

“A SHOW THAT PROVES THE WORST MONSTERS ARE REAL”: MEDIA AND SOCIAL
MEDIA IMPACT ON CRIMINAL TRIALS AND POST-CONVICTION GUILT AS
PERCEIVED BY CRIMINAL JUSTICE STUDENTS.

by

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THESIS

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ABSTRACT

“A Show that Proves the Worst Monsters are Real”: Media and Social Media Impact on Criminal Trials and Post-Conviction Guilt as Perceived by Criminal Justice Students.

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This study, using survey data collected in 2022, investigates how consuming true crime media, from media such as podcasts, influences fear and anxiety among criminal justice students. In addition, the relationship between viewing criminal trials in real time and forming opinions different from the sentencing juries is assessed. Results suggest that there is no significant relationship between the consumption of true crime media and fear or anxiety. Moreover, viewing criminal trials in real time does not have a significant effect on the formation of opinions that differ from criminal juries. Limitations, implications, and directions for future research are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

The most influential court cases of the 21st century have profoundly changed the way the media covers trials, shifting them from public interest to entertainment. A new generation of soon to be law enforcement professionals are entering the workforce, having grown up in an age of media saturation. For older generations, the change was slow as the Menendez brothers, O.J. Simpson, Lorena Bobbit, and Betty Broderick trials emerged as trials to be observed through television firsthand.

For the newest members of the workforce however, a precedent has been set regarding what is available surrounding criminal trials. Televised trials are regularly available to stream and watch live. Podcasts dissect every judicial decision, and post-conviction documentaries call to question the validity of a conviction. The recent trials of Casey Anthony, and George Zimmerman left the public on edge in disagreement with the jury findings. The collective outrage even found its way from the public streets to the law desk of legislatures across the country, as individuals sought to change laws after these trials occurred.

For those future criminal justice professionals however, it is unknown how media has changed their perception of crime. Determining media influence during these criminal trials is essential to understanding if criminal defendants are receiving fair trials, or if their due process is being compromised. The influence of media saturation over criminal trials can include post-conviction documentaries, and podcasts which cause continued scrutiny surrounding criminal convictions. Since students enrolled in criminal justice majors are more likely to become criminal justice professionals, there is a need to determine motivations for entering the career field. The questions that lie ahead are indicative of what criminal justice majors think of media saturation, criminal justice due process, crime documentaries, and criminal trials.

In 2022, a survey was conducted at the University of Texas at Arlington (UTA) which surveyed undergraduate students enrolled in at least one criminal justice course for that semester. The main objective of this study was to investigate the perceptions of students regarding how fearful or anxious they felt after consuming true crime media, from media such as podcasts. In addition, those who participated were asked if they watched criminal trials in real time, and formed opinions that differed from the sentencing juries. Some of the opinions the participants were asked about involved their perceptions of crime media and the perceived fairness of trials during criminal proceedings. The study was guided by three specific research questions: *1) Do individuals feel more anxious after consuming true crime entertainment? 2) Is there an increase in fear after an individual consumes true crime entertainment? 3) Do individuals who watch criminal trials form opinions about the guilt of criminal defendants?* Those who participated were also asked to define the amounts and types of true crime related media they consumed. Within the survey, students were asked about the quantity and types of crime related media they consumed, including fictionalized television shows and movies. The purpose of these questions was to determine the amount of media consumption to which potential criminal justice employees are exposed.

The next section of this study includes a literature review of true crime media and how that media has evolved over the years. In addition, there is an exploration of how publicized criminal trials have influenced public response, and how those responses have even led to legislative changes. Following the literature review, the methodology of this study is discussed. The next section describes the results of the bivariate analyses used to answer the research questions of this study. This study concludes with a discussion of the results, including limitations and directions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The CSI Effect

In the early 1990s a shift occurred in the type of entertainment made for both television and movies that included an influx of crime related shows. This shift in entertainment has influenced a generation of both criminal justice employees and members of the general public who participate in juries. These shows have created a misconception about the type of work conducted by criminal justice professionals. One such misconception, deemed the “CSI effect”, can affect the perception someone has surrounding criminal justice worker duties, as well as increasing general interest in the topic. The “CSI effect” (Clements, 2015) has been described in a multitude of ways, with many definitions focusing on the influence forensic shows have on the opinions of jury members. For the purpose of the current study, the CSI effect is defined as, “a phenomenon where ‘television educated’ jurors are less likely to convict someone who is guilty because procedures and techniques they observed from fictional television shows were not applied in the case” (Clements, 2015, p. 16).

Crime related television shows portray a wide facet of criminal justice workers, with police officers no longer being the sole protagonist. The CSI effect, while generalized, does not reflect only crime scene technicians but can also show misconceptions of a wide range of “key criminal justice players” (Bissler & Conners, 2012). These glamorized roles portray police officers, social workers, adult supervision officers, correctional officers, crime scene technicians, as well as prosecutors, judges, and defense attorneys. Fictionalized shows discuss a variety of positions and can reflect stereotypical experiences or troupes that plague different criminal justice organizations. Crime related entertainment can also stigmatize violent crime, which can cause fear that an individual may be victimized in that manner (Bissler & Conners, 2012).

Ill-conceived notions of the responsibilities of criminal justice employees may lead individuals to seek out a career with inaccurate expectations. Criminal justice is often an underpaid career field that requires individuals who are passionate about the work they undertake. Employee burnout, glamorization, poor pay, and low morale are just a few of the potential barriers that future employees can encounter in their new profession. These professional barriers or experiences are not often represented or discussed within media (Kohan & Mazmanian, 2003).

Media misinformation is one of many stigmas that working professionals must combat. Shows such as *Law & Order*, *CSI*, *NYPD Blue*, and *The Practice* seemingly show a romanticized view of criminal justice. These shows often provide a neatly packaged crime from start to finish within a 45-minute window. Occurrence of the crime, investigation, and even court proceedings all occur within the same timeframe. These jam-packed episodes set a precedent that crimes are easily managed and solved. In comparison, real life investigations and court proceedings can often span the course of several years (Barthe et al., 2013).

In addition, the CSI effect has transcended public opinion and criminal justice professionals, and now appears to affect criminal juries as well. The affect criminal shows exude on juries directly, influences the decisions these juries make regarding conviction (Cole & Dioso-Villa, 2009). Studies have indicated the CSI effect marginally increases an expectation of DNA evidence be presented in criminal trials in certain circumstances (Cole & Dioso-Villa, 2009). Scientific evidence is expected at higher rates for violent crimes, such as murder and rape (Shelton et al., 2006). An increased need for scientific evidence places pressure upon law enforcement and prosecutors to provide evidence that is not necessarily easily or frequently obtained for these types of crimes.

Ultimately, researchers have indicated that jury expectations are not inherently the fault of the CSI phenomenon. Ongoing studies have indicated that the CSI effect for juries is overblown and non-existent (Smith et al., 2011). Expanding upon previous research, there is reason to suspect that the CSI effect is often utilized as a scapegoat for jury demands because juries expect scientific evidence due to broader changes in popular culture (Shelton, 2010). This suggests that juries are no longer blank slates with limited knowledge regarding forensic science. However, lawyers have changed strategy to compensate for an anticipated CSI effect (Smith et al., 2011).

While the CSI effect continues to be studied, it is not the only area where the media and criminal justice intersect. True crime entertainment is broadening and increasing as the demand for new and riveting crime stories emerge. These types of television programs, documentaries, podcasts, and news reports exist because the population craves and demands it. While society has embraced the true crime genre, it is important to determine the ethics and consequences of treating crime as entertainment.

Is Crime Entertainment?

Law & Order and its prospective spin-offs often boast about dramatized versions of what they deem “ripped from the headlines” episodes (Collins, 2009). These television episodes are often loosely based on true crime stories, with only subtle changes. *Law & Order* is one of many crime shows that takes this approach where art imitates life. Often, crime drama television shows and movies take a bold approach to dramatizing crimes that have occurred (Turnbull, 2010). This has the potential to instill the perception that crimes are easily solvable and that criminal justice workers maintain embellished careers. Serious crime topics can often be treated in a bizarre or comical manner, while also negating or minimizing victims’ feelings.

While crime dramas dominated the 1990s, documentaries and podcasts have seemingly taken over with the advancement in technology. One recent example of this occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic with the release of *Tiger King*. A gay male Oklahoman exotic safari park owner was embraced by millions of Americans who binge watched the series in the entirety while quarantining in the confines of their home. This Netflix produced documentary garnered over 64 million views within the first month of its premiere (Littleton, 2020).

Despite Joe Exotic, The *Tiger King*, being convicted in a murder for hire plot, he became an overnight sensation. Due to his popularity, there were cries for his immediate release from custody, whereas his victim, Carol Baskin, was seen as a pariah by members of the public. Footage taken from before the murder for hire plot shows Joe Exotic unraveling as he threatens to murder Baskin while staging varying murder scenes meant to reflect her death. According to Lagerwey and Nygaard (2020), these images created “a feeling of intense feminine vulnerability bizarrely tinged with sexualization” (Lagerwey & Nygaard, 2020, p. 4).

