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Fundamentally Different Stories That Matter: True Crime Podcasts and the Domestic Violence Survivors in Their Audiences

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FUNDAMENTALLY DIFFERENT STORIES THAT MATTER: TRUE CRIME
PODCASTS AND THE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SURVIVORS IN THEIR AUDIENCES

by

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DEDICATION

For Mother – your love of words and confidence to do hard things was instilled in me at a young age. I am the woman that I am because of your example, and for that, I am truly grateful.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“No matter what accomplishments you make, somebody helps you.” - Althea Gibson

Originally, this acknowledgement was a well-written tribute to all those who have supported me throughout this process. Unfortunately, the formatting requirements for this dissertation have forced me to cut it down to one page or less. So, I will simply list the names of those that have helped, guided, listened, bought coffee, prayed, hugged, cried, stood by me, and held me up throughout this process. If you want to know exactly how amazing these folks are, visit this link to see the original version of this section:

http://kelliboling.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/KBoling_diss_ack.pdf

Dr. Leigh Moscovitz, Dr. Carol Pardun, Dr. Kevin Hull, Dr. Drucilla Barker, Minhee, Denetra, Noura, Mother and Daddy, Clara and Juli, Shelby, Ella Jane, Miles, and my better half, Hun. Thank you all, for everything. I owe you, big time.

ABSTRACT

This audience reception study qualitatively examines women who identify as both domestic violence survivors and fans of true crime podcasts. Using a feminist, critical cultural lens, this study explores why these women are drawn to these podcasts and how the content presented intersects with their lived experiences as domestic violence survivors. Employing a multi-method approach, I interviewed 16 women who listen to true crime podcasts and identify as domestic violence survivors as well as six hosts/producers of true crime podcast media and conducted an in-depth narrative analysis on one of the most popular podcasts mentioned by my participants. Sixteen in-depth qualitative interviews with audience members reveal six major themes: love of a good story, uniqueness of audio media, the educational value of true crime podcasts, connection to lived experiences, the potential therapeutic role of true crime narratives, and the community connections forged by listening to true crime podcasts.

Through in-depth qualitative interviews with six true crime podcast hosts, this study also examines the political economy of podcast production, the atypical interactions that these hosts have with domestic violence survivors in their audiences, and how they are working with their audience members to present a counter-narrative to create awareness and improve understanding while simultaneously empowering victims to seek assistance and shed the stigma of shame that is prevalent for victims in our society.

Combining qualitative interviews with a narrative analysis of the *COLD* podcast, the top podcast mentioned by participants that covers a domestic violence case, I examine

the narrative structure of *COLD*, unpack the intended and stated storylines, juxtapose the stated themes with the counter-narratives that emerged, and interrogate how *COLD* measures up to what my participants defined as a “favorite” true crime podcast. I also explore the production decisions that were made and the impact those decisions had on the final product by combining insights from my interview with the host of *COLD* and the narrative analysis of the podcast.

Ultimately, I found that the female domestic violence survivors in true crime podcast audiences are using this emerging media in unprecedented ways and challenging the patriarchal nature of the criminal justice system and media’s traditional coverage of domestic violence. My participants demonstrated that they have formed a collective identity and a virtual community where their voices are heard, their stories are normalized, and that they are collaborating with true crime podcasters to process their own trauma and educate others about the reality of their lived experiences.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

APM.....	American Public Media
DSHS	Department of Social and Health Services
GO.....	Gratifications Obtained
GS	Gratifications Sought
LDS.....	Latter-Day Saints
NCADV	National Coalition Against Domestic Violence
PCR.....	Post Conviction Relief
RSS	Rich Site Summary
SPJ	Society of Professional Journalists
UDVC	Utah Domestic Violence Coalition

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“Until our society gets better at preventing violence, true crime stories will never be in short supply. And they will attract those far removed from the subjects and those of us who know violence all too well. We are all fascinated with our dark places.”

– Jes Skolnik, in an Op-Ed about attraction to true crime podcasts published in *The New York Times*

With well-known staccato notes playing in the background, millions of listeners sat on the metaphorical edge of their seats, tuned in to the familiar words of the computerized voice-over, “This is a Global Tel Link prepaid call from...Adnan Syed...an inmate at the...Maryland Correctional Facility.” For eleven weeks, the podcast audience had been captivated by the story of a young Muslim teenager in Baltimore and the untimely death of his girlfriend, Hae Min Lee. After hearing the details of their breakup, reviewing the terrifying account of the autopsy report, and sharing the frustration that a teenager, known to dabble in drugs, could not remember his whereabouts on the afternoon of his girlfriend’s death, there seemed to be only one final question left to be asked – did he do it? As the host of the popular podcast *Serial*, Sarah Koenig, approached

the final episode, she understood the gravity of the task-at-hand as well as the fact that the audience was asking her to be judge and jury in a criminal case.

It's funny, I did not fret about the ending that much. I really didn't... So many people were asking me [about that] and I was like, "Wait, should I be more worried about this? Should I be more freaked out? Should I be thinking about this a different way?" But I always just felt like I'm just going to keep my head down and keep reporting and keep reporting and keep reporting, and it will come to an end, as all stories do. The reporting is going to take me there. I can't pre-engineer this, right? So I just have to keep going with it (Gross, 2014).

With a worldwide audience, vouching for Syed's innocence could have both judicial and political ramifications. As Koenig wrestled with her position as a journalist, the audience had to contend with their personal opinions regarding Syed's criminal conviction. This debate over the innocence of an inmate in Baltimore became a phenomenon that arguably changed the course of both podcast and true crime media. In the end, Koenig said she would acquit Syed if she were a juror but admitted that she could not vouch for his innocence (Koenig & Snyder, 2014). Six years after the podcast was launched, Syed's legal team remains relentless in their fight for freedom, and listeners continue to wrestle with his conviction.

Serial is arguably the most popular podcast ever produced, and it capitalized on a genre that has been prevalent for decades. This rise in popularity of an established genre within a new medium illuminates an interesting opportunity for research. However, the Op-Ed published in *The New York Times* by a domestic violence survivor explaining the attraction to true crime in light of lived experiences, identifies a unique audience subset

engaging with the genre and medium in unprecedented ways. This audience reception study is designed to understand how a specific subset of the true crime podcast audience, self-identified female domestic violence survivors, is interpreting and incorporating podcasts both in their daily lives and potentially for personal and societal change. Using a critical cultural lens, I explore how this audience is understanding and interacting with true crime podcasts, and the impact of this relationship on the audience, producers, and society as a whole. Building upon prior female audience reception studies, I will contextualize audience engagement with true crime media against the backdrop of broader cultural, political, and economic forces to uncover insights into the true crime genre, the podcast medium, and its complex relationship with its predominantly female audience.

1.1 BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The first season of *Serial* left listeners begging for more, left Syed (who has been incarcerated since 1999), on his way to a new trial, and left the Baltimore police and justice departments under a cloud of suspicion. With an estimated 40 million downloads as of the final episode and over 175 million downloads as of March 2017, *Serial* is arguably the most popular podcast ever produced (Roberts, 2014; Spangler, 2017). As *Serial* approached the final episode of season one, spin-offs, follow-ups, and other true crime podcasts flooded the podcast landscape (Bell, 2016; Goldberg, 2018; O'Connell, 2015). Industry insiders refer to this time in podcast history as the “Serial effect,” but the success extended beyond podcast media (Fieldstadt, 2016). True crime documentaries, including *Making a Murderer* on Netflix and *The Jinx* on HBO, also attracted media interest and large audience followings (Fieldstadt, 2016).

True crime podcasts also have had a substantial impact on the criminal justice system. The judge who presided over Syed's Post Conviction Relief (PCR) hearing, Judge Martin Welch, mentioned the public's support for Syed (due to the popularity of *Serial*) when he granted Syed's PCR petition (Syed v Maryland, 2016). Judge Welch stated that he used his "best efforts" not to be influenced by the popularity of *Serial* but admitted that the podcast had brought renewed attention to the case, assisting in investigatory efforts that offered fresh perspectives on the evidence, and ultimately having a positive impact on the proceedings (Syed v Maryland, 2016). *Serial* was also physically present at Syed's PCR hearing, covering the trial and producing daily podcast updates as well as details on Twitter. Fans of *Serial* lined up outside the courthouse at 6 a.m. on the morning of the hearing to watch the proceedings and show physical support for Syed (Hesse, 2016).

Serial is not the only podcast to have been cited in court documents. In 2016, Judge Mary Staley mentioned the *Breakdown* podcast, produced by the *Atlanta-Journal Constitution*, in her decision to grant a change of venue request in the case of Justin Ross Harris, a father convicted of murder for leaving his toddler in a hot vehicle (Rankin & Halicks, 2016). Another case in Georgia, the disappearance/murder of Tara Grinstead, was covered by the podcast *Up and Vanished*. While the podcast was not credited with solving the case, numerous officials mentioned the renewed focus that the podcast provided as being a catalyst for the arrest of Ryan Duke (Dudley, 2018). The case had been considered unsolved but open, commonly referred to as "cold," for over a decade, and even after receiving national coverage on television and offering a \$100,000 reward, the podcast was credited with providing the necessary impetus to make an arrest. The

Georgia Bureau of Investigation ultimately thanked “the media” for their involvement (Dudley, 2018).

American Public Media (APM) has covered two cases with national interest on their podcast, *In the Dark*. In season one, they explored the 1989 kidnapping and murder of 11-year-old Jacob Wetterling to investigate why the case went unsolved for so many years. Following the podcast, the sheriff of Stearns County (where Jacob was abducted), resigned after allegations of mishandling the case (Baran, 2018). In season two, APM covered the case of Curtis Flowers, a Mississippi inmate on death row who has been tried six times for the same crime (Baran, 2019). During production of the podcast, lawyers for the defense had their appeal denied by the Mississippi Supreme Court and subsequently appealed to the Supreme Court of the United States. In 2019, the Supreme Court of the United States agreed to hear the petition. In March of the same year, defense counsel and the Attorney General of Mississippi presented their arguments. Waiting outside the courthouse on March 20, 2019, were over 400 people interested in attending the oral arguments (Baran, 2019). As the podcast host interviewed those in line, she found people who had traveled from as far as Japan, those who had been in line since 4:00 a.m., women passing out “Free Curtis” t-shirts, and someone who said, “You know this is a podcast line, right?” (Baran, 2019). The podcast coverage is not credited with propelling the case to the U.S. Supreme Court, but interest in the case due to podcast coverage is undeniable.

The popularity of true crime podcasts is not surprising because the genre has been around for decades. The allure of the true crime genre has been studied by scholars across various media formats (Durham, Elrod, & Kinkade, 1995; Livingstone, Allen, & Reiner,

2001; Punnett, 2017; Surette & Otto, 2002; Vicary & Fraley, 2010). However, with the launch of *Serial* in 2014, the true crime audience found a new passion, podcasts. In the last six years, almost 200 true crime podcasts have launched, and the genre regularly occupies many of the spots on the Top 20 podcast chart in iTunes (“True Crime Podcasts,” 2016; “#Toppodcast,” 2018).

As a relatively new medium, podcast production and the podcast audience represent an under researched area of journalism and mass communication scholarship. Previous studies have shown that the true crime podcast audience is predominantly female (73%) (Boling & Hull, 2018), and that listeners tune in to podcasts to seek entertainment, for convenience, and to avoid boredom, while women are attracted to the true crime genre because they are drawn to female protagonists and they feel like the information they learn in the stories may be useful for survival (Vicary & Fraley, 2010). Recently, a subset of this audience has emerged – female domestic violence survivors listening to true crime podcasts as a form of exposure therapy (Skolnik, 2017). This trend highlights an interesting gap in previous scholarship that has primarily considered podcasts and the true crime genre to be purely entertainment-driven.

In addition to scholarly work on podcasting, researchers have also studied the true crime audience, the relationship of the genre with actual crime statistics, accurate portrayal within the genre, and even developed genre-specific measurement scales (Russell, 1995; Surette & Otto, 2002; Vicary & Fraley, 2010). However, only one known study to date has examined the uses and gratifications of the true crime audience through the lens of podcast media (Boling & Hull, 2018). This study, of which I am a co-author, originated after I began listening to true crime podcasts during my commute. After

interviewing podcast producers for a class project (Boling, 2019a), I later worked with a fellow researcher to survey the podcast audiences using the online forum Reddit (Boling & Hull, 2018). In addition to finding that the true crime audience was predominantly female (73%), we also identified a difference in motivating factors for using this medium among genders (2018). Female listeners were found to be more likely than males to use true crime podcasts for social interaction, escape, and voyeurism. With a predominantly female audience shown to interact with the medium in gender-specific ways, the popularity of the true crime genre and the interest in the podcast audience made me want to explore these issues more deeply.

While the true crime landscape continues to see growth post-*Serial*, so do podcasts in general. Podcasts are on-demand user-selected audio content that allows listeners to go beyond the geographic and temporal restrictions of radio and listen to content at their leisure, similar to video streaming services Netflix and Hulu (Menduni, 2007). Edison Research has conducted a study on the podcast audience each year since 2006 and has found that as of 2019, 70% of those surveyed were aware of the term podcasting (up from 22% in 2006) (“The Podcast Consumer,” 2019). In addition to an increase in awareness, the most recent survey found that 51% of respondents had listened to a podcast, which is a dramatic increase from 11% in 2006. About 32% consider themselves monthly listeners, and 22% consider themselves weekly listeners, an increase from 9% and 7% respectively in 2008. However, the most notable difference comes from how people are listening to podcasts. In 2013, 58% of respondents listened on their computers, and in 2019, only 25% listened on a computer while 65% listened on a portable device (“The Podcast Consumer,” 2019). This shows a marked shift in

technology use that corresponded with a change in the overall production and quality of the podcasts produced, contributing to the growth of the medium.

Scholars have also examined podcasts from the perspective of the producer and the unique, participatory culture that podcasts tend to cultivate (Markman, 2011; Wrather, 2016). Many scholars have documented the history of the medium as well as the terminology involved, and compared podcasts to radio, VCRs, satellite radio and audio storytelling (Berry, 2006, 2015, 2016a; Bottomley, 2015a; Cwynar, 2015; Markman, 2011, 2015; McHugh, 2016). Specific to this study, in addition to my work on the uses and gratifications of the true crime podcast audience (2018), several other studies have found that social networks play a notable role in podcast trial and adoption and that the audio component of the medium is a key feature of why consumers become podcast fans (Berry, 2015; McClung & Johnson, 2010; Mou & Lin, 2015; Perks & Turner, 2019; Wrather, 2016).

Two studies have called for additional work on podcast audiences to examine usage motives. In 2015, Kris Markman was the discussant for a symposium in the *Journal of Radio and Audio Media*, and in her conclusion, she argued that the studies presented showed the importance of audience interaction for the success of podcasts and called for researchers to, "...investigate what draws people to different types of podcasts, how they listen, and perhaps start to explain why some podcasts go viral, and why others do not." In 2016, Kyle Wrather examined podcasts on the Maximum Fun network and argued that "...a deeper ethnographic study of podcasting listeners, habits and consumption practices may offer a deeper understanding of what motivates podcast listeners and the role podcasting plays in everyday life..." My study aims to fill this gap

in scholarship and answer the calls of previous researchers to explore a specific subset of the true crime podcasting audience and illustrate how this emerging media is impacting their everyday lives.

1.2 CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To properly position this study in the context of mass communication scholarship, I focus on three main areas of study: audience reception of media forms and messages, audience interactions with media producers, and the media messages themselves. Using prior audience reception studies as a guiding force, I place this study of true crime podcast audiences alongside studies like Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* and Radhika Parameswaran's work in postcolonial India with readers of romance fiction (Parameswaran, 1999; Radway, 1984). These previous studies, both qualitative in nature, offer key insights into how particular media audiences make sense of and interact with certain media genres and formats. Much like Radway and Parameswaran, I am attempting to illuminate a unique subset of a larger audience and examine their perspectives on, and interactions with specific media messages, in light of their shared experiences. Keeping the audience and their media use as my central focus throughout the study, I rely heavily on prior audience reception work for my conceptual and methodological framework.

From a theoretical perspective, I will incorporate uses and gratifications theory (Katz, 1959) into my audience reception study as a way to explain the relationships between audience and media as well as audience and producer. Uses and gratifications focuses on what the audience is doing with the media, not on what the media are doing to the audience. A core tenet of both uses and gratifications theory and audience reception studies is that of active audiences. This notion centers media audiences as active

consumers rather than as passive receptacles, making active decisions about which media they select, consume, and share with others. Expanding on active audiences, in 1974, Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch argued that to examine the media properly, scholars need to consider the environmental, psychological, and socioeconomic factors of audiences. Consumers do not live in a bubble; many factors impact their media decisions. If we examine media without considering the human element of consumption, we are overlooking a large part of the equation.

In addition to the conceptual framework of audience reception, I also draw from feminist theoretical perspectives, specifically feminist standpoint. Instead of proposing this as a theory or an overarching concept, I argue that feminist standpoint is a mindset or a lens from which to interpret the behaviors, beliefs, and media components of a study. Initially proposed by Nancy Hartsock in 1983, feminist standpoint argues that women have a unique understanding of the world because their lives differ structurally and systematically from those of men. Since then, communication scholars have used feminist standpoint to examine how a feminist standpoint can benefit journalists working on gender-related stories (Steiner, 2018), Latina perceptions on gender and ethnicity in the public relations industry (Pompper, 2007), and feminist collaboration during social media movements (Boling, 2019b). Building on the foundational work by Radway and Parameswaran, I argue that these podcast consumers create a virtual community, being mentally collective to enact societal change. Using the notion of a collective identity as a guide, I examine this audience as a community because of their shared circumstances and media choices. As a collective, I examine the ways in which their behaviors and beliefs are shaped by and through specific media forms. Through the lens of feminist standpoint,

this study adds new theoretical insights to both audience reception studies and mass communication scholarship. Examining media use qualitatively, through the voices of women in the audience, allows this study to unpack, directly from their lived experiences and interactions, why and how they are using the media. Their interpretations are not categorized by predetermined scales and previous research findings; they are coded openly and uniquely analyzed based on their individual perspectives as a true crime podcast listener and a domestic violence survivor.

While other media scholars have examined uses and gratifications of specific media, some examining predominantly female audiences and/or respondents, (Boling & Hull, 2018; Brown, Lauricella, Douai, & Zaidi, 2012; Herzog, 1944; Wei, 2006), feminist theoretical perspectives are often largely absent from media use conversations and analyses. I examine women listeners through a feminist lens because women receive and interpret media in unique ways due to their place in society. My study contributes to the body of knowledge on mass communication scholarship from both a production and audience reception perspective, through the critical lens of feminist standpoint and has both theoretical and practical implications as the body of research on podcasting continues to grow, and podcast producers seek to attract and better understand their audiences.

1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to understand how female domestic violence survivors make sense of true crime podcasts and how they incorporate it into their daily lives. I explore how they are listening to true crime podcasts and how they interpret and use the information presented. This study delves into the audience, the producers, and the

media messages themselves to present a more holistic understanding of how podcasts and the true crime genre are shaping the media landscape. This project addresses the overarching question of why women are drawn to this medium and this genre, and how this unique subset of domestic violence survivors is using and making meaning from the media. It also examines the political economy of podcast production and the unique audience interactions that true crime podcasters invite.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS & APPROACH

The following research questions will guide my study as I explore how this media and this genre are speaking to these women.

RQ1: Why are female domestic violence survivors drawn to true crime podcasts?

RQ2: How are female domestic violence survivors interpreting and using the media?

RQ3: How do domestic violence survivors incorporate their experiences into their podcast listening decisions?

RQ4: How are true crime podcast producers interacting with this audience?

RQ5: How do the true crime podcasts that my participants describe as their favorite depict domestic violence?

While listening to *The Big Listen*, a podcast that discusses the world of podcasts, a guest piqued my interest by explaining the Op-Ed they had recently written for *The New York Times*. In this piece, Jes Skolnik discussed attraction to true crime podcasts as a form of exposure therapy after surviving domestic violence (Fenston, 2017; Skolnik, 2017). After the piece was published, women with similar backgrounds and an affinity for true crime

podcasts began to contact Skolnik (Fenston, 2017). I also contacted Skolnik as well, asking to schedule an interview for this project.

Thus, this project began with in-depth interviews with women who identify as both domestic violence survivors and fans of true crime podcasts. I solicited volunteers for the study using the social media sites Reddit and Facebook. During the interviews with participants, I asked them to rank their top three true crime podcasts. Once my participants had identified their favorite true crime podcasts, I reached out to all four podcasts mentioned that covered domestic violence cases as well as others in the top seven. This list was determined based on the number of times participants mentioned specific podcasts in their top three. I included not just those that were mentioned the most, but those that had been mentioned at least twice as either number one or number two. In total, I contacted ten podcasters for potential interviews, and I interviewed six, including the podcast participants ranked as their top favorite (*Crime Junkie*) and the favorite podcast focusing on a domestic violence situation (*COLD*) (which was number two overall). See Table 5.2 for a list of all podcasts mentioned and their overall ranking. I was able to interview all of the podcasters mentioned by my participants that worked on domestic violence cases. After interviewing both the participants and the podcasters, I scheduled an interview with my key informant, Jes Skolnik (Skolnik, 2017). All interviews and all episodes from the top domestic violence podcast were transcribed for analysis using Nvivo and Rev transcription services.

This study is etic in nature, building off of key mass communication literature as well as feminist scholarship. It is designed as a single case study, female domestic violence survivors who listen to true crime podcasts, with three embedded units of

analysis: producers, audience, and media (Yin, 2018). These three units of analysis offer a deep understanding of producer intent, audience interpretations, and media messages, resulting in triangulation of my findings. Kellner (2011) argued that audience reception studies should include examinations of production and political economy, a textual analysis of the media, and an investigation of audience interpretation and cultural meaning. My dissertation seeks to investigate each of these points of analysis in order to produce a more thorough inquiry into the unique relationship between the audience and producers and the media.

Throughout this study, the term “domestic violence survivor” refers to anyone who has previously been a victim of intimate partner violence, as defined by the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV), “...the willful intimidation, physical assault, battery, sexual assault, and/or other abusive behavior as part of a systematic pattern of power and control perpetrated by one intimate partner against another. It includes physical violence, sexual violence, threats, and emotional/psychological abuse” (“Domestic Violence,” n.d.). It is not part of the interview protocol that my respondents define how they are a domestic violence survivor, only that they self-identify as such. I did not give them a definition of domestic violence survivor or ask any details about their personal experience. They each responded to my request for participants and confirmed that they fit the parameters of the study. Through our conversations, I noticed several variations on the violence mentioned, some as children with parents and some with boyfriends or husbands.

1.5 OVERVIEW AND SUMMARY

This audience reception study examines why and how female domestic violence survivors are using true crime podcasts. Using the lens of feminist standpoint and a qualitative, critical cultural perspective, I explore the uses of the medium by this unique group of female listeners as well as how they make meaning from the podcasts that they consume. Findings inform the areas of mass communication scholarship on podcasting, audio media, and audience reception from a feminist perspective. A critical cultural lens adds additional insight into how this audience describes their media use and the role that they believe media plays in their own lives. Ultimately, this study shows the importance of a feminist perspective in mass communication scholarship as well as the role that media can play (either intentionally or unintentionally) in the lives of consumers. This study seeks to answer why and how this audience is interpreting and using a specific genre of podcasts, and how the audiences and producers are interacting with each other to process lived experiences, educate other listeners, increase general awareness of domestic violence and impact the criminal justice system. This work is intended to add depth to podcast and audience reception research and provide insight into how media producers can assist with, or drive, institutional and societal change. This study helps understand how media messages impact a marginalized group of women, survivors of domestic violence, and the unique ways podcast producers collaborate with audiences to create media that shapes impressions and support for a societal issue while providing a sense of healing and normalcy to victims.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

While podcasts have evolved over the last two decades, so has scholarship on the topic. At its onset, podcast scholars produced detailed comparisons with other audio media such as radio and audiobooks and provided historical accounts of how the medium was launched (Berry, 2006, 2015, 2016a, 2016b; Bottomley, 2015a; McHugh, 2016; Menduni, 2007). Only recently have scholars begun to examine podcast content and audience reception to the medium, mostly in the last five years (Buoziš, 2017; Florini, 2015, 2017; McClung & Johnson, 2010; Mou & Lin, 2015; Perks & Turner, 2019; Wrather, 2016). To place my study in the current body of podcasting literature, I focus on four key components of podcasting scholarship: history and industry impact, content programming, key features of the medium, and drivers for adoption. Linking podcasting scholarship to audience reception research and feminist standpoint perspectives, I will show the praxis of media and theory that builds the framework for this study.

2.1 PODCAST PRODUCTION AND ADOPTION

The term “podcasting” appears to be linked directly to the iPod, but it was originally coined by someone outside of Apple – Ben Hammersley, a reporter for *The Guardian* (Berry, 2006). While reporting on the growth of content designed for MP3 players, Hammersley posed a question to his readers regarding “what to call” this medium and offered several options (Hammersley, 2004). “Podcasting” seemed to catch on, and within a year it had become the predominate moniker. Industry insiders and

podcasting scholars often refer to 2005 as the year of the podcast, primarily because that was the year that the *New Oxford American Dictionary* selected “podcast” as their Word of the Year (Bottomley, 2015a); however, podcasting did not become mainstream until much later.

Podcasts have been around since Apple created the iPod in 2001 but did not “come of age” until a new version of Rich Site Summary (RSS) made it possible for audio files to be distributed in RSS feeds (Bottomley, 2015a). Around this same time, the first iPhone was released (2007), completely altering the course of mobile telephony (Sandler, 2017). The iPod, designed to be a digital music player, has been called “the true heir of the Sony Walkman,” but it quickly added file storage as well as photo/video storage and audiobooks to its repertoire to distinguish itself from more generic MP3 players (Costello, 2019; Menduni, 2007).

Several crucial technology advancements have played roles in the emergence of podcasts. First, both the hardware (MP3 players, iPods, the iPhone), and the software that Apple developed to manage digital content (iTunes) has seen some dramatic shifts. Apple reached the one billion subscriptions mark for podcasts in the summer of 2013, but it was not until iTunes 4.9, launched in 2015, that Apple offered full podcast support in iTunes (Bottomley, 2015a). The fact that the iPhone, iTunes, and podcast media all launched in the same decade cannot be overlooked. *Serial* producer Ira Glass, credits, “a lucky congruence of a bunch of new, really good podcasts, but also the fact that the technology has changed [and] made for a lot of new people finally hearing podcasts” with the success of *Serial* (Berry, 2015).

Scholars have shown that social connections (especially those on social media) are instrumental in the adoption of podcasts. For example, McClung and Johnson (2010) looked at the motives of podcast users and found that a significant factor in predicting podcast usage was the social aspect: heavy users like podcasts because they enjoy discussing them with friends. In 2015, Berry found that 67% of listeners heard about *Serial* through friends or social media and that 85% of *Serial* listeners had told a friend about the podcast. In addition to discussing the podcast with friends, 45% of respondents said that they also mentioned the podcast on social media sites. In 2019, Perks and Turner conducted five focus groups with podcast listeners and found that enjoyment of podcasts is primarily driven by the customized nature and portability of the media. Listeners feel like they are learning while multitasking, and also enjoy the opportunity to interact with hosts and other audience members. Another popular podcast, *Welcome to Night Vale*, has been called a successful case study for viral marketing. Having never spent any money on advertising, the podcast claims that their growth has come primarily from online fandom (Bottomley, 2015b).

Much like other media, podcasts have several potential barriers to entry. First, someone must own the technology needed to listen to a podcast. The purchase of a computer, tablet, smartphone, or other mobile device could easily price some people interested in podcasts out of the market. Then, once you own the necessary technology, you need to learn how to get access to podcasts. In addition to devices, listeners also need to select a platform. There are a multitude of applications and websites that provide access to podcast content. Once you access the podcast through your chosen device and application, you need to make another choice to physically play the podcast. For podcasts

produced weekly or as a season, this is a continuous choice to keep making time for consumption. These steps can be complicated, and there is the potential of user frustration and technical problems at many points during the process. Without prompting from their social network, audience members may not continue to pursue the medium actively (Berry, 2015; McClung & Johnson, 2010).

It is impossible to understand the popularity of particular podcasts without first understanding the history of the medium itself. The most notable podcast is *Serial*, and prior studies have examined not only the impact that a show as successful as *Serial* can have on a medium, but also the broader media landscape (Berry, 2015). Koenig's use of Syed's voice in the production of the podcast challenged the way crime narratives have been historically presented (Buozis, 2017). Additionally, her journalistic style and use of multiple voices in her presentation of the cases questioned the notion of "any single authoritative truth," consistent with the feminist poststructuralist argument that our subjective experience/truth is constantly evolving and impacting the environment around us to change as well (Butler, 1997; Doane, McCormick, & Sorce, 2017). While Koenig does identify as a feminist, she does not label her work as such. However, each of the three seasons of *Serial* have examined issues of social justice and power structures, a key theme in feminist standpoint theory (Doane, McCormick, & Sorce, 2017; Hartsock, 1983).

In addition to *Serial*, another popular true crime podcast, *My Favorite Murder*, straddles the genre boundaries of crime and comedy. With comedic hosts Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark, *My Favorite Murder* describes itself as a "true crime comedy podcast" ("About," n.d.). Showing up regularly in the top 20 on iTunes, the show has

expanded to include live performances, novels, and merchandise (“About,” n.d.). Supporters are members of the “Fan Cult” and call themselves “murderinos” (“About,” n.d.). “Murderinos” have regular in-person meetups around the country and cultivate an active online presence on social media sites (Hawgood, 2018; Lavery, 2018).

Another popular podcast, *Welcome to Night Vale*, was created in 2012 under the premise of being a radio show for a fictional town where strange things happen every day. It has since expanded into merchandise, novels, live shows, and an upcoming TV series (Kiefer, 2017). The popularity of this show has been attributed to viral fandom and the revival of radio drama that was popular in the early to mid-1900s (Bottomley, 2015b). This podcast format has also opened the door to other successful “podcast theatre” and “audio fiction” productions such as *Limetown*, *The Message*, and *LifeAfter*. Scholars have also examined other key genres and shows to demonstrate the importance of the medium for niche audiences, including *This Week in Blackness*, which targets a Black audience, and *Hardcore History*, for history buffs (Florini, 2017; Salvati, 2009). Both of these podcasts have been shown to offer audiences a unique and engaging product that challenges the prevailing cultural and historical narratives (Florini, 2017; Salvati, 2009).

Along with the impact of popular shows, podcast scholars have also explored key features of the medium, including portability, audio intimacy and audience participation (Berry, 2016a, 2016b; Buozis, 2017; Florini, 2015; Lindgren, 2016; Markman, 2015; Perks & Turner, 2019). Users regularly cite portability and the power to multitask while listening to podcasts, or how a podcast makes their commute to work go by faster as key adoption drivers (Perks & Turner, 2019). In his 2016 analysis of podcasts on the Maximum Fun network, Kyle Wrather proposed that “Podcasting combines radio’s

intimacy with the portability and personalization of digital media forms to create a new and interesting space for media and cultural interaction.” In 2015, Sarah Florini looked specifically at the role Black podcasters have played in the emergence of the podcast medium and argued that this portability factor (coupled with audio intimacy) had the ability to reproduce the feeling of being in a Black social space like a church or a barbershop. Leaning on prior research, Florini demonstrated that mobile listening via headphones could create an “aural cocoon that sonically insulates them from their surroundings” (Bull, 2007).

This predominant feature of audio media being “intimate” was found in several studies (Berry, 2016a, 2016b; Buoziš, 2017; Florini, 2015; Lindgren, 2016; Markman, 2015; Perks & Turner, 2019; Wrather 2016). While none of the studies explicitly mentioned a parasocial, or non-reciprocal relationship, between hosts and listeners, many of them alluded to the idea that the podcast audience feels like they have a connection with the host because the host is speaking directly into their ears (usually via headphones). Since many podcasts employ an informal, casual style of storytelling, to the audience, it can feel like they are having a conversation with a friend (Markman, 2015). Several studies cited headphone listening as being a personal or private act that cultivates intimacy because the audience is making a conscious decision to allow the media to infiltrate this personal space (Berry, 2016a, 2016b; Perks & Turner, 2019).

Since consumption of podcasts is described as being personal and private (bordering on parasocial), it is not surprising that studies have also mentioned the connection that hosts have with their audience due to the interactive nature of the medium. Podcast hosts and producers regularly solicit audience participation through

Twitter, email, Facebook, Reddit, and dedicated voice mail numbers (Florini, 2015; Wrather, 2016). In his analysis of the Maximum Fun network of podcasts, Wrather (2016) examined how hosts interact with fans on sites such as Reddit and involve fans in decisions related to the show. In addition to having audience participation via voicemails and online forums, some shows, such as *My Favorite Murder*, dedicate entire shows to listener generated content. One of the shows on the Maximum Fun network, *Judge John Hodgman*, acts like the *Judge Judy* of podcasting, where each episode is centered around a dispute between listeners. In this scenario, the judge is actually using listeners to generate content for every show and then interacts with them after production as the fans comment on the “court’s” decision (Wrather, 2016).

True crime podcasts are well known for audience participation. The key alibi witness that came forward in the Syed case, covered in the first season of *Serial*, realized the importance of her testimony in part, because of the audience response (Truesdell, 2016). A follow-up podcast to *Serial*, *Undisclosed*, also covered the Syed case, and they found a key witness for the defense willing to testify on the autopsy report via podcast audience solicitation (Chaudry, Miller & Simpson, 2015). In a previous study on true crime podcasts, I interviewed Colin Miller, one of the hosts of *Undisclosed*. He described the audience interaction as being critical to production of the podcast:

You turn it [a true crime story] into a podcast and you have people who listen to the podcast, they can then e-mail us, reach out to us on social media. They might be someone who lived in Baltimore and went to Woodlawn High School [with Syed] or lived in Rome and knew the people involved [with the case in Season two] and they can give us information. It’s very much an interactive process

where it's a two-way flow of information and people. I think part of the *Serial* revolution is that people are able to listen and participate, and in some cases, have been involved (Boling, 2019a).

This audience interactivity expands beyond genre to medium, and scholars continually point to it as a key feature in podcast adoption.

Beyond audience participation, scholars have also examined producers and the production of podcasts. In 2011, Markman explored what drives someone to become a podcaster and found that many producers enjoyed the technology and process of producing a podcast, but that interactions and interpersonal relationships are key motivators. Research has also found that educating the public is a driving factor in producers' motivation to launch podcasts. In my 2017 study of podcast producers, participants mentioned that they felt like one of their fundamental roles as a true crime podcast producer was to educate the audience about the criminal justice system, including explaining important terms and the general processes and procedures of adjudicating a case (Boling, 2019a).

Analyzing true crime podcasts, their production, and their audiences within these contexts sets up this current study in hopes of offering new insights into the role and impact of podcasts. In this audience reception study, I examine the importance of social networks for both adoption and continued use of podcasts, specifically looking at how female listeners rely on podcasts socially and how they function as an interpretive community. I also analyze specific podcasts that my informants identify as key drivers for their podcast usage, paying particular attention to the key features of the medium that

facilitate audience interaction, encourage participation, and potentially drive social change.

