



Exploring The Impact of Crime-Focused Media on The Female's Fear Level and Perceived Vulnerability to Crime

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Abstract: Crime-focused media content is pervasive in today's society, having a significant impact on people's perceptions of safety and vulnerability. This research analyzes the effects of media consumption on fear of crime and perceived vulnerability among Indian women aged 20 to 50 years. Adopting a quantitative ex post facto correlational design, data were gathered from 150 female respondents residing in major cities of India: Delhi, Noida, Chandigarh, Mumbai, and Bangalore. All respondents reported consuming at least one hour of crime-related media content. Therefore, they were recruited through an online advertisement and, using Google Forms, completed a self-developed questionnaire containing demographic information and media consumption details that included standardized scales such as the Fear of Crime Scale (Ethopia & Bethelot, 2021) and the Perceived Vulnerability to Crime Scale (Truman, 2005). The scope of this research sought to determine how women's emotional responses to crime media exposure, as well as self-assessed personal risks and coping mechanisms, change with the volume and level of exposure. Results were stratified and analyzed to provide a better understanding of age-specific patterns within the framework of the study's objectives. Results are expected to provide further explanation of media impacts on gender, space, and media consumption and their interplay on mediated fear and vulnerability. This research also seeks to provide insights for future interventions to help women maintain realistic perceptions of crime risk despite continuous media exposure, particularly within the unique social and cultural contexts of India.

Keywords: *Crime-Focused Media, Fear Of Crime, Perceived Vulnerability, Media Consumption, Women's Safety, Psychological Impact, Indian Women, True Crime Media, Media Effects, Victimization Perception.*

1. Introduction

Whether in the form of news stories, television shows, documentaries, or social media conversations, media that centres on crime features and focuses on criminal activity has become a staple in daily life. These representations often exaggerate criminal activity and contribute to the construction of a more dangerous, risky world (Champagne-Buckley, 2019; Higgins, 2022). Women, more than men, are deeply affected; both socially and through the media, they have to deal with the notion of heightened fear and vulnerability when compared to men (Snedker, 2012; Schafer, Huebner, & Bynum, 2006).

According to cultivation theory (Gerbner), exposure to crime media and its portrayal of a 'dangerous' world leads people to regard reality as more perilous than it actually is, which in turn overestimates one's risk (Custers & Van den Bulck, 2011; Callanan, 2012). This is even more so when it comes to social media, which provides instant but rather lackadaisical context concerning crime (Kim, 2023). For a majority of women, crime media inflates narratives of ongoing danger and threatens their sense of safety in public and private spaces (Tandogan & Ilhan, 2016; Stanko, 1993). The ideas of fear and vulnerability stem explain a more symbolic process, one built by representations constructed through media (Jackson, 2009; Keel et al., 2024; Stewart, Smadis, & Forth, 2022). The escalation in the impression true crime media have brought to psychological domains is related to the very genre that captures the public's attention. Following crime stories frequently is linked to an increase in vigilance as well as defensive actions such as avoidance of certain places or changes to routines (Pennicott, 2024; Soto-Sanfiel & Montoya-Bermudez, 2023). Granted, there are moderating factors such as past victimization, emotional strength, and other individual traits (Custers et al., 2017; Perloff, 1983). Females, in comparison, will report anxiety and take precautionary steps more frequently than males (Russo, Roccato, & Vieno, 2013; Normoyle & Lavrakas, 1984). Through understanding the impact of crime-centric media on women, the current study seeks to address issues related to fear, vulnerability, and crime reporting, along with the responsibility of the media in shaping societal perceptions.

Women and Fear of Crime

Women, in many cases, being exposed to violence, are politically marginalized and socially confined. Furthermore, victimization is a control tactic used against them. The

imagery captured in crime media impacts the audience psychologically, leading them to irrationally overestimate the level of risk they face (Pain, 2001; Warr, 2000). Moreover, the media reinforces the socially constructed notion of risk, portraying women as succumbing to violence, intuitive victims (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2015; Dowler, 2003). As a result, the symbolic meanings the media associates with risk outstrip the actual figure of crime, straining women (Greer, 2007; Snedker, 2012).

Women and Perceived Vulnerability

One's estimation of the risk of becoming a victim of crime is referred to as a subjective judgment that is shaped profoundly by media representations. Earlier surveillance (Stroman & Seltzer, 1985) and recent studies (Mastorocco & Minale, 2018) show that the media do inflate risks but disproportionately affect women (Callanan & Teasdale, 2009). Vulnerability goes beyond fear as it impacts mental health, behavior, and decision making (Rader, Cossman, & Porter, 2012). Poorly lit spaces and constant media reinforcement enhance the vulnerability of women in college (Seymour, 2020).

