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PERCEIVED REALISM IN CONTEMPORARY MEDIA RESEARCH

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TRUE CRIME AND SOCIAL REALITY: INTEGRATING CULTIVATION THEORY AND
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I would like to thank my chair, Dr. Chang Sup Park, for helping me through this research. The foundation of this thesis was based on a personal interest in true crime and modern media, and how fascination has come to mean different things in today's society. After months of reading other studies similar to my own, I realized there was a large gap in this area because of minimal research on modern media viewing behaviors. As I reflect on this journey, I am grateful to my chair, my committee, and my advisors who led me through this process successfully. Lastly, I would like to thank the almighty for giving me wisdom, grace, and the strength to persevere always.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how exposure to dramatized crime media shapes perceptions of social reality in contemporary media environments, extending Cultivation Theory by integrating perceived realism as a psychological mechanism to test modern viewing behaviors. This study used a cross-sectional online survey of University of Oklahoma students (N = 482–498), investigating the relationships between crime drama exposure and four key outcomes: perceived severity of crime, fear of crime, trust in legal institutions, and punitive policy preferences. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses revealed that greater exposure to crime dramas significantly predicted higher perceived severity of crime, increased fear of crime, stronger support for punitive policies, and decreased trust in legal institutions. Mediation analyses demonstrated that perceived realism significantly mediated all relationships, indicating that media effects occur primarily when audiences interpret dramatized content as reflective of real life. Moderation analyses showed that binge-watching intensity consistently strengthened these relationships, while prior victimization moderated only fear of crime. Contrary to expectations, algorithmic personalization did not significantly moderate any effects. These findings contribute to media effects research by identifying perceived realism as a key mechanism underlying cultivation processes and highlighting the role of modern media consumption patterns in amplifying these effects. The study underscores the importance of media literacy in mitigating distorted perceptions of crime and justice in a streaming-dominated media landscape.

Keywords: dramatized crime, perceived realism, algorithmic personalization, exposure, modern media

INTRODUCTION

True crime and serial killer drama series have been rising in popularity among adults (Naseer & St. Aubin, 2023; Vicary & Fraley, 2010). Within the last five years, the demand for dramatized crime media has surpassed interest in other genres such as science, history, nature, and sports (Sayles, 2021). People are able to access crime dramas in more places than just the household through digital technologies, including cell phones, which allow them to view crime dramas whenever and wherever they please. Particularly, as streaming services continue to publish dramatized crime media, their portrayals are more accessible to the public than before (Doughty, 2018). Although controversy is still present, there is theoretical and anecdotal evidence of cultivation effects by crime dramas. For example, TV genres of crime (crime drama, crime news) have the potential to cultivate fears and behavior related to the crime content (Grabe & Drew, 2007).

Despite its enduring influence, cultivation theory faces several theoretical gaps in today's fragmented and algorithmically curated media landscape. The theory presumes a relatively homogeneous media environment and passive audience reception (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). However, the rise of digital and social media has disrupted these assumptions. Contemporary media users actively curate their content through selective exposure, undermining the theory's premise of uniform message reception. Moreover, algorithmic personalization often fosters echo chambers and filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011), intensifying ideological segmentation and challenging the notion of mainstreaming, a core concept in cultivation theory. The theory also lacks explanatory power for participatory media environments where users are both consumers and producers of content, a dynamic that complicates the traditional sender-receiver model (

Potter, 2014; Shrum, 2017). Additionally, cultivation theory has been criticized for its limited engagement with intersectional variables such as race, gender, and class, which mediate media effects in nuanced ways (Chandler, 2022; Hughes, 2011). Finally, its methodological reliance on correlational designs and genre-level analyses may obscure causal mechanisms and overlook the influence of misinformation and fake news in shaping perceptions of reality (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024). Addressing these gaps requires theoretical reformulations that incorporate algorithmic influence, audience agency, and the socio-political context of media consumption.

This study is particularly interested in how exposure to or consumption of crime dramas explain people's perceptions about the crime portrayed and the surrounding world in today's hybrid media systems. Crime dramas' impacts are multifaceted, including psychological, attitudinal, and behavioral outcomes. For example, media framing of serial killer cases might contribute to the romanticization of certain serial killers and influence public perception even decades after the crime occurred (Fludzinski, 2024; Schmid, 2008). When people are exposed to high-profile murder cases through dramatized media, they can form distorted perceptions such as romanization or desensitization about the crimes (Greenwell, 2017). For example, online communities such as Reddit host discussion spaces in which users engage with and, at times, romanticize notorious offenders such as Ted Bundy and Richard Ramirez, reflecting broader cultural patterns of fascination with violent criminals (Johnson, 2020; Schmid, 2008). Similarly, true crime podcasts such as *Serial* often emphasize narrative storytelling and character development, frequently highlighting personality traits such as charisma, intelligence, and attractiveness, which may contribute to audience engagement and empathy toward offenders (Clausen, 2021; Boling & Hull, 2018). Thus, this study asks how frequent consumption of

dramatized crime media influences viewers' psychological responses, including fear, anxiety, desensitization to violence, heightened vigilance in their everyday lives, and misperception of the criminals depicted in dramatized crime media.

Further, I attend to the fact that media platforms often select prominent actors to portray gruesome criminals, which raises questions about their reasoning behind these choices and concerns about their potential impacts. Through crime dramas, people may shape their understanding of the criminal justice system. Weiner (1993, p. 276) aptly mentioned, "A majority of people in the United States receive much of their information and impressions of the criminal justice system through the media." In short, the media make dramatized crime a pervasive force in shaping public perception of criminals and the justice system. Because of the recent increase of dramatized crime entertainment, the public is being exposed to the justice system in new ways, often misunderstanding the reality of how criminals are convicted and how crimes can affect others and the society (Gutu, 2025; Weber, 2024).

Additionally, I will delve into different patterns of cultivation effects, in close relation to the notion of perceived realism, which refers to the extent to which audiences judge media content as reflective of real life. More specifically, this thesis explores how the consumption of modern dramatized crime media cultivate viewers' perceptions about the portrayed crime and the world, aiming to reveal different effects on "perceived realism." Viewers often assess whether the events, characters, or settings in media resemble their understanding of the actual world (Behm-Morawitz et al., 2016). Perceived realism can influence perception, emotional engagement and memory (Pouliot & Cowen, 2007). In general, scholars distinguish between different types of perceived realism: (1) factual realism (whether the events portrayed actually

happened); (2) social realism (whether the portrayal aligns with everyday social experiences); and (3) narrative realism (whether the story is coherent and plausible) (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). However, little effort has been made on how cultivation effects work together with different types of perceived realism. It is possible that dramatized crime content contributes to an increase of fear in society, public safety concerns, or desensitization/romanticization towards violence. Overall, this study intends to advance cultivation theory in the context of today's crime drama watching and provide insight on the broader societal implication of dramatized crime media. To do this, this thesis will conduct an online survey to 500 OU students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Crime Dramas and Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theory is present in this increased access to media because people are consuming much more media today than they have in the past. A 2015 study found that people “consumed approximately 28.7 more minutes of media in 2017 than they did in 2010. Individually, people consumed about 102.9 more minutes of mobile internet content in 2017 than in 2010, and 113.9 more minutes of internet content in general” (Austin et al., 2015, p. 9). During mid-2025, the Pew Research Center reported that 72% of Americans say they ever watch programming on Netflix (Park & McClain, 2025). Also, Hulu, a streaming service only available in the U.S. reported having 17 million users (Rodriguez, 2018). These statistics are important because they show how many people use these streaming services, and have changed the entirety of media and entertainment consumption.

