



‘My Favourite Genre is Missing People’: Exploring How Listeners Experience True Crime Podcasts in Australia

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Abstract

In Australia, the public is increasingly accessing stories about crime, violence and harm via true crime podcasts (TCPs). Despite the proliferation of these sources, TCPs have received limited attention in criminological media research. To address this gap, this article outlines findings from a recent research project that examined Australian listeners’ perspectives of TCPs. To explore how listeners relate to TCPs and the factors shaping the podcasts they gravitate towards, this vignette study asked participants to read two podcast summaries, choose which they would prefer to listen to and write about what informed their decision. The analysis of these accounts presented in this article provides insight into which TCP narratives listeners recognise as meaningful and how these texts produce and entrench different ways of experiencing and understanding crime.

Keywords: True crime podcasts; true crime; cultural criminology; crime media.

Introduction

Public engagement with crime media is increasingly diffuse. New media have destabilised television, print and radio news coverage as the epicentre of crime information (Evans 2021), and the public now bypasses these outlets to access, disseminate and produce information about crime and criminal legal processes in new forums (Surette 2015). This increasing and diversifying flow of crime narratives is particularly evident in relation to true crime, which is now consumed through books, movies, streaming series, Facebook, Twitter, subreddits, YouTube and podcasts. In Australia, the public is increasingly accessing stories about crime, violence and harm via true crime podcasts (TCPs). In 2018–2019, the number of Australians who downloaded a podcast reached 1.6 million (ACMA 2019), and true crime is a popular genre for these listeners (ABC 2019). This trend is evident in monthly listening patterns and podcast numbers. In Australia, the podcast with the most monthly listeners is a podcast focused on true crime named *Casefile* (Triton 2022), and the number of Australian TCPs has increased to approximately 124. This increase demonstrates that the enduring interest in true crime in this settler–colonial context (Franks 2020) is being channelled into new and engaging mediums.

Despite the proliferation of these (mostly) freely accessible sources, TCPs have received limited attention in criminological media research. While criminologists have engaged extensively with crime in cinema and television (Goyes and Franko 2022; Rafter and Brown 2011; Stoneman and Packer 2021; Young 2009), empirical explorations of crime media in Australia have focused on the content of news media and highlighted how news values prioritise sensationalist, inaccurate and racialised accounts of crime (Evans 2021; McGregor 2017; Our Watch 2015). Additionally, where public perspectives on crime media have been sought, Australian research has focused on how television, radio and tabloid media consumption shape perceptions



of crime rates and punitive attitudes (Davis and Dossetor 2010; Gelb 2011; Roberts, Spiranovic and Indermaur 2011). As local TCPs proliferate, questions remain as to the content of these texts and the meanings, sensations and subjectivities that emerge from public engagement with them, particularly as their technological and mediated affordances enable them to be intimate, affecting and de-centralised.

To address these questions, this article outlines findings from a recent research project that examined Australian listeners' perspectives of TCPs. To explore how listeners relate to TCPs and the factors shaping the podcasts towards which they gravitate, this vignette study asked participants to read two podcast summaries, choose which they would prefer to listen to and write about what informed their decision. The analysis of these accounts presented in this article provides insight into which TCP narratives listeners recognise as meaningful and how these texts produce and entrench different ways of experiencing and understanding crime.

In doing so, this article contributes to media criminology's project of examining which crime stories are circulated and desired in popular culture by investigating favoured narratives in contemporary media sites. Concomitantly, this approach contributes to the cultural criminological project by drawing from Young's (2009) seminal work on the crime image, specifically, its emphasis on examining *how* crime media are experienced. By examining listeners' accounts of the TCPs they gravitate towards, this article explores how encounters with mediated crime narratives generate affective experiences, shape understandings of 'judgment and justice' (Young 2009: 2) and interpolate listeners into unique subject positions (Brown 2017).

Australian True Crime Podcasts

True crime refers to stories centred around real cases or events involving crime, harm, criminalisation and the criminal legal system that are 'shaped by the teller and imbued with [their] values and beliefs' (Murley 2008: 6). This interweaving genre sits at the nexus of journalism, non-fiction, crime fiction and testimony narratives of late modern social media and blurs the boundaries between journalistic non-fiction and narrative fiction (Punnett 2018). It has been popular since the European invasion (Franks 2020), so much so that Australia has been described as a nation 'obsessed' with true crime. While true crime circulates across all media, podcasts have become a new medium through which these narratives are consumed.

TCPs follow three main formats. First, *deep-dive podcasts* (Sherrill 2022) discuss, narrate and investigate one case or issue over multiple episodes through a 'richly textured narrative featuring self-reflexive gestures exposing audiences to the journalistic process of production' (Dowling and Miller 2019: 180). This format is exemplified in *The Teacher's Pet* podcast, which mixes investigation, interviews, temporal shifts and serialised revelations across multiple episodes. In contrast, *short-form podcasts* narrate specific cases in single 30- to 60-minute episodes and employ a fiction narrative approach in which the host retells the story without placing themselves in it. Finally, *testimony podcasts* focus on the testimony of people with lived experience of crime and the criminal legal system, including police, academics, legal actors, victims and current or formerly incarcerated people (Russell and Rae 2020).