Gender Differences

Gender moderates significantly the exposure to fear and vulnerability. Women are more afraid of certain phenomena than men, and the difference is that women are socialized to worry about things through phrases and messages exposed to them by the media (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2015; Stroman & Seltzer, 1985). There is evidence to support that perceived vulnerability is indeed more influential than real vulnerability for women (Rader, Cossman, & Porter, 2012). Indeed, media perpetuate the tendency of women to interpret certain safe settings as dangerous, which shows the impact of gender socio-cultural identity portrayals within the media and the aftermath on psychological health (Smith, Torstensson, & Johansson, 2001; Van Soomeren, 2013; Cashmore, 2014).

1.1 Purpose

This study aims to explore the psychological effects of crime-related media on Indian women aged 20 to 50. Specifically, the research investigates how crime media exposure affects fear of crime, perceived vulnerability to crime, and attitudes toward crime. Finally, this research will also try to establish some correlations, such as that between fear and media consumption versus perceived vulnerability; desensitization also moderates the impact of media exposure on fear of crime. This research will close the research gap by studying a female population in Indian contexts and making strides toward understanding how media narratives can shape women in terms of psychological well-being and perceptions regarding their safety.

1.2 Hypothesis

H1: If females have a higher consumption of crime-focused media, then their fear of crime would be higher compared to those who have lower consumption.

H2: If females have a higher consumption of crime-focused media, then their perceived vulnerability toward crime would be higher compared to those who have lower consumption.

H3: If females show persistent fear of crime happening to them, then they would have a higher level of perceived vulnerability to crime occurring to them.

2. Review of Literature

The body of literature on fear of crime differentiates victims on gender lines, with women reporting a greater fear of victimization than men. Their health status, perceived vulnerability, and demographic variables significantly mediate this type of fear. Schafer, Huebner, and Bynum's work (2006) found that women's neighbourhood perceptions conflicted with localized fears. Cossman and Rader (2011) suggest that poor self-reported health is especially linked to an increased fear amongst women. Jackson (2009) and subsequent works emphasized women's low perception of control and self-efficacy, claiming that it mediates the effect of vulnerability far more than objective risk factors do. Tandogan and Ilhan (2016) showed that fear of crime, as a concept, is not gender-neutral. They stated that this fear, especially in women, restricts public participatory activities. Mesch (2000) and Scott (2014) linked specific fears, such as the fear of sexual assault, to crimes against humanity, and Sutton & Farrall (2005) suggested that there is a social desirability bias that makes men under report fear, especially towards the aforementioned threats.

The role of the media in creating and shaping fear, as well as perceptions of crime, violence, and the criminal justice system, cannot be overstated. Malamuth and Check (1981) conducted an experiment that showed that exposure to violence against women in films increases acceptance of interpersonal violence. Intravia et al. (2017) and Dolliver et al. (2018) demonstrated that exposure to crime-related media heightens fear, influences attitudes towards the system, and subsequently changes public perception of the criminal justice system. According to Coston (1995) and Callanan (2015), women and ethnic minorities, in particular, suffer heightened fear due to media coverage, local television, and crime-oriented programs. The work by Custers et al. (2011, 2017) and Kim (2023) also shows that the consumption of media impacts personal coping behaviors and vulnerability perceptions. These effects are culturally specific, given that Soto-Sanfiel & Montoya-Bermudez (2022),

researching Colombia and Singapore, noted different patterns of media consumption in those countries.

The perception of crime is influenced by dominant social stories, perhaps none more so than gendered violence. Stanko (2008) criticized the singular focus of criminology's 'street crime' culture, while Pain (2001) and Snedker (2012) focused on the disproportionate effects of the media on women's fear within cities. Russo et al. (2013) and Perloff (1983) indicated that victimization and residing in high-crime areas increase the perception that crime is prevalent. The amalgamation of literature highlights the intricate relations of media, gender, race, and lived experiences to psychological responses to crime. The effect of crime-related content on our safety has yet to be studied in depth, especially given the ever-growing media consumption. People have studied the effect of the media on the general perception of crime and its information on the public's attitude towards crime in the media (Dowler, 2003), but little is known about the new media habits, such as social media, and smartphones and their impact on perceived vulnerability (Kim, 2023). Though studies suggest that self-protective behaviors are influenced by exposure through television (Custers et al., 2017), there is little understanding of the impact of true crime podcasts and social media on risk perception. Furthermore, gender, age, and social vulnerability factors (Keel et al., 2024) mediate the relationship between media consumption and perception, and pose a risk of victimization and media-led fear. This research seeks to bridge this gap by investigating the impact of crime media on women's mental health in India through the lens of fear, vulnerability, and violence, while acknowledging the interplay of social and personal experiences and responses to these issues.

