

True Crime Podcasts: Analyzing Ethical Principles, Advocacy, and Sensationalism

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Abstract

The ethics of true crime podcasts are questionable. They appear to promote social justice but may utilize media tactics that could be exploitative and sensationalist. True crime podcasts bear ethical responsibility to promote social justice and advocacy, as they profit off real stories of murder, kidnapping, and crime. Without a social justice orientation, these podcasts may become unethical, sensationalist media forms. An audiology assessment of three popular true crime podcasts—*Mile Higher*, *My Favorite Murder*, and *Morbid*—reveals the thematic dialogue and rates of incidence within each podcast. Frequencies and sample dialogue from the podcasts reveal core values of the podcast and the degree of ethical responsibility upheld.

Introduction

Since the emergence of the podcast *Serial*, the true crime genre, particularly through the podcasting modality, has become a revolutionary media craze. These podcasts boast millions of avid listeners who tune in for aural recounting of true crime—primarily accounts of murder and missing persons—as a source of entertainment. True crime podcasts offer the option to sensationalize tragedies for mass entertainment, to advocate for criminal justice reform, or a combination of the two. Fans of this genre may be passionate about social justice or criminology. Due to the nature of the genre, podcasters must carefully balance storytelling with advocacy to avoid falling into unethical practices that bring profit from the death and suffering of others. Curiously, the true crime podcast audience consists primarily of female listeners. The subthemes expressed within true crime podcasts may be correlated with female fans' motivations behind listening to these aural recounting of heinous crimes. Women are drawn to crime podcasts that engage in critical examination, journalism, and advocacy. Such podcasts also contain subthemes of feminism and mental health support, especially conversation-based programs. Combined, these trends naturally attract educated women looking for supportive online communities that promote advocacy through the analytical nature of investigative podcasting.

Regardless of subscribers' motivations for listening, the ethics of utilizing real accounts of vicious crimes as a mode of entertainment remains questionable. The conversational dialogue podcasts utilize can directly determine their ethical orientation. Integration of empathy and justice in podcasting is arguably more ethical than podcasts which sensationalize the crime as if it were purely a story rather than a real event. If podcasters orient their conversation with a social justice approach, the podcasts may have potential to evoke social change and positively impact real cases. As true crime podcasts continue to rise in popularity, upholding values of justice,

respect, and advocacy is critical. Media is an integral aspect of current culture, which is now involved in real systems like politics and law. Assessing the approach popular true crime podcasts are taking when presenting these stories can provide information on how to reform media and the criminal justice system, as the two arenas become more intertwined.

Literature Review

Understanding the impact of these true-crime podcasts includes knowledge of the audiences who access them. According to Andy Rudduck (2001), audiences are complicated systems that cannot be universally quantified. Media scholars face a dichotomy of balancing the hard sciences with humanities, making audience analysis complicated rather than straightforward. Based off Rudduck's theory of audiences, media scholars need to establish qualifications for their audience. Podcasting audiences can be identified as passive or active listeners. Passive listeners consume content and do not further their involvement, whereas active listeners may continue the conversation in their community or join online forums (Rudduck, 2001). All podcast listeners, however, are active on a small scale, as they are required to sift through a plethora of content and select one podcast to engage with (Boiling & Hull, 2018). The acts that comprise the selection and consumption of content determine the variability of engagement among individual audience members, which can be analyzed through the theory of planned behavior (TPB) and uses and gratifications theory.

Uses and gratifications theory asserts that media usage is linked to the desires, needs, and likes of the user (Pavelko, 2020). According to this theory, all users are active but are selective over which content they choose to engage with (Pavelko, 2020). The audience is highly interactive, responding to the information they are receiving, while simultaneously being entertained by the media they are consuming (Boiling & Hull, 2018). Podcasting audiences

utilize multiple ways to engage with the content they consume, despite the modality being a one-sided conversation. Approximately 63% of audience members frequently engage with fanbase communities of their favorite podcasts—these can be online forums, such as Reddit, or in-person meet-ups—to discuss true crime and its implications (Boiling & Hull, 2018). In particular, the *My Favorite Murder* (MFM) fanbase has created several Reddit groups, social media groups, and frequent in-person meet-ups, some of which involve the hosts of the show (Pavelko, 2020).