2.2 MAKING MEANING THROUGH AUDIENCE RECEPTION

Henry Jenkins argues that the mission of audience research is simple: “Reception theory and audience research asks basic questions about how we make sense of the [media] and what [it] mean[s] in our lives” (2000, para. 8). This assumes that audiences are active participants in media consumption and that they are “...engaged in a process of making, rather than simply absorbing, meanings” (2000, para. 8). Revisiting this idea of an audience as an interpretive community, Jenkins goes on to argue that what audience reception scholars are hoping to find is “shared patterns of meanings or shared strategies of interpretation” (2000, para. 11). He emphasizes that genre interpretation is key, as are societal constructs. Maintaining that we learn what to expect based on genre classification, Jenkins furthers his argument by stating that our genre classification determines our response to the media. When we select a specific genre, such as true crime, we anticipate how the story will develop, we include meanings we have assigned from previous experiences, and we extrapolate details and information that are not explicitly present (2000). One genre that Jenkins has explored extensively is fandom within the television audience (1992). Widely popular shows such as *Star Trek* are known to have an almost obsessive fan base that appropriates content, illustrating Jenkins’ concept of an interpretive community within audience reception research (1992). Jenkins argues that if a consumer is continually selecting media from the same genre, they are building on this genre construct as well as how they make meanings from the information presented (2000).

Audience reception scholars explore the intersection of media, audience, and culture to examine the interpretive relationship that exists as well as the application of that connection within a broader societal context. Prior research is vast, but for my study, I rely on three main insights from this body of work: 1) the impact of genre on audience reception, 2) the disruption of feminist theoretical perspectives on audience studies, and 3) the importance of qualitative methodologies in audience research. Building on previous literature, I consider this audience of podcast listeners an “interpretive community,” defined by Jenkins as people who share “common strategies for making meaning” (2000). Using the connecting thread of “meaning making,” and the insights from qualitative feminist perspectives, my goal is to analyze the ways in which domestic violence survivors make sense of true crime podcast media, how they integrate messages into their lived experiences, interact with hosts, producers, and other listeners, build community either physically or virtually, and how this exchange impacts society.

I rely primarily on two prior female audience reception studies as a guide in my dissertation, both of which used genre as a key component of their study (Parameswaran, 1999; Radway, 1984). These scholars examined women who read romance novels, one in India and one in the Midwest. While the genre was the same, how the audience interpreted the media and incorporated it into their everyday lives was different and unique to those women and their culture. Radway and Parameswaran both discussed the idea of genre guilt in their research. For Radway’s participants, genre guilt was described as guilt over the money they spend and the ridicule they often experience from family members and the media for selecting and enjoying this genre (Radway, 1984). For the participants in Parameswaran’s study, the guilt was primarily driven by family members

that thought the novels were not something that a young lady should be reading (Parmeswaran, 1999). However, because the women read these novels in English, their professors applauded their command of the English language and others who saw them reading an English novel perceived them to be upper class and well-educated. Radway's participants read the novels as an escape from their daily duties, and Parmeswaran's participants read the novels to master English. Both groups of women enjoyed the content as well as the benefits they sought, and both experienced some form of genre guilt, but the way they interacted with the media and incorporated it into their daily lives was uniquely different (Parmeswaran, 1999; Radway, 1984).

Building on that, I explore the idea of genre guilt in the true crime genre. If enjoying the true crime genre has negative social implications, those feelings of guilt may influence both consumption and sharing of this media (Hall, 2007). As domestic violence survivors, the women in my study may experience a more complicated version of genre guilt than either Radway's or Parmeswaran's participants. Not only could they feel guilty about consuming media that is seen to be macabre, but also guilt from consuming media that mirrors their own life experiences. If our society is creating an environment where people do not feel comfortable talking about their true crime podcast listening habits, the audience may minimize their involvement with the media in conversation. This feeling of discomfort could also impact their thoughts, beliefs, and interpretation of the media. Hall argues that genre is a socially constructed concept that goes beyond a simple description (2007). As my audience is making meaning from true crime podcasts, they are also constructing perceptions of the genre as a whole within the culture. This can

impact their interpretation of the media as well as how they internalize the material covered.

Closely related to the concept of genre guilt, I will also be examining my participant's relationship to shame. Psychologist Brené Brown studies the relationship between women and shame, as well as the role that media plays in our perception of self and society (2006). Brown defines shame as being significantly different from guilt. Shame is the feeling or belief in "a flawed or bad self," whereas guilt is "a feeling that results from behaving in a flawed or bad way" (Brown, 2006). This difference is key in my study. My respondents may be selecting or avoiding a particular genre due to the shame of their lived experiences, or they may be feeling guilty because societal norms judge that genre to be "creepy," "dark," and "disturbing" (or a combination of all three). Comparing and contrasting these complex feelings regarding their listening habits will add an essential layer to how my participants interact with this media and integrate it into their experiences.

In addition to genre, the gender identity of my participants will also play a key role in how they make meaning from media messages. In her study on the romance novel reading habits of young women in postcolonial India, Radhika Parameswaran echoed a call for more audience reception studies on female-specific audiences using a feminist lens originally posed by Sandra Harding (Harding, 1987; Parameswaran, 2003). She argued that predominantly female audiences are "...molded by authoritative (and persuasive) media discourses but are not 'passive recipients' of dominant messages" (p. 317). While women may live in a hegemonic male-dominated society, their interactions with media go far beyond mindlessly absorbing messages. Their unique place in society

gives them the ability to make meaning from media in a way that is different from others. Using a feminist lens, I examine the discourses of power and patriarchy embedded in societal institutions, specifically in the media landscape, as well as in the criminal and judicial branches of our government. Following the call from Parameswaran (2001) and Harding (1987), my study will consider interpretation of media messages from the unique experiences of my participants.

Other work has examined additional forms of true crime media. In 2018, Kennedy analyzed the Reddit forums for *Making a Murderer* to see how the audience was responding to the Netflix documentary. He discovered very complex views regarding the criminal justice system in light of specific societal contexts. Findings included feelings of empathy, confusion, anger, frustration, heartbreak, fear, and helplessness – often polar opposite responses. When you layer those feelings on top of the beliefs of efficacy in the criminal justice system, the cumulative effect becomes multifaceted. Kennedy’s qualitative approach to audience reception work “examines and unpacks the entire spectrum of human emotions” (p. 392). Speaking specifically to crime media, he argued that the way cases are presented by media outlets often challenges traditional beliefs, supporting the idea that audience members may question patriarchal structures. Contending that qualitative methodologies have the unique ability to examine the nuance of audience reaction and deal with the complexity of human emotion, Kennedy demonstrates the importance of contextual understanding in analyzing crime media.

In an earlier essay on the importance of qualitative audience research, Klaus Jensen outlined four critical factors of qualitative receptions studies: situational, media, audience, and analytical (1987). Arguing that reception is a process, Jensen said,

“quantitative analysis aims for the *products* of meaning, while qualitative analysis focuses on the *process* of their production” (p. 32). Using his proposed framework and examining reception as a process, Jensen contends that qualitative methodologies are necessary in audience reception studies in order to properly understand the societal situation, the “genre conventions” of the media, the unique audience groups, and the analysis of the audience experience (p. 33).

2.3 HOW AUDIENCES USE MEDIA

Scholars often entwine audience reception work with uses and gratifications theory in mass communication – if not from a specific theoretical definition, at least from a conceptual one (Hall, 2008; Jensen, 1987). Uses and gratifications theory examines what audiences do with the media they consume – how they “use” it in their lives (Katz, 1959). Katz argued that personal values impact choices, reception, and interpretation of the media. When scholars examine how an audience “uses” the media today, it is typically done quantitatively using a pre-determined list of uses and gratifications (Chen, 2011; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2016; Lariscy, Tinkham, & Sweetser, 2011; Liu, Cheung, & Lee, 2010; Pai & Anott, 2013; Sumter, Vandenbosch, & Ligtenberg, 2017). While a majority of uses and gratifications studies are quantitative or mixed methods, the roots of this core mass communication theory are driven by qualitative insights. Early researchers like Herzog (1944) and Mendelsohn (1964) believed that a deeper interrogation of the “why” behind a list of uses and gratifications with interviews and focus groups was necessary to flesh out statistical findings.

In 1974, Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch asserted that the primary motivation for media use is an unspoken need for social contact. Using this base need for social

connection, they argued that when you consider why people select the media that they consume, you have to consider the broader context of all needs, not just media-related needs. A complicated relationship drives this selection, including psychological, sociological, and environmental conditions. To truly understand how audiences use media, Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch propose that researchers should study human needs to see how the media connects individuals with society (1974). This concept of studying the relationship of human needs to media consumption is what makes uses and gratifications a core mass communication theory. It assumes we do not live in isolation, and it seeks to connect the complexity of our lives to the media that we consume. Looking at that interaction, scholars can attempt to understand not just why we consume media, but how our choices impact our lives.

While many uses and gratifications researchers have used quantitative methods, several scholars have employed qualitative methods to explore media usage. For example, Burakgazi and Yildirim (2014) examined how students use media to learn about science. Others have explored how African American women in Kentucky learn healthy food habits (Smith, Della, Rajack-Talley, D'Silva, Potter, Markowitz, Craig, Cheatham, & Carthan, 2013), motivations for using an online agnostic discussion group (Richardson, 2003), how a Black Baptist community uses Christian media (Jones, 2011), benefits and barriers for visually and hearing impaired adults using the Internet (Abeelee & Roe, 2012), the role of Twitter in an NFL player dispute (Sanderson, 2014), and how older players use video games (De Schutter & Malliet, 2014). Many of these studies examine a unique subset of a larger audience, supporting their use of qualitative methodology to delve into uncommon uses and gratifications.

Specific to my study, Perks and Turner (2019) examined motivations for podcast usage via focus groups to allow for open-ended discussion. They discovered that a main driver for podcast usage was the ability to multitask, be entertained, and learn while doing something else (such as cleaning or commuting). They argued that “users are not just controlling the listening experience: They are better able to control what *else* they are doing while they are listening,” (2019, p. 100). The focus group discussions resulted in five uses and gratifications for podcast media: media displacement, customization options, multitasking abilities, parasocial relationships, and social interaction. Several of these uses have not been explored in previous studies, supporting the idea that a qualitative investigation of media use can produce unique and valuable insights.

One canonical study that drives this dissertation research is Herzog’s 1944 examination of daytime serial listeners (similar to television soap operas). At that time, Herzog reported that “at least 20 million women in this country keep a regular rendezvous with these serials,” as justification for her study (1944, p. 3). She conducted a content analysis to look at the messages in the serials as well as in-person and phone interviews with the listeners to gauge the effects of the media. Surveying 5,325 women in Iowa with follow-up case studies in New York and Pittsburgh, Herzog considered social activities and intellectual interests as well as level of education and media and public library usage. She discovered that women with less formal education tended to be drawn to daytime serials, but she continued to probe into their voting habits, personality characteristics, and even how much they worry. She also discovered that avid daytime serial listeners tend to be heavy users of radio in general and fairly loyal to the medium for both entertainment and news (1944). Herzog’s study was both qualitative and

quantitative in nature, using survey and interview methodologies and setting a precedent for future studies in uses and gratifications. Specific to my study, Herzog's examination of a predominantly female audience using an audio-centric media through the lens of uses and gratifications is key. Herzog showed the importance of open-ended questions in uses and gratifications research and the potential for gender-specific uses of the media.

Several studies have looked specifically at the uses of podcast media (Chung & Kim, 2015; McClung & Johnson, 2010; Perks & Turner, 2019). In a previous study, I examined the motivations of the true crime podcast audience and found that users were motivated by the entertainment value of podcasts, the convenience of the medium, and because they wanted to cure boredom (Boling & Hull, 2018). The predominantly female audience was also shown to be more likely than men to listen to podcasts for social interaction, escape, and voyeurism (2018). This survey of the true crime podcast audience echoes several findings from previous studies at the macro level and demonstrates that the reasons people choose to adopt podcasts can be medium-specific and/or genre-specific (Chung & Kim, 2015; McClung & Johnson, 2010). Our study used survey measurements from previous podcast uses and gratifications research on students using podcasts in an educational environment (Chung & Kim, 2015). While prior scale use is an important first step in examining a new media form, it does limit the findings to the uses present in the previous scale. In this particular case, it is interesting that the quantitative findings from our study in 2018 are markedly different from the qualitative findings from Perks and Turner in 2019, which found that users enjoyed the customization options, multitasking, and the feelings of companionship and interaction. Of course, the findings do not have to be mutually exclusive, and since we sampled a

unique audience subset, it is possible that their findings would be different. However, this potential contradiction in findings for the uses and gratifications of podcast media shows the importance of more in-depth research on the topic and underscores the need for context in audience-specific studies. It also shows the potential power of qualitative research methods for uses and gratifications scholars. Qualitative methodologies allow for deeper interrogation into the “how,” “why,” and “what for” questions of podcast media uses, and helps to illuminate the overall cultural context of the project, including the psychological, interpersonal, and environmental influences on media consumption.

2.4 TRUE CRIME MEDIA

Moving from the technology attributes and theoretical framework supporting this study, I also examine the specific media content and the unique characteristics of the women who are domestic violence survivors in the true crime podcast audience. True crime books, streaming video, television, magazines, radio, websites, online chat forums, and podcasts all offer users the ability to “enjoy” crime by presenting fictional-like narrative formats of real-life stories. Scholars have examined the importance of narrative in crime drama and wrestled with the definition of entertainment (Turnbull, 2010). They have questioned the idea of “wound culture,” defined as being, “where personal trauma and media-driven popular knowledge interlock to produce something else: [an] intersubjective social/media space...” (Biressi, 2004). They have also examined the impact of using the voice of the accused as a narrator in the crime drama (Buozis, 2017), why women are drawn to true crime (Vicary & Fraley, 2010), the history of specific shows and books (Carroll, 2018; Fuhs, 2016), the types of crimes portrayed in true crime stories in comparison with actual crime statistics (Durham, Elrod, & Kinkade, 1995).

Scholars have debated the line between infotainment and entertainment (Surette & Otto, 2002), and even proposed a theory of true crime media (Punnett, 2017).

One of the main questions that scholars and journalists alike seem to grapple with is the degree to which true crime narratives are journalism, infotainment, or entertainment (Surette & Otto, 2002; Turnbull, 2010). In 2002, Surette and Otto proposed a scale for classifying infotainment based on research by previous scholars. They contend that the line between infotainment and entertainment has not always been blurred, and that there was a time when consumers could more easily distinguish crime shows from news portrayals of crime. However, "...this clear demarcation between news and entertainment no longer exists today" (p. 444). They cite capitalistic reasons for the popularity of infotainment and true crime, fueled by advancements in media technology. I argue that the average consumer can tell the difference between fictional shows like *Matlock* or *Perry Mason* and a newscast, but it is easy to see how the line gets blurry when you consider shows like *The Jinx*, *Making a Murderer*, and *The People vs. O.J. Simpson*, which promote themselves as being either true crime or based on real-life stories. It would be easy to speculate confusion in the minds of consumers as they decipher the difference between "based on real-life events" and "true crime."

Using the infotainment scale by Brants and Neijens (1998), Surette and Otto focus on three determining factors of the infotainment classification: topic, style, and format (2002). Topic includes the type of story presented, such as human interest or a news story on recidivism. Style deals with the mood or tone of the show, typically determined by the host (a journalist versus a celebrity personality). Format is how the information is presented, including voice overs, background music, graphics, special effects, and the

like. Brants and Neijens propose that shows are ranked on each of the three characteristics, and then a combined score would rank the content as either infotainment or entertainment (1998). Surette and Otto went on to argue that even if a show is deemed to fall closer to infotainment on the continuum, if the audience is consuming it for entertaining or voyeuristic reasons it could still be considered entertainment. In other words, it may not matter how the producers categorize the programming themselves; it is up to the perception of the audience members who consume the media.

In 2017, Punnett took a slightly different approach. Instead of trying to classify true crime as either infotainment or entertainment, he proposed a theory of true crime based on eight different narrative components. He discussed the tension between formal journalism and true crime, maintaining that the real issue is not the classification of entertainment, but that in order to be considered true crime, it needed to meet certain criteria. Punnett emphasized that “...in the tension between the demands of fact-based nonfiction and the literary lure of pure fiction, true crime must always be drawn to the pole of verifiable facts and accountable claims” (p. 184). Punnett asserted that if a narrative is shown to have a simple majority of the eight measures (discussed below), it would be considered true crime (2017).

The first component of a true crime narrative should be truth. Shows that are “based on” truth would not be classified as true crime, and stories that are overly dramatized or sensational would also fall short. The narrative, the evidence, the people, and places discussed should all be 100% accurate. Once truth has been verified, researchers would examine the perspective of justice in the narrative. True crime narratives are typically victim-centric in their perspective of justice. The next component

would be the subversive nature of the narrative – is it questioning the foundations of patriarchy and/or taken-for-granted cultural norms? This type of narrative would call for the audience to reconsider evidence, expose judicial issues, or introduce new facts.

Component three is crusader – this is a true call to action, focusing on changing laws and reforming policy. Following crusader is the geographic component. Punnett contends that true crime narratives must have very specific geographic details. For example, in *Serial*, listeners heard many details about the high school Syed attended, the ethnic makeup of the community, and the local park where the body was found. The final two components relate to the tone of the narrative – vocative and folkloric. Punnett maintains that true crime narratives meeting the criteria for vocative would have a clear shift from objective reporting to advocacy, and that the details would be presented in a story-like, informative manner, not an educational tone. According to Punnett’s proposed theory, *Serial* would meet seven of the eight requirements of a true crime narrative (2017).

These debates over infotainment versus entertainment, moving towards a theory of true crime, are important in relation to my study because these concepts could impact how someone describes their reasons behind consuming true crime media or how they construct meaning from the narrative. For example, if my participants consider true crime to be pure entertainment, then they may be turning to it primarily to cure boredom or simply to take their mind off the day. The way they classify the media could impact how they describe their use of the media. Going one step further, I also ask my participants what they think makes a “good” true crime podcast. I examine the specific components of the podcasts they enjoy – for example, production values, justice for the victim, accurate portrayals of criminals, and the like. Using Punnett’s (2017) theory of true crime media,

my participants may have specific components of a true crime narrative (crusader or subversive, for example), that they look for when selecting a specific podcast. These components may drive not only their selection but also their use of the media. It is critical to examine not only how women listeners use the media, but what portion of the narrative they enjoy and/or incorporate into their everyday lives.

2.5 WOMEN, MEDIA AND VIOLENCE

Media coverage of crime and criminals has been studied for decades from a variety of different perspectives. Scholars have examined crime coverage in television news magazines (Grabe, 1999), how the portrayal of race in crime impacts identification of criminal suspects (Oliver & Fonash, 2002), how actual crime rates relate to news coverage of crime (Sheley & Ashkins, 1981), portrayals of crime in soap operas (Estep & Macdonals, 1985), portrayals of crime in “reality-based” police shows (Oliver, 1994), and construction of gender in television crime programming (Cavender, Bond-Maupin, & Jurik, 1999). This dissertation builds on scholarship examining crime media as a genre, the intersection of women and media violence, variations across the true crime media genre, and how feminist standpoint guides the conversation.

Courtroom dramas, private investigators, stories of gangsters, murder mysteries, police vigilantes, ordinary people with amazing hand-to-hand combat skills as saviors, documentaries of real-life crimes, and much more, all fit into the category of crime media. Audiences have ardently supported television shows like *Matlock*, *Magnum P.I.*, *24*, *Homeland*, *Sherlock*, *Making a Murderer*, *Dexter*, *CSI*, *The Sopranos*, *Law & Order*, *Hawaii Five-O*, *Blue Bloods*, and *Orange is the New Black*. Some shows are comical, some are gruesome, some are exciting, and some are dramatic, but they all have one thing

in common – crime. While crime shows on television have been popular for decades, the crime genre expands beyond the small screen into movie theatres, books, magazines, podcasts, and radio.

Scholars have studied crime as entertainment (Turbull, 2010), the crime audience (Livingstone, Allen, & Reiner, 2001), crime as infotainment (Surrette & Otto, 2002), portrayals of crimes in the news (Meyers, 1994, 1997), and the appeal of criminals (Bonn, 2014). The findings seem disjointed, or at best, mildly connected. For example, studies looking at crime as entertainment tend to focus on the definition of entertainment, the importance of narrative, and portrayals of crimes versus reality (Turnbull, 2010; Sheley & Ashkins, 1981), while scholars focusing on the content of the media tend to examine violence, justice, and improper portrayals of criminals and victims (Durham, Elrod, & Kinkade, 1995; Meyers, 1994, 1997). In this work lies a fundamental conflict: those who argue audiences find the crime genre to be merely entertaining (and not accurately reflective of society) and those who find crime portrayals to be dangerously inaccurate representations of society. Specific to this study, I argue that these two perspectives are not mutually exclusive. For example, it is possible to consume media because you find it entertaining yet share a common frustration with how those media messages represent women and minorities.

Many scholars have criticized media portrayals of violence, specifically those related to women and minorities (Alat, 2006; Cuklanz & Moorti, 2006; Gilchrist, 2010; Kahlor & Eastin, 2011; Meyers, 1994, 1997, 2004; Moore, 2011). Research has shown that media (both news and entertainment) perpetuates gendered stereotypes in relation to violence while maintaining victim-blaming, perpetuating rape myths and reinforcing

classism (Alat, 2006; Cuklanz & Moorti, 2006; Gilchrist, 2010; Kahlor & Eastin, 2011; Meyers, 1994, 1997, 2004; Moore, 2011). In her 1994 analysis of newspaper coverage in the *Atlanta-Journal Constitution* of a woman who was murdered by her husband, Marian Meyers argued that, “the brutalization of women by men is seen as neither accidental nor random, but intentional, goal-oriented, and calculated, ‘the heritage of a patriarchal society’” (p. 50). Meyers contends that a feminist critique of media coverage is critical to demonstrating patterns of hegemonic discourses in news narratives.

Not only has the coverage of violence against women been shown to perpetuate and reinforce stereotypes, but the intersectionality of women and minorities in crime coverage further exacerbates the problem. In 2004, Meyers examined newspaper coverage of Freaknik, a spring break party in Atlanta typically attended by historically Black colleges and universities. She found that coverage minimized violence and portrayed Black women as “...jezebels whose lewd behavior provoked assault,” in essence absolving the perpetrators. She also found that the out-of-state Black college students were portrayed as “law-abiding” middle class citizens while the local, Black non-students were “underclass troublemakers prone to crime,” reinforcing stereotypes of both race and class (2004). Other studies have looked at longitudinal patterns of media coverage across multiple outlets and found similar systemic patterns (Alat, 2006; Moore, 2011). Victim-blaming, downplaying the seriousness of the crimes committed, shifting the meaning of date rape, and the racial and gender-stereotyped portrayals of victim and criminal continue dominate narratives across news and entertainment media (Alat, 2006; Cuklanz & Moorti, 2006; Gilchrist, 2010; Kahlor & Eastin, 2011; Moore, 2011).

Using Punnett's (2017) theory of true crime, we should find accurate portrayals of crime, criminals, and victims in a narrative format within the true crime genre. To date, most studies examining true crime narratives tend to focus on the individual stories, journalistic objectivity, and what attracts audiences to the genre (Bonn, 2014; Turnbull, 2010; Surrette & Otto, 2002; Vicary & Fraley, 2010). Examining the true crime genre is important because as the line between news and entertainment is increasingly blurred, sensationalizing the narratives or focusing on certain case details in order to perpetuate stereotypes and myths would be a gross miscalculation by the journalists involved. In 1995, Durham, Elrod, and Kinkade argued that "...the true crime genre has become an important source of information about crime for a substantial number of American readers" (p. 146). In the almost 25 years since that article was published, the true crime genre has continued to flourish and expand into new media forms such as podcasts, further underlining not only the popularity of the genre but the importance of accurate, fact-based narratives for consumers.

Feminist scholarship on crime and criminals has also expanded into new areas such as Twitter, Instagram, and other social media outlets. In a Twitter analysis of the hashtags #YesAllWomen and #YesAllWhiteWomen, Jackson and Banaszyk (2016) maintained that via public, digital discourse, Twitter users were able to present a counter-hegemonic narrative regarding violence towards women. The connection between true crime, podcasts, and digital communities is still forming, but some journalists are starting to take note. A recent survey by ABC in Australia found that the popularity of true crime podcasts has grown year-over-year, with 44% of podcast listeners reporting that they have listened to a true crime podcast in the last month (up from 30% in 2017). Podcasters

have also taken note of their audience demographics and mentioned that women seem to be driving the growth in the true crime genre (Cunningham, 2018; Marks, 2017; Munro, 2018). With increased popularity in the last few years, some journalists are proposing that the true crime genre, podcasts specifically, are leading the charge towards a more diverse and feminist perspective toward crime media coverage (Laure, 2017; Schrieber-Byers & Frasl, 2018; W., 2017).

True crime has been called “the study of gendered violence” (W., 2017). Exploring the intersection of true crime, podcasts, and feminism, two components need to be addressed: first, the notion that female audiences can form a collective identity, and second, that collective identities can present counter-hegemonic discourses. Both of those components are core tenets in Nancy Hartsock’s description of the feminist standpoint (1983). Hartsock argued that women have a uniquely exclusive viewpoint on male supremacy because their lives differ systematically and structurally from those of men.

Women who are the victims and/or survivors of domestic violence can claim a particular feminist standpoint, and with the cultural shame and secrecy ascribed to domestic violence, these women battle to have their voices heard. As an example, the #MeToo movement has shed light on the prevalence of violence against women. It has also demonstrated the ability for women to form a collective identity (using Twitter and a hashtag), to make their voices heard and incite measurable change toward systemic disempowerment of survivors (North, 2019). Using Hartsock’s model of standpoint, women’s unique positionality can bring awareness to critical social issues, demonstrate how their situation relates to others, and present a powerful counter-narrative to prevailing cultural norms. Working together, women can use media in part to form a

collective identity and resist/reform hegemonic masculinity in the culture. That may sound like a lofty goal for true crime podcasts, but new media technologies might make this reality more possible in 2020. When women collectively organized during the suffrage movement, the only way to communicate was in-person or via letters and phone calls. Today, organization and mobilization are fast, convenient and powerful through online social media forms. In fact, the first-ever Women's March on Washington, less than 24 hours after President Trump was inaugurated, was launched through Facebook (Stein, 2017).

Journalists have noticed how offline communities have formed around female-centric true crime podcasts. These communities have regular world-wide meetups, attend live tapings of their favorite shows and proudly wear show merchandise (Fitzpatrick, 2017; Laure, 2017; Marks, 2017; W., 2017). One journalist described the *My Favorite Murder* podcast community by saying that "...they have given women permission to lock arms, stare evil in the face, and laugh" (Laure, 2017). The two female hosts use the platform of their popular podcast to broadcast a counter-narrative to victim-blaming and cultural rape myths. For example, sayings like, "her dress was too revealing, she was asking for it," are not tolerated. Their famous sign off, "Stay Sexy. Don't get murdered," encourages women to embrace and showcase their sexuality in any way they would like, but to stay safe. The podcast is regularly in the top 20 on iTunes, and their Facebook group has over 230,000 members.

2.6 CHAPTER CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I focus on audience reception of podcast media. How are audiences interpreting and using the media, why, and what for? Following previous

audience reception scholars, I ask my participants which podcasts they enjoy and why. In doing so, I examine commonalities and differences among my respondents based not only on life circumstances, but also in their relationship to media. I use previous research to examine a community that has gathered through a shared interest in true crime podcasts, and in so doing, has formed a collective identity. One of my key arguments is that podcasts are not just a new medium; they are inciting change in the traditional media model beyond just format. Audience members have to actively select, download, and listen to podcasts, so it is difficult to mindlessly or passively consume them. In a world of streaming services and a la carte media options, this active selection and consumption is not unique to podcasts. However, a crucial difference with podcasts is audience interactivity. Many true crime podcasts post case details on their websites and publish their episodes weekly or bi-weekly (as opposed to an entire season), to allow the audience the opportunity to participate in both the discussion and the investigation. Audience members are not just consuming the media; they are interacting with it and influencing it, as well as interacting with and influencing others in their social sphere. Hartsock argues that women define and experience themselves relationally because of how they are raised (1983). Combined with the formation of a true crime podcast community, it is possible that female fans are not just consuming the media, they are interacting with the media and their fellow audience members on a relational level.

This study has a focused objective – why are *these* women consuming *this* media, and *what* for? However, there are many other underlying questions that stem from this core objective. For example, is it possible to create a community if audiences listen to podcasts in isolation? Can we understand how this community is being formed? How do

audiences make meaning from the media they consume? Has the #MeToo movement influenced these media audiences and messages? How do audiences articulate the societal changes they hope to see (if they are trying to influence change)? What is the impact of the collective identity that Hartsock calls for? To what extent are true crime podcasts tied to social justice and political movements? Exploring the audience, the producers, and the media through a feminist, critical/cultural lens, this study seeks to unpack these questions and add valuable insights into true crime media and audience reception studies.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

In the previous two chapters, I demonstrated what prior research shows: that my participants are part of a larger, predominantly female audience, and that their specific media uses and interpretations are, in part, influenced by their gender identity. This dissertation is designed as an audience reception study, answering the calls of prior research to explore the uses of podcasts by considering specific genres and audiences (Markman, 2015; Wrather, 2016). I examine *why* this particular audience is listening to true crime podcasts, the reasons behind their selections, and *how* they listen. In this chapter, I highlight the multi-method, qualitative approach I use to interview audience members and podcast producers and analyze podcast content.

To do so, I ask my respondents to describe how they interpret the podcasts, interact with producers, and what drives them toward specific podcasts. My participants define what they believe makes for a “good” true crime podcast, and how that definition might fit or might not fit with their favorite true crime podcasts. I am also interested in how their podcast consumption impacts their attitudes and beliefs toward the criminal justice system as well as particular social problems such as violence toward women, resources available for survivors of violence, and educating others about the reality of violence in our culture. The purpose of my study is to investigate why a subset of the audience, female domestic violence survivors, listen to true crime podcasts and how they

use and interpret the media in light of their lived experiences. Therefore, my first research question focuses specifically on the audience's selection of the media form itself:

RQ1: Why are female domestic violence survivors drawn to true crime podcasts?

This first research question allows me to explore why my participants select and enjoy true crime podcasts and also how they define a “good” podcast. Much like other media, consumers do not always enjoy the same podcasts. What attracts, informs and entertains one audience member may not entertain others, even if they share similar interests and life experiences. Examining respondents' definition of a “good” podcast and deeply probing their true crime media choices helps provide the necessary context for research question two.

RQ2: How are female domestic violence survivors using the medium?

The second research question allows me to examine specific uses of podcast media. Not just the daily logistics of use, but also how they describe their use, how they make meaning from what they hear, and what impact, if any, they believe the content may have on their attitudes and beliefs. This discussion may also shed light on what previous research has found to be a collective identity forged through media consumption, and what influence this community could have in challenging patriarchal discourses about women and violence. If they do see themselves as a community, are they striving for change? If so, how do they articulate the change they are seeking? Given the media and cultural attention on the #MeToo movement, this research question will allow me to explore the extent to which this context emerges during these discussions, to see if these women connect their media use to these larger social justice or political movements.

RQ3: How do audiences incorporate their experience as a domestic violence survivor into their podcast listening decisions?

Research question three addresses the intersection of media use and the lived experiences of domestic violence survivors. In her *New York Times* Opinion-Editorial discussed in Chapter 1, Skolnik discussed the ways in which domestic violence survivors use true crime podcasts as a form of exposure therapy, so they can virtually experience “...a world that doesn’t turn its back on the fact that day-to-day violence exists” (Skolnik, 2017). I am interested to see if other participants mention concepts related to exposure therapy, or if any of them consider their media consumption to be therapeutic. My fourth research question will connect podcast audiences with the producers to consider how their interaction might influence the production of the media.

RQ4: How are true crime podcast producers interacting with their audiences?

In my fourth research question, I shift perspective to examine the interaction between audience and producer to see how producers themselves describe that relationship. In a previous study, I found that true crime podcasters hoped their work was helping to expose inadequacies in the criminal justice system and exonerate the wrongly convicted (Boling, 2019a). Also, 80% of true crime podcast audience members have been shown to believe that the media they consume are having an impact on the cases covered (Boling, 2018). These two findings imply that producers and audience members share similar goals for podcast media. This final question will allow me to explore if the audience includes the producers as part of their potential “collective identity” and how producers describe their impact (or intended impact) on the criminal justice system. My

final research question will explore the media content itself to unpack the characteristics of the podcasts my participants are consuming.

RQ5: How do the true crime podcasts that my participants describe as their favorite depict domestic violence?

The final research question will look at the media itself to see how violence is depicted, how victims and perpetrators are shown, how specific production techniques are employed, how the narrative arc impacts the depiction of events, and how perceived failures of governmental agencies are framed. Through narrative analysis of the podcast that my participants describe as their “favorite,” I will explore how that podcast compares to the qualities they defined as valuable and important.

The remainder of this chapter will justify the methodologies chosen for this study in detail and highlight the various steps involved. I also discuss the rationale for both qualitative and critical cultural research as well as detail the ethical considerations related to studying a vulnerable group of domestic violence survivors. In addition, I include an overview of other qualitative audience reception studies as justification and support for my chosen approach and methods. This is followed by detailing how the data were collected, managed, and analyzed.

3.1 RATIONALE FOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DESIGN

According to Lindlof and Taylor (2011), qualitative researchers choose to interview participants for several reasons: to understand their unique perspectives, to review past experiences, to gain insight into decisions, to better understand relationships that are not easily observed, to discuss connections between components of the study, and to create a record that can be easily transcribed and analyzed. My study centers on

interviews with both audiences and producers in order to understand, discuss, gain insight, and deeply analyze the unique nature of the people involved in making and consuming this media. Echoing the idea that qualitative methods offer a unique perspective, Lindlof and Taylor maintain that, “Interviews are particularly well suited to *understanding the social actor’s experience, knowledge and worldviews*” (emphasis in original) (2011, p. 173). Quantitative methodologies, while powerful tools for experimentation, surveying large groups of the population, and detailed content analyses, cannot fully explore the experiences, knowledge, and worldviews of participants; therefore, in-depth, qualitative interviews are critical to the success of my study.

A qualitative approach is crucial to this study because I am examining a media audience that has been understudied. A thorough, open-ended approach to the research allows for in-depth analysis to this emerging audience and medium. Approaching a unique population with a set of pre-determined possible media uses and survey questions based on prior research of a different audience would limit the unique findings specific to this group. Qualitative methods will allow my participants to speak freely, using their own words, about how and why they are selecting and listening to podcast media. As I previously demonstrated, the Perks and Turner (2019) study found markedly different uses and gratifications than my study on the true crime podcast audience (Boling & Hull, 2018). Granted, they were not examining the same population. However, the fact that both studies were looking at uses and gratifications of the podcast audience, but that both qualitative and quantitative approaches rendered significantly different findings, supports the need for qualitative methods in this study. Moreover, my study is not meant to be generalizable to the population of either domestic violence survivors or true crime

podcast audiences. I am interested in this unique group and their reception and interpretation of this specific media. However, future research trajectory could follow the methodological framework of uses and gratifications scholars like Herzog (1944) and combine both qualitative and quantitative findings.

In 1989, Christians and Carey argued that qualitative studies are, "...concerned not only with the explanation of past events, but with contemporary phenomena as well" (p. 345). Given the media attention and cultural awareness brought by the #MeToo movement, it is possible that this context may play an integral role in the formation of a collective, feminist identity of the true crime podcast audience, and its potential to present a counter-hegemonic narrative to the prevailing norm of victim-blaming. Using qualitative methods, I can see to what extent, if at all, #MeToo emerges in the interviews and then investigate its potential role.

