crime, justice, and, perhaps most critically, the victims involved? The portrayal of crime in media is significant, as the general public often learns about crime, victims, and perpetrators through these representations (Davies et al., 2008). As these stories unfold, who becomes the central focus? Whose suffering is deemed worthy of attention, and whose pain is either diminished or exploited for narrative impact? These ethical concerns have become more pressing as the genre grows, demanding a deeper examination of how these podcasts shape not only the stories they tell but also the listeners' broader understanding of crime and its impact on individuals and society.

Much like traditional media, the stories chosen for these podcasts reflect deeply ingrained cultural values about whose pain matters. The disparity in media representation is blatant when comparing coverage of White women to that of Black women. While cases of missing or murdered White women frequently dominate the headlines, Black women's stories often remain on the periphery, underreported and framed in ways that fail to capture the complexity of their experiences. This is especially alarming given the high rates of violence Black women face, from intimate partner violence to homicide (Catalano et al., 2009; Nowotny & Graves, 2013). Despite this reality, media continues to center narratives on the *ideal victim*, a concept developed by Christie (1986) that highlights society's preference for victims who appear innocent and are typically White, middle-class women.

Christie (1986) emphasizes that society empathizes most with those who are perceived as *ideal victims*, individuals who are weak, blameless, and engaged in respectable, familiar

activities. This archetype, often represented as a White, middle-class woman, is seen as the worthiest of public empathy and attention. This concept has profound implications in media portrayal, where victims perceived to embody these qualities attract more coverage and sympathy. Expanding on this idea, van Wijk (2013) highlights the profound implications of the *ideal victim* concept in media portrayal, where individuals fitting these qualities receive greater coverage and sympathy. At the same time, those who do not fit the mold, such as Black women, often struggle to receive the same level of visibility or compassion. Black women are frequently framed in ways that cast doubt on their innocence or worthiness, subtly reinforcing racial stereotypes that undermine their victimhood. This discrepancy reflects broader societal biases that not only determine which stories get told but also shape public perceptions of who deserves justice and empathy. As a result, the prevailing media narratives fail to address the complexities of Black women's experiences, reducing their stories to the margins and denying them full recognition as victims.

In contrast, those who do not fit this mold, such as Black women, are often dehumanized through harmful stereotypes that portray them as less innocent or more complicit in their victimization. These reductive portrayals strip Black women of the empathy and concern that is readily afforded to White victims, thereby diminishing their humanity. Moreover, this exclusion from the *ideal victim* status contributes to the perpetuation of racial and gender inequalities. By framing Black women through a lens that prioritizes racialized and gendered stereotypes over their victimhood, media narratives not only ignore the complexities of their lives but also uphold systemic biases that influence how victims are perceived and treated in broader societal contexts.

The power of storytelling in shaping societal perceptions is at the heart of this issue. In narrative theory (Propp, 1968), seven archetypal roles are identified across various forms of

storytelling, including true crime podcasts: the villain, the donor, the helper, the princess, the dispatcher, the hero, and the false hero. These archetypal roles frame the way audiences view crime and justice, casting White women as "helpless victims" in need of rescue. In contrast, Black women are often portrayed in more complex or unsympathetic roles, reinforcing damaging stereotypes.

In true crime podcasts, these narrative structures are particularly influential in shaping public perception. The roles of "victim" and "villain" are critical, as they determine who is worthy of empathy and who is condemned. This distinction goes beyond storytelling; it reflects and reinforces cultural norms about race, gender, and morality. White women are frequently portrayed as pure and fit into Propp's ideal archetype of the ideal victim, who elicits maximum sympathy and is seen as blameless. This characterization aligns with societal expectations of femininity, where white womanhood is historically tied to purity, virtue, and vulnerability. In contrast, it remains to be seen whether women and girls of color will be symbolically annihilated within true crime podcasts, similar to how they are in other media forms (Coleman & Yochim, 2008). This concern reinforces the need for critical examination of how these narratives shape audience perceptions of race and victimhood.

This bias in representation also taps into larger cultural constructs of race and victimhood. For decades, media scholars have pointed out the disproportionate focus on Black individuals as perpetrators of crime rather than victims. Local news coverage often overrepresents Black men and women in mugshots, reinforcing stereotypes of criminality (Dixon & Linz, 2000a; Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000). At the same time, Black women victims are portrayed through the lens of racialized and gendered stereotypes, sometimes hypersexualized, sometimes

portrayed as complicit in their own victimization, but rarely as innocent victims worthy of empathy.

Framing theory, introduced by Goffman (1974), also plays a critical role in how media influences public perceptions. This theory examines how media selects and emphasizes certain aspects of a story to shape audience understanding, and in the context of crime reporting, it determines how victims are portrayed (Entman, 1993). The framing of crime stories in true crime podcasts impacts not only how audiences perceive individual cases but also how they understand crime, justice, and victimhood on a larger cultural level.

Through a textual analysis of true crime shows, this research investigates how true crime podcasts frame Black women victims, highlighting how media bias influences narrative choices, victim portrayal, and audience perceptions. The objective of this study is to contribute to the larger conversation about racial and gender bias in crime reporting by examining how these podcasts either reinforce or challenge negative stereotypes. By analyzing language, narrative structure, and key themes, this study will shed light on how race and gender intersect within the podcasting space, offering insights into how media perpetuates or disrupts societal biases.

The impact of this research extends beyond true crime podcasts, contributing to wider discussions about media representation of marginalized groups. By examining how Black women are framed in these narratives, this analysis sheds light on the persistent racial and gender biases that shape media portrayals and contribute to societal inequalities. The way true crime podcasts frame their stories not only influences public perceptions of crime but also has profound consequences for how society understands and empathizes with victims. As these podcasts continue to captivate listeners, it becomes increasingly important to critically assess not

only whose stories are being told but also how they are framed. These narratives hold the power to either reinforce existing stereotypes or challenge them, making scrutiny vital.

As listeners continue to engage with these stories, the implications for social justice, empathy, and understanding of victimhood are profound. This exploration of true crime podcasts offers a window into how race and gender intersect within the realm of crime reporting. By focusing on how Black women are portrayed or erased in these narratives, we can begin to understand the more extensive implications of selective storytelling. As listeners tune in, the stories they hear may reinforce their existing beliefs or challenge them, making the way these stories are framed a matter of critical importance.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework: Framing and Narrative Theory

This study employs both framing theory and narrative theory to investigate how true crime podcasts construct their narratives and shape listeners' understanding of social issues. Framing theory, rooted in media studies, offers a lens to examine how information is selected, organized, and presented to audiences. According to Goffman (1974) in *Frame Analysis*, framing theory suggests that individuals rely on interpretive frameworks, or "frames," to make sense of social events. These frames help organize complex information, allowing audiences to quickly comprehend issues through culturally familiar lenses. Over time, scholars such as Gamson and Modigliani (1989) expanded the concept to media studies, demonstrating how media frames shape societal discourse by emphasizing certain aspects of an issue while obscuring others.

Tewksbury and Scheufele (2009) further contribute to framing theory by highlighting the unique framing capabilities of digital media formats. Unlike traditional media, audio-based storytelling, as in podcasts, uses tone, pacing, and sound to create emotional resonance and direct listener attention to specific details. This extension of framing theory shows that true crime podcasts, through narrative techniques and sound effects, not only guide how listeners perceive events but also reinforce or challenge existing stereotypes about victims, particularly those from marginalized communities. This focus on the role of sound and emotional cues deepens the understanding of framing by adding an auditory dimension, which is especially potent in shaping perceptions within the true crime genre.

