LUND UNIVERSITY

Department of Sociology

The Ethical Spectacle

A Cultural Criminological Study of Morbid Curiosity Toward Violent Content in Swedish True Crime Podcast Communities

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Master's thesis CCRM21, 30 credits

Spring semester 2026

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Word count: 20501

Abstract

Interest in violence and graphic content is traditionally explained in relation to media effects concerns, desensitization, or individual psychological attraction. This thesis approaches the interest from a different angle, focusing instead on the morbid nature of such curiosity by exploring how engagement with crime narratives is collectively organized within Swedish digital true crime podcast communities. Drawing on cultural criminology, symbolic-boundary theory, subcultural theory, and perspectives on mediated violence, this study examines how true crime consumers collectively organize their engagement with graphic content. Data collected through semi-structured interviews with active members of Swedish true crime podcast communities, complemented by contextual observations, suggest that participants frame engagement as a way to understand crime and reflect on real-life tragedy with empathy and respect toward victims. The findings also introduce a gendered dimension of true crime engagement, as participants frequently relate their consumption to gendered experiences of vulnerability and risk awareness. This thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of modern digital communities by suggesting that morbid curiosity with violent content is best understood as a social, organized cultural practice and not a psychological pathology toward violence and harm.

Keywords: *Cultural Criminology, True crime, Morbid curiosity, Digital Communities, Symbolic Boundaries, Subculture, Mediated Violence, Edgework, Gender, Podcast Communities*

Popular Science Summary

True crime has become one of the most popular forms of entertainment in Sweden in recent years. Podcasts about murder, missing persons and other violent crimes gather thousands of listeners, some of whom create online communities to discuss cases with each other. At the same time, true crime as a genre is often the subject of public criticism, as there is a great deal of skepticism concerning why people decide to engage in the leisurely activity of listening to stories about violence and death. This study aims to explore how podcast listeners themselves understand their interest in true crime but with a focus on interactions within Swedish true crime podcast communities. The study is based primarily on interviews with eight women who regularly listen to Swedish true crime podcasts and identify as active participants in online true crime communities. To better understand the context in which their community discussions take place, the study also includes observations of online discussions and a live true crime podcast event.

The interview accounts suggest that participants hardly ever considered their interest a fascination with violence itself. In most cases, participants described being interested in understanding the reasons behind crimes, the process of investigation and the experiences of victims and their relatives. Interest motivated by curiosity and a desire to learn and empathize was considered acceptable, while individuals interested in true crime due to shock value or entertainment purposes were regarded unfavorably. Moreover, conversations between other true crime podcast listeners are important in shaping these interpretations, as community members share their opinions, discuss ethical aspects and try to understand cases together. There is also a specific gendered perspective in that engaging with true crime can be seen as a matter of female vulnerability and learning how to recognize potentially dangerous situations.

The findings suggest that interest in graphic content is not simply an attraction to violence and harm but a socially organized interest defined by shared norms, discussions and interpretations. To understand true crime audiences, you need to look beyond individual motivations and focus on the communities in which engagement is made meaningful.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to everyone who made the completion of this research project possible. First and foremost, thank you to all the participants of this study for welcoming me into your community and for volunteering to discuss a topic that often faces public criticism. This thesis would not have been possible had you not spent time sharing your experiences and reflections with me.

Secondly, I want to thank my supervisor, Cecilia Nordquist, for her encouragement and constructive feedback throughout this research project. I could not have finalized this thesis without her help. I also want to extend my appreciation for the Cultural Criminology program and its excellent program coordinator, Erik Hannerz. Your passion and dedication to cultural criminology have always been inspiring to me. I could not imagine anyone better fitted for the position as the program's coordinator.

And finally, thank you to my parents for everything you have done for me. You left behind your home and the life you knew to escape poverty and war, all so I could have a better chance at a brighter future. This thesis marks the end of my Master's program and perhaps, in terms of my academic path, the most important chapter yet. This opportunity is not a given, and I will never take it for granted. I truly believe that the chance to conduct and write a master's thesis is a privilege that many others could only dream of. I was given this privilege by my parents, and for that, I am deeply and eternally grateful. I hope that you are proud.

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Introduction

I. Background

With the development of technology, scrolling on a digital screen has become part of the everyday routine. People carry their phones with them throughout the day and pick them up while commuting, eating or waiting, often without a specific goal in mind. Previously, close encounters with violence and suffering were more limited to specific institutional or mediated contexts, such as courtrooms, newspapers or television news broadcasts. However, with increased accessibility to the internet, descriptions and images of violence, harm and death appear alongside advertisements, recipes and entertainment within the same digital spaces. What is interesting here is not why such material is accessible online, but rather how one is expected to encounter it. At what point are we expected to look away and refuse to engage, and can *morbid curiosity* make it acceptable to linger? This question is also one of symbolic order, moral classification and social expectation (Douglas, 2002; Becker, 1963).

Morbid curiosity, referring to an unconventional interest in disturbing or harmful phenomena such as death and violence (Oosterwijk, 2017), helps explain why people willingly engage with material that we are often expected to avoid. Traditionally, bodily harm and suffering have been framed as experiences to be condemned. Pain, for example, has often been considered something that needs privacy or institutional intervention rather than being released to the public eye (Scarry, 1985: 3-6). In late modern media culture, this privacy has increasingly been replaced by repeated mediated encounters with public suffering (Seltzer, 2008), appearing in everyday media consumption. A perfect example of this change is the growing interest in true crime, which has become a popular source of entertainment through books, documentaries, television shows and podcasts (Tang & Zhao, 2023). These sources of true crime often attempt to accurately reconstruct timelines, discuss evidence and emotionally engage with both the victims and perpetrators. In doing so, they encourage the consumers of such media to do the same. True crime is a particularly relevant context for studying morbid curiosity, as the genre consists of repeated engagement with violence and suffering.

In Sweden, true crime podcasts have gained significant mainstream popularity in recent years. This is seen as even major media actors, such as *Sveriges Radio* (Sweden's national public service radio broadcaster), produce crime podcasts that create ongoing engagement through discussions and listener interaction. Podcasts have become so popularized that they often reach large national audiences, resulting in the creation of various digital spaces and member communities among engaged listeners. These private online

spaces allow participants to discuss details of podcast episodes and crime cases with one another. As research suggests, members of a community do not always engage with suffering passively but often collectively discuss and interpret it through interactions within the community (Maloney, 2013). Such research on exposure to graphic content indicates that the consumption of true crime holds a morally complicated cultural position.

The inevitable complexity of the true crime genre has led to much criticism and concern from the public, often centered around the potential harms of repeated exposure to graphic violence to the consumer. The main concern lies in the possible desensitization to violence and distorted understandings of crime and justice (Schmid, 2005; Surette, 2015). Such critique assumes a rather passive consumer who is vulnerable to the corrupting influence of true crime media. From a sociological perspective, however, the concerns reflect the broader moral contexts in which true crime is interpreted. This sociological perspective relies on the fact that public reactions to harm are not only shaped by the physical but also the symbolic meaning of harm (Hier, 2002: 312, 316). Criticism of true crime, in this sense, appears less concerned with crime itself and more with how people engage with representations of violence.

Despite much public critique, recent studies on the true crime genre suggest a more nuanced picture, rejecting the idea of curiosity and consumption as inherently pathological. Instead, scholars suggest that curiosity about violent content is a product of context, motivation and interpretation (Mrug et al., 2015: 2-3; 14-16), meaning that individuals actively engage with the media they consume. As a result, the consumption of true crime holds a morally complicated cultural position. However, while these scholars challenge pathologization, they fail to address the collective and moral aspects of such interest in violent content. What remains unexplored is how engagement with graphic details in true crime media is shaped collectively through shared norms, moral justifications and social interaction within specific cultural contexts.

From an anthropological and cultural criminological perspective, encounters with harm and violence do not come with fixed meanings but should be understood through classification, narratives and collective practices. As famously argued by anthropologist Mary Douglas, danger is not a predetermined property of objects or acts; it is rather a result of social ordering and boundary maintenance (Douglas, 2002: 44-45; Lamont, 1992). From Douglas' perspective, true crime media can be understood as a way of engaging with what is usually expected to be avoided. Naturally, such engagement with violence is not morally neutral, and true crime enthusiasts are often questioned about respect for victims and the

responsibilities of both podcast producers and audiences. This morally complicated nature of the true crime genre raises questions regarding how audiences justify and emotionally manage engagement with disturbing material, particularly within communities where violent narratives are repeatedly discussed and revisited.

It is within the discussions of obsession and critique of the true crime genre that morbid curiosity about true crime must be evaluated. Rather than labeling such curiosity as a deviant impulse (Becker, 1963), this thesis treats it as a socially organized way of understanding harm. The findings presented are based on qualitative interviews with true crime enthusiasts who are active participants in digital podcast communities. These interviews are used to analyze how listeners themselves understand and justify their engagement with harm and violence through everyday discussion online. By focusing on how true crime consumers make sense of their engagement with the graphic details of true crime media, this thesis explores how harm is not only popularized but also potentially holds a deeper meaning within modern digital cultures.

II. Purpose and research question

Previous research shows that fascination with graphic content cannot be explained through individual pathology or media effects alone. Instead, sociological, anthropological and cultural criminological perspectives argue that harm is culturally produced and morally and emotionally regulated. The purpose of this thesis is to expand on these findings by analyzing how morbid curiosity is collectively organized within Swedish digital true crime podcast communities. Sweden provides a relevant context for this study due to the widespread popularity of podcasts and the true crime genre, as seen in how both public service and commercial media actors actively produce true crime content, contributing to the genre's mainstream visibility and audience engagement. This thesis' focus moves from the violent content to the ethical and emotional perspectives of consumers. Through interviews with participants of Swedish true crime communities and complementary observations, this paper aims to explore the consumption of true crime as an active moral practice in digital culture. In order to explore this, the study asks the following question:

> *How is morbid curiosity toward graphic content collectively organized through shared norms, moral justification and interactions within Swedish digital true crime podcast communities?*

III. Disposition

This thesis is categorized into five main parts. The first chapter discusses previous research on topics relevant to the research question, such as violent media, morbid curiosity and collective engagements with harm. It also observes a research gap regarding how engagement with violent content is shaped through shared norms, moral reasoning and social interaction. The second chapter goes into the theoretical framework, presenting symbolic boundary theory, subcultural theory and edgework that will be used to analyze morbid curiosity toward violent content as a socially organized practice. The third chapter describes the study's methodological approach and discusses the ethical and reflexive considerations taken throughout the duration of the study. The fourth chapter presents the analysis, discussing how true crime listeners interpret violent narratives, morally justify their engagement and collectively organize norms, boundaries and emotional responses within their digital Facebook community. The findings present true crime engagement as an active and morally negotiated practice instead of a source of passive consumption merely for entertainment purposes. The final chapter discusses the study's findings and broader contributions, limitations and directions for future research.