The popularity of this documentary suggests that what were once seen as delicate topics are now meme worthy events. Memes are typically pictures or images in a specific style that are spread across the internet via social media or are shared by individuals through text. Victims in crimes that see these criminal acts go viral now appear to be the butt of jokes as they become viral sensations that were once topics loosely covered by *Saturday Night Live* or late-night talk show hosts. In 2017 and 2018 during the height of the *#MeToo* movement, memes including images of women were shared across social media platforms with victims being listed as either “rapeable” or “unrapeable” (Andreasen, 2021). A powerful and important movement was reduced to sexual innuendos and internet banter with the core focus of the movement being overlooked by those who spread the jokes.

Processing the impact that victims feel or have felt by their victimization can be compounded by reenactments and nonstop media coverage of the crime to bolster ratings. Poor portrayal of these victims affected by crime fosters an environment where victims feel directly affected by the media coverage. Crime victims can often be blindsided by renewed interest in a crime after new coverage via documentaries or podcasts emerge. Aside from revictimization, minorities such as people of color, individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and LGBTQ members are often portrayed as the criminals in true crime podcasts and were very rarely portrayed as victims in episodes (Sherrill, 2020).

According to Greer (2007), news portrayals surrounding victims can often appear to contain a certain level of “white-washing,” where media focus centers around cases that are perceived to have the ideal victim (Greer, 2007, p. 29). Researchers have examined the impacts of media stories as the ideal victim seemingly is still portrayed with more emphasis being placed upon missing or murdered white female victims. Research indicates that minorities are portrayed with less frequency compared to white victims (Slakoff & Brennan, 2020).

Aside from the potential racial undertones experienced by victims, further mistreatment occurs when there is a lack of acknowledgment by the media. Some crime victims are forgotten when the crime is discussed by mainstream media, podcasters, and documentarians. Mass shooting victims are often untouched by media coverage, but an interest and focus surround the shooter and motive (McWhorter, 2021). Some argue that victims deserve representation from the media and that these victims need to have the ability to speak for themselves regarding crimes committed against them (Rentschler, 2007).

In September 2022, Netflix released a fictionalized docuseries about serial killer Jeffery Dahmer, titled *Dahmer*. The 10-part series followed the early life of Dahmer and included

background stories of his victims and the eventual double-digit murders of young minority men. While the series undoubtedly captivated audiences and provided a new generation with an intrinsic view of a renowned serial killer, the series was met with severe backlash from victim families. Surviving family members, Rita Isbell and Eric Perry, were especially outspoken stating that Netflix was profiting from victim trauma, and that the company failed to notify families of the series. Rita Isbell's victim impact statement at Dahmer's sentencing was reenacted and seen as traumatizing as it replayed on television (Strause, 2022).

While fear of victims reliving the trauma through the media can occur, there is an even more alarming danger. As indicated, Carole Baskin of the *Tiger King* docuseries was immediately vilified by social media following the release of *Tiger King*. Forgoing due process, members of the public posted conspiracy theories indicating Carole Baskin was involved in the disappearance of her former husband (Guerra-Pujo., et al 2021). The willingness to publicly condemn an individual, without evidence, has the potential to set dangerous precedents that can ultimately undermine due process. Being deemed as guilty in the court of public opinion has the potential to devastate a person's life even if they are not criminally prosecuted.

While interest in a crime is a natural curiosity for members of the public, it can seemingly have negative connotations as viewers see what can only be described as reality shows with a criminal twist. With the evolution of technology, new immersive media such as Podcasts have emerged. These audio files which can be streamed through a variety of services or downloaded to a device can be stand-alone criminal episodes or an entire series of episodes that follow one crime. Audiences no longer have the power of visuals, but instead are captivated by compelling storytelling and interviews. Podcasters provide interviews, recorded testimony, pre-recorded

media coverage, 911 calls, and sometimes even open discussions with crime victims or law enforcement directly involved with the crime.

Limited research has been conducted regarding podcasts and criminal justice. Many true crime podcast research centers around fear-of-crime and the influence listeners feel from true crime podcasts (Bailey, 2017). One noted area of concern by researchers, however, is the fine line regarding journalism and entertainment within podcasts that is easily blurred. Having the public know the difference is essential to ensuring that cases are presented in an accurate and fair manner. Journalistic integrity is one expectation listeners should have when they listen to a podcast episode.

Podcasters have acknowledged the importance that lies with them regarding presenting a fair and balanced approach to a case. Many podcasters reflected that it was essential they present the evidence surrounding a case in a clear and concise manner, ensuring that integrity was maintained (Boling, 2019). The potential has risen for podcasts to shape criminal justice reform, as these podcasts have highlighted injustices in trials, essentially giving a voice to the accused. In the past, these types of questions by the public were typically only presented after a documentary was released that highlighted such inaccuracies. These former documentaries required production, encountered filming constraints, and took months, if not years, to film and edit. In comparison, podcasters can quickly record and edit these podcast files and upload them for listeners.

Public reactions from documentaries and podcasts have included demand for criminal justice reform as well as new trials for convicted defendants. These demands in some situations have led to changes in public policy and have greatly affected criminal defendants. As consumption of true crime media has increased, it is important to determine its effect on

defendants. Specifically, it is important to determine whether media coverage affects a criminal defendant's right to a fair trial. Determining lingering effects of public perception is crucial to understanding the longstanding impact surrounding criminal convictions, in addition to whether the public accepts jury verdicts.

Reasonable Doubt Post-Conviction

Making a Murderer was a 10- part documentary that was released in 2016 by Netflix. The docuseries followed the initial wrongful conviction of Steven Avery as he was sentenced to prison for 35 years for the sexual assault and beating of Penny Ann Beernsten. After serving roughly 18 years of his prison sentence, he was exonerated by DNA evidence in 2003. Following his release from prison, Avery filed a multi-million-dollar lawsuit against Manitowoc County for his wrongful conviction. During the trial, a woman named Teresa Halback went missing and evidence was located on the property that indicated Avery was involved in her subsequent murder. Both Avery and his nephew, Brendan Dassey, were arrested for Halbach's murder in Manitowoc County. The investigation was spearheaded by the same County officials who were being sued by Avery (LeChance & Kaplan, 2020).

Shortly after the release of the docuseries, over 300,000 people signed a change.org petition urging the courts to overturn the convictions of Dassey and Avery (D'Addario, 2016). A second season was even green lit by Netflix which closely followed Dassey's impending appeals. Real life played out before the country as Avery's nephew and accomplice, Dassey, went through the appeals process.

The looming lawsuit by Avery and the lack of oversight from a separate governing agency over Manitowoc County during the investigation gave credence to those who questioned the validity of the conviction. These concerns fostered and spurred individuals to take to social

media, demanding justice be served. All the while, Halbach's family desperately watched from the sidelines as the men they believe responsible for the death of their relative became viral sensations and appeared as victims to countless viewers. Brendan Dassey, an intellectually challenged juvenile at the time of his arrest, ultimately had his appeals denied, which left many feeling as though justice was not served. This is a prime example of how podcasts and documentaries play a pivotal role in how the public perceives and understands convictions. Public perception of injustice can affect victims' families, the perceived legitimacy of the courts, and other criminal justice processes.

Many examples can be found of seemingly innocuous crime entertainment that led to public outcry in support of criminal cases being reopened. *Serial*, *Making a Murderer*, *The Jinx*, and *The Staircase* are just a few of these popular podcasts or documentaries. As indicated by Bruzzi (2016), we are "in danger now of fragmenting or eliding the distinctions between documentary and the law." (p.39).

Serial ushered in a new era of what has been described as a golden age of podcasting (Berry, 2015). This new version of documented true crime popularized a wave of crime entertainment, seemingly paving the way for future podcasts. The premise outlined the conviction of a man identified as Adnan Syed. Syed was found guilty of murdering his on-and-off girlfriend Hae Min Lee at the age of 17. The podcast highlighted several inconsistencies and inaccuracies from Syed's first trial.

The podcast was hailed as a visual story telling medium for a radio audience. The episodes contained high production value with interviews from a variety of sources and were arranged in a thematical way (O'Mera, 2015). The podcast gave listeners viewpoints that highlighted the motive for why Syed may have killed his former girlfriend, while also

pinpointing inaccuracies that provided potential reasonable doubt surrounding the conviction. Producers provided visual aids as well in their storytelling by linking a variety of crime related material to their website for viewers to access after listening to an individual episode (O'Meara, 2015).

Syed's appeal process continued after becoming a viral sensation. With the podcast experiencing millions of downloads (O'Meara, 2015), individuals found themselves in the front row seat as the court proceedings were covered extensively by mainstream media outlets. Public opinion was not the only perspective that appeared to be affected by the podcast. Most notably, the appealing judge cited the relevance of facts as presented in the podcast. This was one of the first instances where a podcast was mentioned by a presiding judge (Boling, 2019). The effect of criminal justice entertainment is undeniable when seen in this light.

While journalists, documentarians and podcasters have utilized media as a tool to expose potential ethical and legal misgivings, this is scarcely the only potential innocence review that is conducted. Innocence reviews, as they are referred to, are not a new concept. These investigations are typically led by defense attorneys working *pro bono*. These reviews are conducted to free wrongfully convicted defendants. The innocence project is one example of an organization working to exonerate and free the wrongfully convicted (Ricciardelli et al., 2012).