The number of Australians who downloaded a podcast increased from 908,000 in 2014–2015 to 1.6 million in 2018–2019 (ACMA 2019). True crime is the fourth most popular genre for podcast listeners aged 14 to 34 years and the third most popular for listeners aged 35 to 54 years (ABC 2019). Additionally, the most popular Australian podcast in the country (*Casefile*) is a TCP, and six of the top 20 Australian podcasts are also focused on true crime (Triton 2022).¹ These increases reflect several dovetailing shifts. First, the popularity of National Public Radio's *Serial* in the US contributed to the proliferation of true crime markets internationally. Similarly, the national and international success of *The Teacher's Pet*,² which focused on the 1982 disappearance and alleged (at the time of this publication) murder of Lynette Dawson by her husband Chris Dawson, solidified TCPs as a media product of interest. Although *The Teacher's Pet* remains a prime Australian example of the genre, the market for TCPs is increasingly diverse. Of the approximately 124 Australian TCPs, many are produced by major media outlets and professional journalists, in addition those produced by crime agencies and institutional actors. Media corporations have readily included TCPs in their array of new products. For example, after the commercial success of *The Teacher's Pet*, News Corp launched *True Crime Australia*, a stand-alone website across all metropolitan mastheads consolidating its true crime content, including podcasts (News Corp Australia 2018; Pash 2019; Schwarz 2019).

While major media outlets are capitalising on TCPs, the emergence of podcasting in open access settings and low barriers to entry for production and distribution have meant that pro-amateur podcasting is a key feature of the medium (Markman 2012; Schlütz and Hedder 2021). This trend is also aided by long-tail distribution markets that ensure the proliferation of large numbers of niche podcasts with small but dedicated audiences (Schlütz and Hedder 2021: 4). For example, from 2005 to 2018, there were a recorded 1,152 unique TCPs internationally (Sherrill 2022). In Australia, many of these TCPs are independently produced.

Murder, Serial Killing, Violence Against Women, and Justice

The rise of TCPs in Australia reinvigorates questions about how crime is depicted in the media. True crime texts are important resources for establishing what counts as crime and who counts as a victim because they depict crime in a way that blends fiction and non-fiction and are formulaic and repetitive in their focus on specific narratives and crime types. The genre focuses extensively on violent crimes like murder and serial killing (Murley 2008) and has also reproduced misogynistic, racialised and classist hierarchies of victimhood by repeatedly focusing on young white women as crime victims while simultaneously obfuscating minority groups' experiences of crime and marginalisation (Webb 2021; Yardley, Kelly and Robinson-Edwards 2019). The genre's frequent depictions of violence against women have been voyeuristic and misogynistic, producing an 'uncomplicated and patriarchal view of a woman's life' by emphasising the lost potential of victims as wives and mothers (Murley 2019: 219) while providing detailed descriptions of the lives and internal machinations of the perpetrators.

These routine depictions of specific kinds of violence are coupled with a focus on law and order. True crime is replete with conservative 'ordering narratives' that merge detailed descriptions of the perpetration of crime and violence with inevitable formal legal outcomes (Murley 2008), underpinned by a purported desire to pursue justice for the victim. This dual focus on violence and justice is shaped by true crime's ideological commitments to social order, which reflect and assuage cultural anxieties through conservative positioning. For example, the proliferation of serial killer narratives in the 1990s reflected rising fears of declining community standards (Biressi 2001; Murley 2008). In the Australian settler-colonial context, popular true crime 'bushranger' and 'murders across the rural landscape' stories have been tied to 'formations of Australian national identity' (Smith 2008: 7) and tap into underlying anxieties about colonial dispossession. True crime also has the potential to assuage anxieties when it deploys narratives that valorise institutions like police and courts as mechanisms of social ordering (Murley 2019; Yardley, Kelly and Robinson-Edwards 2019) and, in doing so, shores up the carceral state (Vitis 2022; Webb 2021).

While these observations have been repeatedly made for the true crime genre, questions remain as to whether contemporary TCPs reproduce the same narratives. Our recent survey of TCP listeners highlighted how this contemporary medium is sustaining enduring narratives, as most respondents indicated that they preferred TCPs focused on serial killers (91%), missing persons (69%), stranger homicide (60%) and intimate partner homicide (54%) (Vitis and Ryan 2021). The wider TCP market in Australia is also replete with similar stories. For example, 61% of the *Casefile* podcast episodes and 44% of the *Australian True Crime* podcast episodes focus on cases or accounts featuring the rape, murder or disappearance of women and girls (Vitis 2022). However, Yardley, Kelly and Robinson-Edwards' (2019) analysis of six international TCPs, including the Australian podcast *Bowraville*,³ found that the podcasts both 'reproduced and critiqued ideal victimhood' and demonstrated a critical orientation by exploring the conditions shaping the recognition of victimhood and questioning whether police can or do address harm (Yardley, Kelly and Robinson-Edwards 2019: 510).