While uses and gratification theory views the audience's involvement as absolute, the theory of planned behavior (TPB) identifies factors that contribute to the likelihood of engagement, or behavior (Mou & Lin, 2015). The TPB states that behavioral attitudes, perceived behavioral control, and subjective norms influence whether a behavior will be executed (Mou & Lin, 2015). Behavioral attitudes indicate one's feelings or perceptions toward the behavior itself; if they are predisposed to view the behavior positively or negatively, it will impact their likelihood of engagement (Mou & Lin, 2015). Perceived behavioral control is defined as a person's view of whether the behavior is achievable for them to enact, while subjective norms refer to the cultural importance of the behavior (Mou & Lin, 2015). Within the podcasting audience, the TPB can be utilized to analyze an audience member's likelihood of engaging with the content; engagement behaviors could range from discussing the content on forums, sharing the information with others, downloading the content, commenting on the content, donating to a victim's family support fund, signing a petition, or engaging in any call to action the podcast imposes on its audience. The relationship an audience member forms with the podcast host holds power over behavior as well.

Online relationships formed between a podcaster and their audience operate as parasocial relationships. Parasocial relationships, as defined by Horton and Wohl (1956), occur between an

audience member and a character or individual in a media source—such as podcasts, YouTube videos, or movies—in which the observer feels a close connection with the character, despite a lack of in-person, reciprocal interactive aspects that cultivate traditional relationships (Pavelko, 2020). However, a parasocial relationship is not inherently negative; the feeling of the authentic connection to the podcaster is important for the audience. Even though podcasting functions primarily as a one-way interactive relationship (i.e., the podcaster’s sharing information with the audience and the audience’s listening), social connections can still be formed, especially in conjunction with online social media platforms (Mou & Lin, 2015). According to Hoffner and Cohen (2012), parasocial relationships can assist audience members in reducing negative outlooks on mental health (Pavelko, 2020). Media personalities exert a powerful impact on audiences. Observing media personalities portray openness about their own mental health issues or dispel stigmas about mental health can encourage audience members to alter their mindset about the topic (Pavelko, 2020). The true crime podcasting platform, particularly within the show *My Favorite Murder*, provides conversation about mental health that is supportive to audience members, who may be living with a diagnosis themselves.

Hosts of the *My Favorite Murder* podcast, Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark, have utilized their platform to discuss their own struggles with addiction, depression, eating disorders, and personal issues pertaining to mental health while encouraging audience members to seek help by preaching the benefits of professional therapy (Pavelko, 2020). *My Favorite Murder* frequently integrates topics including mental health, feminism, and safety that are supportive of the individual well-being of the audience members (Greer, 2017). These conversations often continue on other platforms, such as Reddit, allowing audience members to cultivate connections with one another through the shared interest of true crime podcasts (Greer, 2017). Podcast hosts

indirectly create space for audience members to form meaningful relationships that are supportive of their mental health.

Roughly 73% of the true crime podcasting audience comprises women (Boiling & Hull, 2018). Typically, women are the victims of the crimes discussed in these podcasts yet are also the primary audience. In a survey conducted by Boiling and Hull, female participants identified the top three motivations for listening to true crime podcasts to be entertainment, convenience, and boredom (2018). The reasons women provided for listening were also more salient than reasoning provided by male listeners, and they tended to be more active listeners than men (Boiling & Hull, 2018). Motivations for listening did not provide conclusive answers as to why women are drawn to the subject, but it did identify that the podcasts were viewed primarily as an entertainment source rather than a platform for advocacy, justice, reform, or conversation. The findings of this study, however, may be limited due to the smaller scope of participants (n=308) in comparison to the entire demographic. A popular study regarding true crime books was conducted by Vicary and Fraley, which utilized five different studies, with four of the studies consisting of population samples between n=1,000 and n=13,600 (2010). Although the medium for that study (books) is not the subject medium (podcasts) of this review, the overarching appeal of the genre of true crime to female audiences provides relevance. Vicary and Fraley discovered that women engage with the true crime genre as a form of self-defense and education (2010). Women, who are often victims of crimes, can learn from these real scenarios about warning signs and how to avoid situations with elevated risk of victimization (Vicary & Fraley, 2010). Women may also be drawn to podcasting and book modalities because these media forms lack visual stimuli; the audience does not witness the crime play out and experience the trauma vicariously. Often, sexualization of the female body is entangled with victimization (Greer,

2017). The lack of a visual representation of a female body in podcasting helps eliminate the oversexualization of female victims. The podcast audience is also more educated, with 66% holding at least a college degree (Boiling & Hull, 2018). Educated female fans may be more likely to engage with true crime content in the podcasting modality as opposed to a television drama, documentary, or news account. Often, television documentation of true crime utilizes cultivation theory to skew the audience's perception of reality (Chadee, 2019). Shows such as NBC's *Dateline* utilize this tactic, displaying repetitive images to accentuate a narrative to the audience and distort reality (Chadee, 2019). In contrast, podcasts lack imagery and uphold core values of justice, investigation, social change, evidence, and advocacy in addition to storytelling features (Boiling, 2019). Regardless, the ethics of any modality that profits off stories of real crimes must be questioned.