3.2 RATIONALE FOR CRITICAL CULTURAL RESEARCH

A critical cultural approach to this study is vital because the primary participants are members of a society that has historically oppressed and marginalized them. The intersectionality of gender and domestic violence survivor positions my participants as a potential societal "other" and gives them a unique perspective on the world around them. Using a poststructuralist mindset to maintain that reality is contextual and constantly evolving, I do not assume that my reality (or even the reality of the majority) is the same as their reality. I explore how they describe their relationship to media and how the media helps them understand themselves and their place in society (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). As previously mentioned, my participants have a unique viewpoint on the world because of their lived experiences and their place in society. This research explores the many diverse

ways that they make meaning from their media consumption, and how those messages potentially shape their attitudes and behaviors. My goal is to go beyond how audiences “use” media and explore how they make sense of it, how they receive and interpret the messages. In 2011, Kellner noted that all media texts are subject to multiple meanings, depending on the audience. He argues for a “multiperspectival” approach to media studies in order to account for differences in interpretation of the media based on race, gender, class, ethnicity, religiosity, and the like (Kellner, 2011). Rather than assign my own singular interpretation of media messages, or assume the interpretations of others, I center the meanings in the participants themselves, giving them the opportunity to describe their relationships to the media content under study.

I also employ Kellner’s proposed approach to critical cultural studies, including an examination of media production and political economy, a textual/narrative analysis, and an examination of the reception and use of the media (2011). Reception and use are explored in my interviews with the participants, production and political economy are addressed in my interviews with the producers, and my study is then grounded in an in-depth narrative analysis of one of the podcasts that my participants describe as their favorite. By encompassing all three components of Kellner’s recommended approach to critical cultural studies, I explore the relationships among the audiences, the producers, and the media messages themselves. A conceptual model of the research design is shown in Figure 3.1.

3.3 OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH DESIGN

Using prior audience reception studies as a guide, I lean heavily on the methodologies used by canonical scholars such as Janice Radway (1984) and Radhika

Parameswaran (1999). In 1984, Janice Radway published *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. This qualitative media study explored women in a small, rural, midwestern community who had gathered around one specific bookstore employee to feed their passion for romance novels. After asking each participant to fill out a questionnaire, Radway then interviewed the women in depth. She attended book club meetings and held group discussions with them on multiple occasions. In between her two trips to visit the participants, she revised her questionnaire and developed additional discussion points for the group meetings to solidify her findings. Her goal was to examine why these women were drawn to romance novels, what particular narratives they liked (and disliked), and how they used these novels in their daily lives (Radway, 1984). In addition to interviewing the women, she stayed in the home of her primary source, the bookstore employee (Dot), and had regular, on-going conversations with her about the project. Radway's structure is useful in my own study, as I rely on a specific group of women who are drawn to a particular media form, the true crime podcast.

In 1999, Parameswaran used a similar approach in her examination of young women reading romance novels in Hyderabad, India. All of the women she interviewed were attending college and between the ages of 17 and 21. In addition to group and personal interviews, Parameswaran also interviewed some of their family members as well as owners of the lending libraries where they would get the books. Her findings showed that the combination of cultural pressure, power structures, and class plays a vital role in understanding the complexity of media consumption (Parameswaran, 1999).

Similarly, I anticipate cultural pressures and power structures to play a crucial role in this

study as my participants seek to understand their own attraction to the genre as well as the governmental agencies involved in the cases.

In 2001, Livingstone, Allen & Reiner used oral history methods to explore audience reception to crime. While I am not examining crime per se, true crime podcasts deal heavily with crime narratives, so I use several key findings from their study. First, they argue that crime media is typically analyzed at two levels, 1) media representations of crime, and 2) the meanings of those representations. I look at not just how this audience makes sense of these media messages, but also how the messages embedded in podcasts themselves present narratives of criminal behavior and construct notions of victim and perpetrator. Livingstone et al., argues that both of these perspectives are key because crime media offers audiences an account not only of crime, but also reflects the society in which crime occurs (2001). Again, echoing prior scholarship and examining not just the message, but the society in which crime occurs (Kennedy, 2018; Parameswaran, 2001, 2003; Radway, 1984). These larger narratives depict who matters, defines normal and abnormal behaviors, and demonstrates punishment (or lack thereof) for violent crimes. We live in a society that is so immersed in media that it is impossible to excavate it from our everyday lives. Therefore, we must examine how audiences integrate media messages into their lived experiences.

In addition to mirroring the general structure of my study to be similar to Radway's and Parameswaran's, I also explore the concept of genre guilt that was discussed by each author. The notion of romance reading provokes both personal and cultural guilt because of how the literature is presented and discussed by others, as well as cultural norms about women's sexuality, and the class-based stereotypes surrounding

‘trashy’ or low-brow media forms (romance novels, talk shows, reality TV). Across both studies, participants dealt with their guilt in a myriad of ways. I am not suggesting that true crime podcasts provoke the same type of consumer guilt as romance novels. However, the participants in my study have expressed similar feelings of guilt about listening to crime narratives (and enjoying them), since they are also victims of crimes. Radway argued that the romances had a “short-lived therapeutic value” that was causing its repetitive consumption. She contended that this therapeutic value might be made both “necessary and possible by a culture that creates needs in women that it cannot fulfill” (1984, p. 85). Using Skolnik’s (2017) description of podcast use, one could argue that my participants may be listening to true crime podcasts for “short-lived therapeutic value” that was made both “necessary and possible” by our culture.

Considering my audience as an “interpretive community,” due to their similar life experiences and media choices, I examine their passion for the media, their attachment to the hosts of the podcasts, and also the participatory nature of true crime podcasts. Jenkins (1992, 2000), argued that audience research asks fundamental questions about how we make sense of the media and what it means in our lives. Saying, “We inhabit a world populated with other people’s stories,” Jenkins argued that we, as consumers, take those stories and rework them to satisfy our own needs (2000, para. 41). It is that active interpretation by a specific community that allows us to explore the unique relationships among audiences, producers, and messages.

3.4 MANAGING, RECORDING, TRANSCRIBING AND PRESENTING DATA

As this study is interested in in-depth interviews, in part with what people would argue is a vulnerable community, this study underwent review by our

institutional Internal Review Board (IRB), and was approved on May 22, 2019. On June 4, 2019, a call for audience participants was posted on Reddit in the r/TrueCrime, r/TrueCrimePodcasts, r/UnresolvedMysteries, and r/TrueCrimePodWatch discussions. On June 10, 2019, a similar message was posted in the Facebook groups “True Crime Podcasts,” and “True Crime Podcasts & Documentaries We Love Discussion Group.” These online communities were selected to reach a variety of women spanning race, class, geography, and socio-economic factors. In a prior study, I found the online true crime podcast community open and accepting of recruitment from social media sites, so this recruitment effort was meant to mirror the success of that study (Boling & Hull, 2018). One of the moderators for the “True Crime Podcast” group offered tips on how to get interactions from the group, and the post was well-received, generating over 100 comments and 21 interested parties. Each person volunteering was contacted privately to schedule an interview.

Participant interviews began on June 10, 2019 and concluded on July 1, 2019. All participants were given an invitation to participate, read an informed consent form, and agreed to the recording and transcribing of interviews prior to beginning. All interviews were kept on a password-protected computer with off-site backup, and all participants were given pseudonyms to maintain privacy. A list of pseudonyms, self-identified characteristics and interview length is shown in Table 4.1. Overall, 28 women volunteered, and interviews were scheduled and conducted with 16 due to scheduling restraints and/or family emergencies. Of the initial 28, 25% came to the study from Reddit, and 75% had found out about it from Facebook. Of the final 16, 18.75% were from Reddit, and 81.25% were from Facebook. Interviews lasted an

average of 40.6 minutes, with the longest being 59.5 minutes and the shortest being 18.2. Interviews varied greatly in length because of scheduling constraints and how much each participant was willing to share. All interviews were conducted either by phone or Skype, and the audio was recorded for transcription. After each interview, I followed up with a short online questionnaire (see Appendix A) using Qualtrics to collect demographic and basic media use information. Findings are summarized in Chapter 4 since only half of the participants (10) completed the questionnaire.

After conducting the interviews, I transcribed each one for analysis using a combination of Rev.com and Nvivo transcription services. Both services offer a cost-efficient digital transcription process that does a rough translation and requires that the researcher go back through to edit and check for errors. Using this process allowed me to save time and money on transcription while also giving me the ability to listen to and review each interview in detail before analysis. Using Saldaña's (2013) coding methods, I performed six rounds of coding on the participant interviews. Each round of coding was selected intentionally to explore research questions and specific themes noted in the interviews. InVivo coding was used to capture thoughts in their words, and three rounds of Protocol coding were used to explore the first three research questions (Saldaña, 2013). Emotion coding was used to capture the emotions mentioned or implied, specifically examining any mentions of shame or guilt, and Value coding was used to look at how my participants described true crime podcasts in the context of their own world views and value systems (Saldaña, 2013). Saldaña's coding methods are more intentional than traditional organic methods of qualitative coding and allow for in-depth exploration of particular topics as well as overall themes

present. Using this coding method can be more time-intensive than traditional coding, but it also aids in the triangulation of findings and keeps the coding focused on specific topics when there are large amounts of data, such as a project of this magnitude.

Analytic memos were used throughout the coding process to capture my thoughts and to identify categories and themes. Protocol coding lends itself to showing categories by research question. These categories often overlapped, so the final analytic memo condensed the categories into themes for the presentation of findings. This process of writing analytic memos, organizing categories and condensing categories into themes was employed for coding all aspects of this study: participants, podcasters, and the media analysis.

Another important aspect of this project was interviewing the producers of some of my participants favorite podcasts. In order to determine which producers to contact for this study, I first asked each audience participant about their favorite true crime podcasts. I used an Excel spreadsheet to list the favorite podcasts mentioned and force rank them for analysis. Each podcast mentioned as number one was given three points, the second favorite was given two points, and the third favorite was given one point. The podcasts were then sorted by total points, and those earning the highest points were deemed to be the favorite overall. Rankings and points are shown in Table 5.2.

Thirty-two different podcasts were mentioned, and the top three were *Crime Junkie*, *COLD*, and *Casefile*. Of the top three, both *Crime Junkie* and *Casefile* feature a different crime each week, whereas *COLD* focused on one domestic violence case for the entire season. Of the 32 that were mentioned, 4 (12.5%) covered specific cases

about domestic violence situations. These cases ranged from domestic violence between parents and children to intimate partner violence. By focusing on the domestic violence aspect of the cases, these podcasts are able to discuss, in-detail, the relationships and power dynamics at play as well as interactions with the criminal and judicial systems. Two of those (*COLD* and *The Teacher's Pet*) were in the top six. I contacted the hosts of all of the podcasts mentioned that focused on domestic violence, as well as the others in top seven. The podcasts contacted were: *Crime Junkie*, *COLD*, *Casefile*, *Last Podcast on the Left*, *The Teacher's Pet*, *Dr. Death*, *Bear Brook*, *Dirty John*, and *Root of Evil*. In total, I interviewed the hosts of six podcasts, including the number one podcast mentioned and all of the podcasts mentioned that focused specifically on domestic violence. A summary of the podcasts and interview length is shown in Table 5.1.

In this study, I use the term “host” and “producer” interchangeably. In reality, those jobs have distinct duties. However, many of the podcasters I spoke to were hosts that crossed the producer line and had regular, significant input into production decisions. I also use the term “producer” in the sense of “someone who produces/makes a product,” not in specific reference to the job title. Technically, all of my podcasters were hosts, and some of them were also part of the production team. When I refer to them as a collective, I use the terms interchangeably, but when I refer to them specifically, I use the term host.

The hosts I interviewed included Ashley Flowers from *Crime Junkie*, Dave Cawley from *COLD*, Hedley Thomas from *The Teacher's Pet*, Rasha Pecoraro and Yvette Gentile from *Root of Evil*, Chris Goffard from *Dirty John*, and Jason Moon

from *Bear Brook*. All interviews were conducted by phone except for Chris Goffard's interview, which was conducted via email because he was covering another case for the *L.A. Times* during the interview period. Interviews began on July 14, 2019 and concluded on September 9, 2019. Average length of the interviews was 43.04 minutes, with the longest being 53.35 and the shortest being 35.05. See Table 5.1 for a summary of the podcasts, hosts, and interview length. While 43.04 minutes is considered short for an in-depth interview (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011), prior studies have shown that interviews with journalists are typically shorter (Besley & Roberts, 2010). Many of these hosts were current or former journalists, so they are familiar with source interviews and were prepared to answer questions. Since podcasters are skilled interviewers, a short interview is still productive and valuable. Interviews varied in length based on the time that each participant had available due to other responsibilities. Four of the podcasters interviewed are full-time journalists at various media outlets. Dave Cawley works for *KSL* in Utah, Hedley Thomas works for *The Australian*, Chris Goffard works for the *L.A. Times*, and Jason Moon works for *New Hampshire Public Radio*. While they were all allowed to work on the podcast full-time during production, many have returned to other duties or have begun producing additional seasons, so interview time was scarce and critical. Despite the time constraints, all of the podcasters were eager to discuss both their podcast as well as their audiences during our interviews, mirroring what I found in a previous study, that podcasters are fruitful sources for research (Boling, 2019a).

Interviews with the podcast hosts were also transcribed using a combination of Rev.com and Nvivo transcription services and reviewed for accuracy. Using Saldaña's

(2013) coding methods, I performed two rounds of coding on the podcaster interviews: InVivo, to capture thoughts in their words, and Protocol, to specifically code for research question number four. Saldaña's methods are customized for each project, and since there were more research questions related to the audience participants, the podcaster interviews required fewer rounds of coding.

Since five of the six podcasters I spoke to focused on a domestic violence case, I wanted to continue that examination with the narrative analysis. I selected the *COLD* podcast as a representative "favorite" for several reasons. First, it was the top domestic violence podcast mentioned. Second, it was the number two favorite podcast mentioned. Third, *COLD*'s host/producer, Dave Cawley, offered particularly significant insights into both production and audience interaction providing several interesting angles and points of analysis to examine in the podcast content. Finally, the *COLD* podcast was one of the most nuanced and detailed podcasts available on domestic violence. Because of the unique features of this podcast, the richness of its narrative storytelling, and its significance to my listening audience, I selected *COLD* for in-depth narrative analysis.

After both the audience and podcaster interviews had been transcribed, I used the Rev.com and Nvivo transcription services to transcribe the initial 18 episodes of *COLD*, which were released between November 7, 2018 and March 13, 2019. The average episode length was 57.1 minutes, with the longest being 64 minutes and the shortest being 31. A summary of each episode and length is shown in Table 6.1. All episodes were transcribed and analyzed using Saldaña's coding methods (2013). For the narrative analysis, I wanted to explore not just the structure and content of the

podcast, but also how the narrative is organized, who gets a voice, and whose voice is most prominent. I performed three different rounds of coding on the *COLD* podcast: InVivo, to search for important pieces of the narrative as well as quotes from those involved in the case; Emotions, to look for what emotions were recalled and described by those featured on the podcast; and Narrative, to examine the tone, point of view, and themes in the narrative. These three rounds of coding were selected intentionally to address research question number five. I also used the Narrative coding to note the types of violence mentioned in each episode and how the acts were described. While performing the narrative coding, I also sought to identify and expand on the three themes that emerged from the interview with Cawley: victim denial, police failures, and the mentality of the perpetrator. Not only was *COLD* the top domestic violence podcast mentioned by my participants, but Cawley had access to unique, first-person resources, that are missing from many other true crime podcasts. I expand and explain this justification in-depth in Chapter 5. A conceptual model showing the three components of the study is shown in Figure 3.1.

3.5 CHAPTER CONCLUSION

Because I expect social and cultural influences will play such a key role in my analysis, gender will be a defining factor in this audience reception study. Livingstone et al. (2001) argued that gender complicates audience reception because women tend to see themselves as potential victims of violence due to the onslaught of media messages perpetuating this narrative. Since my audience participants identify as victims of violence, these crime portrayals and narratives will be even more complex to unravel. Livingstone et al. (2001) also argue that because women are less likely to rely on

authorities, they seek out the media as a resource so that they can be sufficiently informed and self-reliant. This will add another interesting layer in my own study that will be worthy of exploration.

For this qualitative audience reception study, I immersed myself in the culture by listening to the podcasts recommended by my participants while considering larger societal movements as the backdrop to this popular media form (like the #MeToo movement). I analyzed the audience, the media, and the producers of true crime podcasts through the lens of feminist standpoint to examine the potential of a collective identity as well as the presentation of a counter-narrative to the prevailing norm in order to achieve triangulation (Hartsock, 1983). Understanding that the media, society, and audience all work together to build an “interpretive community,” the goal of my study is to explore how this media and this community intersect and influence each other.

Figure 3.1. Conceptual Model of Study

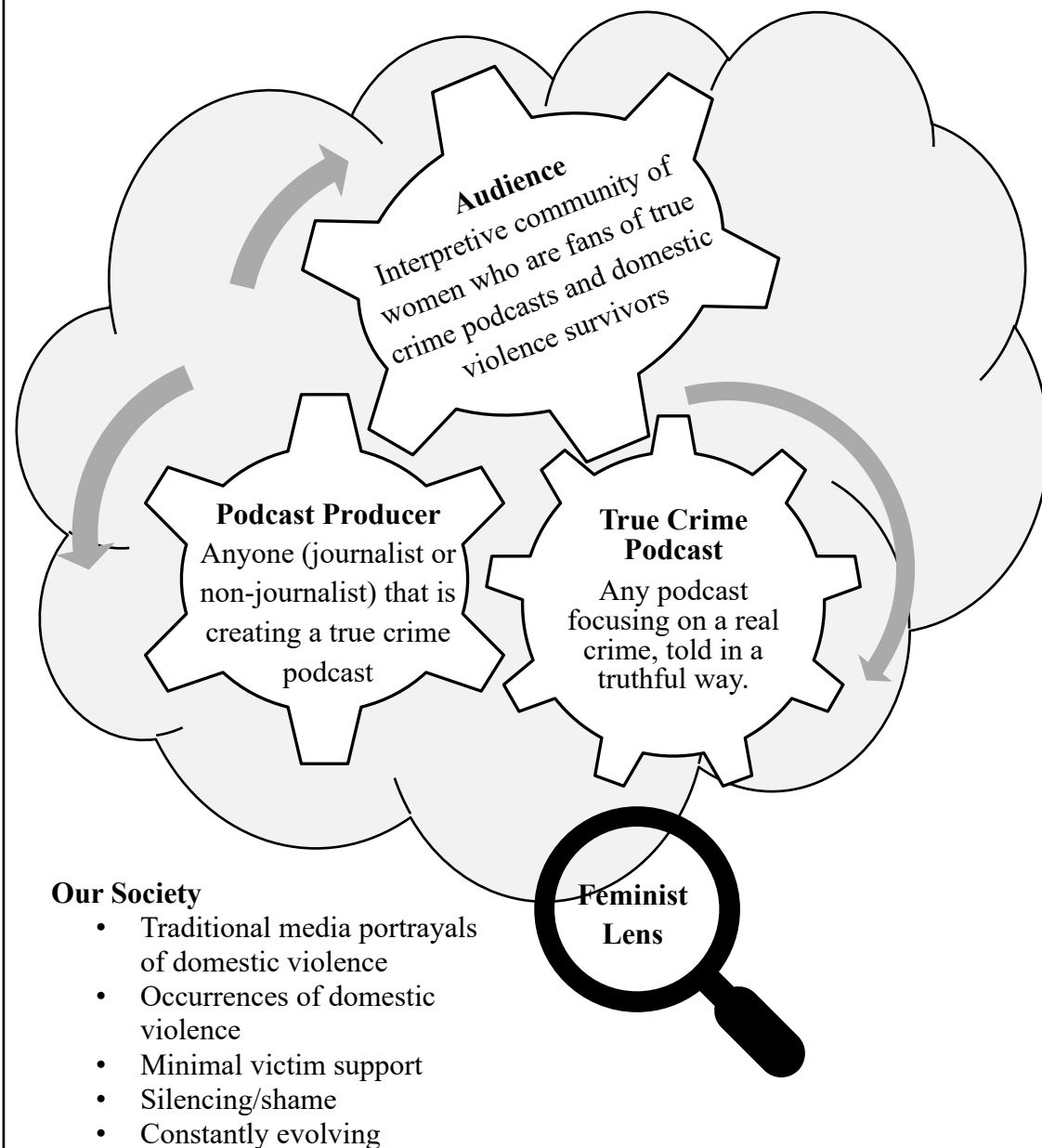


Figure 3.1. Study model. This study incorporates the audience, the producers, and the media produced. All of these three components influence each other simultaneously. They exist within our society, which includes competing factors such as traditional media portrayals of domestic violence and victim blaming. Since society is constantly evolving, these three components (working together), can influence change.

CHAPTER 4

THE POWER OF A GOOD STORY FOR A LISTENING AUDIENCE

“I love their format. I love the way they tell a story. I think if there’s anything that the podcaster must do, or the podcast must do, it’s to give us a narrative. Give me a narrative. I don’t just want the cold facts; I want you to tell me a story.”

– Tina, participant interview, June 2019

Our brains are hardwired for stories (Cron, 2012). Most of us have been consuming stories in books, movies, television, and radio our entire lives. By the time we are young adults, we can quote lines from famous stories such as, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” or “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (Austen, 1813 p. 1; Dickens, 1859 p. 3). Or perhaps a more modern version, “Mr. and Mrs. Dursley of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much” (Rowling, 1997 p. 1). As unique individuals, we are drawn to stories for various reasons. Just as we all have different tastes in food, music, and clothing, we also have different interests when it comes to stories.

However, the term “story” is ambiguous. Journalists regularly refer to their jobs as “working on a story,” as do authors. Stories can be hard facts reported in a news broadcast, or tales of fantasy fiction involving warlocks and dragons. One thing that

“good” stories seem to share in common is the ability to capture an audience’s attention immediately. Take this opening, for example: “Apprehension knotted up Catherine Terry’s insides on the drive over Snoqualmie pass. It was late November 1999. Catherine’s boyfriend, Dennis, was at the wheel of the Mitsubishi Galant, heading west towards Seattle.” This is the introduction to the first episode of the *COLD* podcast, produced by KSL in Utah. Reading this, and for the podcast audience, listening to it, you may be wondering, who are Catherine and Dennis, and why are they apprehensively headed to Seattle? We have no idea that Catherine was the ex-girlfriend of Josh Powell, a man accused of murdering his wife, Susan. That is the beauty of stories, the good ones at least; they always leave us wanting more. According to Lisa Cron in *Wired for Story*:

As counterintuitive as it may sound, a story is not about the plot or even what happens in it. Stories are about how we, rather than the world around us, change. They grab us only when they allow us to experience how it would feel to *navigate* the plot (emphasis in original) (2012, p. 11).

This ability to insert ourselves into the narrative and emotionally navigate the plot is key to a good story (Cron, 2012). Researchers have measured brain chemicals while listening, watching, and reading stories and found increased levels of cortisol, dopamine, and oxytocin in subjects, showing that our brains go through the patterns of responding to distress, learning from the environment, and being able to have empathy with the protagonist, similar to reactions in real-life situations (Rodriguez, 2017; Zak, 2014).

Built on the combination of a strong narrative and the host’s ability to chronicle the events in an engaging way, true crime podcasts naturally capitalize on our innate desire for a “good” story. Much like the romance novels that Radway examined in 1984,

true crime podcasts are designed to draw listeners into the story, allowing them to become immersed in the narrative. In this chapter, I examine why women who identify as domestic violence survivors are drawn to true crime podcasts, how they are interpreting the stories they consume, and how their lived experiences are incorporated into their media choices.

Through interviews with 16 women who identify as both domestic violence survivors and fans of true crime podcasts, I explore their enjoyment of the medium and the genre as well as the difference between genre guilt and personal shame (see Appendix B for a participant interview guide). My participants were recruited using both Facebook and Reddit, and they ranged in age from 24 to 53. Most (90%) were employed full-time, and they were highly educated, with 90% reporting at least “some college.” While the 10 participants who completed the questionnaire all identified as white, through conversations with the participants, they shared details about their identities that showed they encompassed a variety of geographic and demographic factions (See Table 4.1 for self-identified characteristics). One participant was Australian and living in Hong Kong, and another was from the U.K. While we did not discuss their lived experiences in detail, some mentioned suffering abuse as children, some as adults, and some as both. There were young moms who scheduled the interview around naptimes, retirees, grandmothers, those who worked in law enforcement, and those who were journalists. Some mentioned other aspects of their identities, such as race and sexual orientation. Two of the participants mentioned that they had (or were in the process of) producing their own true crime podcast – one for their employer (a media outlet) and one independently. The diversity of participants offered various perspectives on the media they consume and their

own lived experiences. Given the differences in the participants, it was notable that they shared a common connection to true crime podcasts and how this particular media form was impacting their lives.

This chapter focuses on the first three research questions: why these women are drawn to this media, how are they using the medium, and how are they interpreting the media and incorporating it into their lived experiences shared media choices. The responses are grouped into six major themes: love of a good story, uniqueness of audio media, the educational value of true crime podcasts, connection to lived experiences, the potential therapeutic role of true crime narratives, and the community connections forged by listening to true crime podcasts. Drawing from previous literature outlined in Chapter 2, I use these themes to also discuss the differences between the genre guilt that Radway found in her participants and shame resiliency (Brown, 2006) that I uncovered in the responses of my participants. The chapter concludes by considering my participants connection to Jes Skolnik's original Op-Ed and exploring both the potential benefits of true crime podcasts for domestic violence survivors as well as the virtual communities forged in the process.

4.1 THE ALLURE OF TRUE CRIME PODCASTS

In many ways, true crime stories are just like other stories. They start with an intriguing situation or question and lead the audience down a path of discovery and resolution. However, true crime podcasts seem to offer a few things that other stories may not. First, they offer storytelling through audio format. Stories crafted for the ear as opposed to the eye, with no visuals to rely on, invite the audience to use their imagination to see the events unfold. While this may not be unique to true crime, it is unique to audio

media, and true crime podcasters capitalize on that strength (Lindgren, 2016; Markman, 2015; Perks & Turner, 2019; Wrather 2016). Second, they offer the element of mystery. Especially for cold cases, listeners tune in hoping to hear new evidence or assist in a long-overdue conviction. Third, by using both first-person accounts and case files, audience members are given insight into the psyche of a criminal and educated about the internal process of the criminal justice system.

The participants in this study defined three main reasons why they listen to true crime podcasts: they enjoy a good story, they are drawn to the audio medium, and they gravitate to the educational aspects of true crime podcasts. I will address and expand on each of these themes while discussing the appeal of the genre for my participants.

Once upon a time, there was you and me: Authenticity in true crime podcasts

My participants described a “good” story as one that is authentic, genuine, accurately portrays victims, respects the victim and their family, and includes justice for the involved parties. While there are obvious distinctions between shows like *Murder She Wrote*, *Law and Order*, *CSI*, and true crime podcasts, many participants related their enjoyment of true crime podcasts to the idea that they had been consuming mysteries since childhood. Several mentioned reading *Nancy Drew*, *Encyclopedia Brown*, Agatha Christie or *Sherlock Holmes*; others reminisced over watching *Law and Order* with their grandmother. Of course, these childhood mysteries and television shows focused on entertainment as opposed to presenting or solving real-life crimes. All of the shows and books mentioned by participants fell into the entertainment or educational category (such as documentaries), rather than hard news programs or television newsmagazines like *Dateline*. One participant, Robin, said that she believes it is just human nature to love a

good story, and those containing fear or horror are especially appealing: “Humans like scary stories. Humans have been sitting around a campfire, since, you know, all of history, telling stories. There’s something about a scary story that gets people.” Sarah Koenig, host of *Serial*, reflects Robin’s perspective specifically to true crime, saying, “People just like a good crime story; they want to know who did it” (Ramisetti, 2015).

In addition to childhood books, many participants equated their podcast listening to the books they read as adults. Comparing books to true crime podcasts was common in almost every interview. While they mentioned other true crime media like documentaries, television, and movies, a majority of the participants compared true crime podcasts to books they had read. Jo described this as, “I walked around my house almost feeling like I’m reading a novel because it takes me to a different headspace when [I] read.” This idea that true crime podcasts have the ability to remove listeners from their lived reality and activate their imaginations was mentioned in several of my interviews, echoing what Radway found in her interviews with readers of romance novels (1984). This is not unique to these two forms of media; audience members have been found to consume media as an escape from their daily lives for decades (Chung & Kim, 2015; Rubin, 1983). However, the comparison between podcasts and books seems unique. Participants were comparing one of the oldest forms of media with one of the newest, arguing the similarity across those experiences.

Not only were my participants looking for good stories, but they were also seeking stories that were so compelling that they could help them mentally withdraw from real life, if only for a few minutes. They described their true crime podcast listening using words and phrases like “need,” “gripping,” “enthraling,” “addictive,” and “fell in

love.” They also mentioned “looking forward” to listening or using true crime podcasts to decompress after a tough day. For example, one participant, Jo, described this as

“Sometimes you just get tired of being in your head.” When asked to elaborate, she said:

First of all, it’s a story. So, it entertains your brain while you do things. Rather than you’re just cleaning and listening to music, it still leaves that headspace open to start with the, ‘This is what I regretted,’ or ‘I didn’t get this done.’ It [true crime podcasts] doesn’t give you time to focus on anything in your head...it occupies my brain.

Shelly’s description was a bit more intense, saying, “I listen to podcasts all the time, it’s probably my big addiction.” Beth discussed her overall addiction to the criminal justice system by explaining that she listens to true crime podcasts and watches real trials on YouTube. She said, “Real trials, yeah. I’m way addicted.” Meg confessed that she had just become a patron of *Crime Junkies* “because I’m so addicted.” Clare described her initial attraction to true crime podcasts by saying, “I was gripped. I was enthralled.”

This strong “need” to consume true crime podcasts could be attributed to many underlying reasons why my participants are drawn to the medium, and it could also simply be related to escaping the common stressors they experience in their everyday lives. We all have different coping mechanisms for surviving daily life in a world with bills, jobs, family, children, and other responsibilities. Couple that with traumatic experiences of domestic violence, and life can be overwhelming for even the most self-aware person. Reaching for a book, podcast, or another form of entertainment is a natural way to decompress. However, this ability to mirror the qualities of a great novel with a

captivating story does seem uniquely applicable to true crime podcast media for this particular audience subset.

Not only was it essential that the story was captivating and interesting, or “good,” it was also vital that it be authentic. One participant, Diana, said, “I don’t like love stories, I don’t think they’re real...but give me a good story about how horrible people can be and I can relate to that.” Many of the participants echoed Diana’s sentiment that the stories needed to be believable and based on real-life cases. Nora said, “I’m very much a left-brain person, so I’m more interested in true stories than like some made up romance or drama. I don’t watch romantic comedies because they drive me up the wall.” Clare described it as, “I just love the personal, real stories about human nature and society and things that are outside the realm of what I’ve experienced.” Remaining factual and real, not editorializing or sensationalizing the story, was also key. Meg emphasized how important authenticity is in the stories she enjoys – especially in how they depict crime victims.

I think that every true crime whatever, podcast, movie, TV show, the news even, they give the victim this just angelic personification...But let's be honest, not everybody is a wonderful, loving, lovely person who lights up a room...Sometimes I bet some people could be a dick, and I get you don't want to speak ill of the dead. But when I'm dead and gone, I hope people are like, oh man, [Meg], she was great, but she was a bit of a dick sometimes. Be honest. You're supposed to be giving the facts and the truth, and the truth is people aren't always great. People are not always happy and perfect and angelic and never did a bad

thing in their life. Not saying they're bad people and they deserve to die at all. But they are real people. They are you and me.

Others talked specifically about the importance of telling the story of the victim's life. In fact, the extent to which these stories honor the victim was critical and mentioned by every participant. One participant, Tina, said, "These people lived, and somebody needs to tell their story...If something happened to me or my daughter or my son, I would want somebody to tell that story." Dita reflected that thought with, "I think you owe it to that person, if you're going to undertake something like that, their story, to not tell it in a way that suits you, you know?"

Not only was their story important, but participants also needed to be able to imagine the victims as a human, not just a character in the narrative. According to my participants, not only is it important that the narrative is authentic, but it is also imperative that podcasters respect the victim, do justice to the victim's story, and never victim-blame. Both respect and authenticity are crucial components in true crime podcasting. One participant, Jo, said, "I just think that it always needs to be told with respect, without joking, if it's about someone's last night. Sometimes they're just a victim, and that needs to be remembered." Another participant, Nora, reiterated the importance of the human element in the story:

I want emphasis on respect for the victim and who they were as a person. I don't want it to be just, 'Oh, this story is about Jane Doe and she was in the wrong place at the wrong time and this terrible thing happened to her.' I want to hear about their life and who they were to their friends and family. Why are their friends and family missing them? Was this a really well-loved mother, or someone who

was really respected in their community, or a leader, and things like that. I want to hear the human details, you know.

For my participants, a “good” story goes beyond just an intriguing plot and interesting characters (although those are important). The women I interviewed are looking for authentic stories, about real people, told in a relatable way that shares the humanity of our society with the utmost respect for the victim and their families. Hartsock argues that women experience the world and define themselves through relationships (1983). The fact that these women are looking for relatable, real, protagonists in the true crime podcasts that they are consuming cannot be overlooked. A woman’s inherent desire to experience that relationship defines how she sees herself (Hartsock, 1983). If it is possible that my participants could use true crime podcasts to help heal from their own traumas, as Skolnik suggests, they need to feel a relational connection to the characters in the narrative.

Participants also mentioned being encouraged by listening to stories where things worked out the way they should – the perpetrator was caught, and justice was served. Tina said, “I like hearing stories of survival too, and like how people overcome things.” Nora agreed, saying, “I’m always looking for either justice or some form of closure.” When asked who they are rooting for when they listen to true crime podcasts, Abby said, “I’m always rooting for the right answers for the victim and the victim’s family.” Isabelle agreed, saying:

I think it's just human nature that we all sort of ... we look at a situation, don't we? And we sort of think, ‘Well that's not fair and that's not right and I want this person to, like, get their comeuppance,’ or ‘I want this person to, like, get justice.’

Emma said that she actively searches for stories with a satisfying ending, saying, “Are there places where it’s turned out okay? Like, someone did speak up and the right thing happened?” Others discussed their appreciation for true crime podcasts that show an accurate depiction of the criminal justice system and the reality of what “justice” might look like.

Overall, participants mentioned several key features of what makes a “good” story: a well-designed narrative, the power of escape, authenticity, no victim-blaming, and hearing stories of justice with a satisfying ending. Naturally, every podcast may not fit each of these categories. For example, a podcast covering a cold or unsolved case may not have a satisfying ending. However, some of the features, such as no victim-blaming and authenticity, were non-negotiables. My participants spoke in unison on these prerequisites – if there were too many personal opinions offered by the hosts, or any victim-blaming, they would abandon the podcast immediately. One important note, my participants clearly stated that they wanted to know details about the victims, and they were connecting the victim experiences to their own lives. In this scenario, these victims are not just random people, but people that my participants felt like they (or desired to) truly know. Blaming a victim for the situation in any way has the potential to feel very personal.