The Innocence Project focuses on fighting for the overturning of wrongful convictions exclusively via the appeals process with the use of DNA evidence that was either never tested, or retesting said DNA. The scope they utilize for case selection is very narrow to ensure they are fighting for those who have truly received a wrongful conviction. Universities have taken an approach to providing students with innocence practicums so they understand the importance of wrongful convictions (Ricciardelli et al., 2012).

One of the most important ideologies gained by participants undertaking an innocence case review course is the resounding implications of much needed criminal justice reform. Students who participate in innocence review courses weigh the human cost associated with prosecutorial misconduct. The course allows for students to deconstruct cases and view them from a perspective of criminal justice failure (Carmack & Wallace, 2018). These types of classes in criminal justice education are important to both dispel some false assumptions created by true crime entertainment and appeal to students interested in affecting change.

Publicized Criminal Trials

While the above scenarios are associated with a post-conviction approach to possible miscarriages of justice, there exists a new genre of entertainment for public consumption. That entertainment exists in the form of publicized criminal trials, live-streamed court proceedings that are filmed with a circulating media frenzy. Due process, which was once a sacred and coveted systematic process, is now televised and scrutinized with a barrage of non-stop analytical coverage by former and current professional court employees. These spectacles include both benefits and drawbacks that impact a defendant's right to a fair trial, while also providing public oversight to ensure a non-diluted and ethical due process.

It can be difficult to pinpoint the exact moment that criminal trials became sensationalized. Some researchers have argued that movies and television shows shifted in the 1970s, which led to an increased fear of crime (Reiner, 2007). These types of maverick-style cop movies glamorized police work and resulted in the idolization of the cop and an ill-conceived and discriminatory perception of the criminal, often portrayed by a racial or ethnic minority. It has been argued that this media shift ultimately impacted public policy, as legislatures reacted to public outcry for tougher crime laws (Cavender, 2004).

While there may be debate as to the exact moment that crime caught the public interest, media sensationalism is undeniable. Starting with the trials of the Menendez brothers and O.J. Simpson, it became clear the public craved coverage of high-profile criminal trials. It appears that news coverage surrounding victims and offenders demands elaboration defining those characteristics. For high profile cases, especially those which experience frenzied news coverage, the public is interested in the characteristics between those who are vulnerable and those who are predatory (Lin & Phillips, 2014).

One of the biggest concerns associated with criminal trials that are heavily publicized is providing the defendant with a fair trial (Lyon, 2009). Trials that receive extensive media coverage before and during the trial can affect a defendant's right to presumed innocence (Greer & McLaughlin, 2010). Per the standards of criminal trials, all defendants are to be presumed innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt (Tanoos, 2017). A delicate balance exists in protecting First Amendment rights for the media, while also trying to ensure juries are not tainted by the onslaught of media coverage. This creates a conundrum for judges to ensure that both are protected, and that the court proceedings remain as pure and unadulterated as possible (Tanoos, 2017). Despite warnings given by judges it is possible to encounter rogue jury members who seek out media that provides information juries should not have access to (Aaronson & Patterson, 2013).

To fully understand the stakes associated with criminal trials, it is essential to understand what governs and protects the rights afforded to defendants and the media. The public access of criminal trials is protected by two separate constitutional amendments. The First Amendment of the constitution grants members of the media the right of access for criminal trials. The Sixth Amendment provides protection for the defendant's right to a public trial. In theory, this

protection ensures that there is a certain level of safety by preventing a defendant from suffering governmental oppression (Public Access, 2006). In situations where the presumption of innocence has been tainted, there are potential methods the court can use to ensure the defendant receives a fair trial. These include gag orders that prevent discussion surrounding the case with the media, changes of venue to move the trial to a different location, and sealing the court to prevent material being released to the public (Tanoos, 2017).

Media involvement in the criminal courts can have positive and negative effects on both the trial and the public. For instance, positives associated with media coverage include familiarization and education of the criminal justice process among the public. The negative effects include the inability to receive a fair trial because of jury contamination and negative attitudes towards criminal defendants (Tanoos, 2017).

While O.J. Simpson, the Menendez brothers, and Lorena Bobbitt monopolized the news stories of the '90s, new publicized crimes entered the true crime genre, and eclipsed headlines both nationally and internationally at the turn of the millennium. Publicized international crime stories featured Americans abroad who were both the victims and alleged perpetrators on foreign soil. Stories such as those of Natalee Holloway and Amanda Knox were two primary cases that remained in the spotlight for years.

Amanda Knox was a college student studying abroad in Italy in 2007. Her roommate, Meredith Kercher, a student from England, was raped and murdered in the home they shared. Knox and her boyfriend Raffaele Sollecito quickly became the primary suspects. The trial appeared before the public eye and was seen as a miscarriage of justice with a different suspect emerging and later convicted for the rape and murder. Gies (2017) indicated that Knox was dubbed "Foxy Knoxy" in the media, a nickname from her former soccer days that saw her

identified as an alluring, yet murderous, vixen (Gies, 2017). While Knox and Sollecito were convicted of the crime, they were later retried and had their convictions overturned.

Amanda Knox became the brunt of late-night talk show hosts, was the subject of hundreds of hours of crime TV coverage, and spurred a steady stream of documentaries that provided a play-by-play synopsis of what occurred in her case. While a *Lifetime* movie provided a made for television dramatized version of the crime, nearly fourteen years later new attention was brought forth by Hollywood. A fictionalized version of the crime with subtle changes was released titled, *Stillwater*. Several key elements remained the same, but the movie shared characteristics with Knox's murder trial. Amanda Knox herself spoke out publicly against the film, indicating that Hollywood was profiting off her name and story without her consent (Schwartz, 2021).

Within a year of the Amanda Knox investigation and subsequent trial, Casey Anthony was accused of murdering her daughter, Caylee Anthony, in 2008. The media followed the crime closely in the search for Caylee, which included the discovery of her body and the ultimate arrest of her mother. What proceeded was a frenzy of local, national, and international media that followed every step of the trial. What was unique about the case was the influence social media had surrounding the subsequent trial (Battaglia, 2012). The Casey Anthony murder trial was deemed the social media trial of the century, in part because it was one of the most heavily publicized trials after the social media boom of the early 2000s. Casey Anthony was ultimately found not guilty and the public revolted with outcry of jury incompetence. Concern by the public of wrongful exoneration can lead to a loss of faith in the judicial process (Battaglia, 2012).

In addition to spurring public outcry, the trial spawned calls for legislative changes across the United States. Anthony, who initially claimed her daughter's baby sitter kidnapped Caylee,

failed to report the kidnapping to police. Anthony waited approximately 31 days before reporting that her child was missing, but could not be charged with any criminal charges in relation to the failure to report because it was not a criminal offense. After the trial, concerned citizens and legislators demanded laws be enacted to require parents and guardians to report a missing child within 24 hours. After successful lobbying, States across the United States passed versions of Florida's Caylee's Law, which provided new protections for children who faced danger at the hands of their relatives or guardians. This law ensured that parents and guardians who failed to report their children missing would face legal consequences (Socia & Brown, 2014).

Within five years, TV court reporters had returned to Florida, captivated by another murder case that took place within the state. On February 26, 2012, George Zimmerman shot and killed Trayvon Martin, an unarmed 17-year-old. Zimmerman, armed with a handgun, was acting as an unofficial neighborhood watch when he saw Martin. Believing that the unarmed teenager was doing something nefarious, Zimmerman dialed 911 and alerted the dispatcher that the juvenile was dressed in a hoodie and walking in the rain (Carlson, 2016).

Despite the dispatcher advising Zimmerman to remain in the vehicle, he exited the car and began following Martin. The two became involved in an altercation and Martin was shot and killed by Zimmerman. Initially prosecutors failed to charge Zimmerman with any crimes, which spurred national protests. After a special prosecutor was assigned to the case, Zimmerman was charged with second degree murder. Americans watched and listened as Zimmerman's lawyers relied on the controversial stand your ground law as his defense (Carlson, 2016). Florida's stand your ground law allows for a person to use deadly force in the event of self-defense. Stand your ground was legalized in 2005 and provided a caveat that people defending themselves were not required to retreat during the encounter (Weaver, 2008).

By the end of the trial, arguments arose nationally regarding the validity of self-defense laws with many individuals calling for the end of stand your ground laws (Lave, 2013). Zimmerman was ultimately acquitted of the charge, sparking national protests as many members of the public disagreed with the outcome. The trial highlighted the intense theme of racial disparity, with the national discussion focused on the killing of unarmed African Americans, and the acquittals of those individuals who committed the crimes (Carlson, 2016).

While the Casey Anthony and George Zimmerman juries faced public outrage surrounding the verdict, these juries were not the first to encounter such criticism. O.J. Simpson was acquitted for two counts of murder in 1995 in a highly publicized trial where he was accused of murdering his ex-wife Nicole Brown Simpson and her friend, Ron Goldman. The trial ended in a heavily divided country that left Americans on opposing sides regarding the validity of the verdict. Public perception surrounding the O.J. Simpson verdict was assessed by researchers. The approval rating from respondents was at 30% for the jury compared to 70% for Judge Ito (Uelmen, 1997). Americans are welcome to accept or deny a verdict in the court of public opinion, but ultimately must still respect the results of the decision decided by members of the jury who sat through the entirety of the trial.

