

## Dehumanized in Death: Representations of Murdered Women in American True Crime Podcasts

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How do American true crime podcasts represent women victims of murder? Emerging research shows that the podcast storytelling format can produce more personal and compassionate discourse, potentially countering the overall harmful representations of the true crime genre. However, research focusing on the representation of women victims of violence in the podcast genre has so far been limited. Based on a discourse analysis of 14 popular true crime podcast episodes released between 2014 and 2021, we identified that the murdered women in the podcasts are represented as part of a dehumanized group who are complicit in their deaths and who serve as a cautionary tale for other women. Based on these findings, we argue that although podcasts' discursive dynamics can potentially introduce alternative representations of the victims based on social group identification and self-reflexivity, overall, American true crime podcasts align with dominant representations and discourses about stigmatized victims.

*Keywords: representation, true crime, podcast, immersive storytelling, women, media, victim, victim blaming, crimes, discourse analysis*

Podcasts have been around for decades; however, in 2014, the true crime podcast *Serial* (Koenig, 2014–present) changed the landscape “from a niche activity to a mainstream media platform” through its episodic approach to the storytelling of real crimes (Berry, 2015, p. 171). Since then, true crime—a nonfiction genre that presents information about actual crimes entertainingly—has become one of the more popular genres of podcasts (Surette & Otto, 2002; YouGov, 2022). This growing popularity has been accompanied by concerns about what some believe to be a dehumanizing and unethical form of entertainment (Linehan, 2023; Shaw, 2020), especially considering the accessibility of the podcast format as well as the specific strategies used to engage and maintain audiences (Newman & Gallo, 2019; Rime, Pike, & Collins, 2022; Wyld, 2021). A particular area of concern deals with the social, psychological, and normative effects true crime podcasts may have on women, the primary victims of

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the crimes discussed (Boling, 2022; Washak, 2018). Considering scholarship's emphasis on how traditional media can shape public opinion on issues like violence against women (Galarza Fernández, Cobo Bedía, & Esquembre Cerdá, 2016; Kohlman et al., 2014) and traditional media's contribution to the harmful perpetuation of gendered stereotypes in the representation of women (D'Heer, Vergotte, Vuyst, & Leuven, 2020), the question of how this growingly popular media genre may contribute to societal representations and beliefs about victims of gendered violence is paramount (Belmonte & Negri, 2021). Taking popular American true crime podcasts as a case study, this article asks: How do American true crime podcasts represent women victims of murder?

An emerging body of literature has focused on the discursive dynamics found in podcasts. Dowling and Miller (2019) found that true crime podcasts rely on a type of storytelling known as immersive storytelling to engage audiences, and Lindgren (2023) and Nee and Santa (2022) suggested that true crime podcasts employ a narrative structure with the use of chronology, plot, and points of view. Traditionally, this type of storytelling has been limited to theaters and interactive exhibits, with scholars of digital media defining this immersive storytelling as "narrative immersion," which works to create a story through historical and current context to guide audiences through "a narrative experience" (Stogner, 2011, p. 192). Such immersive storytelling has been shown to result in (a) more compassionate and favorable views toward stigmatized groups represented in the stories (Oliver, Dillard, Bae, & Tamul, 2012), (b) social group identification, where speakers draw on similarities to connect themselves and their audiences to the victims, thus shaping a more personal and relatable narrative for their listeners (Lindgren, 2023), and (c) self-reflexivity on the part of the narrators (Dowling & Miller, 2019) with hosts of true crime podcasts reflecting on the crime and sharing the internal conflicts they may have with the story (Oliver et al., 2012).

These discursive dynamics suggest that podcasts may discuss the social groups they focus on in ways that challenge the problematic representations typically seen in traditional media,<sup>2</sup> making podcasts an enticing medium for studying the language used to represent stigmatized groups. However, research in this direction has been limited when it comes to the representation of women victims of violence. In their descriptive analysis, Slakoff and Duran (2023) investigated whether White women and girls have been overrepresented in American true crime podcasts. Slakoff (2023) investigated the portrayal of victim-blaming narratives in true crime podcasts focused on interpersonal violence (IPV). Through an online survey, Boling and Hull (2018) identified that women are the dominant audience(s) of true crime podcasts (73%). Finally, Boling (2022) used interviews to explore why women who identify as domestic violence survivors consume true crime podcasts and how they make meaning of the content. Although these works have demonstrated the need to critically analyze representations in true crime podcasts, they did not directly study the way murdered women are represented in podcast discourses.

This article aims to address this gap. It examines representations of women murder victims in true crime podcasts through a discourse analysis of 14 popular American true crime episodes released between

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<sup>2</sup> By traditional media, we refer to newspapers, magazines, and crime novels as studied in the literature, focusing on media representation of victims and stigmatized groups, which we reference in the article to put our findings into perspective.

2014 and 2021. Informed by literature in discourse studies, gender studies, and media and communication studies, we argue that the murdered women are represented as (1) part of a dehumanized group, (2) who are complicit in their deaths, and (3) who serve as a cautionary tale for their fellow women. Although this analysis provides some evidence to support that discursive dimensions specific to true crime can nuance traditional media discourses, the representations of murdered women identified in the corpus largely align with the representations identified in traditional forms of media: Podcast storytelling also represents women in a way that misplaces the responsibility of the violence and runs the risk of reinforcing existing gendered stereotypes. The article will first present our analytical framework, followed by the methodology and the results of our empirical analysis.

### **Analytical Framework**

To conduct this study and guide our analysis, our analytical framework mobilizes the concepts of discourse, representation, and (ideal/nonideal) victim. In discourse analysis, language is seen as a cyclical entity that constructs social qualities while also being constructed by these qualities (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000): a coproductive process contained within the concept of discourse. In this article, we approach discourse as a relational meaning-making practice based on language that articulates conceptual and physical dimensions of social life and produces sociopolitical orders, identities, and subjectivities. Doing so, we align with the broad definition of discourse as spoken or written communication about an event or action (van Dijk, 1997). Representation has been a focus of interest within the scholarship studying mass media discourse, primarily how mass media constructs a reality about victims and the violence they experience (Efe, 2019; García Marrugo, 2021).

Our approach to representation aligns with Hall's (1997) interpretation, which suggests the social meaning of language is understood and interpreted through the broader social and cultural context. Matus (2018) conceptualizes representation as something that "gives meaning to one thing by means of another," "implies two levels of existence: one imaginary, in the consciousness of the individual, and the other material, expressed in speech or text" and "implies a dual condition" (p. 112). In our interpretation, this dual condition aligns with the idea that representations reflect who speaks and what they speak about. More precisely, discursive representations can be approached in both (a) their social dimensions—e.g., who speaks, who identifies with the discourse produced, and who feels represented within this discourse (either as an object of discourse or by identifying with the speaker in the sense of democratic representation)—and (b) their symbolic dimensions as words do not naturally describe things and representative signs carry meaning that is socially acquired and might not be conscious to the people engaging with these representations (Alejandro, 2018, pp. 7–8). In that sense, the study of the representation of murdered women in contexts where speakers disseminating these representations are women, and women are also the primary audience consuming these representations, constitutes an interesting case combining both social and symbolic interpretations of representation.

In this article, we focus on the representations of women who are victims of violence. The term victim plays a central role in this study. The legal definition defines a victim by the extent of the crime the individual experiences and his or her role in it (Nash, 2007). Things like consent and culpability heavily influence which individuals are awarded the category of victim and given this identity. Beyond the scope of

the judicial definition, the broader social definition of a victim is more nuanced. To be perceived as a victim by society, a person must meet various criteria; failing to meet these criteria may alter the victim's relationship to the rhetorical framing of responsibility for a crime. This understanding of victimhood is best explained through Christie's (1986) ideal victim concept. Typically, scholars who have explored media representations of victims have found that the role of the ideal victim is awarded to victims who are perceived as weak and feminine, are described as respectable, and have no blame for the violence enacted against them—attributes that make them undeserving of their fate (Christie, 1986; Lewis, Hamilton, & Elmore, 2021). If these attributes are not met, the victim is seen as nonideal, and the attention of the crime is directed away from the responsible party and toward the victim's actions (Anthony, 2013; Christie, 1986). Previous work has applied Christie's (1986) concept to the representation of women victims in the news media, finding a hierarchy of victims where some victims were seen as legitimate while others were not (Greer, 2007). Building on this literature, this article uses the concepts of ideal/nonideal victims to inform our analysis of true crime podcasts.

### **Methodology**

This article focuses on the representation of women victims of murder in popular true crime podcasts in the United States. Within the literature's continued exploration of media's representations of stigmatized groups (see Sallabank et al., 2022), we focused on women for this specific study for several reasons. First, violence against women is highly dominant in true crime podcasts (Vitis, 2022). Second, women make up 73% of true crime podcast listeners (Boling & Hull, 2018), and studies suggest that they consume the true crime genre because they relate to victims and can learn potential ways to prevent themselves from becoming victims (Boling & Hull, 2018; Vicary & Fraley, 2010). Finally, violence against women is one of the largest public human rights violations worldwide (Devries et al., 2013), and literature has long shown how mass media can normalize this violence across a wide range of case studies (Burnay, Kepes, & Bushman, 2022; Malamuth & Check, 1981). Additionally, we chose to focus on American true crime podcasts because most true crime audiences are American (YouGov, 2022). Moreover, the United States has been classified as a society where the acceptance of violence is deemed a public health issue, affecting women financially, physically, and mentally (Chrisler & Ferguson, 2006), making it a relevant case for the study of representations that can potentially reinforce existing forms of violence against this group.

In line with our interest in discourse, our study used discourse analysis (DA), a method developed to examine ways in which language reflects and potentially produces implicit assumptions that contribute to the production of social norms, perceptions, and representations, including those related to violence against women (Dunn & Neuman, 2016; Fairclough, 1995). More specifically, we mobilized a "bespoke discourse analysis" (BDA) approach, which offers a four-step method for DA that uses the broad DA toolbox available (Alejandro, Laurence, & Maertens, 2023, p. 165).

The first step involved selecting the documents and constructing the corpus to be analyzed. Namely, we adopted a two-stage sampling strategy combining random and purposive sampling. First, we selected Spotify as our platform of choice because of its popularity (YouGov, 2020) and the rigor of its ranking methodology (a document on ranking methodology can be found on OSF:

[https://osf.io/8n7te/?view\\_only=355698c6d3794578a6e9041eed2f28a7](https://osf.io/8n7te/?view_only=355698c6d3794578a6e9041eed2f28a7)). Using historical data from podcast ranking software Chartable (<https://chartable.com/>), we randomly selected a sample of 20 episodes from the top 100 most-listened-to episodes between the years 2014 and 2021. The timeframe of the sample reflects the growth of the true crime podcasting genre during this period (Clausen & Sikjaer, 2021). Second, we refined this initial corpus's inclusion/exclusion criteria to match our research question better. To do so, we restricted our corpus to include episodes focusing only on at least one woman murder victim for at least half of the episode. Selected podcast episodes can be found in the OSF supplementary material ( see [https://osf.io/8n7te/?view\\_only=355698c6d3794578a6e9041eed2f28a7](https://osf.io/8n7te/?view_only=355698c6d3794578a6e9041eed2f28a7)). This second stage also enabled us to narrow down the corpus further and increase the feasibility of the study, in line with the traditional trade-off of qualitative discourse analysis, which produces rich results but often requires a small corpus to maintain close attention to the discursive elements of each document while drawing potential patterns of commonality between them. Depending on availability, we either downloaded the transcripts from the official websites or transcribed the podcast episodes through transcription software (the entire corpus of transcribed podcasts can be found on OSF: [https://osf.io/8n7te/?view\\_only=355698c6d3794578a6e9041eed2f28a7](https://osf.io/8n7te/?view_only=355698c6d3794578a6e9041eed2f28a7)). All podcast episodes were publicly available, and ethical approval for this research was obtained through the London School of Economics and Political Science.

BDA's second step consisted of identifying relevant elements of the context of the textual material, allowing us to conduct a preliminary analysis of these documents informed by these contextual dimensions. For example, we identified that all the hosts of the podcasts selected are cisgender women. This dimension encouraged us to pay specific attention to linguistic instances of hosts emphasizing shared aspects between themselves and the victims. We also reviewed the literature relative to the textual context (i.e., the podcast genre) and the discursive context of the material analyzed (i.e., discourses about murdered women happening outside of this genre) to inform our preliminary analysis. Namely, we identified three salient patterns that we used to structure our analysis: reduction to body, nonideal victims, and cautionary tales (see Table 1). Beyond these patterns that we identified inductively, we explored the idea of immersive storytelling emphasized by the literature as a distinctive quality of podcast discourse, following the idea that the meta-commentary characteristic of podcasts may introduce representational dynamics absent in traditional media.

Based on the preliminary analysis, we engaged BDA's third step: identifying relevant DA tools adapted to our material. We iteratively reread the transcripts and reviewed existing methodological literature to pinpoint discursive mechanisms and create a toolbox that would enable us to answer our research question. We introduce them in Table 1 below.

**Table 1. Discourse Analysis Toolbox Used for the Analysis.**

<b>Salient patterns</b>	<b>Discourse Analysis Tools/ Discursive mechanisms they enabled us to identify</b>	<b>Definitions from the literature and what the tools enabled us to analyze</b>
Reduction to body	Somatization	Somatization occurs when discourse reduces women to some of their physical characteristics and represents them as fungible bodies (Renkema, 2009; van Leeuwen, 1995). This allowed us to identify instances where women were objectified by being reduced to a dead body.
Nonideal victims	Blame reassignment	Blame reassignment is the action of justifying violence through shifting the blame—and is typically found in victim-blaming narratives (Lazar, 2007). The analysis of blame reassignment allowed us to identify language use that transferred the responsibility of an attack onto the victim.
	Negative descriptors	Adjectives and verbs used to negatively describe women and their actions. This allowed us to identify when language was used to adjectivally modify nouns or represent women and their actions as negative (Baker, 2012).
	Tropes	Tropes serve as a lens through which the intersection of various texts converges to create a shared understanding in representing social actors. Analyzing tropes enabled the identification of linguistic patterns used to evoke imagery laden with connotations that transcend literal interpretation (Rothe, 2011; Talbot, 2005).
Cautionary tales	Lecturing through moralizing discourse	Lecturing through moralizing discourse is a commonly used sensationalistic mechanism that aims to warn audiences of the consequences of social actors' actions. This enabled us to identify instances where women and their actions were represented as doing the opposite of what was deemed appropriate (Ge, 2015).

Social group identification	When speakers draw upon similarities to connect or align themselves and their audiences to the victims, thus shaping a more personal and relatable narrative for their listeners (Oliver et al., 2012). Group identification can take different forms, in our case mainly via association, described as language that demonstrates the connections between the victims and the host (i.e., similar experiences; Karlsson, Lila, Gracia, & Wemrell, 2021; Osisanwo, 2016). The study of systematic association of the murdered women throughout the podcast episodes allowed us to isolate instances where the murdered women in the episode were represented as similar to the hosts through shared experiences or characteristics.
Immersive Host self-reflexivity storytelling	Instances where the hosts of the true crime podcasts critically reflect on their own perspectives and biases. It involves acknowledging and transparently addressing their own subjectivity and the impact their own identity and experiences has on their content (Oliver et al., 2012). This allowed us to explore meta-commentary and understand how this may contribute to nuance and bring complexity to the representations of the women hosts are speaking about.

Last, as part of BDA's fourth step, we carefully analyzed our corpus using these tools and the relevant contextual elements we identified. The findings from this analysis are synthesized in the following section.

### Findings

We argue that popular American true crime podcasts represent murdered women as (1) part of a dehumanized group, (2) who are complicit in their deaths, and (3) who serve as a cautionary tale for their fellow women. We organize our demonstration around these findings. Throughout the presentation of the results, we aim to be sensitive to the way immersive storytelling contributes to shaping and negotiating the representations identified. To support the analysis, we mobilize existing literature to put

the textual elements of the transcripts in the social and historical context(s) in which the true crime genre gains popularity.

### **Murdered Women: Part of a Dehumanized Group**

Literature shows that audiences are more likely to identify with victims that are represented in a humanizing way, as audiences are able to empathize with the emotions and feelings that the victims experience (Loughnan, Pina, Vasquez, & Puvia, 2013). Unfortunately, some discursive mechanisms can instead produce *dehumanization* and hinder audiences from experiencing such relations. This idea of dehumanization, which is derived from Nussbaum's (1995) theory of objectification, explores how objectification can lead to the fragmentation of a woman's identity from her identity being tied to a more object-like nature, including reduction to body and denial of human traits, which work to strip an individual of their humanity (Papadaki, 2021). Previous work on objectifying representations of victims has found that such object-like identities commonly result in a lack of empathy among audiences (Papadaki, 2021).

Literature focusing on podcasts suggests that hosts' potential engagement in social group identification may result in more personalized representations of the victims, resulting in humanization (Lindgren, 2023). However, our analysis reveals that dehumanization processes are at play in our corpus. In the podcasts analyzed, murdered women are represented as part of a dehumanized group through somatization. Somatization occurs when discourse reduces women to some of their physical characteristics. In the podcasts, the women are diminished to their physical characteristics in almost all instances. The most common form of somatization encountered is the reduction to body and body parts. Still, the process also includes elements such as nudity and the positions the women were found in, with some even calling the women's bodies "it" (Kilgariff & Hardstark, 2016a, 00:23:54).

Previous studies on discursive representations of women victims found that, rather than being the mere result of technical language, the discursive reduction to the body lessens key humanizing characteristics of the victim (Clark, 2021). Indeed, somatization disrupts what is known as the "identifiable victim effect" (Jenni & Loewenstein, 1997, p. 235). This effect refers to the predisposition of people to help victims who have been identified as a specific person, compared with a larger group experiencing adversity (Jenni & Loewenstein, 1997). This denial of individuality is a pillar of fungibility (Nussbaum, 1995). By identifying these women as elements of their bodies and representing them as fungible bodies—e.g., a body X, and not by name—the true crime podcasts allow for the possibility of these women being objectified by their audiences, which may work to support the continued dismissal of the violence they suffered from.

In the podcast episodes discussing the murders of Meredith Kercher and Glenna Sue Sharp, somatization through reduction to body parts is frequently employed to represent these women in ways that fail to highlight their humanity. For instance, when discussing the murders, the podcasts state, "you can see the crime scene with the bodies" (Kilgariff & Hardstark, 2016a, 00:36:00), "her skirt is above her waist and her underwear are 50 yards away and her whole body is bruised and battered, has cuts and bite marks all over it" (Kilgariff & Hardstark, 2016a, 00:23:54), "she was basically found naked from the waist down,



splayed open in a humiliating manner” (Kilgariff & Hardstark, 2016a, 00:48:14), and “there is a large knife wound just under her chin and several smaller stab wounds to her neck. The floor around her body is covered in blood” (Flowers & Prawat, 2021, 00:09:00).

Moreover, by reducing these women to a set of body parts, audiences may perceive a sort of fungibility—e.g., the understanding that these women’s bodies or body parts could easily be replaced by other women’s bodies or body parts (Nussbaum, 1995). For instance, this fungibility is exemplified in the word choice used about Meredith Kercher, which may influence the audience into perceiving all women murder victims as an unnamed group rather than humanized individuals. This is seen in statements like “who find a woman’s body under the duvet in the bedroom lying on her back and naked from the waist down” (Flowers & Prawat, 2021, 00:08:33).

However, in one occurrence, the hosts corrected themselves when speaking about Sara Ludemann, thus shifting away from this pattern of fungibility. They first used a fungible description of the victim, Sarah, stating, “she said to what’s-her-face [referring to the victim, Sarah]” (Urquhart & Kelley, 2020, 00:46:30) before quickly correcting themselves and saying, “I didn’t mean to say what’s-her-face. I keep getting them confused” (Urquhart & Kelley, 2020, 00:46:33).

In this specific instance, the host comments on the language she is using, thus displaying self-reflexivity. Doing so, they reflect on their use of language, which might only partially reflect their actual perceptions of the events they narrate. While this commentary may not contribute to transforming their initial representation of the victims—as they kept the original statement of “what’s-her-face” in the final recording—this additional insight departs from traditional journalistic discourse, where audiences may not be provided with additional reasoning for language choices (Urquhart & Kelley, 2020, 00:46:30). However, this type of commentary is mainly absent in the current sample of podcasts.

### **Murdered Women: Complicit in Their Death**

Two critical elements in the reinforcement of victim-blaming beliefs are the shifting of responsibility onto the victims and their actions and the use of gendered stereotypes about women’s sexuality and behavior (Easteal, Holland, & Judd, 2015). In fact, Slakoff (2023) showed that women victims of interpersonal partner violence in true crime podcasts are often portrayed as responsible for the violence they experienced because of flirtation and supposed promiscuity. Building on such findings, we found that the true crime podcasts we analyzed (which are more general than the specific type investigated by Slakoff) also run the risk of reinforcing harmful victim-blaming beliefs by systematically positioning the women as complicit in their deaths through blame reassignment, negative descriptors, and tropes.

Blame reassignment is a discursive mechanism commonly used in the media when representing victims as undeserving of sympathy (Thacker, 2017). This discursive mechanism is common in the podcasts we analyzed. Below are hosts’ statements from episodes on the murders of Qandeel Baloch and Nancy Spungen, like “I think she really confused them . . . I think she enraged them” (Judge, 2021, 00:14:48), “It’s just a video of this girl who is kind of preening in front of the camera . . . And she’s sort of goading him on” (Judge, 2021, 00:09:24), “I mean, like, it’s not like she was like, beloved by all exactly” (Kilgariff &

Hardstark, 2020, 01:38:10), and "it is true that she had done like a, you know, suicide attempt before just to get his attention" (Kilgariff & Hardstark, 2020, 01:39:15).

The active language used in these excerpts provides information about the victims that suggests they played a part in the violence enacted against them, reproducing an "ethic of personal responsibility for risk management" (Barca, 2018, p. 265). When Qandeel is represented as confusing, enraging, and "goading" on the men who murdered her, she is represented as complicit in her death (Judge, 2021, 00:09:24). Similarly, when Nancy Spungen is represented as having a history of self-harm, the focus of the representation moves from her identity as a victim of violence toward her previous actions of enacting violence upon herself.

In parallel, these statements also illustrate immersive storytelling, which provides insight into the hosts' interpretation of the women's actions through their commentary. For example, when speaking about Qandeel, the hosts introduce their own opinion of the victim's actions with language such as "I think" (Judge, 2021, 00:14:48). In another instance, the hosts state that Nancy's suicide attempt was a ploy for attention (Kilgariff & Hardstark, 2020). These statements exemplify how the more intimate, personal approach to podcasts may work, in some cases, to describe murdered women in ways that support problematic representations already existing in traditional media format.

Additionally, various types of negative descriptors are used that reinforce the idea that women are complicit in their deaths: Negative adjectives are used to describe the women, and negative verbs are used to describe their actions. Both work to represent them as bad women who do bad things. Some extracts about Nancy Spungen, Helen List, and Hae Min Lee demonstrate these lexical choices through statements like "[she] was an alcoholic who was verbally abusive, crazy, and unstable . . . she had demanded that John buy her that colonial mansion in Westfield" (Kilgariff & Hardstark, 2016b, 00:22:19), "she is regarded as loud and obnoxious and unlikeable" (Kilgariff & Hardstark, 2020, 01:23:41), and "Hae's friends say she had a strong personality, strong opinions" (Koenig, 2014, 00:35:47).

When the women are represented as being "crazy" and "unstable," the negative connotations of these words are foregrounded in the story of their deaths (Kilgariff & Hardstark, 2016b, 00:22:19). Despite the immersive storytelling dimension inherent in podcasts, this language presents a description of the situation rather than the hosts' opinion and interpretation of the events. Negative descriptors are also not self-reflexively questioned by the hosts within our corpus. Instead, the conversational nature of the podcast tends to casually draw upon victim-blaming discourses that work to shift the responsibility of the violence onto the victim. This is in line with findings from work on more established forms of media (see Bagai & Faimau, 2021; Taylor, 2009). Evidence of these discourses in mass media has shown that this redistributed responsibility could lead audiences to criticize the dispositions and actions of the women, possibly shifting the hosts' view of this violence because of the victims' negative behavior (Bagai & Faimau, 2021; Nirmalasari & Sarwono, 2021; Taylor, 2009).

Last, the use of the Madonna versus Whore trope is another discursive mechanism that contributes to representing the women in true crime podcasts as potentially complicit in their murders. This dichotomy polarizes the morally good and respected figure of Madonna and her counterpart, the Whore, who lacks

humanity and morality because of her sexual desires (Kahalon et al., 2019). This trope appears in the podcasts when a murdered woman's sexual nature is foregrounded. In an episode about the murder of Jennifer Levin, who was raped and murdered in Central Park, the hosts state, "Like what respectable girl wants to get boned in Central Park?" (Kilgariff & Hardstark, 2016a, 00:23:25).

The trope helps the podcasts accommodate the audiences' understanding of the dichotomy between a good woman and a sexual woman. Moreover, the representation of Jennifer as being inherently sexual supports victim-blaming discourses (Lewis et al., 2021). The hosts in the podcasts we analyzed do not explain why they believe a respectable woman would not participate in these actions. The lack of an explanation may leave the audience with the impression that Jennifer Levin, because of her sexual behavior, is not considered part of the same group as "good" women. This discourse also plays into the idea of a nonideal victim, presenting Jennifer as a woman who was participating in nonrespectable acts in a supposedly dangerous place.

Overall, the victim-blaming discourses representing women complicit in their deaths align with the discursive mechanisms identified by the literature on traditional media, where commonly accepted understandings of sexuality and victimhood contribute to the justification of violence against women (Taylor, 2009; Thacker, 2017). This justification of violence is created through the shifting of blame and is heavily associated with constructions of respectability that draw on social and cultural norms (Lazar, 2007). These constructions of respectability arise when the podcasts foreground the women's strong-willed personalities and atypical behaviors, positioning them as nonideal victims.

These findings also introduce novel evidence, expanding on the current literature that focuses on true crime podcasts discussing non-IPV-related crimes (Slakoff, 2023) by demonstrating that the true crime podcast genre, at large, also foregrounds the victims' sexual behavior to represent them as complicit in the violence they experience. Despite literature emphasizing self-reflexivity within the podcast genre, our specific corpus reveals a lack of self-reflexive commentaries and critical commentary toward problematic representations about victim-blaming discourses. This absence might reflect a potential general normalization of these representations in society, but further research would be required to examine this assumption.

### **Murdered Women: A Cautionary Tale for Fellow Women**

Finally, we found that our sample of podcasts represents murdered women as a cautionary tale—another safety tip for women listeners who hope to avoid the threats faced by women—as a collective group. These findings align with the framing of victims in traditional media, further demonstrating that the podcasts do not shift away from foregrounding the representation that victims are responsible for their deaths (see Jeanis & Powers, 2017). About what podcast storytelling does to this representation, the hosts' commentaries combine the idea that the victims faced an obvious threat with the idea that their ability to avoid this threat was inadequate. This dual positioning introduces a tension through which the hosts' discourse warns the women listening to the podcasts of the dangers they face while placing responsibility on them to avoid the harmful actions of others. This is achieved through systematic association and moralizing discourse.

First, association—an extension of social group identification that occurs when the host highlights connections, similar behaviors, and experiences between themselves and the victims—is present in the podcasts, with the hosts occasionally associating themselves with the murdered women based on their own experiences as women (Osisanwo, 2016). An example of this association can be seen in episodes about Jessica Heeringa and Sarah Ludemann, where the hosts state, “I’m your host, Ashley Flowers, and Britt, and today I want to tell you a story about a woman who could have been any of us” (Flowers & Prawat, 2020, 00:00:03), “you can sit there and say like, oh my god, like why would you do that, but we’ve all been there, I’ve been there” (Urquhart & Kelley, 2020, 00:43:21), and “we’ve all snapped at this point, with this kind of situation” (Urquhart & Kelley, 2020, 00:48:12).

The concept of association is a component of social group identification mentioned in the literature on podcasts. Indeed, Oliver et al. (2012) suggested that narrative journalism, such as podcasts, leads to a stronger identification of the speaker with characters and social groups. This identification offers a unique opportunity for podcast hosts to oppose the traditional representation of women victims as others, which we explored through the discursive tools of association.

As we can see, the statements made by the women hosts of the two different podcasts demonstrate efforts to associate themselves and their listeners with the women victims, which contrasts the language traditionally used to represent victims as inherently different from most women (Bullock, 2007). This contributes to a type of self-reflexivity unique to podcast and narrative journalism, where the hosts’ commentary works to reflect on their experiences that could have led them to be in the same situation as the character in the story they are speaking about.

However, although the statements made by the hosts demonstrate an identification with the women victims, there are instances across the 14 podcasts of hosts’ commentary that introduce a tension between what the victims did and what the hosts believe should have been done. Such evidence counters the idea that social group identification (here via association) inherently leads to representations that depart from traditional media or are less harmful. A few examples of this can be seen in the statements made by the hosts, such as “this case sucks to look at afterward because it’s so avoidable” (Urquhart & Kelley, 2020, 00:45:45) and “who did she call? Not 911, not her friends, not her parents . . . she called Josh!” (Urquhart & Kelley, 2020, 00:50:33).

The hosts’ commentary in the story implies their disapproval of the actions taken by the women, illustrating how immersive storytelling can sometimes make the victims seem responsible for their safety. This suggests that the women in the podcasts failed to take the necessary measures to protect themselves, which ultimately led to their deaths. Ultimately, this creates nuanced commentaries through which the hosts criticize or lament the actions taken by the victim. Such criticisms from the hosts contribute to discursively constructing the image of nonideal victimhood—where an ideal victim would have had no role in their death by taking the proper measures. The hosts’ self-reflexivity and discussion of similarities they share with the victims end when considering the principles of an ideal victim. In these moments of the podcasts, the hosts avoid highlighting shared traits with the victims and instead use language that shifts blame and portrays the women as nonideal victims.

Additionally, the podcasts engage in moralizing discourse, a discursive mechanism that lectures audiences about correct or incorrect actions (Ge, 2015). By drawing upon this somewhat normative/moral register, this practical discourse offers guidance on how one should act or think in a situation (Nielsen, 1957). This can be seen in statements like “the poor girl, but this whole situation. Guys don’t meet strangers on Tinder” (Kilgariff & Hardstark, 2016b, 01:07:04) and “don’t go to a place where someone is who said they would stab you” (Urquhart & Kelley, 2020, 00:49:38).

These findings align with the literature about the representation of victims in traditional media when it comes to the relationship between moralizing discourse and women victims of violence. Berridge and Portwood-Stacer (2015) identified that widely held beliefs about women’s safety frame individual responsibility (i.e., not walking at night, dressing modestly, not getting drunk) as the critical factor in preventing a crime. This call for individual risk management is common in media that uses sensationalistic language, working to promote fear among audiences through moralizing discourse (Haw, 2020). Such discourse may present captivating cautionary tales and advice to audiences who wish to continue listening to the episodes to prevent themselves from becoming victims of a possibly preventable crime (Haw, 2020). In the podcasts, this moralizing commentary implies a correct way for women to act—primarily those discussed who were victims of murder but, more broadly, women in general. Such discourse supports the widespread belief that true crime podcasts can be used as safety lessons on survival for female audiences (Sales, 2023; Vicary & Fraley, 2010).

Our findings show that although true crime podcasts tend to depart from traditional mass media to the extent that hosts engage in social group identification via association, hosts’ commentaries also partake in moralizing discourse that supports victim-blaming representations by emphasizing individual responsibility in preventing personal harm. By representing murdered women as a cautionary tale, true crime podcasts depict them as individuals whose experiences should be taken as a warning for other women who do not want to experience the same type of violence, possibly promoting fear among the predominantly female audience (see Boling & Hull, 2018). Work by Froio (2021), Hoffman and Hobbs (2021), and Thacker (2017) similarly found that in cases of victim blaming and moral policing in representations of women, tolerance about the representations of violence against women can be justified under the umbrella of safety lessons for women. As such, these representations could encourage the belief that is predominant in media advising women and women who experience violence to learn self-defense, proposing they play an active role in its prevention (see Berridge & Portwood-Stacer, 2015).

### **Conclusion**

This study aimed to provide insights into the ways that American true crime podcasts represent women victims of murder, with a specific interest in whether these representations align with previous findings focusing on traditional media or introduce novel representations that challenge existing discourses around victims. Our discourse analysis of 14 popular episodes shows that American true crime podcasts’ representations of murdered women align with representations identified in traditional news media. The podcasts unsympathetically represent murdered women as nonideal victims—e.g., victims who are not viewed as blameless (see Christie, 1986). These representations connote that rather than complete people to empathize with, women are often reduced to body parts or choices that can be

held as emblems of what not to do. As suggested by Sutherland and colleagues (2015), representations supporting such discourses can shape audience beliefs on violence against women through unrealistic and often unsympathetic representations of the victims that influence policy, law enforcement, and public opinion (Clark, 2021).

In alignment with the literature focusing on podcast discourse, we also found discursive mechanisms specific to podcasting, such as self-reflexivity and social group identification, adding personal commentary to the narration of the murders. However, while hosts' commentary allows them to identify with the women victims, there remains a tension between this associating language and social group identification and the way their words support victim-blaming discourse through individual risk prevention. As such, our research concludes that immersive storytelling does not imply increased empathy and humanization or a general departure from dominant representations and discourses about stigmatized victims.

Overall, this article makes two empirical contributions. First, we demonstrate that although true crime podcasts have not previously been treated as a traditional form of media in existing scholarship, they perpetuate similar problematic representations about women victims of murder that deserve to be investigated for their roles in societal discourses like other forms of mass media. This perpetuation can likely be attributed to the reliance on information from traditional media sources in creating podcast episodes, with hosts referencing these sources throughout the episodes. The reliance on traditional media descriptions of cases, which have been shown to exhibit victim-blaming tendencies, may explain why these podcasts perpetuate the same tropes. Second, we argue that although immersive storytelling in true crime podcasts may contribute to perpetuating traditional problematic discourses such as victim blaming, the personal commentary of the hosts can also offer a departure from the negative views of the victims. However, these instances are only marginal in the corpus studied. Although these findings may resonate with the growing discomfort toward true crime, we hope that this analysis of the discursive mechanisms at play can encourage both the public and producers of true crime podcasts to reflect on their language use when engaging with the sensitive topic of women being murdered.

About the limitations of this study, our use of qualitative discourse analysis, which mobilized many discourse analysis tools, resulted in a relatively small corpus size that provided in-depth results but limited their scope. Future studies could expand the corpus, for example, by conducting a comparative analysis of the representations before and after the #MeToo movement and whether the discourses changed since the start of the movement in terms of overall representations and more specific dynamics related to immersive storytelling. Further research could also engage in comparative analysis, for example, by investigating representations of other social groups or subgroups within women, for example, representations of cis- versus trans-women, women of different ethnic backgrounds, and more. Finally, additional work could also expand to reception studies and audience studies to investigate how mechanisms identified in the material affect public perception of this type of crime, women victims of violence, and the normalization of violence.

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