I also asked my participants if there were any podcasts they had tried and did not like. While many had to visit their phone or playlist to recall favorites, and they often vacillated between which was number one versus number two, none of my participants had a problem listing the podcasts they actively despised and avoided. In fact, that list was often much longer than the list of favorites.

All true crime podcasts are not created equal. There is a wide variety of formats and topics covered, and many draw large audiences. While there may be some that are fighting for justice and empowerment, that does not necessarily represent the majority. For example, one podcast that was mentioned by almost all participants as one they had abandoned was *Sword and Scale*. This podcast has been highly rated for several years and describes itself as, “A show that reveals that the worst monsters are real” (Sword and Scale, n.d.). However, it has also been the center of controversy. The network that was hosting the show dropped it after the host posted an inappropriate social media comment on International Women’s Day (Baysinger, 2019). My participants recalled victim-blaming and too many personal opinions as reasons they decided to unsubscribe to *Sword and Scale*. This example is not meant to imply that this show is the worst of the true crime podcast universe, or to exploit one particular instance of bad judgment by a podcast host; instead, it is meant to show that my respondents did not consider every true crime podcast to be inspiring and empowering.

Listen close and I will tell: Key features of audio media in podcast adoption

In addition to appreciating a good story, the audio format was key to the appeal of true crime podcasts. Several participants mentioned audio media giving them the ability to multitask. One participant, Jo, described it as, “I don’t feel tethered. It’s a freedom.” Discussions of busy lives led to describing podcasts as convenient entertainment and a way to block out the world around you. Clare said, “To watch TV, you’ve got to sit down and concentrate, but to listen to a podcast you can go about your business and do what you’re doing.” Abby reiterated the idea of convenience:

I think podcasts are so convenient now with it being on your phone, listening in the car. It can make a bad day good because you look forward to listening to something, you know what I mean? That's why I listen to them.

Other participants mentioned listening to podcasts while exercising, cooking, gardening, cleaning, and other everyday tasks. Kate said, "I can put one headphone in and play with my children while I'm listening to stories of people being eviscerated. It's great." All of the participants talked about the idea of true crime podcasts as both entertainment and a distraction in daily life. Clare described podcasts as being popular because of our increasingly full way of life.

I think it's really interesting to note that people's lifestyles are becoming so busy that having audio is a really, really good way to get your entertainment while you're on the go. I think more and more people are going to be listening to podcasts because our lifestyles are becoming busier and busier and more stressful and frantic.

In addition to multi-tasking and convenient entertainment, many discussed enjoying the format because they had grown up listening to talk radio like National Public Radio (NPR). Nora said, "I'm an auditory learner, so I like listening to people talking. As a child, I grew up with NPR in the car, so I've just always kind of had someone talking in an educational manner in the background."

Some specifically discussed audio being the perfect format for true crime because attaching visuals to the narrative may be disturbing or overwhelming. This lack of visuals could potentially make the stories less troubling or triggering and also less distracting. Emma said:

I think there's something too about that audio setting that's different from seeing something on TV and I can't necessarily explain why. I think it's because it's so, it feels so much more discussion based, and...you're really able to like focus on...things...and not be distracted by a visual.

Emma also mentioned not wanting the visuals to be “seared” into her memory. She said, “I feel like it’s much harder for me to process visually than in an auditory manner.” Jo echoed Emma’s perspective by explaining how the audio format may make the content more palatable: “I think in a lot of ways it buffers and it’s not like when you watch it on TV.” Ginny agreed and extended the idea from television to books, saying, “...it can be uncomfortable sometimes, reading it, instead of listening to it.”

Others mentioned listening to the podcasts as a way to relax, or even fall asleep. Beth said, “I can’t go to sleep without them...I usually fall asleep during it and then I’ll wake up at 3:30 in the morning and finish it.” Clare mentioned, “I got into it during menopause when I wasn’t sleeping. I found it a great way to relax and to sleep.”

The participants in this study seem to be attracted to the audio format for a variety of reasons, including entertainment, relaxation, convenience, and the lack of disturbing visuals. Many participants mentioned several different reasons for enjoying the audio format, showing that our relationship and use of media is often complicated and could differ from day-to-day or even moment-by-moment.

Hoping for the best, prepared for the worst: Education via true crime podcasts

At one point in the interview, I asked each participant what they thought they were learning by listening to true crime podcasts. Responses seemed to fit one of two categories – survival skills in case of an attack and how to navigate the criminal justice

system. These findings mirror two prior studies. In 2010, Vicary and Fraley found that women were drawn to true crime novels because they enjoyed a female protagonist and wanted to learn survival skills. In 2001, Livingstone et al. argued that gender complicates audience reception studies on violence because women often see themselves as potential victims of a crime. This triangulation of data points shows how crucial gender is in how we receive and interpret the media we consume.

Many participants named specific survival skills they have learned by listening to true crime podcasts. Robin described:

...locking my car door and as soon as I get in the car, locking the doors to the house even during the day. Or just like when I drive up to my house, and if I ever come home at night...I will shine my light as I pass by the house...you know, [where] I think they would be hiding, like, I'll run to the front door from my car to my house.

Tina also mentioned specific tips, including:

Don't tell people your name. Don't tell people where you live. As a runner, I try to never go running at the same time every day...I don't want anyone trying to put a pattern on my behavior to where they can know when I'll be gone and when I'll come home.

Jo mentioned specific weapons effective in staving off and surviving potential attacks.

I know the number one deterrent from someone breaking into my house is dogs, first of all. Second of all, I'm not going to be able to ever get a weapon like a gun, readily handy and be able to use it.

Others described an increase in general awareness and the notion that you never know who is going to attack. Isabelle said, “I’ve learned more about like the psychology behind murderers...why crimes occur...there’s a very large spectrum of bad people. It’s not just everyone’s the same kind of bad.” Robin said, “...it’s been a recognition of the fact that you cannot tell by looking if somebody is a predator...I feel like I’m just more aware of my personal safety.” Kate agreed, saying, “...it’s almost like kind of mentally practicing in order to avoid violent scenarios in your life.” Jo expanded this idea, saying:

Well, first of all, any act can happen to anybody, anytime, all the time. There's always an opportunity, but people feel safe. I think for me, like I said, it kind of gives you forethought. It almost gives you awareness. If I go out to the bars by myself and I drive my own car, I lock all my doors so that when I get into my car, I know nobody's been able to climb in my backseat. As silly as it is, it really brings kind of an awareness to where someone thought that they were safe. Or there was just that moment of opportunity to try to be prepared.

Tina concluded with, “I’ve learned to be observant, just of my surroundings, for my own safety.” When pressed for specifics, she said, “Love your family while they’re here. Love everyone while they’re here and share your location with your sister-in-law on your iPhone so she always knows where you are.”

These comments show that the participants in this study have a different lived reality than most. They are aware of their safety and surroundings and understand that crimes occur daily. The intersectionality of their lived experiences, gender, race, socioeconomic factors, and their media choices creates a unique perspective from which they view the world. They do not describe their lives as though they stay locked in their

homes, but they approach each day with a high level of understanding and awareness regarding violence towards women. My participants have a unique lens from which they see the world and a collective interpretation of the media, meeting one of Hartsock's requirements for a feminist standpoint (1983).

In addition to being more self-aware and conscious of their surroundings, participants also discussed how much they have learned about the inner workings of the criminal justice system. Opinions regarding the effectiveness of the criminal justice system were varied, but most believed that true crime podcasts accurately represent the reality of the bureaucracy involved. Anne said:

I've learned a lot more about how the justice system works. How to go about advocating for yourself or if a loved one's a victim of a crime, like things that you can do to help keep that, you know, in the media.

Several participants relayed an over distrust of police and criminal authorities and advised that you should never talk to the cops without a lawyer. Meg said, "I have an alibi and I have my receipts. I'm not talking without a lawyer...Don't talk to the cops unless you have a lawyer, even if you didn't do it. That's number one. Number two is don't hitchhike." Robin agreed, stating clearly, "Don't talk to the police without an attorney...Don't talk to the police. Don't trust the police...I don't trust anybody."

It is important to note that all of the women I spoke with have had personal experience dealing with the criminal justice system – one used to work in law enforcement. The women who were citizens of the United States mentioned bureaucracy and a general feeling of distrust of government institutions. The women outside of the United States mentioned that true crime podcasts have shown them how horrible the

criminal justice system is in the U.S., regardless of how accurately the podcasts portray the criminal justice system. However, it is the intersection of those media messages and their lived experiences that seems to reinforce their beliefs about how the system works. This first-hand knowledge of the criminal justice system alongside true crime podcast portrayals is rare, and it is, perhaps, why they have such a strong desire to educate and defend themselves if the need arises. Parameswaran (2003) argues that audiences are “molded by authoritative (and pervasive) media discourses but are not ‘passive recipients’ of dominant messages” (p. 317). Other studies have shown that media portrayals of crime tend to describe the incidents from the view of law enforcement, often victim-blaming and citing officers as the only authoritative voice (Bullock, 2008; Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Meyers, 1994). My participants are seeking out true crime podcasts that do not victim blame and usually tell the story from the perspective of the victim or their family. This is an example of how my participants are challenging the prevailing norm of victim blaming as an interpretive community.

Others discussed the ways in which true crime stories reinforce their perception that authorities fail to help victims. Clare said, “It’s taught me a lot about how terrible the U.S. criminal justice system is. It’s shocking. It’s appalling, the injustices that occur in the criminal justice system in the U.S.” Anne agreed:

Most of the time I'm very skeptical...very critical of how they do things. And I realize that, you know, there's always going to be some issues in any type of government agency. But it seems, more often than not, that a lot of people are dismissed or ignored. And it just seems like they don't care.

Jo, who used to work in law enforcement, said, “I don’t trust the criminal justice system, which is why I quit wearing the badge.” She continued, “I saw people sitting in jail who they knew absolutely that there was somebody else who had committed that crime, who had a history, but...because they didn’t want to admit that they were wrong they just let it go.” Focusing specifically the concept of fairness, she said, “There are a lot of times, to be honest, that I do a lot of questioning about the way the court proceedings were and the fairness of it.” Giving a specific example, Jo said, “I know that a lot of times they wouldn’t grant DNA to the defense because they didn’t want to give too much of their samples away or they didn’t feel like it was a necessary expense.” Again, this is not just conjecture – these women, Jo especially, had first-hand experience with the criminal justice system. She argued, “I’ve always believed that the more you know the better.” She continued with, “I also think true crime is educational. It’s just factual stuff.” When asked to expand, she said:

I think podcasts can be an amazing tool to the criminal justice system because people like me who live in a town, we have a sheriff. Well, if we don't really know that it's our duty to hold him accountable, we just vote him in. But does anybody ever put him on blast for what he does? Podcasts are really shining the light on the corruption and a broken system.

Diana argued that true crime podcasts are important to expose bureaucratic failures as well as to show people that the world is rife with injustices. She said, “Most people are ignorant to the fact that our criminal justice system is so broken...people are generally just cattle. A lot of people don’t question things.” When asked to expand, she said:

I do think that some people tend to treat others as if no consequences will ever befall them. I would say that's a good bit of being conditioned through domestic violence, that you learn self-preservation. You learn to do whatever it takes to end the argument, the cycle. You can be self-righteous later. Some things are more important.

Shelly could see both sides of the coin. When asked how she thought the representation of the criminal justice system was reflected in true crime podcasts, she said:

I believe that it's extremely important, but I feel that it's extremely flawed. I think when we really take the time to look into the criminal justice system we can see just how often people are not treated fairly, how bias plays into so much of everything that happens, so when the cops are doing their job and they're doing a good job and they really work to keep these people off the streets or just get them help, I root for them. But more often than not, I find myself going 'wow, our system is flawed.'

Another participant, Tina, referenced the podcast *Small Town Dicks* when discussing the criminal justice system. In this podcast, identical-twin brothers that are detectives in a small town are interviewed by Yeardley Smith (the voice of Lisa Simpson on *The Simpsons*). In each episode, they walk listeners through complicated cases to show how they solved them as well as the effort involved to catch the perpetrator. Tina mentioned this podcast precisely because of how law enforcement is represented.

When they present the case, you can tell that they are trying to do the right thing so that this case can go through the legal system and justice will be served. When I listen to that one it makes me feel warm and fuzzy that we have law enforcement

out there that wants to do it the right way...not every law enforcement officer is a jerk. Not every situation is the same. I think it [true crime podcasts] paints a broad spectrum and shows where the system works, and it shows where the system doesn't work.

In general, participants all agreed that they were learning from true crime podcasts and that they were seeking this specific media form for educational purposes. Similar to Parameswaran's participants that read romance novels to learn English (1999), this study shows that consumers can and do seek out media for education. These findings show active participants in the consumption of media, "engaged in a process of making, rather than simply absorbing meaning" (Jenkins, 2000). Opinions differed on exactly what they were learning, but most responses fell into two categories: survival skills and navigation of the criminal justice system. This aligns well with prior studies, which have shown that one of the primary motivating factors for true crime podcasters is to educate the public on the criminal justice system (Boling, 2019a). Examining this educational aspect with a feminist lens demonstrates the importance of creating a community to challenge the hegemonic power structures by arming listeners with skills and knowledge to fight the dominant narratives as well as the institutions that perpetuate them.

In addition to what participants are learning from true crime podcasts, they had strong opinions regarding what other listeners, and our society as a whole, are learning. Several participants mentioned that they felt like true crime podcasts, specifically the role of investigative reporting in bringing these cases and issues to light, played a key role in our society. Clare said, "I think what we're learning from [true crime podcasts] is that the investigative journalists are doing a better job than the cops generally." Diana took that

one step further saying, “I think [true crime podcasts] fulfill a role that the press used to cover.” Abby agreed, saying, “I think podcasting has helped create a lot of awareness and bringing a lot of attention to some issues that don’t always stay in the news.”

The women I interviewed articulated in a variety of ways the importance of true crime podcasts and how the medium and genre are impacting our society. Much like the impact that the #MeToo movement had on media coverage of sexual assault (Ennis & Wolfe, 2018), coverage of domestic violence cases can also increase awareness and shed light on the extent to which domestic violence occurs daily. The NCADV reports that, in our society, “nearly 20 people per minute are physically abused by an intimate partner” (“Statistics,” n.d.). Meg argued that our society needs to start paying attention to true crime to grow beyond our present by learning from our past. If our present is “based on a true story” of the past, and if we intend to progress as a society and support victims of domestic violence, Meg is arguing that we need to learn more about the crimes committed and how to best offer support for victims. Examining our lived experiences is a crucial component of growth. Meg said:

Look at all the true crime movies that have come out lately. Ted Bundy, the Central Park Five, several others I can't think of. Pop culturally, it's blowing up. Society, I think, does need to take true crime into consideration. Just like history, we need to learn about stuff like the Nazis, so we don't become the Nazis. We need to learn about domestic violence so we can end domestic violence. We need to see this is how serial killers work...The world is, we'd like to think it's a safe place, but unfortunately, it's not. Anything could happen to anybody at any time.

Dita agreed that true crime podcasts could help our society become more aware of the prevalence of domestic violence, hoping that the audience would continue to grow to expand the reach of this media genre. She said:

I think it's playing a bigger role as people start to listen to true crime podcasts more and more. I do...I don't think there's a lot of people that don't know about true crime podcasts. They might be...they know about true crime, the TV shows and stuff like that, but I think it's gathering a pretty big following and...Yeah, I think it's playing a bigger role in society now and it's making people more aware of cases that probably hadn't gotten a light shined on them before now.

Jo agreed on the importance of growing the true crime podcast audience, saying, “I wish more people [would] listen, because, I guess, people need to be aware it happens all the time, in general, and in small cities.” This is not just conjecture. A journalist from *The Washington Post Magazine* recently attended CrimeCon, a national convention dedicated to true crime and hosted by the Oxygen channel, and described first-hand how family members of victims are using podcasts to elevate their stories and garner support from traditional media and law enforcement (Peterson, 2019).

Robin believed that true crime podcasts can educate the public, make our society more aware of domestic violence, and potentially inspire change. She said:

Anybody who would say America is not a violent place or not a hostile place to women, you know, true crime podcasts would. You listen to some of those and you'll realize it is...but it doesn't have to be this way.

Similarly, Beth discussed the importance of true crime podcasts are for revealing cultural myths about crime, victims, and perpetrators. She said, “It's [true crime podcasts] a

resource that can help us be more aware of the type of people that are out there, when they provide details of how a crime was committed.”

In general, participants agreed that true crime podcasts fulfill several important societal (or cultural) roles. First, people who may not understand how the criminal justice system works can learn real-life applicable lessons by listening to true crime podcasts. Second, listening may open up the eyes of people who are not aware of criminal behavior or government corruption. However, perhaps the most important reason is to learn from the past so that we can move forward and build a safer and more equitable world for women and survivors of violence. Participants argued that if people listen to true crime podcasts, they can learn more about the reality of the world we live in and avoid repeating past mistakes. True crime podcasts examine some of the most powerful agents in our society – police, lawyers, judges, the prison system, and elected officials. Through their listening practices, my participants are mentally challenging the patriarchal nature of the criminal justice system and hoping that others will listen to move beyond awareness and drive societal change for victims and their families.

Happily, ever after: Questioning their attraction to true crime podcasts

In addition to educating themselves and others about the criminal justice system, self-defense, and domestic violence in general, participants also described an attraction to true crime podcasts to better understand the psychological motivations of the criminal mind. Participants described several different reasons for wanting to gain insight into the psyche of a criminal: to be able to identify criminals in real life, to better understand what is driving the motivation to commit a violent crime against another human being, and to learn more about people in general.

One participant, Shelly, said that in her struggle to grasp what drives people to abuse others, her therapist recommended listening to true crime podcasts as a way to help her comprehend the mindset of someone who perpetrates violence. She said, “I was also told by my therapist specifically to give true crime podcasts a chance, so I could look into the psychology of why people do that thing.” Emma agreed, saying, “I want to understand why a person would ever harm someone else. Because I can’t ever, I’m just never going to be able to come to an understanding of that...like, why my stepfather hurt the people he supposedly loved.”

Others saw this desire to understand the mindset of a perpetrator more of an educational exercise. Isabelle said, “[I listen to] anything that teaches me something about people.” She continued with, “...it’s just so unfathomable that you want to try and understand it by getting all of the details.” When asked what she thinks must be included in a true crime podcast, Shelly said, “I think what must be included is the psychology of the crime, why these people do what they do. It’s a very interesting look into society in general but it’s what captivates me every time because I think that all of us...we could never be those people.”

Participants grappled with the reasons behind why and how certain people mistreat others, especially those they purport to love, as well as how to identify potential perpetrators who might fall into that category. Shelly said, “The number one reason I listen to true crime podcasts is because of the curiosity of how people can break and do bad things to others, I just can’t wrap my mind around it.” She continued:

I know that before what happened to me occurred, I chose to avoid anything that was kind macabre or dark, because I didn't want to think that people were capable

of that. And now I have to understand why people are capable of it, to an extent that sometimes I get upset, because I just can't comprehend being violent.

Meg agreed, saying, "I sympathize with the victim, but at the same time, I know how it is. I like to look for stuff, sounds really bad, but I like to look for signs in the perpetrators or killers or whatever."

In addition to questioning the motives of violent people, participants also examined themselves. Questions like, "What's wrong with me?" were common. Robin said, "[It] makes me wonder why, like what is wrong with me that that's what I've gone through, but I think it's that... 'there but for the grace of God go I' piece of it." She continued with questioning, "'Does this make me really creepy?' But then I see the droves of people that also like true crime, so then I'm like, 'Okay, maybe I am more normal than I think I am.'" Ginny appreciated the sense of community that has arisen from the popularity of the genre, saying:

I work in a bookstore where we sell true crime books. I see the type of people who buy them and their reactions to things. I have to say that it's become a unifying thing, at least for me personally, with people. That now it's much more socially acceptable to discuss that.

Dita also found the genre's popularity inspiring, saying, "There's so many people that are like me out there, that really enjoy true crime. And I think that's just...it's awesome."

With self-described traits like 'wrong' and 'creepy,' tinged with judgment, this finding initially appeared to echo Radway's concept of genre guilt, similar to what she found in her study of women who read romance novels. However, Radway defines genre guilt based on three components: the amount of money the women spent on the books,

the amount of time they spent reading (and therefore neglecting their household duties), and the subject matter in the book – in this case, romance novels, seen as culturally unacceptable for married women to consume (1984). Perhaps due to the socio-economic class of my participants, they never discussed money or time spent during our discussions. While podcasts are typically free, many offer additional content if you become a paid subscriber, and some are entirely behind a paywall. Instead, their guilt seemed to stem from perceived cultural norms.

According to Jenkins (2000) and Hall (2007), genre interpretation is a social construct. We learn what a genre is by hearing about it from others and consuming it ourselves. As a social construct, genres can evolve. For example, the rap music that began in predominantly urban areas in the 1970s has evolved to be featured in one of the most successful Broadway shows of all time, *Hamilton* (Culwell-Block, 2018). Our beliefs about, consumption of, and discussions regarding genres are constantly evolving as our society evolves. Several participants mentioned that women who enjoy stories of crime might be considered unusual or even weird. Layer on that the idea that a woman who enjoys crime stories is a domestic violence survivor, and the concern revolves around cultural judgment: that most people would question her attraction to these real-life cases, if she is “supposed” to be listening to them, or if this type of media consumption is “healthy.”

According to Brown, media is a big component of our beliefs regarding what we “should be” (2006). Even if society is not projecting those beliefs onto my participants, media representations of domestic violence may be depicting victims of these crimes as something to hide or be ashamed of. For example, Meyers has examined coverage of

portrayals of violence against women in the media and repeatedly found that they are often portrayed as provoking the assault, therefore, acquitting the perpetrators of responsibility (Meyers, 1987, 2004). Brown defines shame as: “An intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging” (2006, p. 45). With shame, the messages that we are flawed or unworthy of acceptance are not only generated externally (though they may be reinforced by social norms), they are innately internalized “feelings.” For my participants, even if society and or the media are not projecting these beliefs, the presumption is enough to justify their feelings that it is not okay to discuss their enjoyment of true crime media. Following her definition, Brown describes shame as a “social construct,” arguing that “...the way women experience shame in an interpersonal context...is inextricably tied to relationships and connection” (2006, p. 45). She also argues that our culture defines expectations and that women experience shame out of a “...real or perceived failure of meeting cultural expectations” (p. 45).

Brown also clearly distinguishes between shame and guilt. She considers shame to be “...a feeling that results from...a flawed or bad self,” and guilt as “...a feeling that results from behaving in a flawed or bad way” (2006). Based on this distinction, my participants’ understandings of their media choices more closely reflect shame rather than guilt. I did not ask participants specifically about how our culture impacts their feelings of self, so I cannot make claims based on extrapolations of exactly what they experience when they listen to true crime podcasts. However, based on their responses, it appears that they may be experiencing a combination of cultural guilt (a belief that discussing true crime podcasts is not socially acceptable for women, let alone survivors of domestic

violence), and of internalized shame, questioning their own attraction to the genre in light of their lived experiences.

One of my participants, Clare, was very familiar with Brown's work and discussed it during our interview. She mentioned both guilt and shame when discussing her attraction to the genre, saying, "It is very hard to overcome the shame and the guilt of putting yourself or your children in domestic violence situation and fearing for your life at different times." I did not press Clare on this topic, but based on this answer, she seems to see guilt and shame as intricately connected ideas that work together to impact her feelings, not distinct entities, as Brown describes.

Cron argues that, "Story is the language of experience, whether it's ours, someone else's, or that of fictional characters. Other people's stories are as important as the stories we tell ourselves" (2012, p. 8). For the women in this study, it is clear that the power of a good story goes well beyond the construction of a strong narrative. If done well, true crime podcasts have the ability to resonate on a personal level with women who identify as domestic violence survivors, aiding them in processing their own story, and helping them work through feelings of guilt or shame.

4.2 INCORPORATING LIVED EXPERIENCES WITH MEDIA CHOICES

Connecting attraction to true crime podcasts with uses of this media form, this section examines how participants relate their lived experiences to their media choices and considers links between exposure therapy and a sense of community. My participants are crafting a collective community that allows them to disrupt dominant narratives. As a whole, my participants agreed that their lived experiences influence their media choices, giving them a unique relationship to the true crime podcasts they listen to. To help

answer RQ3, regarding how audiences incorporate their experience as a domestic violence survivor into their podcast listening decisions, responses were grouped into two themes: how podcasts help them process their own lived experiences and potentially serve as exposure therapy, and the notion that they were participating in a sort of group therapy, a community of listeners built from hearing the stories of others.

Mirror, mirror on the wall: Reflections of ourselves in the media we consume

While love of a good story, enjoyment of audio media, and the role of education are prominent reasons mentioned for listening to true crime podcasts, participants are also drawn to true crime podcasts because they mirrored their own lived experiences.

Listening to true crime podcasts in order to process their own life stories was something that almost every participant discussed. While they did not all agree that they were making this choice consciously, when asked to reflect on their enjoyment of true crime podcasts, almost every participant came to the realization that hearing stories similar to their own is both validating and healing. Clare said that not only is it interesting to listen to the stories of others, but she believes that it helps to process her own lived experiences.

I think it helps to own your own story, and I think it could be cathartic...I think maybe on a subconscious level I'm seeking out stuff where people have survived their own kind of trauma to validate my survival story and to reassure that I'm not alone in getting myself into a whole lot of shit that I had to work really hard to get out of.

Emma found that when she told people about the abuse going on in her life, they were not willing or able to step in and process her lived experiences with her. This is a common,

isolating experience. When she started listening to true crime podcasts, it reminded her that she was not alone as a survivor of domestic violence:

I always thought it was something that needed to be closeted...The fact that anybody was talking about it I sort of found exciting, and in a way I felt like, oh, this is a way for me to sort of process some of the stuff that's happened to me. Robin agreed, saying, "It validated for me that reading about other instances of women dealing with domestic violence...that it can happen to anybody."

In addition to feeling legitimized, some participants specifically mentioned the connection they feel with the victims in true crime podcasts. Anne said, "It makes me feel close to the victims...sometimes, I relate to them very well." She continued with, "I think a lot of times I go for either books or documentaries or podcasts that reflect the same types of relationships I've had or are things I've been through." Nora agreed, saying, "I can identify with the victim...it's kind of like, 'Hey, I'm not the only person who, something like this happened to me.'" While the participants may not be reaching out to each other for community, they are seeking stories similar to their own to feel connection with the protagonists.

One participant, Meg, mentioned how listening to other stories validates her feelings towards perpetrators and men in general, giving her the opportunity to sympathize with other victims.

Well, I hate men. So, anything that a man does against a woman, I'm like, typical pieces of shit, burn in hell. But I guess I have more of a heart than I did before.

That sounds really bad. But I just sympathize more [with the victim].

Listening to these stories not only helps them to validate and process their lived experiences, but it also gives them gratitude for their survival. Many participants experienced what Brown (2006) calls comparative suffering – comparing their own experiences to the victims in the podcast to either feel better about their own story or to rank their trauma against the trauma of others. Anne said, “It makes me feel better about things that have happened to me, like that could’ve been me. Like it’s almost a morbid fascination with like, a situation that I could have been in.” Jo summed her thoughts up succinctly with, “That could’ve been me...I know how that victim lived and what they went through and that could be me and I’m so glad it’s not.” Emily agreed, saying, “It’s like I cannot get enough of stories about women who were in domestic violence situations that turned into murder.” Discussing a specific series of true crime books, Emily went on to say, “I just want to read every one of them because it’s almost like, thank God that wasn’t me. Thank God I got out. It validates me, I guess.” Clare had an appreciation for the stories of others and also how her story relates to theirs.

We’ve got to look at everything individually and recognize that all our feelings, and our suffering, or our shame, or our guilt, or our torment or trauma, they’re all ours and if listening to these other stories can help us to overcome them, or work through them, or feel better about what we’ve been through...[then it is good].

Others talked about putting their story into “perspective” with comparative suffering.

Tina said:

It’s almost a comfort to watch somebody else’s problems and be grateful, ‘Hey, at least that’s not happening to me.’ That sounds horrible, but when you watch a documentary about somebody who’s gone through something really bad it puts

your own worries and woes into perspective...If they can live through that and look for self-healing, I should not be feeling sorry for myself for anything.

When describing why she was drawn to one particular episode of *Crime Junkie* focused on domestic violence, Emma said simply, “I realized, it could’ve been me.” Listening to the stories of others to process their own lived experiences and hear stories of survival or escape from domestic violence was a prominent theme throughout interviews and shows how these participants are seeking media at a relational level. While participants did not agree on whether their preferences were conscious, all of them made some mention of relating the stories in true crime podcasts with their own lived experiences, showing the potential for an interpretive community actively constructing meaning from the media they consume. Hearing stories of other women like themselves was one of the main reasons they listened to true crime podcasts, reinforcing the need for these virtual or mediated communities that many lacked in their off-line worlds.

Listener discretion is advised: Exposure therapy within a mediated community

Not only do participants listen to true crime podcasts as a way of processing their own lived experiences with validation, gratitude, and comparative suffering, but some were also open about listening to podcasts as a form of exposure therapy. During my initial round of coding, I saw this discussion as a continuation of the ideas related to validation and gratitude. However, when I began emotion coding, specifically looking for emotions they described and or the presence or absence of shame, I could see a clear difference between using true crime podcasts to process their lived experiences and true crime podcasts functioning as a form of exposure therapy. Since Skolnik (2017) argued true crime podcasts can act as a form of exposure therapy, I sought to explore the extent

to which this notion resonated with other domestic violence survivors, or how their interpretations of exposure therapy might differ.

This round of coding also examined their “values, attitudes and beliefs representing their world view” (Saldaña, 2013) to shed light on how they see their media choices impacting their core belief system. Processing their lived experiences was described with statements like, “I realized it could’ve been me,” or “I’m so grateful that wasn’t me.” However, these sentiments do not fit the definition of exposure therapy.

According to the American Psychological Association, exposure therapy is defined as,

A psychological treatment to help people confront their fears. When people are fearful of something, they tend to avoid the feared objects, activities or situations. Although this avoidance might help reduce feelings of fear in the short term, over the long term it can make the fear become even worse. In such situation, a psychologist might recommend a program of exposure therapy in order to break the pattern of avoidance and fear. (2019, para. 1)

In other words, being attracted to the media to process lived experiences is when media audiences compare their own story to that of others to know that they are not alone.

Incorporating their lived experiences into their media choices by listening to true crime podcasts for exposure therapy is when audiences choose to listen to a particular media for a therapeutic experience and “break the pattern of avoidance and fear.” Both aspects highlight the role of collective identity and use of the media by the participants in this study.

Some participants specifically used the word “therapy” when describing their choice to listen to true crime podcasts. Robin said, “It’s almost therapeutic somehow to

validate...validate that I got out.” Clare agreed, saying, “I think it helps me to own my story, overcome my shame, allow myself to be vulnerable, allow myself to forgive myself and I think it does work in a way but it’s a subconscious thing.” Nora talked specifically about the importance of exposing herself to violence by saying, “We kind of live in a dark world, we live in a world that has some dark realities and I don’t shy away from the truth of that.” Anne talked about selecting stories to expose herself to media that reflects her own lived experiences, “I think a lot of times I go for either books or documentaries or podcasts that reflect the same types of relationships I’ve had or things that I’ve been through.” After discussing exposure therapy and how it might apply to her, Beth said, “I never made the connection, but perhaps people use it to desensitize them to similar stories of what they unfortunately went through.” While not all participants said it was a conscious decision, many agreed that listening to true crime podcasts for exposure therapy was likely one of the ways in which their lived experiences impacted their media choices.

In addition to the idea of using true crime podcasts as exposure therapy, several participants discussed emotional, cathartic responses they had while listening. Emma recalled an emotional reaction while listening to an episode of *Crime Junkies* in a public setting: “I started crying on the metro, and I had to like, take a step back and be like, why am I having...why is this affecting me so strongly?” Then she began to wonder, “Why would you like subject yourself to something like this when it feels like you probably want to be as far away from this as possible?” When discussing the different formats for true crime podcasts, Emma said that sometimes the comedic versions help expose her to stories in a way that makes the content more tolerable. She said, “I feel like [comedic true

crime podcasts are] a good way for me to make light of something that is really terrible, and it is helpful to process it that way.” Other participants also mentioned cathartic experiences while listening to true crime podcasts. Meg said, “I wept. I cried like a little baby. I still cry when I think about that case.” In discussing a specific episode of *COLD*, Tina said, “I stood in my kitchen and sobbed.”

One participant, Anne, went slightly beyond a cathartic experience and discussed wanting to hear stories similar to her own when she has a bad day.

Sometimes, if I’m feeling like I’m having a bad day, I keep remembering things that have happened, and that really kind of helps me to kind of, you know, go through somebody else’s story that’s similar to mine. I think it does really help to know that there’s like other people out there who are the same, who’ve had the same experience.

The burden of my story: Finding community through a podcast

Not only are the participants in this study potentially using true crime podcasts as exposure therapy, but many of them also discussed the idea of virtual group therapy through listening and meeting other fans. Isabelle said, “It does kind of give a sense of community in a way, like there’s other weirdos out there.” Ginny agreed, saying, “It’s, I think, one of the things culturally is that it’s definitely connected people that may not have been connected otherwise.” Others described it as “comradery” or a “tribe.” Tina said, “There’s a sort of sense of comradery. When you hear that other people and other women have gone through what you’ve gone through.” Clare expanded on that saying:

It can happen to anybody but there’s a sense of belonging. There’s a sense of being part of a tribe. There’s a sense of being a part of a big group of people and I

think for people who suffer from domestic violence having other people that you can identify with and can support you is really, really helpful.

Again, while these women never meet in person (offline face-to-face context), these comments show a collective conscious and identity found through shared experiences and media consumption. Emma discussed how it is often difficult to share their stories with others in their offline worlds who may not understand, saying, “I didn’t get to talk about it when it was happening. And even now, I don’t want to burden people with that. I mean, that’s heavy.” Then she discussed how, when she is not in a counseling session, podcasts give her “some sort of solidarity with something else and someone else’s experience.” This idea that there are “others out there” generates a sense of not being alone though a mediated community, a group of women surrounding survivors, sharing their own lived experiences, and helping victims process theirs.

Brown also discussed the idea of community as a key resource for women dealing with shame. She argues that it was rare for her participants to identify therapy or counseling as an effective way to deal with shame, but in general, they agreed that “being with others who have had similar experiences or talking with people who’ve been there” was the most common tool described to aid in shame resilience (2006, p. 51). My participants appear to be using the true crime podcast community of listeners as a support system to aid in processing their own experiences, as Brown described, but virtually.

4.3 CHAPTER CONCLUSION

Skolnik recalled that the *New York Times* Op-Ed addressing domestic violence survivor attraction to true crime podcasts had two intended goals: to unpack the ways in which domestic violence survivors are drawn to true crime narratives for unique reasons

and to expose structural and institutionalized violence. Media narratives, Skolnik argues, need to do a better job representing the lived reality of survivors and shed a light on systemic problems that suppress the voices of victims. In an interview with Skolnik (whom I now refer to as Jes, a respondent in my study), I asked if the goals of the piece had been accomplished. Jes said, “It achieves one of them...the idea of talking about the human aspect of the story.” However, Jes said that the goal of exposing structural and institutionalized violence was cut from the Op-Ed for unknown reasons. In general, Jes felt like the Op-Ed opened the conversation for survivors to discuss the “normalcy of violence.” Jes described this as something other survivors mentioned, allowing them to reflect on their own experiences. This idea of using media for reflection underscores how media messages can serve as tools for catharsis and aid in processing personal trauma. Jes described it as, “Just being...immersed in that narrative world is oddly comforting because it is a world in which violence exists.” As Jes wrote in the Op-Ed:

Those of us who have experienced violence and find refuge in true crime are looking not for closure but for empathy, for understanding, for a world that doesn’t turn its back on the fact that day-to-day violence exists, and that it is less freakish than banal.