Local police departments, as well as police within major cities, are often forced to prepare for a rapid response if a hotly contested trial verdict outcome differs from what the public expects. Protests and rallies are often organized following the trial verdict announcement. While victim's families encourage peaceful demonstrations in the name of their loved ones, these events can turn deadly for the protesters, counter demonstrators, and police trying to maintain peace. In recent years, police have been the focus of public demand for policy changes due to

incidents of police brutality, and these episodes have included the deaths of innocent individuals and suspects in police custody.

On August 25, 2020, Kyle Rittenhouse, a 17-year-old white male traveled from Illinois to Kenosha, Wisconsin with an AR-15 in tow reportedly for protection from counter protesters who marched in response to the police shooting of Jacob Blake. Mr. Blake, an African American male, was shot and killed by a white police officer. During the demonstrations Kyle Rittenhouse shot and killed two adult males and injured a third man (Stommel, 2022).

Rittenhouse was later arrested and charged with a multitude of criminal offenses which included: First-degree intentional homicide, First-degree attempted intentional homicide, and First-degree reckless endangerment, but was acquitted on all charges. As the trial progressed, the public questioned and dissected the process. The trial was hailed as a success for Second Amendment rights, protecting the right of individuals to bear arms. Advocates also praised the verdict for protecting the rights of a child who was charged as an adult (Stommel, 2022).

The Rittenhouse trial created a new type of publicized criminal trial because it occurred during protests associated with police brutality. Hundreds of thousands of demonstrators were marching to demand action be taken against a white police officer who killed an unarmed African American man. All the while, a juvenile white male who claimed he was acting in self-defense shot and killed two people. Kenosha, Wisconsin was already filled with a heightened police and media presence, which provided an abundance of video and witness evidence to be presented at trial. This second shooting event spurred a national debate further muddling the commentary regarding race and police.

The Rittenhouse trial was one of many heavily followed events in recent years that involved the deaths of African American males at the hands of white defendants. Amber Guyger,

and Derek Chauvin, are two additional examples of white police officers who were charged with the deaths of African American men. Both of their trials were scrutinized and aired for members of the public to follow. All three crimes occurred within short timeframes of one another, which left a lasting impression both in the media and within members of the public.

In 2018 Amber Guyger, a police officer who was returning to her apartment complex after a shift with the Dallas Police Department, accidentally parked on the wrong floor in her complex garage. As she entered the apartment complex, she went to the wrong residence, not realizing she was on the wrong floor. When she entered what she thought was her apartment she saw victim, Botham Jean, and within a matter of seconds shot and killed the victim, thinking that she was the victim of a burglary. What followed was an extensive trial and guilty verdict that sentenced Guyger to 10 years in prison (Bartholomew, 2019).

Guyger supporters were upset with the guilty verdict, while many individuals perceived the lighter sentence as a slap on the wrist for a manslaughter conviction. Amber Guyger, attempted to have her sentence reduced or overturned during her appeal process but was unsuccessful when her appeal request was denied by the Court of Criminal Appeals. Guyger is currently serving a 10-year sentence in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice with a Parole eligibility date of 2024 (Livengood, 2022). The appeals request and looming Parole eligibility date continue to keep the story relevant within mainstream media.

Two years after of the shooting death of Botham Jean, and a mere year after Amber Guyger's trial, a new crime with racial undertones transpired in Minnesota. On May 25, 2020, police were called in response to an African American male attempting to buy products from a local corner store with a counterfeit \$20 bill. When the police arrived, George Floyd was detained by police officers and a crowd formed to watch the impending arrest. Officers were

heckled and action was demanded as white police officer Derek Chauvin, a veteran police officer, knelt on the back of the victim's neck. Three police officers looked on and attempted to contain the crowd as Chauvin slowly suffocated Floyd to death during the approximate 8-9 minutes that his knee remained on the victim's neck. Countless members of the public watched and recorded while Floyd cried out that he was unable to breathe (Radebe, 2020).

The death of George Floyd, which occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, saw unprecedented challenges experienced throughout the United States, and across the world. Protestors marched through the streets demanding justice, and that the officers be held accountable for their actions. The arrest and subsequent trial of Derek Chauvin faced new challenges as courts scrambled to adjust to processing criminal defendants while ensuring new health protocols were followed.

Trials are now covered by traditional forms of media and social media as well. Information, stories, and trial clips spread in milliseconds compared to pre-social media when viewers would have to tune into regularly scheduled programming. While the growing popularity of social media has changed the face of many other organizations, it has presented both benefits and challenges to law enforcement. Social media allows for interactions between corporations and consumers, marketing opportunities, brand growth, news dissemination, and countless other avenues of exploration. Within the world of criminal justice that change has not necessarily been entirely beneficial.

Social Media Influence During Investigations

The dangers from a media frenzy can be felt far before the trial takes place. Media focus on major events can impact the public response. It is not uncommon for police departments to request assistance from members of the public to identify suspects. Often, law enforcement

agencies withhold key pieces of information or evidence while conducting investigations. In other situations, law enforcement divulges information to the public or seek out the public's assistance when an investigation stalls. One such example took place in 2013 after a terrorist attack occurred in Boston, Massachusetts.

The Boston Marathon Bombing, and the events that followed took place in real time for media viewers. Investigators released images of the suspected terrorists to the public to aide investigators in identifying those responsible for the attack. Prior to social media, this would have consisted of investigators releasing these images to news outlets who would broadcast the images on their nightly programs and publish the images the following day. Images swept across social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit instantaneously.

Following the release of the images, heated discussion and furious attempts at identifying the suspected terrorists were held on social media. Members of the public engaging in a social media site known as Reddit, falsely identified a missing college student as one of the bombers (Hodson, 2013). Theories swirled around the missing college student, and quickly went viral, leading to an extremely stressful experience for the family. There is little accountability available to protect those who are innocent from being accused in this manner.

Social media continues to be a potentially dangerous source of misinformation as members of the public make sudden choices regarding the guilt or innocence of potential defendants. Gabby Petito was a young woman who disappeared in 2021 after her fiancée, Brian Laundrie, seemingly abandoned her in the wilderness and returned to the home they shared in Florida. The media immediately latched onto the case, and rumors swirled as the disappearance was investigated. Over 80 podcast episodes from different publications appeared following the disappearance of Petito (Ciarlrello, 2021), with some of the publications including well known

media sources. As the case transpired, theories circulated regarding where Petito was, the guilt of her fiancé, and possible other crimes associated with the disappearance. Publications providing such theories can muddy the waters for investigators as they attempt to separate fact from fiction.

This type of armchair investigation is described as digital vigilantism, using technologies to assist with criminal investigation from the comfort of one's home, with little to no investigation experience (Trottier 2017). Digital vigilantism videos directed towards missing person Gabby Petito were abundant on social media sites such as TikTok. Users collected money, provided manpower, and gave further attention to the case, but there were negative effects. Users posted speculative theories and called law enforcement agencies with redundant information which took away valuable resources from the investigation (Aguilar 2021).

While the Rittenhouse trial was taking place, there was a dramatic increase in the amount of social media engagement. A torrent of articles released following the shooting proclaimed Rittenhouse as a hero for shooting rioters. These types of articles written about Rittenhouse had approximately 83,000 engagements from commenters. Researchers determined that junk news outlets often misquoted the sources, or omitted important details (Au et al., 2020).

The Podcast Generation

Many of the cases discussed above are documented and discussed extensively for viewers on a number of platforms. This has spurred a new genre of true crime: podcasts. Listeners tuning in for weekly episodes are privy to crimes that were once only generally discussed, or perhaps featured on news programs. With podcasts, listeners obtain a front row seat to each case.

Podcasts, are audio recordings that are produced and streamed through a variety of media sources. The topics vary, but include many options within the true crime genre. These podcast true crime shows include *Sword and Scale*, *My Favorite Murder*, *Murder and Martinis*, *Crime*

Junkie, and *Generation Why*. The true crime genre seemingly exploded after the rising popularity of the podcast show *Serial*. This expanded true crime universe now often features the same crimes discussed in different manners based on which series the listener chooses to listen to. While shows are often researched and produced, they are not usually hosted by journalists.

For instance, *Sword and Scale*, which provides the namesake of this thesis, provides the tagline within the introduction of the show, “A show that proves the worst monsters are real.” The host of *Sword and Scale*, Mike Boudet holds a background in audio engineering (“Sword and Scale,” n.d.). While his previous experience coincides greatly with the needs of an audio program, it provides little sanctity in the form of journalistic integrity. Aside from the limited journalism experience of Mike Boudet, he has faced bouts of controversy. Having made controversial comments, he was temporarily fired as the host before moving the show to a different streaming service in order to remain the host of the series (“Mike Boudet Returns,” 2019).

Shows such as *Sword and Scale* often portray and outline the lives of the perpetrator and victim, detail the murder, and subsequent trial all within a 45 minute to one hour presentation. Proponents for crime podcasts have argued that providing additional exposure for unsolved crimes provides renewed interest and public intrigue which could ultimately lead to the successful closure of unsolved criminal cases (Noe, 2022). In comparison, for podcasters who cover violent and solved criminal cases, there is potential for victims to face revictimization. For example, on several occasions, Mike Boudet has faced criticism for including 911 phone calls without the permission of the victim/victim family (“The True Crime Podcast,” (n.d.).