Are true crime podcasts an ethically acceptable form of entertainment? True crime podcasts are often regarded as a format of media journalism since the emergence of the podcast *Serial* (Buozis, 2017). *Serial* provided a shift in the industry for true crime to be presented through journalism to uncover truth; prior to *Serial*, any knowledge gathered about a crime was derived strictly from law enforcement agencies (Buozis, 2017). Journalists are given an opportunity to contribute to the conversation around true crime and disseminate the imbalance of power (Boling, 2019). Sarah Koenig, the creator of *Serial*, fought the injustice of power distribution between the accused and law enforcement by giving a platform for an accused man, Adnan Syed, to share his perspective, alibi, and counterarguments to his accusation (Buozis, 2017). This discursive space about the unsolved case emphasized the importance of a commitment to justice that lacking in the criminal justice system. According to interviews conducted by Boling with true crime podcasters, the goal of these podcasts is to answer the

following question: “Why has this case not yet been solved?”—thereby drawing attention to injustices that occurred (2019). If these values are clearly demonstrated within podcasts, should they be considered entertainment? If a true crime podcast lacks themes of advocacy, reform, and social justice, does it become unethical or crude? Little research has been conducted specifically on true crime podcasts and their societal ethics. This research aims to begin a conversation about the ethics of these podcasts.

Methodology

Research methods for this study involved analyzing of one episode each from three popular true crime podcasts, including *Mile Higher*, *My Favorite Murder*, and *Morbid*. To maintain consistency, each episode analyzed discussed the case of JonBenet Ramsey. Each podcast was selected according to Spotify rankings and needed to contain an episode on the case; the podcasts have differing formats, hosts, and styles to provide a holistic view of the genre. After podcasts were selected, each episode was observed at full-length for a minimum of two rounds to get a sense of the audience experience. Full audiology analysis was then conducted after obtaining written transcripts of the episodes.

All podcasts were assessed on stylistic tendencies, social psychology theories, and Punnett’s seven components of a true crime podcast (2017). Stylistic tendencies consisted of observation of minor details, such as overarching structure, use of humor, and opening topics. These traits were observed qualitatively with no general requirements. Social psychology theories utilized include the theory of planned behavior (TPB), perception of control, and downward versus upward comparison. The theory of planned behavior assesses the likelihood of behavior engagement. Regarding podcast analysis, TPB provided a framework for assessing the call to action (CTA) given by a podcast. The CTA describes any instance when a podcaster

encourages audience members to engage in a specified behavior, such as subscribing, signing a petition, or donating. Similarly, the TPB determines how likely it is for the CTA to occur and was used as a tool for assessing CTA's effectiveness and likelihood audience engagement in social justice promotional behaviors. Perception of control refers to the perceived level of ability one has over their actions or environment and is typically used to assess an individual's beliefs about their own capabilities (Pagini et al., 2016). This concept was utilized yet slightly altered for analysis of podcasting efficacy. In analysis, perception of control is highlighted when a podcaster comments on the perceived ability of control an individual in the story has over their actions or situation. Traditionally, perception of control is used as an assessment of an individual, but in this context the theory is used as an assessment of the podcaster's commentary on the actions of the victim, the victim's family, police, the accused, or other individuals involved in the crime. Thirdly, downward and upward comparison are social psychology terms used to describe how an individual assesses themselves against another individual by elevating or degrading themselves by comparison. Downward comparison within podcasting is identifiable as instances in which the podcast hosts view the actions of the victim, families, police, or other persons involved in the event as negative and inferior; the hosts may state oddities in the person's behavior or actions and comment on how they would have acted in the scenario instead. Upward comparison within podcasting analysis operates when the podcast host views the actions or behavior of a person in the event as positive, viewing that individual as superior to the host.

Most of the podcast analysis was conducted through the framework of Punnett's seven dimensions of true crime podcasts: justice, subversion, crusader, geographic, forensic, vocative, and folkloric (2017). Justice dialogue consists of references to justice for the victim and their families, which may include discussion of next steps or failures of law enforcement to enact

justice (Boling, 2019). Subversive dialogue consists of a call for further investigation (Boiling, 2019). Subversion could appear through a CTA or discussion of investigative failures and how to repair them. Crusader dialogue includes a call for social change (Boling, 2019). A CTA for social change through crusader dialogue emphasizes structural or systemic inequities, such as lack of media coverage for minority victims. Geographic dialogue is a basic factor that includes discussion of physical location of the event, such as a city or geographic terrain of the crime (Boling, 2019). Forensic dialogue involves discussion of evidence and factual details (Boling, 2019). This dimension often includes video or audio clips, review of DNA, or other evidence presented in court or discovered at the crime scene. Vocative dialogue is comprised of advocacy and journalism themes (Boling, 2019). The vocative dialogue can include advocating for the victim and family, calling for reform, or providing journalistic commentary about the crime. Finally, folkloric dialogue contains thematic elements similar to a fictional story (Boling, 2019). The folkloric dimension presents itself in true crime as the storytelling structure podcast hosts utilize; although the story is real, it may be framed as if it were a fictional story being read aloud (Boling, 2019). Combined, the presence of all, or nearly all, seven dimensions demonstrates that a podcast can be identified within the true crime genre. However, analysis of frequency of the seven dimensions allows for the podcast to be better categorized as entertainment or social justice. A higher frequency of folkloric dialogue would indicate possible sensationalism, whereas higher frequency of vocative or justice dialogue may indicate ethical podcasting, which aims to promote positive social change.

Specific frequency is difficult to determine, as some dialogue excerpts fall into multiple categories. Furthermore, thematic dialogue may vary in word count or length, although the impact may be weighted equally. For this analysis, frequency was determined by accounting for

number of times a thematic dialogue was utilized and the total volume namely, word count, of a dialogue dimension. Frequency analysis of true crime dimensions, social psychology principles, and stylistic features of the podcast contribute to the overall thematic elements of each podcast.

Results

A frequency analysis of the podcast *Morbid* revealed a high frequency of forensic dialogue, with moderate frequencies of vocative, justice, and folkloric dialogue, and low frequencies of crusader, subversive, and geographic dialogue, as indicated in Table 1. Forensic dialogue was the most significant of Punnett's dimensions, with a total word count of 2,398, which is equivalent to 20.5% of the total episode dialogue.

Morbid Frequencies

Table 1

Punnett's Seven Dimension Frequencies in Morbid

Dimension	Frequency (n)	Word Count (n)	Total Percentage (%)
Folkloric	8	513	4.39
Crusader	1	80	0.68
Subversive	4	101	0.86
Justice	10	523	4.47
Vocative	9	650	5.56
Forensic	25	2,398	20.5
Geographic	5	136	1.16

High forensic frequency demonstrates the podcast's value for discussion with a scientific, critical approach. While heavy focus on forensic evidence may be considered sensationalist in other media forms, such as documentaries or television, the high level of forensic dialogue in podcasts reflects a concern for truth; forensic evidence is the factual basis for the case which allows for investigators to determine what occurred. One line of forensic dialogue from the podcast stated: "he said, quote, 'the FBI told us they'd never before seen a two-and-a-half-page ransom note; no

note has ever been written at the scene and then left at the scene with the dead victim at the scene other than this case” (*Morbid* 27:49). Other forensic dialogue within the podcast included discussion of DNA evidence, the condition the victim’s body was found in, details of the ransom note, and the like. Furthermore, when discussing the details of JonBenet’s death in *Morbid*, the podcasters said, “I don’t know how anybody garrotes a six-year-old. I don’t understand how there is a human on this earth that is capable of that” (*Morbid*, 59:31). Forensic dialogue that involves sensitive details of the case is accompanied by sincere empathy, which is indicated by the podcaster’s tone of voice.

Another important result of *Morbid*’s analysis included a high use of vocative dialogue at 5.56%. Vocative language can include advocating for the victim, but can also encompass advocacy for policy change, human rights, or other case-related issues. *Morbid* hosts Alaina Urquhart and Ashleigh Kelly advocated for JonBenet’s wellbeing. JonBenet was heavily involved in beauty pageants as a young girl, and her mother bleached her hair at six years old. JonBenet was also dressed in mature, adult-like costumes and wore heavy make-up when competing in these competitions. Although there has been no direct correlation between JonBenet’s pageantry and her murder, the treatment and over-sexualization JonBenet received from this may be viewed as unethical. Urquhart and Kelly challenged the ethics of child pageantry when discussing the case, stating, “I don’t know who’s allowed to come into these pageant audiences, but this is like so dangerous to just display your kid like that. I don’t know. It’s just that as a mother, I just can’t understand it” (*Morbid*, 20:45). *Morbid* also discussed the negative implications pageantry had on JonBenet even after her death: “Unfortunately, because everything kind of focused on the pageants and the pageant mom, all the pictures are of her all dolled up. And I mean, there’s not a lot of pictures floating around or information floating

around of JonBenet just being a little kid. That's so sad" (*Morbid*, 21:37). Even though these details are not directly related to the case, the dialogue demonstrates Urquhart's and Kelly's orientation towards justice. The podcasters are concerned with preserving the memory of JonBenet as a child rather than oversexualizing her as a pageant queen.

Another key aspect of *Morbid's* dialogue included the use of downward comparison at a frequency of 6.68%, as demonstrated in Table 2.

Table 2

Social Psychology Theory Utilization and Stylistic Tendencies of Morbid

Styles and Theories	Frequency (n)	Word Count (n)	Total Percentage (%)
Use of Humor	4	132	1.13
Sympathy for Victim	4	257	2.20
Blame or Theorizing	1	37	0.31
Perception of Control	1	46	0.39
Downward Comparison	11	781	6.68
Upward Comparison	2	97	0.83
Sympathy for Family	8	539	4.61

Utilization of downward comparison indicates that *Morbid* questioned the behavior of those involved in the case, including family members, investigators, or bystanders. A high frequency of downward comparison indicates the podcast is concerned with justice by pointing out inconsistencies and odd behavior from the persons involved with the case. In this case, JonBenet's family did exhibit some odd behavior. However, not all downward comparison dialogue was made regarding the family's behavior, but often included analysis of the investigator's reactions to the case, including mishandling of evidence.

***My Favorite Murder* Frequencies**

Between all three podcasts, *My Favorite Murder* had the overall lowest frequencies. However, these lower frequencies may be attributed to the fact that *My Favorite Murder*

incorporates dialogue which were not part of the analyzed themes. The podcasters incorporate frequent discussion about their personal lives, including discussion of mental health and feminism (Greer, 2017). The frequencies are likely skewed as lower due to incorporation of topics outside of JonBenet’s case. For example, at the beginning of the episode, the hosts introduce a segment called “corrections corner.” The segment allows the hosts to correct any misinformation about previous cases. Within the episode, the hosts also discussed a personal experience of meeting a fan at the mall: “So look, we are having some nice success with this podcast. It's very, very exciting and quite bewildering. . . . [A fan I ran into while shopping] told me was that the J crew of the Grove listens to our podcast when they shut down at night” (*My Favorite Murder*, 8:13). Although these topics are not part of the case, nor the genre of true crime, they cultivate community among audience members. The personal topics of *My Favorite Murder* allow for the hosts to connect with the audience, thus cultivating community which can uplift one another online. The support the podcast offers to its listeners demonstrates concern for physical, psychological, and mental wellbeing, contributing to the podcast’s ethical orientation.

Table 3

Punnett’s Seven Dimension Frequencies in My Favorite Murder

Dimension	Frequency (n)	Word Count (n)	Total Percentage (%)
Folkloric	2	192	1.17
Crusader	6	340	2.08
Subversive	0	0	0.00
Justice	10	516	3.16
Vocative	4	287	1.76
Forensic	17	1,139	6.99
Geographic	2	52	0.31

As demonstrated in Table 3, *My Favorite Murder*’s highest frequency among Punnett’s seven dimensions was their use of forensic dialogue, at nearly 7%. This frequency is far lower than

Morbid's highest frequency, at 20.5%. Forensic evidence is integral to solving a crime and receiving a conviction within the justice system. While *My Favorite Murder* has a relative lower frequency within this dimension, it does not diminish the credibility of the podcast, but rather indicates the individual differences between true crime podcasts. When looking at the word count, *Morbid*'s word count within the forensic dialogue is 2,398 words (see Table 1), which was 20.5% of the total podcast. However, *My Favorite Murder* used a total of 1,139 words encompassing forensic dialogue, for about 6.99% of the total podcast time (see Table 3). Although the percentage of forensic dialogue of *My Favorite Murder* is nearly a third that of *Morbid*, the word count of *My Favorite Murder* is roughly half the word count of *Morbid*. This instance indicates how the frequency analysis may not be the sole resource when determining the ethics of a podcast, as the content within each dialogue is critical; the statistics of word count and frequency will also have variation between podcasts, as podcasts vary in length.

Stylistically, *My Favorite Murder* differed from the other two podcasts. *My Favorite Murder* adopted a podcasting structure for the JonBenet Ramsey case that assumed audience familiarity with the case. Folkloric structure—or chronological storytelling—was avoided. The hosts of the show preferred to discuss aspects of the real case in relation to the presentation of the case on recent crime documentaries on the broadcast network CBS. *My Favorite Murder* hosts utilized their platform as a social critique on the ethics of the CBS true crime podcasts while presenting additional evidence and opinions on the case. Within the CBS documentary, there was a physical demonstration in which a pigskin-covered mannequin was beaten on the head to reproduce the head injuries JonBenet sustained. This demonstration followed one popularized theory in which JonBenet was killed by her brother Burke in a fit of rage, which led to a cover-up of the murder by JonBenet's parents. In response to this demonstration, the podcast hosts

stated, “I say, shame on CBS. Because that was not necessary. It was super creepy. He looked like a child actor, but his eyes were a bit wild. The whole thing of that was gross” (*My Favorite Murder*, 44:18). Even though the structure of *My Favorite Murder* differed from the other podcasts, and did not have high frequencies within other dimensions, the quality of the dialogue consistently commented on topics related to reform and justice within the true crime realm. Commentary on the CBS documentary critiqued the sensationalist nature of televised true crime; such commentary supports the proposition that true crime podcasts promote justice and advocacy while avoiding use of sensationalism.

Lack of subversive commentary also trended across all podcasts. Dialogue rarely called for more investigation into the case. However, this lack of subversive commentary—especially noting its trend across podcasts—may be a result of the parameters of the individual case. JonBenet Ramsey’s murder is a well-known, infamous case from the 1990s. Investigation was poorly handled (e.g., contamination of evidence, parental involvement in search and seizure, failure to interview parents in a timely manner), which makes it difficult for further investigation. Subversive commentary often urged reanalyzing the case and was therefore tied to justice dialogue. The dialogue related to conversation on failures of the police department to uphold the integrity of the case through preservation of evidence, crime scene, and proper interrogation techniques.

Table 4

Social Psychology Theory Utilization and Stylistic Tendencies of My Favorite Murder

Styles and Theories	Frequency (n)	Word Count (n)	Total Percentage (%)
Use of Humor	15	820	5.03
Sympathy for Victim	3	498	3.05
Blame or Theorizing	4	323	1.98
Perception of Control	2	190	1.16
Downward Comparison	14	1,059	6.50

Upward Comparison	1	68	0.41
Sympathy for Family	8	304	1.86

In Table 4, the stylistic tendencies of *My Favorite Murder* are analyzed. *My Favorite Murder* had the highest use of humor between all podcasts. The use of humor provided relief when discussing aspects of the case which were heavy, such as discussion of the wine cellar room where JonBenet's body was found. After mentioning the wine cellar room, used humor to relieve some of the tension, saying, for "a millionaires house it is kind of a (expletive) house. And it was like, there was like fake autumn leaves that were plastic in it in a drawer that was hanging down from the top of a light shelving system. It was like, what? Sorry, you're rich. What is this house?" (*My Favorite Murder*, 47:31). The use of humor allowed the podcast to retain a unique style; the dialogue demonstrated the personalities of the podcast hosts, which may make the podcast more enjoyable or relatable for audience members. Similar to *Morbid* and *Mile Higher*, the podcast also had a high rate of downward comparison. Consistency in this style across all podcasts may be due to the nature of the case rather than similarities between podcasts; this trend may not be present had the analysis been conducted on multiple cases.

***Mile Higher* Frequencies**

Mile Higher also demonstrated a high frequency of forensic discussion, with a percentage of 23.6. *Mile Higher* had the highest quantity of forensic evidence (see Table 5) within the podcast, including a full word-by-word audio transcript of the ransom note. Forensic dialogue is a critical dimension within podcasting, as it presents evidence to the audience without attaching a narrative or interpretation of the evidence. While *My Favorite Murder* has a relative lower frequency within this dimension, it does not diminish the credibility of the podcast, but rather indicates the individual differences between true crime podcasts. Additionally, *Mile Higher*,

although the crusader dialogue was only at a 2.11% frequency rate (see Table 5), provided critical dialogue regarding external social issues. On the day of JonBenet's death, neighbors apparently heard a scream in the middle of the night but did not call police. When discussing this aspect of the case, *Mile Higher* podcast host Kendall Rae responded, "This is how the bystander effect happens is people are too afraid to say anything because they think they could be wrong. Imagine what would have happened if they weren't.... It's important, dude. If someone had called, if that neighbor had called, they would know what happened to JonBenet today. If police went to their house at this time, you think they would've caught the killer? Yes" (*Mile Higher*, 18:21).

Table 5

Punnett's Seven Dimension Frequencies in Mile Higher

Dimension	Frequency (n)	Word Count (n)	Total Percentage (%)
Folkloric	10	915	5.90
Crusader	3	328	2.11
Subversive	4	207	1.33
Justice	17	1,177	7.60
Vocative	8	650	4.19
Forensic	39	3,663	23.6
Geographic	3	210	1.35

Integration of commentary such as this excerpt encourages the audience to act when they hear suspicious activity, such as a similar scream in the middle of the night. Crusader commentary was consistent across all podcasts and emphasized the over-sexualization of JonBenet. Low frequency surrounding this topic could be tied to upholding sensitivity for the victim and their family, because they were heavily involved in beauty pageantry. It is acceptable to raise questions of pageantry ethics, but the podcasts do not dive deeply into issue out of respect for the victim and their family.

Another common theme among all podcasts was the utilization of sympathy for the victim's family and downward comparison. Rates of frequencies vary between each podcast, although both aspects are present at a minimum of 1% frequency. It is important to note that downward comparison commentary was directed at all odd behavior of individuals within the case, whether family, police, or friends. Therefore, a higher rate of downward comparison dialogue does not necessarily indicate a higher rate of criticism toward the families. A balance of sympathy for the family and downward comparison conversation reflects an orientation towards objective neutrality. Especially in the JonBenet Ramsey case, odd behavior of family members and poor police work have contributed to the frustrating nature of this unsolved case. Multiple theories surround the case, most of which include familial involvement with the murder. Each of these podcasts presents pieces of these theories while offering counterarguments. Jon Benet Ramsey's murder has unique circumstances and oddities that have made the case famous. Unsolved cases naturally bring about questions of who committed the crime. Although this question was brought into discussion, it was not the center of conversation. *Mile Higher*, however, had a higher rate of sympathy for the family than downward comparison (see Table 6).

Table 6

Social Psychology Theory Utilization and Stylistic Tendencies of Mile Higher

Styles and Theories	Frequency (n)	Word Count (n)	Total Percentage (%)
Use of Humor	2	25	0.16
Sympathy for Victim	6	326	2.10
Blame or Theorizing	10	614	3.96
Perception of Control	8	454	2.93
Downward Comparison	8	454	2.93
Upward Comparison	4	133	0.85
Sympathy for Family	13	801	5.17

The podcast upheld justice through a combination of behavior analysis of the family while providing sympathy and possible explanations for their atypical behavior. The death of a child can cause undue distress, and, although there are societal expectations as to how a parent reacts in this scenario, individual differences in reactions to stress exist. Similar frequencies in sympathy and downward comparison demonstrate that the podcast attempted to seek justice for JonBenet by questioning concerning behavior of police, family, and the involved community. For example, John Ramsey has been criticized for his behavior when finding JonBenet's body. John removed the body from the wine cellar where she was found, carried her upstairs, placed her underneath the Christmas tree, and ripped the duct tape off her mouth, contaminating multiple pieces of evidence in the process (*Mile Higher*). *Morbid* comments on this behavior, saying, "Anybody who questions that, it's like stop.... That's your kid. That's your baby. Of course, you're going to rip the thing off her mouth" (*Morbid*, 44:55). True crime podcasts balance a mixture of viewpoints and perspectives, offering sympathy and humanizing the individuals involved yet maintaining a social justice orientation. This orientation involves questioning behavior if necessary to evoke justice for the victim.

Discussion

Analysis of Punnett's seven dimensions of true crime podcasts, social psychology theories, and stylistic preferences revealed an inadequacy of statistical data in determining ethical integrity of true crime podcasts. Statistical frequency data may be used as a guiding framework to understand the core values of each podcast. Findings revealed a failure of frequency data to capture the moralistic impact of certain statements. Many critical statements were made in each podcast siding with JonBenet, empathizing with her family, and addressing inadequate police work, or they called for social change and justice. Frequency, word-count, and

quantity cannot effectively determine the quality and impact of statements within a podcast. *Morbid, My Favorite Murder*, and *Mile Higher* all upheld narratives of social justice and examined the case through a critical lens. Grotesque forensic evidence was delivered cautiously, with empathy, and was expressed as difficult to discuss by the podcast hosts. This sensitivity directly contrasts the orientation of televised media, such as CBS's documentary on JonBenet Ramsey.

As social media has become popularized in modern American culture, the criminal justice system can expect to see more integration of social media with true crime. For example, the Gabby Petito case demonstrated how social media was integrated into a real missing person's case. Social media users provided a chronological timeline of Petito's disappearance, and many users found information which was critical to solving the case (Suciu, 2021). The high involvement of social media users led to popularity of the case, which in turn provided the investigators with resources they may need while putting pressure on law enforcement to solve the case. While social media and heightened awareness of a case can help to solve a crime quickly, there can be downsides to high media involvement. First, not all users treat the case as a real individual's life but approached the case with a lack of sensitivity. Videos trended across TikTok which presented information of the case as if it were a mystery game or entertainment (Suciu, 2021). This social media sleuthing can lead to misinformation and exploitation. Furthermore, this case demonstrated a phenomenon known as "Missing White Woman Syndrome" (Suciu, 2021). Unfortunately, minorities and men rarely receive a fraction of the level of media attention as Petito did. White women, especially young white women, are more likely to receive media attention, whereas minority men and women do not (Suciu, 2021). Ethically, social media users need to be educated on moral sensitivity when engaging in internet

sleuthing (Suciu, 2021). Social media also has potential to be helpful by increasing public awareness and cultivating resources to solve a crime that are needed for many minority missing persons cases, but it must be done so in an ethical, sensitive manner.

When integrating social media into the criminal justice system, true crime podcasts appear to be the most ethical medium. True crime podcasts have already made significant impact on the criminal justice system. Sarah Turney's podcast, *Voices for Justice*, began by her sharing the story of her sister, Alissa's, disappearance. Turney had always been weary that her stepfather my somehow be involved in Alissa's disappearance, and shared that information, including video media. Turney then took this same information and posted it on the social media platform, TikTok, which resulted in a viral video (Edwards, 2020). After going viral, Turney's information stated in the video and her podcast led investigators to reopen the case and arrest Turney's stepfather for involvement in Alissa's disappearance (Edwards, 2020). Turney now continues her work on *Voices for Justice* podcast for other missing persons victims and incorporates specific call to actions in each case, such as links to tip lines or urging the audience to engage in ethical, action-oriented true crime (Turney, n.d.). Similarly, Kendall Rae from the *Mile Higher* podcast also runs a popular YouTube channel for true crime. Throughout her career, she has conducted partnerships with family members of victims to understand their perspective on the case or uncover critical information that was not included in the police report; during these collaborations Rae also donates the proceeds from ad revenue directly to the families (Rae, 2020). Rae has also conducted various fundraisers and collaborations, such as a collaboration with the nonprofit Her Justice, which assists women in New York City living in poverty by providing free legal help and training to attorneys on how to assist in immigration, divorce, and family cases (Rae, n.d.). Giving back to victims, their families, and individuals in need can be

empowering; true crime podcasts should integrate tangible action, such as running fundraisers like Kendall Rae, into their work to become more supportive, ethical, and collaborative. If true crime podcasts implemented action in addition to upholding ethical principles while discussing the case, powerful social change could occur.

Future research is still needed in multiple avenues. Accurate representative analysis samples of each podcast could provide a holistic view of each podcast's strengths and weaknesses. This analysis could be achieved by applying a similar method as this research to various episodes within each podcast rather than evaluating between podcasts. The research conducted in this thesis had limitations because other critical information discussed in the podcast was not always part of the dimensions analyzed. Research may also compare distinctions between true crime podcasts and televised true crime or study the impacts true crime has made on the lives of victims' families and the cases involved. An in-depth analysis of podcasts such as *Voices for Justice* could also be powerful; this podcast features social justice at its core, and an analysis of the podcast's values, structure, content, and calls to action could provide an ethical framework for other true crime podcasts to follow.

Conclusion

The true crime podcasts *Mile Higher*, *My Favorite Murder*, and *Morbid* utilized several formats and themes of dialogue to promote social justice and advocacy. However, the theory of planned behavior and call to action to the audience was miniscule in comparison; the podcasts themselves did not urge their audience to enact social change, except for *Mile Higher's* discussion of the bystander effect. The podcasts avoid sensationalist practices, which are common in traditional popular media, by balancing factual evidence and disturbing details with discussion on justice, proper investigation practices, and advocacy. Ethical responsibility was

valued by the podcasters and may explain why this entertainment medium is growing. Holistically, the true crime podcasts analyzed maintained a balance of information and commentary while integrating empathy, advocacy, justice, and pertinent subtopics—such as real-time updates on current missing persons cases and comedic personal stories—which build rapport with the audience and reflect the podcast’s core values. To improve ethical responsibility, true crime podcasts may also integrate fundraising events, collaboration with families, utilize specific call to actions to enact social change.

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