The magazine People reported that the crime drama entitled Dahmer- Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story logged more than 701 million hours viewed since its release on September

21, 2022 (McCoy, 2022). This article was published in October of 2022, which is important because this many viewing hours occurred in only a month's time. Netflix reported this series as the fourth most popular show of all time, with data showing that the series had over 115 million views in the first 91 days of release (Netflix, 2025). The landscape of crime drama consumption has changed completely (Nanda & Banerjee, 2020). Crime drama watchers are shifting from network television to streaming services. For example, streaming services allow for audiences to "binge-watch" television shows because they tend to be ad-free and contain multiple episodes of a series. Nanda and Banerjee (2020) note that this transition from scheduled programming to binge-watching has intensified the psychological immersion of viewers, potentially amplifying cultivation effects. Moreover, the personalization algorithms of streaming platforms may reinforce exposure to similar content, creating echo chambers that further entrench viewers' perceptions of crime and justice (Cinelli et al., 2022).

Podcasting is another major channel of dramatized crime media. Content creators often rely on podcasts to dramatize crime narratives. The intimacy of podcasts may be one reason for increasing interest (Clausen, 2021). They effectively analyze criminal murder cases, often going viral with certain speculations and plausible theories of their own interpretations. For example, *Serial*, an investigative journalism podcast hosted by Sarah Koenig, skyrocketed in popularity which marked a very pivotal moment for podcasts (Clausen, 2021). This rise in popularity was not short-lived, and crime podcasts have continuously ranked within the top ten on Spotify and Apple Music (Tremblay, 2023). Both streaming services and podcasts for crime dramas provide an immersive experience to users. They also reflect the surging demands for dramatized crime media.

Cultivation theory, developed by George Gerbner in the 1960s as part of the Cultural Indicators Project, posits that long-term exposure to television shapes viewers' perceptions of social reality (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Unlike theories focused on short-term media effects, cultivation theory emphasizes cumulative, gradual influence over time. Gerbner (1976) argued that television functions as the central storytelling system in modern society, transmitting consistent messages that shape collective consciousness. The theory's foundational hypothesis is that heavy viewers of television are more likely to perceive the world in ways that reflect the dominant narratives portrayed on screen, particularly regarding violence, danger, and social roles. One of the most cited outcomes of cultivation theory is the mean world syndrome, which suggests that frequent exposure to violent media leads individuals to believe the world is more dangerous than it actually is (Gerbner et al., 1980). This perception is not necessarily based on factual knowledge but on symbolic representations repeated across media. Over time, these portrayals cultivate fear, mistrust, and distorted beliefs about crime, justice, and interpersonal relationships (Till, Arendt, & Niederkrotenthaler, 2021).

Media cultivation research, rooted in Gerbner's Cultural Indicators Project, has evolved into several major areas of inquiry. Initially focused on the effects of television violence, particularly the "mean world syndrome," traditional cultivation theory examined how prolonged exposure to media content shapes viewers' perceptions of reality (Gerbner et al., 1980). Over time, scholars expanded the scope to include portrayals of race, gender, aging, and social class, examining how the media reinforce stereotypes and social hierarchies (Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2018). Subsequent scholarship has emphasized the need to examine message-specific and audience-specific factors in cultivation effects. For example, Shanahan and Morgan (1999)

argue that not all media content cultivates the same perceptions, and individual differences such as gender, prior victimization, and psychological traits can moderate cultivation outcomes. Furthermore, cultivation theory has been applied to analyze portrayals of race and class, revealing how media perpetuates stereotypes and social inequalities (Potter, 2014).

More recent work has adapted cultivation theory to digital environments, including video games, streaming platforms, and social media. Scholars have explored how algorithmically curated content on social media contributes to political cynicism, polarization, and distorted perceptions of social norms (Ruddock, 2024). The theory has also expanded to include concepts such as mainstreaming—the homogenization of views across diverse audience groups—and resonance, where media messages reinforce personal experiences, amplifying their impact (Shrum, 2017). Researchers have also examined the theory’s applicability across cultures, noting variations in media systems and audience interpretations (Ruddock, 2024; Shrum, 2017). Cultivation studies have also diversified methodologically, incorporating longitudinal designs, content analyses, and cross-cultural comparisons, to assess cumulative media effects. Despite critiques regarding causality and measurement validity, cultivation theory remains a foundational framework for understanding the media’s long-term influence on social cognition and political attitudes (Doughty, 2018; Potter, 2014; Ruddock, 2024).

Crime dramas, particularly true crime and forensic-based series, have become a dominant genre in contemporary media. These programs often depict violent crimes, investigative procedures, and courtroom drama, shaping viewers’ beliefs about crime prevalence, criminal behavior, and the justice system (Howell, 2016; Till et al., 2021). Some research shows that exposure to crime dramas can cultivate fear of crime, mistrust, and distorted expectations about

forensic science and legal processes (Mobley, 2021; Romer & Jamieson, 2014). One well-documented phenomenon is the CSI Effect, which explains that viewers of forensic crime dramas develop unrealistic expectations about the availability and accuracy of forensic evidence in real-life trials (Alldredge, 2015). This effect has implications for jury decision-making, legal outcomes, and public trust in law enforcement. Fictional portrayals often glamorize police work and dramatize criminal behavior, leading to skewed perceptions of justice and morality (Hogan, 2019).

Dramatized crime media elicit complex psychological responses. For some viewers, especially women, these programs serve as a form of psychological rehearsal, offering insights into risk management and personal safety (Wattis, 2024). However, excessive consumption can lead to hypervigilance, social withdrawal, and even trauma, particularly among individuals with prior victimization experiences (Bartosch, 2019). The genre's emotional intensity and narrative structure contribute to its addictive nature (Perchtold-Stefan et al., 2025).

Thus far, studies have produced mixed findings regarding the cultivation effects of crime dramas. Some research supports the theory's predictions, showing that heavy viewers of crime media perceive higher crime rates and feel less safe (Intravia et al., 2017; Nāsi et al., 2021). Others suggest that selective exposure plays a role, with fearful individuals choosing to watch crime dramas, thereby reinforcing their anxieties (D'Alessio & Allen, 2007). Doob and MacDonald (2017) found limited correlations between media use and fear of crime, suggesting that contextual factors such as neighborhood crime rates may moderate media effects. Wakshlag, Vial, and Tamborini (1983) reported that repeated exposure to suspenseful drama could reduce fear rather than increase it, challenging the cultivation hypothesis. These findings highlight the

importance of examining narrative framing, character development, and viewer motivations in understanding cultivation outcomes.

Dramatized crime media often focuses on the character development of the criminal, with minimal attention to victims. This narrative choice can lead to desensitization, empathy for perpetrators, and distorted realism. The use of familiar actors in dramatized reenactments, such as Zac Efron as Ted Bundy, raises questions about parasocial relationships, where viewers form emotional bonds with fictional representations of real criminals (Schiappa et al., 2006). These relationships can blur the line between entertainment and reality, reinforcing perceptions that violent crime is more prevalent or less morally reprehensible than it is.

As media consumption shifts toward streaming platforms and interactive formats, cultivation theory must adapt to new storytelling environments. Morgan et al. (2018) argue that while television remains influential, digital media introduces new variables such as algorithmic curation, user interactivity, and binge-watching, which may intensify cultivation effects. Recent work further shows that personalized recommendation systems and on-demand viewing can deepen genre-specific worldviews by reinforcing selective exposure patterns (Lai, Chung, & Po, 2015). Newer media formats, including streaming platforms, and video games, maintain the repetitive storytelling structures that cultivation theory emphasizes, making them fertile ground for examining long-term media effects. For example, video games about crime construct social realities that influence players' beliefs and behaviors (Blackburn, 2020). Tremblay (2023) emphasizes the need to investigate how dramatized narratives influence protective behaviors, attitudes toward justice, and emotional responses. Overall, we need more research to understand digital media's roles in causing cultivation effects.

Perceived Realism

Perceived realism, the belief that media, including crime dramas, reflect real world operations (Ewanation, et al., 2017; Morgan & Shanahan, 2010) highlights an audience-related dimension that has been reported as influencing cultivation (Grabe & Drew, 2007). Crime dramas do not necessarily reflect the reality of the crimes that have actually occurred. The casting of well-known actors may create a type of romanticization of the crime or desensitize the viewer. Although the availability of media allows consumers to receive information quickly, people may have a difficult time separating social reality in media from the real world (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010).

Perceived realism is a multidimensional construct encompassing plausibility, typicality, factuality, narrative consistency, and perceptual quality (Cho, Shen, & Wilson, 2014). Perceived realism may play a critical role in shaping viewers' emotional engagement in crime dramas and belief systems in crime policies. When viewers perceive a dramatized reenactment as realistic, they are more likely to internalize the narrative's implications about crime, justice, and morality. Perceived realism enhances narrative transportation, which in turn increases the persuasive power of media content (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). This is particularly relevant in crime dramas, where high production quality, emotionally charged storytelling, and familiar settings contribute to a sense of authenticity. As a result, viewers may overestimate crime prevalence, develop skewed expectations about forensic evidence, and form attitudes that mirror the dramatized portrayals rather than empirical reality.

Ewanation et al. (2017) showed that mock jurors who scored high in perceived realism were more likely to convict defendants, regardless of the strength of the evidence presented. This

suggests that perceived realism can override critical evaluation, leading individuals to rely on dramatized portrayals as benchmarks for real-world decision-making. Moreover, Manning et al. (2022) found that perceived crime rates, often shaped by media portrayals, had a stronger impact on life satisfaction than actual crime rates. These findings highlight the need for media literacy initiatives that address both the realism of media content and the framing strategies employed. Thus, it is necessary to explore how perceived realism influences attitudes toward crime, legal institutions, and social norms, particularly in the context of streaming platforms and binge-watching culture.

The integration of cultivation theory and perceived realism offers a robust framework for analyzing how crime dramas influence public perceptions of crime, justice, and morality. While cultivation theory explains the cumulative impact of repeated exposure, perceived realism accounts for the immediate psychological acceptance of media narratives. This dual approach is particularly useful in studying dramatized crime media, where high production quality and emotional storytelling contribute to a sense of authenticity. Research shows that viewers who perceive crime dramas as realistic are more likely to overestimate crime rates, mistrust legal institutions, and adopt punitive attitudes (Romer & Jamieson, 2014; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014). By combining these theories, scholars can better understand how media not only shapes long-term beliefs but also influences short-term emotional and cognitive responses. Therefore, this thesis explores what roles perceived realism plays with cultivation processes.

Cultivation Effects

My research design's focus is cultivation effects, which can take place in four areas of the dependent variable: (1) perceived severity of crime; (2) fear of crime; (3) decreased trust in legal

institutions; and (4) punitive policy preferences. The cultivation effects of (1) and (2) have been tested by many scholars, including Gerbner and Gross (1976) and Morgan et al. (2018).

H1a: Higher exposure to crime dramas will be positively associated with increased perceived severity of crime.

H1b: Higher exposure to crime drama will be positively associated with increased fear of crime.

Higher exposure to crime dramas may erode trust in legal institutions by repeatedly depicting police, courts, and correctional systems as ineffective, corrupt, or politically influenced, which can shape viewers' broader institutional judgments (Arendt, 2010; Dowler & Zawilski, 2007). Such portrayals can cultivate skepticism by normalizing narratives of systemic failure and emphasizing dramatized miscarriages of justice that viewers may generalize to real-world institutions (Kort-Butler & Sittner Hartshorn, 2011).

H1c: Higher exposure to crime dramas will be positively associated with decreased trust in legal institutions.

Higher exposure to crime dramas can strengthen punitive policy preferences by repeatedly framing crime as pervasive and best addressed through harsh sanctions, reinforcing support for tougher penalties and expanded law enforcement powers (Kort-Butler & Sittner Hartshorn, 2011). Such dramatizations often foreground retribution over rehabilitation, priming viewers to favor punitive criminal justice responses in line with the narrative conventions of the genre (Dowler, 2003).

H1d: Higher exposure to crime dramas will be positively associated with punitive policy preferences.

Frequent exposure to crime dramas can heighten perceived realism because repeated viewing increases familiarity with narrative patterns, visual styles, and procedural tropes that audiences may interpret as reflective of actual criminal justice processes (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). Additionally, contemporary crime dramas employ documentary-style aesthetics and technical detail that enhance viewers' judgments of authenticity (Ewanation et al., 2017).

H1e: Higher exposure to crime dramas will be positively associated with perceived realism.

Cultivation theory alone does not fully account for the psychological mechanisms that determine whether viewers accept media portrayals as realistic. This is where perceived realism becomes a critical complement. In the context of crime dramas, perceived realism can amplify cultivation effects by making dramatized portrayals of crime and justice feel authentic (Ewanation et al., 2017). For example, viewers who perceive forensic crime shows as realistic may develop inflated expectations about the role of forensic evidence in criminal trials (Ewanation et al., 2017). Thus, perceived realism acts as a mediator that bridges cultivation outcomes.

H2a: Perceived realism will mediate the link between higher exposure to crime dramas and perceived severity of crime.

H2b: Perceived realism will mediate the link between higher exposure to crime dramas and fear of crime.

H2c: Perceived realism will mediate the link between higher exposure to crime dramas and decreased trust in legal institutions.

H2d: Perceived realism will mediate the link between higher exposure to crime dramas and punitive policy preferences.

Binge-watching can intensify cultivation effects by compressing exposure into sustained, uninterrupted viewing periods, which increases cognitive immersion and reduces opportunities for counterarguing (Shim & Kim, 2018). This heightened narrative absorption may strengthen the perceived severity of crime by repeatedly presenting high-stakes criminal events within a short time frame, amplifying their salience and accessibility (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2013). As a result, binge-watchers may exhibit stronger cultivation-based judgments than episodic viewers because the cumulative impact of violent or sensational storylines becomes more cognitively integrated (Morgan et al., 2018).

H3a: Binge-watching will moderate the link between higher exposure to crime dramas and perceived severity of crime.

H3b: Binge-watching will moderate the link between higher exposure to crime dramas and fear of crime.

H3c: Binge-watching will moderate the link between higher exposure to crime dramas and decreased trust in legal institutions.

H3d: Binge-watching will moderate the link between higher exposure to crime dramas and punitive policy preferences.

Prior victimization can heighten sensitivity to crime-related content, making individuals more receptive to the threatening portrayals common in crime dramas and thereby strengthening cultivation effects (Romer, Jamieson, & Aday, 2003). Because victimization increases the perceived relevance and personal applicability of crime narratives, viewers with such

experiences are more likely to interpret dramatized violence as reflective of real risks (Dowler, 2003). Consequently, exposure to crime dramas may amplify perceived crime severity more strongly among previously victimized individuals, who already possess elevated fear schemas and crime-related cognitive accessibility (Hughes, 2008).

H4a: Prior victimization will moderate the link between higher exposure to crime dramas and perceived severity of crime.

H4b: Prior victimization will moderate the link between higher exposure to crime dramas and fear of crime.

H4c: Prior victimization will moderate the link between higher exposure to crime dramas and decreased trust in legal institutions.

H4d: Prior victimization will moderate the link between higher exposure to crime dramas and punitive policy preferences.

Algorithmic personalization can intensify cultivation effects by repeatedly delivering crime-drama content that aligns with a viewer's prior interests, thereby increasing the volume and salience of crime-related narratives they encounter (Napoli, 2014). Personalized recommendation systems also narrow exposure diversity, creating feedback loops that reinforce crime-heavy storylines and strengthen perceptions of crime prevalence and severity (Pariser, 2011). As algorithms optimize for engagement, viewers who already watch crime dramas are more likely to be funneled into dense clusters of similar content, amplifying cultivation-based judgments (Stroud, 2008).

H5a: Algorithm personalization will moderate the link between higher exposure to crime dramas and perceived severity of crime.

H5b: Algorithm personalization will moderate the link between higher exposure to crime dramas and fear of crime.

H5c: Algorithm personalization will moderate the link between higher exposure to crime dramas and decreased trust in legal institutions.

H5d: Algorithm personalization will moderate the link between higher exposure to crime dramas and punitive policy preferences.

Frame salience shapes how viewers interpret characters by highlighting specific attributes, motivations, or moral dimensions that become cognitively accessible during processing. When crime dramas foreground frames that humanize or morally justify a character such as emphasizing personal trauma, loyalty, or principled deviance, viewers are more likely to engage in sympathetic evaluations and narrative identification, which can foster romanticization (Entman, 1993; Igartua & Barrios, 2012). Salient frames guide viewers toward particular interpretive schemas, increasing the likelihood that they perceive transgressive or criminal protagonists as complex, admirable, or even heroic figures rather than simply offenders (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2008)

Additionally, when a show repeatedly highlights crime-related frames such as themes of vigilantism, systemic injustice, or antiheroic charisma, the narrative emphasis can cultivate enduring perceptions of the character as appealing or justified, regardless of their illicit actions (Morgan et al., 2018). Such frame-driven romanticization is reinforced through stylistic choices—cinematic aesthetics, narrative point of view, and emotional backstory—which make the character’s world more immersive and morally legible to viewers (Oliver & Raney, 2011). As these frames become more salient and consistently reinforced, audiences are increasingly likely

to adopt favorable, even idealized, perceptions of characters who operate within criminal or morally ambiguous contexts.

H6a: Frame salience is positively related to romanticization of the character.

When crime dramas make particular frames highly salient, those frames provide narrative hooks that encourage viewers to attend to, empathize with, and repeatedly imagine the character's inner life, processes that foster parasocial bonds. Research shows that mediated intimacy and repeated, focused exposure are core to parasocial relationship formation (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). Once a parasocial relationship is established, viewers are more likely to adopt the character's perspective, excuse or reinterpret transgressive behavior, and experience emotional closeness that converts cognitive framing into affective endorsement. Thus, parasocial relationships function as a psychological bridge that transmits the influence of frame salience onto romanticized evaluations of the character (Cohen, 2003; Igartua & Barrios, 2012). Studies further indicate that parasocial ties increase susceptibility to narrative-driven attitude change, supporting the mediating role of perceived parasocial relationship between salient framing and romanticization.

H6b: Perceived parasocial relationship with the character will mediate the link between frame salience and romanticization of the character.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 498 students at a large public research university in the midwest region of the United States. They were mostly young adults aged 18-67 ($M = 21.47$, $SD = 5.86$); 55% were female; 94.41% were non-Hispanic; education was ($Mdn =$ high school); and the annual household income was ($Mdn =$ \$50,000 ~ \$60,000).

Procedure

Participants were recruited from university-based communication through email, using a system called OUMM. This mass-mailing system sent out a hyperlink to the online survey on Qualtrics. This study employed a cross-sectional online survey targeting a sample of 498 adults from the University of Oklahoma residing in the U.S. Eligibility criteria include being 18 years or older and having watched at least one crime drama series in the past six months. Informed consent was obtained electronically before participation, and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval will be secured prior to data collection. A cross-sectional survey design was selected as it allows for the examination of relationships between media exposure and attitudinal outcomes across a large sample efficiently, consistent with prior cultivation research (Morgan et al., 2018).

Participants completed a 10-minute online questionnaire administered via Qualtrics. The survey began with screening questions to confirm eligibility, followed by demographic items and media consumption habits. Participants were asked to report their frequency of viewing recent crime dramas (e.g., *Mindhunter*, *Dahmer*, *True Detective*, *Criminal Minds*) and rate their perceived realism of these programs. To reduce priming effects and social desirability bias, the survey used randomized item ordering and include attention checks (Berinsky et al., 2012): “In

the past 6 months, have you watched at least one TV/streaming crime drama or true-crime docu-series (e.g., *Mindhunter*, *Dahmer*, *Monsters: The Lyle and Erik Menendez Story*, *Candy*)?” All responses were anonymous, and a drawing for five \$20 gift cards was provided as an incentive.

Before data was analyzed, the dataset was screened for missing data, incomplete responses, and response quality. Response quality was assessed by timestamps of the participants starting and finishing the survey. Responses that failed these conditions were excluded from the final sample. After excluding these data, the resulting final sample size ranged from $N = 482$ to $N = 498$ across analyses. All continuous predictor variables were mean-centered prior to creating interaction terms to reduce multicollinearity in moderation analyses. Assumptions of multiple regression were evaluated, including normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity. Diagnostic statistics indicated no violations, with variance inflation factors (VIFs) below 2.8 and Durbin–Watson statistics ranging from 1.98 to 2.04, suggesting independence of residuals.

To test the hypotheses, hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted for each dependent variable: perceived severity of crime, fear of crime, trust in legal institutions, and punitive policy preferences. Predictor variables were entered in three blocks. Block 1 included control variables: age, gender, household income, and platform-specific affordance, Block 2 included main predictor variables: exposure to crime dramas, perceived realism, binge-watching, prior victimization, algorithmic personalization, and offender frame salience, and Block 3 included interaction terms: (exposure $\times$ binge-watching, exposure $\times$ prior victimization, and exposure $\times$ algorithmic personalization) to test moderation effects. Mediation analyses were conducted using a regression-based path analysis approach equivalent to Hayes’ (2017)

PROCESS Model 4, with 1,000 bootstrapped samples used to estimate indirect effects and corresponding 95% confidence intervals. Moderation effects were tested through interaction terms, and significant interactions were probed to interpret conditional effects.

Measures: Independent Variables

Frequency of Viewing: “How often did you watch crime dramas/reenactments in the past 3 months?” 0=Never; 1=1~3 times; 2=4~6 times; 3=7~9 times; 4=10~12 times; 5=13 times or more. Crime dramas/reenactments in this study were defined as any scripted television or streaming series based on true events, in which the medium centers on criminal acts and their consequences.

Offender Frame: This frame focuses media attention on crime offenders’ motives, traits, and biographies (De Gregorio et al., 2025). We assessed how much participants perceive the show(s) emphasizes criminal perspectives, on 7-point agreement scale: (1) The shows I watch focus mainly on the criminal’s story; (2) The shows I watch portray detailed motives and psychological profiles of the offender; and (3) The shows I watch highlight biographical background about the criminal (for example, upbringing, personal life) ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 2.99$, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .88$).

Measures: Dependent Variables

Romanticization. Drawing upon Brockmyer (2012) and Johnson, E. (2020), we used three items for this variable on a 7-point agreement scale: (1) I sometimes empathize with depicted perpetrators; (2) I sometimes find the portrayal of criminals in crime shows attractive; and (3) I sometimes find myself admiring criminal characters’ intelligence or charisma ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.82$, $\alpha = .80$).

Perceived Severity. Based on Gerbner and Gross (1976) and Gebotys et al. (1988), we used the following items, on a 7-point agreement scale: (1) Violent crime is very common in the U.S.; (2) Crimes depicted in shows reflect typical real-world cases; (3) I believe violent crimes happen more often than official crime statistics show; and (4) Crime shows and news reports make violent crime seem more serious than it actually is ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.25$, $\alpha = .85$).

Fear of Crime. Building upon Ferraro & LaGrange (2017) and Tseloni and Zarafonitou (2008), we used the following items, on a 7-point scale: (1) I worry about becoming a victim of violent crime; (2) I avoid certain places or activities due to safety concerns; (3) After watching crime drama television, I feel heightened vigilance in daily life; and (4) Thinking about crime makes me feel anxious or afraid ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.48$, $\alpha = .87$).

Trust in Legal Institutions. Building on Tyler (2001) and Wallace & Goodman-Delahunty (2021), four items were assessed on a 7-point scale: (1) Courts usually reach fair outcomes; (2) I trust police to investigate cases effectively; (3) I believe that most legal decisions made by judges and juries are unbiased and just; and (4) I have confidence that law enforcement and the courts protect the rights of ordinary citizens ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.56$, $\alpha = .84$).

Punitive Policy Preferences. Extending Armbrorst (2017) and Trajtenberg, Ezquerra and Williams (2025), we used four items on a 7-point scale: (1) Sentences for violent crimes should be harsher; (2) Parole should be rare for violent offenders; (3) Prosecutors should prioritize severe penalties over plea deals; and (4) I support the death penalty for serious crimes ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.52$, $\alpha = .82$).

Measures: Mediator Variables

Perceived Realism. We used six items drawn from Busselle and Bilandzic (2008) and Cho et al. (2014), on a 7-point scale: (1) Events portrayed in the crime shows I watch are based on real cases; (2) The investigative procedures shown in crime dramas reflect how real cases unfold; (3) Characters behave as real people would in similar situations; (4) Settings and communities in crime shows resemble actual places; (5) Storylines of crime shows are coherent and plausible, even when dramatized; and (6) The sequence of events in crime shows could realistically happen ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 2.54$, $\alpha = .85$).

Parasocial Relationship with Criminal Characters. Drawing upon Rubin et al. (1985), Giles (2002) and Cohen (2004), four items were measured on a 7-point scale: (1) I feel I ‘know’ some criminal characters well; (2) I miss certain criminal characters when a series ends; (3) I think about what those criminal characters might do next; and (4) I feel as if I could talk to criminal characters if they were real ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.74$, $\alpha = .90$).

Measures: Moderator Variables

Binge-Watching Intensity. We asked an open-ended question: “When you watch a crime drama, how many episodes do you typically watch in a single sitting?” ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 1.63$).

Algorithmic Personalization. Drawing upon Moravec et al. (2025) and Eder and Sehl (2025), we measured the following on a 7-point scale: (1) My platform repeatedly recommends similar crime content; (2) I often notice that recommended crime shows match what I’ve watched before; (3) The more I watch, the more similar the recommendations become; and (4) I feel that the platform’s recommended crime content fits what I would want to watch even when I don’t explicitly search for it ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.47$, $\alpha = .92$).

Prior Victimization. Building on Lauritsen and Rezey (2013) and Cantor and Lynch (2000), this study used the following items on a 5-point scale: (1) Have you ever been a victim of a violent crime? (2) Has a close friend/family member been a victim of violent crime? and (3) I have experienced fear or trauma as a result of a violent crime committed against me ($M = 1.03$, $SD = 1.14$, $\alpha = .77$).

Control Variables

Platform-Specific Affordances: Drawing upon Roberts and David (2025), Dekker and Tverdina (2025) and Ma, Zhao and Gao (2025), we used the following items on a 7-point scale: (1) Short-form clips (e.g., TikTok/YouTube Shorts) make me watch more crime content than I planned; (2) Auto-play/next-episode features keep me watching longer than intended; (3) The design of my platform's interface (e.g., layout, buttons) makes it easy to discover crime content without actively looking for it; (4) I feel that the platform's recommendation system narrows what I see over time, showing me more of the same type of content; and (5) I often watch content longer than I planned because the platform automatically queues up related videos ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 1.97$, $\alpha = .86$).

Political Ideology: Drawing upon Yeung and Quek (2025), I asked "In politics, would you describe yourself as..." on a 7-point scale (1 = very liberal, 2 = liberal, 3 = somewhat liberal, 4 = moderate/middle of the road, 5 = somewhat conservative, 6 = conservative, 7 = very conservative) ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 2.26$). **Political Interest** was measured with two items: (1) I am interested in politics in general; (2) I pay attention to political issues and debates; (3) I follow

political news and discussions in the media regularly; and (4) I enjoy talking about political issues with others (e.g., friends, family, colleagues) ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 2.07$, $\alpha = .93$).

Demographics included age ($M = 21.47$, $SD = 5.86$), gender (55% female), race/ethnicity (Hispanic/Latino 5.37%, non Hispanic 94.41%), education ($Mdn =$ high school), and annual household income ($Mdn =$ \$50,000 ~ \$60,000).

RESULTS

To test the direct effects and moderation hypotheses, hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted for each of the dependent variables: perceived severity of crime, fear of crime, trust in legal institutions, punitive policy preferences, and romanticization.

Predictor variables were entered in three blocks. Block 1 contained the control variables: age, gender, household income, and platform-specific affordances. Block 2 introduced the main predictor variables (exposure to crime dramas, perceived realism, binge-watching, prior victimization, algorithmic personalization, and offender frame salience). Block 3 added the interaction terms to test for moderation (exposure $\times$ binge-watching, exposure $\times$ prior victimization, and exposure $\times$ algorithmic personalization). All continuous predictors were mean-centered prior to creating interaction terms to reduce multicollinearity. Listwise deletion handled missing data; effective N s ranged from 482 to 498 across models.

Direct Effects

Perceived Severity of Crime

Exposure to crime dramas was a significant positive predictor of perceived severity of crime, supporting H1a. Block 1 (controls) accounted for a small but significant portion of

variance, $R^2 = .065$, $F(5,492) = 4.12$, $p = .001$. Block 2 included the main predictors and produced a significant increment, $\Delta R^2 = .19$, $\Delta F(3,483) = 6.72$, $p = .001$. Block 3 (interactions) further improved the model, totaling $R^2 = .052$, $p < .001$.

In the final Block 3 model, exposure to crime dramas was a significant positive predictor ($\beta = .28$, $p < .001$) of perceived severity of crime dramas, as were perceived realism ($\beta = .24$, $p < .001$), prior victimization ($\beta = .12$, $p = .027$), algorithmic personalization ($\beta = .15$, $p = .004$), frame salience ($\beta = .14$, $p = .004$), and the binge-watching $\times$ exposure interaction ($\beta = .11$, $p = .016$). Binge watching was not significant ($\beta = .08$, $p = .057$).

Table 1. Coefficients predicting each cultivation effect (DV = Perceived Severity of Crime).

Predictor	Perceived Severity (β)	Perceived Severity (β)	Perceived Severity (β)
Block 1: Control Variables			
Age	.02	.01	.00
Gender (female)	.03	.02	.02
Race (1 = Hispanic, 2 = non Hispanic)	-.03	-.02	-.02
Income	-.03	-.03	-.03
Platform-specific affordances	.10*	.08	.08
Inc. R^2 (%)	6.9*	6.7*	6.5*
Block 2: Predictors			
Exposure to crime dramas		.30***	.28***
Perceived realism		.25***	.24***

Binge-watching		.08	.08
Prior victimization		.14**	.12*
Algorithm personalization		.15**	.15**
Frame salience		.14**	.14**
Inc. R^2 (%)		22.1***	19.0***
Block 3: Interactions			
Binge-watching × Exposure			.11*
Prior victimization × Exposure			.07
Algorithm personalization × Exposure			.08
Inc. R^2 (%)			5.2**
Total R^2 (%)			30.7***

Note. N = 498. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Fear of Crime

Exposure to crime dramas was significantly associated with increased fear of crime, supporting H1b. Block 1 was significant, $R^2 = .058$, $F(5,483) = 5.08$, $p < .001$. Block 2 increased explained variance substantially, $\Delta R^2 = .221$, $\Delta F(6,477) = 23.14$, $p < .001$. Block 3 added further variance, $\Delta R^2 = .046$, $\Delta F(3,474) = 8.31$, $p < .001$. Significant Block 3 predictors included exposure to crime dramas ($\beta = .30$, $p < .001$), perceived realism ($\beta = .21$, $p < .001$), binge-watching ($\beta = .10$, $p = .038$), prior victimization ($\beta = .23$, $p < .001$), algorithmic personalization ($\beta = .11$, $p = .041$), frame salience ($\beta = .16$, $p = .001$), the binge-watching × exposure interaction ($\beta = .13$, $p = .003$), and the prior victimization × exposure interaction $\beta = .10$, $p = .029$).

Table 2. Coefficients predicting each cultivation effect (DV = Fear of Crime).

Predictor	Fear of Crime (β)	Fear of Crime (β)	Fear of Crime (β)
Block 1: Control Variables			
Age	.02	.02	.02
Gender (female)	.06	.06	.06
Race (1 = Hispanic, 2 = non Hispanic)	-.02	-.02	-.01
Income	-.03	-.03	-.02
Platform-specific affordances	.10*	.09*	.09*
Inc. R ² (%)	6.2**	6.0**	5.8**
Block 2: Predictors			
Exposure to crime dramas		.30***	.30***
Perceived realism		.23***	.21***
Binge-watching		.10*	.10*
Prior victimization		.24***	.23***
Algorithm personalization		.12*	.11*
Frame salience		.16**	.16***
Inc. R ² (%)		23.4***	22.1***
Block 3: Interactions			
Binge-watching × Exposure			.13**
Prior victimization × Exposure			.10*
Algorithm personalization × Exposure			.07
Inc. R ² (%)			4.6***
Total R ² (%)			32.5***

Note. $N = 489$. $*p < .05$. $**p < .01$. $***p < .001$.

Trust in Legal Institutions

Exposure to crime dramas was a significant negative predictor of trust in legal institutions, supporting H1c. Higher exposure was associated with lower levels of trust. Block 1 was significant, $R^2 = .039$, $F(5,476) = 2.94$, $p = .012$. Block 2 added substantial variance, $\Delta R^2 = .175$, $\Delta F(6,470) = 16.42$, $p < .001$. Block 3 added $\Delta R^2 = .038$, $\Delta F(3,467) = 5.89$, $p < .001$. Significant negative predictors in Block 3 were exposure to crime dramas ($\beta = -.26$, $p = .001$), perceived realism ($\beta = -.20$, $p = .001$), prior victimization ($\beta = -.13$, $p = .018$), algorithmic personalization ($\beta = -.12$, $p = .027$), frame salience ($\beta = -.13$, $p = .012$), and the binge-watching $\times$ exposure interaction ($\beta = -.09$, $p = .039$). Binge watching was nonsignificant ($\beta = -.06$, $p = .78$).

Table 3. Coefficients predicting each cultivation effect (DV = Trust in Legal Institutions).

Predictor	Trust in Legal Institutions (β)	Trust in Legal Institutions (β)	Trust in Legal Institutions (β)
Block 1: Control Variables			
Age	-.02	-.02	-.01
Gender (female)	-.05	-.04	-.03
Race (1 = Hispanic, 2 = non Hispanic)	.02	.02	.01
Income	.06	.05	.05
Platform-specific affordances	-.08	-.08	-.07

Inc. R^2 (%)	4.3*	4.0*	3.9*
Block 2: Predictors			
Exposure to crime dramas		-.27***	-.26***
Perceived realism		-.22***	-.20***
Binge-watching		-.08	-.06
Prior victimization		-.14*	-.13*
Algorithm personalization		-.12*	-.12*
Frame salience		-.15**	-.13*
Inc. R^2 (%)		17.9***	17.5***
Block 3: Interactions			
Binge-watching × Exposure			-.09*
Prior victimization × Exposure			-.06
Algorithm personalization × Exposure			-.07
Inc. R^2 (%)			3.8*
Total R^2 (%)			25.2***

Note. N = 482. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Punitive Policy Preferences

Exposure to crime dramas significantly predicted greater support for punitive policy preferences, supporting H1d. Block 1 was nonsignificant, $R^2 = .031$, $F(5,489) = 2.11$, $p = .062$. Block 2 produced a large increment, $\Delta R^2 = .194$, $\Delta F(6,483) = 19.67$, $p < .001$. Block 3 added $\Delta R^2 = .036$, $\Delta F(3,480) = 6.14$, $p = .001$. Significant positive predictors in Block 3 included exposure to crime dramas ($\beta = .24$, $p < .001$), perceived realism ($\beta = .22$, $p < .001$), prior victimization ($\beta = .15$, $p = .005$), algorithmic personalization ($\beta = .13$, $p = .016$), frame salience

($\beta = .13, p = .012$), and the binge-watching $\times$ exposure interaction ($\beta = .10, p = .027$). Binge watching was not significant ($\beta = .09, p = .056$).

Table 4. Coefficients predicting each cultivation effect (DV = Punitive Policy Preferences).

Predictor	Punitive Policy Preferences (β)	Punitive Policy Preferences (β)	Punitive Policy Preferences (β)
Block 1: Control Variables			
Age	.02	.01	.00
Gender (female)	-.03	-.03	-.01
Race (1 = Hispanic, 2 = non Hispanic)	.02	.02	.01
Income	-.04	-.03	-.02
Platform-specific affordances	.09*	.09*	.09*
Inc. R^2 (%)	3.3*	3.3*	3.1*
Block 2: Predictors			
Exposure to crime dramas		.26***	.24***
Perceived realism		.22***	.22***
Binge-watching		.09	.09
Prior victimization		.15**	.15**
Algorithm personalization		.14**	.13*
Frame salience		.14**	.13*
Inc. R^2 (%)		21.5***	19.4***
Block 3: Interactions			
Binge-watching $\times$ Exposure			.10*
Prior victimization $\times$			.08

Exposure			
Algorithm personalization × Exposure			.06
Inc. R ² (%)			3.6**
Total R ² (%)			26.1***

Note. N = 495. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Overall, the results show that H1a–H1e (direct positive associations between exposure to crime dramas and perceived severity of crime, fear of crime, perceived realism, and punitive policy preferences; negative association with trust in legal institutions) are fully supported: exposure to crime dramas remained a significant predictor in all final models (all $p < .001$).

H3a–H3d (binge-watching as moderator) received full support: the binge-watching × exposure interaction was significant for perceived severity of crime ($p = .016$), fear of crime ($p = .003$), trust in legal institutions ($p = .039$), and punitive policy preferences ($p = .027$). H4a–H4d (prior victimization as moderator) received partial support: the interaction was significant only for fear of crime ($p = .029$); it was nonsignificant for the other three outcomes. H5a–H5d (algorithm personalization as moderator) was not supported: the algorithm × exposure interaction was nonsignificant across all four models. Overall, the findings advance cultivation theory by demonstrating robust direct and moderated effects of crime-drama exposure in a streaming-era sample, with binge-watching emerging as the most consistent moderator.

Frame salience did not significantly predict romanticization of the character, $\beta = .05$, $p = .177$. Therefore, H6a is not supported. H6b predicted that perceived parasocial relationships with the character mediate the link between frame salience and romanticization of the character. The indirect effect was significant (indirect = .015, $p = .025$; 95% CI [.018, .034]. H6b is supported.

Mediation by Perceived Realism

Using regression-based path analysis (equivalent to Hayes' PROCESS Model 4, with covariates controlled), perceived realism significantly mediated the relationships between exposure and the four outcomes. Path *a* (exposure → perceived realism) was significant ($b = .25$, $p < .001$). The specific indirect effects, tested with 1,000 bootstrapped samples, were as follows: Severity: indirect effect = .055, 95% CI [.032, .081]; Fear: indirect effect = .048, 95% CI [.027, .071]; Trust: indirect effect = -.045, 95% CI [-.068, -.024]; Punitive attitudes: indirect effect = .050, (95% CI [.029, .074]). None of the confidence intervals included zero, providing support for significant indirect effects (H2a-H2d). These results indicate that perceived realism transmits the effect of exposure on the outcomes in the hypothesized directions.

Table 5. Indirect, direct, and total effects of exposure on outcomes through perceived realism.

Outcome	Path <i>b</i> (Mediator → DV)	Indirect Effect (<i>ab</i>)	<i>SE</i>	95% CI	Total Effect (<i>c</i>)	Direct Effect (<i>c'</i>)
Severity	.23	.055	.013	[.032, .081]	.18***	.12**
Fear	.19	.048	.011	[.027, .071]	.15***	.10**
Trust	-.18	-.045	.011	[-.068, -.024]	-.12**	-.08*
Punitive Attitudes	.20	.050	.012	[.029, .074]	.14**	.09*

Note. All analyses controlled for age, gender, race, income, platform-specific affordances, Exposure to crime dramas, Binge-watching, Prior victimization, Algorithm personalization, and Frame salience. Bootstrap *SEs* and 95% confidence intervals are based on 5,000 resamples. $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

The present study investigated the influence of exposure to dramatized crime media on viewers' perceptions of crime severity, fear of crime, trust in legal institutions, and punitive policy preferences within a contemporary streaming environment. It also examined perceived realism as a mediator and tested moderators including binge-watching, prior victimization, and algorithmic personalization. Additionally, the current study explored how offender frame salience relates to romanticization of criminal characters, with parasocial relationships as a potential mediator. Overall, the findings provide robust support for core tenets of cultivation theory while extending the framework to account for psychological mechanisms and modern consumption patterns. Exposure to crime dramas significantly predicted higher perceived severity of crime, greater fear of crime, lower trust in legal institutions, and stronger punitive policy preferences (H1a–H1d), as well as elevated perceived realism (H1e). These direct effects persisted after controlling for demographics, platform affordances, and political ideology, replicating classic cultivation patterns in a digital context (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Morgan et al., 2018).

Perceived realism emerged as a significant mediator between exposure and all four primary outcomes (H2a–H2d). None of the confidence intervals included zero. The results clarify a key mechanism: repeated exposure cultivates distorted social perceptions primarily when audiences judge dramatized content as authentic. High-production elements—narrative coherence, procedural detail, and documentary-style aesthetics—enhance judgments of realism, thereby amplifying internalization of portrayed messages about crime prevalence, danger, and justice (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008; Cho et al., 2014; Ewanation et al., 2017). By specifying

perceived realism as a mediator, the present study addresses a longstanding criticism of cultivation theory: its limited specification of intervening psychological processes (Potter, 2014; Ruddock, 2024).

Moderation analyses revealed nuanced boundary conditions. Binge-watching intensity consistently strengthened the associations between exposure and all four outcomes (H3a–H3d), with significant positive interaction terms in final hierarchical regression models. This pattern aligns with intensified narrative transportation and reduced counterarguing during compressed viewing sessions, which heighten cognitive accessibility of crime-related schemas (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2013; Shim & Kim, 2018). In streaming contexts, where autoplay and on-demand features facilitate sustained immersion, binge-watching appears to accelerate and intensify cultivation processes beyond mere frequency of exposure. Prior victimization moderated only the exposure–fear link (H4b), consistent with resonance effects whereby personal experience amplifies affective responses to threatening media content without necessarily altering broader cognitive or policy judgments (Romer et al., 2003; Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). These differential moderation patterns indicate that cultivation outcomes are not uniform but depend on both media consumption style and individual life experiences.

Contrary to hypotheses, algorithmic personalization did not significantly moderate any exposure–outcome relationship (H5a–H5d). A plausible explanation is that algorithms increase uniform rather than differential exposure when content within a genre (crime dramas) is relatively homogeneous. Rather than polarizing effects across audience segments, personalization may simply amplify overall volume of similar narratives, functioning as a broad rather than targeted amplifier. Hence, fears that algorithmic curation exacerbates cultivation-like

distortions in perceptions of crime severity, fear, trust, or punitiveness may be overstated for standardized entertainment genres. This finding highlights the need for future research to distinguish algorithmic influence across homogeneous versus ideologically diverse content domains and to test indirect pathways via exposure volume or perceived realism.

This study further examined offender frame salience in relation to romanticization of criminal characters. Frame salience—operationalized as perceived emphasis on criminals’ motives, psychological profiles, and biographical backgrounds—did not directly predict romanticization, failing to support H6a. However, perceived parasocial relationships with criminal characters mediated the association, supporting H6b. Salient framing thus influences favorable evaluations indirectly by fostering emotional bonds and a sense of knowing the character, rather than through direct cognitive pathways. This integrates framing theory (Entman, 1993) with parasocial interaction within cultivation processes (Cohen, 2003; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). In dramatized crime media, character-centric narratives—often featuring charismatic portrayals by familiar actors—may subtly humanize perpetrators, with potential downstream implications for desensitization, empathy toward offenders, or softened attitudes toward criminal justice. The mediation via parasocial ties suggests relational mechanisms warrant greater attention in cultivation research, particularly as streaming platforms emphasize serialized character development.

Theoretical Implications for Cultivation Theory

These results affirm cultivation theory’s enduring relevance while demonstrating necessary extensions for the digital age. Gerbner’s original framework posited that television’s repetitive storytelling cultivates shared conceptions of social reality, particularly regarding

violence and danger (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner et al., 1980). The present findings show that such processes persist—and may intensify—amid streaming accessibility, binge-watching, and algorithmic curation. The strong mediation by perceived realism and consistent moderation by binge-watching address critiques concerning explanatory mechanisms and audience activity (Potter, 2014; Ruddock, 2024; Shrum, 2017). Cultivation is not solely a function of exposure frequency but depends on interpretive judgments of authenticity and consumption intensity. The indirect pathway from frame salience to romanticization via parasocial relationships further enriches the theory by incorporating relational and framing dynamics previously underemphasized. Collectively, the present research suggests cultivation theory remains a flexible macro-level framework capable of integrating micro-level psychological and technological variables without losing its core explanatory power. It also highlights that when media messages within a genre remain thematically consistent, selective exposure and personalization do not necessarily undermine mainstreaming effects (Morgan et al., 2018).

Practical and Societal Implications

The findings carry notable societal implications. Dramatized crime media may contribute to heightened fear of crime, eroded trust in legal institutions, and increased public support for punitive policies—outcomes capable of influencing public opinion, political discourse, and criminal justice attitudes (Dowler, 2003; Kort-Butler & Sittner Hartshorn, 2011; Till et al., 2021). The mediating role of perceived realism implies that media literacy programs should prioritize training viewers to critically evaluate authenticity cues, narrative coherence, and production techniques rather than focusing solely on exposure volume. Awareness of binge-watching patterns is equally important, as prolonged immersion appears to amplify effects; platform

designers could consider default limits on autoplay or episode queuing to mitigate unintended cultivation. Content creators bear responsibility for offender-framing choices, given evidence that character-centric portrayals may foster parasocial bonds and romanticization, potentially desensitizing audiences or distorting moral evaluations. Public health initiatives addressing fear of crime or promoting balanced justice perspectives could incorporate these media dynamics. Overall, the results suggest that while dramatized crime entertainment provides engaging storytelling, its cumulative societal footprint warrants thoughtful consideration by producers, platforms, educators, and policymakers.

Limitations and Future Research

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design, limiting causal inferences about relationships between crime-drama exposure and outcomes. Although findings align with cultivation theory, longitudinal or experimental designs are needed to establish temporal precedence and long-term effects. Self-reported measures introduce potential biases, including social desirability and recall inaccuracies regarding media habits and attitudes. The sample consisted primarily of University of Oklahoma students ($N = 482 \sim 498$ after cleaning), which restricts generalizability to broader adult populations differing in age, media consumption, or life experiences. Future research should employ more diverse, representative samples. Finally, while several moderators and mediators were examined, unmeasured variables—such as personality traits, media skepticism, or specific content preferences—may further shape effects.

Future studies should utilize longitudinal and experimental designs to strengthen causal claims and track cultivation processes over time. Experimental manipulations could isolate specific framing strategies or realism-enhancing production elements. Researchers should also

examine effects across more diverse populations and media formats, including short-form video, podcasts, and interactive content. Given the null moderation by algorithmic personalization, investigations should test indirect pathways (e.g., via increased exposure volume) and compare effects in homogeneous versus polarized genres. Incorporating additional mechanisms—such as narrative transportation, counterarguing, or moral disengagement—would further refine understanding of how dramatized crime media shape social reality. Cross-cultural comparisons could clarify whether observed patterns generalize beyond U.S. contexts.

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