Podcasts, and documentaries clearly have both positives and negatives associated with their consumption. Little research, however, has provided an insight into how that media

consumption impacts the perception of potential criminal justice employees. This study conducted at The University of Texas at Arlington (UTA) seeks to provide insight into what opinions students form regarding crime media, and how media affects their perception of criminal justice.

Criminal Justice Student Perceptions and Motivations

Over the last few decades there has been a slow and steady change within criminal justice agencies which have required prospective employees to obtain a bachelor's degree as a condition of employment. For reference in 1960 the national average of police officers who had obtained some form of higher education ranked at 2.7 percent compared to 65.2 percent in 1988 (Polk & Armstrong, 2001). This change has created a greater need for criminal justice courses. With an increase of students attending college for criminal justice, a need exists to determine what motivates students to pick criminal justice as a career path.

To understand a criminal justice major's perspective regarding the media and criminal proceedings, it is important to first understand the reasoning behind why students pick a criminal justice major. A plethora of research has taken place that is indicative of media influence impacting criminal justice students' decisions regarding choosing criminal justice as a potential career choice (Collica-Cox & Furst 2019; see also Mackey & Courtright, 2000; Tsoudis, 2006), these motivations can often be attributed to a fascination surrounding crime and a desire to seek out media related to that topic (Robbers, 2007).

Realizing that criminal justice related shows may play a direct role in shaping public perception regarding the criminal justice process, a 2013 study was conducted on student motivation. Researchers examined the type and level of exposure to popular criminal justice shows, knowledge of criminal justice practice, and perception of criminal justice careers. The

researchers noted that 65% of respondents reported being drawn to the field because of television shows (Barthe et al., 2013). However, viewing dramatized crime shows did not result in a better understanding of criminal justice processes. For reference, nearly half of the criminal justice respondents believed that crime scene technicians, like those portrayed on the television show *CSI*, participated in the questioning of criminal suspects. When the researchers compared statements between those students who had little to no media influence and those students with media influences, they found that the students without media influences were more accurate regarding criminal justice processes (Barthe et al., 2013).

In contrast, a 2019 study looked at the factors influencing students choosing criminal justice as a major in college. Ninety-seven percent of students indicated that they chose criminal justice because they thought the topic was interesting. Overall, the researchers indicated that students who reported enjoying watching criminal justice related material, also enjoyed learning about criminal justice. This provided little indication that those students wanted to join the profession based on media they consumed (Collica-Cox & Furst, 2019).

Several studies have examined the various aspects regarding the motivational influence of shows such as *CSI* (Slak et al., 2020). While there is some motivational aspect associated with interest in these television shows, it does not appear as the primary motivation behind someone joining the criminal justice field. Therefore, determining the motivation of why someone joins a criminal justice field can also help determine the effect of their perception regarding criminal justice as entertainment.

Aside from misconceptions that arise from incorrect criminal investigations, and proceeding portrayals, investigators often must combat romanticized versions of law enforcement. New criminal justice workers entering the workforce may have incorrect

assumptions regarding what law enforcement professionals encounter through their work in the field. Often portrayed as glamorized dirty work, investigators and criminal justice professionals encounter incorrect characterizations of the work they complete. Members of the public often are fascinated, but ultimately thankful that someone else is focused on accomplishing these careers. It allows for members of the public to remain interested, yet far removed from the truths of the professions (Huey & Broll, 2015).

There is a line often blurred between the misinformation and what is accurately depicted. Knowing that there are misconceptions that are engrained in potential criminal justice majors, there has been a slow movement to articulate these inaccuracies in a classroom setting (Kadleck & Holsinger, 2018). Teaching criminal justice majors' crime related material can curb the misconceptions that have risen from popular media.

The Current Study

The proposed study serves as an attempt to better understand the perceptions that criminal justice students have regarding crime and the media. Current criminal justice students are the next working professionals in this field. This means that understanding the motivations behind these career choices can better prepare educators and agencies on how to select these candidates, and how to better prepare them for this field.

True crime media has evolved and grown as evidenced by the amount and type of media that is now available. Those individuals who are interested in the topic of criminal justice can now follow a high-profile crime from the investigation stages, through the trial, and into post-conviction via documentaries or podcasts. However, perceptions of how future criminal justice employees form opinions surrounding media involvement and the validity of high-profile convictions are not as frequently studied and are essential to understanding.

Future criminal justice professionals are exposed to criminal due process through trial media consumption. Instead of viewing the material years or decades after the fact, individuals can watch the trial as it occurs. Televised criminal trials offer a new, insightful view into the process as viewers can see judicial decisions when they occur. In comparison to the general public, students enrolled in criminal justice courses have the potential to see trials and appeals while they learn due process themselves from criminal justice professionals.

To investigate these issues, students enrolled in criminal justice courses at UTA were asked their opinions regarding media and the effect of social media on the coverage of crime events. Students were required to be enrolled in at least one criminal justice course for the semester. This provided the opportunity for both criminal justice majors and students of other departments to respond. The contrast of opinions between the two is noted in the research analysis. This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. *Do individuals feel more anxious after consuming true crime entertainment?*
2. *Is there an increase in fear after an individual consumes true crime entertainment?*
3. *Do individuals who watch criminal trials form opinions about the guilt of criminal defendants?*

Research Hypotheses

As indicated by the research questions posed, three key areas were explored in the survey. Previous research has indicated that individuals who consume true crime are more likely to feel anxious after listening to true crime (Bailey, 2017). This study seeks to determine if this is the case among criminal justice students. Therefore, the following hypothesis has been included:

H1: Participants who view true crime entertainment more frequently are more likely to feel anxious.

In addition, previous studies have indicated that individuals who consume true crime media have an increase in fear after consuming true crime entertainment. A primary goal of this study is to replicate previous research that indicates this increase in fear. Based on previous research, there is reason to believe there will be an increased feeling of fear among students who consume true crime entertainment more frequently (Bailey, 2017). Based on this research a second hypothesis was included of:

H2: Participants who view true crime entertainment more frequently are more likely to feel fearful.

Finally, media oversaturation is theorized to play a role in the perception students, and members of the public have regarding the guilt of those defendants featured in highly publicized criminal trials. Escalated media coverage has the potential to bias juror views, which ultimately affects a defendant's right to a fair trial (Geragos, 2006). This study aims to determine whether students form differing opinions from the convicting juries in trials they have observed.

Following this, the third hypothesis was included:

H3: Participants who have viewed criminal trials in real time are more likely to form opinions that differ from the jury.

METHODS

Sample

This study uses quantitative data collected by a survey administered at UTA. The survey is comprised of questions taken from Barthe et al. (2013) and Colica-Cox and Furst (2019). Additionally, original survey questions were created to address the purpose of this study. Electronic copies of the survey were sent via email to all currently enrolled criminal justice students in the Spring semester at UTA. All undergraduate students enrolled in at least one

criminal justice course were given the opportunity to participate in this study. The email addresses were obtained from Dr. Kent Kerley, who sent out the initial email requesting student participation. The survey consisted of 12 demographic questions and 17 questions related to media, social media, and criminal trials.

Students were required to be at least 18 years of age or older in order to participate in this study. Approximately 56 students voluntarily participated in the survey at UTA for the Spring 2022 semester, but only 53 students completed the survey¹. The parameters of this study and requirements were listed in a disclaimer letter attached to the beginning of the survey. Students were required to provide consent by clicking a link labelled 'Accept' at the bottom of the disclaimer before they could participate in the survey.

Measures

A variety of questions were utilized to gauge participants' opinions concerning how victims are portrayed, media saturation, potential victim rights, and gauging if an individual believes it is better to free guilty defendants than risk convicting innocent ones. Three dependent variables were created.

The first dependent variable, *Anxiety*, was created from a survey question asking if respondents felt more anxious after listening to true crime. The responses included *strongly agree*, *somewhat agree*, *neutral*, *somewhat disagree*, or *strongly disagree*. An ordinal measure was developed based on this item where a score of 1 indicates low anxiety and a score of 5 indicates high anxiety.

The second dependent variable labeled, *Fear*, was created from a question that asked if respondents felt more fearful of their surroundings after listening to true crime. The responses to

¹ The three incomplete surveys were removed from the analytic sample using list-wise deletion.

this question included: *strongly agree, somewhat agree, neutral, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree*. An ordinal measure was developed based on a score of 1 for low fear and a score of 5 for high fear.

The third dependent variable was identified as *Opinion*, created from a question that asked if respondents formed an opinion about a case while viewing true crime media related to a real court case. The responses were coded such that *no = 1, yes = 2, and 3 = unsure*.

Seven independent variables were identified from survey questions related to the types and amounts of true crime media that participants consumed. The first independent variable was identified as *Trial Viewed*. A survey question asked participants if they viewed any criminal trial in real time through a news source or streaming service. The responses were coded as *no = 1, yes=2, unsure =3, and prefer not to say =4*.

The second independent variable, *Consume TC*, was created from a survey question asking participants to indicate if they viewed crime related television. The responses were coded by the following responses of *no= 0, yes=1, and unsure =2*.

