True crime: Tales for women living in high-crime and low-crime areas

A narrative analysis on women's engagement with the true crime genre

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Abstract

The true crime genre has gone from a 'guilty pleasure' to a cultural phenomenon. And while these stories often recount horrific happenings of women suffering from violent crimes, studies show that women overwhelmingly consume more true crime media than men. This is paradoxical, given that research also shows that women fear violent crimes more than men do, despite the latter being more likely to become victims. But while research focused on the paradox of women's attraction to the genre exists, there is a gap of knowledge on how fundamentally different levels of risk of victimization influence women's engagement and discourses in relation to the true crime genre. This research therefore explores how women from high-crime areas in Mexico and low-crime areas in the Netherlands make sense of their consumption of true crime media, as well as how their lived experiences shape their narratives. To achieve this, two focus group interviews with Dutch women and two with Mexican women between the ages of 24 to 36 years old were conducted and then analyzed through thematic narrative analysis in order to analyze group identity while preserving individual stories. Results show that while the narratives from women from both groups presented similarities in the way they interacted with the context, engaging in sensationalistic and voyeuristic discourses, the differing levels of crime within their countries did provide some demarcated differences in terms of how the degree to which these stories increased their fear and how they coped with the negative emotions generated by their consumption. It can therefore be concluded that the social context of the women, particularly the level of crime in their county, does have an impact on how they engage with true crime content. As well, while heavy exposure to stories of crime does have an influence in their perceptions of risk, and in their moral panic reactions, the degree to which they perceive themselves likely to be victimized is influenced by how often they are exposed to local crime reports.

Keywords: True crime, sensationalism, voyeurism, moral panic, women's fear-risk paradox

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1. Introduction

From award-winning films to highly celebrated books and podcasts, true crime has gone from a 'guilty pleasure' to a cultural phenomenon (Lawson, 2015). These stories often recount horrific happenings of women being kidnapped, tortured, raped, and killed, yet studies show women overwhelmingly consume more true crime media than men (Boling & Hull, 2018; Vicary & Fraley, 2010). This is also evident in the predominantly female audience of popular true crime podcasts such as *Serial*[1], *Sword and Scale*, and *Wine and Crime*[2] (Boling & Hull, 2018; Dickson, 2019; Weller, 2016). However, women drawn to true crime content almost sounds like a paradox. After all, research also shows women fear violent crimes more than men (Yavuz & Welch, 2009). But despite men being more likely to be victims of a violent crime (UN, 2019), globally, almost one in every three women have been subjected to violence at least once in their life[3] (UN Women, 2021; WHO, 2020). Global studies on homicide show that while women only make up 19% of intentional killings, around 90% of homicides registered were committed by male perpetrators; and intentional killings of girls and women by a partner or family member is on the rise (UN, 2019).

Crime-related content has fed the public's fascination through the sensationalistic retelling of violent crimes for decades (Durham et al, 1995) and research has found women are attracted to this content hoping to learn information that could prevent them from becoming a victim (Vicary & Fraley, 2010), but are also motivated by purposes of entertainment, escapism, and voyeurism (Boling & Hull, 2018). In Mexico, where femicides are a human right crisis (Amnesty International, 2021; Sanchez, 2020), the genre's popularity is exemplified by the podcast *Leyendas Legendarias*, which since its debut in 2019, has consistently placed itself in Spotify's top three most popular podcasts in Mexico[4] (Unocero, 2020). The Netherlands' state of affairs in gender violence and equality is starkly different, with decreasing levels of homicides since 2012[5] (UN, 2019), and a long-standing tradition of

[1] Arguably the most popular podcast ever produced (Boling, 2020) and the fastest ever to reach 5 million downloads (Roberts, 2014).

[2] Serial (73%), Sword and scale (70%), Wine and Crime (85%)

[3] This covers an estimated 736 million women (WHO, 2020; UN Women, 2021)

[4] It has also been nominated *Podcast of the year* two years in a row (Milenio, 2020; iheart 2021)

[5] In the Netherlands 0.4 per 100,000 persons fall victims of intentional homicides in contrast to Mexico's result of 5.8 (UNODOC, 2018).

the emancipation of women (Ramos Martín, 2008). However, the genre has also found popularity in the Netherlands, with crime becoming the third most listened to podcast genre in 2022, just behind general news, and people and society podcasts (Audify, 2022).

As a part of mass media, crime-related content has often been criticized for its high levels of sensationalism, evoking emotional resonance to draw its audience (Wiltenburg, 2004), also for promoting moral panic, contributing to exaggerated and distorted public perception of the levels of crime (Altheide, 2009), and avoidance behavior, which tends to intensify fear (Rader et al, 2007).

Women's attraction to the true crime gene has been studied by academics such as Browder (2006), Vicary and Fraley (2010), Boling and Hull (2018), Boling (2020) and McDonald et al. (2021). However, while their work has sought to understand women's motivations for their engagement with the genre, it does not fully explain the paradox of their consumption, particularly from the perspective of fascination. Existing studies have also not focused on studying notably different demographics of true crime consumers, such as Dutch and Mexican women. Research on female true crime audiences has generally focused on countries such as the United States of America, Canada, and the United Kingdom (Browder, 2006; McDonald et al., 2021; Vicary & Fraley, 2010), or aimed for a broader online audience without geographical specifics (Boling, 2020), resulting in a gap of knowledge about how fundamentally different levels of risk of victimization influence women's engagement and discourses in relation to the true crime genre. Particularly within Latin America and other European countries. This aspect is particularly significant as Boling's (2020) research on female domestic violence survivors who consume true crime media indicates that their lived experiences intersect with their engagement with the genre. Therefore, the research question is as follows: How do women from high-crime areas in Mexico and low-crime areas in the Netherlands make sense of their consumption of true crime media, and how do their lived experiences shape their narratives?

The particular significance of this study lies in bringing the intersection between true crime media consumption and women's demographic differences into the academic debate to explore how it contributes to the knowledge of how women engage and interpret the medium from their own unique perspective. It is relevant to explore this as there is a gap in the discussion on how women's engagement with the true crime genre is shaped by the levels of crime in their places of residence. Furthermore, this study contributes to the scholarship on how media influences its audience's perceptions of the world.

This thesis is divided into five chapters and its structure is as follows. The next section introduces the theoretical framework, which provides a critical review of existing literature on true crime media and its consumption, as well as the relevant theoretical concepts of sensationalism, voyeurism, moral panic and women's risk-fear paradox. This is followed by the chapter on the methodology, which includes the research design choices. This includes the reasoning for conducting qualitative research, focus groups interviews and narrative analysis. As well the rationale behind the sampling criteria and recruitment method, and information on the final selection of the study's participants, which resulted in four focus group interviews with Dutch and Mexican women aged 24 to 36 years old. Subsequently the ethical considerations of this research are discussed, followed by the operationalization of the key concepts and the data analysis process, which included an overview of the final thematic categories, as well as discussion of my positionality as a researcher. The fourth section presents the results of the analysis, structured by seven themes identified within the data. Each theme presents the participant's narratives along with my interpretation of their meaning in relation to the theoretical framework. The results identified that while the narratives from women from both groups presented similarities in the way they interacted with the context, engaging in sensationalistic and voyeuristic discourses, the differing levels of crime within their countries did provide some demarcated differences in terms of how the degree to which these stories increased their fear and how they coped with the negative emotions generated by their consumption. The final section is the conclusion, which provides a clear answer to the main research question and concludes by reflecting on the study's limitations and suggestions for future research

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Perspectives on true crime media

Studies have found that true crime content does not always portray crimes accurately (Durham et al., 1995; Harper & Hogue, 2014; Pace, 2019; Sommers, 2016). Different from real life, perpetrators in true crime stories are predominantly male and white, while homicide victims are overwhelmingly white, female and middle or upper class. True crime stories also significantly underrepresent cases of domestic violence, male sexual assault, and victims for minority groups (Yardley et al., 2018), and depict aspects of homicide differently than how commonly or frequently they occur [6] (Durham et al, 1995). In fact, popular media has been found to often portray the perpetrator and the crime in a sensationalized and biased manner (Durham et al, 1995; Pace, 2019), perpetrating stereotypes and leading to an inaccurate portrayal of the nature of crime and inaccurate estimates of the likelihood of becoming a victim (Durham et al, 1995). Fishman (1978), illustrates this through the heavily reported crime wave against the New York elderly that lasted several weeks in the media in 1976. The numerous stories reporting muggings, murders, and rapes resulted in great nation-wide concern, heightened perceptions of risk and increase in public fear, despite police data not supporting the existence of a crime wave. Being heavily exposed to stories of crime and violence has thus been found to result in a heightened concern about crime and an increased perception of the risk of criminal victimization, and hence an increase in fear (Fishman, 1978; Willem Winkel & Vrij, 1990). However, it has also been observed that the degree to which a person's fear is heightened is related to the degree to which they identify with the described victim, perceive their neighborhood to resemble the described locale, and how much the described crime aligns with the type of crime they fear (Willem Winkel & Vrij, 1990). This was reflected in the results, as participants from Mexico and the Netherlands displayed differing levels of fear, precisely due to it being easier for the former to identify with the cases in true crime stories as a result of their social context.

Research has also shown that women's attraction to true crime stories is also linked to "potential survival cues contained therein", which they perceive as important life lessons on how to prevent becoming the victim of a killer (Browder, 2006; Vicary & Fraley, 2010, pp. 82) and "educates [them] about the criminal justice system" (Boling & Hull, 2018, pp. 97).

[6] For instance, these crimes do not occur as a revenge plot on a family member as often as true crime stories make it seem (Durham et al, 1995).

But as a result, true crime consumption in women is like a vicious cycle (Vicary & Fraley, 2010) in which women are afraid of crime, and thus they consume true crime content as a source of information to prevent victimization, which in turn heightens their fear of crime, restarting the cycle. The recreation of this cycle was identified within the study's data, as participants expressed engaging with true crime stories, using them as cautionary tales for survival, and then engaging in evasive behaviors due to the resulting fear.

Browder (2006) argues that the interest in true crime for some women comes from its subversive questioning of the foundations of patriarchal culture and dysfunctional familial relations. Until the 1960s, true crime stories focused on tales of violence by evil, anonymous perpetrators; monsters who attacked women living alone, or without the protection of men. With the rise of feminism in the 1970s, a new kind of true crime stories acknowledging the dangers of toxic patriarchal dynamics began to appear. They recounted crimes and murders committed in interpersonal settings by seemingly normal and trusted men (Halttunen, 1998). This was reflected in this study by the participant's emphasis on the importance of understanding the context of the crime and of the criminal, to understand their dysfunctional origins. At the same time, this strongly relates to the concept of feminist standpoint, since, as the epistemological backbone for women's studies, it recognizes sociopolitical issues stemming from systemic sexism (van der Tuin, 2016). This theory begins from the notion that those in society with less power encounter a different reality as a result of their oppression (Van Wormer, 2009), which links to feminism because, as Hartsock proposed (1983), women have a unique understanding of the world as their "lives differ systematically and structurally from those of men" (pp. 316). Thus their position in society provides a perspective from which to study their social reality and possibilities for overcoming oppression (Swigonski, 1994; Hartsock, 1983). This is especially relevant given that even within the women in this study, their social reality may vastly differ due to the significantly different statuses in gender equality, crime, and violence in their respective countries. Therefore, drawing from Boling (2020), feminist standpoint theory will be taken as a lens from which to interpret the participant's narratives in relation to the genre.

For women who have suffered victimization, the consumption of true crime content also allows them to cope with the violence (Browder, 2006). It allows them to express violent feelings they have been socially prescribed to hide, as well as to see the villain be punished, providing them the happy ending they might have not personally obtained. Additionally, for women who suffer from trauma, whose memories tend to be fragmented, true crime, especially in the form of books, has been found to help narrate their experiences and find

meaning in them (Reviere, 1996; Browder, 2006). Nonetheless, there is hardly any information on whether women who have not directly been victims of violence but live in areas where crime is prevalent also utilize true crime content as a way to cope. It is also unclear whether there is a difference in the perceived importance of these 'life lessons' for women who live in areas where they are statistically less likely to face victimization. However, in addition to the link between true crime and women's risk perceptions, the concept of sensationalism also plays an important part in their consumption, as I shall explore in the following section.

2.2 Sensationalism

As discussed earlier, the true crime genre is based upon the compelling and detailed narration of crime stories, employing sensationalistic elements often associated with fiction (Murley, 2008). The term sensationalism at its core can be defined as an appeal to emotion and human instinct (Kilgo et al., 2016; Slattery and Hakanen, 1994) through the supply of emotionally charged, morbid, and thrill providing content that entices the "basic though depraved human taste" for horror, disaster, gore and crime (Danielson et al.,1958, as cited in Tannenbaum & Lynch, 1960; Wiltenburg, 2004, pp. 1378). Though sensationalism is believed to provoke "unwholesome emotional responses" (Mott, 1962, pp. 442, as cited in Kilgo et al., 2016), it is also perceived to engage people emotionally, leading to empathy (Graber, 1994; Wiltenburg, 2004). Participants in this study, for instance, displayed sensationalistic discourses through their curiosity for accessing detailed information about the crime and those involved in it, which provided them with strong emotions such as shock and anger. Nonetheless, as Garber (1994) and Wiltenburg (2004) suggested, this also resulted in empathy for the victims in these stories and their families.

Quintessential elements of sensationalistic stories involve the coverage of themes of crime, disasters, scandals and sex, the use of attention-grabbing elements in the form of narrative, sounds and visuals (Grabe et al., 2001), as well as emotionally charged vignettes and information of ordinary persons (Wang and Cohen, 2009). Katz (1987), who analyzed the data of 550 crime stories, found that for a story to be considered newsworthy it boiled down to stories that expose weaknesses in the structure of social order, either through the crime of a recognizable defendant of strong legitimacy (e.g., white collar crime), through the involvement of whimsical circumstances where the criminal's genius generates public interest (e.g., a gruesome murder), or through implicitly addressing the vulnerability of the

moral integrity of a community through the presence of evil forces who endanger the collective identity, which can be politically charged if involving a local organization (e.g.: a politician stealing education funds). The latter point relates to the concept of moral panic, which will be discussed later. In relation to this, Roshier's (1973; as cited in Katz, 1987), analysis of the British news media's daily coverage of crime suggests that "crimes do not become newsworthy because of what they tell about crime, but because crime may be especially telling about other things of interest to readers" (pp. 50). This is particularly relevant to this thesis as the narratives identified in the data indicate that the participant's interest in what may be perceived as sensationalistic elements of true crime is also motivated by their desire to understand how to avoid victimization.

Murley (2008), who discusses the rise of true crime in popular culture, describes some of the sensationalistic conventions of the genre not only as the depictions of gory death scenes and reenactments of the murders, but as emphasizing the moral differences between the criminal and the reader and including preoccupation with the biographical details of the killer, treating them as monsters 'hideously outside the moral boundaries of humanity' in order to generate a sense of moral outrage and horror (pp. 8). Joel Bartlow Martin, author of *Why did they kill?* (1952), argues for the importance of including the context in which murders take place and how a killer is made, stating that crime does not happen in a vacuum but is caused by social and/or psychological factors, and their inclusion provides an opportunity to talk about society through crime stories. So, these elements, while sensationalistic, also provide a thick-description of the factors that led to the crime (Murley, 2008), something that participants of this study highlighted as important, as alluded earlier, due to this context serving as a basis to reflect of the societal influences that led to the crime.