The potential for TCPs to deviate from previous ideological and discursive patterns has also been explored concerning depictions of violence against women. For example, popular American podcasts like *Serial* and *My Favorite Murder* have been characterised as 'feminist' for relying on testimony and memorialising women victims (Doane, McCormick and Sorce 2017; Fitzpatrick 2017). Similarly, Horeck's (2019) work on 'bingeable' true crime streaming series and podcasts suggests there is a feminist possibility in true crime because it can frame violence as systematic and structural. This subversive potential has also been noted by Murley (2019), who argues in her analysis of four first-person female true crime memoirs that these texts can explore trauma and the misogyny of violence against women while simultaneously critiquing the exploitation embedded in the genre. Additionally, Slakoff's (2022) analysis of the portrayal of domestic violence in long-form TCPs found that the podcasts recognised the role of context and male entitlement in domestic violence. Moreover, others have recognised TCPs as informal justice mechanisms that utilise the efforts of hosts, listeners and family members to seek justice in response to the formal justice system's longstanding failures in addressing and recognising violence against women (Pâquet 2021).

However, allusions to the critical dimensions of TCPs require thought. For example, Brown (2017) argues that while documentary-style crime media can be both voyeuristic and progressive, they remain rooted in an ideological commitment to the carceral state and restrict discussions about its permanence. Indeed, TCP producers describe their podcasts in explicitly reformist terms (Boling 2019) and, in doing so, 'contribut[e] to and suppor[t] the racial inequities of our criminal system', despite positioning their podcasts as 'victim-centred, progressive and feminist' (Webb 2021: 133). Similarly, Vitis (2022) questions suggestions that TCPs focused on violence against women are inherently justice-seeking, noting that historically, Australian media actors have often used claims of community justice to legitimate exploitative accounts of violence against women.

However, it is important to note here that limited empirical research into the content of TCPs makes it difficult to take fixed positions on these texts. While there is, of course, the potential to subvert these historical narratives, particularly in media with

low barriers to entry, the sheer volume of Australian TCPs coupled with the recent involvement of large media corporations in the market raises questions about the extent to which subversive narratives are present across the overall landscape. Moreover, questions remain as to whether these undercurrents are evident in listeners' perspectives.

Listeners and Listening

Much of the current literature on TCP listeners has focused on the statistical analysis of listener motivations, largely with US audiences (Boling and Hull 2018; Vitis and Ryan 2021). This research has highlighted that engagement with TCPs is shaped by various factors, including the affective nature of both true crime and podcasting. For example, these surveys have found that listeners primarily regard TCPs as entertaining, compelling and exciting (Boling and Hull 2018; Vitis and Ryan 2021). These findings align with the extant literature on true crime narratives, which indicates that true crime is uniquely designed to create feelings of disgust, rage and pleasure by creating an affective economy for audiences to enjoy experiences of hatred, judgement and vengeance (Punnett 2018; Stoneman and Packer 2021). These findings also align with examinations of contemporary TCP narratives, which have shown that podcasts routinely evoke anger and disgust, particularly when narrating cases that fail to produce a criminal legal outcome (Yardley, Kelly and Robinson-Edwards 2019).

These affective experiences are shaped by the connective nature of sound and intensified by podcasts' ability to utilise stylistic choices that generate a closeness in the listening or 'earwitnessing' experience. Scholars in the field of sensory criminology have described sound as a 'medium for emotion', with a capacity to create shifting embodied experiences (Herrity 2020: 28). For example, Herrity's (2020: 28) ethnographic research into prison soundscapes highlights that auditory experiences are affecting because sound is connective and forges links between imagined and current worlds, constituting 'a means of traversing boundaries between disciplines, people, time and space' (Herrity 2020: 31). In TCPs, sound's emotive and connective nature is coupled with the narrative, stylistic and technological aspects of true crime podcasting, which culminate to generate a sense of intimacy. For example, TCPs use serial narratives and cliffhangers to generate imaginative engagement or an absence through which listeners yearn for more of the narrative while speculating on what might have happened (Haugtvedt 2017: 6). While serialised storytelling is common in the genre, as an auditory medium, TCPs harness sound's unique ability to create bridges between the imaginative and the real to intensify this experience.

Emotion is also facilitated by podcasts' ability to provide listeners with a close and ongoing connection to stakeholder voices (Rae, Russell and Nethery 2019). Podcasts generate intimate and authentic exchanges by 'speak[ing] directly and personally to listeners through their earbuds' (McCracken 2017: 1), imbuing narratives with whispering closeness (Swiatek 2018: 176). This immersive interior experience is enhanced by sound's ability to stimulate imagination by generating experiences that traverse the internal and external (Herrity 2020) and the absence of visual markers, which forces the listener to imagine the people and places within the story (Boling 2019).

These affective experiences are further intensified through the testimonies of hosts, guests and stakeholders. Because TCPs provide the audience with direct access to the voices of victims, perpetrators, legal actors and law enforcement, they generate a sense of authentic insight into closed institutions (Boling 2019; Buozis 2017; Doane, McCormick and Sorce 2017; McCracken 2017; Rae, Russell and Nethery 2019). For example, Rae, Russell and Nethery's (2019: 1046) research into *The Messenger* (a podcast focused on the experiences of refugees on Manus Island) found that detainees' voices and personal accounts imbued the podcast with a 'moral authority' and registered it as a 'truthful account of life in a prison camp' (Rae, Russell and Nethery 2019: 1046). These aural techniques provide a sense of insight into the realities of crime, harm and political violence (Yardley, Kelly and Robinson-Edwards 2019) and, therefore, shape the affective experiences of listeners in ways that are unique to podcasts.

Listening not only produces affective experiences but also calls listeners to inhabit specific subject positions that can shape how they interpret crime and the justice system. For example, Brown (2017) suggests that spectatorship—a specific 'mode of subjectivity' both produced and appealed to through encounters with crime media—brings the public into the proximity of crime and penalty, which they experience and are encouraged to experience with fascination, while ensuring enough distance to prevent critical questioning. Spectatorship takes on various forms in true crime. For example, Biressi's (2001: 2) survey of British true crime texts since the 1970s argues that the genre encourages 'the modern social subject who is both fearful and vigilant, but also intrigued by crime'. TCPs encourage a variation on this vigilant subjectivity by inviting listeners to take the position of a co-investigator who speculates on cases, provides leads and shares personal experiences (Haugtvedt 2017). These podcasts openly encourage sleuthing and solicit knowledge, experiences and testimony from their audiences. In this dynamic, the host is often positioned as exploring and questioning the issues at hand alongside the listener (Horeck 2019), who is 'being asked to adopt the juror perspective' when engaging with the account (Bruzzi 2016: 274). These participatory dynamics have been evidenced in listener surveys, which have found that audience members listen to TCPs to learn about crime and participate

in the story (Vitis and Ryan 2021). Overall, statistical analyses of listener motivations highlight key listening patterns, but detailed qualitative insights from Australian listeners are lacking. As such, this paper outlines the findings from a vignette study aimed at exploring the perspectives of true crime podcast listeners.

Vignette Study

This vignette study was placed in a survey completed by a non-probability sample of 124 undergraduate and postgraduate students attending a Queensland university in 2020 who were over 18 and had listened to a TCP in the past seven years. The online survey was administered through Qualtrics and contained 34 items; it received ethical approval from Queensland University of Technology. Almost two-thirds of the survey respondents were aged 18 to 24 years (65%, $n = 80$), and one-quarter (27%, $n = 34$) were 25 to 34 years. A smaller proportion was aged 35 years plus, with 4% ($n = 5$) aged 35 to 44 years, 2% aged 45 to 54 years ($n = 3$) and 2% aged 55 to 64 years ($n = 2$). Therefore, respondents were slightly younger than the average podcast listener (ABC 2019). Most respondents (88%, $n = 109$) described their gender as woman. The remaining respondents described their gender as man (9%, $n = 11$) and non-binary (3%, $n = 4$). This gender distribution aligns with Australian consumer data, which show that listeners who favour TCPs are largely women (ABC 2019). This paper focuses on responses to the survey's open-ended vignette study, which aimed to examine the type of TCPs that listeners prefer and their reasoning for selecting those podcasts.

Respondents were presented with two vignettes featuring short descriptions of two fictional TCPs. The first vignette described a podcast focused on a missing person case involving the potential murder of a woman by her husband (see Table 1). The second described a podcast focused on a large-scale corporate fraud (see Table 1). Both were modelled upon existing precis of popular TCPs to replicate the tone and detail provided to the public when selecting podcasts. After reading these vignettes, participants were asked to select their preferred podcast and write about why they made their selection. Vignettes were presented in this manner to replicate the interfaces offered by distributors and enable participants to freely discuss their specific preferences and perspectives on TCPs more generally.

Table 1. Podcast vignettes

Title	Description
Podcast 1	In 1995, 35-year-old Sarah Brentwood left her job at the local shopping centre in Ringwood at 6pm and never came home. The following day, her husband David, a local architect, reported her disappearance to the police. He told police that Sarah would often 'go missing' for days at a time due to an undiagnosed mental illness. After a full investigation, and 15 years later, no one has heard from Sarah. In 2018, investigative journalist John Lawrence revisits this disturbing case. Why didn't Sarah's workmates tell police that she described David as controlling and possessive? Why didn't neighbours share that David left his home at 11pm two days after her disappearance and returned three hours later? Why didn't police follow up on an anonymous tip-off about a woman's jacket found in bushland near David's home two years later? All questions are answered in this 12-part podcast.
Podcast 2	Australian financier Paul Blanche was a local celebrity. A renowned financier, broker and philanthropist, he ran the most successful securities firm Australia had ever seen, Blanche Investment Securities. After decades of enjoying a successful reputation, in 2010, it became known that for 20 years, Blanche's firm had been running the largest financial pyramid scheme in Australian history. The fallout was so expansive that the Blanche Victim Fund was created to assist people who had been defrauded by the company. To date, the fund has received more than 10,000 applications from Blanche's former clients across 40 countries. Hosted by journalist Helen Stanković, this podcast questions how Blanche was able to get away with defrauding investors of nearly 100 million dollars and who helped him do it? Drawing from interviews with Blanche from prison, as well as law enforcement and victims, this podcast examines Australia's most shocking fraud case.

As this is an exploratory study and the aim was to organise patterns in participants' responses as to why they selected their chosen podcast, I drew from Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-stage phases model of reflexive thematic analysis and used an inductive thematic analysis. This approach was undergirded by an experiential framework aimed at capturing and exploring the diversity of perspectives and understandings across participants (Richards, Death and Ronken 2021). I began by familiarising myself with the data and writing notes detailing my primary insights. The data were then coded manually and with NVivo software. I deployed a systematic and iterative approach to coding using both semantic codes (codes focused on meaning at the

explicit level) and latent codes (codes focused on meaning at an implicit level; Braun and Clarke 2021). This approach was repeated twice for consistency. In the second stage of this process, I focused on refining codes and reducing duplication. I generated seven initial themes from these codes that were then developed into four key themes: subject matter, affective experiences, psychology and justice-seeking, which I detail in the analysis below.

Subject Matter: Missing People, Cold Cases and Murder

Most participants (85%) selected Podcast 1 as their preference. Respondents identified subject matter as the primary reason for their selection. The vignettes describe two specific scenarios, and participants neatly categorised each podcast through ‘case type’ references, describing them as missing persons, homicide, domestic violence, white-collar crime or fraud stories. In doing so, they demonstrated a familiarity with how a heavily saturated true crime market relies upon delineated ‘crime type’ narratives. Participants who chose Podcast 1 often explained this choice in relation to an interest in ‘missing persons’, ‘cold cases’, ‘murder’ or ‘homicide’. For example:

My favourite genre is missing people.
 I am always interested in stories where someone goes missing.
 I usually find murder-based cases more interesting.
 I'll pick murder, violence, etc over money related crimes any day.

Importantly, while the vast majority framed Podcast 1 in ways that reflected the broader demarcation of TCPs into sub-genres like ‘missing persons’ and ‘homicide’, others described Podcast 1 as intimate partner homicide, framing their selection in relation to their broader interest in domestic violence. For example:

The disappearance of Sarah Brentwood strikes me as a DV case. That is a field I'm really passionate about, so I'd be more interested in that podcast.

Participants also distinguished relevant subject matter based on the presence or absence of interpersonal harm. In describing their selection, participants also indicated a desire for stories that were ‘personal’ or involved a ‘human’ component that presented what some participants recognised as ‘real’ victims:

Stories with personal motives other than financial greed and stories which involve interpersonal harm and not anonymous financial damage or more interesting to me.
 Sounds more interpersonal rather than fraudulent behaviour.
 Person centred rather than corporate centred.
 I like to understand the interpersonal relationships that resorted in that crime, instead of a mass money fraud.

These decisive articulations of subject matter preference demonstrate that mediated narratives of interpersonal violence, historically popular in true crime, are sought and valued in contemporary TCPs. The importance placed on the subject matter also reflected the extant dynamics around the hierarchies of victimhood and crime (Greer 2007; McEvoy and McConnachie 2012) in the genre (Yardley Kelly and Robinson-Edwards 2019). The presence of human or interpersonal elements was recognised as a determinative factor in these choices, particularly for those who chose Podcast 1. Moreover, some participants clearly distinguished the importance of a personal narrative compared to a corporate or financial narrative. These distinctions reflect entrenched ‘real crime’ constructs, where crimes involving interpersonal violence are considered in the public interest because audiences struggle to recognise ‘elite victims’ as ‘innocent victims’ or victims at all (Levi 2008). This consideration was evident in comments distinguishing podcasts as ‘person centred rather than corporate centred’ with ‘human consequences’, or, as one participant noted explicitly, ‘I empathise more with a normal woman needing justice than with a wealthy person who exploited others’. Biressi (2001: 36) suggests that the genre is adaptive, with its discourses ‘tak[ing] on the colour of others that seem to fit most closely with the material under discussion, its potential audience and its cultural context’. Reflecting on this argument, Yardley Kelly and Robinson-Edwards (2019) suggest that TCPs can simultaneously align with and deviate from narrative patterns that support ideal victimhood. While it is not possible to conclude whether participants preferred specific narratives in their podcast of choice, deference to podcasts involving interpersonal violence suggests that dominant narrative patterns that have proliferated the genre continue to drive podcast audiences.

While participants broadly named Podcast 1 as a murder or missing persons case, others also recognised this as a story of domestic violence. Indeed, some participants suggested that podcasts were concerningly saturated with such narratives:

It would really depend on the day, but I think I would pick number 2 because I've listened to and watched a lot of true crime series about missing women and their husbands, and it starts to feel really depressing after a while.

Evidently, domestic violence narratives were recognised as a 'crime type' worthy of consideration in TCPs. This finding is perhaps unsurprising as true crime narratives are receptive to cultural context (Biressi 2001), and domestic and family violence has become increasingly visible in Australia in the past decade due to, among other factors, media campaigning from prominent anti-violence activists. Although few participants used the language of domestic violence when describing Podcast 1, the preference and enthusiasm for Podcast 1 raise questions about how domestic violence is being constituted and popularised in these texts.

Affective Experiences

While participants attributed their selection to interest in the subject matter of murder, missing persons and domestic violence, their decisions were also shaped by the podcast's potential to produce familiar affective experiences such as excitement, intrigue and horror. First, participants selected Podcast 1 because they expected that listening to a missing persons case would produce affective sensations of mystery, intrigue, catharsis and fear. Among the affective experiences described by participants, mystery was the most prominent. For example:

A missing person is intriguing - what happened to them?

There seems to be more mystery involved in the first option.

... would be interested in both podcasts, but I am more interested in podcast 1 because there is something intriguing about the mystery of a missing person.

This desire for intrigue was further evidenced by participants expecting that the potential for revelations and investigations in Podcast 1 could keep them in suspense:

Missing persons case, slow revelations of facts.

I feel as though the storyline and the investigation into podcast 1 would be more engaging as opposed to podcast 2 as it already has an outcome.

References to the affective elements of mystery were most common, but participants also described the potential to experience graphic and morbid content as a determinative factor:

The first one is more disturbing and interesting.

It seems a bit more morbid I suppose.

First one seems more gruesome.

These comments—like those citing the pleasures of intrigue and mystery—demonstrate that affective experience was a modulating factor for listeners. The desire for affective experiences was also evident in comments describing Podcast 2 as 'boring', whereas missing persons and murder podcasts were familiar and easy to understand. For example:

Finance is boring. Fraud is boring.

Robbery, white collar crime such as fraud does not interest me in the slightest and I find it boring.

These criticisms were also concomitant with descriptions of Podcast 2 as too complicated and confusing compared to Podcast 1:

I can get confused by all the financial details and feel a little bogged down in that sort of information.

I find financial crimes a bit confusing and boring.

I could understand Podcast 2, but it would take a larger amount of cognition.

Punnett (2018: 93) argues that true crime 'seeks to create emotional sensations', and Young (2009: 7) describes mediated spectatorship as something which is 'watched, heard, felt, lived and remembered'. In line with these observations and sensory criminology's recognition of sound as a medium for embodied and imaginative auditory experiences (Herrity 2020), the emphasis on the desire for mystery, tension and morbidity suggests that the potential for 'affective encounters' (Young 2009: 42) guides listener decisions. Listeners routinely identify entertainment and excitement as their primary reason for listening

(Vitis and Ryan 2021). Explicit preference for ‘disturbing’, ‘gruesome’ and ‘scary’ encounters exemplifies how crime mediation offers audiences pleasures that oscillate between ‘repulsion and attraction’ (Young 2009: 77), a tension that is often sought in true crime because of its position as a unique access point for grotesque violence, dead bodies, autopsies, wounds and bodily fluids (Browder 2006; LaChance and Kaplan 2019; Lynes and Yardley 2021).

Although these comments made the importance of affective encounters explicit, participants’ descriptions of unwanted features indicated that the desire for pleasure was conditional on their familiarity with the story and its simplicity. Participants described ‘details’, ‘information’ and ‘finance’ as negatives. Moreover, Podcast 2 was described as requiring ‘cognition’, whereas Podcast 1 was described as ‘simpler to understand’. These descriptions speak to Murley’s (2008: 4) observation that true crime’s repetition makes it ‘addictive and soothing’, with participants continuing to gravitate towards narratives that are simultaneously exciting and familiar. This dual desire provides insight into how the hierarchy of crime is entrenched in true crime texts, as the saturation of interpersonal violence in the genre enables listeners to feel ‘primed’ to both understand and enjoy a podcast on this topic. In contrast, unfamiliar topics were characterised as difficult and less likely to produce the necessary affective experiences.

Psychology

Young’s (2009: 2) seminal work on the crime image suggests that audiences’ experiences of crime media imbue them with ideas about crime, violence, law and justice. This work raises an important question about which frameworks for understanding are sought and used by listeners. In line with Yardley, Kelly and Robinson-Edwards’ (2019) research, which argues that TCPs can pose critical questions about the legitimacy of the legal system, the desire for critical understanding was evident in comments that indicated a preference for stories of unacknowledged crimes, police misconduct and the sociopolitical contexts that shape procedural failure.

However, what was more common were comments indicating a desire to learn about crime ‘motivations’ and the ‘psychology’ behind offending and an expectation that these narratives would be embedded in the podcast of the participant’s choosing. For example:

I feel like the first podcast will go into motives and reasoning, whereas the second one seems like it will just tell me what has happened.

I have more of an interest into the psychology of disappearances.

I am more interested in the psychology behind homicide and serial killers than whitecollar crimes.

I find the psychology of DFV more interesting.

Participants were well versed in the true crime genre, and their interest in motivations and psychology reflects true crime and crime media’s attribution of crime to ‘individual pathology’ (Greer 2010: 12). More specifically, these comments must be contextualised in relation to the popularity of both serial killing and profiling in contemporary and historical true crime. In her catalogue of twentieth-century true crime, Murley (2008) notes that stories about serial killers thrived because they represented cultural anxieties about the erosions of stabilising forces in society. Concomitantly, the figure of the forensic ‘ profiler’ emerged to affirm the corrective legitimacy of law enforcement. Participants’ expectations and desire for narratives featuring psychological explanations and motivations highlight how repetitious profiling narratives ensure that audiences engage with questions of crime and justice in ways that reflect the discursive dominance of psychology as a site of understanding. Indeed, Brown (2017: 156) describes TCPs as alluding to critical positions but continuing to invest ‘psychic, financial and cultural energies in prisons and carceral formations’ at the ‘expense of a discussion of penalty as a social problem derivative of divestment in non-penal needs’. These responses demonstrate the impact of crime media’s continued investment of energies in the discursive hegemony of psychological and pathologising explanations for crime.

Justice-Seeking

The above findings suggest continuity. Participants’ emphasis on crime type, affect and pathology aligns with historical observations about the content of true crime and patterns of public engagement. However, participants also framed their choices around the importance of justice-seeking, specifically whether they felt their selected podcast could bring about instrumental justice, expressive justice or offer them the opportunity to solve the case. In the following section, I outline how this interest in justice outcomes highlights how TCPs are conceived as mechanisms rather than representations and hail listeners into varied contemporary subjectivities that emphasise participation.

In terms of instrumental justice, some reported that their decision was shaped by the potential for the podcast to formally resolve the case by generating new evidence, creating new leads or searching for a missing person:

Sounds like if there was enough evidence and traction on this cold case that perhaps it could be resolved.

Potential to implicate new suspects.

Podcast 1 seems to be more more captivating when it comes to the search for the disappearance of the person.

One key theme that emerged in relation to instrumental or conventional justice-seeking was the importance of addressing and exposing police failures. The description of Podcast 1 mentions the police, asking, ‘Why didn’t police follow up on an anonymous tip-off about a woman’s jacket found in bushland near David’s home two years later?’ Some participants recognised this as an allusion to police misconduct and indicated that narratives that feature this component are valued:

I am more interested in cases where there has been negligence in the investigation and finding out how/why oversights have happened.

Looks at how the police can fail when examining cases that seem easy in hindsight.

It’s a cold case which has more intricate layers of possible police malpractice.

Some also went further and highlighted the potential for Podcast 1 to expose the wider sociopolitical and institutional factors that shape procedural failures:

Also highlights possible corruption, abuse of power or societal attitudes during the time of the case that may have prevented certain questions from being asked, or certain witnesses from coming forward, or certain pieces of evidence from being used/examined.

These comments show that the potential for a podcast to facilitate a resolution or change is valued (and anticipated), but this instrumentality is conceptualised specifically on criminal legal terms, as evident in the expectation that the podcast will produce ‘evidence’ and ‘suspects’ or highlight how and why police investigations fail to ‘solve’ cases.

In line with this desire for outcomes, participants also spoke about making their selection based on the potential to participate as co-investigators who pieced together evidence:

Find it more interesting trying to piece together what happened to someone.

... slow revelations of facts, potential to implicate new suspects, 12 parts hint there's there's a large story behind the scenes.

There seems to be more of a mystery - clues to find, piece together, more uncertainty.

The knowledge of the unknown is the most interesting to me, and when a missing persons case involves new evidence, and more parts of the story to explore, it becomes ten times more interesting and I find myself getting super involved in cases such as these ones.

It intrigues me, all the questions the journalist makes, it makes me wonder what truly happened to Sarah. I feel like this podcast would keep me up for hours on end trying to solve the case alongside the podcast.

Here, participants reported being drawn towards adopting the subjectivity of a co-investigator who actively participates in solving the case. Implicit in these comments is the assumption that by adopting this subjectivity, the listener participates in a process undertaken by the podcast—not hearing about crime but solving it.

While the potential for Podcast 1 to facilitate formal outcomes resonated with participants, they also selected this podcast because of its perceived potential to provide expressive justice to victims through memorialisation, testimony and earwitnessing. For example, one participant noted that their selection was based on a desire to seek justice for the fictional Sarah Brentwood:

Also I empathise more with a normal woman needing justice, than with a wealthy person who exploited others.

Others described testimony, earwitnessing and memorialisation as a core and valued function of a podcast:

The Blanche story is receiving current attention whereas the Brentwood story is a cold case.

I prefer to hear about homicide/missing persons cases, perhaps because they give a voice to the voiceless.

I think victims of unsolved crimes need to have their stories heard and if they have to go through it I think the least we can do is listen. I am not that into financial stuff. I think people are worth more than a monetary value so hearing about a missing person or victims of homicide, rape, abuse Etc is more valuable for me. I just think that a women/wife going missing is such an important topic to continue to explore.

Here, participants were explicit in their recognition of podcasts as a form of narrative politics, as sharing someone's story, particularly an unacknowledged story, is constituted in terms of justice by providing victims a 'voice', 'attention' and a chance to be 'heard'.

These comments indicate that the potential for 'justice' outcomes draws listeners towards specific TCPs. However, participants conceptualised podcasts as facilitating multiple modes of justice, which, in turn, created space for multiple subjectivities to be inhabited. Some indicated that Podcast 1 could produce instrumental justice outcomes like generating evidence or solving a disappearance. While these comments can be contextualised in relation to recent examples of high-profile TCPs shaping criminal legal proceedings,⁴ they also demonstrate a deeper set of conditions around crime mediation. Specifically, they demonstrate the distinction between representation and reality in late modern contexts that enable TCPs to be recognised as mechanisms for shaping criminal legal interventions rather than re-stylised news coverage (Pâquet 2021; Vitis 2022). As such, these responses affirm cultural criminological critiques of media analysis, which presume that crime represents crime rather than 'constitute[ing] the experience of crime' (Hayward 2010: 5).

However, participants also recognised that podcasts and the act of listening could be a way of providing justice to victims by memorialising and sharing testimony. This recognition crystallises a range of discourses. First, the emphasis on memorialisation accords with key tenets of feminist narrative politics, which Serisier (2018) describes as a cultural shift shaping the use of rape testimony as a mechanism of activism. The legacies are evident in many practices of informal justice-seeking that rely on mediated testimony in online spaces—like naming and shaming and collective hashtags—to raise awareness and seek justice for victims (Vitis and Naegler 2021). Listeners demonstrated familiarity with these ideas when they noted that Podcast 1 could 'give a voice to the voiceless' and allow 'victims of unsolved crimes' to 'have their stories heard'. While some made explicit connections between podcasts as expressive justice, others described the listener as a core part of this process; as one participant noted, 'crimes need to have their stories heard and if they have to go through it I think the least we can do is listen'. Here, listeners are not consumers; they are understood as active participants, engaging in ethical earwitnessing to provide justice for the victim (Dalton 2015). Importantly, these comments demonstrate that a pastime historically described as exploitative provides a new subjectivity for listeners to inhabit that emphasises ethical conduct.

Conclusion

This article explored listeners' desires for TCPs to understand better *how* the public encounters contemporary crime media (Young 2009). This study is limited: it was based on a small non-representative sample, and most participants were women; therefore, it is not generalisable. However, it illustrates both a stagnant and shifting set of relations between the community and TCPs that should be explored in future research. Specifically, a desire for traditional crime narratives and affective encounters in addition to a recognition of listeners as active and instrumental participants in varying forms of informal justice.

Participants' emphasis on subject matter demonstrated a continuation of the historical patterns of true crime narratives. True crime has been characterised as prurient and exploitative; however, researchers have argued that TCPs can and do circulate critical and feminist narratives (Horeck 2019; Yardley Kelly and Robinson-Edwards 2019). Although responses certainly showed a desire for podcasts featuring police misconduct, domestic violence and justice for women, they were primarily interleaved with preferences for topics that aligned with entrenched law-and-order discourses, including psychological explanations, murder, violence and serial killings. The responses indicated that although critical podcasts can emerge, these listeners continue to seek popularised true crime narratives in TCPs. Continuity was also evident in the desire for podcasts as resources for affective experiences, particularly mystery and gore. This desire has important implications for the authoritative position of TCPs in the Australian media landscape, particularly as emotive auditory experiences have the potential to be both sources of knowledge and transformative sites of understanding (Herrity 2020). The importance participants placed on affective encounters suggests that TCPs that rely heavily on thrilling devices have the distinct potential to act as authoritative sites for

crime information in Australia. The implications of this dynamic should be contextualised in relation to listeners' desire for both affective and familiar stories, which troubles the potential for critical narratives to emerge and indicates the need for a systematic analysis of the content of Australian TCPs.

Nevertheless, shifts were evident in how participants recognised and valued podcasts as justice mechanisms. True crime's commitment to law-and-order narratives and ability to offer audiences the affective thrills of vindication has meant that justice-seeking is a core feature of the genre (LaChance and Kaplan 2020; Punnett 2018; Young 2009). As such, discussions of justice are to be expected. However, participants indicated that they selected Podcast 1 because of its potential to *produce* formal and expressive justice *outcomes* in which they could participate. These responses exemplify the dynamics of late modern crime media, particularly how it spirals forward, shaping what it is recording (Ferrell Hayward and Young 2011). In these data, participants favoured a podcast that had the potential to replicate these dynamics, so much so that responses indicated recognition of TCPs as discrete justice sites. However, podcasts were not just identified as vehicles for criminal legal outcomes—participants also valued podcasts that would memorialise victims. In doing so, these perspectives demonstrate the co-option of discourses of feminist narrative politics (Serisier 2018) into true crime and a concomitant interpellation of the listener into the subject position of ethical earwitness rather than exploitative consumer. Overall, this emphasis on justice outcomes indicates that the potential authoritative power of Australian TCPs relates not only to their ability to act as an exciting new repository for affecting crime narratives but also their position as sites that allow listeners to adopt varied subject positions and participate in a range of instrumental and expressive justice-seeking practices.

While redolent of historical true crime tropes, a desire for pathologisation in stories featuring intimate partner violence (Podcast 1) also indicates the importance of examining depictions of violence against women in TCPs. Feminist scholars have critiqued true crime's tendency to provide in-depth psychological explorations of the mind and motivations of perpetrators with limited emphasis on women victims, who become the proxy for audiences to enjoy the affective experience of getting 'inside the killer's mind' (Murley 2019: 219). Although recent research into representations of domestic violence in TCPs has shown that long-form podcasts focus on recognising the role of context and male entitlement in domestic violence (Slakoff 2022), participants' desire for psychology and motivations suggests the potential continuation of these patterns and the importance of systematically exploring violence against women narratives in Australian TCPs.

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¹ Popularity is ranked by the most monthly listeners.

² *The Teacher's Pet* has been downloaded approximately 28 million times globally and has won a Walkley Award (ABC 2018).

³ *Bowraville* is a podcast by *The Australian* focused on three murders in Bowraville, NSW, in the 1990s.

⁴ For example, Chris Dawson was found guilty of murdering Lynnette Dawson after the release of *The Teacher's Pet* (Bucci 2022).

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