The third variable, *Watch TC*, was created from a question asking what true crime media the participant viewed. These questions provided respondents the opportunity to indicate if they watched, *Making a Murderer, (no= 0, yes=1), The staircase, (no= 0, yes=1), Tiger King, (no= 0, yes=1), The people vs O.J. Simpson, (no= 0, yes=1)*. This variable was measured at the ratio level, where a higher number of shows selected indicates a higher rate of true crime shows consumed.

A fourth variable was identified as *Listen TC*, which was created after asking participants which podcasts they had listened to. Participants had the ability to make multiple choice selections to indicate if they had listened to any of the listed shows. The variable was scored

based on selections of *Serial*; (*no*= 0, *yes*=1), *Sword and Scale*; (*no*= 0, *yes*=1), *My Favorite Murder*; (*no*= 0, *yes*=1), *Crime Junkie*; (*no*= 0, *yes*=1). *Generation Why*; (*no*= 0, *yes*=1). A ratio measure was utilized to determine podcast listening frequency where a higher number of items selected indicates greater exposure.

Fifth, *Follow TC* was created from a question asking respondents if they had followed true crime during a real court case. The three responses were coded as *unsure*= 0, *no*= 1, *yes* =2. Sixth, *TC Hours*, sought to determine the number of hours that participants watched, listened to, or read true crime related material. Five separate categories were listed to determine the number of hours that true crime was viewed. The variable was scored based on choices of 0, *1-4 hours*, *5-9 hours*, *10-14 hours*, and *15 or more hours*. Finally, the seventh independent variable, *TC Weekly*, was created from a question that asked respondents to determine how many hours per week they spent watching fictionalized crime TV or movies. Respondents had the ability to choose from categories that included 0, *1-4 hours* *5-9 hours*, *10-14 hours*, *15 or more hours*.

Respondent Characteristics

A series of questions were also asked to determine the characteristics of every respondent. Starting with the variable *Age*, participants were asked to directly type their birth year into the survey to allow for the calculation of their individual ages. Next, participants were asked to identify their *Gender*, and were given the choices of *male*, *female*, *non-binary*, and *prefer not to say*. Participants were also asked to indicate their *Race/Ethnicity*, among the following answer choices: *African American*, *American Indian or Alaskan Native*, *Asian*, *Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander*, *Caucasian*, *Hispanic or Latin descent*, *Other*, and *Prefer not to say*. Students were then asked to select their current *Academic Year* among the following: *Freshman*, *Sophomore*, *Junior*, *Senior*, *Prefer not to say*, and *Other*.

Students were asked to indicate what their current major was, which was identified as *CRCJ Major*. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate if they were a criminal justice major and responses were coded as yes, no, and unsure. For those students who stated they were not a criminal justice major, they were given the opportunity to type in a response and write in their major. *Enrollment status* for students was determined with selections of *full time*, *part time*, and *prefer not to say*.

The variable *Employed* determined in what industry students were employed. Choices included: *Architecture and Engineering*, *Farming*, *Fishing and Forestry*, *Business and Banking*, *Protection Services (fire, police, military)*, *Personal care*, *Computer and Mathematical*, *Building*, *Grounds Cleaning and Maintenance Operations*, *Teacher*, *Government*, *Retail and Sales*, *Transport and Material Moving*, *Other*, *Not employed outside of school*, and *Prefer not to say*. The survey also asked for participants to consider their personal and political views and determine which selection most closely matched those views. Options for *Political View* included: *Very liberal*, *slightly liberal*, *slightly conservative*, *very conservative*, and *prefer not to say*.

The media influence section asked questions about opinions that the respondents may have formed from media interactions. Respondents were asked if they had disagreed with any of the verdicts in the following cases to determine *Disagree Verdict*: *Casey Anthony*, *O.J. Simpson*, *Derek Chauvin*, *Amber Guyger*, *Conrad Murry*, *Jodi Arias*, *George Zimmerman*, *Amanda Knox*, *Scott Peterson*, *Chris Watts*, *Kyle Rittenhouse*, and *none of the above*.

Respondents were asked whether they disagreed or agreed with the following statement to determine *Victim Portrayal*: victims are fairly portrayed in documentaries and podcasts.

Response categories included *strongly agree, somewhat agree, neutral somewhat disagree, and strongly disagree.*

Next, participants were asked if they thought that defendants are portrayed as innocent before proven guilty by the media to determine *Media Portrayal*. Responses included *strongly agree, somewhat agree, neutral, somewhat disagree, and strongly disagree.* Students were asked to identify if they had watched news coverage related to a criminal trial that they had viewed. This was utilized to determine *Watch Coverage*. The answer choices included *yes, no, unsure,* and *prefer not to say.*

For *Fair Trial*, participants were asked if a defendant's right to a fair trial outweighs the victim's rights, with the potential responses of *strongly agree, somewhat agree, neutral, somewhat disagree, and strongly disagree.* Variable *99 Guilty* sought to determine if students thought it is better to let 99 guilty people go free rather than convict one innocent person. Answers included *strongly agree, somewhat agree, neutral, somewhat disagree, and strongly disagree.* Finally, participants were asked if *Media Saturation* of criminal cases impairs someone's right to a fair trial. Answer choices included *strongly agree, somewhat agree, neutral, somewhat disagree, and strongly disagree.*

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table one contains the results of the univariate analyses and descriptive statistics for the sample. The final sample contained 53 respondents. Three respondents did not complete the survey, so these cases were removed using listwise deletion (i.e., 56 respondents began the survey). Below, the descriptive statistics for the sample are discussed.

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following statement: *I often feel more anxious after listening to true crime*. In response to this statement, 15% of respondents strongly agreed, 16% somewhat agreed, 26% were neutral, 18% somewhat disagreed, and 22% strongly disagreed. Participants were then asked to rank their level of agreement with the following statement: *I often feel more fearful of my surroundings after listening to true crime*. In response to this statement, 13% of respondents strongly agreed, 32% somewhat agreed, 16% were neutral, 18% somewhat disagreed, and 18% strongly disagreed. Students were asked to indicate if they ever formed an opinion about a case while listening or watching true crime media related to a real court case. Around 88% indicated yes, 9% indicated no, and 1% said they were unsure.

Results reflect 54% of respondents viewed a trial in real time, 32% did not, 9% were unsure, and 3% preferred not to say. Regarding consumption of true crime material, 5% consumed no media, 1% consumed one category, 15% consumed two categories, 22% consumed three categories, 30% indicated they consumed four categories of true crime media, and 24% consumed five categories. These categories included books, podcasts, documentaries, dramatized shows and movies, and fictional crime shows.

The results reflect 16% watched no true crime material, 16% watched one true crime related material, 9% watched two products of true crime material, 18% of respondents watched three true crime related materials, 9% watched four true crime related materials, 7% watched six true crime related materials, 5% watched seven true crime related materials, 1% watched eight true crime related materials, 1% watched nine related true crime materials, 1% watched ten true crime related materials, and 5% watched eleven items true crime material related.

Results suggest 15% of respondents listened to no true crime podcasts, 24% listened to one podcast, 18% listened to two, 13% listened to three podcasts, 15% listened to four, 5% listened to five, 3% listened to six, and 3% listened to seven. Results show that 62% of respondents followed true crime related to a trial, 32% did not, and 5% were unsure. Results demonstrate 64% of respondents watched 1-4 hours of true crime material, 20% watched 5-9 hours, 5% watched 10-14 hours, 5% watched none, and 3% watched 15 or more hours. Results suggest 58% of respondents watched 1-4 hours of true crime material weekly, 16% watched 5-9 hours, 5% watched 10-14 hours, 1% watched 15 or more hours, and 16% did not watch true crime.

Respondent ages ranged from 20 to 52, with the average age of 24. An overwhelming majority of respondents, 75%, identified as female, 18% were male, 3% were non-binary, and 1% preferred not to say. The majority of the sample was Caucasian, 28%, while 26% were Hispanic, 24% were Black, 7% were Asian, 1% were Hawaiian, 1% preferred not to say, and 9% reported they were some other race/ethnicity. Academic year was comprised of 11% freshman, 18% sophomore, 37% junior, 28% senior, and 3% identified as other. Approximately 77% of the respondents identified as a criminal justice major, 18% were not a criminal justice major, and 3% were unsure of their major. The overall majority of the sample indicated that they were enrolled on a full-time basis, 92%, whereas part-time enrollment was 7% of the sample. For employment status, 30% of the sample reported being unemployed, 67% of the sample were employed, and 1% indicated they preferred not to say employment status. A majority of the respondents indicated they were of a liberal political affiliation, with 30% of respondents indicating they were very liberal, 39% indicating they were slightly liberal. By comparison, 5%

of the sample indicated they were very conservative, 13% reported they were slightly conservative, and 11% indicated they preferred not to say.

The sample was given the choice of selecting which jury verdicts they disagreed with from a list of ten heavily covered criminal trials. Findings reflect 24% of respondents did not disagree with any verdicts, 26% disagreed with 1 verdict, 16% disagreed with 2 verdicts, 15% disagreed with 3 verdicts, 7% disagreed with 4 verdicts, 5% disagreed with 5 verdicts, 1% disagreed with 7 verdicts, and 1% disagreed with the jury findings for every specific trial that was listed.