3. Methodology

The study uses an ex-post facto research design to explore the impact of crime media exposure on fear and vulnerability. It is a correlational, quantitative study focusing on the relationship between media consumption and fear/vulnerability to crime.

3.1 Sample

The sample consists of 150 females aged 20-50 who consume crime-focused media for at least 1 hour per day. For more precise analysis, participants are divided into age groups (20-25, 26-30, 31-35, 36-40, 41-45, and 46-50). The sample is representative of women from cities such as Delhi, Noida, Chandigarh, Mumbai, and Bangalore.

3.2 Tools and Measures

Data was collected through an online Google Forms survey. The survey included:

- **Consent Form:** Informed participants about the study.
- **Demographics:** Collected data on age, education, occupation, marital status, and location.
- **Media Consumption Habits Scale:** Self-prepared questions on media consumption patterns.
- **Fear of Crime Scale** (Ethopia & Bethelot, 2021): A 10-item scale measuring fear of crime on a 6-point Likert scale.
- **Perceived Vulnerability to Crime Scale** (Truman, 2005): A 14-item scale on a 0-5 Likert scale assessing perceived likelihood of victimization.

4. Result

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics of the key variables. Mean scores for fear were reported as 3.52 (SD = 0.79), while mean vulnerability scores were 2.59 (SD = 0.67). Participants reported an average of 2.32 media frequencies and 2.46 media hours.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables ($N = 150$)

Variable	Mean	Median	Skewness	Std. Error of Skewness
Fear Score	3.52	3.50	-0.381	0.198
Vulnerability Score	2.59	2.57	0.014	0.198
Media Frequency	2.32	2.00	0.514	0.198
Media Hours	2.46	2.00	0.103	0.198

4.2 Correlational Analysis

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to see the relationships existing between fear, vulnerability, media frequency, and media hours (see Table 2).

- Fear was positively correlated with vulnerability ($r = .362$, $p < .001$).
- Media frequency was negatively correlated with fear ($r = -0.178$, $p = 0.030$).
- Media hours were not statistically significantly correlated with fear ($r = 0.120$, $p = 0.142$) or vulnerability ($r = 0.046$, $p = 0.579$).

Table 2: *Pearson Correlations Between Variables*

Variable	Fear Score	Vulnerability Score	Media Frequency	Media Hours
Fear Score	1	.362**	-.178*	.120
Vulnerability Score	.362**	1	-.085	.046
Media Frequency	-.178*	-.085	1	-.501**
Media Hours	.120	.046	-.501**	1

*Note: $p < .05$, $p < .01$.

4.3 Regression Analysis

Predicting Fear

Multiple regressions were run to predict fear from media frequency and media hours. The global model was not significant, $F(2, 147) = 2.501$, $p = 0.085$, $R^2 = 0.033$.

Table 3: *Regression Analysis Predicting Fear*

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
(Constant)	3.692	0.281		13.116	<.001
Media Frequency	-0.108	0.065	-0.157	-1.673	.096
Media Hours	0.030	0.068	0.042	0.446	.656

Predicting Vulnerability

Likewise, the model predicting vulnerability from media frequency and media hours was non-significant, $F(2, 147) = 0.532$, $p = 0.589$, $R^2 = 0.007$.

Table 4: *Regression Analysis Predicting Vulnerability*

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
(Constant)	2.700	0.247		10.942	<.001
Media Frequency	-0.049	0.057	-0.083	-0.869	.386
Media Hours	0.003	0.059	0.004	0.045	.964

Mediation Analysis

Mediation analysis was run using PROCESS (Model 4) to test if fear mediated the relationship between media frequency and vulnerability, run separately for media hours and vulnerability.

Mediation of Media Frequency on Vulnerability via Fear

- **Direct Effect:** Media frequency had no significant direct effect on vulnerability ($B = -0.0125$, $p = 0.789$).
- **Indirect Effect:** The indirect effect through fear was significant ($B = -0.0380$, 95% CI $[-0.0895, -0.0021]$), indicating that higher media frequency predicted decreased fear, which then predicted decreased vulnerability.

Mediation of Media Hours on Vulnerability via Fear

- **Direct Effect:** Media hours had no significant direct effect on vulnerability ($B = 0.0013$, $p = 0.979$).
- **Indirect Effect:** The indirect effect through fear was not significant ($B = 0.0272$, 95% CI $[-0.0081, 0.0769]$).

Moderation Analysis

Moderation analysis (PROCESS Model 1) was implemented to test whether attitude toward crime moderated the interaction between media frequency and fear.

- There was no significant interaction between media frequency and attitude ($B = -0.2183$, $p = 0.453$).
- Thus, attitude did not significantly moderate the relationship between media frequency and fear.
- Overall model $R^2 = 0.041$, $F(3, 146) = 2.064$, $p = 0.108$.

5. Discussion

This research explored the connections between women's media consumption (both frequency and hours), fear of crime, and perceived vulnerability in a woman. The findings add to the existing body of literature by explaining the role of media in constituting psychological impacts of crime, especially the impacts of media on fear and vulnerability. Confirming previous literature, fear of crime was found to have an elevation in **correlation** with perceived vulnerability (Jackson, 2009; Cossman & Rader, 2011). This supports psychological models that need a greater fear of crime, also allowing the subject to consider themselves more vulnerable to victimization. Importantly, media usage frequency, and not

media time, demonstrated a slight negative relationship with fear of crime. This supports studies conducted by Callanan (2012) and Intravia et al. (2017), who indicated some forms of media exposure can influence fear, but not consistently. Interestingly, media time was found to have no significant correlation with either fear or vulnerability. This is contrary to previous claims that total exposure duration, such as hours spent consuming crime-related media, directly correlates with heightened fear (Dowler, 2003; Custers & Van den Bulck, 2011). One possible reason might be the media type; for example, passive entertainment crime media may not have the same psychological effect as news-focused or sensationalized crime media (Champagne-Buckley, 2019; Higgins, 2022).

The **mediation analysis** showed that fear mediated the link between media frequency and vulnerability, but not in the case of media hours and vulnerability. To be more exact, greater media frequency was associated with higher vulnerability through increased fear of crime. This confirms models put forth by Custers and colleagues (2011, 2017) wherein media exposure shapes perceived personal risk, which in turn influences emotional reactions such as fear and vulnerability. The echoes of the funded mediation effect, whose consequences were analyzed by Dolliver et al. (2018), noted that fear is one of the most important factors that connects media exposure and changes in a person's psychological state and behavior.

The **moderation analysis**, looking at the possible impact of attitude toward crime as a moderating variable, also did not identify any significant interaction effect. In other words, participants' attitudes did not moderate the connection between media frequency and fear. This result seems to contradict the expectation guided by selective exposure and social cognition theory (Greer, 2007; Sutton & Farrall, 2005), which noted that an individual's belief or attitude could magnify or dampen media impacts. The absence of moderation might suggest stability in the intensity of fear across the sample regardless of the profile attitudinal template.

As part of wider studies, some demographic variables such as sex have been known to increase the intensity of fear (Braungart et al., 1980; Schafer et al., 2006; Stanko, 1993). While demographic analysis was not within the scope of this research, it must be noted that complex intersections of social narratives, personal history, and media depiction shape women's fear and sense of vulnerability (Pain, 2001; Snedker, 2012; Little et al., 2005). In essence, these findings suggest that the pattern and not just the amount of media exposure influences something. Even limited but regular viewing of crime genres could activate a crime-related vulnerability schema which embodies elements of a crime 'myth' (Malumuth & Check, 1981; Lindfors, 2024; Soto-Sanfiel & Montoya-Bermúdez, 2023).

6. Conclusion

The study thus indicates a differential role for media in terms of measure frequency rather than duration in women's fear of crime and perception of vulnerability. Fear emerged as a dominant psychological pathway linking media consumption to perceptions of vulnerability. The results strengthen the need for responsible crime reporting and media literacy interventions, hence avoiding unnecessary fear and creating a culture of more balanced comprehension of personal safety risks.

6.1 Limitations and Future Directions

Among the various limitations, this study should mention the first cross-sectional design, which precludes causal inferences. Longitudinal or experimental designs are better suited to determining the temporal sequence between media consumption and fear and vulnerability (Russo et al., 2013). Second, this research has not distinguished types of media, such as true crime documentaries from crime news, which may bring about different effects (Pennicott, 2024; Kim, 2023). Finally, the sample was exclusively female and, to a large extent, confined to a single national-cultural context, able to restrict generalizability (Tandogan & Ilhan, 2016).

Future studies may be directed to specific genres of media and their psychological effects, broaden their scope to include diverse populations, and psychosocial variables such as neighborhood safety and social support (Keel et al., 2024; Mesch, 2000).

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