The analysis of these podcasts is primarily based on framing theory (Entman, 1993), which is designed to explore how media texts construct meaning through specific interpretive structures relating to their content. Framing theory is particularly useful for understanding how stories influence public perception, especially in the context of crime reporting. According to Entman, frames serve four key functions: they define problems by identifying what a causal agent is doing, assess the consequences based on societal and cultural values, diagnose causes by pinpointing the forces behind an issue, and make moral judgments by evaluating the agents and their effects. Additionally, frames suggest solutions and predict the outcomes of potential remedies.

In media texts, including podcasts, a single sentence can perform multiple framing functions, though not every sentence may engage in framing, and not all texts include every function. By analyzing how certain aspects of a story are emphasized while others are downplayed or omitted, framing theory offers insight into the power dynamics within media portrayals, particularly concerning marginalized groups like Black women. In crime reporting,

the framing of Black women's stories often reflects and reinforces existing power structures, perpetuating racial biases, victim-blaming, or dehumanization. This study critically examined how these framing functions were employed in true crime podcasts to shape narratives about Black women victims, uncovering the subtle ways in which harmful stereotypes and racial biases were reinforced.

Goffman's (1974) work on social interactions further deepened the analysis by exploring how podcast hosts maintain narrative frames that guide listener's interpretations. This is especially important in the true crime genre, where hosts often use framing to evoke emotional responses or influence listeners' moral judgments about the victims or the crimes. Through this lens, the study explored how hosts framed the stories of Black female victims, frequently perpetuating stereotypes or reinforcing narratives of victim-blaming.

A critical element of Entman's work is his emphasis on omission. What is left out of a narrative can be just as impactful as what is included. In true crime podcasts, decisions about which details are highlighted or minimized directly influence how listeners emotionally and morally respond to the victims. For instance, when marginalized victims like Black women are given less attention or their stories are framed through harmful stereotypes, these omissions contribute to a wider misunderstanding of their significance.

These framing choices often reflect the values, interests, and biases of the media producers and podcast hosts. By controlling how information is presented and contextualized, podcast producers wield significant influence over audience perceptions, especially in high-profile cases where public opinion can affect legal outcomes. True crime podcasts are a newer entry into the crime-based media category and soared into popularity after the smash hit *Serial* was released in 2014. Known as the "Serial effect," the number of true crime podcasts available

has continued to increase (Sherill, 2022). The ethical responsibility of these creators becomes particularly apparent when the media blurs the lines between journalism and entertainment, as seen in cases like the *Serial* podcast's investigation of Adnan Syed's potential wrongful conviction.

Complementing framing theory is narrative theory, which explores how stories are structured and presented. While framing theory focuses on the organization of information, narrative theory analyzes the storytelling techniques used to present that information engagingly. True crime podcasts rely heavily on narrative techniques—such as suspense, empathy, and emotional appeal—to guide listeners through complex cases, often blending fact with interpretation.

Tewksbury and Scheufele (2009) argue that framing goes beyond the presentation of facts, suggesting that subtle narrative cues such as tone, pacing, and music can shape how listeners perceive events. These cues, although often unnoticed, have a profound influence on how stories are understood. In the first season of *Serial*, for example, Sarah Koenig uses reflective pauses and rhetorical questions to build moral tension around Adnan Syed's guilt, subtly framing him as potentially wrongfully convicted. This narrative choice shaped public discourse, with many listeners advocating for his release, demonstrating the power of narrative framing in influencing public opinion.

Similarly, the *My Favorite Murder* podcast, hosted by Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark, uses humor to engage listeners, blending light-hearted banter with discussions of disturbing crimes. This unconventional approach challenges traditional crime storytelling, which typically frames victims and perpetrators in more serious tones. While humor makes these stories accessible, it can also trivialize sensitive topics like murder and assault. This tension between

humor and tragedy reshapes audience perceptions and illustrates the power of narrative framing in altering how listeners interpret crime stories.

Podcast hosts, therefore, play a key role in these narrative power dynamics. Through tone, pacing, and selective focus, hosts wield significant influence over how stories are framed and perceived. Their choices about which cases to cover, which details to highlight, and which voices to include or exclude reflect broader societal power structures related to race and gender. Even when presented under the guise of neutrality, these framing choices shape how listeners engage with the material, subtly guiding interpretation.

Incorporating feminist media studies into this analysis provides a critical lens for examining these power dynamics. In feminist media theory, particularly in the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), race, gender, and other social categories intersect to create oppressive systems. In media representations, these intersecting identities often determine how individuals are framed. Black women, for instance, are frequently portrayed through racialized and gendered lenses, rendering them less deserving of empathy or justice compared to their white counterparts. Scholars like Roberts (1997) have shown that this type of framing contributes to the broader dehumanization and marginalization of Black women.

While podcast hosts shape these narratives, audience reception plays an equally critical role in determining their impact. According to Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, audiences actively interpret media content, accepting, negotiating, or resisting the meanings presented. In the context of true crime podcasts, this means that listeners may align with the podcast's narrative, critique it, or reject it altogether, depending on how they engage with the framing and narrative choices.

Through both framing and narrative theory, this study offers a comprehensive analysis of how true crime podcasts influence societal perceptions of crime and justice. These podcasts are not merely entertainment; they are powerful tools that shape how we understand and engage with broader social issues, particularly concerning race and gender. The narratives presented in these shows often reflect and reinforce societal biases, perpetuating stereotypes that affect public discourse and perceptions of marginalized communities. By dissecting the framing techniques employed in these podcasts, we can better appreciate their role in either challenging or upholding existing power dynamics. Furthermore, the impact of these narratives extends beyond individual listeners, influencing societal attitudes and institutional responses to crime and victimization. As such, it is crucial to recognize the responsibility of content creators in shaping narratives that can either contribute to a more informed, empathetic society or reinforce harmful prejudices.

Racial Biases and Media Framing in Crime Reporting

Crime narratives have long been a central feature of American journalism, heavily influencing public perceptions of crime and criminality. Local news outlets have played a major role in shaping community awareness through extensive crime coverage. However, the way some of these stories are framed raises serious concerns about racial bias and its impact on how the public views race in relation to crime. Research consistently demonstrates that minorities, especially African Americans, are disproportionately depicted as violent criminals, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and deepening existing racial prejudices.

The biased portrayal of Black individuals in crime reporting is deeply rooted in American history, with enduring stereotypes that continue to influence modern media narratives. Following the era of slavery, media outlets often depicted Black people, especially men, as inherently dangerous and criminal. These portrayals were part of a broader effort to maintain white

supremacy by associating Blackness with deviance and lawlessness. Such depictions instilled widespread fear of Black communities and perpetuated the myth of Black criminality. The historical narratives established during this period laid the foundation for the racial biases that persist in contemporary crime reporting.

Recent studies highlight the ongoing impact of these stereotypes. A study in the *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* found substantial racial bias in arrest records, indicating that Black individuals are disproportionately represented in criminal records compared to their actual involvement in criminal activities. This disparity suggests that systemic biases continue to influence how Black individuals are perceived and recorded within the criminal justice system (Grunwald, 2022). Additionally, a 2023 report by The Sentencing Project revealed that Black Americans are significantly more likely to be victims of homicide compared to white Americans, yet media coverage often underrepresents these cases. This underreporting contributes to a skewed public perception that associates Black individuals more with criminality than victimhood, reinforcing harmful stereotypes (Ghandnoosh & Barry, 2023). These findings underscore the need for critical examination of media practices and the implementation of more equitable reporting standards to address and rectify the longstanding biases in crime reporting.

Iyengar's (1991) study demonstrated that crime coverage in African American neighborhoods makes up a substantial portion of television news coverage, overrepresenting Black communities in crime narratives. This focus not only exaggerates the connection between Black communities and criminal behavior but also distorts the true demographics of crime in America. Despite statistical data showing that White individuals commit most crimes, the prevailing public perception often skews toward associating crime with Black individuals (Gilens, 1996). News coverage disproportionately emphasizes crimes involving Black suspects

while underreporting those committed by White individuals, reinforcing a distorted view of crime demographics and furthering stereotypes of Black violence.

Building on this, Entman's (1990) analysis of visual framing in news coverage reveals a stark racial bias in the portrayal of suspects. Black suspects are more often shown in dehumanizing contexts, such as mugshots or being escorted by White police officers, while White suspects are often presented in less compromising or criminalizing ways. Entman's concept of "framing" illuminates how media shapes public perception through selective emphasis, associating Black individuals with criminality in ways that visually reinforce racial hierarchies. Chiricos and Eschholz (2002) support Entman's findings through their analysis of local television news, revealing that Black and White individuals appear as criminals at nearly identical rates, yet Black suspects are more frequently depicted in threatening or criminalized contexts. Black individuals are also more than twice as likely to be portrayed as suspects rather than positive figures like police officers or community leaders.

This pattern of racialized framing creates a criminal typification of Blackness, linking Black individuals with criminal behavior far beyond mere appearance frequency. Entman's framework suggests that these visual and narrative techniques are not isolated incidents but are embedded within a media system that shapes audience perceptions through repetitive, biased portrayals. Together, Iyengar's, Gilens', and Entman's findings reveal how media framing operates to reinforce stereotypes, portraying Black individuals as inherently dangerous and thus sustaining a social narrative that perpetuates racial biases within the justice system and broader society.

These patterns of biased framing are not confined to local news outlets. True crime media, such as television shows, podcasts, and documentaries, often reinforce these skewed

portrayals of minorities. By disproportionately focusing on Black suspects and victims, these media perpetuate a broader narrative that criminalizes Blackness. The combined effect of these biased depictions shapes public opinion, informs policy decisions, and contributes to systemic discrimination against minorities within the criminal justice system. Furthermore, these representations reinforce harmful stereotypes, embedding racial bias in viewers' subconscious and normalizing the association of criminality with Blackness. As these narratives are consumed by mass audiences, they also perpetuate a cycle of racial prejudice, influencing how everyday people, law enforcement officers, and jurors perceive Black individuals involved in the justice system. This bias extends beyond just personal perception, seeping into institutional practices and maintaining racial inequities in areas like policing, sentencing, and media coverage.

The Intersection of Race and Gender in Media Portrayals of Black Women

In addition to the racial bias present in crime reporting, it's essential to examine how Black women are portrayed across various media forms. Media depictions of Black women, whether in news, film, or television, have long been shaped by stereotypes that persist today. These portrayals not only influence public perceptions but also impact how Black women are framed in true crime narratives. Understanding these representations is crucial to unpacking how racial and gendered biases intersect in the media and how they shape the larger cultural narrative surrounding Black women.

Black women have long been subjected to harmful stereotypes that date back to the period of American slavery, where they were cast into specific images such as the "mammy," "sapphire," and "jezebel" (West, 1995). These historical stereotypes did not disappear with the end of slavery or the civil rights movement. Instead, they have evolved and persisted, subtly

infiltrating modern media portrayals of Black women across genres, from news to entertainment. Black women are often framed through a lens of hypersexuality, aggression, or servitude.

The "Mammy" stereotype represents a maternal, subservient figure whose role is to nurture and care for others, often at the expense of her well-being. She is depicted as a woman with a soothing voice and infinite patience, whose self-deprecating humor and acceptance of an inferior social status make her seem content in her subjugation (Wallace-Sanders, 2009). This stereotype was designed to portray Black women as non-threatening, loyal caretakers of white families during slavery and the Jim Crow era, further entrenching racial hierarchies. The Mammy figure not only dehumanizes Black women by confining them to roles of service but also perpetuates the expectation that they should care for others, even when it means suppressing their own needs and desires.

In modern-day media, the "Mammy" figure continues to surface in more subtle yet equally damaging forms. Black women are often cast in roles of caregivers, such as nannies, maids, or nurses, in television shows and films, reinforcing the idea that their primary value lies in serving others. A character like "Madea" from Tyler Perry's films, or even the beloved housekeeper in *The Help*, shows Black women as ever-loyal, nurturing figures who exist to comfort and care for others.

Fontaine's (2011) study further illustrates how Madea's character, despite her modern setting and familial loyalty, still embodies the traits of the Mammy stereotype. Fontaine's research highlights that Madea possesses classic Mammy traits, including being a nurturer, caregiver, and protector. In all four films examined, Madea is depicted as an elderly, brown-skinned, large-statured woman, a physical representation of the traditional Mammy. In *Madea Goes to Jail*, for instance, the opening credits feature a photo montage that portrays Madea as

perpetually old, reinforcing the enduring image of the Mammy figure. Historically, the Mammy was characterized by her extreme loyalty and devotion to the white family she cared for, often to the detriment of her own family.

This portrayal persists in advertising as well, where Black women are frequently used in campaigns for domestic products, such as cleaning supplies or baby care, subtly reinforcing the notion that caregiving is their natural role. These representations not only perpetuate stereotypes but also limit the visibility of Black women in diverse and empowered positions. By consistently associating Black women with domesticity, advertisers contribute to a cultural narrative that diminishes their multifaceted identities, framing them primarily as caretakers and homemakers rather than as individuals with agency and aspirations.

In contrast to the nurturing Mammy, the "Sapphire" stereotype portrays Black women as rude, sassy, overly assertive, and aggressive, both verbally and physically (Jerald et al., 2017). Often depicted as angry, volatile, and emasculating, the Sapphire character diminishes Black women's strength by framing it as hostility. This trope is exemplified by characters like Aunt Esther from *Sanford and Son*, whose assertiveness is played for comedic effect, reducing a complex Black woman to a caricature of rage and belligerence.

In modern portrayals, this stereotype persists, often positioning Black women as the "angry Black woman," whose emotions are deemed irrational or excessive. Shows like *Scandal* and *How to Get Away with Murder* feature strong, intelligent, and ambitious Black female leads like Olivia Pope and Annalise Keating. While these characters represent groundbreaking depictions of professional Black women, they are often framed as threats rather than empowered figures. Reynolds-Dobbs et al. (2008) explored how the "Superwoman" trope also emerged to depict professional Black women who are independent, assertive, and intelligent. Despite their

accomplishments, these characters still battle a media landscape that treats their ambition and strength as problematic rather than empowering.

Reality television perpetuates these stereotypes. Shows like *Basketball Wives*, *Love and Hip Hop*, and *The Real Housewives* frequently portray Black women as loud, combative, and aggressive, further reinforcing the Sapphire image (Ward, 2015). These women are often hypersexualized, and their conflicts are sensationalized for entertainment value. Producers exploit these portrayals, trivializing Black women's emotions and reinforcing negative perceptions of them as inherently angry or difficult to work with. This creates a harmful cycle where the public internalizes these depictions, further entrenching harmful stereotypes.

Beyond the realm of television, the "angry Black woman" stereotype has also infiltrated professional and personal environments. Black women who assert themselves in the workplace are often labeled as overly aggressive or emotional. This ongoing portrayal diminishes the complexity of Black women's experiences, leading to real-world consequences, including marginalization in the workplace, strained relationships, and wider societal exclusion. By framing Black women's assertiveness as hostility, the media continues to perpetuate a distorted view of Black femininity, reducing Black women to one-dimensional figures and making it more difficult for them to be seen as multifaceted individuals with a full range of emotions and experiences.

The "Jezebel" stereotype presents yet another damaging archetype, positioning Black women as hypersexual, seductive, and promiscuous. Unlike the Mammy or Sapphire, the Jezebel figure is valued purely for her sexuality, portrayed as an alluring, immoral woman whose primary identity is tied to her physicality and sexual availability (Donovan, 2007; Jewell, 1993). Rooted in the exploitation of Black women's bodies during slavery, this stereotype persists today

in media and culture, where Black women are often hypersexualized and objectified. Among other harmful effects, the Jezebel trope fuels the sexual harassment and violence Black women experience and reinforces the idea that they are "asking for it."

In modern media, the Jezebel stereotype is perpetuated in various ways, particularly in music videos, reality television, and films. The representation of the Jezebel image portrays African American women as sexually available, affirming the message that they are willing to do anything for attention and affection. This image is often found in rap videos and dovetails with the image of the "video vixen" (Steffans, 2005). While shows like *BET Uncut* gave these portrayals new prominence, this stereotype has roots dating back to early 20th-century media portrayals. Music videos, especially in the hip-hop and rap genres, often depict Black women in sexually explicit ways, reducing them to objects of desire. These portrayals emphasize physicality and sexual availability, with little regard for the women's autonomy and individuality.

The modern-day manifestation of the Jezebel stereotype also appears in film and advertising. Black actresses are often cast in roles where their sexuality is emphasized over characteristics, reinforcing the idea that Black women's primary worth is tied to their sexual desirability. Additionally, advertising campaigns often use Black women's bodies to sell products in ways that objectify and exoticize them, with little acknowledgment of the damaging stereotypes these portrayals reinforce. Aside from its impact on the entertainment industry, this stereotype also has real-world consequences, contributing to the dehumanization and mistreatment of Black women in general. Recent research suggests that Black women are hypersexualized to a greater degree in the media than White women. Using 120 music videos as examples, Turner (2010) discovered that Black female characters (both central and background

characters) are significantly more likely than other types of characters to wear provocative clothing. This disproportionate hypersexualization reinforces the Jezebel stereotype, painting Black women as objects of sexual desire while diminishing their other qualities. This hypersexualization fuels the sexual violence and harassment they face as society continues to view Black women through a lens that strips them of their agency and humanity. The persistence of the Jezebel trope not only perpetuates the idea that Black women are sexual but also reinforces a double standard where Black women's sexuality is vilified while their counterparts are often celebrated for similar expressions of sexual freedom.

These enduring stereotypes—the nurturing Mammy, the aggressive Sapphire, and the hypersexual Jezebel—continue to shape how Black women are viewed in American society, reinforcing societal power structures that devalue and constrain their identities. In true crime media, such stereotypes can subtly influence narratives, framing Black women as either caretakers, combative figures, or hypersexualized objects within crime stories. Recognizing these reductive portrayals is essential for understanding the biases that persist in media and for dismantling harmful narratives that deny Black women their full humanity.

Black Women in True Crime Media

Media representations of crime and violence often emphasize White victims and perpetrators of color while systematically underrepresenting victims of color, particularly Black women. This skewed coverage reflects deep-seated racial and gender biases that shape how violence is reported and perceived. In the article “The Tie That Binds: Race, Gender, and U.S. Violence,” Collins (1998) argues that the erasure of Black women from these narratives is rooted in the way both racial and gender violence are framed. Racial violence narratives tend to focus on Black men, highlighting issues like racial profiling and police brutality, while gender violence

narratives predominantly center on White women, especially in cases of domestic or intimate partner violence.

Historically, Black women's victimization has often been ignored or criminalized in media, with Jim Crow-era reports portraying them as immoral figures deserving of violence, especially in cases of sexual assault where they were frequently blamed for their victimization while White women were depicted as innocent. This legacy of criminalizing Black women's experiences laid the groundwork for modern biased portrayals that frame Black women as aggressors or complicit in their suffering rather than as true victims. This skewed portrayal marginalizes Black women within discussions of both race and gender, where violence is often framed as a racial issue centered on Black men or as a gender issue focused on White women. This narrow lens perpetuates the false notion that White women are more often victims of violent crime, ignoring the complex, intersectional violence that Black women endure.

The marginalization of Black women in media coverage of violence has broader implications for how society understands and responds to violence. As Collins (1998) highlights, Black women are rendered invisible in both racial and gender justice movements, leaving their specific struggles unaddressed. This invisibility not only denies Black women recognition as victims of violence but also contributes to a far-reaching societal failure to empathize with or advocate for them. To address these inequities, it is essential to adopt an intersectional approach that recognizes how race and gender interact to compound the challenges faced by Black women as victims of violence.

One manifestation of this marginalization is the media phenomenon known as *Missing White Woman Syndrome*. This term refers to the media's disproportionate focus on cases involving young, White female victims, while the disappearances and victimization of women of

color, particularly Black women, are often ignored or underreported. Numerous studies have documented the existence of MWWS in news media. For instance, Sommers (2016) found that missing White women and girls received higher coverage intensity in the media than other missing people, while Slakoff and Fradella (2019) noted that missing White women and girls received more initial and repeat coverage than missing Black women and girls. Despite the high rates of violence that Black women face, their stories are frequently overshadowed by sensationalized coverage of White women, reinforcing the notion that White women are more deserving of public attention and empathy. A biased representation of Black women reflects societal prejudices and perpetuates harmful stereotypes, making them less visible in public discourse about victimhood and justice.

MWWS is characterized by intense, round-the-clock media coverage of young White female victims who are portrayed as damsels in distress based on their race, class, and perceived innocence (Stillman, 2007). The media's portrayal typically includes images of the victims, emotional search parties, and debates among internet sleuths about potential suspects, all of which dominate news cycles. Vigils and memorials for these victims are frequently featured in news broadcasts, reinforcing the idea that their lives are more valuable or tragic than those of women of color who face similar or even greater threats of violence.

Black women are often caught at the intersection of multiple forms of violence, which are not just physical but also institutional, where their stories are frequently overlooked or minimized. To expand on how Black women's victimization is complex, Jacobs (2017) points out that few mainstream media outlets focus on Black women who are missing or killed despite increased attention to police violence. A lack of media coverage of Black women's deaths, such as the 28 women highlighted in #SayHerName, reveals how Black women are often

marginalized. Jacobs further emphasizes that while the killings of Black men receive significant media attention, Black women's experiences with police brutality remain underreported, leaving families and activists to compile their stories themselves due to the lack of a public database on these incidents.

This pattern in media coverage is not just a reflection of individual biases but also an indication of structural inequalities in the way race and gender intersect within true crime reporting. By elevating stories of White women and minimizing or ignoring those of Black women, the media reinforces a racial hierarchy of victimhood that privileges whiteness and diminishes the significance of violence against women of color. To challenge this dynamic, it is crucial to critically examine how media representations shape public perceptions of crime and violence and to advocate for more inclusive, intersectional reporting that acknowledges the lived experiences of all victims, particularly those from marginalized communities. Addressing these biases requires not only a shift in how crime is reported but also a deeper societal reckoning with how racism and sexism intersect in media narratives. Without this critical examination, the voices and experiences of Black women will continue to be marginalized, perpetuating a cycle of invisibility and injustice.

Listener Perceptions and the Cultural Impact of True Crime Podcasts

In the 1990s, media frenzies around high-profile crimes, like Polly Klaas's 1993 kidnapping, reflected a growing public obsession with true crime stories. This fascination has only intensified in the decades since, driven by sensationalist storytelling and an insatiable appetite for narratives that evoke both fear and fascination. Klaas was a 12-year-old White girl who was abducted from her California home and later found murdered. As Annie Nichol, the sister of Polly Klaas, reflects on her personal experience, she notes that media and true crime

narratives exploit victims and distort justice, privileging white female victimhood while erasing the complexities of marginalized communities (Nichol, 2024). Nichol's story exemplifies how true crime can elevate sensational cases while overlooking broader systemic issues, such as the impact of laws like California's three-strikes rule, which disproportionately affects people of color.

In the realm of true crime media, journalists have continually adapted how they present stories to the public. Traditionally, newspapers and radio served as primary outlets for crime. However, television and film transformed the genre into visual storytelling, and in recent years, the rise of podcasts has revolutionized the true crime genre, providing a new platform for in-depth, serialized storytelling that captures the attention of global audiences. Boling and Hull (2018), Markam (2011), and Wrather (2016) explored these dynamics, highlighting how producers engage with their listeners, while Perks and Turner (2018) and Boling and Hull (2018) investigated the uses and gratifications of podcast media through qualitative and quantitative analyses, respectively. A significant contribution to this field is Spinelli and Dann's (2019) comprehensive analysis, *Podcasting: The Audio Media Revolution*, which emphasizes the unique characteristics of podcasts compared to traditional radio. They argue that podcasting is distinctive in its dissemination, production, audience engagement, and ability to cultivate niche global audiences.

This shift in media consumption was notably marked by the launch of *Serial* in 2014, a true crime podcast that quickly set the standard for the genre. According to Hesse (2016), there had been over 80 million downloads over a year after the final episode of the season aired. Its success signaled a turning point in how crime stories were consumed and paved the way for the rise of true crime podcasts. Although mainstream media portrays Black women as

hypersexualized (Jezebel), angry (Sapphire), or subservient (Mammy), true crime podcasts may challenge or reinforce some of these harmful stereotypes.

In analyzing the portrayal of Black women in true crime podcasts, this study aims to fill the gap in existing literature by examining how these platforms treat Black female victims. While traditional media and film-based true crime narratives have historically perpetuated negative stereotypes, true crime podcasts present a unique opportunity for a more thoughtful and intersectional approach to storytelling. This allows for an exploration of how these podcasts reinforce long-standing racial biases or offer a more inclusive narrative that acknowledges the complexities of Black women's experiences with crime, victimization, and justice.

By focusing on podcasts, this research seeks to uncover whether this evolving media format is offering a more empathetic and accurate portrayal of Black women's stories or if it continues to marginalize them by ignoring the intersection of race and gender in discussions of crime and violence. In this way, the analysis not only highlights gaps in previous media portrayals but also provides insight into how true crime podcasts might serve as a tool for cultural change, amplifying the voices and experiences of Black women that have long been ignored. Additionally, the narratives presented in these podcasts will be examined to evaluate whether they challenge existing stereotypes or reinforce harmful biases. This research ultimately contributes to a broader understanding of how media representation influences societal perceptions of race and gender and assesses the potential of true crime podcasts to advance a more inclusive dialogue around crime, victimhood, and justice.

Research Question

This study aims to examine true crime podcasts to explore how they specifically frame Black women, identifying the presence of stereotypes and investigating potential pathways for improvement. Informed by a review of the literature, the following research question is posed:

RQ: How are Black women framed in the narratives of true crime podcasts?

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative textual analysis, guided by framing theory, to investigate how Black women are portrayed in true crime podcasts. The use of qualitative textual analysis enabled an in-depth exploration of recurring themes, narrative techniques, and framing devices, making it particularly effective for examining the subtle intersections of race and gender in media portrayals. Through this approach, explicit and implicit messages conveyed through podcast scripts—such as word choice, tone, and narrative framing—were deciphered to reveal how these elements either reinforce or challenge racial and gender stereotypes.

Qualitative textual analysis is a critical methodology within cultural studies, allowing researchers to interpret text within their cultural, social, and historical contexts. According to Arya (2020), textual analysis focuses on understanding ideological and cultural assumptions present in a text, making it powerful for analyzing media narratives. This method goes beyond mere content analysis by emphasizing the complexity of meanings and interpretations that arise from the relationship between the text and its audience. As McKee (2003) suggests, textual analysis is not about uncovering a single “true” meaning but rather about offering a variety of possible readings of material. In my analysis of true crime podcasts, I employ this qualitative

method to explore how narratives shape public perceptions of victims and perpetrators, particularly regarding race and gender. Examining the language, themes, and narrative structures within the podcasts aims to reveal how these stories perpetuate societal biases and influence audience understanding of marginalized voices.

The methodology involved a strategic selection of both podcasts and specific episodes to ensure thematic consistency across the analysis. While the primary analysis focuses on the portrayal of Black women as victims, cases involving Black female perpetrators were selectively included to examine shared patterns in media framing and systemic biases. This section outlines the process of podcast and episode selection, along with the theoretical framework that shaped the analytical lens. Framing theory served as the foundation for understanding how media narratives shape public perception, especially concerning marginalized communities. By focusing on how language and storytelling choices influence audience perceptions, this research offers insights into how listeners may internalize and perpetuate racial, and gender biases embedded within crime stories.

Textual analysis was particularly suited to this research, as it allowed for a close examination of the content to identify patterns in the portrayal of Black women victims. This method helped highlight the nuanced ways in which true crime narratives impact societal views, offering a deeper understanding of how media shapes and perpetuates or disrupts racial and gender biases.

Podcast Selection Criteria

The podcasts included in this study were chosen based on their popularity, reach, and relevance to the portrayal of African American women in crime narratives. To ensure the

relevance and scope of this study, the podcasts were chosen from platforms such as Apple Podcasts and Spotify. The five podcasts analyzed—*Sistas Who Kill: A True Crime Podcast*, *The Missing Found Podcast*, *Crime Junkie*, *Black Girl Gone: A True Crime Podcast*, and *Dark Downeast*—were selected for analysis and represent a mix of independent productions and widely recognized shows, offering insight into how both mainstream and niche true crime podcasts frame African American women. This variety was intentional, as it provides insight into how these narratives are shaped within and outside of Black communities.

The podcasts were not only chosen for their popularity but also for their focus on Black women victims or engagement with African American communities. This dual criterion ensures that the study would offer diverse perspectives and storytelling in the way Black women's stories are told. For example, *Sistas Who Kill* and *Black Girl Gone* specifically center on cases involving Black women, providing narratives that contrast with more mainstream shows like *Crime Junkie*. This variety in content and focus allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of how Black women's stories are framed in different contexts.

In addition to their popularity, these podcasts were chosen for their appeal to diverse audiences and their use of distinct storytelling techniques. Each show brings a unique approach to discussing crimes, often incorporating personal reflections, listener engagement, and deep dives into the victims' lives. This diversity in narrative style allowed for a thorough analysis of how Black women are framed in different contexts. Ultimately, the focus on African American women victims was central to this study, ensuring that the intersection of race and gender remained at the core of the research.

Episode Selection and Consistency

To ensure consistency in the analysis, only episodes that featured stories of murders and disappearances were included. Across the five podcasts, 15 episodes were selected, all centered on cases involving African American women as victims. This selection was guided by specific criteria to capture the most relevant narratives. While other episodes met the initial thematic focus, they were excluded for various reasons, such as lacking a central focus on the murder disappearance of an African American woman or failing to employ narrative techniques critical to shaping audience perceptions. By focusing on murder and disappearance, this study emphasizes cases that tend to utilize narrative strategies such as sensationalism, victim-blaming, and dehumanization that are vital in framing how victims are perceived. This approach provides a rich source of data for analysis, allowing for a thorough examination of how these episodes influence listeners' understanding of race, gender, and victimization.

Episodes that did not align with this theme, such as those discussing non-violent crimes or cases unrelated to disappearances, were excluded. This decision was made to maintain a consistent framework for analyzing the representation of Black women across similar types of crime narratives. Focusing exclusively on murder and disappearance cases allowed the study to engage deeply with the common narrative techniques used in these types of episodes, ensuring the findings were relevant and comparable across all the podcasts.

Thematic Analysis and Data Interpretation

The analysis began with the creation of a detailed thematic framework, which provided the framework for identifying recurring themes and categories related to the portrayal of Black women in true crime podcasts. During the initial phase of open thematic exploration, broad

themes such as dehumanization, trauma, and framing techniques were identified. This phase allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the overall narrative structure, pinpointing key elements that shaped the portrayal of victims and influenced listener perceptions.

In the second round of focused thematic analysis, specific framing devices were isolated to deepen the analysis. These included the use of stereotypes that reinforce harmful racial and gender-based perceptions and objectification, where victims were reduced to crime statistics or sensationalized for entertainment purposes. The analysis also captured instances of portraying victims with a lack of agency, often depicted as passive or powerless, with little emphasis on their individuality or personal lives. Victim blaming emerged as a recurring theme, where the victim's actions or background were implicitly or explicitly linked to their victimization.

Additionally, the focused analysis revealed the frequent use of graphic details, with vivid descriptions of violence that risked desensitizing listeners or detracting from the victim's humanity. The emotional impact of the narrative was considered, examining how the tone and framing influenced listeners' empathy or detachment. Attention was also given to the language and tone used by podcast hosts, particularly in moments of moral judgment or reflection. Furthermore, narrative structure was examined to understand how stories were organized, paying attention to the sequence of events and the emphasis placed on specific aspects of the victim's life or death. The characterization of key figures—victims, perpetrators, and others—was analyzed to see how these portrayals reinforced or challenged stereotypes. Lastly, the analysis assessed how crimes were contextualized within broader socio-cultural or historical contexts, especially in terms of race and gender dynamics.

This two-step thematic analysis allowed for a systematic exploration of how Black female victims were framed across the different episodes of the selected true crime podcasts. By meticulously analyzing each episode, the thematic framework provided a robust foundation for identifying patterns in narrative techniques and thematic elements. This approach facilitated meaningful comparisons across various narrative styles and podcast formats, revealing how differing presentation methods affect audience perceptions. Additionally, this comprehensive analysis illuminated how these portrayals not only reflect societal attitudes toward Black women but also contribute to the larger social narratives that shape public understanding of crime, victimization, and justice. Ultimately, the insights gained from this thematic process highlight the critical need for media literacy and awareness regarding the implications of narrative framing in true crime storytelling.

Findings

Results

This section presents key themes identified in the analysis, highlighting recurring patterns in the portrayal of African American women across the selected podcast episodes. The analysis reveals a consistent tendency toward sensationalism, victim-blaming, and reinforcement of harmful stereotypes, all of which shape public perceptions of Black female victims. Framing techniques used by podcast hosts significantly influence audience perceptions, prioritizing sensational narratives over empathetic and accurate portrayals of victims.

The Role of Framing in Media Narratives

The framing techniques employed by podcast hosts consistently cast Black women victims within narratives that prioritize shock value and drama, often diminishing their agency

and reinforcing negative stereotypes. These techniques contribute to a media landscape where racial bias distorts the representation of Black women, as shown through cases like Lakeyria Doughty, Celina Mays, Tiffany Jackson Pugh, Ashinay Horton-Starks, Deanna Cook, Phyllis Malone, Denise Hart, and Sherita Williams. The narratives around these women reveal patterns of sensationalism that trivialize the victims' experiences and perpetuate harmful societal biases, shaping public understanding of violence against marginalized groups.

While this analysis primarily focuses on the portrayal of Black women as victims in true crime podcasts, some cases involve Black female perpetrators. The podcast *Sistas Who Kill*, which tells stories of Black women who have committed violent crimes, offers a unique perspective on how Black women are represented in the justice system as offenders rather than victims. Including cases like Lakeyria Doughty and Ashinay Horton-Starks highlights the dual perspective in these narratives, illustrating how Black women, regardless of their role in the crime, are often subjected to negative stereotypes and sensationalism. This approach enables a broader examination of how true crime media reinforces systemic biases and reduces complex social issues to entertainment, ultimately impacting public perception of Black women across all roles within the justice system.

Dehumanizing Language and Negative Stereotypes

Several cases illustrate how dehumanizing language, and vilifying descriptions perpetuate negative stereotypes of Black women, regardless of whether they are victims or perpetrators. In the case of Lakeyria Doughty, who is portrayed as the perpetrator, the podcast hosts on *Sistas Who Kill* depict her as volatile and aggressive, reinforcing the harmful stereotype of Black women as inherently difficult or unstable. The hosts exemplify this in their retelling of Doughty's story, describing her reaction to her father's death as follows:

I mean, still to this day. But Lakeyria, her dad passed away in 2009 from an aneurysm. Now from what I sleuth on her page and comments and things, it looks like her dad's nickname was Porky. And after her dad's death, she was hurt. She was confused. Those aneurysms, they come sudden, they come quick, and you don't really know what to do. For her, she loved her father. So this really was a blow to her system. And from there, she started acting buck wild, bro. You couldn't tell her nothing. She was a mad kid. 2009, what's that? She was born in 94 like we were. 2009, that's the end of ninth grade? Come on. (Sistas Who Kill: A True Crime Podcast, 2024, 19:30)

This framing reduces Doughty's grief and complexity to a sensationalized portrayal of her as "acting buck wild," reinforcing a broader narrative that casts Black women as inherently unstable or dangerous—even when they are portrayed as perpetrators. Such representations perpetuate racial and gender biases by focusing on dramatic elements over a nuanced understanding of broader social and systemic factors that may influence behavior.

Sensationalism and Victim-Blaming

In the case of Celina Mays, the focus on sensational details, such as her pregnancy at the age of 12, detracts from the structural factors surrounding her life and disappearance. The *Missing Found* podcast highlights her pregnancy in a way that reduces her complex situation to a scandal rather than addressing the social and economic conditions that contributed to her disappearance:

Today, we're analyzing the disappearance of Celina Mays. Celina went missing in Willingboro, New Jersey. A 12-year-old being pregnant is astronomical, but that element may very well tie into why Celina disappeared. Everyone has secrets, but what do you do when you're the one involved in a secret that you have no control over? What if your situation is the secret of someone else? We're gonna offer a fresh look at the case details and examine what has publicly been shared, trace Celina's last known steps of what has been told by those closest to her, then finally break down every detail, the secrets, and then close with my opinion. This case is a convoluted one and, in my opinion, riddled with falsities due to those protecting the case even decades later. We know things like this just don't happen. Someone had a hand in this. (The Missing Found: A True Crime Podcast, 2023, 13:05)

Moreover, framing techniques often play a critical role in shaping audience perceptions, particularly in true crime podcasts where the narrative structure can reinforce or challenge stereotypes. In the case of Tiffany Jackson Pugh, the *Black Girl Gone* podcast initially frames

her life as ideal, emphasizing her external success and personal accomplishments before introducing the underlying turmoil. The hosts describe Tiffany's life as follows:

From the outside looking in, Tiffany Jackson Pugh appeared to be living the dream. She was married with two children, a successful career, and a beautiful home in the suburbs. To the casual observer, Tiffany's life was the epitome of perfection, but beneath the surface, a sinister undercurrent of secrets, lies, and deceit had begun to unravel everything she held dear. By 2014, the facade of her ideal existence had begun to crumble, leading to a chilling climax that no one saw coming. And by year's end, Tiffany's seemingly perfect world would be shattered, culminating in a betrayal so profound it would end in her tragic and untimely death. (Black Girl Gone: A True Crime Podcast, 2024, 5:00)

The Impact of Sound and Style on Perception

In addition to language, sound plays a crucial role in framing narratives and guiding the emotional journey of listeners. Sound effects such as footsteps, slashing noises, and ominous music contribute to the creation of tension and suspense, intensifying the listener's emotional connection to the story. This auditory manipulation can heighten the sensational aspects of the case, sometimes overshadowing the complexities of the individuals involved. In Ashinay Horton-Starks', a Black woman who committed a violent crime, the use of gunshot sound effects in *Sistas Who Kill* amplifies the narrative's dramatic tension. These cues create a vivid and often exaggerated image of violence that may distort the listener's perception of the events, making them seem more cinematic than realistic. Such effects can desensitize the audience, focusing more on spectacle than on understanding the systematic issues that may have contributed to her actions.

Sound effects in these podcasts can often be subtle yet powerful framing tools. The use of walking sound effects, particularly in moments where a victim is described as being stalked or followed, creates an auditory sense of danger that reinforces the narrative of Black women as perpetual victims. By adding layers of audio that mimic real-life sounds, such as footsteps or

doors creaking—podcast creators replicate the tension of horror films, effectively transforming true crime stories into a form of entertainment that diminishes the gravity of the crimes being discussed.

Additionally, *Sistas Who Kill* occasionally reinforces stereotypes around Black identity in its portrayal of perpetrators. When introducing Horton-Starks, the podcast hosts comment on the excessive nature of her name:

Ashinay Nakabri Caprice Horton-Sparks was born to her mother, Schakerra Janine Starks, on April 29th, 1999 in Roseville, Michigan. Two hyphenations and a name feels excessive. The baby don't have to be named after everybody. Or do they? They do not. They do not have to be named after everybody.
(*Sistas Who Kill: A True Crime Podcast*, 2024, 3:10)

Though the comment is made in a lighthearted tone, it taps into a longstanding stereotype about the perceived “unusual” or “excessive” nature of Black names. These types of remarks, even when made by Black individuals, can contribute to the normalization of such stereotypes and reinforce societal biases around Black identity. The critique of names, particularly when it comes to hyphenation or non-Western names, can reduce an individual’s cultural and familial identity to a punchline, further dehumanizing them. This type of commentary also serves as a reminder that internalized stereotypes can appear in discussions within marginalized communities, often as a result of societal conditioning.

Portrayals of Institutional Failure

The Deanna Cook case highlights systemic failures but risks portraying the victim as passive. The hosts of *Crime Junkie* were particularly furious about the injustices in Deanna Cook’s case, expressing their disbelief and anger at how she was treated by authorities. They were vocal advocates for Cook, condemning the slow response and system failures, with one host exclaiming, “Why the f*** did they think they could just take their sweet time getting

there?” Deanna’s mother, Vicki, sued numerous individuals, alleging violations of the 14th Amendment’s due process and equal protection clauses. The podcast hosts echoed her frustrations, emphasizing how Cook’s race and location may have influenced the neglect she experienced. As her mother pointed out, “If Deanna was white or lived in a different neighborhood...” They highlighted how the police’s failure to act swiftly in her case was rooted in institutional biases, making Cook’s death feel even more tragic. Despite their advocacy, though, the podcast’s narrative still risks portraying Cook primarily as a victim of failures rather than recognizing her strength and attempts to escape violence.

Additionally, *Crime Junkie* took action to raise awareness about domestic violence, incorporating a Domestic Violence Awareness Disclaimer and featuring a nonprofit that provides survivors with free smartphones and data. This advocacy reflects the podcast’s commitment to supporting survivors. However, by focusing heavily on institutional failures, there’s a risk that victims like Cook are portrayed more as symbols of systemic neglect rather than as individuals with their own agency and complexity. While it’s crucial to highlight the failures of the police and justice system, this focus can unintentionally overlook the victim’s personal strength, resilience, and efforts to navigate dangerous situations.

Scrutinizing Victim’s Personal Lives

In the case of Phyliss Malone, from *Black Girl Gone: A True Crime Podcast*, the focus on her relationship with a married police officer shifts attention from the crime to her personal life. The detective’s account of their affair, which “only ever consisted of oral sex,” serves to highlight Phyliss’s romantic choices rather than centering on the violence that led to her death. This framing, which scrutinizes her relationships, subtly implies a level of responsibility or complicity in her own victimization. Such portrayals not only detract from the severity of the

crime but also perpetuate negative stereotypes about Black women being involved in morally questionable behavior. This pattern of focusing on the personal circumstances of Black female victims contributes to reinforcing harmful tropes and distracts from the systemic violence they face.

Hypersexualization of Black and Hispanic Victims

In the case of Sherita Williams, the *Black Girl Gone* podcast offers a troubling example of the hypersexualization of Black female victims. The narrative places heavy emphasis on the explicit details of Sherita's body and clothing, reducing her to an object of sexual violence. When describing the discovery of her body, the podcast recounts:

Shortly before 3 PM, Pensalk and police arrived at the 36th Street Bridge. When once police got closer, they confirmed that it was the body of a teen girl. She was lying face up, her shirt ripped open, and her pants unbuttoned. Her hands were tied behind her back. The girl fit Sherita's description, but when a purse with an ID was found nearby, police were able to confirm that Sherita had been found. Her underwear was ripped off, leaving marks around her waist, and the underwear was found discarded near her body. Once investigators arrived on the scene, it was clear to them that this murder was more likely than not sexually motivated. Around her neck, investigators found a durag, and inside her mouth, two plastic bags from Models that had been stuffed inside. Next to her body, they found a single penny and a receipt for a black shirt purchased at Models. (*Black Girl Gone: A True Crime Podcast*, 2024)

This account fixates on her disheveled state and the nature of the crime, reinforcing a narrative that frames her through the lens of sexual victimization. The detailed focus on her torn clothing and discarded underwear shifts the attention from the broader systemic issues to the sensational aspects of her death.

Similarly, Phyllis Malone's case, which was linked to a series of six other murders in the same area, illustrates a broader trend of hypersexualizing women of color in media coverage. In *Dark Downeast*, the story of Sandra Rivera highlights this pattern. The description of Rivera's body, with her shirt pushed up over her head and rosary beads around her neck, reduces her to an

object of sexual violence. The explicit focus on her partially undressed state, coupled with the suggestion that sexual assault was a likely motive, reflects a broader media tendency to objectify women's bodies, especially Black and Hispanic women. Such depictions reinforce the dangerous stereotype that women of color are inherently more vulnerable to or deserving of sexual violence, dehumanizing the victims and distracting them from the systemic failures that allow these crimes to occur.

Similarly, Sherita William's death is framed as "likely sexually motivated" and centers on the perpetrator's motivations, sidelining the systemic inequalities that made her and other women of color vulnerable targets. By focusing on these sensational aspects, podcasts, despite their intention to raise awareness, often risk perpetuating harmful stereotypes rather than challenging them. Sherita's story, like many others, is reduced to a form of entertainment for listeners rather than a platform for critical reflection on the disproportionate violence faced by Black and Hispanic women. The fixation on the graphic details of Sherita Williams' murder highlights how these narratives dehumanize the victims, shifting the focus away from justice and toward sensationalism, ultimately turning the tragedy into a spectacle.

Balancing Advocacy and Sensationalism

Lastly, in contrast to the overt sensationalism present in many true crime podcasts, some hosts attempt to balance potentially stigmatizing details with advocacy for justice. In the case of Denise Hart, for example, the host of *Dark Downeast* acknowledges Hart's alleged involvement in selling drugs but emphasizes that "the circumstances of a person's life do not preclude them or their families from the justice and answers they deserve." This approach attempts to humanize Hart and resist framing her solely through a criminal lens, offering a more balanced narrative. However, despite this intention, the mention of drug involvement still frames Hart in a way that

aligns with stereotypical portrayals of Black women as linked to criminal activity. While the host pushes back against this stereotype, the mere inclusion of these details' risks reinforcing the very biases the host aims to challenge. This tension highlights the difficulties podcast hosts face in navigating the fine line between providing relevant details and perpetuating harmful narratives.

Discussion

As the analysis of these true crime podcasts reveals, there is a clear need for sensitivity in how stories of Black women victims are told. These narratives often frame Black women through dehumanizing lenses that sensationalize, hypersexualize, or even blame them for their victimization, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and perpetuating societal biases. This trend not only impacts listener perceptions, but also reinforces a system that often overlooks or marginalizes Black women, both as victims and as human beings deserving of empathy and justice.

The findings highlight the powerful role media, including true crime podcasts, play in shaping public understanding of crime, race, and justice. By applying Entman's framing theory, coupled with the historical context of racial and gender-based stereotypes, it becomes clear that these issues go far beyond individual portrayals. Instead, they reveal a broader societal framework that privileges certain narratives—often those involving White, middle-class victims—while pushing others, particularly involving marginalized individuals, to the periphery. When Black women's stories are treated with less care or reduced to sensational elements, a powerful message is sent about whose lives are deemed worthy of empathy and public attention, and whose lives are not.

To address these issues, podcasters have a responsibility to critically examine the narratives they create. They must reflect on essential questions such as: Who is telling the story? Whose voices are being centered? How do these perspectives shape the narrative? By considering alternative viewpoints and resisting framing techniques that strip away victims' humanity, creators can cultivate narratives that are not only more ethical but also more inclusive. This approach broadens the understanding of victimhood and justice, encouraging a media landscape that values Black women's experiences as deeply as it values those of more frequently covered groups. It also calls for podcasters to acknowledge the powerful influence they hold and the ethical obligation they have to represent all individuals with respect and dignity.

True crime content at its best can serve as a tool for advocacy and social justice, a medium through which societal issues are explored, and important dialogues are sparked. However, for this potential to be fully realized, content creators must commit to ethical storytelling practices that place equal value on all lives and challenge the norms that have long marginalized victims of color. As these podcasts reach wide audiences, creators have an opportunity to not only entertain but also to educate, informing listeners about the biases that exist in crime reporting and justice systems. This commitment to equitable storytelling has the power to reshape public perceptions and encourage empathy, challenging systemic biases that have historically affected marginalized groups.

Commercial motivations significantly shape how true crime narratives are framed, often pushing content toward sensationalism to attract larger audiences and boost profitability. Given this influence, podcasters could benefit from adopting transparency policies that disclose sponsors and revenue sources, especially when profit incentives align with sensationalistic storytelling. Such transparency would enable listeners to critically engage with the content,

understanding not only the narrative itself but also the commercial motivations that may shape it. By fostering informed media consumption, content creators can contribute to a more ethical media landscape, allowing audiences to discern when financial interests might influence how victims and their stories are presented. This approach would encourage a shift away from sensationalism and toward responsible storytelling that respects the dignity of all victims, thereby promoting a more equitable portrayal within the genre.

Initially, this study began as an exploration of the ethical dimensions of true crime as entertainment, particularly the question of how such content affects victims' families who continue to experience grief and trauma. However, it quickly evolved into a broader inquiry into the systemic issues within podcasting itself, uncovering a troubling prevalence of stereotypes in the five true crime podcasts analyzed—*Sistas Who Kill*, *The Missing Found*, *Crime Junkie*, *Black Girl Gone*, and *Dark Downeast*. The frequent use of sensationalistic techniques in these podcasts often reinforces negative perceptions of Black women, framing them as volatile, angry, or otherwise unworthy of empathy. By portraying Black women primarily through these reductive stereotypes, these narratives fail to honor the complexity of these women's lives and, instead, risk reinforcing harmful biases.

As true crime podcasts continue to gain popularity, both audiences and creators must advocate for more inclusive representations that prioritize the stories and experiences of marginalized communities. The stark contrast in media attention given to cases involving missing White women—such as Polly Klaas and Amber Hagerman—compared to their Black counterparts highlights a troubling trend in media prioritization. This disparity extends beyond individual cases and reflects a broader societal issue where victims from minority communities

receive significantly less attention. Studies show that young White women are far more likely to capture media interest than individuals from marginalized groups, contributing to public ignorance of the violence disproportionately faced by Black women. In turn, this imbalance in representation perpetuates the view that these victims' lives hold less significance in the public eye.

Given these findings, it is essential to investigate the ethical considerations surrounding true crime storytelling further. Engaging in moral sensitivity is vital when both producing and consuming these narratives to ensure that the experiences of victims are portrayed with respect and gravity. *Serial's* first season offers a case study in the influence true crime podcasts can command, captivating audiences while demonstrating the responsibility creators have to handle their subjects with ethical mindfulness. As creators acknowledge this responsibility, they may feel called to adopt approaches that humanize victims and represent their stories in ways that encourage empathy rather than simply seeking to entertain.

Examining how these podcasts influence societal perceptions also emphasizes the broader implications of narrative choices within the genre. As true crime continues to evolve, creators must strike a balance between compelling storytelling and ethical responsibility. This balance is not only a matter of artistic integrity but also one of societal values, as it shapes how audiences perceive victims and, in turn, how society responds to issues of race, gender, and justice. Ethical storytelling has become urgent in the true crime genre, as these narratives shape public attitudes toward marginalized communities and frame race and gender in ways that can either uplift or dehumanize.

In promoting ethical storytelling, content creators can avoid perpetuating harmful stereotypes and contribute to a more just and empathetic understanding of crime and marginalized communities. When podcasters challenge these biases and embrace more complex portrayals, they help create a media landscape that respects the dignity of every individual. Such a shift is critical for accurate victim representation and for empowering historically silenced voices. As both creators and consumers of media, we must collectively advocate for narratives that are grounded in compassion and that accurately portray the experiences of those involved. This commitment to integrity in storytelling ensures that the media we engage with upholds our values and contributes to a broader, more nuanced understanding of crime, victimization, and humanity.

This commitment will pave the way for more respectful, informed, and constructive conversations about crime and justice. True crime media, as a reflection of societal values, has the potential to shape public attitudes and dismantle harmful stereotypes. By critically engaging with these narratives, we can foster a more inclusive and empathetic approach to storytelling, one that not only respects but also accurately represents the lives of those impacted. Ultimately, this shift in focus is necessary not only for ethical media representation but also for exploring the systemic inequalities that shape crime, victimization, and justice. Rethinking how these stories are told opens the door to more accurate portrayals and, importantly, inspires meaningful social change.

Limitations and Future Research

The podcast episodes selected and analyzed in this study were chosen by the researcher. Future research could provide additional insight by incorporating the perspectives of true-crime

podcast listeners to better understand how they perceive the portrayal of African American women within the genre. This approach could explore the impact of these portrayals on societal perceptions, particularly listeners' understanding of race and gender. Conducting interviews or surveys with questions that examine listeners' experiences with true crime podcasts, their feelings about the portrayal of Black women, and their opinions on the language used in these portrayals could offer a richer understanding of audience reception.

Furthermore, research focusing on the production processes of true crime podcasts could shed light on the editorial choices and decision-making dynamics that influence the portrayal of marginalized groups. Interviews with podcast creators or analyses of their editorial processes could illuminate the factors that shape storytelling choices, particularly in cases involving Black women. This approach could contribute to a deeper understanding of how true crime media influences societal perceptions of victimhood, justice, and empathy, ultimately helping guide the genre toward more ethical and equitable practices.

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