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following statement: *Victims are fairly portrayed in documentaries and podcasts*. In response to this statement, 1% of respondents strongly agreed, 41% somewhat agreed, 24% were neutral, 28% somewhat disagreed, and 3% strongly disagreed. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following statement: *All defendants are portrayed as innocent before proven guilty by the media*. In response to this statement, 7% of respondents strongly agreed, 3% somewhat agreed, 9% were neutral, 45% of respondents somewhat disagreed, and 33% strongly disagreed.

The majority of respondents, 73%, indicated they watched news coverage related to a criminal trial, while 18% did not view coverage of a criminal trial, 5% were unsure if they viewed news trial coverage, and 1% preferred not to say. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following statement: *A defendant's right to a fair trial outweighs the victim's rights*. In response to this statement, 3% of respondents strongly agreed, 18% somewhat agreed, 30% were neutral, 26% somewhat disagreed, 20% strongly disagreed.

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following statement: *It is better to let 99 guilty people go free than to convict one innocent person.* In response to this statement, 3% of respondents strongly agreed, 18% somewhat agreed, 15% were neutral, 35% somewhat disagreed, and 24% strongly disagreed. Finally, participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following statement: *Media saturation of criminal cases impairs someone's right to a fair trial.* In response to this statement, 35% of respondents strongly agreed, 43% somewhat agreed, 11% were neutral, 7% somewhat disagreed, and 1% strongly disagreed.

Bivariate Analyses

Tables 2 - 4 contain the results of the bivariate analyses used to address the research questions in this study. Table 2 contains the results of a Chi-square test to determine the relationship between the frequency of true crime consumption and fear. Chi-square tests can be used to determine whether an association exists between two ordinal variables, which makes this an appropriate bivariate test of this relationship. Results of the Chi-square test indicate that there is no significant relationship between hours of true crime consumption per week and anxiety. Thus, for H1, the null hypothesis is retained.

Table 3 contains the results of a Chi-square test to determine the relationship between the frequency of true crime consumption and anxiety. Results of the Chi-square test indicate that there is no significant relationship between hours of true crime consumption per week and fear. Thus, for H2, the null hypothesis is retained.

Table 4 provides the results of the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) used to determine the relationship between viewing a criminal trial in real time and whether the respondent developed an opinion different from the jury. An ANOVA can be used to determine if there is a statistically

significant difference between the means of two or more groups by assessing the significance of the F-test. A majority of the respondents, roughly 54% indicated that they viewed the trial in real time via some form of streaming service. However, there was no significant relationship between viewing a trial, and forming a different opinion than that of the convicting jury. The means across groups are similar, which reinforces the non-significance of the F-test. Thus, for H3, the null hypothesis is retained.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to gain further insight into the opinions formed by criminal justice students. This study attempted to replicate previous research, while also covering relevant topics associated with true crime entertainment. Understanding the opinions of students and how those opinions are shaped by media influence is essential to ensuring future criminal justice employees are prepared for their essential job functions, while also forming an accurate understanding of the criminal justice system.

This study attempted to address three research questions. The first research question asked: “Do individuals feel more anxious after consuming true crime entertainment?” The bivariate analysis above failed to show a correlation between consumption of true crime and anxiety. It appears that students did not have an overwhelming sense of anxiety regarding their surroundings after consumption of true crime. A majority of the respondents disagreed or felt neutral regarding feeling anxious after listening to true crime. The second research question asked: “Is there an increase in fear after an individual consumes true crime entertainment?” The bivariate analysis did not show a correlation between the consumption of true crime, and whether the individual felt fearful. The third research question asked: “Do individuals who watch criminal trials form opinions about the guilt of criminal defendants?” The results of the ANOVA

suggest that there was no significant relationship between watching criminal trials and forming an opinion different from the jury.

The non-significance of the analyses used to answer the first two research questions suggest that true crime consumption, fear, and anxiety are unrelated. However, this study did not assess the type of true crime that was consumed. Shows that center around missing persons, murder victims, and stranger-on-stranger violence perhaps have a heavier connection with fear and anxiety rates compared to true crime media that covers domestic violence cases, or victims that were killed by someone they knew.

Although past studies have suggested that criminal justice students have higher rates of true crime consumption (Robbers, 2007), and the public perception of a case can greatly differ from the final verdict reached by a jury (Carlson, 2016; Uelmen, 1997), a bivariate analysis conducted in this study found no significant correlation between watching a trial in real time, and holding an opinion that deviates from the jury. One possible explanation for the lack of association between these two variables is that the majority of the respondents were criminal justice majors, who likely have a greater understanding of the criminal justice system than the general population. Having knowledge of the criminal justice process does not necessarily mean that someone who watches a criminal trial would automatically disagree with the jury's findings. However, if this study had included more responses from students with limited criminal justice knowledge, the results may have been different. Students who have limited to no knowledge of the criminal justice system could potentially form different opinions, since the knowledge they have gained from entertainment sources contains inaccurate depictions. Further research could explore this possibility and examine whether there is a relationship between knowledge of the criminal justice system and the formation of opinions based on media consumption.

In addition, considering the criminal trials that were covered in this study contained visceral and volatile reactions from the public, it is not surprising that the respondents also disagreed with the verdicts. These criminal trials also experienced a wide array of media coverage, which may be detrimental to individuals' opinions. Further research is needed to determine whether heavier media coverage of certain trials, and the type of coverage, affects the opinions formed by viewers.

While this study aimed to provide insight into the opinions, attitudes, and feelings of criminal justice students towards true crime entertainment and its influence on those opinions, it is important to acknowledge this study's limitations. These limitations include: a small sample size, selection bias, limited generalizability to one University, and utilization of only bivariate analysis. When determining the validity of these results, and the implications, these limitations need to be taken into account.

While all students enrolled in at least one criminal justice course for the Spring 2022 semester were offered the opportunity to participate in the survey, only 53 students participated. The sample size may not be large enough to accurately represent the opinions of all criminal justice students or the general public. In addition to the limited supply, only students from one university in Texas were given the opportunity to participate.

Attempts to replicate this study could benefit from allowing all college students, regardless of major, to participate. Comparing the opinions of students with limited criminal justice knowledge to the opinions of those who perhaps have some knowledge of criminal proceedings could lead to contrasting results. Students who are unfamiliar with proper procedures for trials, and who are unaware of appropriate job duties or investigative techniques perhaps would have different opinions than those of criminal justice students. For example,

students who are only familiar with shows such as *CSI* or *Law & Order* may hold an unrealistic expectation of what should transpire during a criminal trial, leaving them with a misunderstanding of why a criminal defendant was not found guilty.

Finally, another important limitation to consider is the fact that only bivariate analyses were conducted. While a bivariate analysis can reveal the relationships between two variables, it does not account for the influence of other factors that could affect the relationship between variables. A multivariate analysis could have better explored the relationship between true crime consumption, fear, anxiety, while also controlling for other relevant factors.

Although not necessarily a limitation, it should be noted that a majority of respondents were female, therefore, there is little comparison that can be made between the difference of opinions between men and their female counterparts. The criminal justice program at UTA has a significant number of female students enrolled in the program, which may explain why the majority of respondents were female. This study shares similar insights as previous work, which indicate women are the primary consumers of true crime media. Results may have differed if more men were included in the sample.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to understand the effects of true crime media consumption on the opinions formed by criminal justice students and its effects on fear and anxiety. The phenomenon known as the CSI effect is just one example of what encouraged the formation of this study. Determining student motivations, experiences, and knowledge surrounding criminal justice is crucial to determining student career expectations. While the results showed true crime consumption did not correlate with an increase in anxiety or fear, it is suggested that future

studies should further investigate a possible relationship between these variables. Additionally, this study found that criminal justice students did not necessarily form opinions that differed from criminal juries. However, this study's limitations such as a small sample size and selection bias need to be taken into account when interpreting the results. Overall, this study provides valuable insights into criminal justice students opinions and highlights the need for further research in this area.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics (N= 53)

	Min	Max	Mean	S.D.
Dependent Variable				
Anxiety	1	5	3.16	1.36
Fear	1	5	2.98	1.35
Opinion	1	3	1.13	2.17
Independent Variable				
Trial Viewed	1	4	1.62	0.813
Consume TC	0	5	3.43	1.36
Watch TC	0	11	3.47	3.12
Listen TC	0	7	2.39	1.88
Follow TC	1	3	1.43	0.60
TC Hours	1	5	1.66	1.12
TC Weekly	1	5	2.01	1.51
Respondent Characteristics				
Age	20	52	24.98	16.96
Gender	1	4	1.88	0.54
Race/Ethnicity	1	8	4.35	2.17
<i>Education Status</i>				
Academic Year	1	6	2.98	1.13
CRCJ Major	1	3	1.26	0.52
Enrollment	1	2	1.07	0.26
<i>Characteristics</i>				
Employed	0	2	0.71	0.49
Political View	1	5	2.28	1.27
Media Influence				
Disagree Verdict	0	11	1.98	2.07
Victim Portrayal	1	5	2.90	0.96
Media Portrayal	1	5	3.94	1.13
Watch Coverage	1	4	1.35	0.68
Fair Trial	1	5	3.41	1.13
99 Guilty	1	5	3.57	1.21
Media Saturation	1	5	1.96	0.97