Previous Research

Previous research related to the consumption of violent and graphic media has often been discussed through concerns of moral decline and emotional desensitization (Bushman & Huesmann, 2001; Schmid, 2005; Surette, 2015). Public debates reflect similar concerns, as violent media has often been framed through wider themes of moral regulation and social anxiety regarding harmful cultural influence (Cohen, 2011; Hier, 2002). This public representation of violent media is a direct reflection of the cultural beliefs regarding pain and suffering as private matters or to be handled by formal authorities instead of being subjected to the public eye (Scarry, 1985: 3-6). Such perspectives on violent content as a reflection of cultural contexts understand fascination with violence as not inherently deviant but as something to be socially judged through processes of labeling (Becker, 1963), and thus, strong interest in violence risks being seen as morally inappropriate. At the same time, large Swedish media institutions, such as *Sveriges Radio* and *P3 Dokumentär*, produce crime podcasts and build communities around them. These media encourage public engagement with graphic content, which raises questions about when such engagement becomes acceptable and how it is justified in everyday life.

Early research explains these concerns through media effects models. Audiences are treated as passive and vulnerable to influence, while exposure to violence is linked to aggression, fear and desensitization (Bandura et al., 1985; Huesmann et al., 1986). These concerns of desensitization are still reflected in the criticism of violence in popular culture today. Even into the 2000s, with the development of technology, scholars continue to describe exposure to graphic details as dangerous and socially irresponsible (Bushman & Huesmann, 2001; Schmid, 2005; Surette, 2015). According to such scholars, turning harm into entertainment distorts empathy as well as understanding of crime and justice. This argument assumes audiences to be one uniform unit with the exact same passiveness and susceptibility, yet it is rarely studied how the consumers of true crime define and reason with their engagement. In other words, while violence and harm are seen as inherently dangerous to consume, they have yet to be studied from the perspective of meaning through interpretation and justification.

More recent scholarly research takes a different approach. Studies on morbid curiosity suggest that the attraction to violent material should not automatically be associated with deviance or harm. Mrug and colleagues argue that interest in graphic content depends on context, motivation and interpretation instead of a constant quantifiable trait (Mrug et al.

2015: 2-3, 14-16). Suzanne Osterwijk demonstrates that people will seek out unpleasant or disturbing stimuli when the information to be obtained is meaningful or informative (2017). For instance, violent material, particularly that which involves human agency, has a powerful informational value because it can inform us about danger and the taboo.

Despite the progress scholars have made in challenging the traditional pathologized understandings of morbid curiosity, they still tend to explain engagement with violent content through individual motivations or emotional responses (Mrug et al., 2015; Osterwijk; 2017). Less attention has been directed toward how such engagement becomes collectively organized, even though meaning-making is usually understood as collectively produced (Becker, 1963; Ferrell et al., 2008; Sandberg & Ugelvik, 2016). This gap in the previous research is particularly relevant in the case of true crime podcasts, which act as continuous shared engagement through online communities and discussion forums. The meaning-making of graphic media consumption here needs to be explored through personal and collective experiences and interactions. This thesis addresses this gap by exploring how listeners within a Swedish podcast community negotiate and justify their engagement with violent crime narratives through shared norms, moral justification and interaction within digital true crime communities.

The remainder of this previous research chapter is divided into four sections. The first section discusses cultural perspectives on deviance and harm. The second presents perspectives on social classification through symbolic and moral boundaries. The third explores collective engagement and digital communities, while the final section addresses questions of representation and ethics within true crime media.

I. The Culture of Deviance

The collective aspects of deviance have been extensively covered within cultural criminology, as cultural criminologists move away from the effects of violent consumption and focus on the cultural meaning. Instead of questioning why representations of violence could cause harm, they use ethnographic studies, media analysis and interpretive approaches to focus on how such harm is narrated, experienced and morally interpreted (Ferrell et al., 2008: 2-5; Sandberg, 2013). Crime is not understood as simply a breach of law but as a cultural process that is constructed through representation, emotion and symbolic meanings within a specific context. From a cultural criminological perspective, violence and harm are thereby made meaningful through narratives and shared understandings (Sandberg, 2013: 80).

True crime media is an excellent example of this cultural process of deviance, as it comes with proximity to violence through narrative details and descriptions that allow close contact with violence without direct involvement. Podcasts are central in this process, since listening during everyday activities such as commuting or exercise turns exposure to harm into an ordinary practice. This normalization of violent content contributes to this thesis' interest in how such appearances of violence in media are meant to be encountered and justified. Cultural criminology challenges the traditional view that an interest in deviance means moral degradation, focusing instead on how such interest is given meaning within specific social contexts. According to criminologist Mike Presdee, popular culture defines the ways in which to approach transgression and deviance in controlled and moral ways (Presdee, 2000: 4-6). Interest in violence, therefore, should be seen as efforts to test social boundaries, not abandon them (Katz, 1988; Lyng, 1990). In the case of true crime communities, one could consider them spaces to approach taboo material through shared rules and expectations. Harm becomes discussable and open to interpretation through collective norms, which relates to this thesis because it directs the focus toward how true crime listeners might frame their morbid curiosity toward topics that are normally socially condemned.

II. Symbolic Boundaries and Moral Regulation

Anthropologists highlight that harm and danger have no fixed meaning. It should instead be understood as a social classification, which gives it meaning. As famously argued by Mary Douglas, danger is created by the process of ordering, not by the nature of the act or object itself. Dirt, similarly, is simply matter out of place (Douglas, 2002: 44-45). Harm and pain can therefore be understood as a state of symbolic positions that challenge the traditional social order. This symbolic challenging of social order evokes powerful emotions and fascination, which illustrates how engagement with graphic material is rarely unreflective. Similarly to Douglas' discussions on symbolic social order, sociologist Michèle Lamont argued that symbolic boundaries are important elements of moral order, as they separate acceptable practices from those deemed out of line (ibid., 11-13). Lamont's perspective could, for instance, suggest that audiences might have symbolic boundaries that distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable ways of engaging with violent material (Lamont, 1992; Hier, 2002: 312-318). If two individuals consume the same media content, they might be judged differently depending on how they speak about their consumption publicly. For example, a person expressing intellectual interest in historical warfare may be perceived differently from someone expressing enjoyment in engaging with the graphic details of the

event. In the context of this thesis, symbolic boundaries help organize distinctions between forms of morbid curiosity considered legitimate and those perceived as morally questionable. Still, it remains curious how norms of such a morbid nature are organized and justified in the first place.

Sociological research on moral regulation can help us understand these dynamics further. As argued by sociologist Sean Hier, the perception of harm is dependent on moral judgments that maintain social cohesion (Hier, 2002: 312-318). This perspective on harm means that moral concern is not just something that arises because of harm; it is the public interpretation, presentation and reception of harm itself. The public controversy surrounding true crime media often focuses less on the crimes and more on the responses to the violence through outsider labeling (Becker, 1963: 31-33). This form of engagement with violent narratives is often discussed as excessive or ethically questionable (Liu, 2024; Weber, 2024; Gray, 2023).

Socio-legal scholar Steve Greenfield's paper on contemporary true crime media shows the ways in which engagement is increasingly becoming a matter of moral and ethical reflection rather than passive consumption (Greenfield, 2025: 45-47). Through an analysis of the relationship between media portrayals of the criminal justice system**,** true crime consumers were found to take on a more interpretive role akin to detectives or investigators to evaluate evidence and institutional practices, as well as to debate responsibility. True crime consumption, thereby, goes from being a passive consumption for entertainment purposes to a matter of moral positioning (Sandberg, 2013), which supports the view that engagement is active and structured. Instead of denying harm, the audience reframes it to justify participation; instead of subverting moral order, morbid curiosity allows for collective moral negotiation. For better understanding of this, the following section digs deeper into previous research made related to the collective aspect of deviance.

III. Collective Endurance

Cultural criminology offers tools to understand why repeated exposure to graphic content does not necessarily result in withdrawal or avoidance. Katz's phenomenological analysis of transgression focuses on encounters with danger in everyday life that derive emotional intensity through the closeness to conventional moral boundaries (Katz, 1988: 10-12). Such encounters do not require direct involvement. Transgression can also occur through mediated practices of listening, watching and narration.

Katz's perspective on encounters with danger in everyday life through transgression, which might happen even without direct involvement, relates to psychological studies that suggest some consumers use negative content for emotional purposes and threat processing rather than just entertainment alone (Niehoff et al., 2024: 4-5). While the research conducted by Niehoff and colleagues concerned individual experiences, it still suggests a shared practice of emotional endurance that is collectively developed through discussion and repeated exposure (Niehoff et al., 2024; cf. Hochschild, 1979: 560-561). Similar trends can also be seen in other digital subcultures focusing on harm. Patricia Maloney's research on pro-anorexia websites demonstrates how the ritualistic engagement with suffering bodies produces emotional energy and what can be understood as a shared subcultural identity. As the pro-anorexia members develop shared norms, values and ways of interpreting graphic content, the emotional energy that is socially reinforced through interactions allows them to collectively normalize behaviors and interpretations that may be considered deviant outside the community (Maloney, 2013: 106-107, 112). Although the ethical context of a pro-anorexia website differs from true crime communities, both examples show how interactions with harm are normalized through collective framing, norms and representation. The relevance of representation will be further discussed in the following section.

IV. Representation

Studies on true crime also raise questions of representation, as the genre has been criticized for being selective by presenting certain victims, crimes and forms of violence more prominently than others. Durham et al. demonstrate that the true crime genre is heavily dominated by sensational homicide and how this causes a narrow representation of violence (1995: 143-146). These findings show that the true crime genre has a visibility hierarchy in which certain victims and crimes receive greater public attention than others, potentially reflecting broader ideas of the 'ideal victim' within media representation (Christie, 1986). There are cases of harm that are visible, while others are not considered sensational enough to be reported. This type of disproportionate representation increases the ethical conflict tied to morbid curiosity, as the demand for graphic details can risk encouraging sensationalism or exclusion (Surrette, 2015).

Ray Surette's study on media ethics suggests that the constant presentation of sensational cases leads to distorted risk perception and selective empathy. Victims of highly publicized crimes are given depth, while others are made invisible (Surette, 2015: 92-95). Such findings suggest that visibility is less about what is ethically relevant and more about

shock value. This focus on sensationalism and entertainment creates a ripple effect on whose suffering is considered deserving of attention and whose stories are simply forgotten in the public discourse. From this perspective, representation in true crime is ethically irresponsible as the genre favors stories that are shocking. Given these factors, a moral assessment of true crime should consider questions of selection and representation, since choices about which stories are told determine whose suffering triggers public attention and whose experiences are typically left out of the genre.

Discussions regarding representation within the true crime genre are relevant to this thesis because debates surrounding sensationalism, victim visibility and ethical representation play a major role in shaping how the consumers distinguish between legitimate engagement and exploitative fascination with violent content. Questions regarding representation are therefore part of the broader moral framework through which listeners negotiate acceptable forms of curiosity toward violence. Such discussions regarding representation and morality are relevant to the thesis' aim of understanding how morbid curiosity toward graphic content becomes collectively interpreted, justified and morally organized within digital true crime communities.

Theoretical Framework

This thesis combines broader ontological perspectives with more specific conceptual tools. Cultural criminology acts as the study's overarching perspective by approaching crime, violence and deviance as culturally mediated and symbolically constructed phenomena (Ferrell et al., 2015). Adding to this, theories on edgework, classification, subculture and synthetic witnessing are used as conceptual tools to analyze how true crime listeners collectively negotiate morality, identity and mediated encounters with violence; all of which are relevant to unpack how morbid curiosity toward graphic content is collectively interpreted, justified and morally organized within digital true crime communities.

Cultural criminology is useful for this study, as it treats crime and responses to deviance as cultural phenomena by highlighting the symbolic aspects of deviant acts. The focus of cultural criminological perspectives is to understand how people interpret, narrate and experience crime in their daily lives (Ferrell et al., 2015; Sandberg & Ugelvik, 2016), which also draws from traditions that understand deviance through social interpretation, symbolic meaning and situated interaction (Becker, 1963; Katz, 1988). According to Martin O'Brien, rather than treating crime as something that just happens, the cultural criminological approach understands both criminal acts and systems of control as cultural products produced through human meaning-making (2005: 600).

This chapter presents all of the theoretical perspectives that will be used to understand crime podcast engagement as an active cultural practice: edgework theory, theories on classification, subcultural theory and synthetic witnessing. While the theoretical frame is wide, each perspective addresses a different dimension of engagement with violent content. Before I discuss the frame as a whole, I will present each perspective and concept in full. These perspectives, presented in length below, will be used in the analysis of the collected material to broaden our understanding of how morbid curiosity for graphic content is collectively organized through norms, interpretations and justifications within Swedish true crime podcast communities.

I. Edgework

Stephen Lyng introduced the concept of *edgework* to understand voluntary risk-taking behavior. Edgework refers to activities that individuals engage with that separate order from chaos, life from death or control from loss of control. The core of this concept is retaining control while engaging with potential danger (1990: 855-857). Situations involving proximity

to risk and danger generate intense emotional experiences, through which participants report an increased awareness and excitement and feelings of control over dangerous contexts. According to Lyng, the attraction stems from the interaction with the boundary between safety and danger rather than risk alone (1990: 862). Although the concept was first applied to physical risk-taking activities such as rock climbing and other extreme sports, later research expanded the concept toward more symbolic forms of risk and danger through socially taboo subjects (Ferrell et al., 2015). True crime consumption can be a helpful case for contextualizing and understanding symbolic edgework by treating crime narratives as controlled encounters with symbolic danger. Put simply, exposure to narratives of violence and harm may offer a way to approach danger without direct involvement (Katz, 1988; Seltzer, 2008). As has been discussed in the *previous research* chapter, scholars such as Mrug et al. and Osterwijk have also understood violent media engagement similarly by suggesting that attraction to disturbing material is related to meaning-making rather than passive consumption alone (Mrug et al., 2015; Oosterwijk, 2017). Edgework thus provides a way to conceptualize how attraction to such disturbing material may involve forms of symbolic boundary-testing and controlled engagement with danger.

Adding to edgework theory, the study draws on the feminist criminological concept of *lived vulnerability*. Lived vulnerability refers to how exposure to potential violence becomes deeply embedded within everyday social experiences, particularly for women who already face gendered risks in their daily lives (Heidensohn, 1991; Laurendeau, 2008). In this thesis, the concept is used to understand how true crime engagement related to gendered perceptions of safety and threat, which is particularly relevant to exploring how violent crime narratives are emotionally interpreted and morally negotiated within everyday life. The concept further helps explain why engagement with violent media may become framed as a way of interpreting, managing and preparing for perceived vulnerability and danger.

The theory of edgework is a useful framework for conceptualizing the ways in which experiences of danger are mediated through media consumption. At the same time, edgework focuses mainly on individual experiences. It does not fully explain how such engagement becomes socially organized through shared expectations and informal norms. Edgework has also been critiqued for centering masculinized forms of voluntary risk-taking, causing scholars to rethink how mediated, relational and gendered encounters with danger might also constitute edgework (Laurendeau, 2008). Such gendered dimensions of true crime will therefore be discussed in relation to edgework and lived vulnerability (Heidensohn, 1991;

Laurendeau, 2008). To further examine the gendered aspects and how norms develop, this paper turns to an anthropological perspective on classification and danger.

II. Classification and Moral Boundaries

To analyze how communities regulate engagement with violent narratives, this thesis draws on Mary Douglas' anthropological theory of danger and classification. Douglas examines the ways in which societies draw symbolic boundaries by categorizing the acceptable and unacceptable. In her book *Purity and Danger* (1966), she argues that danger is not a property of certain acts or objects, but a result of systems of classification used to organize the social world. In other words, objects or practices are labeled dangerous when they challenge established cultural categories or social order (Douglas, 2002: 44-45). Practices described as "pollution" and "taboo" act as mechanisms for maintaining these social boundaries, as classifications separate what belongs within the social order from what threatens it (Lamont, 1992: 11-13).

Violence holds a complicated position within these classification systems since it represents serious harm, which societies try to prevent and punish (Becker, 1963). At the same time, it often appears within storytelling, media narratives and cultural representation (Ferrell et al., 2008). True crime media is a prime example of this ambivalence, as harm is positioned as something to avoid, yet it also appears in cultural representation. From Douglas' perspective, this process may be understood as reclassification, which directs attention to how boundaries around acceptable engagement are negotiated. Rather than assuming fixed norms, reclassification opens up questions about how distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable forms of curiosity might be constructed. In the context of this thesis, it helps understand how true crime consumers negotiate which forms of engagement with violent narratives are acceptable and which are not. Through consumers' negotiations regarding their true crime consumption, informal norms can begin to take shape. This idea also reflects labeling theory, which understands deviance not as an inherent quality of an act but as a label applied by society, as famously argued in sociologist Howard S. Becker's *Outsiders* (1963). According to Becker, if one is caught being deviant, they will be applied the traits considered improper by the public and thus be regarded and treated accordingly. This labeling of negative traits will also spread as the deviant person becomes regarded as undesirable in other aspects of life (Becker, 1963: 32-33).

Douglas' framework, with the support of Becker's labeling theory, is useful for understanding the ways in which normative boundaries form and how participants organize

their engagement with violent media. Curiosity about crime or graphic media is not inherently deviant or pathological; rather, as will be shown in this thesis, it can illustrate how groups socially categorize and control this curiosity through shared meaning. Whether fascination is labeled as deviant depends less on morbid curiosity itself and more on collective processes of moral labeling and social reaction. In the context of this thesis, these processes of moral classification are also important for the formation of collective identity. By classifying what is acceptable and what is not, communities establish shared norms regarding what kinds of engagement are expected within the group. While Douglas explains how moral boundaries emerge, her framework does not address how they are actively maintained within specific group contexts. Subcultural theory helps address this.

III. Subcultural Theory

Subcultural theory will be used to further explain how such distinctions contribute to collective identity formation within true crime communities. From a subcultural perspective, true crime podcast communities can be defined as digital cultural spaces organized through shared norms, practices and interpretive frameworks. This is what differentiates them from other media users. Subcultural theory describes how subcultures create their *maps of meaning* that organize their social world through their values and symbolic practices (Clarke et al., 1976: 11). Thus, within true crime communities, there are collective discussions, interpretations and evaluations that influence how individuals within these communities think about and approach violence. Although such communities primarily take place in digital environments, many characteristics resemble those associated with subcultures, such as shared vocabulary and informal norms (Becker, 1963). These exchanges can be understood as collective meaning-making practices that organize engagement with crime narratives. Through repeated interaction, shared discussions and collective interpretations of violence, participants may also develop forms of *subcultural identity;* a unique identity that defines one's belonging to a subculture, which is a central component of subcultural theory (Clarke et al., 1976).

Subcultural theory also draws attention to processes of symbolic boundary formation. Clarke et al. argue that subcultures maintain identity through symbolic distinctions separating insiders from outsiders (Clarke et al., 1976: 56). This perspective is also relevant in digital settings where online communities construct collective identities through symbolic distinctions between insiders and outsiders (Andersen, 2023). A similar perspective guides

this paper through explorations of how participants discuss cases, how engagement is justified and how curiosity is negotiated within the community.

Subcultural theory, therefore, provides a framework to analyze how podcast communities organize collective engagement with crime narratives. This perspective redirects the focus from personal media consumption toward the active interaction between community members. Their discussions create social contexts in which interest in and interpretations of crime develop. This focus on the community identity complements the previously presented theoretical perspectives by emphasizing the collective aspect of true crime consumption, which is highly relevant to the present study as members of true crime podcast communities actively participate in shared processes of meaning-making through discussions and interactions with one another.

IV. Synthetic Witnessing and Emotional Responses

Engagement with violent crime narratives is not only shaped by exposure to mediated violence itself but also by the emotional and symbolic meanings that come with such encounters. Therefore, perspectives on mediated witnessing and emotional responses as socially organized are useful to understand how listeners become emotionally invested in violence and harm and how these emotional responses to distant suffering are collectively interpreted and negotiated.

This thesis will draw on Mark Seltzer's work on mediated violence, which addresses synthetic witnessing, wound culture and stranger-intimacy (Seltzer, 2008: 1-18). As people increasingly encounter harm not through direct witnessing but through mediated observation, they become emotionally involved in distant suffering while remaining socially removed from it (Sontag, 2003; Seltzer, 2008: 10-12). Seltzer describes this as *synthetic witnessing*, which refers to audiences becoming emotionally involved in distant suffering while remaining physically removed from the event itself (Seltzer, 2008: 10-12). Adding to this, the concept of *wound culture* refers to the repeated public circulation and attention surrounding representations of trauma, violence and suffering (ibid., 1-3). The concept of *stranger-intimacy* helps further explain how mediated narratives create emotional closeness with people that listeners have never known personally (ibid., 18). Seltzer's framework is useful for this thesis as it helps us understand how listeners' engagement might be shaped by feelings of empathy, attachment and emotional investment toward victims.

However, mediated exposure alone does not fully explain why violent narratives become emotionally engaging. As discussed in the previous research chapter, studies on

morbid curiosity suggest that engagement with violent material depends heavily on interpretation and context (Mrug et al., 2015; Oosterwijk, 2017). Emotional responses to disturbing material are thus also socially organized. Jack Katz argues that emotional intensity is shaped through social meaning-making and often comes from symbolic boundaries between order and disruption (Katz, 1988: 5-12). Finally, Maloney's study on online pro-anorexia communities will be used to understand how collective engagement with distressing material produces shared emotional feelings and reinforces group cohesion (Maloney, 2013: 106-107; cf. Collins, 2004: 93).

These perspectives are important because they reframe mainstream assumptions that attraction toward violent material reflects enjoyment of suffering (Katz, 1988; Whitehead, 2022). By redirecting the attention toward emotional responses as collectively organized rather than purely individual, curiosity toward disturbing content can instead be analyzed as attempts to seek meaning and understand danger.

V. Integration of Theories

The theories discussed in this section address different but related dimensions of engagement with crime narratives as a socially and culturally organized process. However, all of the theories used in this thesis do not serve identical analytical purposes. As mentioned in the start of this chapter, cultural criminology acts as the overarching perspective of the thesis by approaching violence, crime and deviance as a cultural product (Ferrell et al., 2008; Presdee, 2000). This perspective gives us the broader foundation for understanding true crime engagement as socially meaningful rather than an individual psychological interest.

Within the broader cultural criminological framework, theories of symbolic boundaries and classification will be used as central analytical tools. Drawing primarily on Douglas' (2002) perspectives on classification and danger, these concepts are used to further our understanding of how communities construct moral boundaries around acceptable forms of curiosity toward violence. Adding to this, subcultural theory will be used to explore the collective processes through which podcast listeners construct and maintain norms that organize the collective engagement with crime (Clarke et al., 1976; Ferrell et al., 2015; Andersen, 2023). Subcultural theory is used as an analytical tool to explore how participation within true crime communities becomes socially organized through collective interpretations and an identity that distinguishes from the outsider.

Perspectives addressing emotional responses, particularly Seltzer's (2008) work on synthetic witnessing, wound culture and stranger-intimacy, help explain how modern media

creates emotional closeness to distant suffering through repeated exposure to mediated violence. Adding to this, perspectives on emotional responses as collectively organized will be used to explore how disturbing material is socially and collectively negotiated within communities (Katz, 1988; Hier, 2002; Maloney, 2013).

Edgework theory will be used as more of a supporting concept in the analysis. Edgework explores attraction toward narratives through violence, risk and taboo themes (Lyng, 1990; Ferrell et al., 2015). In this paper, edgework is primarily used to understand how individuals approach symbolic boundaries between danger and safety when engaging with true crime media by addressing how mediated encounters with violence involve negotiations of danger, emotional control and symbolic proximity to risk. Additionally, lived vulnerability will be used to understand perceived vulnerability to harm and danger, particularly from a gendered perspective. Lyng's (1990) edgework combined with lived vulnerability becomes especially relevant in this thesis' discussions surrounding fear, preparedness and gendered experiences of lived vulnerability.

Together, these perspectives build this thesis' theoretical framework for examining morbid curiosity toward graphic content becomes collectively interpreted, morally negotiated and emotionally organized within Swedish digital true crime podcast communities. By drawing on perspectives from cultural criminology, edgework theory, theories on classification, subcultural theory and synthetic witnessing, the theoretical framework is used to analyze how curiosity toward disturbing material is shaped, justified and regulated through shared norms, collective meaning-making and distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable forms of engagement. In the following section, these theories will be discussed in relation to the study's empirical material collection.

Methodology

To study how morbid curiosity toward graphic content is collectively organized through shared norms, moral justification and interactions within Swedish digital true crime podcast communities, this thesis uses a qualitative research design. Guided by a research question that focuses on norms, moral reasoning and interaction, a qualitative approach is necessary as it allows for a deeper understanding of how participants interpret and justify engagement with violent material. As previously mentioned, this thesis treats morbid curiosity toward harm as a socially organized practice, which means that meaning is formed through interaction, narratives and shared beliefs. These perspectives view meaning-making as collectively produced and repeatedly negotiated within cultural settings (Ferrell et al., 2008: 2-5). Meaning is treated here as socially produced through situated interaction and collectively shared interpretive worlds (Becker, 1963; Katz, 1988). The following sections of this chapter covers the data collection process of this thesis.

I. Research Design

This thesis uses a qualitative research design with the core focus being semi-structured interviews with listeners of Swedish true crime podcasts. Since the study aims to understand how engagement with violent content is collectively interpreted, morally negotiated and emotionally organized, a qualitative approach is particularly useful to explore participants' reflections and experiences in their own words (Bryman, 2018: 260). As previously discussed, this thesis approaches morbid curiosity toward harm through a cultural criminological lens, by framing the curiosity as a socially organized practice in which meaning is collectively produced through interaction, narratives and shared interpretive frameworks (Ferrell et al., 2008: 2-5; Becker, 1963; Katz, 1988). The empirical focus is on Swedish digital true crime podcast communities, where listeners discuss podcast episodes, criminal cases and ethical questions concerning violence, justice and victims. Eight semi-structured interviews with different true crime consumers are the primary source of this thesis' empirical material.

Although the eight interviews are the core of this thesis, complementary online observations were also conducted to contextualize my interviews. These observations were not treated as independent empirical data for analysis, but rather as contextual material for understanding the social environments in which discussions surrounding violent crime narratives take place (Aull Davies, 2008; Göransson, 2019). The online observations focused

on discussions within Swedish true crime forums where listeners interacted around podcast episodes and criminal cases. These online observations primarily aimed to provide contextual understanding, which in this case was regarding how discussions unfolded, what topics were emphasized and how participants interacted within the community. The approach follows the logic of shadowing rather than full netnography, meaning that the purpose was to gain contextual insight into the field without conducting long-term ethnographic immersion (Hine, 2000: 61).

In addition to the online observations, one live true crime podcast event in Malmö was attended for contextual observation. The event followed the same format as the podcast episodes but took place on stage in front of a live audience. In total, the podcast event lasted for approximately two hours and also included informal social interaction among listeners during short breaks. The event was introduced to me after I presented myself as a researcher in the online true crime group, where several participants recommended attendance. I attended as a listener but observed participants before, during and after the show, in order to learn more about the community and the space that they partake in. Since observation occurred at one event only, the material does not function as a full ethnography. Instead, the observation functioned similarly to my online observations as contextual support for interpreting the interview material and for developing a broader understanding of the community setting surrounding the true crime genre. This approach is relevant as it supports anthropological approaches that highlight immersion in contexts as a means of understanding social practices (Aull Davies, 2008: 77-79).

II. Participant Selection

Data collection took place between March and April of 2026. All participants identified as active listeners of Swedish true crime podcasts and as members of digital podcast communities. The recruitment process followed a self-selection sampling strategy, which is common in qualitative studies focusing on meaning, interpretation and participant experiences rather than statistical representation. In self-selection sampling, participants get to voluntarily choose if they want to participate after being informed about a study (Bryman, 2018: 191-192). Recruitment began through a Swedish true crime Facebook group where listeners discussed podcast episodes and criminal cases. After joining the group, I published a post where I introduced myself and my study, explaining the purpose and asked for volunteers for interviews. In total, six interested participants contacted me through private messages after seeing this recruitment post. This recruitment method shaped the self-selection

sample, as the participants who chose to contact me were already interested in the topic and willing to discuss their engagement with true crime media.

Two of the six participants attended the live true crime podcast event in Malmö, and interviews with them took place in connection to the event. The first interview occurred before the show, and the second occurred after. Given the frequent breaks and casual nature of the event, it also allowed interactions between listeners. These informal conversations during the live podcast event led to contact with two additional participants, who gave me their contact information. The interviews with these two later took place at my home in Malmö, while the remaining participants lived outside Skåne and were interviewed online. The final sample includes eight participants. Four of these interviews were held in person, and the remaining four were conducted through video calls. The interviews did not have a set time limit and ended up varying in length. The shortest interview lasted for 42 minutes and the longest lasted for 72 minutes. The participants' level of engagement within podcast communities also varied; some described being active participants in discussions, while others said they followed the group posts more passively. Although this variation offers different perspectives within the same cultural context, it is still important to note that the sample is rather small and limited to one specific group and that such variations can impact the conclusions.

All participants in the study are women. The sample age ranges between the ages of 21 and 45. The sample consisting of only women was not an active choice on my part; however, it can be discussed regarding both the recruitment process and the composition of the field. Prior to this study, I was under the impression that the true crime genre was widely female-dominated. During my recruitment process, this assumption was validated. After my post in the Facebook group, I received multiple messages from women who wanted to participate but not a single message from a man. I observed a similar pattern while attending the live podcast event, where most attendees were women. Men were present to a much lesser extent and, as I found out through my informants, were often brought only to accompany their female partners who did not want to attend the event on their own. The sample of this study therefore reflects patterns within the field of the true crime genre, but the range is still limited as the female sample does not capture male perspectives.

III. Interview Design

Semi-structured interviews were conducted for data collection. This format allows participants to describe their experiences and interpretations in their own words while

maintaining a general theme across interviews for comparability (Bryman, 2018: 260). Interview accounts can also be understood as narrative constructions through which participants make sense of themselves and present morally meaningful identities (Sandberg & Ugelvik, 2016).

An interview guide was made and followed through all interviews. The questions addressed several themes that directly related to the research question concerning norms, moral justification and interaction. These themes included: 1) level of engagement with true crime podcasts, 2) opinions of and reactions to graphic descriptions of violence, 3) thoughts on acceptable and unacceptable interest in violence and 4) reflections on victims, perpetrators and justice. All interviews were conducted in Swedish. All interviews were audio recorded with signed participant consent. In the analysis, the interviews excerpts have been translated to English. To maintain anonymity, all participants have been assigned fake names.

IV. Data analysis

For the purpose of the empirical analysis, the material was transcribed selectively rather than in full. Since several interviews were relatively extensive, full transcription of all recordings would have been disproportionately time-consuming within the scope of the project. Selective transcription therefore made it possible to focus more closely on analytically relevant material while still managing a larger body of qualitative data (Ahrne & Svensson, 2015: 244). Transcription focused primarily on segments related to the research question, including discussions of moral justifications, emotional responses and justifications surrounding violent content.

The analysis follows a thematic approach, meaning that the empirical material was interpreted through recurring patterns, themes and meaning-making processes identified across the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Rather than strictly following a fully inductive process, the analysis moves between data and theory. The focus is on how participants talk about engagement with graphic content, how they describe appropriate reactions and how they refer to shared norms. While recurring patterns were identified, the theoretical framework helped frame the data, which allowed flexibility in understanding how participants described and made sense of their engagement. Some deductive themes were identified through the theoretical framework from the beginning, including moral justification, symbolic boundaries and acceptable versus unacceptable curiosity toward violence. At the same time, more abductive themes, such as discussions surrounding everyday listening practices and distinctions between different forms of true crime media,

emerged through repeated engagement with the material itself. For the purpose of this study, individual accounts are treated as situated within broader cultural contexts. The aim is not to claim fixed themes but to explore patterns that could indicate collective ways of understanding and organizing engagement.

V. Ethical Considerations & Reflexivity

The study followed the ethical principles outlined by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017), particularly regarding informed consent, confidentiality and participant autonomy. Before each interview, participants received written information regarding the purpose of the study, how the material would be used and their right to withdraw participation at any stage without explanation. Consent was obtained prior to recording the interviews. Additionally, special ethical consideration was required given the study's focus on violent crime narratives and emotionally sensitive material. During the interview process, care was taken not to pressure participants into discussing experiences that they appeared uncomfortable with sharing. Participants were also informed that they could decline to answer specific questions. The investigated true crime podcast community has also not been named in the thesis in order to further protect participant anonymity and reduce the risk of indirect identification. Naming the podcast or associated digital spaces could have increased the possibility of tracing statements back to individual members.

Reflexivity is another important ethical component of research, especially when the researcher has a sense of relatedness to the field (Aull Davies, 2008: 3-5). In this case, I have some familiarity with the cultural context I study, as I am a consumer of true crime media myself. I am, however, not a consumer of true crime podcasts. I mainly watch true crime documentaries, often those where the victims' relatives or the victims themselves participate. My interest lies less in the details of cases and more in the investigative police work and the narratives of those affected. Therefore, this research problem is still of certain unfamiliarity to me. Instead of aiming for objectivity and detachment from the research context, I acknowledge my situated perspective as part of this research process. My experiences of true crime helped in accessing the field and improved trust during interviews, as participants expressed feeling more comfortable speaking about their interest with someone familiar with the genre. Still, I took precautions to avoid uncritical interpretations by maintaining analytical distance from my participants and the data despite being open about my own interest.

My role as a researcher also involved active decisions about fieldwork practice. Two interviews took place in my home, which was a setting I chose to create a private and

comfortable environment where participants could speak openly. It also allowed for clearer audio recordings. This decision of inviting participants into my private space required careful consideration of safety and trust. I had met and talked to both women before, at the live podcast event, and had been in contact with them for several weeks before inviting them. One of these participants was close to my age and also a female student, while the other was a young mother who had shared pictures and details about her family to me prior to the interview. These factors contributed to a sense of familiarity and safety for me as a researcher. At the same time, this setting may have influenced the interviews. A home environment can create a more informal tone, which may affect how participants present themselves. Interview settings are also interactional spaces where participants engage in self-presentation, impression management and narrative positioning of identity (Goffman, 1959; Sandberg & Ugelvik, 2016). These conditions are considered in the analysis.

My presence as a researcher in the field was never hidden, and full transparency was maintained throughout the research process. A researcher's positionality in their field is rarely fully neutral (Aull Davies, 2008: 21); thus, this reflection aims to strengthen the credibility of this study by being transparent with how the findings were produced rather than presenting them as neutral and unbiased (Bryman, 2018: 186-187).

Constructing Morbid Curiosity

This first empirical chapter examines how the participants interpret and make sense of violent crime narratives in a true crime podcast setting. Rather than treating morbid curiosity toward violence as an individual psychological trait or a spontaneous attraction to disturbing material, the analysis explores how curiosity is socially organized through shared interpretive practices and collectively organized symbolic boundaries (Becker, 1963; Sandberg & Ugelvik, 2016).

The chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section, *Meaningful Violence*, focuses on how listeners assign meaning to violent narratives, how they position their engagement as reflective rather than sensational. The second section, *Reinterpreting Morbid Curiosity*, explores how participants negotiate symbolic boundaries surrounding acceptable and unacceptable curiosity toward violence. By examining these processes, the analysis begins to answer this thesis' research question by showing how morbid curiosity becomes structured through collective meaning-making rather than individual impulse.

I. Meaningful Violence

During all of the eight interviews, true crime consumption was described as active and interpretive rather than a form of passive engagement. This is an important distinction as it suggests that morbid curiosity in graphic media does not come from the exposure to such content alone but from engagement that sees violence as meaningful. Some of my informants explicitly expressed that the violent events are not understood as objective facts but as narratives that invite interpretation and emotional investment. One participant, who will be referred to as Ethel, explained: "*I don't listen to true crime podcasts like I listen to the news. It's more like a story where you're waiting to see how everything connects in the end, to try to make sense of it all.*"

In this quote, Ethel describes her typical podcast listening experience and makes a clear distinction between the activities of listening "*to true crime podcasts"* and listening "*to the news*." By distinguishing true crime podcasts from news broadcasts, she appears to reinterpret her engagement with violence as a process of interpretation and meaning-making. This process of reinterpretation can be understood in the way she claims to "*try to make sense of it all*," in contrast to the more passive consumption of news. Ethel's quote therefore suggests that participants construct violent crime narratives as meaningful experiences rather than merely graphic and factual representations of harm. A similar pattern appeared in several

other interviews. Another participant, Mandy, described true crime podcasts as interesting because, instead of just presenting *what* happened, they go deeper into *why* and *how* it occurred. Mandy's statement further suggests that participants perceive true crime narratives as something that offers explanation, context and understanding to the consumer.

Ethel's emphasis on "*waiting to see how everything connects*" also suggests that engagement unfolds gradually through the podcasts' narrative progression. Violence can thus be understood as something that becomes interpreted through sequences, where everything makes sense once *what* happened, *why* it happened and *how* it happened are connected; as expressed by Ethel, "*it's more like a story*." In this sense, the meaning of violence seems to develop through the unfolding structure of the narrative itself, which aligns with Katz's (1988) argument that emotional experiences emerge through interpretation and more symbolic forms of meaning-making through transgression. Similarly to Ethel's and Mandy's expressions of wanting to understand crime events, another participant, whom we will call Lena, stated that the appeal of true crime often comes from "*trying to understand how someone ends up doing something like that*" rather than from the violence itself. These examples suggest that participants approached violent crime stories as narratives that organize causality and moral understanding (Sandberg & Ugelvik, 2016). By drawing attention to the wish to understand, participants appear to position true crime engagement as reflective and meaning-oriented instead of purely sensational. As argued within cultural criminology, crime is often mediated through representations that shape both interpretation and reactions (Ferrell et al., 2008: 3-5). In this context, true crime podcasts seem to do more than just retell violent events, as they structure how violence is interpreted and made meaningful.

Participants repeatedly expressed the immersive aspect of podcasts' narrative structure. As Lena had put it: "*[the podcast hosts] tell it in a way where you kind of feel like you're there and you can see what happened and why."* In this statement, Lena describes why she enjoys listening to true crime through podcast formats. Lena's quote suggests two things: first, that narrative creates proximity, as the podcast listeners experience a sense of closeness with the unfolding events; and second, that the narrative is intelligible, as listeners get an understanding of the causal relations, motivations and outcomes of an event. This feeling of "being there" reflects what Mark Seltzer conceptualizes as synthetic witnessing. In modern media culture, individuals approach trauma not through direct contact, that is, witnessing the event in person, but through mediated representations where they are positioned as observers of distant suffering (Seltzer, 2008: 10-12). This observed way of witnessing harm allows

individuals to engage with violence while remaining physically and socially removed from it. Narratives create immersion (Tannen, 2007: 32), and in this context, such an arrangement allows true crime listeners to experience emotional involvement in violence without exposure to actual risk. Morbid curiosity, from this perspective, appears less oriented toward violence itself and more toward mediated encounters with violence made accessible through narrative form. Importantly, participants also described meaning-making as extending beyond the podcast episode itself. As Julia explained it:

> Julia: "*After finishing listening to episodes, I always think about the cases long after, so now I started to always check the Facebook group to see what others think."*
>
> Interviewer: *"And what's usually brought up in those threads?"*
>
> Julia: *"It's so interesting because people bring up details of the cases and a lot of times, they notice things I didn't even think about, and it makes me rethink the case."*

In this section of her interview, Julia explains a continued engagement where listeners collectively return to cases through discussions. Rather than understanding the podcast episode as complete on its own, Julia's statement, where she alternates between listening and reading discussion threads in the community, suggests that interpretation is not isolated to the individual. Listeners treat their own understanding as partial and sometimes seek alternative perspectives within the collective for socially shaped meanings, reflecting the understanding of transgression, which derives emotional intensity from its proximity to shared boundaries (Katz, 1988). The phrase "*they notice things I didn't even think about*" illustrates the joint nature of meaning-making of violent cases. Participants in the Facebook group work together, each one contributing fragments of interpretation, which are then discussed within the group. Sigrid articulated this dynamic explicitly: "*Sometimes it feels like the episode is just the beginning. The real discussion happens after*." Sigrid's phrasing frames the podcast episode as a starting point rather than a finished product. Meaning is produced through continued discussion, reinterpretation and debate. This collective aspect of engagement is a perfect example of Seltzer's concept of wound culture, in which societies repeatedly gather around representations of violence as shared objects of attention (Seltzer, 2008: 1-3). In this context, those gatherings take shape within smaller digital communities where listeners collectively revisit crime narratives after episodes end. Through these continued discussions, violent

events become repeatedly interpreted and socially negotiated within the community. This is relevant to the research question because it illustrates how morbid curiosity becomes socially organized through shared interpretive practices that make violence meaningful and discussable rather than simply shocking or disturbing.

These interpretive practices are also closely connected to emotional investment in victims and criminal cases. Several participants described developing strong emotional attachments to victims through repeated engagement with the podcast narratives and community discussions. Mandy explained this dynamic in her statement: "*You really start to feel like you know them [...] Not personally, but you know their life and what they went through*." Mandy's account reflects a type of stranger-intimacy, a mediated sense of familiarity with distant others (Seltzer, 2008: 18), which creates personalization of otherwise remote events. The story-telling nature of true crime podcasts plays an important role in emotional investment by presenting victims as people with relationships, histories and lived experiences rather than abstract cases or numbers of a statistic. This personalization triggers emotion as a social moral response through empathy and engagement (Katz, 1988: 6). Participants repeatedly mentioned that victims are not defined only by the crime but also by their individuality. This can be further emphasized as a reflection of the cultural criminological idea that representations of crime are always embedded within broader cultural meanings and emotional investments (Ferrell et al., 2008: 14-16).

At the same time, participants reported an awareness of the mediated nature of this connection. My informants recognized that their knowledge of both criminal cases and the victims is essentially indirect. Participants also described how engagement with violent crime narratives became integrated into ordinary everyday routines, as podcast listening was often described as part of their daily practices. As Julia explains it: "*It's just part of my day. I listen when I walk to the bus or while I'm cooking at home*." Julia's description illustrates how mediated engagement with violence easily becomes incorporated into mundane activities and ordinary routines. This integration into everyday life suggests that morbid curiosity about violence and harm is habitual rather than episodic, which supports the argument that morbid curiosity towards violence acts more as a practice rather than a macabre impulse.

These interview accounts suggest that morbid curiosity in this context is directed less toward graphic violence itself and more toward mediated forms of violence made meaningful through narrative, emotional proximity and collective discussion. Taken together, these patterns of narrative immersion, collective interpretation, emotional attachment and everyday listening practices help explain how violence becomes socially accessible and discussable

within true crime communities. These processes suggest that morbid curiosity toward graphic content is organized through meaning-making practices before it becomes morally justified and collectively maintained within the community. This brings us to the next point, where we will explore how true crime listeners seem to fully reinterpret their curiosity toward violent content.

II. Reinterpreting Morbid Curiosity

When asked about their reasons for listening to true crime podcasts, the participants consistently described their engagement as reflective and purposeful rather than driven by the attraction of violence itself (cf. Whitehead, 2022: 64). This distinction seemed to be very important to them, as it was emphasized across all interviews. It is also a central point to this paper, as it suggests that morbid curiosity toward graphic content is actively constructed and justified through interpretation. According to my interviewees, violence is not consumed as something of enjoyment but as something to understand. One of my participants, Claire, stated: *"I don't listen because I like the violence. That's horrible. These are real victims of real crimes, and I listen because I want to understand how something horrible like that can even happen."* Here, Claire expresses clear distaste toward the possibility of fascination with violence, instead describing her engagement as a wish to understand. Claire's statement can be understood as a symbolic boundary between two forms of engagement (Lamont, 1992; Hier, 2002). Enjoying violence is defined as morally problematic, while understanding violence is presented as legitimate and acceptable. In a way, this distinction allows participants to engage with violent content without seeing themselves as deviant or insensitive, which may challenge their identity.

Mrug and colleagues suggest that emotional responses to violent material vary depending on context and interpretation rather than exposure alone (2015: 2-3, 14-16). This was reflected in the interviews, where the participants did not describe themselves as drawn to violence itself, but instead framed their engagement as driven by a desire for explanation. Their curiosity can therefore be defined as cognitive rather than affective. Claire's phrase "*how something like that can even happen*" suggests a search for causality because, while they are listening to true crime podcasts, the participants also seeem to try to understand the factors that lead to violent acts. This suggests an interest in motives, situational contexts and the sequences of events among the listeners. Violence appears to be positioned as an object of inquiry and understanding rather than an object of curious fascination, which suggests that morbid curiosity does not lie in the shock value of graphic details themselves.

Another point that appeared consistently throughout the interviews was how engagement with true crime had an impact on the participants' perceptions of everyday situations. Lena explained it as follows:

> "*It's scary, but it changes your life in a way. You don't even realize it, but you start to think about things differently. Like what you would do if it happened to you, or what signs you're going to look out for*."

Lena's statement, where hypothetical scenarios are described as ways to prepare herself if subjected to danger, suggests that listeners of true crime podcasts do not always remain outside the narrative as distant observers. They sometimes use the violent narratives as resources for the listeners to understand their social world as they identify patterns and indicators of dangers, thus developing strategies to approach potential threats. Put simply, the listeners appear to imagine themselves within similar situations; they evaluate possible responses and identify warning signs relevant to their own lives. This way of applying the narratives of the podcasts to their own reality supports the argument from previous research that curiosity about negative content has an educational function by helping individuals orient themselves toward potential threats and uncertainty (Oosterwijk, 2017: 2-4). This point will later be revisited and further discussed through gendered perceptions of potential risks (see *II. The Gendered Aspect of True Crime*).

At the same time, all but two of the participants emphasized the importance of control in their true crime engagement, as Millicent said: *"[...] it's in a controlled way. It's like you can just turn it off or skip an episode if it's too much."* The listeners approach what is scary and uncomfortable but are ready to withdraw if they get overwhelmed. This controlled exposure creates a bounded form of exposure where violence is consumed but within limits where it can be controlled. To understand this dynamic of control, we need to use the work of Katz, who argues that emotional intensity is created at the boundary between order and chaos (1988: 10-12). The true crime genre places participants right at this boundary. They are brought close to violence while remaining outside its immediate consequences. This type of controlled confrontation with danger can be further understood as edgework, as the consumer gets close enough to the risk without facing negative consequences (Lyng, 1990). As Claire put it: *"You feel close to it, but you're not really in it."* Claire's phrasing captures the dual position participants repeatedly described. The proximity and distance are constantly coexisting. This balance is important because without a certain degree of proximity,

engagement would lose meaning, yet without a certain distance, true crime consumption would become overwhelming. Morbid curiosity toward graphic content appears organized around this balance between proximity and distance.

Importantly, all eight participants rejected the idea that repeated exposure leads to desensitization to violence (cf. Bandura et al., 1985; Huesmann et al., 1986). One of them, Julia, stated: *"If anything, I feel more for the victims."* Julia's quote challenges the idea within media effects research that suggests that repeated exposure to violence reduces emotional responsiveness. My interview data instead suggest that their engagement reorganizes rather than reduces empathy. Participants develop ways to engage that let them stay emotionally involved while continuing to encounter disturbing material, as repeated exposure seems to normalize the emotional process of engaging with such narratives. Hence, rather than becoming indifferent toward violence, participants described themselves as becoming more capable of emotionally managing violent content while still maintaining empathy toward victims. At the same time, repeated engagement also appeared to reinforce the moral positioning. By expressing their understanding and awareness, the participants redefine their curiosity toward true crime to fit within socially valued forms of knowledge. They present the graphic content they consume as meaningful and see themselves as reflective and responsible rather than passive consumers of the violent media.

The presented interview statements suggest that the morbid curiosity lies in reframing violence as an object of inquiry rather than attraction. Listeners position themselves within narratives and learn the patterns and warning signs, thereby applying these insights into their own lives. The exposure is carefully managed through control, which allows engagement without overwhelming the individual. At the same time, empathy is maintained and even reinforced, which suggests that repeated engagement the participants to better process the graphic material. This further relates to the study's research question by showing how curiosity toward violence becomes cognitively, emotionally and socially organized through practices that give disturbing material meaning, purpose and manageable form. In the following section, I will build on this argument further by discussing the moral justifications of engagement with true crime.

Engagement and Moral Justification

This chapter examines how participants justify and morally negotiate their engagement with violent crime narratives. The first section, *True Crime Consumption as Ethical Practice,* explores how listeners frame the nature of their consumption as socially and ethically meaningful rather than exploitative. The second section, *Shock and Sensationalism*, addresses how participants distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable forms of engagement through discussions surrounding respect and representation. Finally, the chapter's *Classifying (Un)Acceptable Engagement* analyzes how these distinctions are collectively constructed and maintained through symbolic boundaries, shared norms and interaction within the digital podcast community.

I. True Crime Consumption as Ethical Practice

The true crime genre has previously been criticized as ethically irresponsible due to questions of representation and disrespect towards victims (cf. Surette, 2015; Liu, 2024; Weber, 2024; Gray, 2023). All interviewees acknowledged these moral controversies surrounding engagement with true crime. With awareness of the controversies surrounding true crime, they addressed how their engagement was not uncritical, as it occurred through explicit justifications that made their participation legitimate through a form of positioning of identity (Goffman, 1959). These justifications did not come across as just personal reflections but as shared patterns across the interviews. Iris explained:

> *"People think it's weird and disrespectful, but what they don't get is that we obviously don't sit and gloat in the cases. Nothing about these cases is exciting and thrilling. It's more about understanding what happened and honoring and bringing justice to the victims."*

Here, Iris can be seen defending her true crime consumption against public criticism. Iris' statement shows a structured defensive positioning, as she differentiates between other "people" and the collective "we." Her wording, "*people think,*" suggests the awareness that true crime listeners are often judged by others as morally questionable. They are aware that their engagement is perceived as inappropriate and morally questionable to many who do not consume true crime. The statement rejects this external assumption by justifying engagement as an internally shared understanding, focused on retribution by "*honoring and bringing*

justice to the victims," while simultaneously creating a distinction between insiders and outsiders. In this context, the insiders are positioned as those who understand the true nature of true crime engagement, while outsiders are depicted as misinterpreting and wrongly judging it. This aspect of community building will be further discussed in later sections; however, the distinction is still important to address here, to understand how moral justifications are constructed. The distinction between insiders and outsiders allows participants to overlook critique while supporting their own interpretations.

The second part of Iris' statement reframes engagement through moral language explicitly. By highlighting a desire to understand and honor the victims, Iris situates her engagement with true crime within an ethical framework. This means that, according to her, violence is not approached as entertainment but as something that requires critical reflection. This moral framing also appears to work as boundary-making (Lamont, 1992). By defining what their engagement is not, participants indirectly separate themselves from forms of true crime consumption they see as shallow, disrespectful or sensational. In other words, moral justification through distinction also becomes an aspect of the listeners' identity.

Another participant, Claire, expressed a similar point to Iris: *"I obviously think that it's horrible. I think we all do. But that's also why it's so important to talk about it."* What makes Claire's statement interesting is how her emotional reaction toward violence, particularly feelings of discomfort and seriousness, becomes reframed into a sense of moral responsibility (Katz, 1988: 6). By expressing that it is the seriousness of crimes that makes it important, the negative aspects of violence can be understood as a moral justification for attention. According to the participants of this thesis, the engagement with violent media is not excused *despite* its disturbing nature but instead justified *because of it.* For them, the graphic content of true crime cases becomes something that must be confronted, discussed and understood. This moral justification allows the participants to maintain their moral values while engaging with content otherwise perceived as problematic. For these podcast listeners, the seriousness of harm becomes part of what makes engagement feel morally meaningful.

The justifications framing knowledge as a form of responsibility are seen multiple times across interviews. For example, Ethel explained: *"I actually think it's important to know about these things. These are real-life issues that happen all the time. Not acknowledging it won't make it go away."* Here in Ethel's quote, engagement is described as a necessity, as she changes the moral controversies from engagement to avoidance. Later in the interview, she followed with: "*When you think about it, I don't really think it's strange at all. Why are we so scared of facing reality?"* In this quote, avoidance becomes what is

morally questionable; instead of asking why someone chooses to engage with violent content, she turns the question around by implicitly asking why someone would choose *not* to. This perspective, as seen in Ethel's quote, reframes true crime consumption as an ethical practice. According to Ethel, it's the avoidance of such content that becomes questionable because it implies ignorance or denial of real problems. Engagement, by contrast, becomes morally justified due to individual awareness and societal responsibility. This is important to note because it normalizes curiosity toward graphic content within a moral framework that values knowledge and understanding.

Another participant, Sigrid, also shifted the attention from the act of engagement to the perspective of critics through her statement: "*People who don't listen don't even know what true crime really is. They think it's just about the crime details."* This phrase implies that critics lack insight, dismissing their judgments as uninformed while delegitimizing external critique, which protects participants from moral judgment by undermining the credibility of critics. It also strengthens subcultural identity by positioning members as sharing a more accurate understanding of the practice, which others fail to recognize. The repetition of such statements across the interviews thus suggests that moral justification is not only an individual strategy but also a shared framework. Participants use similar forms of moral reasoning, which indicates that the moral justification should also be understood as collectively constructed and maintained. This finding demonstrates how morbid curiosity is actively maintained through collective moral justification. Participants do not ignore the moral implications of their engagement, rather, they define their engagement with violence as ethically and socially meaningful. Yet another layer will be added to this in the following section, raising questions regarding respect and representation.

II. Shock and Sensationalism

Participants appeared not to ignore the moral complications of their engagement with true crime. They did, however, not defend all forms of engagement with true crime. They pointed out that it depends on how the engagement is conducted. Respectful tone, attention to victims instead of perpetrators and a focus on understanding were consistently expressed as necessary for acceptable engagement. Most of my participants implicitly or explicitly rejected engagement that prioritizes shock and sensationalism. Not only that, but they even described discomfort toward the content that they consider overly dramatic or excessively focused on gruesome details. They instead stressed the importance of maintaining focus on victims and their families rather than perpetrators and the acts they had committed. This reinforces the

observation that, for them, engagement was acceptable when labeled as serious and reflective (Becker, 1963). By contrast, sensationalized forms of true crime were described as distasteful or ethically questionable, as expressed by Millicent: "*I don't need all the wild and crazy details […] I'm not here to be all like, wow!"* Similar expressions appeared throughout the material, where participants rejected forms of engagement associated with spectacle or shock value. Another participant, Claire, similarly explained that she avoided podcasts that "*try too hard to make everything dramatic and disturbing*." These accounts taken together suggest that acceptable engagement is closely tied to maintaining emotional seriousness and distance from forms of consumption perceived as exploitative or entertainment-oriented. This perspective suggests that moral justification also depends on adherence to specific norms. In the process of classification, participants did not reject the true crime genre itself but certain ways of presenting and consuming it. The interview accounts of Millicent and Claire, where they express discomfort toward graphic details, relate to broader critiques regarding representation and visibility within true crime media. As discussed in the *previous research* chapter, true crime media often prioritizes shocking and highly publicized cases, shaping selective forms of visibility and empathy while making other victims invisible within public discourse (Surette, 2015: 92-95). Highly publicized victims are often overrepresented in relation to victims who receive little or no visibility. Selection is therefore shaped by the media's ideas of drama and audience appeal.

Participants' rejection of sensationalism can thus partly be understood as an awareness of the dynamics presented by Surette (2015). Although participants did not explicitly discuss media ethics in theoretical terms, many reflected critically on the ways violent stories are presented within podcasts, documentaries and online discussions. Some questioned why certain crimes become popular and well-known while others disappear quickly from public attention. Others criticized creators who appeared more focused on shock value than on the victims themselves, primarily by defining crimes through their graphic details. Julia's quote below gives us a perfect example of this.

> *"I've seen true crime creators, mostly on social media platforms like TikTok, who talk about criminal cases with unnecessary stuff to make it scarier and more shocking. Like, they'll use scary music in the background and start by saying something like, 'this killer did the unthinkable to his victim!' or captions like… the other day I saw a caption saying, 'this killer's victims were in such a horrible state that the officers who*

> *found them went mentally insane!' or something like that [...] and then you go to their page and literally all their videos are like that."*

Statements similar to Julia's were made by many other participants as well. Such reflections suggest that the participants are not just passive consumers of true crime but also actively evaluate the moral aspects of different forms of true crime media. These reflections, like Julia's, further add to previous discussions regarding how moral justification within true crime engagement depends on distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable consumption practices. Participants frequently position themselves against imagined "others," who are fascinated by the perpetrators and the gruesome details of their crimes. In this sense, participants' emphasis on respectful engagement can also be understood as a rejection of forms of true crime consumption perceived as exploitative or ethically irresponsible. This conditional structure will be discussed more thoroughly through boundary work perspectives in the following section; however, it was still worth bringing up here since moral justification and classification coexist within true crime contexts. Justification explains why engagement is acceptable, while classification defines which forms of engagement meet this standard in the first place.

III. Classifying (Un)Acceptable Engagement

My informants did not approach true crime as an unrestricted area of engagement. A distinction between acceptable and unacceptable ways of engaging with violent content was made across all interviews. These were not talked about as personal preferences and will thus not be discussed as such. In this section, these distinctions will instead be regarded as central mechanisms through which morbid curiosity is organized and regulated. The theoretical framework developed by Mary Douglas will be applied to explain this. As famously argued by Douglas, danger does not exist as an objective quality of objects or practices but is created when something disturbs preestablished symbolic categories (2002: 44-45). Within Douglas' framework, violence and harm have unstable positions. In everyday life, violence is treated as harmful, disturbing and outside what belongs in ordinary routines. True crime, however, reintroduces violence into everyday contexts through media consumption, which creates a classificatory problem. How can violence and harm be socially condemned while the popularity of the true crime genre seems to be rising? How does one engage with such disturbing content without becoming morally compromised by it? Violence can here be

understood as "matter out of place," something that must be reorganized to be deemed acceptable (Douglas, 2002).

During interviews, it was made clear that participants actively engaged in this process of reclassification. They never outright rejected violence, but they discussed it as something that can be integrated into their everyday practices by establishing moral boundaries. As seen in this part of my interview with Iris:

> Iris: *"I think people need to understand that there's a big difference between listening to true crime to understand and just watching something because it's crazy and shocking."*

When asked what she meant, she continued:

> Iris: *"Watching something crazy is like… I could just watch a horror movie or go on an amusement ride, you know what I mean? This isn't the same kind of engagement as being attracted to the scary, shocking stuff. It's real stuff [...] if something in a case is truly too shocking and disturbing, then I stop listening."*

What Iris draws in these statements is a clear symbolic boundary. Engagement oriented toward "understanding" is defined as legitimate (as we have previously covered) while engagement driven by shock value alone is considered illegitimate. The distinction is not based on the content itself but on the mode of engagement. This also means that the same violent material can be evaluated differently depending on how it is approached, similarly to how classifications of what is dirty and polluting depend on the context it exists in (Douglas, 2002). As discussed in the first empirical chapter, understanding violence is seen as reflective and meaningful (see *Constructing Morbid Curiosity*). Shock, however, is considered superficial and sensational. The way in which my informants spoke about it implies that this type of violent material is consumed for immediate emotional reactions without deeper interpretation. That is exactly what Douglas helps explain: meaning changes according to context and classification (ibid. 54). By classifying their own engagement, true crime podcast listeners seem to categorize themselves within an acceptable moral category.

This boundary work is also seen in how another participant, Julia, stated: *"If it's too dramatic and extreme, or if it focuses only on the worst details, it just feels wrong to me."* Julia saying that certain true crime media feels wrong to her is significant because it suggests

that classification is not only dependent on explicit rules but also made through shared moral feelings that guide judgment (Hochschild, 1979). Unnecessary dramatization appears as a boundary marker where content that focuses on suspense and shock is seen as illegitimate forms of engagement. Such unacceptable content transforms violence into spectacle in a way deemed "wrong," which suggests community boundaries are maintained through shared moral sensibilities and feelings about what respectful engagement should look like. During my online observations in the virtual space, I found several threads where such discussions regarding respectful true crime engagement were debated.

Both within Facebook group threads and in my interviews, discussions regarding respectful engagement were almost always accompanied by contextualization in relation to the victims. *"To me, it's really important that they talk about who the person was [...] instead of just covering what happened to them,"* said Sigrid when describing what type of true crime content she preferred the most. This can be understood as a way to reclassify violence within a framework that preserves personhood that, without context, risks becoming abstract and dehumanized. Across all interviews, it was argued that victims should not be reduced to shocking events or numbers in a statistic. For the participants, reduction is considered morally wrong because it removes the humane dimensions of the individual. As expressed by Ethel: *"[...] this is a real person with family and friends and a whole life behind them. Can we talk about that first?"* These accounts show listeners reordering violence through personhood. By emphasizing who the person was, victims are presented as individuals with lives, relationships and unique identities. This contextualization restores moral order by placing violence within a meaningful narrative structure. This process of categorizing closely follows Douglas' concept of classification: violence, when presented without context, appears as "matter out of place," something excessive and disturbing, but when it is embedded within narratives that emphasize meaning and personhood, it is reclassified into an acceptable form (Douglas, 2002). This way of reorganizing violence rather than removing it is how participants appear to make violent content acceptable.

Important to note is that these moral classifications are not built alone. The classifications are constantly being produced and reproduced through interactions between members of the community. Several participants described how discussions within the Facebook group shaped their understanding of what constituted appropriate engagement with violent crime narratives. As expressed by Claire: *"We're obviously fully aware that people think it's problematic […] at least we reflect on cases together*." Similarly, Julia described how reading comment threads often made her reconsider her own interpretations of cases (see

quote in *Meaningful Violence*). These interactions between members within the Facebook group can also be understood as moral boundary work. The listeners constantly draw the line between what is acceptable and what is unacceptable engagement through discussions of cases. It can also be understood that these processes protect participants from experiencing external critique regarding morality by demonstrating that engagement is made with ethical reflection. Claire's and Julia's accounts also suggest that the discussions help members maintain a sense of community through the communal moral boundary work. It helps the listeners structure their interpretations, as well as identify what emotional responses are appropriate, by guiding how true crime content should be approached. My online observations within the Facebook group also supported these interview accounts, where discussions frequently included topics of respect, appropriate emotional reactions and criticism toward content perceived as overly sensationalized.

The accounts presented in this section suggest that morbid curiosity is not an unrestricted attraction toward violent content. The podcast listeners do not engage with all forms of violent content but actively choose formats that correspond with their moral framework. This selectivity among participants also challenges simple understandings of morbid curiosity as attraction to violence. Their attraction is instead directed toward specific representations that meet their criteria of what is acceptable, which creates a form of informal regulation. Although there were no formal rules controlling participation, engagement was still shaped through shared expectations produced and maintained through interaction within the community (Hier, 2002: 312-318). Furthermore, the classification process among the group members turns violence into something manageable, as it does not remove the violence itself but reorganizes it within acceptable symbolic categories (Douglas, 2002; Becker, 1963). This suggests that morbid curiosity is not an unstructured response to violent content; it is shaped through ongoing processes of classification and boundary work. Within the community threads, members define expectations on how violence should be approached, interpreted and discussed. These classifications and discussions happen collectively, which leads us into the final part of the analysis: the true crime podcast community as a subculture.

The Community as a Subculture

While previous chapters addressed how participants morally justified and classified their engagement with violent crime narratives, this chapter focuses more specifically on how these shared distinctions create a collective identity within the podcast community. Using subcultural theory, the chapter presents the community as a subculture by discussing themes of how participants construct and maintain a sense of belonging through shared norms, symbolic boundaries and distinctions from other forms of true crime consumption.