Though this is not to say that all context and data in true crime is justifiable. Rare instances where the killer is given a platform to tell their own story[7], for instance, are not only sensationalistic but allow the killer to "foreground his legitimacy as a subject of inquiry and further "silences" the victim" (Murley, 2008, pp. 107). Similarly, providing them with representation through highly publicized mass media coverage, whether fictional or nonfictional, can lead to what Bonn (2014) refers to as "celebrity monsters", giving them a platform from which to gain fame and, in some cases, even their own 'fan club'. Last year

[7] As seen in the 2005 documentary *'The serial killers: The sick minds behind the most gruesome murders in America'* or more recently on Netflix's *'I am a killer'* (2018) (Murley, 2008; Sky Vision & Znak & Co., 2018)

Netflix released the miniseries '*Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story*' starring Evan Peters, which sparked controversy due to its romanticized focus on the killer's "backstory of childhood neglect, rather than the stories of the victims", which was deemed to have fostered sympathy and support for the killer (DeBello, 2022). The show trended in social media platforms such as Twitter and TikTok, where users fawned over Dahmer's looks and even attempted to find justifications for his actions (DeBello, 2022). This is concerning because as Strutz (2022) discusses, the romanticization of serial killers not only is insensitive towards victims and misleading for viewers, but also has serious consequences, imposing detrimental effects on audience's perceptions of love, increasing their tolerance of abuse and violence by normalizing it. This topic was also spoken of by the participants, though focused on the importance of avoiding this kind of romanticization and glamorization of these criminals. And while sensationalism remains a present element of true crime, overtime more thoughtful depictions of these stories have emerged providing a counter narrative of the previously reported version of the story and where "interrelated social and cultural structures of violence and power" that led to the fatal developments are explored (Murley, 2008, pp. 107). Murley (2008) illustrates this with Patty Jenkins' 2004 film '*Monster*', which explored the counter-narrative to Alieen Wuonros' story as set by the media, allowing the audience to see the integral influence of "social and cultural structures of violence and power" that shaped to the person that the killer became (pp. 107).

The term sensationalism did not always hold such a negative connotation, but today it is associated with depravity that violates the notions of social decency. Especially as being an undeniably powerfully persuasive tool, it plays a role in defining the public's notion of what is moral and acceptable (Grabe et al., 2001; Wiltenburg, 2004).

Concerning this study, sensationalism links not only to the fascination women seem to have for true crime stories, but can also be perceived as a way to induce thrill in oneself through fear. Due to their arousal-seeking characteristics, the concepts of sensationalism and voyeurism are sometimes confused. But associating these concepts, however, is not implausible because, as explored in the following section, voyeurism also plays a significant role in increasing and satisfying the audience's emotional arousal (Bagdasarov et al., 2010).

2.3 Voyeurism

Voyeurism, especially in psychiatric literature, has often been defined as having a sexual connotation, involving a desire to stealthily observe others in the nude or engaging in

sexual behavior (Freund et al., 1988). But multiple academics suggest that voyeurism does not always involve sexuality. Its definition has expanded beyond sexual deviance and conceptualizes it as pleasure derived from getting access to the private details of other people's lives and from getting to see what you otherwise cannot (Baruh, 2010; Calvert, 2000; Lacan & Miller, 1998; Metzl, 2004).

In his research on voyeurism in reality television consumption, Baruh (2010) explains that this type of voyeurism detailed above is known as *trait voyeurism*, which diverges from the known pathological form of voyeurism, and seeks "less risky means through which the desire to take a peek at what should normatively not be accessible can be satisfied" (pp. 204). In relation to this, Boling and Hull (2018), who studied the motivations behind the true crime podcast audience, found that women have stronger voyeuristic tendencies in their motivations for consumption than men, more often stating their interest in 'peeking into the mind of the criminal' and wanting to hear about the secrets, misdeeds and details about other people's lives. This can also be linked to how Murley (2008) describes the evolution of true crime media in the 1940s, where voyeurism became central through depiction of different lifestyles and illegal activities that its audience perceived as unfamiliar and exotic. These arguments proved to be positively represented in the data, as voyeuristic discourses were identified numerous times with participants expressing enjoyment for getting to know about the intimate details of the lives of those involved in the crime, as well as of the crime itself, even if gruesome.

But this is not the only form of voyeurism that has been identified in the consumption of true crime media. Stoneman and Packer (2020) analyzed the genre of retributive justice true crime documentaries, which as a principal product generates harm to those perceived as 'guilty' of having harmed others, especially if they have not faced any repercussions for their misdeeds[8]. They identified this as *vengeful voyeurism*, defined as the pleasure or thrill the audience feels by the prospect of seeing these 'villains' be punished. And as they suggest, this places true crime within the category of 'penal spectatorship' (Brown, 2013), where the audience self-identifies as a force for social justice by participating in the workings of the criminal justice system, though within experiential distance, which allows them to "imagine, produce and engage in the affective work of hatred, mourning, judgment, and vengeance as cultural practice" (Linnemann, 2014, pp. 515). Regarding this, participants' stories also

[8] This may include not only the criminal but also a corrupt official, a dishonest prosecutor, or an indifferent lawyer (Stoneman & Packer, 2020).

displayed characteristics of vengeful voyeurism through seeking pleasure and satisfaction in seeing the criminal punished and justice being achieved.

While not failing to acknowledge how the genre can be destructive and negative, reflecting on whether the true crime genre has a moral center, Murley (2008) suggests that despite true crime long serving as a form of entertainment, what looks like voyeurism may in fact be "the gut-level human desire to comprehend the irrational" and the violence persistent within the human character (pp. 160), and that as with horror films, true crime works as a way of being confronted with mortal terror and fatal violence that may help us maintain a form of social and psychological health.

Pertaining to women's motivation to consume true crime by choice, voyeurism is a term that can helped define part of the participants motivations and distinguish them from those related to fear and perception of risk and sensationalism, the latter being an important element in sparking a moral panic, as seen in the following concept.

2.4 Moral panic

According to Cohen (1972) societies are every now and then subjected to periods of moral panic; a condition where a group of people presumes that the behavior of other members of society possesses a threat to society's values and interests (i.e., folk devils), therefore reacting with increased hostility, volatility, fear, and concern (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). Cohen (1972) coined the term to refer to the reactions the media and the public had to disturbances by the youth. Therefore, in a moral panic "the reactions of the media, law enforcement, politicians, action groups, and the general public are out of proportion to the real and present danger a given threat poses to the society"; so it is no surprise that sensationalism is greatly emphasized when a moral panic occurs, as it comes with the disproportionality (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994, pp. 156). And it is this exaggeration of threat that has been a focus for academics researching moral panic (Ungar, 2001).

While mass media is noted for promoting moral panic and using it extensively as seemingly a guaranteed way to keep the public emotionally invested in a story, McRobbie and Thornton (1995) argue it is also thanks to it that moral panics have become harder to create, as mass media can also be used to campaign against the "institutionalized agenda" (pp. 567). They illustrate this with the case of former British politician John Major, who attempted to spark a moral panic around the issue of single mothers through his 'Back to

Basics' campaign. This instead resulted in the Labour Party shifting the focus to an "investigation into the personal morality and sexual practices" of the Conservative Party (pp. 567). Nonetheless, this has been contradicted by Thompson (2005) who argues "almost anything can spark off a panic", especially as contemporary panics hook more people than earlier panics did, and that it is this rapid and "all-pervasive quality of the panics that distinguishes the present era" (pp. 1-2). He exemplifies this stating that just one incident of 'home alone' children could now create a panic about child abuse, questioning the institution of the family, or women's maternal instincts.

In terms of this study, moral panic discourses were identified multiple times within the participants' narratives, with Dutch participants for instance, having less strong moral panic responses to stories in true crime media given their lowered perceptions for risk due to reduced exposure to local crime stories.

As discussed earlier, true crime content is often presented in a sensationalized, biased, and inaccurate manner, leading to the disproportionate perception that women are more likely to suffer from violent crimes and victimization. Likewise, this continuous consumption of inaccurate information leads women to a heightened fear of crime, which as a result leads them to a state of moral panic, believing that their safety consistently diminishes.

2.5 Women's risk-fear paradox

Fear is not always proportional to a person's likelihood of victimization. This has been studied over the years, and results show that despite men having much higher chances of victimization[9], women consistently report levels of fear of crime three times higher (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2013; Stanko, 1992). This makes gender the most important predictor of fear, even beyond social aspects like socio-economic position or age (Ferraro, 1996). In the

[9] While this is true, it is important to note that women suffer higher rates of interpersonal victimization such as sexual assault, intimate partner violence, stalking, etc. (Fisher et al, 2000; McCreedy & Dennis, 1996; Nobles et al, 2009). Intimate partner violence one of the most widespread problems globally (Kahya, 2021); 30% of women worldwide have suffered from physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner (World Health Organization, 2013). Among Latin American women, 53% report at least one instance of interpersonal victimization; 66% experienced it more than once, showing revictimization patterns (Cuevas et al, 2012). In the Netherlands, while there is a lack of studies on victimization patterns focusing on the Dutch context, 80% of homicides took place at the home of the victim and/or the perpetrator (Schönberger, 2018; Aarten & Boelema, 2019).

results, for instance, the relevance of true crime media in the participant's lives was associated with perceiving higher vulnerability to crime. And while this applies to all types of crime, making women's high fear of crime, despite a low likelihood of victimization, into something known as the *risk-fear paradox*, which research has aimed to explain over time.

Explanations have been linked to the relationship between fear of crime and sexual assault. Rape is seen by women as a capital fear and a major offense (Ferraro, 1996), making sexual assault something that greatly impacts their level of fear. Linked to this is what Warr (1984) describes as *perceptually contemporaneous offense*: the fear that one offense, might lead to other forms of victimization. For instance, that a home-invasion would lead to rape. In other words, what the hypothesis suggests is that women's fear of sexual assault escalates their fear regarding other crimes, which results in a hightened fear for all types of crime (Ferraro, 1996; May et al., 2009; Warr, 1981). But it is relevant to mention that one of the reasons why women are less likely to suffer from violent crimes is due to their employment of *avoidance behavior*, which typically involves the avoidance of certain locations at night, restriction or avoidance of potentially dangerous events or activities to reduce exposure to risk of victimization (May et al, 2009; Skogan and Maxfield, 1980). Defensive behavior, on the other hand, involves getting a guard dog, owning a gun or learning self-defense (May et al, 2009). Studies have shown for instance, that women who lack confidence in their physical ability to effectively defend themselves are more fearful than women who perceive themselves as able to resist an attack (Hale, 1996; May et al, 2009; Riger et al., 1978). The latter were also less likely to adopt avoidant behaviors (Riger et al., 1978). Despite presenting vastly different perceptions of their level of risk, participants in both countries displayed numerous avoidant behaviors, including, amongst other things, avoiding potentially dangerous situations, and not trusting people, even at the expense of politeness.

Other explanations to this paradox suggest that the reason women are more fearful of crime may be linked to differences in gender socialization, where for women passivity and dependency are encouraged, while taking risks is discouraged (Garofalo, 1979; Sacco, 1990, pp. 495). Burt and Estep (1981; as cited in Sacco, 1990) who studied how gender socialization influences perceptions of vulnerability, found that while patterns between genders were similar during childhood, they differed post childhood with women displaying higher levels of fear and warning. This occurs as in general women grow up being "warned about more situations than men or than they were in childhood" (pp. 494). Sacco (1990) further suggests that the relationship between fear and victimization is also enhanced by gender inequality which reflects in a greater feeling of powerlessness in women.

In terms of true crime consumption, a study by McDonald et al. (2021) found that women reporting a higher fear of rape were more likely to report a greater consumption of true crime media, and more likely to do so for the chance of learning how to avoid or escape an assault. Though, as discussed earlier, they also consider a bi-directional relationship in which the consumption of true crime increases women's fear. Their heightened levels of fear of victimization may as well be influenced by the inaccurate recurrence with which women see themselves represented as victims in true crime media, and seeking to learn tools that prevent victimization could be identified as an alternative form of avoidance behavior resulting from the heightened fear of crime to which the risk-fear paradox refers.

3. Methodology

A series of four focus group interviews (N= 24) were conducted with 11 women from Mexico and 13 women from the Netherlands between the dates of April 9th and May 29th, 2022. Their average age was 28 years old. The focus groups had a duration of approximately one hour to an hour and a half and were held online, through Zoom, and moderated by me.

This chapter accounts for the research design and begins by repeating the research question, alongside the research aim and the expectations that developed throughout the process of the thesis. This will be followed by discussing the reasoning behind the choices in methodology, such as the use of qualitative research, focus group interviews, and narrative analysis. It subsequently addresses the rationale behind the sampling criteria, the sampling strategy used, the challenges encountered, and the considerations taken to keep the study ethical. This is followed by the operationalization of the key concepts and concludes with the steps taken in the data analysis process.

3.1 Research question, aim and expectations

The thesis in question is concerned with exploring how women from high-crime areas in Mexico and low-crime areas in the Netherlands make sense of their consumption of true crime media, as well as how their lived experiences influence their narratives.

The theories discussed in the theoretical framework, which related to the topic of women's consumption of true crime media, resulted in the expectation that participants from both countries will display similar overarching motivations for their consumption of true crime media, such as voyeurism, entertainment, and interest in learning skills for surviving or avoiding a violent crime. But what is expected to be different in how they make sense of the content, is the degree to which true crime stories influence their perceptions of risk and vulnerability, given the fundamentally different levels of risk to which Dutch and Mexican women are exposed, respectively.

So by exploring the data obtained from the study, I aimed to illustrate the intersection of how the lived experiences of women shape the narratives and meaning making of their consumption.

3.2 Research design and methods

3.2.1 Qualitative research & focus group interviews

This research involved exploring how women in Mexico and the Netherlands make sense of their consumption of true crime media, therefore a qualitative approach was deemed ideal given its approach of reality as socially constructed, and its ability to explain factors relating to people's individual experiences, perceptions, motivations, and behaviors (Rich & Ginsburg, 1999), which aligns with the study's purpose of exploring women's individual experiences with true crime media, from their perspective. It was also ideal given the research's aim for obtaining information in regards to the narratives and discourses found in their social context (Rich & Ginsburg, 1999), which was relevant as the study also explores the participant's engagement in relation to the context of each country.

Focus group interviews were selected over conducting individual interviews given that the information sought to answer the research question requires the subject's reflexivity and introspection on their motivations behind their consumption of true crime. Individual interviews may not have achieved this, as without an active dialog with other avid consumers of the genre it would be difficult to encourage the exchange of viewpoints that may help uncover the participants' values and beliefs (Bloor et al., 2001).

Focus group interviews are frequently used to gain an in-depth understanding of social issues, as well as the personal experiences, perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs of a group through a moderated interaction (Nyumba et al, 2018), which is of relevance to the study as it aims to garner a better understanding of the experiences, engagement, and discourses of Dutch and Mexican women's true crime media consumption.

While conducting the focus group interviews physically would have been ideal, given the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic at the time they took place and the vast geographical distance between Mexico and the Netherlands, they were held virtually through Zoom. Conducting the focus group interviews digitally can have some disadvantages such as interviewees feeling nervous in front of the camera, or lacking the technical skills to join the interview, as well as concerns of lack of nonverbal signals, and lack of the spontaneity of face-to-face interaction, as well as concessions such as choppy purviews due to connectivity issues, and being unable to plan where an interviewee would be when joining the focus group interview (Cole, 2017; Oliffe et al., 2021; Hay-Gibson, 2010). This last concession came into play with one participant joining while traveling on the train, which at times led to connectivity and sound issues, and others joining from spaces with outside distractions, such

as their office or shared spaces in their homes. Technical skills, on the other hand, were not a concern, as due to the pandemic, most participants had experience taking part in Zoom video calls and were therefore comfortable with the technology.

Nonetheless, online focus group interviews also have advantages, such as the participants being able to choose to join from locations where they felt comfortable, such as their homes, time and cost effectiveness for both the participants and I, as traveling would not be needed. This also helped reduce scheduling conflicts, as well as allowed me to extend the reach of the recruitment and obtain a sample with women from different regions of Mexico and the Netherlands (see Appendix A), instead of primarily from those residing nearby the physical location of the focus group interview (Joshi et al., 2020; Oliffe et al., 2021). This was especially beneficial in Mexico, which has an extensive territory.

Additionally, conducting the focus group interviews digitally still allowed me to obtain the data contemplated to answer the research question, given that the reasoning behind employing focus groups was not due to the interest in social cues of interaction between subjects, but in promoting an exchange of dialog that allows for reflexivity and introspection on their consumption of true crime content, as well as to observe how people in the group reach consensus with each other, how opinions are formed and meaning is created. For the focus group interviews, a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix B) was developed using the key concepts determined through the theoretical framework to identify relevant themes and their respective questions to be discussed. The interview guide, as well as the focus group interview topics, will be further discussed later in this chapter. Each of the focus group interviews took place either on a Saturday or a Sunday, and had a duration of 1 hour to 1 hour 30 minutes. They were audio-visually recorded, and later transcribed verbatim through the combination of voice-to-text software (Pinpoint and Amberscript), and manually typed transcription, reviewing the audio file several times alongside the written transcript.

3.2.2 Narrative analysis

Narrative analysis was selected as the method of analysis as it allows for the multi-dimensional interpretation of texts that "have in common a storied form", and because it can analyze group identity while preserving the story of individuals, providing as a result, a "fuller" picture (Frost, 2009; Riessman, 2008, p.11). This approach was deemed appropriate for this study as I was interested in analyzing the individual and group narratives of Mexican and Dutch women in relation to their consumption of true crime content. This was in order to

explore how they make sense of their consumption and how it relates to their life experiences, but also to probe into how they create a group narrative and reach a consensus.

The data obtained through the focus group interviews was thus analyzed following a narrative thematic analysis, which Reissman (2008) describes as one of four different methods for conducting narrative analysis. By thematically analyzing narrative content, the data was interpreted considering the themes developed in the interview guide, which was influenced by prior theory. This allowed me to reduce focus on how the data was delivered and from the participant's structures of speech, viewing language as a resource rather than a topic of inquiry. So, in the case of this thesis, the thematic narrative analysis focused on "what" was said by the participants, rather than "how" or "to whom" and "for what purpose" it was said (Reissman, 2008).

I, therefore, employed an inductive approach, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps for conducting a thematic analysis in my coding process. This involves first getting acquainted with the data, a process which began for me from the moderation of the focus group interviews and the transcription process, providing me with early insights into the emerging patterns. During this process, it was also important that I kept memos of potentially relevant ideas that later proved to be useful in the coding process, which I will discuss in more detail later in the data analysis segment of this chapter.

In the context of this study, I drew from the lens of feminist standpoint to explore the participants' stories regarding their engagement with the true crime genre. As well to probe into their messages about fear-risk perceptions, moral panic, voyeuristic, and sensationalistic discourses, whose characteristics were identified through the operationalization of the key concepts. Each part of the participant's narratives was considered in relation to their broader sociocultural context, aiming to honor each participant's individual story, but also exploring how these constituted a wider narrative.

3.3 Sampling & data collection

3.3.1 Sampling strategy and criteria

Participants for the focus group interviews were recruited and selected through purposive criterion sampling that followed the predetermined criteria with specific inclusion and exclusion of characteristics, as shown below in Table 1, which was identified as relevant to the study through the theoretical framework and the research question. This method was deemed ideal as it would help ensure that both samples of Mexican and Dutch groups were

relatively homogeneous, as well as ensured the recruitment of people met the who met the criteria of interests, views and knowledge that fit the aims and objectives of the study (Mason, 2012; Patton, 2002).

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT PROFILE	
Characteristic	**Reason**
Gender: female	The study centers on the paradox of women's true crime consumption.
Age: between 25 to 35 years old	Data from *Sword and Scale* shows 70% of its fans' ages range from 25-45 years old (Robert, 2016). This holds some similarity to results from Boling and Hull's (2018) research in which 62% of respondents were shown to belong to the 18-34 years old age category. A deviation of +/– one year was allowed due to challenges in recruitment.
Identifies as a true crime fan	The purpose of this is to avoid casual listeners and identify people who consistently engage with the content.
Has not been a victim of a violent crime	Having been severely victimized could imply a drastic difference in their experience with true crime, as described by Browder (2006), and as found by Boling (2020) in her research on domestic violence survivors' engagement with true crime podcasts.
Mexican residing in Mexico or Dutch residing in the Netherland	It is important to clearly demarcate the groups as the research theorizes discourse differences in the contrasting populations and lived experiences between women in each country. The experiences of a Mexican woman living in the Netherlands, for instance, would be different from one living in Mexico, even if both were born in the same country.
Ideally, participants are not familiar with each other	To avoid people influencing each other, or having the conversation happen only between a few persons. Also to avoid the presence of people they know in real life affecting their responses.

Table 1. Focus group subject profile

Two digital flyers, one in Spanish and one in English (see Appendix C), seeking subjects for the study were shared in social media pages and groups related to true crime, relevant to each country. The general topic of the focus group interview was included in the announcement, but the specific goals of the study were not described. A shortened URL and a QR code redirecting to a Google form were included as well, requesting those interested in participating to share some personal information. The data obtained was subsequently used to filter and exclude those who did not fit the predetermined criteria (as shown earlier in Table 1) and to obtain the ideal interviewees.

The recruitment of Mexican participants was facilitated mainly through the Facebook group for female listeners of the Mexico-based podcast *'Leyendas legendarias'* (*'Fans Legendarias'*), and further aided through acquaintances who shared the flyer in their social

media accounts. Recruiting Dutch participants proved to be more challenging given my lack of a broader Dutch social network, but was achieved by reaching out to multiple Netherlands-based true crime podcasts, of which *'Moordzaken'*, *'De Volksjury'* (*'De volksjury discussiegroep'*), and *'Duister'* (*'De Duister club'),* allowed me to share the flyer in their Facebook fan groups, and/or shared it in their Instagram stories.

The recruitment process resulted in the registration of 31 Dutch and 58 Mexican participants. From whom, those who did not fit the predetermined profile, were eliminated from the study's pool of candidates. For instance, due to not fitting within the proposed age range, identifying only as a casual listener instead of as a fan of the genre, or due to registering for the study despite not living or having lived in Mexico or the Netherlands. This narrowed the pool of candidates down to 18 Dutch and 31 Mexican participants.

The aim was to conduct four to six focus group interviews, each of five to eight female true crime consumers. And while five focus group interviews were achieved, two Dutch and three Mexican, the last Mexican focus group interview was not included in the data and analysis as it did not reach the minimum number of attendees required due to previously confirmed participants not showing up without prior notification. Ultimately, as mentioned earlier, across four focus group interviews, a total of 24 participants, 11 Mexican and 13 Dutch, between the ages of 24 to 36 years old took part in this study. Focus group interviews with Mexican participants were conducted in Spanish, while those with Dutch participants were conducted in English.

An unexpected challenge encountered in the sampling process was that in the case of the Dutch participants, recruitment was also influenced by people's own perception of their cultural background. For instance, multiple women interested in participating in the study were not born in the Netherlands but moved there from a young age, and while they are not technically Dutch, they identified as such and/or recognized the Netherlands as their home country. From this pool of candidates, due to challenges gathering more Dutch participants, I opted to keep those who had arrived in the Netherlands up until 4 years of age.

Another challenging factor in this process was setting the dates for the focus groups and getting the minimum number of participants required per group to join. In multiple instances the focus group interviews had to be rescheduled due to people informing they would be unable to join just a few hours before the appointment or simply not showing up. In the case of the former scenario, knowing ahead of time that the focus group interview would not reach the minimum number of participants allowed me to give notice to those attending and reschedule without taking up more of their time. For the latter scenario, only in the

instance of the excluded Mexican focus group interview did I go through the interview despite having an insufficient number of participants. This was due to the fact that in the two previous Mexican interviews some participants joined 10 to 15 minutes after the scheduled time, and therefore I hoped it would be the case as well.

This extended the recruitment and interview process from what was expected to be one month to almost four and a half months. Fortunately, in multiple cases participants that had previously canceled were willing to join a different group. But similarly, especially in cases where they did not communicate they would be absent, participants stopped engaging, which reduced the pool of participants. This could be explained by Rupert et al.'s (2017) finding that virtual focus groups have a higher number of last minute cancellations and no-shows than in person focus groups, potentially as the lack of previous visual interaction may decrease the participant's sense of accountability. The lack of accountability may have also been aided by participants lacking further motivation to join the focus group interview beyond personal curiosity as there was no financial incentive.

3.3.2 Ethical considerations

To ensure that the research remained ethical, each participant was given an informed consent form that thoroughly informed them about the objectives of the research (see Appendix D). It further noted that their participation was entirely voluntary and they could choose to withdraw from the study at any time. On the day of the focus group interview, the contents of the informed consent form were reiterated to them during the introduction and before the discussion. Subsequently, they were asked to provide verbal consent.

Additionally, after the interviews took place, to protect the participant's identity and personal information, their data was fully anonymized by assigning each of them a pseudonym in all texts pertaining to the study. They were provided with the option of selecting their own pseudonym during registration but no participant selected one, therefore their pseudonyms were chosen through a list of the most common names in the Netherlands and in Mexico, found in 'Names and genealogy resources' website Forebears[10]. Participants' ages, occupation, and location can be found below, in Appendix E.

While no potential risks were identified prior to conducting the focus group interviews, considering potential emotional distress would have been appropriate, as a

[10] https://forebears.io/

Mexican participant who had recently been in indirect proximity to a violent crime was afflicted when discussing their perceptions of risk.

3.3.3 Researcher positionality

As a Mexican woman who has spent the majority of her life in Mexico and has witnessed its high levels of crime, it is important to acknowledge that I have a deeper understanding of the Mexican social context and lack such a deep understanding of the Dutch context despite living in the Netherlands for almost three years. As a result, I am both an insider and an outsider in the context of this research, and I must acknowledge the shortcomings involved, such as that I may be able to produce a thicker description for one group at the risk of appearing biased in my analysis. However, as someone of the participants' age group and gender, as well as an avid consumer of true crime content, my positionality can benefit this research given that I resonate with many of the experiences they describe.

3.4 Operationalization

The key concepts of this study, as displayed below, have been defined through the theoretical framework and literature, which were subsequently used to create the interview guide (see Appendix B). In this section, I will further explain how these indicators were used in the interview guide to observe the key concepts in the focus group interviews for the analysis. All four focus group interviews used the same interview guide, which was divided into two segments: one seeking to uncover potential discourses of voyeurism and sensationalism, and another focused on their perceptions of risk in relation to the genre, as well as possible discourses of moral panic.

The indicators for *sensationalism*, for instance, were operationalized as participants expressing attraction to the true crime genre in relation to emotional stimulation in the form of thrill. As well as other forms of emotionally charged stimulation such as anger or sadness. This concept also includes their interest in hearing about the morbid details of a story, seeking gruesome visuals, or crime cases of unusual and/or extreme circumstances. This was reflected in the interview guide by inquiring about the participant’s first encounter with the true crime genre and the reasons for their interest in it. They were also asked to share their favorite true crime story and explain why that story was their favorite, as well as which

format they preferred consuming the content on, hoping to find answers that might involve particular interest in visuals of the crime scene.

Voyeurism was considered to potentially also arise in the participant's responses to the aforementioned questions. Nonetheless, more questions were included, such as the relevance of the inclusion of the most gruesome elements of the story, and which aspects of the story can not be missing from the retelling of the case. These questions related to voyeurism because this concept was operationalised as pertaining to the participant's interest in getting access to details they would not know otherwise. Such as information that allows them to 'dive into the mind of the killer', or learn about private information about the victim and/or perpetrator, such as their lifestyle, upbringing, or the details of their misdeeds. Related to vengeful voyeurism, this was operationalized as participants expressing pleasure from seeing the perpetrator punished, as well as having a keen interest in following along the narration of the justice process, hoping to see justice be done.

The interview guide subsequently inquired about the participant's emotional state when engaging with true crime content, which pertained to the operationalization of *moral panic.* This concept was defined as participants showing concern for the state of social order and society, placing focus on 'folk devils'. This also includes characterizing criminals in true crime stories as 'monsters', as well as perceiving themselves to be more at risk after consuming true crime content.

In the case of participants' *risk-fear perception*, its operationalization was reflected in questions involving whether participants related true crime stories to real-life scenarios, whether they identified with victims in these stories, and if consuming true crime cases made them consider their likelihood of victimization. Additionally, given that Mexican and Dutch participants reside in countries of such differing levels of crime, their relationship to local crime stories was inquired to observe whether indeed the degree to which participants identify with the characteristics of a crime relates to their increase in fear (Fishman, 1978; Willem Winkel & Vrij, 1990). Therefore its indicator relates to participants expressing feeling at risk of victimization and/or identifying with the victims of true crime stories. After consuming a new story, they may be left feeling concerned, afraid for their safety, or of being unable to protect themselves. They may also show interest in learning survival tools from true crime content and display avoidant behaviors such as avoiding certain locations or activities to lower their risk of victimization.

Finally, *feminist standpoint*, which is taken as a lens to analyze the data, instead of as a concept, will be sought to be identified within the participant's discourses emerging from

the interview questions, primarily focusing on their social context and on identifying social and gender related issues emerging in their narratives concerning their consumption of true crime.

Overall, the interview guide covered the key concepts established within the theoretical framework, allowing for the focus group interviews to provide insight into Dutch and Mexican women's engagement with true crime stories.

3.5 Data analysis

To gain an in-depth understanding of the participant's narratives surrounding their consumption of true crime media, the coding was conducted using the program ATLAS.ti and through a coding procedure developed using open, axial, and selective coding. Also, as stated earlier, the analysis followed a narrative thematic analysis and made use of the theoretical concepts to guide it.

This process therefore began by using open coding to generate primarily descriptive codes (e.g.: "Shocking", "Psychology") of data extracts deemed relevant, following an intuitive approach with reduced input from my interpretations. After conducting a first round of coding in all four interview transcripts, this resulted in the creation of 526 codes that were subsequently reviewed, collapsing them into broader codes, which reduced them to 156 codes. This was followed by reading through each transcript one more time to ensure nothing was left out and then by categorizing the open codes into axial codes, now with some degree of interpretation. This resulted in 93 codes, which were then reviewed one more time, this time employing a higher degree of interpretation, in order to be allocated in broader selective codes. This resulted in 73 codes, of which 39 were excluded from the analysis due to not fitting an overarching narrative. The rest of the codes proceeded to be allocated under 7 overarching themes and 33 sub-themes connected to the theoretical framework and the research question, as seen below in Table 3. This was achieved by identifying data extracts corresponding to overarching narratives pertaining the key concept indicators as discussed above.

OVERVIEW OF THEMATIC CATEGORIES

	Theme	**Sub theme**	**Definition**
1	*Relevant to women's lives*	Relatable to women	Participants view true crime stories as relevant and relatable to their lives given their vulnerability to crime due to their gender, therefore needing more awareness.

		Unlikely to happen	Despite perceived vulnerability, crimes in these stories are seen as the exception, not the rule.
		Not too far from reality	The happenings in true crime stories are seen as realistic and likely to occur to them.
		Alert but not afraid	While being alert of potential dangers thanks to true crime stories, it is important to not be afraid and be able to live your life.
2	*Cautionary tales*	Cautionary tales & safety awareness	True crime content serves as cautionary tales that provide them with safety awareness and resources to avoid becoming a victim.
		Precautions for protection	Actions learned from true crime stories to protect themselves and their loved ones, many of which can be categorized as avoidance behaviors.
		Mistrust of people	True crime increases their mistrust of people even at the cost of politeness; safety is more important.
		Unnoticed by society	This increased mistrust is reaffirmed through stories of criminals getting away with horrible crimes due to seeming normal, socially adept people.
		My life is good	True crime stories serving as a reminder that their life is good and normal.
3	*Crime has a context*	Into the mind of the killer	Interest and fascination for understanding the psychology of the killer. Why they do what they do and how they differ from other people.
		The importance of backstory	Information about the perpetrator's upbringing and interpersonal relationships is seen as helpful to understand how a criminal is made, what triggers them and pushes them to kill.
		How can someone do this?	Disbelief, fascination and shock about these cruel individuals that draws them to true crime.
		De-glorifying criminals	Details about their backstory and psychology allows them to profile a criminal, taking away their power.
4	*Different approaches to local true crime*	Consuming local cases	Participants seek and casually consume local crime stories, feeling drawn to them due to their proximity.
		Not often in the media	Despite their interest most local crimes are not frequently reported in the media. The few sources available lead to them wondering 'what happens here that we do not know of?'.
		What else is happening that we don't know about?	A sense of shock and fear emerges after finally learning about some of these local crime cases.
		Evading local crime stories	Local crime cases are avoided as they generate emotional distress and bring concern.
		Unavoidable	Participants express being unable to escape local crime in the media due to how prolific the media coverage of violent crimes is.
		Too close, too recent & personal	The avoidance for local crime stories also relates to the cases being too close to home, which overwhelms them.

		Feeling vulnerable & scared	The proximity of the cases lead them to feel vulnerable and scared, especially due to their frequent lack of resolution.
		Sensationalistic & frustrating	These cases are a source of frustration due to their sensationalistic content, which often re-victimizes the victims.
5	*Dissociation & the protective mental barrier*	Fictionalizing true crime stories	Participants 'fictionalize' and dissociate true crime stories from real life to avoid being emotionally overwhelmed. This is aided through things such as humor, the antiquity of the cases, etc.
		Broken mental barrier	Happens as a result encountering extremely disturbing stories, overconsumption, or real life situations involving proximity to violence.
		Local cases can not be fictionalized	Directly related to the previous code, it is not easy to dissociate from local crime stories and therefore they can not be fictionalized in their consumption.
		Limiting consumption	Participants express limiting consumption of true crime content as a tool to both protect themselves emotionally and reconstruct the protective mental barrier.
6	*To know or not to know the details of a crime*	Curiosity to know	Participants express curiosity to know all the details of a case, even the gruesome ones.
		Emotional engagement	Details provide a stronger emotional engagement with the case and allow participants to engage with violent feelings.
		Useful & important	Details can be helpful to digest a case and differentiate it from other crimes.
		Required relevance & purpose	Details require purpose, such as helping the participant's understand the story better, otherwise they are sensationalistic tools.
		Can go too far	Participants recognize that some of the most gruesome details are disrespectful and unnecessary; they go too far.
7	*Justice & respect for victims*	Humanizing & respecting victims	Participants emphasize the importance for true crime stories to place focus on the victims, treating them as humans and protecting their integrity.
		Empathy for victims & their family	True crime stories foster empathy in the participants, prompting them to picture themselves in the victim's or their victim's family's place.
		To see justice served	They hope to see justice being served and seeing the perpetrator punished, otherwise they feel frustrated and angry at the justice system.

Table 3. Themes and subthemes with definitions

4. Results and analysis

To better understand how women from high-crime areas in Mexico and low-crime areas in the Netherlands make sense of their consumption of true crime media and engage with the content, the participant's stories were positioned in conversation with broader narratives about gender, perceptions of safety, and risk, societal issues, as well as discourses of voyeurism, sensationalism, and moral panic.

These narratives, which emerged in relation to the previously discussed theoretical concepts and literature, were selected due to their recurrence and relevance to both the theory and the research question. By focusing on the "what" in the participant's experiences, I was able to connect and illustrate their at times conflicting relationship with the true crime genre to their sociocultural context.

4.1 Relevant to women's lives

Despite the distinct levels of crime between Mexico and the Netherlands, a narrative that was widely shared in all the focus group interviews was that of true crime being *relevant and relatable to women* due to perceiving that "statistically" these crimes "happen mainly to women", and therefore could happen to them, so they "need[ed] to be more aware". Of course, as discussed earlier in this thesis, men in fact have much higher chances of victimization (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2013; Stanko, 1992), but true crime media also overwhelmingly portrays victims as female (Yardley et al., 2018), which potentially influences their perceptions of how likely they are to suffer from a violent crime. Nonetheless, this perception of higher risk, as argued by Burt and Estep (1981; as cited in Sacco, 1990) may also relate to gender socialization, as women grow up being warned about potential dangers more than men. As Laura from the Netherlands puts it: "It's still like, in the sense that you know that these crimes do happen and they do happen, of course, mainly to women that, you know, you do feel uneasy, say, at night walking down the street or anything like this."

So they in fact deem it possible that because of their age and gender, being victimized is something that can happen to them. Nonetheless, this was stated almost two times more often by Mexican participants, introducing one of the primary differences in the narrative of true crime's relevance in their life and their perceptions of safety, which was emphasized by the fact that the Mexican participants also directly link the genre's relevance in their life to the crisis of gender violence in their country. As Cecilia put it: "I feel that, whether I like it or

not, deep down, well, living in Mexico, in such an unsafe place, (...) I want to know how a person who does those things thinks. Because being a woman, at any moment I am exposed to being a victim, and [it is about] knowing what to do."

This difference in their discourse, as women living in a high crime area, presents their perceived risks as more palpable due to their closer proximity to violent local crimes. This, combined with their frequent exposure to media reports of murders and rapes, makes it easier for them to identify with the characteristics of true crime stories and to see them as more realistic, which in turn increases their perceptions of risk (Willem Winkel & Vrij, 1990).

In direct relation to this, another clear distinction that can be made between both groups is that, despite both perceiving vulnerability to violence due to their gender, they also present contrasting perceptions of how likely they think a crime akin to those in true crime stories is to happen to them. Dutch participants describe these crimes as "the exception, not the rule" and therefore as *unlikely to happen*, feeling like "[they] won't be a victim" and stating they "[are not] afraid to be a victim". As Eline describes it, true crime stories show things that "could happen to [her]", but that "doesn't make [her] feel more afraid". For them, crimes like these are a "worst case scenario sort of thing". This is influenced by the fact that some cases are just too extreme to identify with or occur in situations and/or to people they do not share similarities with beyond their gender or characteristics such as being a college student and therefore cannot identify with. This relates to Willem Winkel & Vrij's (1990) findings that the degree to which fear increases after consuming a crime story also relates to the degree to which the consumer identifies with the described victim and locale. Also, perhaps, as I will discuss in one of the subsequent themes, the limited and understated media coverage of local crime cases prevents them from perceiving the Netherlands and their everyday spaces as zones of risk and concern. In other words, it reduces their chances of having a strong moral panic reaction as a result from consuming true crime content (Cohen, 1972).

For Mexican participants, on the other hand, the crimes chronicled in true crime media seem "*not too far from reality*" due to "[their] current context", living in a country "where girls disappear every day" and are later "found dead in a vacant lot". Unlike a worst-case scenario, as Alma expresses, "[she] knows that at some point [she] could be a victim of something, or someone [she] know[s] could be a victim". And while they agree that at times they do not share many qualities with the cases and victims of true crime stories, they can't help but identify with being reduced to "a number", to just another murder victim, as it so often occurs to femicide victims in Mexico. This relates to Sacco's (1990) suggestion that

gender inequality reflects in women as powerlessness, enhancing their fear. Additionally, as discussed earlier, the local media's coverage of local crime tends to be grim and sensationalistic, further emphasizing the persistent violence in the country and heightening their fear and perceptions of victimization (Fishman, 1978; Willem Winkel & Vrij, 1990), making true crime both more relatable and relevant in their lives.

But while their discourses were opposing, something that did seem to be of general consensus amongst Dutch and Mexican participants was that while true crime stories are relevant to women due to their vulnerability to crime, they conclude that it is important to be *alert but without living in fear*. As Erika from Mexico said: "I think you have to see, learn [how] to spot suspicious behaviors and learn how to detect them. And to know that yes, threats are going to be there, but we have to know how to react to those threats, right? So that we do not live in fear, and so that we can go out and do the things we have to do. Because at the end of the day they have to be done, don't they?".

For them, it is important to "have that instinct" and to not "let [their] guard down too much", but without "liv[ing] in constant fear" because "that would not be good for [their] mental health". The relevance of true crime media in their lives, and their purpose of helping them stay alert is akin Vicary and Fraley (2010), and Browder's (2006) argument that women's interest in true crime media is associated with learning useful cues for survival.

This topic relates to the following theme, where we will discuss the role that true crime media takes as a source of cautionary tales that help the participants keep alert.

4.2 Cautionary tales

As noted by previous research, women's attraction to true crime media has been linked to the purpose of learning how to prevent victimization and learn tools of survival (Browder, 2006; McDonald et al., 2021; Vicary & Fraley, 2010), and therefore it was of no surprise that the notion of true crimes stories as *cautionary tales that provide them with safety awareness* was highly demarcated in all the focus group interviews. Their narratives describe being drawn to true crime because "no one else tells you about [these stories]" otherwise despite them being resources that raise your awareness and provide you with "tips" on how to increase your safety to avoid victimization. Or in the worst-case scenario, to survive a violent crime through lessons such as "don't get taken from point A to point B" in the case of getting kidnapped. Participants also highlighted how these tales teach you to identify potential criminals by showing you "what people are capable of", and to identify 'red flags' in their

behavior. Flor from Mexico, for instance, as a child was caught reading about Ted Bundy in a magazine, and was surprised by her mother's reaction:

> Instead of scolding us or telling us that it was wrong, because it was reading for adults, she said, "It is important for you to know this kind of stuff and to know what can happen when you interact with strangers." (...) That it was an approach, like, of caution. Of knowing that it was something that I needed to know to be on the lookout all the time.

Amongst these learned *precautions for protection*, not just for themselves but also their loved ones, both groups of participants practice trying to "be aware of [their] surroundings", trusting their instincts more, avoiding locations they perceive as unsafe or that remind them of a specific crime case, especially if alone, avoiding engaging with strangers, amongst other things. Ana from Mexico, for instance, recalls Ted Bundy's crimes "really st[icking] with [her]", even warning her mother: "If someone asks you to help them put something in their car, or to come closer, please, do not come closer". These practices positively constitute avoidant behaviors, as they involve averting situations and locations that might put them at risk of victimization (May et al, 2009; Skogan and Maxfield, 1980). Participants also state carrying defense items such as pepper sprays, which in contrast are defensive behaviors, that studies have found to be more frequent in men than in women (May et al, 2009). An additional interesting precaution described by Vera and Marieke (Netherlands) was having a "preparation kit", which involves an extensive file with all the relevant personal information that might help find them if "[they] go missing"[11]. This, along with turning on their GPS to share their location, neither directly fits avoidant or defensive behavior but can be linked to their fear of crime and moral panic sparked by true crime content, resulting from increased and disproportionate concern for a violent crime (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994).

Something that stood up as well was true crime consumption resulting in a deliberate *mistrust of people*. Participants from both countries expressed wanting "to be able to trust people", but after "having heard so many stories" felt paranoid about the people in their surroundings, therefore preferring to be safe even at the expense of politeness. Quoting

[11] Created by the podcast 'Crime Junkie', it is a tool meant to help people advocate for themselves in the case of going missing. It includes detailed descriptions of the potential victim's physical appearance, dental and medical information, frequently visited locations, details of personal relationships, fingerprints and more (Crime Junkie Podcast, 2020).

something she heard on the ‘Morbid’ podcast, Karin from the Netherlands asserts this:

> “Somebody rang my doorbell and I'm not opening that. I don't care who you are. Maybe I'm rude. I don't care. You need my help? I don't care. Because we've seen this happen and I'm not gonna do that. I’d rather be safe. I’ll call 911 for you, but I don't care. I'm not opening my door”. Like that's actually a good attitude. So, when I'm home and somebody rings my doorbell, I'm not gonna be polite. Like, nope. I'm not expecting visitors. I'm not gonna answer at all ‘cause I'm home alone. So I'm not gonna be polite to anyone if I don't feel safe.

Karin rejects the concept that as a woman you “always need to be polite and not make a fuss”, putting her safety over social expectations while also engaging in avoidant behavior by evading a potentially dangerous situation with a stranger (May et al, 2009; Skogan and Maxfield, 1980). Concerning this, participants from both countries expressed that the fact that criminals like John Wayne Gacy, the Toy-Box Killer, and Ted Bundy, were able to go *unnoticed by society*, hiding their crimes for years and playing the roles of normal, “socially adept”, religious family men, impacted them. It taught them that “it can be anyone” and therefore they “don't know who to trust anymore”, increasing their mistrust of people, especially of strangers.

This mistrust, along with the precautions described above, clearly pertains to the participants’ heightened perceptions of risk and are avoidant behaviors bolstered through the bi-directional relationship between the participants and their consumption of true crime content, which increases their fear, as discussed in the theoretical framework (Vicary & Fraley, 2010). Through this theme, we see the cycle recreated. Dutch and Mexican participants seek these ‘cautionary tales’, perceiving them as relevant due to, as women, feeling more vulnerable to victimization and hoping to learn how to protect themselves. They thus engage in avoidant behaviors, such as evading and distrusting people, which can also be constructed as a moral panic due to being on the lookout for ‘folk devils’ (Cohen, 1972) and having a disproportionate view of their likelihood of victimization because of continuously being exposed to stories of crime (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994).

Lastly, an interesting effect that these cautionary tales had on Dutch participants, was reminding them that *their lives are good* and normal, as true crime stories “puts [things] into perspective” for them, making them “realistic about how good [their] own life is”. These stories make them realize that the Netherlands “is so freaking safe and you always feel safe here”, and that “Dutch people all would feel like they are safe everywhere they go”. In this case, unlike what Willem Winkel and Vrij (1990) and Fishman (1978) suggest, the heavy

exposure of the Dutch participants to true crime stories, while it did increase their fears of vulnerability, it also resulted in an opposing effect, providing them with a higher sense of safety within their own country. But these cautionary tales in the true crime genre are not only used to learn tools of safety but, as I will discuss in the following segment, to also learn how to identify potential criminals through a deeper understanding of their psychosocial context.

4.3 Crime has a context

The most recurrent code in the data involved Dutch and Mexican participants expressing interest in getting *into the mind of the killer* to garner a better understanding of their psychology, and their sociopathy, to obtain insights that explain what triggers and motivates these criminals to commit such heinous crimes and their thought process. The way "someone's mind works so completely differently that they become serial killers" is described by them as both "fascinating" and "educational". Delia from Mexico had the following to say about it:

> (...) that's what interests me about serial killers: What is it that happens in your head? What is it that is the breaking point, the point where there is no return? That it takes you just to the part of the self and says, "I have to satisfy my impulse", right? (...) that's what really gets my attention: the psychological part. And the difference, right? Between one [person] and another. Because there is the psychopath, the power killer, the opportunity killer. A thousand things, right? So it is a wider field. And with more cases now known, we can understand a little more.

Connected with this, to truly understand both the killer and the story, participants also share the consensus that it is very *important to learn about the criminal's backstory*: the context in which they grew up and committed these crimes, the status of their interpersonal relationships, the challenges that they faced in their formative years. In other words, Mexican and Dutch participants, just like Murley (2008) and Martin (1952), recognize the value of exploring and reflecting both on the psychological and social factors that led to the crime. Concerning this, Simone from the Netherlands said:

> I really like a good introduction as well. So really like, dive into the past of the killers and just try and see what went wrong, I guess. And also afterward I really like listening to what psychologists and every[one] thought was wrong with them (...) So like, diving into the mind of the killer, and what triggered them.

These details of their backstory matter to them because a person “did not become like this overnight”, but it is “circumstances in [their] lives lead [them] to end up like this”. These details help the participants “understand what the crime is about to the [perpetrator]” and reflect on the influence that social issues can have in the development of these criminals, again, just as discussed by Martin (1952) and Murley (2008). As Cecilia from Mexico puts it: “A lot of it is related and that's why I feel like (.), like you can't get a good feel of the story or you can't understand them if you don't understand who the killer is.”

So while the narrative demonstrates how a thick-descriptions of the criminal’s psychology and backstory help remind the participants that crime does not happen in a vacuum and allows them to contemplate societal influences through true crime stories (Martin, 1952), the sensationalistic and voyeuristic aspect of engaging with this information can not be overlooked. Diving into the mind of the criminal and learning private details of their lives also functions as entertainment and feeds into their fascination by providing shocking insights into otherwise unknown details of the private lives of those involved in these stories. This, therefore, relates to discourses of voyeurism (Baruh, 2010; Bolling & Hull, 2018; Murley, 2008) but also of sensationalism as these details likewise provide them with emotional thrill and engagement through the supply of details about morbid crimes (Danielson et al.,1958, as cited in Tannenbaum & Lynch, 1960; Kilgo et al., 2016; Slattery and Hakanen, 1994).

However, akin to what Murley (2008) argues, their interest in understanding the criminal’s mind through the details of their life, might also relate to the participants’ human desire to comprehend the irrational and the persistent violence within human nature. This is something they can safely explore through true crime media as it allows them to practice trait voyeurism (Baruh, 2010). This is especially relevant given that these elements are sought after by the interviewees to answer the question of: *how can someone do this?* Surrounding this question there is a mix of fascination and shock, bordering on both sensationalism and moral panic, as it pertains to how these extreme and gruesome crimes come to be, which elicits an emotional response from them (Kilgo et al., 2016; Slattery and Hakanen, 1994). Statements of disbelief are recurrent, describing the crimes as “unreal” and “pure evil”, wondering how “a person like this [can] exist”, be “so cold” and with “zero level of empathy”. As Leticia describes, it was her “curiosity to understand the human mind that led [her] to keep consuming” true crime content, to understand “how someone does that” and “why they do it”.

Getting access to this information, despite effectively taking part in sensationalistic

and voyeuristic discourses, also plays an important role in *de-glorifying* the criminals in true crime stories, which is of importance to the interviewees as they express disliking when criminals are given a "celebrity" status and are portrayed as "cool" in true crime media. They as well point out that the media has "that responsibility of not glorifying them". Akin to the discussion surrounding Netflix's miniseries about Dahmer, Karin from the Netherlands, deems the TV show 'American Horror Story'[12] as guilty of glorifying serial killers: "...they made Richard Ramirez to be this kind of idol type. And it really didn't sit well with me. So, you know, only talking about how gory this person is, and like kind of hyping it up doesn't work. And I like it way better when they kind of like (.) make him more small."

The information obtained through their backstory helps them categorize the perpetrator and reduce them to a profile, which in turn also "takes away [their] power" by reducing them to simply very disturbed humans who at times go uncaught more due to "lack of follow-up [by the police], rather than them really being geniuses". This emphasis on the importance of using the criminal's psychology and background to reduce their power is something that opposes the approach that is often associated with true crime media, where the criminal is often depicted in a sensationalistic and glorified way (Durham et al, 1995; Pace, 2019), by instead representing them merely as unstable persons.

Overall, this theme relates to Roshier's (1973; as cited in Katz, 1987) suggestion that newsworthy crime stories are interesting to their audience as they might be telling about other topics of interest to them. In the context of this theme and the narratives identified in this study, it can be said that true crime is of interest to the participants, not only for the entertainment and thrill it can provide them, but due to the relevant knowledge it can give them to reduce their chances of victimization at the hands of a disturbed individual. Furthermore, this can be connected to Browder's (2006) interpretations that for some women their interest in true crime media stems from the genre's questioning of the foundations of dysfunctional family relationships and society's patriarchal culture in which violence is acknowledged as also being committed in interpersonal settings and by trusted members of society.

Nonetheless, the interest in understanding crime within its psychosocial context gains importance in the participants' discussion of their engagement with local true crime stories,

[12] The series, while fictional, has included real life murderers in many of its 9 seasons. An episode from season 5, for instance, has murderers Richard Ramirez, Aileen Wuornos, John Wayne Gacy, Jeffrey Dahmer, and the Zodiac Killer meet at a dinner party (Bachman, 2020).

as found in the following theme.

4.4 Local true crime stories

Given the differing levels of crime between the participant's countries, when inquired about their interest and engagement with local crime stories, a strong contrast in narrative was identified between both groups.

On one hand, Dutch participants acknowledged both actively *searching for local crime cases and casually consuming them*, finding them "very interesting" and "more personal" due to their proximity, which makes them "want to dive into [them]". Karin, for instance, likes keeping up with cases such as the murders of Anneke van der Stap and Sharleyne Remouchamps, every now and then googling them to see if there are any updates. This is primarily due to being "emotionally invested" in these stories and "want[ing] to see justice be done". Krista and Karin, who at the time of Marc Dutroux's crimes in Belgium, were close in age to his victims, even discuss how their proximity to this crime "had a lot of impact on [them] because [they] were very young", triggering their interest in true crime stories. Here their interest in consuming local true crime stories can be constructed as a sensationalistic discourse as it involves seeking content that produces an emotional reaction in them (Kilgo et al., 2016; Slattery and Hakanen, 1994). Although, as will be discussed in the final theme, despite its link to sensationalism, this emotional engagement also generates in the participants a feeling of empathy for the victims and their loved ones (Graber, 1994; Wiltenburg, 2004)

Unfortunately, despite their interest, these *local crime stories are not often in the media* in the Netherlands. Participants discuss how back then, before his murder, journalist Peter R. de Vries was their source of information, "keeping [local crime cases] very current". In his absence, many of the participants have now taken to listening to the podcast 'Moordzaken', which "focuses only on Dutch crimes". They find this podcast to be well researched and interesting as "you don't hear about [local crime cases] a whole lot". As Vera from the Netherlands said:

> If it wasn't for 'Moordzaken the podcast' I wouldn't know about any of these Dutch cases. Because I feel like (hhh) maybe American or English, British cases are more sensationalized? Or more talked about? I don't know. But I feel like I haven't heard any of the cases that they talk about in Moordzaken the podcast, so I'm really thankful that I found them and that I now know more about what's going on (..). Or has been

going on.

Participants state that in the Netherlands, information on foreign cases is more readily available than on local ones. They attribute this to having a “different culture” and “legislations” in terms of crime coverage in comparison to the United States of America and the United Kingdom, where the news media “hype[s]” and “sensationalizes” these stories, which are often being presented as “breaking news”. “We don't really have that here”, said Eline. In the Netherlands stories about local crimes “are not really in the picture”, and when they are, it is often something they learn about after many years have passed. As noted in the first theme, the scarcity of local crime stories in the Dutch news media is a likely influence as to why Dutch participants perceive crimes akin to those in the true crime genre as unlikely to happen to them. Their low awareness of some local crimes even occurring makes their life and environment appear far safer and different from those depicted in true crime media, lowering their perception of the risk of a violent crime. Presenting the opposite case, this illustrates and supports the theory that frequent exposure to crime stories increases people’s fear and concern about crime (Fishman, 1978; Willem Winkel & Vrij, 1990).

Nonetheless, after encountering a local crime story in the media, such as the documentary ‘De kinderen van Ruinerwold’, Dutch participants are left in shock, wondering “*what else is happening that we don't know about?”*. The participants “feel like there's a lot of stuff happening that's hidden away”, which “makes [them] feel kind of scared” as it leaves them with the question of “what else happens here?”. This reaction is a good example of a state of moral panic (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994), as they react with heightened fear and concern. This also supports the theory that greater exposure to crime stories with which a person can identify increases their fear and risk perceptions (Fishman, 1978; Willem Winkel & Vrij, 1990) as Dutch participants indeed express feelings of vulnerability and fear when consuming content about local crime cases.

Mexican participants, on the other hand, tend to *evade local crime stories* as these produce negative emotions in them, leaving them “very angry”, “overwhelmed”, “sad” and feeling “very sick”. Because contrary to what happens with other true crime cases, a local story is something that participants “already see as a concern”; as something that “is happening right now” and “a family is going through”. Because, unlike the Netherlands, in Mexico, local crime stories are almost *unavoidable*. The news media heavily covers local crime stories, and quickly, which as participants express, leads them to be exposed to “so much information, so much all at once, where even if [they] don't want to look for it, everything appears”. So there is not even a need for them to search for these stories, the local

crime stories find them, which, as they state, “is not cool anymore”. In fact, at the time of the focus group interviews, in Monterrey, the hometown of three of the participants, a large number of young women were disappearing; the number increasing every week and saturating the media with reports, as Leticia said:

> It's not like I'm looking for them. Literally, all my Facebook is that a girl disappeared here in Escobedo, another one in Apodaca, another one in, I don't know, in Colinas de San Rafael. In Guadalupe. Literally, all my Facebook is covered with people, with missing women. So, as you say, it overwhelms you. I mean, in March [voice quivers] I am very overwhelmed[13]. I feel very sad. So I try not to know– (...) Rather not to inquire too much when [local crime stories] are current, because it makes me very angry.

As we will further discuss in this theme, the Mexican participant’s negative reaction to local crime reports illustrates how heavy exposure to crime stories leads to an increased perception of victimization and fear (Fishman, 1978; Willem Winkel & Vrij, 1990). It also exemplifies how the degree to which a person’s fear is heightened relates to how much they can identify with the locale and the victims in a crime story (Willem Winkel & Vrij, 1990). In this case, Mexican participants quite literally reside in the described locale, and as young women, share the profile of femicide victims, making the crimes covered by the local media a source of great concern.

Unlike Dutch participants expressed, Mexican interviewees prefer to not get emotionally invested in local crime stories, primarily because, unlike foreign and/or very old cases, these feel *too close, too recent, and personal*. Especially at times, such as “March 8th”, when they “feel so vulnerable”, it is difficult for them to be consistently faced with so many stories of murders, disappearances, and rapes. “I'm already so overwhelmed in my daily life that I don't want to add to it for the sake of it” stated Cecilia, who also acknowledges that when she was younger she liked watching the local news due to “morbid curiosity” but that the current violence in the country has made an impact in her and prefers now to avoid them. Because the victims they hear about in these local cases are at times at few degrees of separation from them, such as being their “friend’s cousin”, “a family acquaintance”, or a neighbor.

> It is just too close to home. And that proximity to the stories makes them *feel*

[13] March 8th is international women’s day, but also a day of recurrent protests against gender violence in México.

vulnerable and scared. Because as discussed in the first theme, to them these crimes feel realistic and likely "to happen to any of [them]". This sense of vulnerability, while strongly influenced by the crisis of violence in Mexico, is also, as discussed, also prompted by their heavy exposure to the sensationalistic coverage of violent local crimes which, more often than not, do not find justice (Fishman, 1978; Willem Winkel & Vrij, 1990). Alicia from Mexico expressed the following:

> (...) for example, this [documentary], 'The three deaths of Maricela Escobedo'[14]. I ended up crying, inconsolably. Because you say: "This is what awaits me if something like this happens to me", right? And it is a [feeling of] helplessness, and it's a lot of anger (...) the closer they are to me geographically, the more it hurts me.

Local crime stories, particularly those in which the justice system fails the victim, as it did in the case of Rubí Escobedo, or where the media re-victimizes them through its sensationalized coverage, as it did in the case of Ingrid Escamilla, are another reason why Mexican participants tend to reject these stories. For them, following these cases is both *sensationalistic and frustrating* as their hopes for justice rarely ever come true. To them, "the system is broken" and therefore they know "they're not going to give [them] real justice", and these crimes "will not be solved". Instead, they expect the victim to be blamed for becoming a victim. "You kind of want to save yourself from the bad taste", said Cecilia.

Overall, it becomes clear that the high exposure to local crime stories indeed increases the Mexican participant's fear and perceptions of risk (Fishman, 1978; Willem Winkel & Vrij, 1990), particularly due to the fact that these crimes occur frequently to victims and in spaces they not only identify with but are part of, making it for them scarier to a greater degree (Willem Winkel & Vrij, 1990).

4.5 Dissociating from real life stories

Another narrative to emerge as a pattern was the conscious *fictionalizing of true crime stories* when consuming them, to create what some participants described as a protective 'mental barrier'. The narratives surrounding this mental barrier, which is almost exclusively used by Mexican participants, explicitly mention having to "dissociate [the stories] from real life even though [they] know they are real cases". They do so by thinking of them as a distant

[14] "This documentary examines a mother's tireless crusade to jail her daughter's murderer after Mexico's justice system failed to do so". (IMDB, 2020)

and external “story being told to [them]” in order to “not feel like [they are] hearing something real”. This process helps create distance between themselves and the stories in order to avoid emotional distress by creating a conscious emotional detachment. Alma from Mexico, for instance, describes being able to get through an extremely gruesome and descriptive podcast episode about the serial killer Albert Fish by fictionalizing the story: “I don't know–, [it is] as if I wanted to think ‘no, that case didn't happen’, although I know it did happen, I know they were people and everything. So that it doesn't affect me in such a crude way.”

Previous research on true crime engagement has not highlighted this phenomenon of fictionalizing the cases to mitigate the effects of its consumption. However, in the case of Mexican participants, it could be inferred that their use of dissociation to cope with the violent content of true crime stories functions as a defense mechanism. After all, dissociation is a defense mechanism that arises as a way for an individual to cope with stress and reduce cognitive, emotional, and physiological responses by altering their internal and external perceptions of reality and keeping their effects within tolerable limits (Costa, 2020; Vaillant, 2020). In the case of the Mexican participants, who are already regularly exposed to the stress of their country's high levels of crime, therefore engage with this strategy in order to consume and enjoy true crime content without adding additional distress and overwhelm to their daily lives. In contrast, Dutch participants, who live in a country where they feel safe, very rarely alluded to using these strategies, which is reflected in the data. However, unlike the conventional definition of dissociation, which involves changing the awareness of the self through depersonalization and derealization (Costa, 2020), Mexican participants simply dissociate true crime stories from their reality, reducing the impact these may have on their perceptions of risk and fear despite their exposure to them (Fishman, 1978; Willem Winkel & Vrij, 1990). This could explain why local crime stories appear to have a significantly bigger influence on their levels of fear, because, as we will further discuss in this theme, for Mexican participants, local stories can not be fictionalized.

This fictionalization of real happenings is aided by the antiquity and geographical distance of the case and by approaching the story with a conscious emotional detachment; for instance, by viewing it through a “clinical perspective”. Additionally, the narrative style, lack of images, and at times humorous approach of some forms of media such as podcasts, make the content “more digestible”. These elements were described throughout the interviews by both Mexican and Dutch participants, although the latter primarily mention them significantly less and in passing rather than as a conscious tool. What is interesting is that

data showed that participants had a preference for consuming true crime content through podcasts; and while one of the reasons for it was due to their convenience and multi-tasking capabilities (Boling & Hull, 2018), it could also be theorized that the popularity of the format could unconsciously come from how it eases the process of dissociation through the aforementioned elements. This, in turn, as stated earlier, helps diminish their emotional response to the stories and thus their perceptions of risk (Fishman, 1978; Willem Winkel & Vrij, 1990).

Nonetheless, these tools for fictionalization and dissociation are not easily applied to all true crime stories, as when discussing local crime cases Mexican participants acknowledged being unable to generate the same emotional distance due to their close proximity to violent crimes and the recurrent gender violence in the country. This in consequence *breaks the protective mental barrier*, leading to emotional distress and a heightened perception of vulnerability (Fishman, 1978; Willem Winkel & Vrij, 1990). Flor from Mexico, for instance, shares how the murder of an acquaintance led her to stop "listening to this kind of podcast for a long time" due to the reminders of the victim and her suffering:

> For me with this particular case, that barrier was broken. So I had to build it again and I had to distance myself a little bit from this world, from these cases, from all these kinds of things. But due to what happened to me (.). Or well, what happened to a person close to me.

Evidently, as stated several times during both focus group interviews, *local cases can not be fictionalized* for Mexican participants because, as described in the previous theme, these cases are too close and personal to create that 'mental barrier' that allows them to dissociate from crime stories in order to facilitate their consumption. Therefore, they express a preference for only getting informed about "the most famous [local cases], and those that have transcended" after enough time has passed, and "less biased" information is available. In other words, as these crimes happen within their country, the characteristics of these stories – locale, victim and, crime–, are too close to something they can identify with, and therefore participants are unable to successfully dissociate from them, which leads to a significant increase on their vulnerability perception (Fishman, 1978; Willem Winkel & Vrij, 1990)

Moreover, when that protective mental barrier is broken, Mexican participants then *limit their consumption* of true crime stories as a form of protecting their mental health. But proximity to local crime is not an exclusive reason for limiting their consumption. They do so as well when it comes to overly gruesome crime stories, or after extended periods of

consumption leave them restless and afraid. So, while engaging with true crime content is "exciting in the sense of learning these new cases (...) if there are a lot of them, there comes a time when it is overwhelming" and therefore, "[they] kind of need that detox". This is interesting because it demonstrates that, whether consciously or unconsciously, participants recognize the effects that heavy exposure to these stories can have on their emotional and mental state, leading to increased fear that requires a break from the content (Fishman, 1978; Willem Winkel & Vrij, 1990).

However, the extremes which a true crime story can go in its detailing of these gruesome happenings not only overwhelm the participants at times but also leave them in a position of conflict in terms of how much they need or want to know about the details of these crimes, as will be discussed in the following theme.

4.6 To know or not to know the details

The true crime genre is known to include detailed narrations of violent crimes, appealing to people's curiosity and emotions (Murley, 2008). But for the participants of this study, the "line of morbid curiosity is super thin" and therefore the details of a crime can easily become inappropriate and disrespectful to the victim and their family, putting them in a conflicting situation with their engagement with intimate, gruesome and shock-inducing details.

On one hand, participants can not help but acknowledge their *curiosity to know* the details of a crime. They express "wan[ting] to know what happened" and wanting "to know everything", even consuming different sources covering the same case to complement the information, "to be more specific, or so that [they] don't miss any little detail of what's out there". This includes specifics about the violent murders, intimate information about the criminal or the victim, and comprehensive retellings of the steps taken by the killer, among other things. Katja from the Netherlands expressed that for her the details of a true crime case were "very important" and something that can not be missing:

> That's the thing which I enjoy most. It's really weird to say enjoy because there's really a person that's affected [by] it, but it gets you sucked into the case. And with just a bit of imagination you can, you know, like, follow the story and follow the mind of the killer. And yeah, the details are really for me what makes the story.

This curiosity to learn the details of a crime pertains to sensationalistic discourses as participants acknowledge seeking these thrill-providing elements despite their depravity and

gore (Danielson et al.,1958, as cited in Tannenbaum & Lynch, 1960; Murley, 2008; Wiltenburg, 2004). The unusual circumstances under which many true crime cases occur, particularly make the story more interesting for the participants, which relates to Katz's (1987) theory about the elements that make a story newsworthy. Similarly, their desire for knowledge about intimate details of the murderer and the victim displays a discourse of voyeurism, as it involves enjoying access to the lives of others, and learning what they otherwise would not (Baruh, 2010; Calvert, 2000; Lacan & Miller, 1998; Metzl, 2004).

Participants acknowledge that the details of the story provide them with a stronger *emotional engagement*, because not only through them are they able to satisfy their curiosity, but "know[ing] how awful it was" allows them to engage with violent feelings that, as Browder (2006) describes, women are "culturally proscribed" to mask through femininity (pp. 929). Participants state "want[ing] to feel angry", and to hear all of the horrible details "so [they] can actually hate the killer even more". To them this "adds to the seriousness of the case" and at times also provides them with a feeling of "resolution" when the criminal is caught. This can be interpreted as vengeful voyeurism (Stoneman & Packer, 2020), as the participants gain satisfaction from immersing themselves in these violent emotions which, as I will discuss in the last theme, allows them to take greater pleasure in seeing the criminal apprehended and punished. It increases the thrill and makes the payoff at the end of the story more satisfying, which is therefore also sensationalistic discourse as it involves appealing to their emotions through shock-inducing elements (Kilgo et al., 2016; Slattery and Hakanen, 1994), at times even morbid ones (Danielson et al.,1958, as cited in Tannenbaum & Lynch, 1960; Wiltenburg, 2004).

But beyond the emotional thrill that can be obtained, for Mexican and Dutch participants details in a true crime story are *useful and important* as they help them "digest better" a case and follow along with the investigation. Participants express liking when the story includes elements such as the weapons used and the evidence that helped capture the killer. As Laura from the Netherlands puts it: "I would find it silly if they just left that all out. Because it wouldn't be like a real investigation in my opinion". Likewise, context and details are for them what "makes a case" unique and interesting, because otherwise "they would all be the same"; " it would be just another crime". So while it is important for them that the story includes details that help them understand why something happened, such as through the previous history of those involved, it should also be noted that this also pertains to voyeuristic discourses, as it involves accessing thrill-inducing information (Baruh, 2010; Calvert, 2000; Lacan & Miller, 1998; Metzl, 2004). This is part of the aforementioned

conflict that the participants have with the details of a true crime story. Because while they recognize their curiosity and the use these details have for them, many of these are still products of sensationalism (Kilgo et al., 2016; Slattery and Hakanen, 1994).

However, the importance of these stories and their details goes beyond mere entertainment. As Carmen from Mexico states, these details "[are] not to know what so-and-so did in a given year, but to avoid repeating the events". They work as a reminder of why certain laws and systems such as the AMBER Alert[15] were created. Additionally, the intimate details, while voyeuristic, provide them with a better understanding of the context of the crime and the psychology and motivations of the criminal, which as discussed in the third theme, is important for them as it allows them to reflect on the social and psychological factors leading to the crime (Martin, 1952). In relation to this Alicia from Mexico said the following:

> (...) because [these crimes] are not just things they do for the sake of doing, but many of them have a psychological background, right? (...) Like this- What was his name? The one who killed the mother. The big one. Kemper! The one who cut her head off and abused it, right? Perhaps because the mother was, uh, very emasculating to him. (...) It was like his way of getting even, wasn't it?

Participants find value in details that can provide some "meaning" and "help understand" these crimes. For instance, the details of Kemper's difficult relationship with his abusive mother[16] inform the participants about a potential correlation between Kemper's anger at his mother and his misogyny, which he might have projected in the killing of his victims (Lawson, 2002). This shows how the thick-description of a crime, while containing sensationalistic elements, also provides the participants with information that might help them reflect on the role that social and psychological factors have in leading to a crime (Martin, 1952; Murley, 2008).

This means that, for the participants, the inclusion of details like the ones described above, although important for their engagement with a story, also *requires relevance and*

[15] AMBER stands for America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response. The system was created in 1996 as an early warning system to help find abducted children, as legacy to 9-year-old Amber Hagerman, who was kidnapped while riding her bicycle in Arlington, Texas, and then brutally murdered (AMBER Alert, n.d.).

[16] Kemper's mother was very critical of him, forcing him to live in the basement since he was 10 years old, fearing he might harm his sisters. Kemper had a dark fantasy about killing his mother from an early age, as he blamed her for all his problems (Biography, 2021).

purpose. So, despite their curiosity, they also recognize that the violent details of a crime or the personal lives of people need to add something to the story, such as helping "profile [the murderer] or to have a broader picture of what happened". The inclusion of information that does not serve a purpose beyond shock value or sensationalism is unnecessary and at times even described as "distasteful". This is interesting as despite sensationalism being something that naturally entices their curiosity (Danielson et al.,1958, as cited in Tannenbaum & Lynch, 1960; Wiltenburg, 2004), participants seem to set for themselves limits of what is appropriate. This could be related to sensationalism engaging people emotionally and as a result developing a sense of empathy, as will be discussed later in this theme (Graber, 1994; Wiltenburg, 2004). Erika from Mexico, for instance, recalls Leyendas Legendarias' episode on the case of Paulette Gebara Farah, a 4-year-old girl who went missing from her bedroom and whose body was found in the same room days later (El Universal, 2010):

> (...) They described how they found the girl and that– for example, I didn't know that the blood went to the part of the body where you stayed. In other words, if you lay down, all your blood would go to the bottom and it would look purple[17]. I didn't know that. So they explained it to you and said, "No, let's see. When they found her, she was in such position, with such– with many marks of the blood that accumulated", I said, "Ah, ok!". It helps me to understand how they found her and to understand the case, right? And that it probably would have helped to consider it as evidence.

What is interesting is that Mexican participants were almost four times more likely than Dutch participants to justify their interest in the details of the story through their relevance and purpose. And while the data obtained in the study and available research are not sufficient to explain this, a statement by Flor from Mexico, which connects the need for limiting unnecessary details in true crime stories to the way Mexican news media handles local crime stories, treating them as entertainment, may provide some insights:

> It's like the pictures that appeared or that were in the newspapers in the press, for example. It's really unnecessary to see so much blood, to see the victims so, so vulnerable already in their saddest moment. At their death, as it is. And for that kind of thing to be shown as something for consumption and entertainment to me is unnecessary.

[17] Erika refers to livor mortis, the fourth postmortem sign of death where a reddish-purple color develops in the skin of the deceased due to the pooling of blood. It is particularly useful in establishing if a body is moved postmortem (Reddy & Lowenstein, 2011).

So while Mexican participants' narratives still display voyeuristic and sensationalistic discourses, they differ in how they engage with these elements as a result of their heavy exposure to their local news media coverage of crime, which they perceive as employing sensationalism for entertainment, at the expense of the integrity of femicide victims, as discussed in the fourth theme. This constant exposure to sensationalism, both in true crime and in local news media, seems to foster in the participants' empathy towards the victims (Graber, 1994; Wiltenburg, 2004), leading them to regard sensationalistic details as a form of disrespect and thus as something to avoid if lacking purpose. This is something that would be interesting to investigate further in future research.

Nonetheless, Dutch and Mexican participants share the consensus that some of the information and details provided by true crime stories can be unnecessary and "*go too far*", describing being horrified and "nauseous" at overly descriptive cases where the violent things that the victim suffered are "[told] to you in detail", such as with the aforementioned case of Albert Fish, where the perpetrator's gruesome letter detailing the murder of a girl is often included in the retellings of the case when it could have simply be omitted. As Danielle from the Netherlands puts it: "I feel like there should be kind of a balance of knowing what happened to the victim, but also not going too much in detail and taking it too far, when it's also not necessary". After all, for them, it is not about "It's not so much what the killer does, but everything that's behind it". It is not about watching people get murdered. It is about obtaining a thicker description of the case that allows them to understand it better (Murley, 2008) but within the limits of what is respectful to the victims and their families (Graber, 1994; Wiltenburg, 2004). This relates to the following and final theme, where the importance of protecting the victim's integrity is highlighted by the participants.

4.7 Justice & respect for victims

A narrative that arose equally amongst Mexican and Dutch participants pertained to the importance for true crime stories to *humanize and respect the victims.* In this narrative, they state that despite true crime stories often being "about the crime or the person that's doing the crime" they deem it relevant, and at times even prefer, for the focus to be placed on the victim instead. This is with the purpose of "protect[ing the victim's] integrity" and acknowledging "the impact that [the crime] had on the family and the friends [of the victim]" instead of "mak[ing] the perpetrator the celebrity". Delia from Mexico, for instance, discussed this when speaking of the case of murder victim Elizabeth Short, also known as the

Black Dahlia:

> I think that despite the way she died, they never managed to kill her spirit and her essence (...) It is not so much [about] what they did to her, but the symbol that represents her. That even when there are horrible images [of her murder], the photo you remember most of the Black Dahlia is of her (...) And in this case, you don't talk about the killer; you talk about her and remember her picture. So I prefer to remember the photo of her, where she looks, in black and white, beautiful. And I avoid even looking at the photo of her murder.

This protection of the victim's integrity, as alluded to by Delia, for the participants involves "mak[ing] sure the victims are [treated as] humans instead of [as] just things that were discarded", being mindful about how descriptive and gruesome the narration of the crime is, and about limiting the depiction of unnecessarily brutal images of the victims. The last two elements, akin to what was discussed in the previous theme, are a point of conflict for them, as explanations of how the violent crimes took place and images of the crime scene are recurrent and often key elements in the retelling of true crime stories. Nonetheless, this narrative can be viewed as the product of the participants' empathy towards the victims, triggered as a result of their emotional engagement with the stories (Graber, 1994; Wiltenburg, 2004).

Furthermore, they also express feeling *empathy for the victim and their family*, hoping to be able to help them if ever coming across them, wondering how they would feel if they were in their place, experiencing such a harrowing situation. By putting themselves in their shoes, participants once again support Garber's (1994) and Wiltenburg's (2004) theory that engagement with sensationalistic elements, which are abundant in the true crime genre, fosters empathy through emotional engagement. Karin from the Netherlands, for instance, expresses feeling conflicted about "visuals of the victim" being available on the internet or included in documentaries as this means "[the victim's] family will forever have to see [these images]". Some participants expressed feeling especially emotional when it came to cases involving people from vulnerable sectors of society such as the elderly and children. The latter was especially the case for participants who are mothers, all of whom were from the Netherlands, who can not help but empathize "especially [with] the perspective of the parents", as they can identify with the fear of their children becoming a victim. This again supports the notion that being able to relate to characteristics of the crime influences the degree to which a person's fear is increased (Willem Winkel & Vrij, 1990). In the case of the participants with children, their fear corresponds to the thought of losing a child, which leads

them to have empathy for the victims and their loved ones. This can also be related to a moral panic reaction, as Dutch participants express being "scared that [their] kids are going to be a victim" despite not being concerned about crimes similar to those in true crime happening to themselves due to perceiving them unlikely to occur (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). As Vera from the Netherlands puts it:

> I relate now more to parents (.) whose kids, for example, go missing. (...) Um, 'cause I can imagine, but I also cannot imagine what that would be like. (...) Like how do they function after something like that happens? I think I would be puking constantly. I don't know. It makes me feel so nauseous and so anxious. So now I can really relate to that.

However, part of their empathy also manifests itself in a great desire *to see justice served* and to know that the cases were handled correctly. Clara from Mexico, for example, discussed the 2021 case of The cannibal of Atizapán, whose residence contained more than 4,600 skeletal remains presumed to belong to 19 victims (El Universal, 2022), stating that part of her interest in learning about the case stemmed from "want[ing] to know that justice was done":

> I want to know what happened and what they did with those bodies. I want to know if they found out who the victim was. More than anything for the sake of that: the justice of having that respect for the victim (...) I want to know that the authorities did something".

Unfortunately, justice is not always the outcome in these cases, which leaves them feeling angry and disappointed in the justice system. Karin, from the Netherlands, for instance, expresses her frustration at how Dutch youth care services (*jeugdzorg*) "failed [eight-year-old Sharleyne Remouchamps]", whose mother was suspected of pushing her from the 10th story of their apartment building in 2015. The case left her "distres[sed]" as at the time of the focus group interview, the victim's mother had not been convicted of the crime[18].

Their wish to see justice brought to the victim and put the perpetrator behind bars relates to the concepts of penal spectatorship (Brown, 2013) and vengeful voyeurism (Stoneman & Packer, 2020), in which the participants engage in the pleasure and satisfaction of seeing the victim receive justice by having the perpetrator punished and allowing them to participate in the hatred and judgment that directed at the latter (Linnemann, 2014). This

[18] Hélène J., Sharleyne's mother, would be sentenced to 9 years and 8 months in prison the following month, June 2022 (RTL Nieuws, 2022)

practice can also be linked to trait voyeurism given that they are able to take part in this activity safely and within experiential distance (Baruh, 2010).

5. Conclusion

This study was concerned with exploring how women from high-crime areas in Mexico and women from low-crime areas in the Netherlands make sense of their consumption of true crime media, as well as how their lived experiences shape these narratives.

This topic was of interest given that true crime has experienced a boom in popularity and become a cultural phenomenon with an overwhelmingly female audience despite the often depicting violent crimes against women. Although this paradox has been studied to some extent, a gap of knowledge was identified regarding how different levels of victimization influence women's engagement and discourses concerning the genre. This thesis, therefore, contributes to the academic debate on how women interpret and engage with true crime as influenced by their demographic and social context, as well as how media consumption influences women's view of the world.

This final chapter will answer the research question based on the findings. Furthermore, it will discuss the limitations identified, and address any potential future research.

Through the data collected across 4 focus group interviews with 11 women from Mexico and 13 women from the Netherlands, it can be said that women from places with vastly different levels of crime do indeed hold some differences in their engagement with the true crime genre, pertaining to their sociocultural context. Nonetheless, both groups of participants still shared similar narratives and demarcated motivations for their consumption.

In their stories, both Dutch and Mexican participants make meaning of their true crime consumption by perceiving the genre as *relevant and relatable* to their lives due to their gender putting them at greater risk of victimization than men and thus requiring them to raise their awareness of the topic. While statistics do not support this notion, their perception is potentially influenced by true crime’s overwhelmingly female representation of its victims. But despite consensus, Mexican participants mentioned the genre's relevance twice as often, which may be related to the different degrees to which each group perceived to be likely to suffer from a crime akin to those in true crime. True crime stories are viewed by Dutch participants as the exception rather than the rule, feeling unlikely to become a victim of a violent crime and not easily relating to the victims in these stories. In contrast, Mexican participants perceive these crimes as something that could realistically happen to them given the state of affairs in their country where they are heavily exposed to local stories of violence.

Despite this difference in narrative, they eventually reach a consensus again, agreeing that true crime stories while helping them stay alert should not make them live in fear. This demonstrated that while gender socialization and inaccurate portrayals of victims in true crime stories may influence the participants' risk perception, their perceived risk of victimization is also strongly influenced by the levels of crime and the status of gender inequality within their country. Because the more they are exposed to violent local crimes, the more they can relate to the possibility of becoming victims of a crime like those depicted in true crime stories, significantly heightening their fear.

Participants, therefore, engage with true crime content due to these stories serving as *cautionary tales* that offer them insights on how to prevent victimization and learn tools for survival. These stories teach them precautions such as being conscious of their surroundings and avoiding potentially unsafe locations and individuals. Additionally, their heightened sense of risk projects itself in the participants' deliberate mistrust for people, fueled by perpetrators who managed to pass as normal individuals while committing the most heinous crimes. Overall this exemplifies how the vicious cycle of women's true crime consumption is recreated. Participants consume these cautionary tales to reduce their chances of victimization which at the same time causes them to increase their perceptions of risk, thus reacting in fear and a moral panic. This leads them to employ avoidant behaviors and puts them back at the start of the cycle. Despite this, Dutch participants also expressed that true crime stories led them to realize how good and safe their lives are in the Netherlands, an effect that contrasts with the theory of how exposure to crime stories increases fear.

Another important aspect identified in their engagement was reflecting on the fact that *crime has a context*. For both Dutch and Mexican participants, learning about the psychology of the killer's mind was something they found fascinating and educational. Particularly when paired with information about the criminal's backstory, such as their upbringing and interpersonal relationships, they were able to gain a better comprehension of the psychosocial factors that influenced them to commit these violent crimes. But for them, learning about this kind of information, while partaking in sensationalistic and voyeuristic discourses, also allowed them to reduce the criminal to a profile, reduce their power and simply see them as disturbed individuals, rather than glorified 'celebrities'. Overall, this shows that while true crime stories are of interest to the participants both due to voyeuristic and sensationalistic motivations, they also serve as a way to explore the societal influences leading to a crime as well as the foundations of dysfunctional family relationships and patriarchal culture. All within a safe distance.

Results also showed that when it came to *local true crime stories*, Dutch and Mexican participants presented contrasting narratives. Dutch participants were interested in and consumed these cases, finding them interesting and emotionally engaging due to their proximity. But while these local cases are not often in the Dutch news media, participants expressed that when they do encounter content about these crimes they are left feeling shocked and afraid, wondering what other things occur in the Netherlands that they are unaware of. Mexican participants, in contrast, expressed dislike of local crime stories as these evoked negative emotions in them. But unlike the Netherlands, the Mexican news media heavily covers local crime cases making them hard to avoid, thus overwhelming them with countless stories about violent crimes. This exposure leaves the participants feeling vulnerable and scared, especially as these crimes feel too close and personal to them as a result of the ongoing violence crisis in Mexico. This is also emphasized due to their perception of the local news media as sensationalistic and disrespectful of the victim, as well as frustrating, as cases are often mismanaged and justice is rarely achieved. In summary, this illustrates how despite Dutch participants engaging in sensationalistic discourses by seeking emotionally engaging content, their exposure to local crime stories does lead them to react in moral panic and increases their risk and fear perceptions as they can more easily relate to the happenings in these stories. The latter is also true for Mexican participants, as their exposure to local crimes, combined with the high levels of violence in the country, heightens their fear of violence.

To more easily digest crime stories, Mexican participants express dissociating from true crime stories, *fictionalizing* them in order to create a protective 'mental barrier'. This in turn allows them to reduce the negative emotional impact these violent cases could have on them, which is especially useful as they express already being overwhelmed by their country's high levels of crime. This dissociation, therefore, allows them to enjoy the genre without added stress. This is aided, for instance, through the narrative style of podcasts, or by viewing the story through a clinical perspective. However, some occurrences in their life, such as the murder of an acquaintance, can break or limit the creation of this protective mental barrier. For instance, Mexican participants express not being able to fictionalize local crime cases due to their proximity. And when this barrier breaks, or when overconsumption leaves them anxious and afraid, they opt to limit their consumption. This shows that indeed their overexposure to these stories can have an impact on their emotional and mental state, which they mitigate through dissociation as a defense mechanism.

A narrative that involved the participants at times conflicting relationship with the

genre was that of wanting *to know or not to know the details of a true crime story*. On one hand, they express wanting to know what happened and obtain every detail of the cases, including at times the gruesome ones, and acknowledge seeking the emotional thrill that these can provide. From entertainment and sock to sadness and anger. This provides them with a deeper immersion in the case and, when the criminal gets caught, a stronger emotional payoff. Participants also highlight the importance of the inclusion of these details, as they help follow the investigation and for understanding why things happened. Nonetheless, they also reiterate that the inclusion of details, such as information about the crime scene, or the intimate lives of those involved in the story, also requires relevance and purpose, such as helping them profile the murderer, otherwise, they are distasteful and just for shock value. This is something more often highlighted by Mexican participants, potentially due to them being able to relate the use of sensationalistic elements to the coverage of their local news media. Nonetheless, Dutch and Mexican participants share the consensus that some information provided in true crime stories can simply go too far. For instance by including overly descriptive descriptions of violence. So despite them being curious and engaging in sensationalistic and voyeuristic discourses by enjoying thill-inducing details in true crime cases, participants also recognize and provide a limit for what is appropriate and respectful. Emotional engagement, nonetheless, allows them to connect with violent feelings that, as women, they are socially deterred from showing.

Finally, a theme that was present in the narratives from women of both countries was the importance of *justice and respect for the victims*. Participants stated the importance of true crime cases placing focus on the victim instead of on the perpetrator, as well as on protecting their integrity, making sure they are treated in a humane way. They, therefore, express feeling empathy for the victims and their families, especially when it came to crimes they could identify their fears with. This empathy was reflected in the participants' desire to see justice served and to know cases were being handled properly. So despite their interest in sensationalistic details, as expressed earlier, participants develop a sense of empathy for the victims through their emotional engagement with true crime stories. Additionally, this reflected that indeed being able to relate to the characteristics of a crime increased the participant’s fear.

Through this study I aimed to provide a view on the dynamic relationship between people and their consumption of media, to observe, from another perspective, how our interaction with it holds a symbiotic relationship in which the content influences us but our lived experiences influences our interpretations of the content as well.

Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that the social context of the participants, particularly the level of crime in their county, does have an impact on how they engage with true crime content. The results indicate that, as theory suggests, the exposure to true crime content, while perceived as useful for women from both countries, does influence their perceptions of risk. But the degree to which they perceive their likelihood of victimization is also heavily influenced by how likely they are to relate their own context to the one found in a true crime story, which in turn is also influenced by how much they are exposed to reports of crime by the local media. Within this, something that was an unexpected finding was the way that Mexican participants use dissociation of true crime stories from reality as a defense mechanism. This presents a point of interest for further study as it has implications for the study of media consumption and how it influences the well-being of its audience. Additionally, the results show that the way that participants engage with sensationalistic elements in true crime stories, while broadly providing them with emotional thrill, also allows them to explore the psychological and social context involved in the development of a murderer, as well as on the dysfunctional structures that prevail in society.

In terms of methodology, focus group interviews did prove to be a good choice as they allow the participants to generate a dialogue through which they could reflect on their experiences with the true crime genre. Narrative analysis as well allowed me to analyze the broader narratives of the participants while also providing me insights into their individual experiences.

A limitation found within the study was that due to language limitations on my part, the focus group interviews with Dutch participants had to be conducted in English. And while participants showed to be fluent in the language, perhaps being able to conduct the focus group interview in their native language could have provided additional information and/or generated a more active discussion by allowing them to feel more comfortable. Additionally, the study did not differentiate between the participant's styles of content preferences during recruitment. This could have been significant given that between podcasts and documentaries, for instance, there are different styles in their narrative, as well as varying levels of inclusion of visuals, which could have also provided early insights on discourses of sensationalism.

As alluded to earlier, exploring the use of dissociation of true crime content from real life to reduce the audience's emotional response is something that would be interesting to further study. To see if this is something unique to consumers residing in high levels of crime, or if it is also shared by those who have experienced a violent crime, or even by those

residing in low-crime areas

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Appendix

Appendix A *– Participants' geographical distribution*

- The Netherlands

- Mexico

Appendix B *– Focus group interview guide & schedule*

- *Schedule*

Introduction (5–10 min)	At this stage of the focus group interview, the participants are welcomed. The study and its aims are introduced in general terms. They will be assured of the confidentiality of the information, and the ground rules of the discussion will be presented. Prior to the meeting, participants will be asked to read and sign an informed consent form and to select an alias if they wished for their name to remain confidential.
Discussion (45–60 min)	The discussion will begin through more general questions of the participants' engagement with true crime content and will slowly progress to more focused questions.
Debriefing & closure (5–10 min)	In closing, the main points of interest of the discussion will be summarized. Participants can also take this time to ask questions and make additional comments.

- *Interview guide and introduction in English*

Hello and welcome to this session. Thank you for taking the time to join us today to talk about true crime. My name is Claudia Hernandez Esponda, I am a master's student at Erasmus University Rotterdam, and this study is part of my graduation thesis. Our topic of discussion, as you might remember, is about how we, as women, engage with true crime content; therefore I am interested in your experiences, attitudes, and opinions in relation to the genre. Rest assured that the results of this focus group interview will be used exclusively for the purposes of this study and your personal information will remain confidential. I am

going to ask you some questions about your experience with the true crime genre hoping to stimulate a conversation amongst you. But remember that there are no right or wrong answers, only different points of view. So feel free to share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said. Every person's experiences and opinions are important and informative. I want to emphasize that what is said in this discussion will remain here, so I hope you will feel comfortable sharing. Also, know that you don't have to answer any question you don't wish to; your participation is completely voluntary and you are free to stop at any moment. I will participate in this discussion exclusively as a moderator, to keep track of time and to make sure all the relevant topics are discussed. You can ask me to repeat a question if needed, but the goal here is that you do the talking and that everyone participates. You can also address each other if you like. As you can probably see this video call is being recorded. This is done so I do not miss any of your comments. But I want to emphasize that your names won't be used in the study; you will remain completely anonymous. The discussion will last for about one hour, one hour and a half and it is best if your phones are placed in silence for the duration of this call.

Do I have your permission to interview you, record this session, and quote you anonymously in the research?

Are there any questions?

Then, let us begin by introducing ourselves one by one. Your name, age, occupation, etc. *[Participants introduce themselves]*

I would like to begin by asking you to…

Voyeurism & sensationalism

1. Tell me about how and why you became interested in true crime?
2. Do you have a favorite true crime story?
    a. Can you explain why it is your favorite?
3. Do you prefer to read, listen or watch true crime content? Why?
4. What is something that cannot be missing from a true crime story?
5. How important are the details of the more gruesome elements of the story?

Moral panic & risk-fear perception

6. How do you feel while you consume a true crime story?
7. Do you connect these stories to real-life scenarios?
8. Do you also seek local true crime stories?

9. Do you relate to the victims in true crime stories?
    a. Yes, no, why?
10. Do these stories make you think about your likelihood of victimization?
11. Is there anything related to what we talked about today which has not been discussed and you would like to discuss?

- *Interview guide and introduction in Spanish*

Hola y bienvenidas a esta sesión. Gracias por tomarse el tiempo de acompañarnos hoy para hablar sobre el crimen real. Mi nombre es Claudia Hernández Esponda, soy estudiante de la maestría en Arte, cultura y sociedad en la Universidad Erasmus Rotterdam, y este estudio es parte de mi tesis. Nuestro tema de discusión, como recordarán, es sobre como las mujeres nos relacionamos con el contenido del true crime; por lo tanto, estoy interesada en sus experiencias, actitudes y opiniones en relación con el género. Los resultados de esta sesión se utilizarán exclusivamente para los fines de este estudio y su información personal será totalmente confidencial. Voy a hacerles algunas preguntas sobre su experiencia con el género del crimen real con el objetivo de generar una conversación entre ustedes. No hay respuestas correctas o incorrectas, solo diferentes puntos de vista. Así que siéntase libres de compartir sus puntos de vista, incluso si difieren de lo que otras participantes han dicho. Las experiencias y opiniones de cada persona son importantes e informativas. Quiero enfatizar que lo que se diga en esta discusión se quedará aquí, así que espero que puedan sentirse cómodas y compartir sus opiniones. Les recuerdo que no tienen que responder a ninguna pregunta que no deseen; su participación es completamente voluntaria y son libres de dejar de participar en cualquier momento. Yo participaré en este debate exclusivamente como moderadora, para controlar el tiempo y asegurarse de que se discuten todos los temas relevantes. Pueden pedirme que repita una pregunta si es necesario, pero el objetivo aquí es que ustedes sean quien hablen y que todas participen. También pueden dirigirse unas a otras si lo desean. Como probablemente recuerden del formato de consentimiento informado que les envié, esta videollamada está siendo grabada. Esto se hace para no perderme ninguno de sus comentarios. Les recuerdo que sus nombres no se utilizarán en el estudio; permanecerán completamente anónimos. La discusión durará aproximadamente una hora, hora y media, y es mejor que sus teléfonos estén en silencio durante la duración de esta llamada.

¿Tengo su permiso para entrevistarte, grabar esta sesión y citarlas de forma anónima en el estudio?

¿Hay alguna pregunta antes de empezar?

Entonces, empecemos por presentarnos uno por uno. Su nombre, edad, ocupación, etc.

[Las participantes se presentan]

Quisiera empezar pidiéndoles que…

Voyeurism & sensationalism

1. Cuéntenme acerca de ¿cómo y por qué se interesaron en el género del crimen real?
2. ¿Tienen una historia de crimen real favorita?
   2.1. ¿Pueden explicar por qué es su historia favorita
3. ¿Prefieren leer, escuchar o ver contenidos de true crime? ¿Por qué?
4. ¿Qué es algo que no puede faltar en una historia de crimen real?
5. ¿Qué tan importantes son los detalles de los elementos más macabros de la historia?

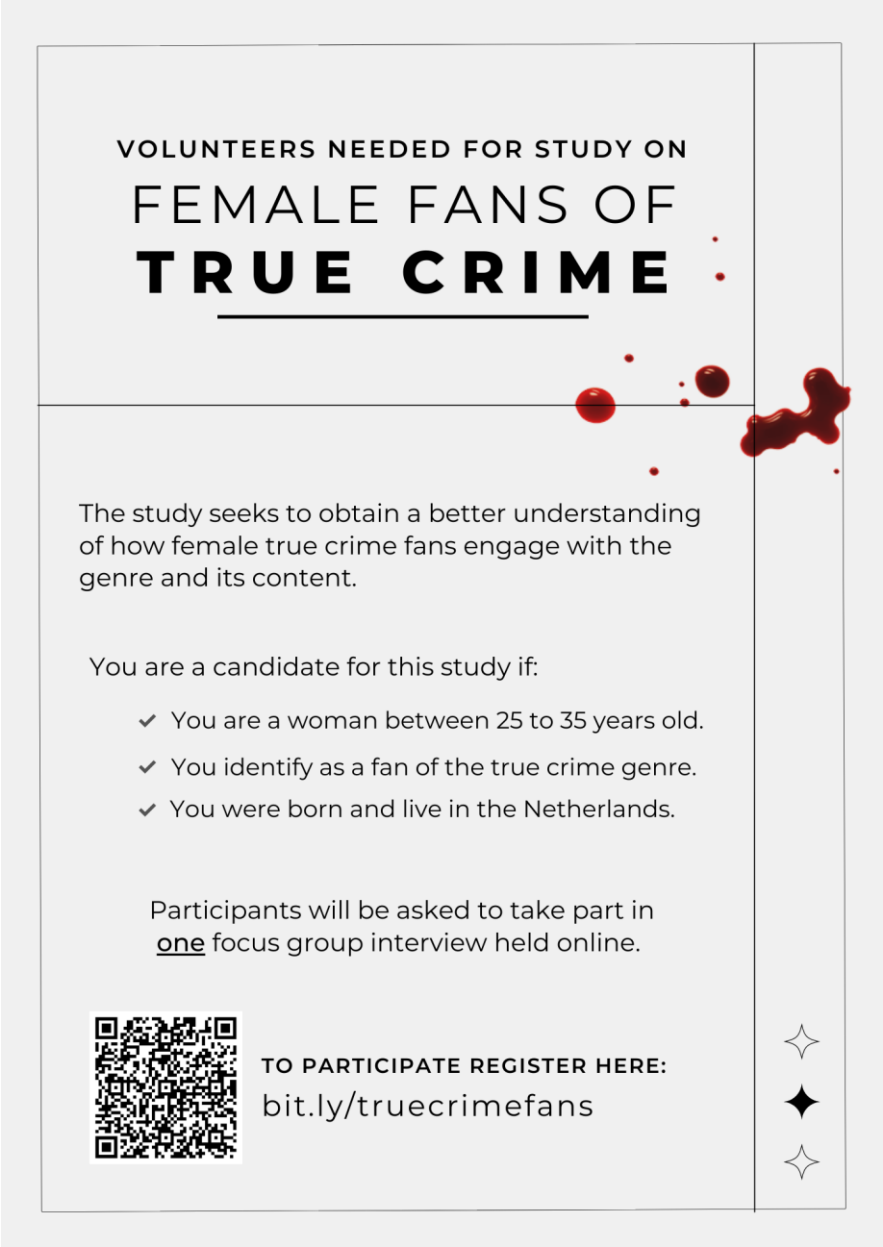
Moral panic & risk-fear perception

6. ¿Cómo se sienten mientras leen o escuchan una historia de crimen real?
7. ¿Relacionan estas historias con escenarios de la vida real?
8. ¿Les interesa y buscan también historias locales de crimen real?
   8.1. ¿Si, no, por qué?
9. ¿Se sienten identificadas con las víctimas de las historias de crimen real?
10. Al escuchar estas historias, ¿les hacen pensar en su probabilidad de ser victimizadas?
11. ¿Hay algo relacionado al tema del crimen real que no se haya discutido de lo que te gustaría hablar?

Appendix C *– Recruitment flyer*

- Spanish version for Mexico

- English version for the Netherlands



Appendix D *– Informed consent form to participate in the study*

- English version for Dutch participants

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Project Title	*Female fans of true crime content*
Name of researcher	Claudia Hernandez Esponda
Name of organization	Erasmus University Rotterdam – Erasmus School of History, Culture, and Communication.
Purpose of the Study	You have been invited to participate in this research project about how women engage with the true crime genre. The purpose of this research project is to garner a better understanding of women's experiences, attitudes, and opinions in relation to the genre.
Procedures	You will participate in a focus group interview lasting approximately 1 hour to 1 hour 30 minutes. You will be asked questions about your consumption of true crime content.
Potential and anticipated Risks and Discomforts	There are no obvious physical, legal or economic risks associated with participating in this study. You do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. Your participation is voluntary and you are free to stop your participation at any time.
Sharing the results	After the study has concluded a summary of the findings will be shared with the participants upon request.
Confidentiality	Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. No personally identifiable information will be reported in any research product and only trained research staff will have access to your responses. This study involves making audio and video recordings of the focus group interview. Transcribed segments from the recordings may be used in the final thesis. The recordings and other documents created or collected as part of this study will be stored securely.
Right to Withdraw and Questions	Your participation in this research is completely voluntary and you may stop participating at any time. If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, please contact the investigator.

Statement of Consent	By taking part in this study the participant confirms that they are at least 18 years old; has read this informed consent form; and voluntarily agrees to participate in this research study. For research problems or any other question regarding the research project, please contact Claudia Hernandez Esponda at truecrimethesis@gmail.com or at 576045hc@eur.nl

- Spanish version for Mexican participants

FORMULARIO DE CONSENTIMIENTO INFORMADO

Título del Proyecto	*Mujeres fans del crimen real*
Nombre de la investigadora	Claudia Hernandez Esponda
Nombre de la organización	Erasmus University Rotterdam – Erasmus Escuela de Historia, Cultura, y Comunicación
Propósito del estudio	Has sido invitada a participar en este estudio acerca de como las mujeres se relacionan con el género del crimen real. El propósito de este proyecto de investigación es obtener una mejor comprensión de las experiencias, actitudes y opiniones de las mujeres en relación con el género.
Procedimiento	Participará en una entrevista de focus group que durará aproximadamente de 1 hora a 1 hora y 30 minutos. Se le harán preguntas sobre su experiencia con el género del crimen real.
Riesgos y molestias potenciales y previstos	No existen riesgos físicos, legales o económicos obvios asociados con la participación en este estudio. No tiene que responder ninguna pregunta que no desee responder. Su participación es voluntaria y es libre de dejar de participar en cualquier momento.
Compartir los resultados	Una vez que el estudio haya concluido se compartirá un resumen de los hallazgos con los participantes si así lo solicitan.

Confidencialidad	Su privacidad estará protegida en la medida máxima permitida por la ley. No se presentará información personal identificable en ningún producto de investigación y solo personal de investigación capacitado tendrá acceso a sus respuestas. Este estudio requiere realizar grabaciones de audio y video de la entrevista de focus group. Segmentos transcritos de las grabaciones pueden usarse en el documento final. Las grabaciones y otros documentos creados o recopilados como parte de este estudio se almacenarán de forma segura.
Derecho a desistimiento y Preguntas	Su participación en este estudio es completamente voluntaria y puede dejar de participar en cualquier momento. Si decide dejar de participar en el estudio, si tiene preguntas, inquietudes o quejas, comuníquese con el investigador.
Declaración de consentimiento	Su firma indica que tiene al menos 18 años de edad; ha leído este formulario de consentimiento; y acepta voluntariamente que participará en este estudio. Para problemas o cualquier otra pregunta relacionada con el proyecto de investigación, comuníquese con Claudia Hernández Esponda en truecrimethesis@gmail.com o en 576045hc@eur.nl Si acepta participar, firme con su nombre a continuación.

Appendix E *– Overview of participants, divided by focus group, with pseudonyms*

ID	Name	Age	Occupation	Location
MX1F01	Flor	34	Digital analyst / Marketing	México City, México
MX1A02	Ana	24	Psychology student / Assistant at a psychotherapy office	México City, México
MX1C03	Cecilia	24	Graphic design student	Monterrey, México
MX1E04	Erika	27	Government worker	México City, México
MX1C05	Clara	29	Architect	Monterrey, México
MX2A01	Alma	31	Material planner	Guadalajara, México
MX2L02	Leticia	24	Architect	Monterrey, México
MX2C03	Carmen	29	Graphic designer	México City, México
MX2A04	Adriana	25	Psychologist	México City, México
MX2D05	Delia	26	Industrial engineer / Unemployed	Veracruz, México
MX2A06	Alicia	33	Sales, planning & forecasting at a pharmaceutical company	Puebla, México
NL1V01	Vera	34	Communications writer	Zwolle, Netherlands
NL1S2	Simone	24	Psychobiology student / Model & customer service agent	Gouda, Netherlands
NL1E3	Eline	29	Job recruiter	Noordwijkerhout, Netherlands
NL1M4	Marieke	31	Architect	Amsterdam, Netherlands

NL 1K5	Karin	36	Teacher at hogeschool	Purmerend, Netherlands
NL 1D6	Danielle	24	Masters student	Rotterdam, Netherlands
NL 1K7	Krista	33	Optician	Alem, Netherlands
NL 2S01	Sandra	35	Artist / Designer within Education	Utrecht & Amsterdam, Netherlands
NL 2L02	Laura	28	Political journalist / graphic designer	Rotterdam, Netherlands / Moved to London recently
NL 2L03	Leonie	24	Pharmacy student / Works at a hospital and a botox clinic	Rotterdam, Netherlands
NL 2L04	Linda	27	Marketing communication	Gouda, Netherlands
NL 2K05	Katja	30	Healthcare	Enschede, Netherlands
NL 2E06	Esther	31	Background in Legal / Unemployed	Rotterdam, Netherlands

Appendix F *– Code tree*