Note: TC stands for True Crime

Table 2. Cross-Tabulation of the Relationship Between Frequency of Watching True Crime Media and Fear (N= 53)

TC Hours	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neutral	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
0 Hours	0	1	1	0	1	3
1-4 Hours	5	10	5	9	5	34
5-9 Hours	1	3	2	1	4	11
10-14 Hours	0	2	1	0	0	3
15+ Hours	1	1	0	0	0	2
Total	7	17	9	10	10	53
Pearson chi2 (16) = 12.3950			Pr = 0.716			
Likelihood ratio chi2 (16) = 14.2354			Pr = 0.581			

Note: TC Hours = The amount of True Crime Hours viewed

Table 3. Cross-Tabulation of the Relationship Between Frequency of Watching True Crime Media and Anxiety (N= 53)

TC Hours	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neutral	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
0 Hours	0	1	1	0	1	3
1-4 Hours	6	5	7	9	7	34
5-9 Hours	1	2	3	1	4	11
10-14 Hours	0	0	3	0	0	3
15+ Hours	1	1	0	0	0	2
Total	8	9	14	10	12	53
Pearson chi2 (16) = 17.8506			Pr = 0.333			
Likelihood ration chi2 (16) = 18.6219			Pr = 0.289			

Note: TC Hours = The amount of True Crime Hours viewed

Table 4. Analysis of Variance for the Relationship Between Viewing Trials in Real Time and Disagreement with Verdicts (N=53)

Trial Viewed	Mean	Std. Dev.	Freq.
Yes	2.418	2.196	29
No	1.765	1.985	17
Unsure	0.4	0.548	5
Prefer not to say	1.5	2.121	3
Total	1.981	2.071	53

Source	SS	df	MS	F	Prob > F
Between groups	19.188	3	6.396	1.54	0.217
Within groups	203.793	49	4.1590		
Total	222.981	52	4.288		

Bartlett's test for equal variances: $\chi^2(3) = 6.2343$ Prob> $\chi^2 = 0.101$

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APPENDIX A

Questionnaire Instructions

My name is Jennifer Patterson, and I am asking you to participate in a UT Arlington research study titled, “A Show that Proves the Worst Monsters are Real: Media and Social Media Impact on Criminal Trials and Post-Conviction Guilt as Perceived by Students Enrolled in a Criminal Justice Course.” This research study is about criminal justice students’ perceptions surrounding offender guilt based upon media and social media material. You can choose to participate in this research study if you are at least 18 years old and are enrolled in at least one criminal justice course for the Spring 2022 semester. Failure to complete all sections of the survey will result in the exclusion of your responses.

Reasons why you might want to participate in this study include sharing your perspective as a student enrolled in a criminal justice class and the opinions you have formed based on media you have consumed, but you might not want to participate if you are uncomfortable sharing your personal opinions regarding the guilt or innocence of offenders who had publicized trials. Your decision about whether to participate is entirely up to you. If you decide not to be in the study, there won’t be any punishment or penalty; whatever your choice, there will be no impact on any benefits or services that you would normally receive. Even if you choose to begin the study, you can also change your mind and quit at any time without any consequences.

If you decide to participate in this research study, the list of activities that I will ask you to complete for the research include: (1) completing the survey. The survey should only take 15-20 minutes to complete. Although you probably won’t experience any personal benefits from participating, the study is not expected to pose any additional risks beyond those that you would normally experience in your regular everyday life or during routine medical / psychological visits.

You will not be paid for completing this study. There are no alternative options to this research project. The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) considers all payments made to research subjects to be taxable income; this may require additional information to be collected from you for tax purposes, such as your social security number.

The research team is committed to protecting your rights and privacy as a research subject. We may publish or present the results, but your name will not be used. While absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, the research team will make every effort to protect the confidentiality of your records as described here and to the extent permitted by law. If you have questions about the study, you can contact me at Jennifer.patterson@mavs.uta.edu. For questions about your rights or to report complaints, contact the UTA Research Office at 817-272-3723 or regulatoryservices@uta.edu.

You are indicating your voluntary agreement to participate by clicking on the “Start” button below.

APPENDIX B

Questionnaire

1.) What year were you born?

(multiple row answer text)

2.) Please select your current academic year.

Freshman

Sophomore

Junior

Senior

Prefer not to say

Other

3.) Are you a CRCJ major, or do you intent to become a CRCJ major?

Yes

No

Unsure

4.) If you are not a CRCJ, what is your major?

(multiple row answer text)

5.) Please select your gender identity.

Male

Female

Non-binary

Prefer not to say

6.) Please select the race/ethnicity for which you identify.

African American

American Indian or Alaskan Native

Asian

Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

Caucasian

Hispanic or Latino descent

Other

Prefer not to say

7.) Enrollment status.

Full time

Part time

Prefer not to say

8.) If you are employed, select the industry that most closely matches your employment.

- Architecture and Engineering
- Farming, Fishing, and Forestry
- Business and banking
- Protection services (fire, police, military)
- Personal care
- Computer and mathematical
- Building, grounds cleaning, and maintenance operations
- Teacher
- Government
- Retail and sales
- Transport and material moving
- Other
- Not employed outside of school
- Prefer not to say

9.) Considering your personal and political views, which of the following closely matches your views?

- Very liberal
- Slightly liberal
- Slightly conservative
- Very conservative
- Prefer not to say

10.) If you consume crime related media, please select all that apply to you.

- Books- including audiobooks
- Podcasts
- True crime documentaries
- Dramatized movies or television shows based on the crime (examples: The people vs. OJ Simpson, Stillwater, Monster, Catch me if you can)
- Fictional crime tv (examples: CSI, Law and Order, NCIS, Without a trace)
- N/A- I do not consume

11.) Have you followed true crime media during a real court case?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

12.) Have you ever formed an opinion about a case while listening or watching true crime media related to a real court case? This includes reading news articles, watching news coverage, or watching the trial in real time.

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

13.) Have you ever viewed a criminal trial in real time through a news source or streaming service?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure
- Prefer not to say

14.) Did you watch news coverage related to the criminal trial you viewed?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure
- Prefer not to say

15.) Did you watch any of the criminal proceedings of the below trials as they occurred?
(Select all that apply)

- Casey Anthony
- OJ Simpson
- Derek Chauvin
- Amber Guyger
- Conrad Murray
- Jodi Arias
- George Zimmerman
- Amanda Knox
- Scott Peterson
- Chris Watts
- Kyle Rittenhouse
- None of the above/Never watched a trial before

16.) Have you watched or listened to any media such as podcasts, documentaries, or fictionalized television shows based on the below trials? (Select all that apply)

- Casey Anthony
- OJ Simpson
- Derek Chauvin
- Amber Guyger
- Conrad Murray
- Jodi Arias
- George Zimmerman

- Amanda Knox
- Scott Peterson
- Chris Watts
- Kyle Rittenhouse
- N/A

17.) Did you disagree with any of the outcomes in the following cases? If yes, please select all that you disagreed with the jury's findings.

- Casey Anthony
- OJ Simpson
- Derek Chauvin
- Amber Guyger
- Conrad Murray
- Jodi Arias
- George Zimmerman
- Amanda Knox
- Scott Peterson
- Chris Watts
- Kyle Rittenhouse
- N/A- None of the above

18.) Have you ever seen/listened to the following true crime documentaries or fictionalized shows? Select all that apply.

- Serial (podcast)
- Making a Murderer (Netflix documentary)
- The Staircase (Netflix documentary)
- Tiger King (Netflix documentary)
- Sword and Scale (podcast)
- The people vs OJ Simpson (dramatized television show)
- My favorite murder (podcast)
- Crime Junkie (podcast)
- Generation Why (podcast)
- N/A

19.) How many hours of true crime related media do you consume weekly (television, documentaries, books, podcasts, movies)?

- 1-4 hours
- 5-9 hours
- 10-14 hours
- 15+ hours
- N/A- I do not consume true crime related media

20.) How many hours do you spend watching fictionalized crime TV or movies per week?
(Bad Boys, Lethal Weapon, CSI, Law and Order)

- 1-4 hours
- 5-9 hours
- 10-14 hours
- 15+ hours
- N/A- I do not consume true crime related media

21.) Have you ever posted an opinion about a criminal trial? If yes, where? (Select all that apply)

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Instagram
- Reddit
- Commented on a news article
- Other
- N/A- Never commented about a criminal trial

22.) How many times have you signed a petition regarding a criminal defendant after viewing a documentary?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5+
- N/A- Never signed a petition

Please respond to the following statement by selecting the most appropriate response.

23.) Victims are fairly portrayed in documentaries and podcasts.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neutral
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

24.) A defendant's right to a fair trial outweighs the victim's rights.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neutral
- Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

25.) All defendants are portrayed as innocent before proven guilty by the media.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neutral

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

26.) It is better to let 99 guilty people go free then to convict one innocent person.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neutral

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

27.) Media saturation of criminal cases impairs someone's right to a fair trial.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neutral

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

28.) I often feel more fearful of my surroundings after listening to true crime.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neutral

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

29.) I often feel more anxious after listening to true crime.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neutral

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree