

Female audiences for true crime television:

Popular discourse, feminism and the politics of 'ethical viewing'

Abstract

This article draws on data from 18 semi-structured interviews with women which explore their relations with true crime television. Complicating popular and academic arguments that such relations operate pedagogically (that true crime offers a form of 'safety advice' for women), the data attests to the participants' reflexive negotiation of ethics as a frame through which viewing investments are presented, regulated and articulated. Both contributing to and questioning feminist work which has explored the potential 'reimagining' of true crime within a post #Metoo context, the data offers insight into how these female viewers negotiate what they see as 'ethical viewing' of the genre and its relationship with questions of 'witnessing' and responsibility.

Key words:

True crime

Gender

Female audiences

Ethics

Victim

Introduction

In 2021, the late-night US comedy show *Saturday Night Live (SNL)* (NBC, 1975-) included a musical sketch based on the popular idea of women's fascination with true crime – in this case television. In 'Murder Show', female comedians sing about watching high profile programmes from the recent true crime boom. Presented as a self-care practice and a means to relax, the sketch depicts the individual women snacking, face-timing and texting whilst cheerfully crooning such lines as 'Two sisters just got killed on a cruise in the Bahamas. I'm gonna half watch it while I fold my pyjamas', or 'A bodybuilder chopped up an old lady. I watch it while I text my sister about her baby.' This is then intercut with scenes of the women in red fetish-inspired outfits whilst singing about their pleasure in shows with 'a really a high body count' ('15. 16. Now it's getting interesting'). Switching between the apparently mundane and the sexually 'pathological', the primary subject of this sketch is neither the 'murder shows' of the title nor the industry that produces them, but rather the *female viewers* who are imagined as their key audience.

Although it has a long history, 'the magnitude of true crime ... media is at a historic high', with such programming often topping the most-watched shows on streaming platforms such as Netflix (Webb, 2021: 153). Women have often been understood as the main audience for true crime (Biressi, 2001; Boling and Hull, 2018; Jermyn, 2007; Vicary and Fraley, 2010). But as the *SNL* sketch attests, the current true crime boom has seen a profusion of popular discourse on this relationship, with varying implications. Indeed, the 'Murder Show' sketch seeks to boldly answer – in comedic form – questions surrounding women's viewership of true crime which have been urgently debated elsewhere in popular and academic commentary. Whilst the sexualised imagery in the sketch nods toward a longer history in which women's relations with true crime are understood as pathological (i.e. a sexual or romantic investment in a male serial killer) (White, 2020: 16), the depiction of viewing practices invokes questions of *ethics*, imagining women's apparently frivolous and disengaged attitude toward the consumption of shocking and heinous crimes. In contrast, popular online articles are more likely to (earnestly) enquire 'Why do women love true crime so much?' (e.g. Bonn, 2023; Sales, 2023; Tuttle, 2019). Unlike soap operas, romance novels, women's magazines or chick flicks (media forms that have attracted feminist scholarship because of their address to, and association with women (Hermes, 1985; Geraghty, 1991; Radway, 1984)), the relationships between women and true crime are framed as surprising or something that at least needs explaining. Popular and scholarly discussion has thus aimed to 'reconcile' its apparently gendered popularity with normative perceptions of its generic content (O'Meara, 2024). But such a task is confounded by the fact that empirical research into women's relations with true crime is limited, and any attention to *television* is conspicuously absent. In terms of the renewed and expanded scholarly interest in true crime,

feminist research on female audiences has focused almost exclusively on podcasts (Boling, 2023; O’Meara; 2024; Rodgers, 2023; White, 2020), whilst work on television has been textual in approach (Hamad, 2023; Hoffman and Hobbs, 2021; Horeck, 2019; 2024; Vedric and Little, 2023).

Adopting a feminist perspective, this article draws on data from 18 semi-structured interviews with women in order to explore their relations with television true crime in ways which respond to key debates in popular and academic discourse on the genre. Complicating popular and academic arguments that such relations operate pedagogically (that true crime offers a form of ‘safety advice’ for women), the data attests to the participants’ reflexive and nuanced negotiation of ethics as a frame through which viewing investments are presented, regulated and articulated. Both contributing to and questioning feminist work which has explored the potential ‘reimagining’ of true crime within a post #Metoo context (Hamad, 2023; Horeck, 2019, 2024), the data offers insight into how these female viewers negotiate ‘ethical viewing’ of the genre and its relationship with questions of ‘witnessing’ and responsibility.

Undertaking this research for the 20th anniversary of *CST* is also an opportunity to reflect on the study of audiences for television more widely. In the inaugural issue of *CST* in 2006, Jermyn and Holmes discussed the then newer debates about the apparent ‘death’ of the audience. They addressed a context in which the concept of interactivity was posing new methodological and theoretical questions for the history of the ‘active’ audience paradigm within television, whilst the wider picture attested to the ways in which the concept of the mass audience had become ‘increasingly fragile and problematic’ (Jermyn and Holmes, 2006: 50). In addition, they observed how this offered a scholarly context in which the more traditional ‘issues of power and ideology [were] ... becoming edged out of the picture: they are there, it seems, but they don’t quite ‘fit’ (Jermyn and Holmes 2006: 51). Since this time, the rethinking of audiences within the context of digital networked communication has clearly accelerated these debates, with some scholars suggesting the need to ‘replac[e] separate attention’ to how different media forms are consumed (Livingstone, 2012: 262) and to situate audiences within media ecologies, ‘constellations of media’ (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham 2010), or networks of media convergence (Livingstone, 2012: 262). Within this context – a culture with perhaps ‘too many texts’ (Couldry, 2000: 69) – there have been calls for further decentring textual analysis and an examination of how ‘content possibilities have been woven into the daily fabric of our lives with outstanding speed and seeming naturalness’ (Boczkowski, 2021: 18).

Some of these shifts are borne out by recent scholarship on contemporary true crime. Horeck argues that true crime has emerged as an ‘exemplary genre for the digital, multiplatform era’ in its audience

address (2019: 4). Whilst being seen as ‘tailor-made’ for binge-watching (2019: 126), Horeck examines how the positioning of the viewer as detective ‘is an important model for the privileging of “clickable” interactivity’ in the digital era (2019: 125). Indeed, the intersections between true crime, digital contexts and participatory cultures have been exemplified by ‘citizen investigation’ or ‘web-sleuthing’ which have spear-headed popular ethical debates about the genre and its blurring of investigation and entertainment (Jones, 2022: 57). It is perhaps important to reflect, however, that true crime, and true crime television, is not always engaged with as a ‘multimodal’ practice, and as our study will demonstrate, it is certainly still possible to ask audiences about the meaning-making processes involved in watching *television* (even whilst exploring the changing understandings and practices that this entails). As discussed in the literature review below, feminist scholarship is also precisely concerned with the ideological structures of true crime television - clearly looking back toward more traditional debates about textual interpretation and power. Although mindful of the limited nature of the data gathered here, we explicitly seek to explore some of these debates from the perspective of audience discussions of true crime. This is particularly so in terms of how the participants negotiated and wrestled with the complex ethical status of the genre in terms of their own viewing, moving across representations of the female victim; aesthetics; to the idea that the genre provides ‘safety tips’ for women to minimise their own risk of being a victim of violent crime.

Feminist perspectives on true crime (is true crime television a ‘bad object’?)

The seemingly incongruous relationship between female audiences and true crime is often attributed to its focus on female victims. Paralleling discussions of horror, true crime is understood as both ‘unwelcoming to women and a genre that women enjoy’ (Farrimond, 2020: 150). In seeking to understand this apparent contradiction, existing work has explored the relationships between gender, crime and victimisation. With a focus on either literature or podcasts, feminist and wider scholarship has suggested that women’s connection with the genre circles around fear of crime, in so far as women fear victimisation far more than men (Browder, 2006; Vicary and Fraley, 2010). Also echoing much popular discourse, this then gives rise to various gendered investments in true crime, such as experiencing identification with the perils that women may face in society, or the genre offering women a ‘how-to guide for personal survival’ in ways which may better equip them to prevent violence in their own lives (e.g Boling, 2023; Vicary and Fraley, 2010). Other perspectives variously suggest that women are drawn to true crime because it ‘gives [female] victims and their families voices’ (Cavender et al., 1999: 646); or enables an outlet for patriarchal violence to be ‘safely’ rehearsed and explored (Boling, 2023; Browder, 2006).

But it is important that a focus on the relationships between female audiences, gendered victimisation and true crime does not end up ‘sanitising’ the experience of any *pleasure* (Anthony, 2023). Recent feminist work on women audiences for true crime has foregrounded the successful American podcast *My Favorite Murder (MFM)* (2016-) (e.g. Billinson and Orr, 2024; Horeck, 2019; Rodgers, 2023). Hosted by comedians and feminist true crime fans, Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark, *MFM* is based on the ‘unabashed assertion that stories of murder are deeply enjoyable, and especially so for women’ (Horeck, 2019: 2). Feminist research has examined how the relations between the textual framing of the podcast and its online interactions offer space for an ‘emerging feminist politics around the inescapability of everyday violence in women’s lives’ and the opportunity to explore, contest and share such experiences in ways which become politicised and collectivised (Rodgers, 2023: 3054; see also Billinson and Orr, 2024). The scholarly energy around the reception of *MFM* exemplifies how online cultures have been the key site for feminist interest in female audiences for true crime – an arena in which podcast audiences are perhaps more visible than those of television.

This work also demonstrates how true crime podcasts have been seen as more amenable to feminist analysis and thus ripe for attention or political ‘recuperation’. Given that true crime has not generally been seen as a progressive site for the representation of gender politics, it has often been understood, like horror, as a ‘bad object for feminism’ (Farrimond, 2020: 151). But it is not entirely clear that some of the reasons given for the feminist interest in podcasts – being able to cover a case in more depth than news (Boling, 2023: 995); the intimacy of the form personalising the victim and resonating with listeners’ experiences (O’Meara, 2024; Rodgers, 2023: 3049); or the intersection between true crime narratives and social media allowing women to speak back to its discourses (Rodgers, 2023: 3060) – can be distinguished from television, especially if there is no feminist work on female audiences for television examples of the genre. Far more germane to this division is arguably the denouncement of the *visual* and its relationship with what are perceived as the generic and ideological norms of true crime. As O’Meara notes, podcasts may offer a space for a shift away from the ‘visual tropes of women’s bodies as bearers of pain, including crime scene photos of bruised or bloodied victims, which are almost inherently sensationalist as they shock viewers with imagery of the damage inflicted during a given crime’ (2024: 223). She goes on to quote from Hoydis’ discussion of the relationships between feminism and podcasting in which ‘the focus on disembodied voices, so central to podcasting, bears potential for feminist studies... to move beyond “visualphilic tendencies”’ (Hoydis, 2020: 7).

Such a perspective both compliments and draws upon a longer heritage of feminist work on the spectacularisation of the female corpse (Dillman, 2014; Jermyn, 2007). In *Women and Death in Film*,

Television and News: Dead but Not Gone (2014), Dillman discusses how there has been an increased exploitation of images of the female corpse since the 2000s – indicative of a postfeminist backlash against feminist progress within the contexts of globalisation and neoliberalism. As she argues:

The rancour and ambivalence surrounding the feminist project and our anxieties about the place of women in a changing world are manifest in the surfeit of women who need to be dead before an exploration of their lives, subjectivities, and experiences is authorized in mainstream representations (2014: 2).

This argument is complimented by recent feminist work on true crime television focused on high-profile serials such as *Making a Murderer* (Netflix, 2015) and *The Jinx: The Life and Deaths of Robert Durst* (HBO, 2015; 2024). Vedric and Little suggest that in their primary focus on the guilt or innocence of the men accused, these programmes ‘mark a key historical moment for voiceless female murder victims’ (2023: 975). Horeck’s *Justice on Demand* argues that contemporary true crime may overlook the potential to offer a feminist analysis of violence against women in favour of delivering a ‘series of microaffective nuggets or thrills’ (2019: 28). Yet she suggests that the contemporary cultural moment may also ‘be ripe for a feminist rearticulation of the genre’ (2019: 176), especially in the context of the #Metoo, post-Weinstein period and the rise of popular feminism. In this regard, her ‘Afterword’ is devoted to deliberating the possibilities of ‘Feminist True Crime’. This would capture the ‘social, collective, and intersectional dimensions of crime and the wider structures which endorse and encourage such violence’ (169), whilst keeping ‘the female victims in the center of the story’ (174). Since this time, Horeck (2024) and other feminist scholars (Hamad, 2023; Hoffman and Hobbs, 2021) have identified a post #MeToo reframing of female victimhood in specific true crime serials. From *The Ripper* (Netflix, 2020), *Ted Bundy: Falling for a Killer* (Amazon Prime, 2020) to *I’ll Be Gone in the Dark* (HBO, 2020-21), these examples have centred victim voices and called attention to the systemic misogyny that facilitates such crimes. Although only a limited number of TV texts have been invoked here, this at least suggests that television has not been excluded from debates about shifting relations between gender, feminism and true crime.

With a focus on the representation of the victims and their wider contexts, this debate implicitly suggests how ideas about *ethics* have been central to understanding the production and circulation of true crime. But there are few studies of true crime, feminist or otherwise, where ethics is the central focus, and even less research which explores how audiences navigate such ethical discourses (Graham and Stevenson, 2022). This points to a wider context in which the debate about gender, feminism and true crime television is being waged at the level of the *text* rather addressing reception cultures or audiences. It has of course long since been acknowledged within Media and Cultural

Studies that audience responses cannot be assumed from textual readings (Gillespie, 2005), and feminist research has historically been at the forefront of such debates (Hermes, 1985; Radway, 1984). Indeed, it is perhaps striking that whilst feminist work on podcasts is listening thoughtfully to women's investments in true crime narratives – and analysing their digital communities online – some of the existing work on television true crime suggests that the most appropriate response 'is to turn off these shows' (Dillman, 2014: 151). This not only further creates a censorious discourse around the consumption of true crime television as a 'bad object', but it does so without any recourse to questions of viewing practices and interpretation which take women's voices seriously.

Methodology

Recruitment

Ethical approval was received by [XXXX anonymised] in March 2024 and the interviews were undertaken in April-May the same year. Recruitment was pursued via various channels including true crime Facebook groups (such as 'True Crime Stories' and 'Netflix real crime documentaries'), general social media posts and word-of-mouth or recommendation. The study was open to anyone over the age of 18 who identified as female. Yet in terms of women actually representing the main audience for true crime, it is important to state that the amount of empirical data here is far outweighed by the general insistence on this relationship within academic and popular contexts. A very limited number of studies are referred to repeatedly in academic scholarship (Boling and Hull, 2018; Vicary and Fraley 2010), and these then appear as they key evidence in popular articles (e.g. Sales, 2023; Tuttle, 2019). Platforms such as Netflix are notoriously reticent in their willingness to release any form of audience data, and there is little available information concerning other platforms or channels in the UK when it comes to true crime viewership. As such, this research was prompted by, and responds to, the *discourses* which have posited women as a key audience for true crime television. Given that discourses about audiences are also 'consequential', 'telling media audiences who they are and how they should behave' (Butsch and Livingstone, 2014: 4), they should be a site of interest (and contest) in their own right. Indeed, part of our focus is on how participants respond to discourses about women and true crime and how they are understood, critiqued or resisted within their discussions of the genre.

Sample and procedure

18 UK-based participants took part. 17 identified as cis-gendered women, whilst one individual who responded to the call explained that: 'I've been socialised as female and I generally live my life sort of in a very feminine way'. Ten participants identified as heterosexual, four as bisexual and two as gay.

In terms of ethnicity, 15 identified as White British, two as White Welsh and one as British Asian. Ages ranged from 21-67, with an average age of 43. The study did not collect information on other demographic issues, such as levels of education or perceptions of 'class'. It is noted that true crime has been 'viewed as a conspicuously white genre' (Horeck, 2019: 16) – both in terms of its primary focus on white female victims, and the ways in which white (and often middle-aged) women are invoked as its primary consumers (White, 2020). Although it would be problematic to extrapolate too much here given the limited size of the group, the sample loosely matches these existing perceptions. In terms of other intersections, the relatively high number of queer-identified participants who took part is notable – particularly given the pervasive heterosexualisation of true crime narratives – and may reflect snowballing methods of recruitment among particular social networks. The parameters and limitations of the sample are reflected on further in the conclusion.

Participants took part in a one-to-one semi-structured interview which lasted between 20-60 minutes and were offered the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym for anonymisation purposes. Both authors are white, middle-aged women who consider themselves to be fans of true crime television and acknowledged this on the recruitment information and at the start of the interview. Such reflexivity was in part prompted by the long-running debate about the interviewer–interviewee relationship in feminist qualitative work and the power dynamics within which this takes place (Oakley, 1981; Tang, 2002). Yet the possibility of a 'non-hierarchical' (Oakley, 1981) relationship based on gender congruence and shared cultural experience has long been subject to critique, with feminist work exploring the range of intersectional factors which shape the balance of power within the interview encounter (Tang, 2002). Sharing that we were ourselves fans of true crime television may have helped to facilitate discussion about the enjoyment of such programming given that participants frequently acknowledged issues of cultural judgement. Yet rather than creating a sense of shared culture, explaining our investment in true crime could also have increased perceptions of academic knowledge and expertise. Equally, in working through how the participants 'justified' their true crime viewing in ethical terms, we also acknowledge that this contributes to our navigation of the genre's disputed status and its relationship with our *own* viewing practices and pleasures.

The interview schedule covered two key areas (each including multiple questions) that can be split into 1) Viewing practices and contexts 2) The relationships between women, gender and true crime television. In 'Viewing practices and contexts' we asked participants such questions as: How do they define true crime? How is material accessed and viewed? Are there any types of true crime television that they avoid and why? In theme two, the agenda asked participants: did they have any thoughts on the apparent popularity of true crime with women? How do they understand their own

investment in/ relations with the genre? Do they have any thoughts on the representation of the victims and the relations set up between victim and viewer? To what extent are questions of ethics important to engagement with true crime?

The interviews offered space for the participants to talk about wider engagements with true crime: a couple mentioned podcasting and YouTube videos, and some referred to reading news stories before or after a programme was viewed. But despite the use of true crime Facebook groups to recruit participants, there was little discussion of wider interaction online. Most largely watched true crime television and their primary engagement with it was through the television screen.

Data analysis

The interviews were undertaken online and recorded using the transcription function. They were also recorded on an audio device and played back (so that any errors in the online transcription could be corrected). The data was then analysed by both authors within a poststructural, discourse-analytic framework which offers insight into how identities or experiences are constituted in the transcripts (Weedon, 1987). Feminist poststructural work sees discourses as actively constitutive of identities and experiences, producing subjectivities within intersecting relations of power (Weedon, 1987). Within this poststructural framework, we drew upon the coding strategies of thematic discourse analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) – working independently (to develop a sense of what the key themes were and to ‘test’ the reliability of our perceptions), and then together in generating the categories and themes to focus on. The first stage involved familiarisation with the data, reading and re-reading transcripts, and producing notes on preliminary observations. Second, this process was used to generate initial codes across the full data set. Third, these codes were then used to produce broader thematic categories which are presented in the analysis below. These are ‘Genre, gender norms and pleasures’; ‘The ethics of representing the female victim’; ‘Ethics and aesthetics’; ‘Ethical viewing’; and ‘Safety “tips”, safety work and warning narratives’.

Theme #1: ‘Oh your sweet little lady brain shouldn’t be interested in this...’: Genre, gender norms and pleasures

Media interest in real crimes has a long and complex history (Murley, 2008; Punnett, 2018), and scholars have cautioned against conceptualising it as a ‘single monolithic genre’ (Biressi, 2001: 2). Rather than offering a pre-determined definition, participants were encouraged to explain what they defined as true crime television. Invoked here was an emphasis on ‘an actual crime that’s been committed ... with the people involved’ (Annie), or a ‘real story of crime’ (Gert). Such definitions are compatible with academic conceptions in which true crime is (loosely) understood as presenting

'accounts of actual crime cases, often in narrative form' (Durham et al, 1995: 144). For some participants, true crime television included fictionalised dramatisations of real crime cases (so examples mentioned included *The Staircase* (Netflix, 2018), *Des* (ITV, 2020), *Dahmer* (Netflix, 2022) and *Five Daughters* (BBC1, 2010)), whilst for others such texts were 'true crime adjacent' (Kerry, Rosie). It was noted by a few participants that true crime television 'covers a massive spectrum ... kidnapping and sex trafficking, ones about cults... robberies, drug stuff, bank heists' (Alex), and some clearly enjoyed this wider range. But it was nevertheless the case that, as with much scholarship on true crime, the primary emphasis in the interviews was on murder narratives, largely within Anglo-American programmes.

Within these discussions, participants were often aware of popular discourses on women consuming true crime, and were quick to reject the normative idea that such a relationship was incongruous or surprising:

Yes, it's weird to think that we have to sort of justify it?... You know, you're a girl. Watch something about flower arranging or something like that... You know, you shouldn't be watching murder and crime, but I've done it for so many years... (Annie).

... The question of why women watch true crime – like why *wouldn't* they? Is it weird 'cos people still think it isn't ladylike to want to see violence etc.? 'Oh your sweet little lady brain shouldn't be interested in this, how strange ... you are...[original emphasis]' (Alex).

Participants call out the ways in which patriarchal constructions of normative femininity shape conceptions of appropriate true crime viewership (and assumptions around fragility and passivity are notably qualities which also consolidate women's 'natural' status as victims of violent crime). At the same time, the participants often invoked gendered binaries in seeking to explain why *they* felt women may be drawn to true crime:

I don't want to make any sort of... assumptions here about... different genders... But... ... me and my girlfriends, we are naturally ... very inquisitive. We want to know the whys and the wheres... You know, a lot of my male friends, my husband included... they just want the facts... Whereas I'm like no, I need to understand. ... It's a natural, inquisitiveness ... It's the desire to know (Isabella).

... I don't know if women are greater puzzle solvers than men... but I think without being completely stereotypical ... women try and understand people more and interactions and personal relationships. We tend to analyze that kind of stuff and try and figure things out a bit more ... (Kerry)

Whilst clearly wary of consolidating gender essentialisms or stereotypes, terms like 'natural' appear to make recourse to innate or biological conceptions of gender. At the same time, there was perhaps the suggestion that any connection could also be related to the cultivation of gendered 'cultural competencies' and generic appeal (Brunsdon, 1981). So, Isabella continued that 'I think we're all little investigators females - because we are in our lives, aren't we? We're kind of like putting out fires everywhere and doing a million things at once. And I think our minds are busy', whereas Jenny observed that 'men are men are very confident in patriarchy, of being right. Whereas women question things' – both of which point to gender socialisation rather than 'innate' or biological differences.

It was within this context that the participants talked about the *pleasures* of true crime which otherwise found little space in the interviews, perhaps precisely because of the cultural judgements surrounding the genre. Participants frequently paused conversation to reflect on their own language and it was not uncommon to hear such comments as: 'It feels weird when you're describing true crime and say like "it's good I enjoyed it". It feels like the wrong terminology, doesn't it?' (Isabella). 'Pleasures' were thus largely spoken of in ways which deflected attention away from the violent focus on murder, violence and death. Kerry explained how: 'For me it's not about the gore and the suffering, it's more the psychology behind it and the circumstances', or as Estelle claimed: 'It's not necessarily the crime. It's how they go about solving it ... the minutest detail they can find, how they extract that information and then use it later on'. There was a recurrent emphasis on both psychology (e.g. perpetrator motivations) or the processes of investigation here. As with the longer history of fictional crime drama, the 'notion of the viewer as a detective – deciphering clues and deciding on questions of guilt and innocence' (Horeck, 2019: 125) is central to the address of true crime. Despite the historical gendering of the detective in terms of (masculine) 'rational thought', objectivity and logic (Jermyn, 2010: 30), fictional crime drama has long since contributed to the visibility of the *female* detective as part of mainstream popular television in ways which surely further question the apparent strangeness of women's investment in true crime.

Theme #2: 'Her story is told, her voice is heard': the ethics of representing the female victim

As the discussion above suggests, the participants often discussed the genre in ways which suggested a constant grappling with the ethics of true crime in the context of their own viewing. Ethics are

acknowledged to be central to the production and consumption of the genre (Biressi, 2001), yet little work has focused on how audiences negotiate these ethical complexities, especially with regard to television. As Hill discusses in relation to news, documentary and reality TV (2005; 2007), in part because of its greater indexical proximity to real life, issues of ethics often arise in audience discussions of factual television genres. Whilst differences exist between genres, Hill observes how the reception of factual television ‘highlights ethical issues to do with the treatment of people by programme makers’ which are articulated in terms of discourses of ‘fairness’ and the social functions of such appearances (such as the ‘public’s right to know’) (Hill, 2007: 209). Whilst true crime is clearly not unique in attracting criticisms about its ethical status (see Hill, 2000 on Reality TV), its generic content shapes these debates and concerns in specific ways – not least of all because it is dealing with victims who frequently have no way of consenting to ‘participate’.

Ethics pertain to moral values and normative judgements about what is appropriate, reasonable or fair and as such, they are socially constructed. As Baron explains in relation to media, ‘it falls on the individual viewer, in the moment of encounter with the text, to determine whether [the text is]... ethical. However, this determination necessarily depends on shared cultural mores ... [making ethics] socially situated and historically specific’ (2021: 15). Furthermore, as Hawkins argues, ethics are not simply a set of abstract rules and codes but are about the ‘affective and visceral’ – involved with our ‘sensuously-engaged responses to the world and others’ (2001: 414). Affect has indeed notably been understood as pivotal to true crime engagement (Horeck, 2019; Walters, 2021), evoking potential emotions of fear, anger, horror, frustration, heartbreak or helplessness (Kennedy, 2018: 391).

As discussed, there has been the suggestion in feminist scholarship that popular feminism has impacted some of the perceived ideological norms of true crime and its ethical implications. Common themes discussed in relation to the idea of feminist true crime are the importance of centring the voices and lives of the female victims over the killer; ‘demystifying perpetrators’ (Fogarty, 2022: 4); placing crimes within a context of systemic violence against women, challenging rape myths; examining the importance of intersectionality (Fogarty, 2022; Hamad, 2023; Hoffman and Hobbs, 2021; Horeck, 2019; 2024); and acknowledging the ethical complexities of making true crime (Fogarty, 2022). But such discussions have been exclusively textual, with no attention to whether they have any relationship with ‘everyday’ viewing practices.

In fact, many of these themes also emerged within the data when it came to the explicit or implicit idea of what the women saw as ethical true crime. Although there is not space here to illustrate each category with a quotation, there was an overall emphasis on centring (and humanising) the victim’s narrative; avoiding the ‘glamourisation’ and ‘sensationalisation’ of perpetrators (seen as detracting

from the social contexts of women's victimisation); including the victim's family and the consequent impact of the crime (seen as offering ethical 'permission' for the programme to be made and viewed); avoiding victim-blaming tropes; covering a diversity of cases (from women of colour to transgender individuals) to the respectful depiction of victim bodies. In light of this congruence with themes in the feminist literature, it is important to state that we did not ask the participants about their identifications (or otherwise) with 'feminism', and it was clear from the conversations that there was a considerable range of relationships here. Given that some feminist cultural discourses – such as critiques of victim-blaming – have become increasingly mainstream over the last few years, it is possible that such responses precisely reflect the cultural moment discussed by feminist scholars.

In this section we focus particularly on the representation of the female victim, and the associated issues of agency and voice. The idea that women are drawn to true crime because of cultural or affective connections with female victims is one of the more sympathetic aspects of popular discourse on this programming (Sales, 2023; Tuttle, 2019) – although notably one that brings the relationship between women and true crime back to more traditional conceptions of femininity. The centrality of the victim(s) identity and story was indeed important for many (although notably not all) of the participants, offering key criteria against which true crime texts were evaluated. Catrin, for example, referred to the dramatisation *Five Daughters* (BBC1, 2010) which told the story of the Ipswich-based murders (in 2006) of Gemma Adams, Tania Nicol, Anneli Alderton, Paula Clennell and Annette Nichols:

[The title] makes you think there's love there because they use the term 'daughter'. But when I watched it, when it came to the end, I didn't feel that they gave the girls the love they should have in the series.

Conversely, engaging with the story of the victim, and feeling that they were humanised *and* had some agency in the narrative, was important for many participants in the programme examples they recalled. Whilst it is possible that this was indicative of some of the more recent textual shifts noted by feminist scholars ('*I'll Be Gone In The Dark* -- I do remember that being very victim-focused' (Alex)), there was actually a range of programmes noted, from long-running American series such as *The First 48* (A & E, 2004) to less high-profile two-parters, such as Channel 4's *The Push: Murder on the Cliff* (2024), about the murder of Fawziyah Jawad at the hands of her husband. Notably one of few stories of a woman of colour (the victim was British-Pakistani) to be discussed in detail in the data, it was suggested that 'it really felt like [Fawziyah]... was someone very valuable within this story.. because of... the extensive interviews with her mother' (Isabella), or that:

The way that [story] was told – she was given ... voice after her death, sadly. Her story is told, her voice is heard. And I think the way that some documentaries read emails and text messages and diaries and ... recreate moments in the life of the victim that does it in a sense give them some power of narration as well... which I think is good ... because it raises them to the power of a narrator in their own story (Jenny).

The participant readings here clearly contrast with the arguments of Dillman who conceptualises how female victims offer 'dead beginnings' in crime narratives and are subject to the 'dead-but-not-gone' convention, in which textual and aesthetic strategies enable the 'presence' of the dead woman so that they 'look back, talk back, and/or are championed by those who look back on their behalf' (2014: 10). Dillman ultimately sees this as a form of desubjectification and pseudoagency as 'what good is agency if it is only gained after physical death? This is the ultimate dead end for women and for a feminist ideal of equality of subjectivity and self-definition for women' (2014: 48). But this debate necessarily comes back to questions of methodological approach and the privileging of textual analysis. In Jenny's response above, she clearly notes that Fawziyah's 'voice' is reconstructed posthumously, but she does not see this as negating the possibility of subjectivity and agency. Being 'championed by those who look back on their behalf' (Dillman, 2014: 10) is seen as meaningful by Jenny, as is the 'spectral' audio-visual re-animation of Fawziyah through images, posts and footage. From Dillman's perspective, this may of course be seen as attesting to how the victim's image is used to 'seduce the viewer into identifying with a perfect stranger' (2014: 147) – an individualisation which detracts from the wider political contexts of women's systemic victimisation, as well as the need for political action. But not only does the language here posit a passive or unknowing viewer ('seduce'), but it is also extrapolating audience responses from textual readings. These are ultimately different interpretations of female agency which should not simply result in the reading of the feminist scholar being preferred – invoking an ongoing debate within feminist empirical research about hierarchies of academic expertise and the agency given to research subjects in analysis (Gill, 2007).

It is possible that such responses from participants are evidence of the (feminist-inflected) shifts in true crime since Dillman (2014) was writing. But the range of discussion in the interviews suggests that it is more complex than this, as it did not seem that the respondents saw the 'voiceless' female victim (Vedric and Little, 2023: 975) as the baseline for true crime television, from which selected contemporary texts may 'deviate'. Such a disparity, as discussed more in the following section, may reflect the academic fetishisation of the foundational serial examples of *Making a Murderer*, *The Staircase* and *The Jinx*. In terms of the representation of the female victim, these serials arguably

occupy a place at the *extreme* end of the textual continuum against which the genre (and its consumption) is then problematically mapped and measured.

Theme #3: 'It is more respectful than that': Ethics and aesthetics

Evaluating the question of victim agency here is intimately bound up with the participants' own negotiation of the genre's ethical implications. This also applies to the issue of aesthetics in true crime television which, as discussed in the framing, has often been used by feminist scholars in particular to evaluate (or sideline) true crime television as an object of scholarly analysis. Murley describes how true crime is obsessed with 'full-on visual body horror', from 'autopsy footage', 'close-ups of ligature marks', 'bruises or lividity on flesh' and 'blood pools, stains and spatters', prompting some critics to refer to it as 'crime porn' (2008: 5). Such claims reflect on the generic instability of true crime and its multiple antecedents – in this case aligned less with investigative journalism or a documentary tradition than with 'lurid' horror or the 'cheap' thrills of pornography. Despite work on true crime literature (Biressi, 2001) and podcasting (O'Meara, 2023) exploring the complexities involved in the evocation of mental imagery (i.e. as opposed to the literal, visual depiction of murder and death), it is television that again bears the status of the 'bad object' here.

Some of the participants did critique true crime television in this respect, especially in terms of perceived gender inequalities in aesthetic and narrative representations of death. As Diana asserts: 'In a lot of true crime, they will show some crime scene photos and you very rarely will see a fully naked dead male, but you will sometimes see fully naked dead females ...'. Anita also noted that:

... [F]or female victims, I have seen them describe what they've been through in ... graphic detail, like if they've been raped, for example ... and ... they don't hold back if they've been stabbed multiple times and where they've been stabbed – like an intimate area or... Yeah [and this is especially] in comparison to ... male victims.

Notably, Anita uses the term 'describe', making it ambiguous as to whether this is visually depicted or not. Indeed, most responses actually focused on aesthetic *absences* in how death was evoked in television true crime. Estelle observed:

I think they've always been very, very careful the way they portrayed the victim. Well, you never really see the body... it's blurred out... You never see because I think that would be totally wrong to have the actual victim. It is more respectful than that.

Katie corroborates this in her suggestion that:

I suppose some[times]... they do sensationalise, but I think a lot of things are quite empathetic to what has happened and I wonder if in your own head you can imagine a lot more... I don't feel like in things that I have watched they've gone over the top just for the sake of it... I think they show what they need to show – what gives the facts.

Some participants noted that images with aesthetic absences (a censor bar over the eyes, the blurring out of the injuries or of nudity) could still be intrusive or graphic in their own right, thus representing more a performance of ethicality: Netflix's *The Night Stalker: the Hunt For a Serial Killer* (2021) was cited here. But in Estelle and Katie's responses above, key terms are 'respectful', 'careful' and 'empathetic', and we also see how factuality is often counterpoised to sensationalism in conceptions of ethical true crime (Graham and Stevenson, 2022: 220).

In *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, Sobchack discusses how the 'event of death seems to pose a particularly strong threat to representation' (2004: 185). The dead body offers an 'indexical sign ... which is always in excess of representation and beyond the limits of coding and culture: Death confounds all codes' (2004: 185). The quotes from the participants attest to this idea of a 'visual taboo' (Ibid: 191) and its inextricable enmeshment with ethical and aesthetic codes. It was notably fictionalised dramatisations that were invoked as the most problematic within their judgements, intersecting with a long history of debate surrounding the ethics of reconstructing events within documentary drama or drama documentary (Paget, 1998). HBO's dramatisation of *The Staircase* (2022) emerged as a key talking point here. In this we see the female victim, Kathleen Peterson (Toni Collette), in three scenarios which depict the dominant theories of how she met her death. Amy recalled how:

As far as I remember in the documentary, all you see is ... the outline of her body, but it's very blurred and it's just ... at the foot of the staircase ... It was actually the [dramatised] series ... [that] was much more graphic.... [T]here is a difference between when it's a documentary and then when they actually make ... a series out of it. It's like they take the artistic licence to ... make it more sensationalist, I guess.

Isabella added that Kathleen's death is 'bad enough. We don't need the extra blood and the extra bone popping out, you know, that was enough'. The re-enactment of the scenarios here involves seeing Kathleen's fall on/ down the stairs three times, each of which involves her sustaining graphic head injuries before slumping at the bottom of the stairs, gurgling and spluttering in her own blood. Isabella's description nods toward a grisly excess of representation – the opposite of the 'visual taboo' or indexical absence in 'real' depictions of death (Sobchack, 2004) - whilst Amy makes further recourse to a binary between factual representations and the unethical 'interference' of

(‘fictionalised’) sensationalism. Sobchack explains how ‘the criteria for ethical vision in the face of death in fiction are not as stringent as they are for documentary’ because ‘documentary is primarily indexical, fiction primarily iconic and symbolic’ (2004: 194). Perceptions of the apparently ‘excessive’ nature of the dramatised depictions may well attest to this hierarchy, yet such scenes have an indexical link to a real case (and woman), prompting respondents to critique what they perceive as their ethical liberties in depicting Kathleen. Notably, and complimenting the ways in which participants tended to foreground the factuality and ‘objectivity’ of true crime documentaries as opposed to their dramatised counterparts, there was no discussion of the prolific use of reconstructions within *factual* programming – which have equally been explored as a site of complex ethical debate (see Jermyn, 2007). Given that the vast majority of the sample viewed (and preferred) what they framed as factual true crime, yoking the more ‘excessive’ aesthetics to dramatised versions is perhaps a way to locate (and contain) this aspect of the genre in ways which further consolidated what the participants presented as their own ethical engagement.

Theme #4: Ethical Viewing: ‘you have to bear witness’

The article has so far explored what participants understood as ethical true crime at the level of representation and aesthetics, but these discussions also extended to discourses on viewing. This theme included engagement with serials vs series; *how* things were viewed (concentratedly, distracted), and the practice of ‘witnessing’.

In recent work on true crime television, there has been a clear emphasis on ‘prestige’ serials. These are more likely to be conceptualised as aligning with the ‘elite tradition of documentary film’, as well as a critical perspective on justice itself (Walters, 2021). As Walters observes, earlier examples of true crime television – often characterised as ‘infotainment’ and ‘crimesploitation’ with ideologically conservative approaches to law and order – are somewhat written out of this lineage (2021: 27). In addition, episodic true crime, whether on streaming services, dedicated crime channels or digital terrestrial television such as BBC or Channel 4, remains both popular and pervasive (Walters, 2021: 21). Indeed, these programmes are arguably *more* prevalent than the occasional long form serials, and participants mentioned such titles as *Forensics: The Real CSI* (BBC2, 2019-), *24 Hours in Police Custody* (C4, 2014-), *Killer in My Village* (Sky Crime, 2018-), *Snapped: Women Who Kill* (Oxygen, 2004-) and *Accused: Guilty or Innocent?* (Channel 5, 2020-). Although it could be argued that there is considerable variety in aesthetics, address and approach across such examples, most of the participants tended to position series as somehow more ‘trashy’ and more ‘formulaic’ than the serials, and as having ethical implications for how true crime is mediated and consumed. Although in a previous section we talked about the two-part narrative of Fawziyah Jawad in *The Push* and how it

was seen as engendering the possibility of both voice and connection, participants could sometimes be more critical of shorter/ one-off narratives:

I like something when you're seeing the real consequences of it, and that's probably why I like something that's longer because you get more time to reflect ... rather than pinging from [one]... horrific thing to the next (Louise).

So [a series] ... gives you the superficialness of it. You see what happens, there's a trial, you find out whether they're guilty or not, but I don't enjoy watching those ones because ... what I want to see are the victims stories and ... the interviews with the family... (Alex).

Although the idea of binge-watching can be defined in different ways (Jenner, 2021), some of the participants did discuss this practice in relation to viewing serials and it was seen as fostering (the desired) 'absorption' or the possibility of becoming 'embroiled'. At the same time, although such terms seem entertainment-led (focused on seeking 'good' narrative engagement), the serial form was also spoken of as respecting the victim's story because there was more space to humanise and contextualise. So *The Ripper* was repeatedly mentioned as it was seen as giving more insight into the victims' backgrounds and critiquing the misogynist incompetence of the police (see also Hamad, 2023). Louise's description above is perhaps ambiguous, but the suggestion of 'pinging from one horrific thing to the next', or from case to case, could be read as implying the bingeing of *series*, which is presented by her as less ethically appropriate. Either way, in the quotes above, there is an emphasis on, and preference for, ideas of immersion and depth over superficiality and brevity. In challenging this binary, Horeck has argued that it is 'important to question whether the immersive long form necessarily leads to more in-depth storytelling or greater critical reflection on the part of viewers' (2019: 125). Equally, Horeck and other feminist scholars have clearly demonstrated that the long-form serial does *not* necessarily offer a more in-depth or ethical representation of female victimhood (Horeck, 2019; Vedric and Little, 2023). Nevertheless, such narrative distinctions were important to how some of the participants judged and evaluated true crime, and how they navigated the ethics of their own consumption.

In sharp contrast to the women depicted in the 'Murder Show' sketch discussed at the beginning of this article ('A bodybuilder chopped up an old lady. I watch it while I text my sister about her baby'), the participants spoke of how true crime television was one of the few forms of programming that they watched in a highly *concentrated* manner. Intersecting with long-standing debates about how television is viewed within the context of the domestic sphere (Ellis, 1982; Wheatley, 2016), participants made such comments as: 'I would say that – with most of the stuff I watch, I am sort of

multitasking, but less so definitely with true crime' (Kylie), whilst others would describe themselves as 'intently watching' (Gert). The reasons given for this were multifaceted, ranging from the narrative-based pleasures of detection discussed earlier, to maintaining a more ethical orientation toward the victim. Both of these perspectives are highlighted here by Isabella:

I'm pretty much absorbed... I really ... don't want to miss anything because sometimes ... you're watching someone talk... you know, the husband, the fiancé... I'm looking for like a telltale sign – ... did he raise his eyebrow? Did he ... look to the left – is he lying? In my head I am literally investigating this as well... But [not engaging intently] ... that can almost feel disrespectful? It feels like you're saying that I kind of I care, but I don't care about you *that* much. ... For me, that is ... not wanting to be disrespectful. It's giving all of me – all of me to you because you *deserve* it [original emphasis].

Some of the participants spoke about this kind of engagement as a form of 'witnessing' – an area in which issues of reception have been central to work on media ethics (Corpus Ong, 2014; Ellis, 2009; Tait, 2011). Discussion has often circled around the 'ethical burden' of witnessing and its relationship to ideas of responsibility and action (Tait, 2011). In this regard, 'bearing witness' has been understood as 'assuming responsibility for contemporary events... thus ... [it] extends beyond seeing through practices of enacting responsibility' (Tait, 2011: 1220). Isabella asserted that: '[Y]ou mustn't turn off because this is really happening... You need to *feel* the upset. You need to *feel* the outrage. It shouldn't be happening ... you need to look so that you *feel* it...' [original emphasis], whereas Jenny suggested that 'It's why I look at animal rescues and things like that - you have to bear witness'. The fact that the idea of witnessing was a key area in which participants grappled with – and rationalised – their own ethical orientation toward the genre is explicitly set out by Jenny: 'That's *why I justified* my viewing ... by saying that I ... bear witness to their story... I don't want to feel that I just get some kind of pleasure from watching someone else's tragic stories [our emphasis]'. But both participants gesture toward issues of responsibility here, with Isabella in particular suggesting the importance of affect ('You need to *feel* the upset. You need to *feel* the outrage') and the ways in which witnessing may 'move the body to participation' (Tait, 2011: 1233).

But in work on media witnessing, 'participation' is often understood as political action (Corpus Ong, 2014) – from which perspective Isabella's affective response would be seen as wanting. But this focus on 'response-ability' (Tait, 2011: 1233) surely has different political inflections depending on the content or the genre at stake. Feminist discourse has long since critiqued judgements about what counts as politics and thus political action. In doing so, it has also called out a (masculine) history of prioritising extraordinary events (Brown, 1991) within witnessing, rather than more everyday forms

of suffering such as domestic violence and sexual abuse which are disproportionately experienced by girls and women (see Kennedy & Whitlock (2011)). True crime sits on a continuum with these issues, and although there is certainly a question about the ethics of turning the murder of women into material for 'everyday' or 'mundane' witnessing (Ellis, 2009), this regularity could also be read as testament to how pervasive sexual and gendered violence actually *is*.

The participants who used the term witnessing explicitly connected it to political activism in ways which further reflect on debates about the feminist implications of the genre in the contemporary cultural climate:

[#]MeToo was all about standing together as women who have experienced some kind of exploitation at the hands of men ... [T]rue crime does the same thing – that mostly female victims are being given the voice to say 'me too', and most of the time they no longer have a voice because they're dead, but someone is actually waving that flag for them and putting their hands up for them... That's part of the bear witness thing... I don't necessarily think that the objective of the [programme] ... makers would be to do a #MeToo thing. But I definitely think that one of the points of viewership ... is to join that movement ... to acknowledge the victim and their story and get their stories out there (Jenny).

Feminist work has questioned the extent to which true crime situates its interest in murder and assault narratives within a context of systemic violence against women (Fogarty, 2022, Horeck, 2019). But Jenny's comment exemplifies how these political connections can be made in the moment of reception ('I don't necessarily think that the objective of the [programme] ... makers'). Alex spoke of her true crime viewing as cumulative in this regard, as 'what I get from it ... [is] I think about this collective history of women... the suffering of women throughout history,' whilst Amy suggested that 'I think *me* sitting there watching it, *I'm* putting it into a wider context, but I don't think the programmes explicitly do that'. The sheer availability of true crime across channels and platforms (so many women's stories) was central to such connections being made. Rather than simply activating 'individual grief' (Dillman, 2014: 12), such responses attest to the *collective* weight of these narratives, and how participants made connections *across* discourses within true crime and *between* programmes and their gendered and political social contexts.

Theme #5: 'Text me when you get home': Safety 'tips', safety work and gendered warning narratives

The article has emphasised the importance of what participants understood as ethical treatment of female victims in true crime television and how such evaluations were invoked in their own navigations of the ethical contours of the genre. These discourse also often extended to debates about victim-blaming. Moving further beyond programme-based interpretations, this section gives space to the ways in which participants connected true crime television and its discourses to the 'safety work' (Kelly, 2017) they undertake in relation to the threat of gendered violence, as well as its relationships with victim-blaming and ideological hierarchies of 'ideal' victimhood.

As discussed, in both popular and academic discussions of women and true crime, there is an emphasis on the genre implicitly providing pedagogical perspectives on how to avoid victimisation (e.g Vicary and Fraley, 2010). Given that this 'gendered responsabilisation' (Wells, 2019, cited in Vitis and Ryan, 2023: 296) can be seen as closely intertwined with victim-blaming and thus rape myths, it is not surprising that the very idea of 'safety tips' has been critiqued within feminist scholarship and activism more broadly (see Rentschler, 2015). But there is little research which explores how women *respond* to these discourses in relation to true crime and in the context of their everyday lives.

Some of the participants were clearly aware of these popular discourses on safety tips and referred to them in the interviews. As Rosie noted: 'I'm not watching true crime to, like, get tips on how to defend myself. If I was going to do that, I'd go and join like a martial arts class or something'.

Similarly, Kylie suggested:

... I heard that women watch it for like methods on staying safe...[T]hat never crossed my mind ... And when I was talking to my friend a little bit about it, she was like... there's so many more like places and resources you would go to for stuff like that before you would be like, "I'm going to watch a true crime documentary for advice on how to stay safe".

In both of these responses, there is the implication that such discourses may be patronising and position the female viewer as naïve. Others critiqued such discourses precisely because of the responsibility it attributed to women: 'I didn't really buy that as a reason because it's not about what you do a lot of the time it's the perpetrator ...' (Diana).

From the vantage point of the safety tips discourse, there is an emphasis on such programming *increasing* women's fear of crime (Cavender et al., 1999; Maddelena, 2021). This was a more marginal discourse in the data, but Anita explained that:

[I]t's ... taken away my independence in a way, because ... it makes me double think .. should I be going out this late at night and stuff and it kind of like scares me as well-

being a woman in this society because ... anything can happen out there ... [T]hese victims [in true crime] didn't know that they'd end this way.

Most participants did not suggest that they had changed their behaviour in response to true crime viewing. But when Anita gestures toward this above, she voices her perspective as rational and logical. Given that women's fear of crime can be framed as excessive in relation to statistical data (see Vera-Gray, 2018: 135), this relationship with true crime can slide into pathologizing projections about a 'vicious cycle' (Vicary and Frayley, 2010: 85) in which women are driven 'to be more fearful, leading to a never-ending obsession with the genre' (Maddelena, 2021: 9). This is a familiar trope in fear of crime discourse more widely which ultimately circles around 'blaming women for never having the "right" amount of panic' (Vera-Gray, 2021). According to Vera-Gray, 'Panic too much and you're paranoid' but 'don't panic enough and you're to blame'. In her empirical study, Vera-Gray explores how women engage in 'safety work' (Kelly, 2017) – 'the habitual, sometimes unconscious, choices and changes we make daily to maintain a sense of safety in public space' (Vera-Gray 2018: 5). Rather than framing safety work as simply a self-limitation for women, it can also be understood as form of 'intuitive adaptation' (144) and 'ordinary resistance' (133). This represents a form of labour that is often over-looked, precisely because it is understood as normative and habitual.

The idea of such work being habitual and taken for granted came through strongly in the participant responses. As Lauren explained, 'I don't think in that sense [true crime] makes any difference [to me] 'cause I think as a woman you're always very hyper aware anyway'. Alex continued that true crime doesn't need to educate women or make them aware as 'It's just like – we *know*. We are also a body, that ... is seen by a lot of people to just be existing in a space that isn't our own [original emphasis]'. This idea of 'embodied watchfulness' (Vera-Gray, 2018: 14) was played out in a range of different ways. As Gert explains:

I live like 5 minutes away from a hospital, so ... people will pull up their car next to me ... and ask me for directions... But I do sort of make a point to myself, at least to be standing away from the window. I don't stand close to the cars unless it's a woman in the car. If it's a man asking me for directions, I stand far away and I tell them in a loud, clear voice where they need to go.

Or:

[It's] more like... be very careful who you're talking to. Maybe try and notify someone that you are talking to someone in a bar ... I think it's more interaction with ... strangers that I'm more keenly aware of now (Amy).

Rather than playing a pedagogic role in outlining the idea of 'how to' and safety 'tips', true crime had – at most – made the participants more aware of the decisions they made and the work they undertook. As Louise reflected: 'I've always been pretty safety conscious...But I think [true crime] has functioned as an explainer to me ... it's informed for me why I make those choices'.

In terms of discourses around women and true crime, participants were sometimes keen to acknowledge that the idea of 'safety tips' couldn't be separated from the genre offering cautionary tales or warnings to women, which further led into the discursive space of victim-blaming. Few suggested that they saw true crime television as *explicitly* offering victim-blaming narratives, yet:

So ... maybe it's not necessarily victim blaming but it's saying ... this is not a great environment to be in on your own, so heads up. This happened to her. It could happen to you. It does feel like a little bit of a warning (Molly).

The case of Sarah Everard, who was raped and murdered by a serving Metropolitan police officer in London (2021), was often cited here. This was a time of heightened awareness in the UK around women being murdered when they were 'just walking home' (or were out alone), due to the death of Sarah Everard, as well as the murders of Sabina Nessa (2021), Zara Aleena (2022) and sisters Nicole Smallman and Bibaa Henry (2020). All but Everard were women of colour, and the other victims received far less media visibility. Indeed, in further unpacking the ideological dimensions of the warning, participants discussed understandings of the 'ideal victim'.

The concept of the ideal victim refers to both the social and cultural background of the person (i.e. race, class, sexuality) and the circumstances surrounding their victimisation (Ricciardelli et al, 2021). Some of the participants discussed the ideological hierarchies at work here:

I'm ... interested ... in how people get represented [in these programmes]. You know, particularly women ... you can be a good victim and you can be a bad victim. And if you're a good victim, it's because you're just [a]... white middle-class person going about your day ... and then something horrible happens to you (Diana).

As this hints, the 'good victim' discourse cannot be separated from the lack of attention to intersectionality in victim narratives in true crime television (Horeck, 2019; White, 2020). In discussing how such omissions or hierarchies overlap with the capitalist basis of true crime as a media product, Rosie commented how:

[M]ost shows are made about heterosexual white women, and you saw it with Gabby Petito's disappearance [and murder in Wyoming in 2021]... [W]hen they were searching for her, they found [multiple]... bodies of Black and indigenous women that had just

gone missing and no one had given a fuck ... and as with trans women it's not as sellable. I don't think it would make any money. And if it did get produced ... I think the comments [in the media] would be even more vitriolic ... no matter how the victims were portrayed in in the show.

Looking back to the previous section, this also foregrounds the limitations of true crime television as a space for enabling the *collective* 'witnessing' of these individual narratives – reflective of a wider debate in feminist scholarship on true crime, and of course the history of feminist thought and activism more broadly (White, 2020).

As with so many women in true crime, *Petito* was murdered by her boyfriend, and there was discussion in the data not simply of 'good' and 'bad' victim tropes, but the wider ideological contours of how female victimhood is narrativized, especially in relation to the safety tips discourse. This was particularly so in terms of the blurring of the relationship between public/ private. Many of the respondents watched on their own (either because they lived alone or because other family members were not interested in true crime), and this often led to conversations about whether their viewing at home – alone – was relaxed, fearful, anxious and so forth. This apparent slippage between public/ private spheres in the participants' discussions of safety is important in further questioning the hegemony of the 'safety tips' discourse. The latter largely focuses attention on women being at risk from a stranger in a dark alley – a message already critiqued in feminist scholarship for its obfuscation of gendered domestic violence (Fogarty, 2022; Jermyn 2007). Indeed, so many women in true crime television meet their death in the context of the home. Whilst true crime arguably explores both perspectives (public/private, stranger/ partner), participants could note the eagerness to 'warn' women about the perils of the public sphere when they understood that the domestic context may be the real site of danger. As Rosie observed: 'In reality... we know that most women are [more] likely to be attacked by their partners at home'. In this regard, participants did not only question the accepted relevance of the safety tips discourse in understanding the key ways in which they engaged with true crime television. They also went beyond this, critiquing its wider implications for narrativizing women's accountability for gendered violence; its continued role in policing their public freedoms, and its erasure of the domestic, everyday dangers that claim the lives of many female victims of true crime.

Conclusion

This article has suggested that the pervasive popular discourse on women as avid consumers of true crime seems to represent a 'evident presence [that is]... speaking for an absence elsewhere'

(Brunsdon, 2013: 391) – namely the lack of detailed empirical evidence which offers insight into this relationship. This is particularly so with regard to television which has been notably neglected in true crime scholarship, representing a significant omission in burgeoning feminist research in the field.

The underlying aim of this study was not to ‘prove’ that television true crime *is* ‘feminist’, nor to establish that a collection of female viewers read it as such. Rather, although we were interested in finding out how the women articulated their own investments in true crime television, we deliberately wanted to use the data in ways which entered into direct dialogue with existing claims and perceptions in feminist and popular frameworks. Necessarily bound up with this process are debates about feminist revisionist true crime in the contemporary cultural moment (Hamad, 2023; Horeck, 2024). A key issue here is that this idea of a ‘reworking’ or a ‘revisioning’ of tropes implies a firm sense of what has gone before. But a limited number of texts have been prioritised in scholarship since the true crime boom – with the prolific existence of *series* (programmes that often deal with one case per episode) most notably invisible. Moreover, existing understandings of true crime television have been overwhelmingly textual in focus, including those emerging from feminist work. But it has long since been argued that audience discourses and practices should be integral to understandings of genre in television, rather than an ‘afterthought’ which *responds* to established textual codes and norms (Mittell, 2004). The discussion of true crime consumption in this article suggests the continued value of this approach.

In terms of findings, the interview data suggests the importance of moving beyond ‘narrow descriptions of true crime as “self-defense” resources’ (Vitis and Ryan, 2023: 309) toward more nuanced discussions of pleasures; the mobilisation of ethically gendered frames of viewing, to the relationships between true crime and women’s everyday negotiations of risk and safety in public space. The data in this study does not suggest that ‘voiceless’ female victims are seen as endemic to the genre in the way that textual approaches appear to have advanced. Whilst interpretations and readings of agency are clearly complex, the data complicates particular feminist arguments, especially those that make claims for reception (Dillman, 2014).

At the same time, there was a lot of commonality between feminist perspectives on, and aspirations for, true crime, and the themes in the interview data – which is perhaps evident of the impact of popular feminism and the mainstreaming of (some of) its concerns. This was especially so in relation to the ethical status of the genre which often rest on constructions of femininity. Many of the responses from the participants – in relation to narrative pleasures, representations of victimhood, aesthetics or viewing practices – are shaped by the ethical frames and tensions surrounding the genre. The respectability of true crime viewing remains disputed or insecure, and women in

particular have to navigate particular discursive obstacles in speaking about their viewing investments, ranging from the highly feminised and 'naïve' subject marooned in an unsuitable terrain of 'masculine' violence; a pathological attraction to the serial killer, to the 'guilty pleasures' of crime 'porn' in which they are devoid of any ethical or affective connection with the stories. As such, it is not surprising that the respondents repeatedly grapple with these popular discourses and thus the ethical questions involved in viewing the genre, especially their positions (and responsibilities) in bearing 'witness' to some of the worst excesses of patriarchal power.

The sample in this research was clearly limited in both scale and demographics. Although true crime has often been discussed as a 'white' genre in terms of both representation and audience appeal (Horeck 2019; White, 2020), we acknowledge that our research contributes to this bias – which has doubtless been shaped by our own status as white women. Given that intersectionality has been prioritised as part of the potential of feminist perspectives on true crime (Horeck, 2019, Fogarty, 2022), this same attention to diversity asks urgent questions about audience reception, suggesting clear avenues for future research. In terms of other potential limitations, participants discussed particular programme examples less than we anticipated. We fully recognise that they were sometimes ranging over a long span of viewing (with all the complexities of memory that this may involve). This may also reflect on the sheer availability of true crime television – and the debate about 'too many texts' (Couldry, 2000) – and the need to move away from studying 'audiences' in programme, genre or even media specific terms. However, the rich data in this study questions the need to jettison more traditional approaches in favour of such radical shifts. Rather, the question of programme detail may suggest the use value of other methodologies or resources here, including textual prompts, focus groups or 'text-in-action' approaches (Skeggs and Wood, 2012).

As discussed in the article, participants were often aware of popular discourses on women as true crime viewers and could both internalise and resist such constructions. By way of ending, it is notable that they not only called out some of the ideological work undertaken by these popular framings, but also questioned the conceptual and cultural basis of *our* investigation into their engagement with the genre. So, reflecting on the extent to which female investment in true crime is presented as a strange 'enigma' that needs to be 'solved', Molly asked:

But why would *men* be watching true crime? Like what sort of answers would you have for that? Why would ... a man be sitting down watching another man be the perpetrator of all this violence against women [original emphasis]?

Whilst clearly also suggesting potential further avenues for research, Molly highlights how there are arguably more difficult questions to be asked about *male* investment, which the question of female engagement appears neatly to divert. This suggests the importance of us (as academics and true crime viewers) challenging our own epistemological orientation toward the genre, and not always following the clues mapped out by scholarly and popular discourse.

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