However, true crime podcasts are doing more than just allowing insight into a world where violence exists. For domestic violence survivors who are seeking this particular genre and medium to help process their own lived experiences, the podcast format also gives them something else – agency. In our interview, Jes described this as, “...the idea that you have control over a narrative about violence.” In other words, you engage, “on your own terms.” Listening to podcasts requires multiple choices – choosing to own a

mobile device, choosing to download an app, choosing to download a podcast, picking a particular genre and series from the thousands available, choosing to listen, choosing to continue listening, and choosing to engage with other fans either offline or online. Jes said, "...you go into the experience of listening to a podcast in an active role in which you are an agent." Not only are true crime podcast listeners choosing their media platform, genre, and narrative, but they also have full control over whether or not to listen. Comparing that with their life stories, Jes said, "...that's not something that you have when you are in a domestic violence situation. It's not something that I had. That agency was purposefully being taken away from me." Giving domestic violence survivors a way to engage with media that could help them heal from past traumas and granting them complete control over that engagement is empowering. Jes connected this to exposure therapy, saying, "...it's not so much exposure therapy to violence as it is exposure therapy to the idea of being able to engage with something on your own terms."

As Jes wrote in the Op-Ed:

But as the genre continues to broaden and deepen, growing to cover a larger variety of experiences and perspectives, the films, books and podcasts that are well-researched, fair and empathetic will be the most fulfilling to those of us who know violence, who seek a place to breathe. We deserve stories that reveal what we know to be true about human nature – that all of us are capable of the most terrible acts, the most incredible resilience and everything in between.

For survivors of violence, the power of true crime stories are far-reaching and serve as potential key components of survivor healing. The culture at large may be beginning to embrace the popularity of true crime, still, many of my participants expressed they feel

“creepy” or “weird” about their own attraction. Jes and I discussed the contrast between genre guilt, societal guilt regarding a certain genre, and personal shame. Jes described the root of this societal guilt as being in the root of the genre itself, noting that the voyeuristic nature of early crime writing was considered “trashy” or “pulpy.” While the current production of true crime may have grown beyond its initial tawdry threads, there is still a wide range of true crime being produced – some as investigative journalism, and others as capitalistic enterprises of pure entertainment.

Radway discussed this tension in her study as well – the women she interviewed could easily spot “bad” romance novels. They discussed dislike for certain publishers that were just trying to make money by producing as many books as possible or writers that crossed an imaginary line from “romance” to “trash” (1984). My participants reflected this distinction as well, mentioning several podcasts they rejected because of the host’s personal opinions, the preponderance of victim-blaming, or the practice of turning traumatic events into a comedy hour. While some participants mentioned enjoying the humorous true crime shows, such as *My Favorite Murder*, they all agreed that humor has no place in the narrative or in discussions of the victim.

When discussing the roots of this societal guilt, Jes compared the history of the genre itself with the history of domestic violence, saying, “...we [survivors] are encouraged not to speak up about our experiences. We are encouraged to keep violence quiet. It’s not proper. You don’t want to upset the family.” Examining the evolution of the genre in conjunction with narratives surrounding domestic violence further complicates this concept of societal guilt. Because of the historical perceptions of true crime media and the unspoken societal censorship of domestic violence, my participants

are seeking a safe place, where violence is openly discussed, traditional portrayals of power and patriarchy are exposed, and their previously silenced voices are heard.

Podcast listeners interviewed for this project describe their appeal to true crime podcasts in ways that echo Brown's notion of shame resilience (2006). Brown argues that women need to be able to "speak shame" to acknowledge their own vulnerability and move forward. Media is a key component in Brown's shame web, circulating important social lessons and 'scripts' for how women interpret their lived experiences and how they should act in certain situations. Jes echoed the media's role in producing shame, saying, "I think the media reinforces dominant narratives. That's a core function of mainstream media especially, is to reinforce dominant narratives, to not question power." Brown argues that women experience shame when they interpret their actions as a "real or perceived failure of meeting cultural expectations" (2006, p. 45). It is possible that true crime podcasts are offering a counter-narrative to the societal norm of victim-blaming and provide a place of support and empathy for victims of domestic violence. In Brown's study, she argued that women needed connection with others to move forward. She defined connection as being:

...about mutual support, shared experiences, and the freedom and ability to explore and create options. Connection allowed the women to move away from the social/cultural trappings of the shame web by working with others to redefine what is valuable and important.

Brown argued that one of the categories where women struggled the most with feelings of shame is surviving trauma (2006). In this case, women need to connect with others, normalize their experiences, and realize that they are not alone. Based on the interviews

with my participants and the communities they produce, it appears that true crime podcasts could be filling that societal void for women who have survived domestic violence. Through listening to true crime podcasts, my participants are able to hear stories similar to their own, normalizing their experiences. Because of the sheer number of true crime podcasts available, they are also able to see that they are not alone; domestic violence is prevalent, and anyone could be a victim. They also see depictions of different types of women survivors – business owners, college professors, married couples, and single moms – underscoring a powerful narrative that they are not alone, their experiences are shared across socio-economic class and occupation, and that their trauma is not their fault.

Prior research has shown that media often perpetuates gendered stereotypes regarding violence, a predominant myth being the one that frequently blames the victim (Alat, 2006; Cuklanz & Moorti, 2006; Gilchrist, 2010; Kahlor & Eastin, 2011; Meyers, 1994, 1997, 2004; Moore, 2011). Marian Meyers argues that the inaccurate and demeaning media depictions of women who are victims of crimes is “the heritage of a patriarchal society” (1994, p. 50). Interestingly, it seems that my participants believe the true crime podcasts they listen to break the mold of oppression and silence, supporting them through the healing process, and increasing cultural awareness of domestic violence. This chapter has highlighted the potential for media forms to drive the collective consciousness and patriarchal challenge that Hartsock was describing (1983). However, a question still remains – can audiences create a community if they listen in isolation? This chapter has shown that they can. Listening to stories similar to their own, finding similar meanings across their diverse interpretations, and gravitating toward

discourses that challenge the current power structures indicates that even though these women are not physically together in offline communities, they are constructing similar meanings from the media they consume and using it to drive awareness and action.

In summary, participants described three reasons they are drawn to true crime podcasts: love of a good story, unique characteristics of the audio medium, and educational aspects of true crime podcasts. In addition to their attraction to true crime podcasts, participants discussed three unique ways they are using the media, incorporating it into their daily lives, and how their lived experiences are impacting their media choices: using true crime podcasts to process their own life story, the potential therapeutic role of true crime narratives, and the virtual community connections forged by listening to true crime podcasts. Examining my participants' attraction to true crime podcasts in conjunction with the uses unique to this audience has demonstrated the unprecedented ways that domestic violence survivors are embracing and using this emerging media.

Table 4.1: Summary of Participants

Pseudonym	Self-Identified Characteristics	Interview Length
Robin	Feminist	53.00
Anne	Parent	27.63
Kate	Getting a degree in library sciences Parent Relative who is an unsolved murder	44.08
Ginny	Identifies as Queer	40.35
Clare	Australian, living in Hong Kong Written a book about her lived experiences Currently hosts a lifestyle podcast Producing her own true crime podcast Victim of internet dating scam	59.55
Meg	None noted	38.58
Beth	None noted	39.53
Dita	Fascinated by missing persons cases Parent	41.43
Nora	Molecular biologist Taught forensic science Consultant for <i>All Crime No Cattle</i> Married Parent	28.24
Isabelle	“Mature student” in the UK	38.03
Jo	Previously worked in law enforcement Grandmother Divorced	57.28
Tina	Travels with her job Parent Dad is in law enforcement and has encouraged her to start a podcast and solve crimes	48.21
Emma	Racial minority	43.17
Diana	None noted	39.14
Shelly	None noted	18.24
Abby	Journalist True crime podcaster for her employer	34.04

CHAPTER 5

PRODUCING STORIES THAT MATTER

“It’s all about telling stories. Telling stories and listening. Because, you know what? Someone may be Republican, someone may be a Democrat, but how do we sit down and just listen? Listen to my story. If you just listen without judging and hear what I’ve been through, you’re going to have compassion. You are.”

– Rasha and Yvette, co-hosts of *Root of Evil*, discussing their purpose in podcasting, June 2019

The basic framework for a story consists simply of a beginning, a middle, and an end. Other components are also important: plot, characters, structure, climax, problem resolution, setting, style, and tone. All can add to or detract from the final product. However, with podcasters, there is another key component – audio. Sound effects, dramatic music, voice actors, theme music, and audio from interviews and trials can all enhance a true crime podcast or potentially push the final product over the line into gaudy entertainment. Where exactly is the line between information and entertainment? At what point does it feel *too* produced or insensitive to victims and families? These are questions that all media producers grapple with. However, as true crime podcasting continues to grow, producers outside the field of journalism also wrestle with the wide range of options available, leaving consumers with a virtual cornucopia of formats, styles and final

products. From highly produced audio masterpieces to those created in a home studio using only basic equipment, each podcaster has to make decisions on how to best present the stories they want to tell.

Since true crime podcasters come from a variety of backgrounds, including journalists, lawyers, and true crime fans, everyone brings a slightly different concept to the podcasting universe. The “Top Shows” section of true crime on iTunes lists podcasts produced by national news outlets such as *NPR*, *NBC News*, and the *L.A. Times*. Independent productions, including the true crime comedy podcast, *My Favorite Murder*, and locally produced *Up and Vanished*, also top the list. Formats vary from serialized podcasts focusing on one case for the entire season to podcasts focusing on a different case each episode. There are podcasts examining murders, cold cases, domestic violence, missing persons, medical malpractice, the mafia, and mass shooters. There is no one size fits all in the realm of true crime podcasting. While some garner larger audiences than others, the top 20 true crime podcasts on iTunes only share one unifying feature – crime.

When I interviewed my participants, I asked them to list their top three favorite true crime podcasts. I then listed the “favorite” podcasts and sorted them based on weighted popularity. Table 5.2 shows the list of podcasts and their final score. I reached out to the top seven podcasts mentioned which included all podcasts that received a weighted score of at least four, meaning they garnered at least two votes and one of those votes were either first or second place. I also reached out to all of the podcasts that my respondents mentioned that were focused specifically on domestic violence cases. I scheduled phone interviews with five of the 10 hosts that I contacted. I conducted a sixth podcaster interview via email due to scheduling conflicts. The other three hosts contacted

never replied to my initial or follow up requests. The podcasters I interviewed for this study included: Ashley Flowers from *Crime Junkie* (2017), Dave Cawley from *COLD* (2018), Hedley Thomas from *The Teacher's Pet* (2018), Jason Moon from *Bear Brook* (2018), and Rasha Pecoraro and Yvette Gentile from *Root of Evil* (2019). Chris Goffard from the *L.A. Times* and the podcast *Dirty John* (2017) answered questions via email. Most of my respondents were professional journalists (4), and most produced a serialized podcast covering a single domestic violence case (5). A summary of the podcasts and the interview length is shown in Table 5.1. The hosts I interviewed reflect many of the same demographic statistics seen in the journalism field (“Divided 2019,” 2019), and specifically in field of audio media – 57% white male (4 of 7), 29% white female (2 of 7), and 14% African American female (1 of 7).

Context for Podcasters Interviewed

Ashley Flowers is the host of *Crime Junkie* (2017), a podcast that covers a different crime almost every week. Flowers is a self-described true crime fan “since birth,” and approaches each episode like she is discussing a case with a friend. The friend, Brit, learns about the crime during production and responds with questions and requests for more details just as friends might over cups of coffee. Flowers also serves on the board of directors for Crime Stoppers of Central Indiana, and she initially began discussing crimes on radio by promoting cases for Crime Stoppers on local radio shows. There are several true crime podcasts with a female duo, but what makes this podcast unique is their background, as well as how the stories are told. Other female crime duos make jokes, drink wine and milkshakes, and go for car rides. Flowers and her co-host

discuss the crimes as though they have been brought on by the local police force as private investigators.

Dave Cawley is a seasoned audio media journalist, an investigative reporter, and the host of *COLD* (2018), produced by KSL in Utah. *COLD* is a serialized podcast that covers the case of Susan Powell, a woman who was presumably murdered by her husband Josh Powell several years before he committed a triple murder/suicide, killing himself and their two sons. This case gained national attention in 2009 and was heavily covered in the local markets of Utah and Washington state. Cawley was involved in covering the case at the time of Susan's disappearance and had local knowledge of the case, coverage, and crimes committed. The *COLD* podcast is an investigative podcast designed to uncover new evidence in the case and fight for justice for Susan and her family as well as bring attention to the prevalence of domestic violence. Cawley interviewed family and friends on both sides of the case, as well as the lead detective and other members of law enforcement. *COLD* is one of the most detailed podcasts covering domestic violence that has been produced. Since the initial 18 episodes aired, Cawley discovered additional evidence in the case and has produced several "bonus" episodes around the 10th anniversary of Susan's disappearance, December 2019.

Hedley Thomas is an investigative journalist and author working for *The Australian*. He hosted the podcast, *The Teacher's Pet* (2018), which investigates the disappearance of Lynette Dawson, a wife and mother who went missing over 30 years ago. Thomas unveils not only the questionable events surrounding her disappearance, but also inappropriate sexual relations between male high school teachers and their female students at the time of her disappearance. While these two incidents may sound unrelated,

Lyn's husband, Chris Dawson, was involved with some of his female students, one of which had moved into the Dawson home. As this case approaches the statute of limitations for prosecution, Thomas uses investigative journalism and a world-wide podcasting platform to fight for justice for Lyn Dawson. Since the production of *The Teacher's Pet*, Lyn's husband, Chris, has been charged with her murder and is currently facing trial in Sydney, Australia.

Jason Moon is an investigative reporter and the host of the podcast *Bear Brook* (2018), produced by *New Hampshire Public Radio*. *Bear Brook* covers a case involving multiple murders by a serial killer. The bodies of four females were found 15 years apart in barrels left in Bear Brook State Park in Allenstown, New Hampshire. Using new scientific testing methods, detectives were able to identify three of the four victims and trace the killings back to a man with multiple aliases. The presumed murderer, Terry Rasmussen, was convicted in 2002 of killing his then-wife, Eunsoon Jun, and eventually died in prison in 2010. The podcast covers how he perpetrated his crimes and the new scientific testing methods that led prosecutors to Rasmussen decades after the bodies were discovered. *Bear Brook* focuses on new developments in DNA and genomic testing available to law enforcement and discusses how at-home services like 23andMe may impact future investigations. On the surface, *Bear Brook* may not seem like a podcast focusing on domestic violence. However, the discussions of Rasmussen as a father, boyfriend, and husband to women and children he killed examines some of the darkest themes of domestic violence.

Rasha Pecoraro and Yvette Gentile were cohosts of the podcast *Root of Evil* (2019), which was produced by TNT. *Root of Evil* covers the Hodel family and their link

to the Black Dahlia murder. While this podcast does cover the Black Dahlia murder in-depth, the main focus is on the inner workings of the Hodel family – specifically George Hodel, the patriarch of the family and presumed killer of Elizabeth Short. Hodel was accused of molesting his fourteen-year-old daughter, Tamar Hodel, the grandmother of Pecoraro and Gentile. Tamar became pregnant as a teenager, and her child, Fauna Hodel, was given up for adoption. As the children of Fauna Hodel, Pecoraro and Gentile have insight into the Hodel family and a direct connection to their uncle (George Hodel’s son), Steve Hodel, a Los Angeles police detective who has been working to prove his father’s guilt for decades. Much like *Bear Brook*, on the surface this might not seem like a podcast focusing on domestic violence. However, the descriptions of abuse in the homes of George Hodel, and eventually, Tamar Hodel, show the cyclical nature of those who suffer from domestic violence at a young age. The podcast culminates with family members gathering together to discuss their lives and work through some of their feelings toward each other as well as feelings towards those long gone. Several participants mentioned this final episode of *Root of Evil* as being particularly powerful in processing their own lived experiences.

Chris Goffard is a journalist and staff writer for the *L.A. Times* as well as the host of *Dirty John* (2017), produced by *Wondery*. I was not able to interview Goffard on the phone because he was covering a trial at the time, but he readily agreed to answer questions via email. *Dirty John* focuses on the relationship between John Meehan and Debra Newell, who met via an internet dating website. Their relationship progressed quickly, and friends and family saw signs of manipulation and abuse almost instantly. Newell eventually left Meehan, and the violence escalated to the point where Meehan

attempted to murder one of Newell's daughters. *Dirty John* discusses domestic violence directly and shows how anyone could fall victim.

Respondents were diverse both demographically and geographically, offering credence to the themes that emerged. Four respondents were trained journalists working for a variety of media outlets (newspaper, television, and radio), one respondent has based her career on advocating for unsolved crimes, serving on the board of directors for Crime Stoppers. The final two respondents had a personal connection with the case they covered. All respondents had different perspectives yet shared consistent views regarding the medium and genre.

All of the podcasters I spoke to had one unifying reason for producing a true crime podcast – the story needed to matter. It needed to educate people, encourage change, gather resources, or shed light on a societal injustice. These podcasters sought something – anything – bigger than just producing interesting entertainment. Many of my podcasters referred to this as the “so what” behind their stories – their driving force behind creating, producing, and sharing stories that shine a spotlight on these horrific crimes that were committed.

This chapter examines the production side of podcasting, addressing research question four: how true crime podcast producers are interacting with their audiences. In doing so, I seek to explore not only how the podcasters interact with their audiences, but also how they work together collaboratively. In this chapter, I explore how podcast producers grapple with objectivity and advocacy, how they drive change in the criminal justice system, how they form virtual and offline relationships with their audience, how they apply the unique features of audio media, and how they define the future of true

crime podcasting. Through interviews with seven podcasters representing six different podcasts, five of which produced a podcast focusing on a domestic violence case, I explore how producers interpret their relationships with audiences and what they define as their driving force behind producing a true crime podcast.

5.1 THE PRODUCER-AUDIENCE RELATIONSHIP

In my conversations with true crime podcast hosts, we discussed objectivity versus advocacy, the unique features of podcast media, the true crime genre, and audience engagement (See Appendix C for podcaster interview guide). The research question driving these conversations was simply, “How are producers interacting with their audience?” However, our discussions went much deeper, covering not just interactions, but relationships, as well as their drive to reform the criminal justice system and the genre as a whole. Responses were categorized into four main themes: a focus on advocacy, collaborative production, the genre’s potential impact on the criminal justice system, and how the medium lends itself to atypical audience-producer relationships.

So what?: The tension between objectivity and advocacy

Producing stories that matter is more than attracting an audience; it is about driving change and creating connections. According to the podcasters I interviewed, for stories to matter, they needed a “so what.” They asked themselves, why are we producing this story? Why does this story need to be told? This “so what” is not unique to podcasters; journalists have been answering this standard question for decades. However, since podcasting is not solely produced by journalists, the fact that this journalistic norm was prevalent in my interviews is interesting. True crime as a genre is widely considered to be entertainment media, so adopting the guiding principles of journalism shows how

these podcasters, in this genre, are seeking to move beyond entertainment (Surette & Otto, 2002; Turnbull, 2010). This driving purpose behind the creation of the podcasts took our conversation through discussions of advocacy in podcasting, solving cases, educating the public, driving change in the criminal justice system, and empowering victims.

This tension between objectivity and advocacy is something that journalists grappled with historically and continue to do so today, in large part because the concepts are not mutually exclusive. Many journalists believe they should remain impartial, while others (sometimes due to the nature of their journalistic focus), see themselves as the societal guardian, investigating and exposing dishonesty and illegal behavior.

Interestingly, the word “objective” is not present in the Code of Ethics for the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) (Anon. n.d.). Replaced by the terms “accurate” and “fair,” the SPJ promotes integrity, truth, and transparency in journalism – implying objectivity without explicitly stating it (Bennett, 2016).

I discussed this tension with podcasters in this study primarily because of my interviews with podcasters in a prior study (Boling, 2019a). In that study, I saw a clear delineation between objectivity and advocacy along the party lines of journalist/non-journalist. Only one informant touted advocacy (a lawyer), so it seemed as though the journalists were adhering to the unspoken standard of objectivity. I wanted to revisit that discussion in this study to see if these podcasters would echo those findings.

The journalists that participated in this study all had strong beliefs regarding objectivity and advocacy. However, they were willing to entertain the idea that there was space for both in journalism if handled correctly. In the prior study, it came down to

communication. Podcasters said that if you had a biased viewpoint (such as a lawyer working for the defense), it was important to communicate that to the audience so that they understood and expected biased coverage (Boling, 2019a). In this study, the journalist-podcasters were clear that biased coverage is not acceptable, but that advocacy had a place – specifically in relation to educating the public regarding the prevalence of specific crimes (like domestic violence) or encouraging victims to seek assistance.

Because of their commitment to producing media that matters, many of the podcasters I spoke to referred to their work as shining light on an “injustice” that they wanted to explore. Hedley Thomas of *The Australian*, which covered the disappearance of Lynette Dawson, said, “I was struck by the tragedy of the story, and what I believed was the injustice surrounding Lyn’s disappearance.” When asked what his objectives were regarding the podcast, Thomas said:

Well, my own objectives were to try and do justice to this sprawling mystery and hopefully find new evidence or old evidence that had not come out before, perhaps in the form of witnesses who hadn’t spoken before or anything else that could potentially solve it.

Dave Cawley from *COLD* agreed, and said simply, “All I knew is that I wanted to bring new facts to light.” Ashley Flowers, from *Crime Junkie*, connected the importance of getting listeners to care about the story to the potential for societal change. She said, “If listeners care, that’s when the media will cover it because podcasts will cover whatever, traditional media won’t cover it until everyone’s up in arms about it and that’s when things really start moving.”

It is interesting to note that Flowers is the only podcaster I interviewed who was not employed by or working for a traditional media outlet. However, she was not the only non-journalist. *Root of Evil* was produced by TNT, and the script was written, produced and managed by industry insiders. Flowers' impression that podcasts could promote cases to national prominence and garner needed media attention was a common thread mentioned by audience participants during this study, as well as other non-journalist podcasters in a prior study (Boling, 2019a). As I mentioned in Chapter 1, several cases covered by podcasts have reached higher courts in an effort to overturn convictions (Baran, 2019; Dudley, 2018; Hesse, 2016). Therefore, the idea that podcasts can impact cases by increasing media attention, public awareness, and funding for the defense, is a realistic goal for podcasters and a tangible way true crime podcasts are impacting the criminal justice system (Peterson, 2019).

While none of the podcasters began their podcast with the intent to solve the case, there was the underlying hope that if their series helped further the investigation or aided in solving the case, it would be exciting and fulfilling. Jason Moon from *New Hampshire Public Radio* and the podcast *Bear Brook* said, "Of course, it would be great if the case was solved."

The podcasters all agreed that there needs to be a strong "so what" to drive the production of a true crime podcast. Thomas described this saying, "You want to have a purpose that is, a noble purpose, and for me it's just a personal thing... I look at proposals and possible next story projects...thinking, okay what will be the public benefit from this one?" Flowers agreed, saying:

I wanted it to be more than entertainment...I wanted to make some kind of impact, even if it was just getting an old story out there that people hadn't heard, if it was telling a story in a different way from a different perspective or if it was actually doing something actionable like getting listeners to sign a petition or donating to a cause.

Jason Moon from the podcast *Bear Brook*, which covered the search for a serial killer using new types of scientific testing, was clear on the idea that he needed to have a “so what,” but also remain critically distant from the story itself, saying, “My role in all this was to be an objective voice that captures the whole story, not to become part of it.” Moon said that it is an “...easier trap to fall into, doing a story without a ‘so what,’” but that maintaining that focus throughout production is crucial.

To me...if the story doesn't point to something larger or illuminate some bigger idea about the criminal justice system, or forensic science or domestic abuse, if there's not some larger point to why we're hearing this story, then it makes me uncomfortable.

Cawley agreed and described it as a fundamental desire of a journalist to want to “...do something that was journalistically rigorous that would advance public understanding of what I consider to be a very important story.”

Many of the podcasters connected their “so what” to advocacy, furthering the longstanding journalistic tension between advocacy and objectivity. When asked to discuss the role of advocacy in true crime podcasting, producers said that they should remain objective but that there was a place for advocacy in the genre. Thomas said clearly, “I think that there is space for advocacy in journalism, in circumstances where

you make a judgment that it's necessary to be a person's advocate...advocacy is not a bad word in journalism, but it has its place." Cawley interpreted advocacy along the lines of education, saying:

I do think there is a role for podcasts, true crime podcasts, to educate people about the criminal justice system, to understand what are some of the hurdles that are faced by suspects, that are faced by prosecutors, by police, judges, by the public and going through victims, going through criminal justice system. I think that information's a first step in empowering people to really say, 'Hey, look, this is something that needs to be fixed.' I'm going to advocate for it at whatever level I feel appropriate.

Moon of *Bear Brook*, who examined some unique new genetic testing options to solve crimes in his podcast, also framed his role in advocacy around education:

So, it certainly was not an objective of ours to have any certain outcome, vis a vis this burgeoning discussion about genetic prophecy or anything like that. I think what we wanted to do was just kind of let people know this was happening, and that, almost like a, 'Here's something you might want to start forming an opinion about, because it's going to become a larger and larger issue.'...If you learn about all this stuff through a true crime podcast, then that's great. That's sort of our mission...educating the public and making them more informed citizens, you know, all the good things that public radio stations like to imagine that we're doing.

While some framed their advocacy role around education, for others, like Rasha Pecoraro and Yvette Gentile of *Root of Evil*, the mission was admittedly biased and more personal.

Driven by the “so what” of their mom’s story, the podcast was about their familial relationships, specifically the history of their mother. Pecoraro said their goal was driven by a desire to speak for their mom: “We were just about getting our Mom’s story out there and doing right by her legacy, really.”

Thomas discussed the idea that while objectivity is essential, it is still important to remain human when presenting these personal stories:

I think objectivity in podcasting in true crime is paramount. It doesn’t mean though that you don’t come to it with your own view as a journalist while you’re doing your investigation about what happened... We’re all human and we’re all influenced by what we read, see, hear, feel... But I think the challenge is to just maintain objectivity while you feel the case is now going one way or the other.

Impact on Criminal Justice System

Overall, the podcasters shared a common goal of educating the public and advocating for the marginalized. This idea of advocacy also extended to the criminal justice system, with a unanimous belief that true crime podcasts have the ability to impact the criminal justice system. Thomas explained:

And impact it in a meaningful way. I think defense lawyers would say [podcasts] have the ability to impact the criminal justice system in a very detrimental way but I’m confident that the public interest in true crime podcasts and the potential for listeners who know something to provide relevant information that could solve an unsolved matter is really high.

Several others agreed. Cawley said, “I think there’s a great power in telling stories, especially that highlight failures, because unless we collectively understand what went

wrong, we can't work to fix those problems.” Flowers said, “I feel like we can make a difference by what we’re doing.”

In addition to general advocacy, several podcasters defined domestic violence as a complex social problem that needs supporters willing to fight for victims. Cawley, who hosted the *COLD* podcast, had a strong call to action in the last episode encouraging his listeners to take a stand to end domestic violence. Cawley’s last words in *COLD* were speaking directly to Susan Powell, the presumed victim of murder due to domestic violence:

Susan, I make this pledge to you. I resolve to treat the women in my life with respect, compassion, and understanding. I vow to believe any woman who expresses through words or actions that concern for her safety. I promise to call out and condemn abusive, manipulative, or controlling behavior anytime or place. If I encounter it and if I ever fail to live up to this standard, I invite those who know me to hold me accountable. We can do better. We can be better. To anyone who is listening, I would be honored if you would join me in making this same commitment.

Because of his strong call to action at the end of *COLD*, Cawley and I discussed advocacy in detail during our interview. He mentioned both his own beliefs regarding advocacy in reporting as well as his newsroom expectations at KSL, a radio station based in Utah. While the station expects reporters to direct the audience to available resources whenever they present a story involving domestic violence or suicide, Cawley went further than that in making his own personal promise to the women in his life. He

described it as a “balancing act,” arguing that he did not want listeners to question his objectivity, but that he also felt his impassioned call to action was necessary.

I don’t want to be somebody that you question my objectivity as a storyteller because of the advocacy portion of the work. I think there’s no perfect answer. It’s a bit of a balancing act, and I became more personal than I’ve ever been comfortable doing in the final episode of *COLD* when I talked about how the story had a personal impact on me. The kind of emotional toil that covering these kinds of stories can have on a person, and the feeling that something needs to happen to change, because it feels somewhat hopeless the way things are currently going.

In addition to advocating for victims of domestic violence and for those impacted by the cases covered, the podcasters I spoke with were also very careful in producing stories that would not exploit the victim or her family. Cawley said, “One of my chief goals with *COLD* was not revictimizing Susan.” Moon, the host of *Bear Brook*, which discussed the many victims of a serial killer, said, “Some of the work we did to humanize the victims, which was really important to me, was stuff that we probably couldn’t have gotten into a shorter format.” This value was reflected in my interviews with audience members who showed a strong preference for podcasts that honored and humanized the victim, carefully avoiding victim-blaming.

In chapter four, I demonstrated how important authenticity was to my participants – the idea that podcasters needed to humanize the victim and their families so that listeners can understand who they were as a person and what impact their life had on those around them. Hearing similar sentiments about the value of advocacy and

authenticity from both my audience participants and producer respondents helps to explain why these listeners were drawn to these particular podcasts, and how unique relationships formed among these groups.

Reciprocal empowerment through relationships and the impact of gender

All of the podcasters I interviewed describe atypical audience interactions that were either unique because of their expectations, or unique because of prior experience with journalist-audience interactions. As Thomas from *The Teacher's Pet* described:

I haven't had in newspaper journalism over many years the kind of engagement and feedback of information and evidence, as well as encouragement, that I've had with the podcast. It's just chalk and cheese in terms of the amount of, the number of people who wanted me to know something after listening to some of the episodes.

This finding echoes a central theme from my interviews with true crime podcasters in a prior study (Boling, 2019a). In that study, all of my respondents discussed the overwhelming amount of audience interactions from podcasts. Those who were journalists talked in depth about the difference between interactions with a podcast audience and interactions with their audiences in other media formats such as newspaper or public radio.

Additionally, my prior study on the true crime podcast audience found that the audience was overwhelmingly female (73%), which is a notable difference from the general podcast audience, which is 52% male according to Edison Research (Boling & Hull, 2018; "The Podcast Consumer 2019," 2019). I asked the podcasters if they were surprised by the gendered nature of their audience, and universally they were not. They

were not looking at responses on a survey to justify what they knew to be true about their audience; the emails in their inbox, voices on their voice mail, and attendees at live events showed this. Jason Moon of *Bear Brook* and Dave Cawley from *COLD* both mentioned noticing that the attendees of their live events were predominantly women. Hedley Thomas of *The Teacher's Pet* said that he expected a mostly female audience even before he began because he knew his wife and her friends were fans of true crime podcasts. Beyond the simply anecdotal evidence from his wife's interest, he also knew that the subject matter of the podcast (domestic violence, motherhood, and infidelity) was more likely to draw the attention of women. Thomas said, "...there's something all [women] could identify with, some life experience, from the classroom to marriage." Even though my producer respondents all realized that their audience was mostly women, the breadth and depth of the audience interactions were markedly different from anything they had ever experienced. Cawley said:

What I didn't expect, what caught me off guard, was not so much that there would be [domestic violence survivors] in the audience, but that [they] would feel empowered by what they had heard to step forward and share their stories with me personally. That's what I didn't see coming.

Thomas echoed this sentiment and also discussed the emotional connection that the audience had with *The Teacher's Pet*:

I found some people became quite emotionally involved in the story, they were really quite anxious with how it was proceeding week by week and wanted to express their really strong support or conviction for what was happening. And I think that most of the contacts I had in this regard were from women. And I think

that that's because women identified with a number of the sort of key themes in this particular case. And they also wonder what would happen if I went missing? Would my friends or family ever stop looking for me? Would they be forgotten? And so, the audience connection was powerful, and it was also very motivating for me.

Thomas's perspective on his connection with the audience gives insight into the gendered nature of those who listen. He understood that the women in the audience would be consuming the podcast on a relational level and identifying with women in the narrative. The gendered nature of this audience is both unique and possibly problematic. According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV), 1 in 9 men "experience severe intimate partner violence" as compared to 1 in 4 women ("Statistics," n.d.). While podcast consumers are typically men (52%), it is widely accepted that most of the true crime media produced depicts white, middle-class, heteronormative female protagonists (Peterson, 2019). My own research also reflects these themes. Not only were 73% of the 308 respondents female, 89% were white (Boling & Hull, 2018). Most of my participants in this study are also similar to the victims presented by true crime narratives – white, middle class, and heterosexual (refer to the description of the participants in Table 4.1). In addition, for the podcasters interviewed who produced a serialized podcast, almost all of the victims presented were white, heterosexual women (some were unidentifiable and potentially mixed race).

Studies show that men and those that identify as gender non-conforming in the LGBTQ community are victims of domestic violence ("Domestic violence and LGBTQ," 2018; "Statistics," n.d.), and the general podcast audience shows an almost balanced

gender representation (“The Podcast Consumer 2019,” 2019). Perhaps women have an easier time connecting to the narratives presented in true crime podcasts because of the prevalence of female victims. Similar to what Vicary and Fraley discovered during their 2010 study of true crime books, women like consuming media where they can identify with the protagonist. If victims are using this media to process their own lived experiences, it is arguably easier to insert themselves into the narrative when the victim is similar demographically. As Thomas said, it is possible that women can identify with these podcasts because of the relational aspect of the content presented (and their inherent need to interpret on a relational level). Flowers of *Crime Junkies* described the connection as coming specifically from the podcast content: “Seeing themselves reflected in a show is, I think, what connects them so deeply to it.”

However, it was not just a base connection to the story that the podcasters described. All of the podcasters I spoke to described interactions with women in their audience who also identified as domestic violence survivors as being uniquely different from other audience interactions. The women who identified as domestic violence survivors often shared very personal stories with the hosts and seemed to relate to the material covered in the podcast on a palpable level. Flowers was surprised by this particular audience subset and expanded on the connection:

It does not surprise me that they're predominantly female. It has surprised me that there is a subset who's been a victim of any crime. We've had people write us these very long heartfelt emails or people we've met when we've been on tour who come up to us and they're like, ‘You know, this sounds so crazy, but I went through my own trauma and somehow listening to this you would think it would

be triggering or awful. Somehow listening to you guys has been a little normal for me and brought back some normalcy.' Which is again, I don't know that I know how to explain it. It's so...It's a very cool thing because I think there's been a lot of good that has come out of the podcast even more than I intended.

This echoes what Jes and many of my participants mentioned in our interviews – immersing themselves in a world where violence exists and is discussed openly normalizes their own experiences and makes them feel understood. Jason Moon from *Bear Brook* described these interactions as intimate:

I would certainly say in some of the emails there is, they're not just quick notes of praise about the podcast, and then a line about their own experience. I mean, some of these are long, detailed emails about their experience and it's...they're intimate, in a way that has been surprising and humbling...I'd never thought about it that way, but I guess it makes sense that they would feel some level of comfort... But probably also that there's some anonymity and being strangers, I mean, I don't know, I'm just speculating here...those are always the longest emails, they're the ones that are most personal and intimate.

Most of the podcasters whom I spoke with had finished production, some more than two years ago, and everyone mentioned that they still receive emails from audience members on a daily or near-daily basis. Goffard from *Dirty John* said:

I get emails all the time – still nearly two years after it aired. Some people send me long emails with their stories and ask that I look into it, and others just seem to need to tell their stories to someone who will listen.

Gentile from *Root of Evil* was able to relate these types of responses to her own story. In *Root of Evil*, Gentile and Pecoraro share the life story of their mother, Fauna Hodel. Recalling the contacts from audience members, Gentile said, “I think that’s the type of response we’re getting is those types of thank you’s. Thank you for telling your story because now I can tell mine. Now I’m not afraid to tell my story.”

As discussed in Chapter 4, audio media has a unique ability to connect audience members with podcast hosts. However, this is not just unique to podcasters. In 1964, Mendelsohn examined the uses of radio by consumers in New York City. He found that one of the main reasons listeners tuned in to radio was for companionship as they were going about their daily tasks. In addition, audience members stated that they sought out “all talk” stations when they were craving this companionship. Findings from Chapter 4 also indicate how my participants form virtual support groups of domestic violence survivors and true crime listeners. Since podcasts are largely “all talk” and audience members are reaching out to hosts to share intimate details of their own experiences, one could also argue that they may be seeking companionship and a relational connection from the hosts, not just the audience members.

Thomas, whose podcast examined the molestation of female students by male teachers as well as infidelity in marriage, explained how audience interactions made him consider how his depictions might impact listeners:

I think for me, one regret I have, I think I should have spent a bit of time before I started the podcast just talking to a couple of people who have a great deal of experience in domestic violence...just to perhaps give me a deeper perspective on how it impacts young people.

Beyond sharing personal stories and empowering audience members to tell their own, some podcasters described the interactions as enlightening and educational. Thomas said, "...some women were trying also to help me understand the situation I had not experienced, because I'm not a woman, and giving me some guidance as well in terms of how some people in the podcast were described." This, again, shows the relational level of consumption as the audience members assist the producers in presenting an accurate representation. Similarly, Moon described interactions that left him understanding his own work in a new way:

But then a hefty portion are people who are really kind of ruminating on the themes of family dynamics and domestic abuse and manipulation and those are the ones that I find really humbling to be receiving. They've made me think about the story in some new ways, in terms of all that. People who have shared with me that listening to the podcast, sort of brought up their own traumas from difficult situations and sort of helped them to re-examine it in a different context.

Gentile felt motivated by the audience interactions and hoped that this empowerment would continue to encourage a greater understanding of domestic violence survivors. She said, "It's been an amazing ride. Just listening to people open up and not be afraid to come forward with their truth, and they tell us that it's so healing for them. So that's been pretty awesome." According to these podcasters, their audience was not a passive one; they were active listeners with a shared consciousness for meaning making. Gentile and Pecoraro hoped that telling their mom's story would inspire and encourage others:

Despite where you come from or what you've been through, you can overcome, and you can make a difference...It's okay that you've been through some shit and

you can talk about it. Talk about it, get it out, don't let it...[Pecoraro finishing the sentence] don't hide it.

Cawley echoed that same sentiment, saying that he felt like his work had greater meaning and purpose because domestic violence survivors were using his podcast to process their own lived experiences and generate awareness. His listeners could:

...listen to a story that helps them realize they're not alone, that empowers them to speak openly about what they experienced to process and deal with some of that emotional wreckage that's left behind and, hopefully, empower them to advocate to protect others.

While the podcasters might not have begun their podcasts with the goal of inspiring or even speaking to women who identified as domestic violence survivors, all of them realized that what they were creating resonated on a deeper level with this core group at some point during or after production. They approached their podcasts trying to answer a specific “so what,” why this case matters now, but the ultimate “so what” that resonated with audiences may have been much deeper and more personal than intended. The stories themselves were about domineering power, usually of men controlling and manipulating women, and in telling them, they seem to be inspiring power in how the audience absorbs, interprets, and uses the media to process their own lived experiences and then shares that context back with the podcast hosts. This reciprocal relationship is a key part of the success of these podcasts, according to the hosts I interviewed. In this emergent media form, producers and audience members work together to share, consume, and interpret messages in ways that may empower audiences to understand the roots of domestic violence and help establish a culture where victims are supported, and violence

toward women is scarce – in essence, answering the “so what” together by empowering change in society.

Fundamentally different storytelling with audio

Much like the audience participants I interviewed, the podcasters discussed the unique benefits of the medium and the ways in which the audio format contributes to the popularity of their podcasts. As previously discussed, audio helps facilitate the intimate nature of audience interactions. In addition, the podcaster-journalists I interviewed described podcasts as “long-form journalism” and discussed needing this lengthier format to cover the details of the story properly. Cawley, the host of *COLD*, is a seasoned radio journalist who wanted to make the leap into podcasting. He felt like the Susan Powell case was a great opportunity to be able to tell the story because there were no strict time constraints:

The impetus for getting into podcasting, and particularly, I guess, a true crime podcast, was a personal curiosity about facts of this particular case that I wanted to know and share with my, primarily my local audience, but understanding that doing so in a 30-second or a 90-second or a 120-second story on TV or radio just wasn't going to capture the full depth of the story.

The long format and serialized nature of most true crime podcasts gives producers the ability to thoroughly present to the stories they wanted to tell, and they all believed that the audio medium was key to audience engagement. Coming from a radio background, Cawley understood the power of the medium:

I think when people consume audio, it's fundamentally different than watching something, in part because so many of us now are listening with headphones, with

earbuds. The kind of oral storytelling tradition goes so far back in our collective memory, it is one of the most fundamental ways in which human beings communicate. Having that voice in your ear is far more intimate than I think any other form of media, and so I think it is easier. Video, because of just the visual nature of video, it's very easy to grab attention with video. Harder to grab attention with audio. But I think it's easier to elicit a deep emotional response from somebody through audio storytelling as compared to text or video.

The ability for audio media to illicit intimacy and connection was a key characteristic described by other podcasters as well. As Flowers described:

It's very intimate. People feel like they know you and they are your best friends. I mean, people are listening to us when they drive to work every day. They're listening to us in the bathtub. We're kind of going everywhere and having somebody's voice in your ear when you're doing all of these very mundane day-to-day things...when someone's walking with you doing your day-to-day tasks, you feel so much more connected to them.

Gentile connected this idea of intimacy with the logistics of listening, saying, "I think for me it's so much more intimate because...it's right there in your ear connecting directly to your brain...when it's right in your ear, you feel like they're talking directly to you."

Audio intimacy has been explored by other scholars examining podcasts (Berry, 2016a, 2016b; Buoziš, 2017; Florini, 2015; Lindgren, 2016; Markman, 2015; Perks & Turner, 2019; Wrather 2016). Most scholars cite the logistical nature of podcast listening as the primary impetus for audio intimacy – headphones. When scholars were studying radio in the 40s, 50s, and 60s, people were mostly sitting next to the radio or listening

while commuting. Today, headphones and earbuds abound in stores, gyms, restaurants, and even around our own homes. Placing yourself in an aural cocoon of your own making is quickly becoming the norm in our society (Bull, 2007).

The fact that podcasts are portable means that you can take the host in your ears almost anywhere you go, like an actual companion. In addition to portability, scholars have also examined the conversational tone that most podcasters employ and argued that listening to a podcast may feel like talking to a friend (Markman, 2015). Marrying those two ideas, listeners are using earbuds and headphones to make their favorite podcasts portable, creating a friendly companion that travels with them throughout their day. It seems natural that this type of listening would encourage a stronger audience-producer relationship than other forms of media.

However, I do not want to imply that this relationship is parasocial, or one-sided. Podcasters have also been shown to have more in-person and online interactions with their audiences than traditional media forms (Boling, 2019a; Markman, 2015). In addition to hosting live events (which are very popular with podcasters and their audiences, often including some type of question and answer session), many podcasters host their own Facebook fan groups where they interact with listeners or regularly contribute on dedicated Reddit threads. Cawley mentioned that he hosted Facebook Live events each week during production to intentionally engage the audience, and he also reached out to a pre-established Susan Powell Facebook page for permission to interact and promote the episodes. In terms of content, true crime podcasts are also interactive, often engaging the audience members as participatory investigators in cases and encouraging physical presence at trials (Boling, 2019a; Markman, 2015). However, this interaction is not

unique to true crime podcasts, a prior study examining the Maximum Fun network of podcasts specifically discussed this unique producer-audience interaction in some of their podcasts that were not focused on a crime narrative (Wrather, 2016).

Much like how listeners described their experiences, the podcasters related audio intimacy to the immersive experience of reading a book. Thomas compared the work of producing *The Teacher's Pet* to writing a book. He said, "...it was kind of like a live book, like the chapters were being produced each week." Indeed, podcasts have created a resurgence in the popularity of audio media. As Cawley, "waxing a little philosophic" said:

I've spent my entire career reporting in audio. I grew up listening to radio on headphones with a Walkman under the covers after going to bed...In college I was listening to late night AM talk radio. I spent a good portion of my early career being told that radio is dead, audio is dead. Nobody wants to listen to this. Here we are in 2019 with growing audience for long-form audio that's been empowered by technology. That's incredible.

The intimacy fueled by the power of audio expands the audience reach for the podcasts as well as deeper connections between producers and audiences. Since both listeners and podcast hosts mentioned the power of the audio connection in their interviews, this study suggests that while the true crime genre may have been popular for over a century, the podcast medium is allowing producers and audience members to connect and consume stories in new and interesting ways.

5.2 CHAPTER CONCLUSION

The podcasters I spoke with, following journalistic norms, were unanimous in their belief that the podcasts they produce need to have a purpose and answer the “so what” question, while grappling with the tensions between objectivity and advocacy. They also discussed the reciprocal nature of their relationship with the audience as unique, and specifically, how the impact they are having on domestic violence survivors who listen is atypical and mutually empowering. Their ability to impact the criminal justice system and the cases they cover was a primary motivator for many of the true crime podcast producers. In addition to impacting the criminal justice system, several podcasters in this study mentioned their desire to increase general awareness of the prevalence of domestic violence and the sources that are available to victims, challenging dominant hegemonic discourses that silence women and ignore the issue. For some, the “so what” extended beyond the audience, to measurable impact and change in their communities through advocacy and education. However, as previously mentioned, the tension between objectivity and advocacy drives not only production decisions but also audience attraction to specific podcasts. Using a combination of reciprocal relationships and a common goal of greater awareness toward domestic violence, the audio format of true crime podcasts affords these producers the opportunity to connect with their audiences on a very intimate and personal level.

While this promise of true crime podcasts may seem empowering and inspiring, it can also be problematic. The podcasters I spoke with represented the “favorites” of my participants, which means it is not surprising that their goals, values, and a vision aligned. However, I do not want to imply that those common goals are the norm for the majority

of the medium or genre. As I mentioned in Chapter 4, my participants were able to clearly identify podcasts they enjoyed as well those they did not enjoy. The focus of this chapter has been to examine the favorites, but it is worth remembering that all true crime podcasts do not meet these standards.

Similar to the concerns expressed by my listener audiences, several of the podcasters I interviewed mentioned their concerns regarding the future of the genre and what they hoped they would (and would not) see as true crime podcasts continue to gain popularity. Gentile said:

I'd like to see more women doing podcasts, and especially we want to do it because the beauty about this world is we all have stories. We all have amazing stories to tell, some good, some bad, some horrific, but what are we learning in the midst of all of this? How are we growing and how are we going to change, and how are we going to impact the world with our change?

Gentile's point is well taken. The Women's Media Center has been tracking the gender gap in media production since 2005, and in 2019 they released a study showing that men continue to dominate the newsrooms ("Divided 2019," 2019). Specifically related to reports on crime, men author about 56% of bylines ("Divided 2019," 2019). Overall, men author 63% of all bylines. Since many true crime podcasts are produced by traditional media organizations, it would not be surprising to see that gender gap extend into podcasting. However, according to the *Podcast Business Journal*, podcasts show an even larger gender gap, with women hosting only 22% of podcasts (Kinnie, 2019).

There are programs encouraging women to enter the podcasting universe. *WNYC* has hosted "Werk It! A Women's Podcast Festival" in Los Angeles, for the last three

years, offering workshops, networking, mentoring, and a chance for women to pitch their show to producers at *WNYC Studios*. The stated goal of this annual event is to get 50% of the shows in the iTunes top 100 chart to be hosted by women (“Frequently Asked Questions,” n.d.). This is a lofty goal that will require support from more than one podcast producer.

In addition to the podcaster gender gap, others discussed concerns regarding content for the future of the genre. Moon said, “The big [concern] is just the potential for exploitation of the suffering of people.” Flowers agreed, saying, “I would hope that people continue to use their platform for more than entertainment.” She continued by discussing the importance of remembering that we are talking about real events happening in someone’s real life, saying, “I think in true crime podcasting, it is so dangerous to forget that you’re talking about real people...Every episode that we do is the absolute worst day in a family’s life. And I think that gets lost often.” Thomas agreed, saying that he hopes that producers in this genre avoid a “race to the bottom” and begin sensationalizing killers and criminals. He said he hopes that the future is, “...constructive and measured. You don’t want to have vigilantism in podcasting in true crime...You want to have context and depth and understanding in all these things. They are not black and white.” As Goffard put it, “I don’t think ‘entertainment’ is a dirty word – but lowest-common-denominator entertainment built on other people’s real pain is too often a feature of the genre.”

Overall, the podcasters I interviewed saw their role as the storytellers of true crime to be a very empowering, rewarding, and privileged position. Since the majority are journalists, it is not surprising that they feel their work has a higher purpose, or that

they strive to answer the “so what.” However, the connection that they share with their audience members, specifically the subset of their audience who identifies as domestic violence survivors, is markedly unique and offers these podcasters and their audience a chance to advocate for victims through education and awareness. This awareness also extends to the genre itself as more traditional media outlets look to expand their audience with podcast content. According to the podcasters I interviewed, echoed in the audience concerns as well, producers need to maintain understanding for the victims and their families and focus on education and empowerment rather than entertainment and mass consumption.

Table 5.1: Summary of Podcasts and Podcasters who Participated in the Study

Podcaster	Name of Podcast	Summary of Podcast	Interview Length
Ashley Flowers	<i>Crime Junkie</i>	Two women discussing a different crime almost every week.	35:28
Dave Cawley	<i>COLD</i>	In-depth, serialized podcast covering the Susan Powell case in Utah	51:49
Hedley Thomas	<i>The Teacher's Pet</i>	In-depth, serialized podcast covering the disappearance of Lynette Dawson as well as sexual misconduct allegations between male teachers and female students in Australia over 30 years ago	53:35
Jason Moon	<i>Bear Brook</i>	In-depth discussion on how new DNA and genomic testing can aid law enforcement in unsolved cases using the example of a New Hampshire serial killer	40:03
Chris Goffard	<i>Dirty John</i>	Singular domestic violence case in a serialized format demonstrating that domestic violence does not discriminate based on education level or income	Interview via email
Rasha Pecoraro and Yvette Gentile	<i>Root of Evil</i>	In-depth coverage of the Hodel family and their connection to the Black Dahlia murder specifically focusing on the patriarch of the family, George Hodel, and the domestic violence he perpetrated on his family	35:05

Table 5.2: Participant Podcast Rankings

Podcast	Focus	Score
Crime Junkie*	Different crime each week	13
COLD*	Domestic violence	8
Casefile*	Different crime each week	8
Last Podcast on the Left*	Crime and the supernatural	6
Teacher's Pet*	Domestic violence	5
Criminal*	Podcast about crime	4
Dr. Death*	Podcast about crime	4
My Favorite Murder	Medical malpractice	3
The Vanished	Missing persons	3
All Crime, No Cattle	Different crime each week	3
Ear Hustle	Life inside prison	3
Small Town Dicks	Detectives in small towns	3
To Live and Die in LA	Missing persons	3
S-Town	Mystery	3
In the Dark	Missing persons/Justice system	3
That's so Retrograde	Health/Wellness	3
True Crime Garage	True crime comedy	2
Dirty John*	Domestic violence	2
Redhanded the Pod	Crime and the supernatural	2
Wine and Crime	True crime comedy	2
Dark Poutine	Crime and the supernatural	2
Generation Why	Unsolved murders and conspiracies	2
This American Life	Entertaining journalism with stories	2
True Crime Obsessed	True crime comedy	1
Murder Squad	Cold cases	1
Radio Lab	Devoted to investigating a strange world	1
Beach too sandy, water too wet	Comedy readings of one-star reviews	1
Trace Evidence	Unsolved murders and disappearances	1
Growing Native	Botany in southern Arizona	1
Minds of Madness	Criminal minds and homicide	1
Root of Evil*	Domestic violence/murder	1
Finding Cleo	Missing persons	1
Bear Brook*	Domestic violence	1

Note. All podcasts mentioned are not true crime. Participants were asked to list their top 3 favorite podcasts. Those podcasts given a rank of 1 were given 3 points. A rank of 2 earned 2 points, and a rank of 3 earned 1 point. Points were totaled, and the podcasts with the most points were deemed the “favorite.”

*Denotes podcasts that were contacted for an interview.

CHAPTER 6

ONE COMPELLING STORY

“He’s mainly emotionally, verbally, and financially abusive. Basically, I’m a single mother with this guy that lives with me and dictates to me what I can do in my spare time and takes my paycheck and spends the money.”

– Susan Powell, in a Facebook message to a friend before her 2009 disappearance

As the podcast *COLD* describes, Susan Powell was a loving mother, a devout member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a hard worker, a friendly colleague and neighbor, and a caring daughter and sister. She has not been seen since December 7, 2009. Mounds of evidence, including her journals, indicate that Susan Powell was the victim of domestic violence, murdered by her husband. Her friends and family attest to how controlling her husband was. The paper trail she left behind in her desk at work shows that she felt her husband, Josh Powell, was capable of murder. Her parents had given her an emergency cell phone “just in case.” She had videoed all of her possessions using a camcorder at the recommendation of a divorce lawyer. She feared for her life. Yet, she stayed in the marriage. While Susan has never been seen again, her husband eventually killed himself and both of their sons in a well-planned, catastrophic house fire, fueling suspicions that he was responsible for her disappearance.

Susan's 2009 disappearance and the subsequent death of her husband and sons have been covered extensively by local news outlets in Utah for the last decade and has also received high-profile, national attention (Flegenheimer, 2012). Over the years, it has also been featured in multiple books and highlighted on Investigation Discovery, *Dateline*, and Oxygen. On November 14, 2018, KSL in Utah launched an eighteen-episode podcast, *COLD*, focusing on Susan's relationship with her husband, events leading to her disappearance, and the details of the police investigation. Hosted and produced by Dave Cawley, the stated goal of the podcast was to "...bring new facts to light." The podcast description on iTunes clearly describes *COLD*'s purpose:

Susan Powell vanished on Dec. 7, 2009. Her body has never been found. From the beginning, West Valley City, Utah police suspected Susan's husband, Josh Powell, had murdered her. They never arrested him. *COLD* dives deep into the case files, uncovering never-before-heard details. You'll learn why Susan stayed with an abusive husband, why Josh did what he did and how the justice system failed Susan and her two boys.

Cawley outlined three themes in the podcast, not only in the iTunes description but also in the first episode, clearly addressing the 'so what' question at the onset:

First, Susan did see warning signs, but chose to ignore them. She, like so many women, stayed in an abusive relationship. Why? We can learn from her experience. Second, it seemed obvious to almost everyone that Josh killed Susan, yet police never arrested him. Why not? We're going to dissect the investigation to find those missed opportunities. And third, why did Josh do what he did? To

answer that question, we have to look deep into his past and at the manipulative father who helped mold his monstrous actions.

Using these three themes, the *COLD* podcast closely examines all evidence available in the case files, interviewing friends, family, and the lead detective in the case. However, the most compelling piece of the podcast is arguably the first-person recordings left behind by Josh, Susan, and Steve Powell (Susan's Father-in-law). Those recordings are also what make this story so ideal for the audio medium. Very few podcasts covering domestic violence cases have access to audio journals from those involved in the case or can allow the audience to hear from the victim herself. In addition to this treasure trove of audio resources, KSL also decided to hire voice talent to read excerpts from the written journals of Josh, Susan, and Steve Powell. This is not only an interesting and unique production decision; it is also a crucial feature setting *COLD* apart from other podcasts. Combining audio journals with voiced paper-to-audio journals, the *COLD* podcast creates a story narrated by Cawley with first-person accounts by the victim and her presumed perpetrator(s).

The Powell family was obsessive with record-keeping, scanning receipts, church bulletins, notes taken on napkins in restaurants, and documents of any kind that would tell the story of their lives. Susan had been keeping journals since she was a teenager, and Josh kept a variety of both written and audio diaries, often carrying a voice recorder with him to capture thoughts throughout the day. When the police raided their homes on multiple occasions, they found an abundance of paper and digital archives offering rich evidence in the case, making Susan's story a perfect fit for podcast media.

In this chapter, I rely on narrative analysis to delve deeply into one particular and popular podcast, *COLD*. I examine the narrative structure of *COLD*, unpack Cawley's intended and stated storylines, and interrogate how *COLD* measures up to what my participants defined as a "good" or "favorite" true crime podcast. I also revisit my interview with Cawley to shed light on some of the production decisions that were made.

COLD was the number one podcast focusing on domestic violence mentioned by my participants and the number two overall true crime favorite podcast mentioned. *COLD* debuted at number 15 on the iTunes charts and reached the number one spot about a month after the final episode. It was not only popular with my participants, it reached global popularity on charts in the U.S., U.K., Canada, and Australia ("American iTunes Chart Performance," n.d.). Running from November 14, 2018, to March 13, 2019, with 18 episodes averaging 57 minutes in length, *COLD* is one of the most recent and relevant domestic violence podcasts launched. Widely discussed and beloved by my participant audience members, I also had an inside look at the production that drove the podcast through my interview with its producer and host, Dave Cawley (see Chapter 5). *COLD* also represents one of the most detailed investigations available to a podcast audience, making it an ideal series to analyze for this study.

This narrative analysis of *COLD* addresses RQ5: how do the true crime podcasts that my participants describe as their favorite depict domestic violence and connect to their lived experiences? To begin, I investigate the editorial decisions made by the producer(s), the narrative structure of *COLD*, how the stated themes function in each episode, and how podcast coverage of the case differs from news coverage. In the second section, I move on to a comparison of the *COLD* podcast with the perspectives from

research questions 1-3, the perspectives of audience participants and audience producers that I discussed in Chapter 4. Finally, I conclude with a discussion on depictions of domestic violence, societal shortcomings leading to violent situations, Cawley's strong call to action, and the impact that one podcast can have on the lived realities of domestic violence victims and survivors.

6.1 NARRATIVE CODING

Podcast-producing journalists whom I have spoken with all agree on one point – podcasting is a full-time job. They cannot continue to do their daily journalistic duties for a traditional media outlet and produce a weekly, serialized podcast. Many of them mention that their podcast did not become a reality until their bosses decided to dedicate them to the project full-time. Dave Cawley, the host of the *COLD* podcast, said that he felt so strongly about telling Susan Powell's story that he was considering leaving KSL because they had told him they did not have the resources to dedicate him to the project full-time. When presented with the reality that they may lose him, Cawley recalls that management said, "What if we allowed you to work on this podcast full-time?" Cawley was excited to pursue this opportunity, saying, "...it [full-time dedication] proved necessary because there was no way I would have been able to make progress at the pace I was working originally."

This idea that a podcast needs at least one full-time resource for production is key because it is typically that full-time resource driving the engine that makes the decisions regarding content and style. While journalists and many of the podcast producers I interviewed strive for objectivity, the truth is, everyone is human, and everyone has inherent biases. Someone has to decide what to keep, what to feature, and what to cut.

Someone has to decide who to interview, what questions to ask, and how to piece the narrative together. In the *Serial* podcast, Sarah Koenig regularly mentioned the long nights she and co-producer Julie Snyder would spend crafting and tweaking each episode (Gross, 2014). Before I dive into the narrative arc of the episode and the podcast, I want to first examine *COLD* from a production standpoint to highlight the same questions that Cawley had to consider: Who gets a voice? Whose voice is prominent? What is the story this podcast is trying to tell? What are the key takeaways this podcast is communicating to its audiences?

Voice of Reason: Purpose and Inclusion

As previously mentioned, the audio diaries from the Powell family added a layer of depth to the *COLD* podcast that most true crime podcasts cannot employ. Listeners were able to hear directly from the victim as well as her husband and father-in-law (her presumed killer and his dad). These audio diaries began when Susan and Josh were teenagers and continued throughout their marriage and into the investigation. Every time the police would get a search warrant, they would confiscate multiple laptops, external hard drives, voice recorders, and written journals. The police had the ability to piece together what each member of the Powell family was thinking when Josh's parents got divorced, when Susan and Josh started dating, when they got married, as they began having children, throughout each of their moves, visits to counselors, and job changes. Listening to it all as a cohesive narrative on *COLD* feels like reading a book where each chapter is told from a different perspective. Cawley assembled the podcast in such a way that big events throughout their lives and during the investigation were captured and described from multiple angles, both inside and outside of the family.

One key voice in the podcast is Josh's sister, Jennifer Graves. While the police did not confiscate any of Jennifer's diaries (she fully cooperated with the investigation), Jennifer published a book about the ordeal titled "A Light in Dark Places," and Cawley had access to the book as well as in-person interviews with Jennifer during production. Jennifer gave insight into the Powell family, and when needed, Susan's dad, Chuck Cox, gave insight into the Cox family. So, not only did Cawley have multiple, detailed (some horrifically so) journals, he also had books written by family members and access to the families themselves. In addition to hearing directly from the presumed perpetrator, the victim, their families, and friends, Cawley also had in-person interviews with the lead detective on the case and other law enforcement and external agencies involved. His use of various sources is noteworthy because studies show that news portrayals of domestic violence often cite only authoritative voices (police and lawyers) and very few (if any) friends, family members, or domestic violence experts (Bullock, 2008; Bullock & Cubert, 2002). In a study examining Koenig's use of multiple voices in *Serial*, researchers contend that using multiple voices challenges the idea that there is one single authoritative truth/reality, supporting a feminist poststructuralist perspective (Butler, 1997; Doane, McCormick, & Sorce, 2017).

The amount of first-person audio that Cawley was able to use to construct the *COLD* podcast is arguably what made it so successful. As a journalist, he wanted to tell "both sides" to the story, but as a member of the community where this tragedy occurred, he wanted to correct many of the errors he had seen in the media. Cawley said, "They [the Powell family] were trying to create a, in my opinion, a false narrative about Susan, the person who's missing." Since Susan was missing, she could not speak for herself

during the investigation. Since her husband was never arrested, he essentially had control over the media narrative, often contacting news outlets for exclusive interviews. There was also a very heated court battle regarding his choice to publish Susan's private journals in order to cast a negative light on her childhood and teenage years. Cawley was clear regarding his intention to present a balanced story in the podcast, saying:

All we've had for years in the news coverage of this case has been families on either side kind of saying bad things about one another. I wanted to use Susan's own journals in a way that would allow her to have a voice, even though she's presumably dead, not able to tell us. That meant finding somebody to voice those journal entries because this is an audio project...Journalistically, that's something I would never do on the radio, but if I want my listener to connect with Susan through her writing, I need to take that subjective leap in order to draw somebody in.

Cawley understood the fact that he had to make decisions during production, and he tried to be thoughtful regarding how information was presented to the audience. He said, "There were some very conscious decisions made. I hope that I did them in a careful enough way that you're staying true to the intent of the original expression."

As he mentioned, he wanted to right some wrongs that he had noticed as a journalist in the telling of this story. Since one side of the family controlled the dominant media narrative, the story presented in the news during the investigation may not have been an accurate representation of events. Cawley spent an entire episode discussing Josh's relationship with his dad, Steve, and Steve's infatuation with his daughter-in-law, Susan. He played audio from police interviews with Steve, had a voice actor read from

Steve's journals, and even played audio from a video that was accidentally recorded in the car when Steve was confessing his love to Susan and asking her to leave Josh and be with him. Cawley was intentional with how he portrayed Steve. He also discussed the impact that Steve had on Josh and Susan's marriage, as well as the impact he had on Susan individually. Cawley said:

My first kind of guiding principle was to not revictimize Susan. Do not allow someone like Steve Powell to say things in this podcast where she's not able to in some way defend herself either by having a friend or family member counter that or even by her own words to show actually, no, this is why Susan wrote about her experience, or revisiting what she said in this recording that's never been heard. It allows you to hear that there's misinformation that is being thrown out there. That was a big part of deciding what goes in and what goes out.

In addition to addressing the one-sided (and often unflattering) depiction of Susan in mainstream media, Cawley was also cautious in how he described the Mormon church. Susan's religion was essential to her, and the Latter-day Saints (LDS) faith is prominent in Utah. Cawley understood that there would be polarizing viewpoints regarding how religion played a role in their marriage, and he also understood that there might be a significant portion of the audience that is entirely unfamiliar with LDS practices and terminology. He said that he was surprised that listeners were curious about his own religious beliefs, which he did not disclose in the podcast, and he was careful to remain objective when discussing the religious themes in the story.

I wanted to make sure that [the religious aspect] was told accurately, but I also didn't want it to be so focused that only a Mormon listener would be able to

understand or that someone would be turned off by thinking, oh, it's this Mormon podcast, because it's not. That took a lot of consideration about how much time do I spend explaining what is 'institute' in the Mormon religion, what is a 'temple recommend,' that kind of stuff.

Cawley certainly did not make all of these choices himself, in a vacuum. His list of acknowledgments at the end of each episode shows this was a team effort. However, this study highlights how Cawley was making very detailed, intentional, well-thought-out decisions, and other producers may have made different choices. For example, if I were producing this story, since I am not familiar with the Mormon faith, I might have spent more time explaining the religious aspect. I also have less insight into the nuance of the local and national press coverage, not understanding that there was a predominant one-sided narrative created. As a member of the community, a journalist that had covered the case for over a decade, and a seasoned creator of audio media, Cawley was arguably the ideal person to create the *COLD* podcast for both a local and national audience. These decisions, while not autonomous, are key components in what made *COLD* unique in the true crime genre and, as I will discuss in section 6.2, one of the main reasons my participants were drawn to the podcast.

Inner Voice: Production Decisions

From the outset, Cawley and the KSL production team not only made critical decisions regarding who got to speak in the narrative, but also whose voice was most prominent. This dissertation does not analyze the podcast to see who had the most minutes of airtime or spoke the most often. The goal of this analysis is to examine the podcast with a holistic, qualitative lens – examining the overall arc of each episode as

well as the arc of the season, how the episodes are pieced together, and how Cawley's stated narrative themes manifest.

Cawley and his team not only developed the storyline, they also made decisions regarding which excerpts from the written journals could be read effectively by voice talent, and which voice talent to hire. However, in addition to the voices included and the religious explanations, Cawley also decided to address three core questions in the podcast: 1) Why did Susan ignore the warning signs and stay in an abusive relationship? 2) Why did the police choose not to arrest Josh? And 3) Why did Josh do what he did?

Cawley said he was intentional about telling the story thematically, and he wanted to "...highlight the reasons why we were telling the story this way and in those themes."

One of his reasons behind this decision was to educate the public about domestic violence and "...the idea that domestic abuse is not always physical and not easily seen by other people." This stance came about during his interviews with Susan's family. Cawley said,

... [the advocacy for DV] came from my having conversations with Susan's dad or her friends who were saying, 'The only reason we're still even doing interviews about this almost 10 years later is because we keep hearing from people who are saying how Susan's story has helped them.'

This analysis included three rounds of coding on the *COLD* podcast: In Vivo, looking for key quotes and passages; Emotions, looking at how emotions were described and recalled by interviewees; and Narrative, looking at the tone of the episode, the point of view, and the themes Cawley described. In addition to those coding efforts, I also noted how violence was described in each episode and what types of violence were mentioned.

While this is not a quantitative content analysis, I did quantify a few pieces of the coding.

This was not done to calculate significance or claim generalizability, but to numerically represent what was or was not dominant in the narrative and complement the qualitative analysis.

Emotional coding of *COLD* was important because I wanted to see which emotions were prominent compared to the emotions that my participants mentioned during our interviews. When classifying emotions, I was looking for specific emotions mentioned, such as, “We were so *hopeful* that would lead to a breakthrough.” I did not infer emotions based on context. Overall, emotions noted ranged from anger and fear to love, disbelief, and heartache. I wrote down each emotion, noted prominence, and categorized them as either positive or negative, condensing them into themes.

The positive emotions mentioned most often in the podcast were hope (mentioned prominently in 50% of the episodes) and love (mentioned prominently in 22% of the episodes). Interestingly, six of the episodes (33%) did not mention any positive emotions (See Table 6.2 for a summary). Throughout the season, the positive emotions shifted from love to hope, mostly due to the relationship descriptions in the early episodes – young love, then marriage, and finally hope that Susan would be found in the later episodes.

As for negative emotions, the most prominent were anger (mentioned prominently in 78% of the episodes), worry (mentioned prominently in 67% of the episodes), sadness/loss (mentioned prominently in 22% of the episodes), and fear (mentioned prominently in 17% of the episodes). The shift in the negative emotions was much more gradual than the positive emotions, and there were no episodes without any negative emotions. Worry, suspicion, anger, and fear were all prominent for most of the season.

Toward the later episodes, defeat, heartbreak, sadness and loss began to show up prominently as the case stalled, and none of the leads panned out.

Comparing those emotions to the emotions mentioned by my participants, there is a noticeable difference in perspective. The emotions noted in *COLD* are all mentioned by either the victim, her presumed perpetrators, or upon reflection by friends and family.

They were describing how they felt in the moment and how they still feel today.

However, my participants were not reflecting on their trauma in our interviews or discussing the emotions they felt during the trauma they experienced; they were recalling the emotions they felt while listening to true crime podcasts. So, instead of love, hope, fear, anger, sadness, and loss, my participants mentioned emotions falling into four main categories: health/healing, safety/protective, relational, and psychological isolation. For example, some participants mentioned feeling gratitude for hearing other stories like their own. Some discussed enjoyment of podcasts, and how listening to other domestic violence stories allowed them to forgive and understand others (including those that may have abused them). The safety/protective category included emotions such as fear, horror, and frustration. However, they were mentioned in the context of learning to “trust your gut” when you feel like you are in a dangerous situation, or frustration that there does not appear to be enough support for victims of domestic violence and that they need to learn to take care of themselves. The relational emotions included things like belonging, sympathy, connecting to others that are “like me,” or feeling “close” to the victim. Psychological isolation included emotions of shame, guilt, comparative suffering, and blame.

When I looked at the emotions described by my participants alongside the emotions noted in *COLD*, I could see marked differences between emotions felt as a victim (or friends and family of a victim), and emotions felt as a survivor. The emotions described by my participants show how they are processing their own experience in light of the podcasts they are consuming. They are more reflective, like gratitude, understanding, sympathy, and belonging. They are also present tense, describing current shame, guilt, frustration, comparative suffering, and resentment for perpetrators.

After I noticed that shift, I decided to go back through *COLD* and look specifically at the emotions ascribed to Susan to see how those might compare to my participants. The *COLD* podcast is organized chronologically, so I examined Susan's emotions throughout her life with Josh, from dating/early marriage to married with kids, to when she was reflecting on the relationship near the time she went missing. Susan's emotions are ones she described in her journals, or emotions mentioned by a friend or family member that might have said Susan told them she was feeling a certain way, such as, "She told me she was concerned for her safety."

During their dating and early marriage, the emotions most often mentioned by Susan were love, anger, frustration, worry, loneliness, and unhappiness. While she was married with children, she most often described feeling disappointed, anger, fear, frustration, and worry. During this time frame, fear was especially prominent. Fear for her own life, fear for the future of her marriage, and fear for her boys. As the podcast approached the day that Susan disappeared, the most prominent emotion was concern. However, this concern was tinged with a tone of despair. In the narrative arc, it is almost as if Susan was concerned for her life, but she felt like there was no hope of leaving

safely. Again, when comparing Susan's emotions to those discussed by my participants, there is a clear shift from victim to survivor – from Susan's despair while suffering abuse to my participants' past tense gratitude for survival and connection with others.

The one emotion that is clearly present in my participants but only contextually present in *COLD* is that of shame. My participants spoke of feeling like they could not talk about their past experiences and finding solace in true crime podcasts that present the world as they see it. They described both personal shame and societal guilt relating to their lived experiences and their consumption of true crime podcasts. Susan's emotions included feeling naïve, defeated, and resentful, but not shame specifically. However, in *COLD*, Susan did mention feeling embarrassed about several situations involving Josh, like how he would act in public and how he would not let her spend money on certain things or force her to take chili for lunch every day because it was cheap. Again, this is not the shame of a being a victim, but contextual shame and or societal embarrassment. Revisiting Brown's Shame Resilience Theory, my participants were "speaking shame," by deconstructing and contextualizing their situations in light of the podcasts they consumed, while Susan was dealing with psychological isolation in the midst of her trauma.

In addition to emotions, I coded the types of violence and abuse that were described in *COLD*. The violence described was consistent, graphic, and appeared in many different forms. I coded the percentage of episodes that contain discussions of a specific type of violence, such as verbal abuse, sexual abuse, and murder. Note that the percentages reflected here do not quantify which type of violence was most prominent, just how many episodes contained each type of violence (see Table 6.2 for a summary).

Again, there was a distinct shift mirroring the chronological timeline of events. Earlier episodes dealing with dating and marriage described largely non-physical forms of abuse such as verbal abuse, manipulation, financial control, emotional abuse, and general arguments between the couple. This type of violence was present in 44% of the episodes, prominent in the first three. Episodes 4-7 shifted to the fear of violence or the suspected violence after Susan had gone missing (Episode 4 is where she goes missing). This fear of, or suspected violence, was present in 28% of the episodes. Beginning in Episode 8, listeners start to learn more about Steve Powell and his obsession with his daughter-in-law. Between Episodes 8-12, listeners follow the investigation as it unfolds, and Steve Powell goes to jail on child pornography charges. The most prominent type of violence described during this portion of the timeline was sexual violence, predatory sex, and inappropriate sexual obsessions (such as a father-in-law's obsession with his daughter-in-law). Sexual violence is discussed in 33% of the episodes. Beginning in Episode 13, Josh is making plans to kill himself and his boys. For the remainder of the season, discussions of murder and suicide are prominent. Overall, the violence of murder and or suicide is present in 33% of the episodes (See Table 6.2 for a summary of violence per episode).

These percentages help shed light on which types of violence were portrayed in *COLD*, specifically as Josh and Susan's relationship progressed. What started as domestic violence with some fighting, manipulation, and control tactics, eventually turned into fear of physical violence, sex crimes, and murder/suicide. The tone of the violence and the type of violence depicted escalated throughout their relationship and was mirrored throughout the podcast season.

While these numbers may indicate the types of violence portrayed, they cannot adequately illustrate the depth of the violence presented. This section gives examples of the different types of violence to illustrate what the quantitative summary revealed. In the narrative analysis, more examples are shown and explained on an episode-by-episode basis. Before *COLD* describes the violence present in Josh and Susan's relationship, it delves into the violence surrounding Josh as a teenager. According to *COLD*, "Divorce court records show that...when Josh was 13, he threatened his Mom with a butcher knife. He also killed his four-year-old sister's pet gerbils then made her touch their blood." Listeners get a vivid description of Josh as a violent child, but Cawley also discusses the violence that surrounded Josh when he was growing up. Descriptions of Josh's dad physically hitting Josh's siblings, mentally manipulating Josh's mom, and bitter divorce proceedings all become emblematic of Josh's behavior with women. Once he was married to Susan, domestic disputes, bickering, and financial and emotional manipulation all eventually escalate to verbal and physical abuse as well as murder and suicide.

By the time Susan and Josh had children, Susan was feeling isolated and frustrated in the marriage. In one of her journals, she wrote, "I decided I don't want him dead. I like him around for the boys. Occasionally he actually does what I need him to do." They each talk about arguments regularly in their journals, and other family members notice as well. Steve Powell wrote:

Theirs is truly a marriage made in hell. It's hard to believe that two people could be so nasty to each other before they even celebrated their third anniversary. In public, they look like the loveliest couple, but in private, they have no respect for each other and little love.

Another entry in Steve's journal said, "At best, Josh is indifferent about her. At worst, he dislikes her intensely but tolerates her because she is a good piece of ass, and she keeps money coming in." In addition to criticizing their marriage, Steve also speculated about what Josh was capable of: "Josh hates her so much he even wishes she were dead. He even talks about occasionally fantasizing that she might have an accident."

While these journal entries are disturbing, the fact that Cawley has first-person audio journals as well as voice talent reading them makes the violence feel tangible. In one audio recording of Susan, she described a quarrel with Josh:

Josh is mean to me. But only because I was mean to him, and then he was mean back to me, so I was mean to him more. And now he's being mean to me again, but I still love him even though he won't kiss me...maybe he'll deserve and earn and actually get his Valentine's Day gift. Maybe. Depends on what he does for me. I love him.

This recording makes their marital troubles sound like teenage drama, but the reality was that their relationship deteriorated quickly. Friends and family noticed, and Susan and Josh were in and out of counseling. Eventually, Susan set up a personal account and started moving small portions of her paycheck. At this point in the marriage, Cawley described their relationship as: "He called her names, chastised her for spending money, and refused to touch her for months at a time." Josh was very strict on how much Susan could spend on groceries, so Susan started a garden so they would have fruits and vegetables. Her dad commented that he knew Susan was skipping meals so the boys would have plenty to eat. This was also the point where Susan starts beginning to wonder

if Josh might try to have her killed. Everyone involved, including Susan, suspected that her death was a possible outcome.

After Susan's disappearance, *COLD* follows the progress of the investigation, eventually leading to the police raid of Steve Powell's home and evidence of sex crimes. At one point in the investigation, the police discover that Steve has a website where he posts songs that he has written and recorded. Cawley played some of the songs that Steve wrote about Susan and connected those songs with entries from Steve's journal about Josh and Michael's reaction. Steve wrote, "There is a place in the instrumental bridge with the line, 'I'm in love with Susan.' Josh said people would find that objectionable, but that's my favorite four seconds in the whole song." This is Susan's father in law writing a song about his daughter in law, who is presumed to be dead, and the only critique he receives from his son is that "people would find that objectionable." In another entry, he said that Michael called him Nostradamus for writing a song that predicted Susan would leave "in a hurry."

The descriptions of Steve Powell's sexual fetishes are particularly disturbing. Cawley is careful in his description as well as what he shares from journal entries, but what is most troubling is that even these restrained depictions are so pointed and shocking. Cawley explains the evidence, including the voyeuristic videos Steve had taken of his prepubescent neighbors in their bathroom and a locked file cabinet in his closet dedicated to items that he had taken from Susan, including fingernail clippings, clothing, and personal hygiene products. Steve's journals that were seized are described as "10 years of his obsessive writings about Susan." In one entry, he wrote: "She says she is

committed to a marriage to someone who despises her. I am also vain enough to think that she stays with Josh partly because she is in love with me.”

In hindsight, the information in the journals of Susan, Josh, and Steve is foreboding, haunting, and alarming. However, the worst descriptions of violence appeared during the review of the planned murder/suicide. When *COLD* plays the first 911 call in episode 14, the terror in the voice of the social worker that took Charlie and Braden to Josh’s house on the day of their death is chilling. *COLD* layers the call with recollections from friends, family, and law enforcement, describing their own numbness upon hearing the news. Cawley describes, in detail, how Josh committed the murder/suicide, and what was found by law enforcement when the fires were extinguished.

...three bodies were all together in a back bedroom. A blackened, metal hatchet, sat next to Josh’s body. [Law enforcement] could see that Josh had used it to bludgeon both of the boys on the back of the head, knocking them unconscious. Intermingled with these descriptions from Cawley and law enforcement, are parts of radio dispatches from police as well as an additional 911 call from Josh’s sister, Alina. Cawley also scoured through the police reports to accurately describe the scene for those listening: “The beams were gnarled and blackened. It had been hot inside the house; so hot, a wire birdcage had turned to goo.” The discussions of suicide continue as Cawley walked listeners through the last few days of Michael Powell’s life, right to the point where “...he climbed to the top of that half wall and launched himself, arms wide, into the frigid air.”

The qualitative analysis aligns with the quantitative summary of the violence present in each episode, with one distinct detail – reality. While the numbers give us an idea of what was prevalent, hearing the reality of those events through the voices and journals of those present (many of which are no longer living), *COLD* crafts a first-person narrative that can make listeners feel like they are hearing from the victim and perpetrator(s) as they await impending disaster. This can be both compelling and troubling. In my interview with Cawley, he told me that he was cautious about the depictions of violence, specifically around the sexual fetishes of Steve Powell:

I wanted to create a podcast that I would be comfortable sitting down and listening to with my own mother. She's a religious person, and if it's going to be full of graphic talk and swearing...I'm going to lose her...I didn't want something that was explicit, but just because of the nature of the material, it is disturbing, and so I had to be careful about the language I use, about the clips of audio...so that you're not just doing it for shock value.

While Cawley's production decisions may have been measured, the depictions of violence in *COLD* offer an authentic and terrifying version of events that help those who have never experienced domestic violence to potentially gain understanding of the nature of these crimes. Some of my participants described an emotional connection to *COLD*, especially relating to the violence depicted. Clare said, "I couldn't believe how that guy in *COLD* treated his wife and killed his children...I felt bereft." When recalling one specific episode of *COLD*, Tina said, "I literally stood in my kitchen and sobbed when they talked about the boy's funeral."

The violence in *COLD* may have been somewhat restrained, but it was also prominent. As Cawley mentioned, there are not always visual signs of domestic violence such as bruises or injuries. His portrayal of what Susan endured showed both the invisible nature and the catastrophic outcome of domestic violence situations. While it may have difficult to hear, the production decisions were deliberate and intended to further the narrative. According to Cawley's conclusion of the series, he wanted to show the reality of the situation so that people would understand and take tangible action to prevent other women from suffering the same fate as Susan.

Narrative Voice

The narrative coding for *COLD* examines the tone of each episode, the point of view, genre, key people, and summary of events. Again, examining the episodes as a chronology of Susan's young adult life, the early episodes (before her disappearance), were cautionary yet pessimistic. In the first episode, Cawley sets the scene of how Josh operates in relationships by interviewing a previous long-time girlfriend, Catherine Terry. Catherine described many of Josh's controlling behaviors and how she escaped from the relationship. Describing a fight with Josh, Catherine said:

I remember one time, getting into a fight with him, and there was nowhere to go but the bathroom. I went and locked myself in there, and I remember putting my feet up against the door and him unlocking the door and pushing with all his might to get to me.

Catherine recalled that Josh would not allow her to attend her uncle's funeral because he felt that her uncle tried to keep them apart. Financial control was also prevalent in their relationship, with Catherine describing, "I just remember every time I got a check; he'd

have me sign it, and then he'd stick it in his account." This episode also explores Josh's childhood and early teen years when his parents got divorced, his attempts at suicide, and his violent outbursts toward his mom.

In episode 2, Josh and Susan get married, and almost everyone involved is less than enthusiastic about the relationship. Susan's father, Chuck Cox, called the Bishop that was going to perform the ceremony and said, "I don't think this is right. Something's not quite right here." By episode three, the violence had escalated, Josh and Susan had two children, and Susan feared for her life. In one of her journal entries about a year before her disappearance, she wrote,

I feel like a prisoner in my own family, fighting to practice my own religion and beliefs in my own home. I can't believe our marriage deteriorated so quickly. I feel so blind and naïve and foolish. I cherish my boys, but realize they'll grow up and move on.

All three of these episodes are told in both first and third person with Cawley as the narrator and include regular insight from both Josh and Susan's journals as well as interviews with friends and family. These episodes are presented as cautionary tales for those that might find themselves in abusive and manipulative intimate partner relationships.

By episode 4, the tone had turned to ominous and foreboding with the story resembling a tragic mystery. Almost everyone suspected Josh had killed Susan immediately after she went missing. When police and family members broke into their house after trying to get Josh or Susan on the phone, Josh's sister, Jennifer Graves, spotted Susan's purse in their bedroom and thought, "...I had this overwhelming feeling

that he had done something to her already because I'd seen her purse there...Why would she walk away without that? You know, that seemed like a very abnormal thing for her to do." Susan's friend, Kiersey Hallowell, had a similar thought when learning that Josh and the boys had returned home without Susan. Kiersey recalls thinking, "What has he done?"

Josh's behavior following Susan's disappearance was notably suspicious, and police caught him in several lies, yet they struggled to find tangible evidence of a crime that warranted cause for an arrest. Episodes 4 through 7 focus heavily on the police investigation with insight from police interview tapes, Powell family journal entries, and in-person interviews with the lead detective. The primary voice shifts from Josh and Susan to criminal authority figures, police and detectives.

In episode 8, another narrative shift occurs. Josh decides to move back in with his father in Washington, and the focus of the storyline is primarily on Steve Powell's control of his family and potential criminal activity. The tone in episodes eight through ten are that of disbelief and frustration with the story focusing on the tragedy of events. The police are frustrated by the lack of evidence in the case, and the detectives are in total disbelief at Steve Powell's erratic and inexplicable behavior. Steve's widely known obsession with his now-missing daughter-in-law and his musical creations, recorded and posted on a website, that feature his love for Susan are covered in-depth in these episodes. At this point in the narrative, Susan and Josh's boys, Charlie and Braden, are in day care and kindergarten, interacting with other kids at school and in the community. They begin saying odd things about their present and past, and people close to the family are concerned for their safety.

Episode 11 brings a glimmer of hope to the story. At this point, the police raid the Powell home and analyze mountains of digital evidence. The police launch a grand series of orchestrated events titled “Operation Tsunami,” which does not work out as anticipated. The goal of the events, organized by law enforcement, was to see if Josh would say something incriminating in a phone call (since their lines were tapped). However, Josh remained silent on the issue in every phone conversation. Even though the operation did not generate a confession from Josh, the amount of evidence seized from the Powell home creates hope that charges will soon be filed. This episode includes excerpts from Steve’s journals, details about the police raid of his house, and his subsequent conviction for child pornography charges; events that happened about two years after Susan’s disappearance. *COLD* also reveals graphic details of Susan’s personal items that police found in Steve’s room. Items included used tampons, dated and in Ziploc bags; undergarments she would have worn to church; and videos of Steve masturbating while watching videos of Susan on his television. While the details of this episode are disturbing, its overall message is one of hope: those involved in the case felt that charges would soon be filed, and Josh would be arrested. As it turned out, police did not arrest Josh, and instead chose to arrest Steve solely for child pornography charges and take Josh’s boys, Charlie and Braden, into protective custody.

Episodes 12 and 13 are when the narratives become even darker and more horrific. The overall narrative still feels like a tragedy as Josh falls into despair and begins his plans for the catastrophic triple murder/suicide. These episodes have a strong tone of defeat by those close to Susan because the hope from earlier episodes did not result in Josh’s arrest. When the boys were placed into protective custody with Chuck

and Judy Cox, friends and family held a balloon gathering at a park. The boys' babysitter, Debbie Caldwell, ran into the detective leading the investigation and remembers telling him, "Do everything you can to keep the boys from going back with Josh. He will kill them." She recalls that he said, "Oh, you think so?" She replied, "Yes, I think so." Placing the boys in protective custody pushed Josh over the edge of reason, but based on documentation, it still appears that the court system was working towards reunification.

Episode 14 includes the terrifying account of the murder/suicide. Listeners hear the 911 call from the social worker that had brought Charlie and Braden over for their weekly visit, and other friends and family members share their memories of the event. At this point in the narrative, it still feels like a horrible tragedy, but it also feels like any chance at a conviction and justice for Susan is lost. Families grieve the young lives of Charlie and Braden, while at the same time fighting over whether Josh's body can be placed alongside the boys in the cemetery.

The tragedy continues in episodes 15 through 18, as the Powells file for Josh's life insurance money and the police begin to close in on Josh's brother Michael as a possible accomplice in the case. The Cox family files a suit against the county for the deaths of Charlie and Braden, and Michael Powell commits suicide. The tone throughout the final episodes shifts from horror to frustration and eventually resignation. The tragic mystery comes to an end without a satisfying conclusion. Steve eventually dies in a hospital due to heart problems, and police are left with an unsolved case and no one to charge for Susan's presumed murder. The final episode of *COLD* shifts back to an educational tone as Cawley begs listeners to fight against domestic violence in Susan's name.

Overall, each episode of *COLD* includes a narrative arc consisting of an introduction with an interesting hook, various first and third-person accounts of events, and a conclusion leading into the next episode. The entire season follows a similar arc, leading us chronologically through the lives of Josh and Susan with an interesting yet complicated beginning, first and third-person accounts of events throughout, and a conclusion that leaves listeners hoping to finally get justice for Susan Powell and her family. *COLD* offers listeners the opportunity to see themselves in the narrative and experience the events as they unfold, which is exactly what Cron argued was a key feature in good storytelling (2012). This characteristic also happens to be key to what my participants said they enjoy in a true crime podcast – events that mirror their own with reflective opportunities to process the details.

Thematic Voice

Addressing the themes that Cawley stated served as the organizing narratives of the podcast, I analyzed which themes were present in each episode and how they were presented. Overall, I found that 39% of the episodes discussed Susan ignoring signs, 78% of the episodes examined the police investigation, and 28% of episodes described what made Josh the person he was (See Table 6.2 for a summary of the themes per episode). These numbers do not quantify prominence of the themes, just presence, noting which themes were present most often. These themes were not mutually exclusive; most episodes included more than one.

Because of the chronological nature of the narrative, the early episodes focused primarily on the warning signs that Susan did not heed as well as what happened in Josh's life to lead him to become the man he was. Episodes 4 through 18 all contain

information regarding the police work and potential oversights. More information regarding Josh's home life appears toward the end when Cawley is discussing the charges against Steve. The thematic arc of the podcast goes from Susan and the warning signs, to what made Josh the man he was, to the police investigation, and back to Susan and the warning signs and Josh's upbringing. The narrative comes full circle from victim and perpetrator history, to ignored warning signs, to the police investigation, and finally returning back to history and the warning signs. Since there was no satisfying conclusion to the story, the narrative essentially ends back at the beginning. The story takes an educational tone to discuss domestic violence prevention as an alternate form of closure.

When I interviewed Cawley, we discussed the decision to organize the podcast thematically. Cawley explained it within the context of traditional reporting:

In some ways, in my mind, reporting doesn't have themes. It's just a recitation of the facts in a purist form. Certainly, there's the decision of why are we telling the story and why are we telling it in this format, devoting this amount of time and attention to it. I felt that it was important that we highlight the reasons why we were telling the story this way and, in those themes.

Interestingly, my analysis of *COLD* revealed a strong counter-narrative to what Cawley described as the theme of victim denial. For example, Cawley stated in the podcast that "Susan did see warning signs, but chose to ignore them." His definition of "ignore" is based on the fact that she stayed in an abusive relationship. However, while Susan may have stayed with Josh, that does not mean that she ignored the warning signs. In fact, saying that she ignored the warning signs essentially blames Susan for her own fate. She

spoke of the abuse often in her journals, as well as openly to friends and family. This is an excerpt from an email sent to a coworker:

I was worth \$1 million dead and biking to work. You tell me how easy it would be to have an accident. I guess our main problem is I feel like just an asset to be controlled. I make the money. I take care of the house and kids and put up with his crap. He could easily take me out. So, yeah, I was worried.

One day, at work, Susan took a sheet of paper and titled it “Last Will and Testament for Susan.” She wrote:

I bike to work daily and have been having extreme marital stress for about three or four years now. For mine and my children’s safety, I feel the need to have a paper trail at work which would not be accessible to my husband. He has threatened to skip the country and told me straight out, if we divorce, there will be no lawyers, only a mediator, and I will ruin you. Your life will be over, and the boys will not grow up with a mom and dad. If something happens to me, please talk to my sister-in-law, Jenny Graves, and my friend, Keirseey Hallowell.

She continues by telling the police where to check to hear her side of the story (blogs, social media) and where she wants her boys to live if she dies. She states clearly, “Coworkers, family, and friends hear me say this occasionally, if I die, it may not be an accident, even if it looks like one.” Again, this is not a victim ignoring signs, she was clearly well aware of what might happen. Susan signed this document and added a note to her boys, “I love you, Charlie and Braden, and I’m sorry you’ve seen how wrong and messed up our marriage is. I would never leave you.”

Not only did Susan intentionally write warnings in her own words and leave documentation in her desk at work, but she told several coworkers about her impending fears so they could inform the police. On the outside of the envelope she wrote, “For family, friends of Susan. All except for Josh Powell, husband. I don’t trust him. Josh Powell is not allowed to possess this.” It was after the creation of this document and another, titled “The Deposition,” that Susan walked through the house and recorded all of their assets on video, “...making sure that if something happens to me [Susan] or my family, or all of us, that our assets are documented.” She also stored this tape in her desk at work. As described in episode 3, weeks later, she opened a safe deposit box at a local bank, made sure Josh could not gain access and stored important documents relating to her and the boys. These actions show that Susan understood the danger she was in and that she took action. She was not in denial and did not ignore the warning signs. She was preparing for her death because she saw them so clearly.

While Susan may not have ignored the warning signs, she did stay in her marriage to Josh. Her parents had given her an emergency cell phone, and her friends had offered her shelter. Friends and family close to Susan were not denying the imminent danger she was in; instead, they were offering help in light of it. One of Susan’s journal entries, revealed in episode 18, offers insight into her thinking. About a year before her disappearance, she wrote, “I’m finding out more and more that family and friends were seeing the red flags, long before I did, and of course, I wish they would have said something.” Audiences are not told why Susan stayed in her marriage to Josh when she felt her life was in danger, but in an interview with Cawley, Jennifer Graves discussed these difficult tensions directly. She said that she hoped that her book, “A light in dark

places,” might inspire other women in Susan’s situation to escape. Jennifer said, “Sometimes with help, people can change, and you can fix the situation and end up with a good and positive marriage and family situation. But sometimes, it isn’t possible. Sometimes the right decision is to get out.” These episodes reveal that those close to Susan wanted her to leave Josh, but the action they took was not enough to address the severity of the situation. Susan’s own words show that she was aware of the imminent danger but felt she had no agency to take action. This mirrors what my participants described as one of the main reasons they listen to true crime podcasts. My participants had no agency in their own experience, and listening to a true crime narrative gives them agency in a similar situation.

Questioning the Authoritative Voice

When a prominent case goes cold or unsolved, the natural inclination is to blame those involved in the investigation. Just as Cawley wanted to right some of the wrongs regarding police coverage of Susan, he also wanted to show the public how thorough the investigation was and what steps police took in the hours, days, weeks, and months following her disappearance. Once Michael and Steve Powell were deceased, the police designated Susan’s case as cold and released redacted files to the public and media. It would take someone familiar with the case to recognize that key pieces of the puzzle were missing, to submit follow-up requests, and to assemble the full picture for an interested audience. Cawley told me that he believed the West Valley City Police Department released all of the documents as, “...something of a glove slap on the part of the city to public critics who accused them of basically botching the case.” He argued that the release of these case documents was essentially saying, “Look, here’s all the work

that we did. If you all think you're so smart, could do better, we welcome you to try." He clarified that that statement was his interpretation of the release only, not a direct quote from the police involved.

The lead detective in the case, Detective Ellis Maxwell, had a prominent, authoritative voice throughout the podcast, but not as someone with definitive answers on every topic. Maxwell regularly questioned himself and the decisions that he made. Cawley presented evidence to Detective Maxwell and allowed him the freedom to explain decisions, expand on decisions, and offer insight into other details the public was not aware of at the time. In the end, Detective Maxwell expressed to Cawley that he appreciated the opportunity to revisit and discuss some of the details of the case. Cawley said:

Police are people, and I think it was healthy for some of those people to talk about their experiences, to look back and analyze, question themselves about the job they did, maybe defend some of the decisions they made, or look and see opportunities where things could have gone differently.

I asked Cawley if he felt like true crime podcasts could impact the criminal justice system or lead to reform, and he said, "I do. I think there's a great power in telling stories, especially that highlight failures, because unless we collectively understand what went wrong, we can't work to fix those problems."

Again, in my analysis, I uncovered a counter-narrative to Cawley's stated theme of authoritative control of the situation – that of legal bureaucracy. Once Susan was missing, many of the issues Cawley discussed were the details regarding how hard it is to get a search warrant and approval for wiretaps. Throughout the case, Josh crossed over

state lines, making things even more complicated. Both Washington and Utah police were involved not only in the case but also in multiple searches and seizures, as well as in the battle for custody of the boys. Cawley covered the hurdles faced by the police and also the legal hurdles of the family and the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) involved in the case. He showed that the police were frustrated by the lack of evidence linking Josh to Susan's disappearance and that many times, it was not their oversight that caused the case to stall, but the legal system involved in managing that oversight, echoing a familiar frustration mentioned by my participants.

In episode 17 of the podcast, Cawley discussed a law proposed by Washington State Senator Pam Roach that would prevent parents suspected of murder from having access to their children until the case was resolved. After the death of Charlie and Braden, the DSHS Review Board made several suggestions about how to prevent children from becoming victims in that situation again. This law would have addressed those concerns and protected future children in the same or similar circumstances. The Cox family supported the bill, and Chuck Cox described it as, "Without this law, a surviving spouse is essentially able to achieve custody by murder. Or, as in this case, causing the disappearance of Charlie and Braden's mother then refusing to cooperate with police." Unfortunately, that bill never became law in Washington; it stalled in the House. However, a similar bill was passed in Utah in 2014, protecting children in these unique situations. The senator who sponsored the bill, Pam Roach, argued that DSHS and the police involved in the case did not take the case seriously enough. In her interview with Cawley, she said, "...we felt this was a big problem, and...it was our opinion, [that it was] treated lightly that the boys would be okay." While the police may have been

working to find Susan, the idea behind this bill is that Charlie and Braden were overlooked and presumed to be fine in the custody of their father. As a reminder, while the boys were still alive, their father controlled the narrative presented by most media outlets. After his death and the murder of the boys, Susan's father, with the help of state legislature, was attempting to help families who find themselves in this unique situation in the future, by offering a counter-narrative to what was known about Josh in the media.

Objective Voice

Another counter-narrative that appeared during my analysis was that of media involvement in the case. Cawley criticized the media for inaccurate portrayals of events without explicitly mentioning the crucial, positive role they played in the investigation (including the *COLD* podcast). As Cawley explained, the media coverage was often one-sided due to who was controlling the narrative, largely Steve, Josh, and Michael Powell. He also thought it was vital that he cover the case in a different, more detailed way than a journalist might report on it. Throughout the podcast, Cawley played clips from the media coverage to demonstrate the role of the press in this case. There were also key points in the investigation in which police used the media strategically to put pressure on Josh and his family. It was clear that media played a role in the investigation; however, as presented in *COLD*, Cawley implies that the media was being manipulated and used by both the Powells and the police. Instead of merely reporting on the events, news organizations were being used to drive events. For example, during "Operation Tsunami" in August of 2011, the police had a wiretap on the Powell phones, and they were trying to use external pressure to get Josh to say something incriminating. They informed the media that there was going to be a search of a mine in Ely, Nevada, which drew a media

entourage and a press conference on-site. No significant evidence was found in Ely, but at the same time, police asked Chuck Cox to organize a “honk and wave,” which involved Chuck standing on a street corner with some balloons and a sign asking people to ‘honk’ in support of Susan. This “honk and wave” was placed strategically near the Powells’ home. Police did not explain the reasoning to Cox at the time, but as soon as Steve drove by Cox realized, “So, I’m the bait. That’s fine with me.” Cox also explained, “They could’ve just told me what they wanted to do. I would’ve done it.” Cox knew the goal was to get Steve to say that Susan’s journals were essential to the investigation so the police would have cause for a search warrant. Not only was Cox used as bait in “Operation Tsunami,” FOX 13 in Utah was given inside information that the “honk and wave” would happen, and they signed an agreement with police that they would publish the video on their website in its entirety, giving the police the ability to obtain the footage and include it as evidence.

In addition to using local media, Steve Powell granted an interview to NBC’s *The Today Show* to garner national media attention. The interview took place in the Powell home, where Steve showed off Susan’s journals, read from them, and posted pages online. It was in this interview that Steve discussed the importance of the journals for the investigation, which eventually led to a search warrant, a raid on his home, and confiscation of Susan’s diaries. Detective Ellis Maxwell was thrilled when he saw the interview on television. He later described it to Cawley, saying, “I mean there is some things that Steve did that was wonderful, and I was like, right on, because that was exactly what I needed to get inside Steve’s house.”

While news coverage of a case is meant to be objective, professional norms also confine broadcast stories to be brief. Typical news segments are edited to between 30 – 60 seconds, sometimes 120 seconds if it is considered a big story. Cawley knew that telling Susan’s story properly would take much longer than that. He said, “...I wanted to know and share with...primarily my local audience but understanding that doing so in a 30-second or 90-second or 120-second story on TV or radio just wasn’t going to capture the full depth of the story.” He felt that the long form of podcasting could do justice to the story and allow him the freedom to give a full picture of the investigation and the history of Josh and Susan’s relationship. *COLD* was meant to “correct” the incomplete and often one-sided narrative presented to traditional news audiences. In this case, the news media was a critical component of both the investigation and the telling of Susan’s story, offering tangible support both for law enforcement and the Cox family, supporting the idea that news coverage depicted in *COLD* demonstrates a counter-narrative to what Cawley intended.

6.2 WHAT MADE *COLD* SUCCESSFUL

In Chapter 4, I discussed why my participants are drawn to true crime podcasts, how they use the media, and how they incorporate their lived experiences as domestic violence survivors into their podcast listening decisions. Since *COLD* was the most popular domestic violence podcast mentioned by my participants, in this section, I analyze this narrative through their lens to uncover to what extent it meets their definition of a “good” true crime podcast.

I asked my participants what a true crime podcast must have to be considered good. Answers fit into five different categories: research, respect for the victim,

production quality, storytelling, and specific genre/interests. For research, participants mentioned things such as first-person sources, attention to detail, and accuracy in recounting facts. As I have previously mentioned, *COLD* had access to an unprecedented amount of first-person material. Cawley interviewed families on both sides of the situation and had multiple interviews with police officers involved in the case; he also had access to most of the case files. The investigative efforts that went into the creation of *COLD* are thorough, and the reporting was transparent. One of my participants mentioned *COLD* specifically when talking about research. Beth said, “I enjoy *COLD*...it had so much detail and background information that I hadn’t heard before. It made it very intriguing for me and really held my interest.”

In my interview with Cawley, he clearly stated that he did not want to “revictimiz[e] Susan.” One of my participants described respect for the victim as an “engaging and compassionate” presentation of the facts. One of the stated goals of *COLD* was to right some of the wrongs that had been presented by traditional media. Cawley took the time to present a comprehensive depiction of both Susan and Josh as well as the events leading up to and after her disappearance. By using Susan’s own words from her journals to show the reality of her lived experiences and educate others in similar situations, Cawley’s respect for Susan was arguably both engaging and compassionate.

COLD was produced by a team of seasoned media professionals in a professional environment. Since KSL produces both radio and television news daily, there should be no question regarding the production quality of this podcast. When discussing production, participants mentioned aspects such as a “host with a voice for radio,” good editing, excellent sound quality, and journalistic construction. As a radio professional in a

media environment, Cawley met all of those requirements. Storytelling, however, is a bit more subjective. Revisiting our definition of good stories from Chapter 4, Cron wrote that a good story was not about the details, but our ability to insert ourselves in the story and experience the plot first-hand (2012). This also speaks to Hartsock's standpoint theory that argues women experience and define themselves relationally (1983). My participants described good storytelling as concise, non-opinionated, something compelling that holds their attention and, as previously mentioned, no victim blaming. While everyone may define "good storytelling" differently, my listener participants in this study all identified as domestic violence survivors, so they could arguably insert themselves into the narrative of *COLD*.

The final category mentioned by my participants in what makes a good true crime podcast was individual-specific. Several participants mentioned types of true crime podcasts they enjoy, such as missing persons or unsolved cases. Others discussed liking cases that have a unique angle, or unusual cases that have not been covered by mainstream media. Two mentioned podcasts that give insight into the criminal mind. As unique individuals, we are all attracted to different things. While *COLD* might not meet the definition of "good" on every level, for every person, it arguably meets the definition of "good" in the majority of categories mentioned: research, respect for the victim, production, and storytelling.

In Chapter 4, my participants said they were drawn to true crime podcasts for three main reasons: they enjoy a good story that can help them get out of their own headspace, they like the audio medium, and they appreciate the educational aspect of listening to true crime podcasts. Examining *COLD* with the same logic, I have already

discussed reasons why my participants may have found it to be a good story, and it is clearly audio media. The third reason mentioned by my participants is something *COLD* does best – giving listeners the opportunity to better understand the criminal mind. Cawley spends parts of five different episodes discussing Josh’s history, his childhood, his early girlfriends, and what happened to mold him into the man he became. He sifted through the divorce proceedings from when Josh was a teenager and spoke to a prior long-term girlfriend to better understand how Josh operated in a relationship. He read letters sent to girls and showed Josh’s frustration with relating to girls during his teen years. However, Josh’s audio and paper journals were arguably the richest source of data that explained how Josh thought about himself and others. Listening to Josh discuss life events from his perspective, Cawley would then switch to versions of the events from the perspective of others to show how Josh’s interpretation was often flawed. Additionally, the podcast describes psychological tests performed and explained by psychiatrists, as well as tapes of police interviews to show how Josh operated during an interrogation. *COLD* begins with Josh’s history and eventually compares Josh’s relationship with Susan to the relationship between Josh’s parents to show how unhealthy things had become. Listeners of the *COLD* podcast had the opportunity to gain an understanding of the criminal mind from first-person accounts, counter-narratives told by others involved, and professionals that evaluated Josh. *COLD* presents one of the most comprehensive depictions of the criminal mind in true crime podcasting today.

Since the suspected murderer, Josh, and his brother, Michael, and his father Steve, are all dead, justice will never be served in Susan’s case. However, educationally, Cawley did conclude each episode by directing listeners to the domestic violence

helpline, and reminders that help is available. He discussed, in detail, the precautions that Susan had taken to protect her boys and share her own story if she were found dead. He also discussed the different types of domestic violence, reminding listeners that those experiencing violence do not always exhibit physical signs. While Susan did not survive her domestic violence situation, Cawley educated listeners on what Susan could have done to escape, how friends and family tried to help, the different types of domestic violence experienced, and resources available for those suffering. Both Dave Cawley (in my interview) and Chuck Cox (during the podcast) mentioned that other victims and survivors had approached them to discuss their own situations or to express how Susan's story helped them. There is clear evidence that Susan's story has been educational for listeners, and both Cawley and Cox continue to advocate for current victims and survivors by sharing Susan's experience. Her story continues to provide education for victims and survivors of domestic violence.

My participants also related their podcast listening to processing their own experiences – validation/gratitude that they survived their domestic violence situation and comparative suffering with statements like “it could’ve been me.” Both Cawley and the family and friends of Susan Powell mentioned that they hope Susan's story helps someone else survive a similar situation. Susan's father, Chuck Cox, said that is one of the only reasons he is still talking to the media about Susan because he keeps hearing that her story is helping other women.

Susan is still missing, and her husband and sons are dead. My participants survived their domestic violence situation. Susan's story could easily give my participants a chance to process their own lived experiences and find solace in the fact

that they survived. I am not insinuating that my participants are using Susan's story for validation as I did not ask them directly. However, all of the components are there to infer that they could use the story this way if they wanted to.

The women I interviewed also described a strong belief that the things they learn from true crime podcasts would help them in their current lives. They also agreed that their listening could be described as exposure therapy; knowing that other women are listening for the same reasons feels like they are in a virtual community of people who understand their situation. Again, based on the tangible feedback that Cawley described receiving from women who survived their domestic violence situations, and from conversations with women currently seeking help, this analysis shows how *COLD* has the potential to support domestic violence survivors or victims in therapeutic way, offering a mediated community of support.

In short, comparing what my participants said made a podcast "good" to the *COLD* podcast, shows clear alignment with what they look for in a podcast: a compelling story, reliance of the audio medium format, comparison to their own lived experiences, and insight into the criminal mind. It also has a clear educational thread woven through the narrative arc. It allows listeners to immerse themselves into the narrative, potentially providing a mediated community of therapeutic support often lacking in their offline worlds.

6.3 CHAPTER CONCLUSION

The *COLD* podcast addresses our society's inability to effectively protect those suffering from domestic violence head on. Cawley examines how the criminal justice system failed to protect both Susan and her boys. It shows that friends and family noticed

the violence and offered assistance, yet were unable to stop the worst from happening. Not only does it show, in detail, how the violence manifested itself, how it was allowed to continue, and ultimately, how it culminated in her presumed death, but it also shows the breakdowns in our society that allowed it to exist. Susan wrote letters to colleagues and left video evidence of her possessions. She sat in offices with lawyers, insurance providers, counselors, and doctors – all of whom could see clear signs of abuse – the power that Josh was wielding to make sure he maintained control of all assets and his indifference towards making any personal changes.

As Susan neared the date of her disappearance, she noticed odd things happening to her body – she was tired more often, nauseous, and not feeling well. She visited several doctors who took bloodwork to test for pregnancy. Based on the events that lead to her disappearance, evidence shows that Josh may have been poisoning her slowly. Could the doctors have looked for more than just pregnancy in her bloodwork and possibly prevented the entire disaster? Maybe. Of course, we will never know. However, the fact remains – Susan was surrounded by people who loved her and professionals that could have seen the signs of abuse, yet, nothing saved her. *COLD* dissects these failures and shows how a series of failings led to her presumed death. In the last episode, Cawley directly addressed the lack of a societal safety net that could have saved Susan by recounting another situation where he covered a story of domestic violence. He ended by saying, “I’m less concerned with the question, ‘where is Susan,’ than I am the question ‘why does this keep happening’”?

Because *COLD* focuses on a domestic violence situation and covers it in excruciating detail, from multiple vantage points, it offers a compelling narrative that my

participants are seeking. Some of the key features of *COLD* are precisely what my participants said they wanted in a true crime podcast: detailed research, first-person audio, respect for the victim, insight into the criminal mind, excellent production quality, and good storytelling. *COLD*'s depiction of how the violence escalated in Susan and Josh's relationship, along with insight into what made Josh the man he was, offers listeners a way to insert themselves into the narrative and better understand how domestic violence often turns deadly.

Even though *COLD* is produced by a traditional news media outlet, there are clear differences between a true crime podcast and media coverage of the same crime. Both are factual, well-produced, and timely (*COLD* was released just before the 10th anniversary of Susan's disappearance). However, news media is often constrained by time limits and deadlines. Not only are segments short, journalists often cite sources that are convenient to reach in order to make a deadline. In 2018, the Women's Media Center published a report showing that not only are most stories involving sexual assault written by men, but that those men are likely to cite other men in their stories, ignoring the voice of the women involved (Ennis & Wolfe, 2018).

Susan and Josh Powell lived in both Utah and Washington during their time together, and researchers have examined coverage of domestic violence stories in both states. In Utah, researchers looked at all newspaper coverage across the state (Bullock, 2008). They found that reporters relied heavily (82%) on official sources, only citing personal sources in 34.5% of stories and domestic violence experts in 4.8% (Bullock, 2008). In fact, 56.3% of articles used sources that were only unattributed or from official sources. Additionally, they found that the articles lacked the information needed to

contextualize the stories within society (Bullock, 2008). A newspaper study in Washington had similar findings, showing only 10% of the articles analyzed contextualized the domestic violence (Bullock & Cubert, 2002). Interestingly, a higher percentage of articles (15.2%) implied that the victim deserved it or that their actions had encouraged the violence. Some articles (8.3%) specifically blamed the victim for bringing about their own death, while only 6.5% blamed society. Again, this study found that almost all of the articles used unattributed information and official sources (99.6%), while only 20% of articles use personal sources, and only 3% cited a domestic violence expert. Interestingly, more stories cited the perpetrator (4.3%) than a domestic violence expert (Bullock & Cubert, 2002).

Both of these studies were conducted prior to the disappearance of Susan Powell, but within the same decade as her disappearance. In today's current cultural climate against the backdrop of a #MeToo movement, perhaps journalists would be more careful about the choices of sources cited and perpetuating narratives of victim-blaming. However, these studies were conducted at the time Susan would have been experiencing the abuse, and just before she disappeared, showing that, at the time, the coverage of domestic violence situations was very one-sided and often did not support or encourage victims. If Susan read the newspapers, this was the coverage she was seeing. Today, however, the *COLD* podcast covered the case and produced the podcast in light of a growing recognition of intimate partner violence and sexual assault (#MeToo), offering additional context to the narrative. Cawley and his team essentially flipped the script on domestic violence coverage in the states of Utah and Washington by intentionally presenting a counter-narrative that supports the victim, shows insight into the societal

shortcomings, and sheds light on the criminal mind that committed the violence. This is something that newspapers in Utah and Washington were not doing at the time of Susan's disappearance (Bullock, 2008; Bullock & Cubert, 2002). One wonders how things might have played out differently for Susan if she were able to hear stories of other women in similar situations that had survived. Would she have felt empowered to make changes, knowing that survival was possible? Of course, we will never know.

Instead of relying on police sources to form the narrative, Cawley included interviews with the police and detectives that critically examined their role in the process and their decisions made during the investigation. His use of personal sources is also unparalleled, and his inclusion of first-person sources, including the victim and her presumed perpetrator, offer depth to the narrative that makes it both personal and relatable for victims of domestic violence. Examining *COLD* in the context of other traditional news coverage of domestic violence in Utah and Washington shows the potential power of in-depth, long-form and investigative story-telling that true crime podcasts can offer.

Table 6.1: Summary of COLD Episodes and Length

Episode	Length	Summary
1	1 hr 1 min	Josh had a difficult childhood and adolescence which turned him into the man he was, with a string of failed relationships prior to marrying Susan.
2	1 hr 4 min	Josh and Susan's relationship progress, from dating to marriage and the birth of their second child.
3	58 min	Marital troubles between Josh and Susan, counseling, fighting, and quickly escalating financial problems.
4	1 hr	The family is missing, and only Josh and the boys return. Investigation begins and Josh is a clear target from day 1.
5	1 hr 2 min	Josh's interview with the police goes poorly. Police get no information, but they do get warrants for the house, the van, and the cell phones. Josh is caught in several lies.
6	1 hr 1 min	Day 3 after Susan's disappearance. Josh rents a car and disappears for 18 hours. All leads end unsuccessfully. Josh empties Susan's retirement and continues to act suspicious.
7	58 min	Prior to Susan's disappearance, Josh had mentioned to several friends that he would hide a body in a mine. This episode recounts the extensive search of mines and the use of cadaver dogs in the search for Susan.
8	58 min	Josh and the boys move back to Washington to live with Steve Powell. He rents the home he owned with Susan to a neighbor. Josh's sister Jennifer confronts him while wearing a wire. Washington Child Protective Services starts a case on Charlie and Braden.
9	1 hr 3 min	Steve Powell contacts the FBI to propose 2 different scenarios for Susan's disappearance other than his son. Police discover Steve's "music" and the depths to his obsession with Susan. Josh gets rid of all of Susan's things and the police put tracking devices on all of the Powell vehicles.
10	51 min	Josh launches Susanpowell.org to try and combat the narrative being presented by the media and Susan's family. Charlie begins to talk to people at the YMCA and kindergarten. Josh takes the boys to a gem and mineral club where members notice odd behaviors. The police's undercover plan to get a confession falls apart just as Steve goes on the TODAY show with Susan's journals, giving law enforcement probably cause for a search.

11	56 min	The police launch “Operation Tsunami” meant to get Josh to admit something incriminating. It included a wiretap, a search in Ely, NV, a honk and wave, and a full search of the Powell home.
12	1 hr	Digital forensics examines mountains of seized evidence. Police continue their search physically and digitally. Steve faces child porn charges and the boys are placed in protective custody.
13	57 min	Michael Powell’s car gets tested and impounded. Charlie and Braden make positive progress while in the custody of Susan’s parents. Josh undergoes a thorough evaluation. When reunification is not granted Josh begins to make plans for a murder/suicide.
14	58 min	Josh commits a murder/suicide killing himself and the boys. Those close to the family recall the day and wonder if it could’ve been prevented.
15	1 hr 4 min	Steve goes to jail for sex crimes and Michael and Alina make a claim for Josh’s insurance money. Chuck Cox sues DSHS for the deaths of Charlie and Braden and Michael commits suicide.
16	52 min	Police pursue any and all leads that could help find Susan including discussions with inmates, prostitutes, and other missing people. In the end, nothing proves useful.
17	54 min	Discussions of the final release of evidence, Steve’s death in a hospital, lawsuits between the Cox family and the Powells all interlaced with journal entries from the 48hrs following Susan’s disappearance. Clearly, Steve thought Josh was to blame.
18	31 min	Host concludes with what journalists are trained not to do – sharing his own opinions and theories. After he proposes his thoughts, he concludes with a plea to end domestic violence and a promise to do better for women.

Table 6.2: Emotions, Violence, and Themes noted in *COLD*

Episode	Predominant Positive Emotions	Predominant Negative Emotions	Violence Described	Themes Present
1	Loving/Love	Anger	Physical Threats Verbal abuse Possessive/Controlling Manipulation	Victim ignoring signs What made Josh the man he was?
2	Love/Hope	Fear Worry Anger	Financial control Manipulation Controlling Isolation	Victim ignoring signs What made Josh the man he was?
3	Love	Fear Worry Anger	Financial control Physical fights Emotional abuse	Victim ignoring signs and help from friends and family
4	None	Worry Concern Fear	Fear of potential violence	Why didn't the police make an arrest?
5	Hopeful	Worried Scared	Fear of suspected violence	Why didn't the police make an arrest?
6	None	Suspicious	Suspected poisoning Controlling	Why didn't the police make an arrest?

7	None	Frustration	Fear of suspected violence	Victim ignoring signs What are the police doing to build a case for arrest?
8	Hope	Frustration	Anger Controlling Unhealthy home	Police are working, but why hasn't there been an arrest?
9	None	Suspicious	Sex predator Sexual assault Controlling	Victim ignoring signs
10	None	Furious	Control General creepiness	What are the police doing to build a case for arrest?
11	Hopeful	Worried Frustrated Anger	Presumed violence Sex predator	What are the police doing? What made Josh the man he was?
12	None	Worried Frustrated Anger	Controlling Sex predator	Victim ignoring the signs Why haven't the police arrested Josh?
13	Hope	Defeat Anger Worry	Inappropriate sexual fantasies Suicidal thoughts	Why didn't the police arrest Josh to protect his children?
14	Love (for the children)	Fear Anger Heartbreak	Murder/Suicide Control	Why didn't the police stop this murder/suicide from happening?

15	Excited Hopeful	Worry Disbelief Nervous	Suicide Sex predator	Could the police have prevented the murder of the children? What made Josh the man he was?
16	Hopeful	Haunting	Inappropriate sexual activities Discussions of murder	Did the police do their job?
17	Hopeful	Worry Dread Sadness Anger Loss	Discussions of murder/suicide Speculating how Susan was killed	Why didn't the police arrest Josh? What made Josh the man he was?
18	Calm Peace Hope	Frustration	Murder/Suicide	Victim ignoring signs Police aren't the only ones responsible for this tragedy

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

@cjharrispretzer: #coldpodcast is riveting. It hits very close to home for me.

During those same years, I was fighting hard in court for my 2 boys to keep them safe from their criminal rapist father. Law wanted to reunite them, but I fought and won. <http://crystaljharris.com> (law docs on website). (February 10, 2019)

@UtahDV: “I’m finding out more and more that family & friends were seeing the red flags long before I did &, of course, I wish they would have said something.”

– Susan Powell #Utah1in3 #ColdPodcast #FindSusan #KnowTheSigns

#StartByBelieving <http://udvc.org/resources/prev> (March 14, 2019)

In 2016, the Utah Domestic Violence Coalition (UDVC) launched the #Utah1in3 campaign, attempting to raise awareness regarding the prevalence of domestic violence in Utah (“#Utah1in3,” n.d.). According to the UDVC, one in three women in Utah will experience domestic violence; nationwide, that statistic is one in four (“#Utah1in3,” n.d.). Around the same time, Rosemary Clark published a study titled “‘Hope in a hashtag’: the discursive activism of #WhyIStayed,” examining the discourse on Twitter after a 2014 NFL domestic violence controversy involving a player and his girlfriend (2016). The incident was caught on camera at a hotel and showed the player punching his fiancé in an elevator and dragging her unconscious body out. When *TMZ* leaked the security video,

the public was outraged at the incident and the lack of punishment levied on the player by the NFL (Clark, 2016). However, articles published in the media and discussions on social media questioned the girlfriend – did she “deserve” it, what did she do to cause it, if he was really that bad, why did she stay with him?

Beverly Gooden saw the conversation developing and decided to share her own story on Twitter using the hashtag #WhyIStayed (Kaplan, 2014). Clark recognized the shift in conversation and began analyzing the tweets. She found that by presenting a counter-narrative and directly challenging the media’s version of events, the participants were able to shift the discourse towards perpetrators of domestic violence instead of victim-blaming (2016). Another study, examining the hashtag #SafetyTipsForLadies described a similar situation (Rentschler, 2015). Interpreting the moment as a “media hijack,” the author argues that the trending hashtag “reroutes the discourse away from victims’ behavior and toward the actions of perpetrators” (Clark, 2016; Rentschler, 2015).

According to the National Domestic Violence Hotline, “nearly half of all women and men in the United States have experienced psychological aggression by an intimate partner in their lifetime (48.4% and 48.8% respectively)” (“Facts & Figures,” n.d.). A recent study analyzing FBI data shows that intimate partner homicides began steadily increasing in 2014, estimating that four women per day are killed by intimate partners (Fridel and Fox, 2019). A Global Study on Homicide, published in 2013 by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, states that 47% of women killed in 2012 were killed by intimate partners or family members. In comparison to men, only 6% of men killed in 2012 were killed by those closest to them. A recent analysis by *The Washington Post*

showed “...nearly half of the women who were murdered during the past decade were...killed by a current or former intimate partner” (Zezima, Paul, Rich, Tate, and Jenkins, 2018). Analyzing five cities closely, findings showed an even more devastating detail – “...about a third of the male killers were known to be a potential threat ahead of the attack” (Zezima, Paul, Rich, Tate, and Jenkins, 2018). This analysis by *The Washington Post* was intended to examine why our national homicide rate is close to historic lows; yet, women with restraining orders and a history of reporting abuse to law enforcement continue to die at the hands of their abuser at an ever-increasing rate. How is it possible that a well-informed society, with data showing the reality of the problem, and the resources of technological advancements and law enforcement, continue to watch women die at the hands of their intimate partners? Is there a societal safety net in place to protect women like Susan Powell?

According to Jes Skolnik and my participants, the answer is simple – secrecy and shame. We live in a society where domestic violence survivors do not feel comfortable discussing their experiences with others. One of my participants, Emma, said that she felt like her experience was “...something that needed to be closeted.” Other participants described listening to true crime podcasts as life-giving because they were able to place themselves into a world where violence exists, and their experience was normalized. This comradery helps them to process their own situation and feel less “othered” by society. As Jes Skolnik said, “Those of us who have experienced violence and find refuge in true crime are looking not for closure, but for empathy, for understanding. For a world that doesn’t turn its back on the fact that day-to-day violence exists.”

In this dissertation, I explored how a traditionally oppressed and marginalized community could interact with emergent media forms to pursue a collective goal. Podcasters have been shown to interact with their audience at a level that is atypical for traditional media outlets (Boling, 2019a; Markman, 2015). Combining that high level of interactivity with an audience eager to hear and speak their truths creates a relationship instead of a hijacking, the pursuit of a common goal by media producers and audiences. Ultimately, through a reciprocal relationship, true crime podcasters and the domestic violence survivors in their audience have countered the traditional media narrative, potentially initiating a form of therapeutic healing and community building for audiences as well as creating greater awareness, education and activism about violence against women.

My research into this topic was inspired by prior scholars who studied the audience reception and interpretation of a gender-specific audience seeking a genre-specific media (Parameswaran, 1999; Radway, 1984). These two audience reception scholars studied notably different populations of women (midwestern women versus young women in India), and found markedly different ways they were using and interpreting romance novels. However, it was not just their distinct use of the media that caught my interest; it was the cultural norms that shaped and constrained their use of and interpretation of this media genre. While their participants were on opposite sides of the world, both discussed genre guilt and societal shame for reading the novels (Parameswaran, 1999; Radway, 1984). Similarly, as a fan of true crime podcasts myself for several years now, and I can personally attest to the looks that I get from people when I start discussing my listening interests. After discovering that I am not alone, that in fact,

the true crime podcast audience is predominantly female, I became interested in a specific audience subset (domestic violence survivors). This study was designed to explore their unique reception and use of the narratives presented in true crime podcasts.

Through in-depth interviews with 16 women who identify as both domestic violence survivors and true crime podcast fans, I found three reasons that they are drawn to true crime podcasts: they enjoy a good story, they like the unique qualities of the audio medium, and they appreciate the educational aspect of listening to true crime podcasts. In addition to what attracts them to this particular media, I also examined how they were using the media and how they incorporated their lived experiences into their media choices. I found that the majority claims they use the media in part to process their lived experiences, that they find listening to stories similar to their own to be therapeutic, and that they gravitate toward the mediated community of listeners drawn to these narratives.

My findings echo findings from earlier studies on women who read true crime novels, showing that women like reading novels with female protagonists and that they want to learn survival skills in case of an attack (Vicary & Fraley, 2010). Looking specifically at audience reception studies, other scholars have argued that gender is a critical component, specifically in relation to depictions of crime, because women often see themselves as potential victims of violence (Livingstone et al., 2001). Other similar findings include the fact that women are less likely to rely on authorities and that they seek media that could help them become informed and self-reliant (Livingstone et al., 2001).

My participants varied geographically, demographically, and socioeconomically, however, their attraction to true crime podcasts was universal. I argue that they achieve a

“collective identity,” as described in Hartsock’s feminist standpoint theory (1983). This collective identity, or consciousness, does not require that these listeners be physically together, but mentally collective. This collective standpoint affords them a unique angle from which to view society. Many of my participants discussed the idea that they felt their domestic violence experience was not understood by others, and culturally, they were expected to remain silent. Those without this shared experience may be unaware of how this audience subset is marginalized in our society. This general oppression leads to an uneducated public and the perpetuation of domestic violence. My participants, while silenced, were seeking media forms in which they could immerse themselves in a world where violence was discussed openly and honestly, systemic flaws were exposed, and their experiences were normalized.

Not only did my listener participants act as a collective conscious, my research also shows the ways in which they worked with the podcasters to produce counter-narratives that could raise awareness and impact society, meeting another requirement for Hartsock’s standpoint (1983). All of the podcasters I spoke with mentioned domestic violence survivors who had reached out to share their story or educate them on some aspect of an experience that they were describing in the podcasts. My participants were not organized physically or working from a stated agenda, but they were seeking out similar media and having similar conversations with the podcasters who produced it. As I previously mentioned, I do not want to imply that all true crime podcasts and domestic violence survivors are interacting in this way, but for *these* women and *these* podcasters, these relationships were powerful ones.

In addition to interviewing audience members, I also spoke with seven podcasters, representing six different podcasts. These podcasters represented the top series mentioned by my participants as well as all of the domestic-violence-specific podcasts they listed as favorites. Speaking to these podcasters, I explored how the unique ways they interact with their audiences, how they use collaborative production techniques, their potential impact on the criminal justice system, and how the medium lends itself to uncommon audience-producer relationships.

These podcasters were unanimous in their belief that the podcasts they produced needed to answer the “so what,” creating a final product that went well beyond entertainment. The podcaster-producing journalists also believed strongly in objectivity but felt that advocacy did have a place. We also discussed podcast impact on the criminal justice system and the collective desire to increase awareness of the prevalence of domestic violence. The podcasters all mentioned their audience interactions, specifically those with domestic violence survivors, to be palpable, authentic, and emotional. The producers and hosts I interviewed present challenges to the hegemonic discourses that have traditionally dominated domestic violence media narratives by presenting counter-narratives that educate, support, and encourage survivors and direct victims to resources that can help.

After interviewing both audiences and the producers, my analysis turned to the media content itself by closely examining the entire *COLD* podcast series, produced by KSL in Utah. Not only was *COLD* the number one domestic violence podcast mentioned by my participants, but it also included unique features such as first-person accounts from the victim and her presumed killer. My narrative analysis of the podcast episodes

examined the narrative arc, depictions of violence, who gets a voice, and whose voice is prominent. I compared these findings with other studies that have examined newspaper coverage of domestic violence in Utah and Washington and found that *COLD* reversed the prevailing norm by presenting a counter-narrative that supports victims and survivors. Notably, while *COLD* was produced in the #MeToo era, news media narratives still perpetuate dangerous stereotypes about victims, perpetrators, and crimes against women, and UDVC statistics shows the importance of awareness and a counter-narrative for an at-risk audience.

Applying a feminist lens to this study, I argue that my participants have achieved a unique standpoint and are also challenging cultural myths about domestic violence. I also believe that the *COLD* podcast resonated on a personal level with my audience in a way that other domestic violence narratives have not because of several unique features as well as thoughtful and intentional production. My participant survivors indicated a common goal in their interviews, the hope for a world where gendered violence was eradicated, perpetrators were brought to justice, and survivors are supported. Ultimately, this dissertation has been concerned with how an emerging media form and a traditionally marginalized audience can work together to educate others and increase cultural awareness.

As with any study, there are limitations. The limitations of this study are primarily due to the limited sample and scope of the project. By interviewing 16 participants and six producers, this study cannot be generalizable to the population as it is not designed to be. Recruiting participants from online sources can narrow the field of possible participants to those within specific demographics, access to the internet, and the

participation in specific chat spaces. My participants cannot be said to represent the entire audience of women listeners or domestic violence survivors, and, therefore, only offer a glimpse into these perspectives from specific social networks.

Since I am focusing on women listeners, I did not interview men or members of the LGBTQ community who may be domestic violence survivors who listen to true crime podcasts. My key informant, Jes Skolnik, identifies as trans/intersex, and during our discussion there was mention of how that experience is different from cisgender, heterosexual women. This would be interesting to explore in future studies. Also, the narrative analysis was limited to only a single podcast of the hundreds of true crime podcasts available, but it is a critical one that my participants deemed to be a “favorite.” Still, this analysis of COLD cannot be meant to represent true crime podcast content more generally. In addition, podcasts are more than just words in a transcript. My narrative analysis involved listening to the podcast three times and analyzing the transcripts. Podcasts often include natural sounds, music, and audio context. It would be interesting to analyze the sounds and music used in true crime podcasts, but that was outside the scope of this study. Also, as a narrative analysis, I did not delve into some of the obvious themes that were present, such as religion. It would be very interesting to combine this narrative analysis with a thematic analysis for additional depth. Several of my participants mentioned specific podcasts that they felt were overproduced or intentionally added in sounds and clips that increased tension in the narrative. It would be interesting to see how podcasts are using the sound they include. While the scope is limited, it is also more in-depth, intended to offer insights that could not be gleaned from survey research or content analyses.

My analysis offers in-depth insight into the true crime genre and the podcast media landscape and shows how an emergent media impacts audiences and fits into society as a whole. Findings from this study could follow the formative methodology of Herzog (1944) and move towards more generalizable findings by surveying either podcast listeners in general or true crime podcast listeners specifically. As a qualitative study, the findings are based on my interpretation of the data and my position as the research instrument. Findings could lead to future, quantitative studies of the podcast audience.

What became clear to me throughout this project is that true crime podcasts are more than just a popular genre expanding across emerging media forms. As one of my participants, Ginny, said, “This isn’t just a piece of entertainment.” I am not suggesting that the hosts and producers of true crime podcasts are creating these products purely for altruistic reasons to inspire social change, nor are they simply pursuing capitalistic goals of growing subscribers. Rather, my research shows that the domestic violence survivors who make up a portion of the true crime podcast audience are collaborating with producers and hosts in tangible ways to reshape the narratives surrounding women and violence, educate other listeners about the systemic roots of these problems, and drive reform of the criminal justice system. In the process, the domestic violence survivors who listen to true crime podcasts are able to use these media forms to create mediated communicates with other listeners who share common lived experiences, in part relying on these stories and one another to help process their own traumas. The survivors I interviewed spoke of a world in which their voices are silenced, and their experiences are marginalized, even shamed, both in media narratives as well as in their daily lives. These

sentiments are reinforced by a long line of media scholarship that has demonstrated how domestic violence crimes are portrayed as rare, non-deadly, and attached to demographics or socioeconomic status, often centering blame on victims themselves (Bullock, 2008; Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Clark, 2016). However, with the work of women audiences who challenge these myths and the media producers who push for justice reform, these problematic narratives may be shifting. As one survivor and true crime fan, Robin, put it, “I’m a feminist. And to me feminism is...about believing that we should live in a world where women aren’t disproportionately attacked, murdered, and raped...And I think podcasts tell the story and it really makes you aware.” As true crime producers and their largely female fan base are leading that charge, it may pave the way for other media outlets and audiences to follow suit.

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APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE

Q1: What is your age?

- Under 18 years old
- 18-34 years old
- 35-54 years old
- 55 years or older
- Prefer not to answer

IF under 18, stop survey and thank them for participation.

Q2: On average, how many hours do you spend listening to podcasts each week (all types of podcasts, not just true crime)?

- Less than 1 hour
- 1 hour to less than 3 hours
- 3 hours to less than 5 hours
- 5 hours to less than 10 hours
- 10 hours or more

Q3: On average, how many hours do you spend listening to TRUE CRIME podcasts each week?

- Less than 1 hour
- 1 hour to less than 3 hours
- 3 hours to less than 5 hours
- 5 hours to less than 10 hours
- 10 hours or more

Q4: How often do you listen to podcasts?

- One day per week
- A few days per week
- Monday thru Friday
- Every day

Q5: How often do you listen to TRUE CRIME podcasts?

- One day per week
- A few days per week
- Monday thru Friday
- Every day

Q6: What is the name of your favorite TRUE CRIME podcast?

Open-ended question

Q7: How long have you been listening to podcasts?

- Less than 6 months
- 6 months to less than 1 year
- 1 year to less than 3 years
- 3 years to less than 5 years
- 5 years or more
- Not sure

Q8: When did you begin listening to TRUE CRIME podcasts?

- Less than 6 months ago
- 6 months to less than 1 year ago
- 1 year to less than 3 years ago
- 3 years to less than 5 years ago
- 5 years ago or more
- Not sure

Q9: How do you most often discover new podcasts?

- Friends/family
- Online search (Google, iTunes, etc)
- Advertisements/promotional spots on the podcasts I currently listen to
- News articles (stories in newspapers, magazines or online that mention a podcast by name)
- Other _____ (Open-Ended Response)
- Not sure

Q10: How many different true crime podcasts do you listen to in a week?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10
- More than 10
- Not sure

Q11: What other TRUE CRIME media do you enjoy? (check all that apply)

- Books
- Magazines
- Movies
- Newspapers
- Radio
- TV
- Other _____ (open-ended response)

Q12: What is your FAVORITE media for TRUE CRIME?

- Books
- Magazines
- Movies
- Newspapers
- Podcasts
- Radio
- TV
- Other _____ (open-ended response)
- Not sure

Q13: How often do you discuss TRUE CRIME podcasts with other people (either in person or online)?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often

Q14: How often do you re-listen to TRUE CRIME podcasts that you've already listened to?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes

- Often

Q15: Do you believe that TRUE CRIME podcasts are having an impact on the criminal justice system (as a whole, not a specific case)?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Q16: Do you believe that TRUE CRIME podcasts are having an impact on the specific cases they cover?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Q17: What is your ethnicity?

- White
- Hispanic or Latino
- Black or African American
- Native American or American Indian
- Asian/Pacific Islander
- Other
- Prefer not to answer

Q18: What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed? If currently enrolled, highest degree received.

- High school graduate or less
- Trade/technical/vocational training
- Some college
- College Degree
- Some graduate school or a professional degree
- Graduate Degree
- Prefer not to answer

Q19: Employment status: Are you currently _____?

- Employed full-time
- Employed part-time
- Out of work
- A homemaker
- A student
- Military

- Retired
- Unable to work
- Prefer not to answer

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR PARTICIPANTS

Thank you for agreeing to an interview, I really appreciate it. As I mentioned in my email, I am a doctoral candidate at the University of South Carolina and I'm working on my dissertation regarding true crime podcasts. I'm specifically interested in the female true crime podcast audience, especially those that are survivors of domestic violence. I am not here today to probe into the details of your domestic violence experience, my interview will be entirely focused on your media use (specifically true crime podcasts). I expect our interview to last about an hour, and if we need to stop or reschedule at any time please don't hesitate to let me know. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

As a reminder, I won't use any of your personal information in my dissertation, and pseudonyms will be used in my notes and in the transcription to protect your identity. If you're okay with beginning the interview, I would like to record our conversation for transcription purposes. Is that okay? Great, let's begin. [start recording]

1. Think about your favorite true crime podcast – can you describe why it's your favorite? (ask for specific examples)
2. Describe for me your favorite true crime podcast episode.
3. Tell me about what you think should NEVER be included in a true crime podcast narrative.

4. Tell me about what you think MUST be included in a true crime podcast narrative.
5. Describe your first experience listening to true crime podcasts.
6. What are your top three favorite podcasts (must-listen) and why? (If they aren't all true crime, ask a follow up of top three favorite true crime)
7. Are there any true crime podcasts that you've tried and then decided weren't for you? Why?
8. Why do you listen to true crime podcasts?
9. Describe for me what you are typically doing while listening to true crime podcasts.
10. Describe what makes a true crime podcast "good."
11. When you're listening to a true crime podcast do you find yourself "pulling" for someone? (victim, host, victim's family, wrongly accused defendant) If so, can you describe for me why you think you are "pulling" for that person?
12. There's a theory in research called belief in a just world, and it argues that, in general, we want people to "get what they deserve." So, for example, if someone commits a crime, we believe (in general) that they should be punished. Thinking in terms of that theory, when you're listening to a true crime podcast, how do you view the role of the criminal justice system in the narrative?
13. How closely do you think the true crime podcasts that you listen to resemble real-life scenarios?
14. Describe some things you think you've learned from true crime podcasts.

15. How accurately do you think true crime podcasts depict the criminal justice system?
16. Do you consider yourself a participatory audience member, or just a listener?
Why or why not?
17. Describe how true crime podcasts fit into your vision of society. For example, do they play a role in our culture? If so, how?
18. Do you consume other true crime media? If so, which is your favorite and why?
(If they say podcasts, ask to expand on what makes podcasts unique/special)
19. Is there anything I haven't asked that you feel like we need to discuss in relation to podcasts and true crime?

Thanks again for helping with my dissertation and for your honesty today. I am forever grateful. Do you have any final questions for me? Great, that concludes our interview. If you think of anything you feel like I should know, please don't hesitate to contact me. Thanks! [end recording]

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR PODCASTERS

Thank you for agreeing to an interview, I really appreciate it. As I mentioned in my email, I am a doctoral candidate at the University of South Carolina and I'm working on my dissertation regarding true crime podcasts. I'm specifically interested in the female true crime podcast audience, and several audience members that I have interviewed mentioned your podcast specifically, so I wanted to get your perspective on audience engagement. I expect our interview to last about an hour, and if we need to stop or reschedule at any time please don't hesitate to let me know. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

If you're okay with beginning the interview, I would like to record our conversation for transcription purposes. Is that okay? Great, let's begin. [start recording]

1. Tell me how you got involved in true crime podcasting.
2. When you launched _____ did you have specific objectives for the podcast?
3. Tell me about the role of objectivity in true crime podcasts.
4. Tell me about subjective positions in podcasting.
5. Tell me about the role of advocacy in podcasting.
6. Can you connect the relationship between objectivity and advocacy?
7. Can you explain to me how the podcasting process works regarding what you decide to a) include and b) how to present the information to the public?

8. From your perspective, what are the top concerns with hosting a podcast on true crime?
9. Let's discuss media coverage of the podcast – what have you experienced regarding how other media interact with or report on _____?
10. What have you experienced regarding how the criminal justice system interacts with _____?
11. Describe the impact of the criminal justice system on true crime podcasts and _____ specifically.
12. Do you think _____ and other true crime podcasts are impacting criminal justice reform? If so, how?
13. Do you believe that podcasts and true crime media have the ability to help the wrongly convicted? (use as probes if needed: media coverage, investigative efforts, or just general awareness)
14. What have you experienced regarding how the _____ audience interacts with you as a host and the case in general?
15. How do you feel that a podcast is different than other forms of media in relation to true crime?
16. If I told you that your audience was predominantly female would you be surprised?
17. If I told you that a subset of that audience were domestic abuse survivors listening to your podcast as a form of exposure therapy (to heal from past abuse) what would you think?
18. In an ideal world, what would you see as the future of true crime podcasts?

19. Is there anything I haven't asked that you feel like we need to discuss in relation to podcasts and true crime? Anyone else you think I need to talk to?

Thanks again for helping with my dissertation and for your honesty today. I am forever grateful. Do you have any final questions for me? Great, that concludes our interview. If you think of anything you feel like I should know, please don't hesitate to contact me. Thanks! [end recording]