I. Subcultural Identity

Other than explaining the moral justifications of engagement with violent crime narratives, the interview accounts discussed in the previous empirical chapters also contribute to a broader sense of collective identity within the podcast community. Several participants described their engagement in ways that suggested a shared sense of subcultural identity based on shared norms, values and interpretive practices. The distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable forms of engagement, as covered in the previous chapter, therefore also act as an identity marker for the members. For example, Ethel stated: *"Yes we consume true crime [...] but we're not like those who watch it literally just for the sake of entertainment,"* which suggests a collective identity marker constructed through separation from "the other" (Goffman, 1959; Becker, 1963). In Ethel's quote, the use of "*we*" and "*those*" establishes a symbolic distinction between different forms of true crime consumption. This is where subcultural theory becomes useful because, as argued by Clarke and colleagues, subcultures create their own interpretive frameworks through shared values, symbolic distinctions and practices that organize how members understand the social world (1976: 11). The true crime podcast community in this study appears to work in a similar way. Ethel's statement defines members of the podcast community as reflective and morally aware listeners while framing other audiences as driven by entertainment value. The distinction works both as moral classification and identity positioning, since acceptable engagement becomes associated with belonging to the community itself. In this context, shared norms of respectful engagement contribute to a collective subcultural identity constructed through distinction from outsiders and other forms of true crime consumption.

This distinction seen in participants' accounts matters because subcultural identity is built as much through rejection of as through sharing of values. Communities define who belongs by defining who does not. Participants repeatedly did this throughout the interviews,

as they positioned themselves against what they described as dramatic, sensational and exploitative forms of true crime media. In the interviews, my informants instead described their engagement as more reflective and focused on understanding and respect. This distinction creates what can be understood as a form of hierarchy of practices within the broader category of true crime. Sigrid also demonstrated this hierarchy with her following statement:

> Sigrid: *"I don't like those crime shows with reenactments. You know, the ones on Netflix?"*
>
> Interviewer: *"How come?"*
>
> Sigrid: *"First of all, they always have horrible acting. Then they always make it super dramatic with a bunch of effects and stuff. It feels like they turn it into a movie."*

Her criticism goes deeper than production quality by creating a separation within the true crime genre itself. In her statement, it is understood that she believes not all content is equally acceptable. Reenactments are criticized by Sigrid because she seems bothered by dramatizing the details of crime for entertainment value. For her, violence becomes uncomfortable when it feels stylized and exaggerated as a spectacle. The way Sigrid states that they turn it into a movie suggests a concern regarding respect among such consumers, while participants of her community value more realistic representations of criminal cases. Millicent made a similar point when discussing the popular Netflix series *Monster*:

> *"I hate that one Jeffrey Dahmer series on Netflix. I don't know, maybe you've seen it, it's really popular. But yeah, big no. It's literally so dramatized and like… Fake, in a way. And I'm not sure if it's true, but I read somewhere that the victims' families weren't even informed of the production. And if that's true, then it's f*cking insane. [...] I don't even know how it became so popular and successful. How can we as a society let this be acceptable?"*

Again, the criticism is moral as much as aesthetic. Seriousness, in this context, becomes a key criteria for legitimacy. Content that is perceived as too stylized or dramatized is believed to downplay the seriousness of real-life tragedy, as it shifts the focus from understanding and

reflection to spectacle. This form of consumption is rejected by the members of the true crime podcast community because it conflicts with the ethical boundaries through which they position their engagement. Furthermore, this distinction between consumers of true crime also suggests that morbid curiosity toward violent content is not a homogeneous phenomenon. Different moral worlds organize curiosity differently through classification (Becker, 1963), and morbid curiosity is structured through shared standards that rank different forms of engagement in almost a hierarchical way. During interviews, it became clear that my informants reject reenactments such as the Jeffrey Dahmer show *Monster* on Netflix; however, they respect certain other forms of true crime content, such as documentaries that do not include reenactments of perpetrators and victims. This process of classification is important because it indicates that the participants of this paper do not approach morbid curiosity across all forms of violent media. They evaluate, select and reject based on their own community's norms and standards. These practices that actively differentiate and evaluate play an important part in the podcast community's identity formation. By rejecting certain forms of content, members position themselves as a particular type of audience that is different from "the others" through their moral awareness. This distinction between insiders and outsiders contributes to a sense of belonging within the community.

The podcast's Facebook group appears central to maintaining this subcultural identity. Iris said during her interview:

> *"In the [Facebook] group, we're very good at holding each other accountable. If someone writes something insensitive, people call it out immediately [...]. A lot of people have been banned from the group because they aren't respectful. I think that's really important to keep the community a safe space for us members."*

Here, Iris expresses that members actively monitor and respond to each other's behavior within the Facebook group. Her emphasis on "*holding each other accountable*" and "*calling out*" insensitive comments suggests that respectful engagement is treated as a shared responsibility within the community. Iris' quote suggests something important: the community is not only a place for discussion but also a context where the norms within the community are actively enforced. The group acts as a regulated environment where certain forms of engagement are acceptable and others are discouraged. If one does not follow these norms, they are not welcome in the group. This also shows a form of symbolic boundary

work. As recognized in Andersen's study on online incel communities, online communities construct and maintain identity through the continuous negotiation of norms (Andersen, 2023). Group identity in online communities is not fixed but constantly reproduced through interaction. In this case, listeners learn what is acceptable by observing what gets praised, what gets challenged and what gets rejected in a symbolic classification process (Becker, 1963; Douglas, 2002). Taking Iris's statement as an example, calling out insensitive comments shows that certain forms of engagement fall outside the unspoken acceptable boundaries while reinforcing the shared values of the community. Members who observe these interactions may internalize the norms and adjust their own behavior accordingly. These regulatory practices can help understand the true crime podcast community as a self-regulating environment, where each interaction continuously reproduces and maintains the subcultural identity. The community norms are never outwardly expressed but are taught through collective practices.

The way in which the podcast listeners differentiate themselves not only from outsiders but also from other true crime audiences also strengthens the subcultural identity. By distinguishing between different types of consumers within the same genre, the sense of belonging to the group is reinforced. For example, rejecting dramatized content demonstrates the community's norms regarding seriousness, realism and respect. Members appear to follow the practices that are recognized as acceptable within their community, which also reinforces the participants' moral justification by distinguishing themselves from "those people" who should be critiqued. If problematic forms of engagement exist elsewhere within the genre, their own engagement appears more legitimate by comparison. This contrast in true crime interest can thereby also be interpreted as a justification for the morbid curiosity among members.

The subcultural identity of the podcast Facebook group distinguishes who belongs to the community and who does not, creating a sense of belonging among participants by establishing shared values. It also creates hierarchies of acceptable engagement that guide the behavior of participants by reinforcing the group's moral norms. The behaviors of members are indirectly regulated through ongoing interactions and feedback within the group, which helps us further understand how morbid curiosity toward violent content is not simply an individual interest but a practice shaped by participation in the community. The interview accounts suggest participants often engage with true crime not as isolated individuals but as members of a group with shared expectations (Clarke et al., 1976; Andersen, 2023). The community identity, norms and boundaries influence how members interpret violence,

evaluate content and react emotionally. This helps explain how morbid curiosity becomes collectively maintained as a form of participation in a community defined by its shared meanings, values and practices, in contrast to others. However, a theme that has yet to be addressed is the gendered dimension of the community, which we will explore further in the following section.

II. The Gendered Aspect of True Crime

One thing repeatedly brought up during the interviews was the gendered aspect of the true crime genre. As discussed in the *participant selection* chapter, this stood out in the recruitment process as well, since all the people who volunteered to participate in the study were women. While gathering information about my field, I had also noticed how the Facebook group appeared largely female-dominated. Such gendered dimensions have been observed before (Heidensohn, 1991; Laurendeau, 2008; Vicary & Fraley, 2010; Bonn, 2023), but the interview accounts in this thesis suggest that gender does more than just describe who listens. Gender also seems to shape *why* participants engage and *what* true crime means to them, which suggests that morbid curiosity toward true crime is also situated within gendered experiences (Laurendeau, 2008). As stated by Lena: *"It makes sense that it's mostly women that like true crime. We're usually the victims in these cases."* Here in Lena's quote, morbid curiosity toward true crime is framed as relevant for women, as they are the ones usually affected. Lena's statement links engagement with true crime to lived vulnerability (Heeidensohn, 1991). These gendered aspects of risk imply that violence is not understood as something hypothetical but as something that disproportionately affects women in specific ways, particularly within domestic and relational contexts (ibid.). Such awareness of vulnerability can be understood as a factor for engagement in my interview data, as they frequently talked about themselves as women in relation to the events.

Mandy's statement "*It's like you learn what to look out for. As a woman, I mean. It just makes you more careful,"* reflects previously covered points on how engagement with true crime affects perceptions of everyday situations, but it adds a gendered layer to it. As implied by Mandy, the gendered vulnerability reframes morbid curiosity as preparation. What this suggests is that true crime narratives are also used as informal knowledge resources for women to learn how to protect themselves against potential harm. Participants use the true crime podcast to extract patterns and warning signs that they should look out for in their own lives. In a way, this means that their engagement with true crime is as oriented toward the future as it is toward the past. The interview accounts reflect Oosterwijk's argument that

engagement with negative content can serve adaptive functions by providing insight into potential threats (Oosterwijk, 2017: 3-5). For several participants in this study, true crime becomes a way for them to manage gendered experiences of vulnerability and uncertainty. They often described how this awareness influences their everyday lives, suggesting that morbid curiosity about crimes also works as risk awareness for gender-based risks (Laurendeau, 2008).

At the same time, my informants acknowledged the complicated emotional aspects of this engagement. Iris stated: *"It's scary because you realize how easily it could happen to yourself, but I guess that's why you want to understand it."* This quote from Iris also shows the balance between fear and curiosity. In the case of true crime, it seems that the recognition of vulnerability does not lead to rejection or avoidance of the genre altogether. Instead, it appears to create a desire for deeper understanding as fear becomes a motivating factor. This nature between fear and curiosity can be understood as edgework. As Lyng defines it, edgework is engagement with the boundary between order and chaos, safety and danger (Lyng, 1990: 855-857). However, traditional uses of edgework focus on voluntary risk-taking activities, often associated with masculinity and thrill-seeking. This has also made the concept criticized for being heavily gender-based (Laurendeau, 2008). The material presented in this paper will therefore offer an alternative form of edgework. Although participants of the true crime podcast community do not seek out and engage with physically risky activities, it can be argued that they approach risk and danger cognitively and emotionally through true crime. Such engagement can be understood as a mediated form of edgework that is less driven by thrill-seeking and more by attempts to understand vulnerability, risk and survival. My interview with Mandy captured this especially well:

> Mandy: *"It's not exciting in a horror movie way to me. It's more uncomfortable but interesting to know about what could happen and how people end up in those situations."*
>
> Interviewer: *"But you do feel like it's uncomfortable to listen to true crime?"*
>
> Mandy: *"Yeah, kind of. I mean, it's horrible stuff. But that's what keeps me engaged because it's like… that could've been me, you know what I mean?"*

This part of Mandy's interview rejects thrill as a sole motivation for true crime engagement. What keeps her engaged is recognition, vulnerability and understanding (Heidensohn, 1991), as she places herself symbolically within the possibility of violence. Although much of the edgework initially presented by Lyng has been criticized as heavily masculine dominated, it should be recognized that it can occur through mediated forms as well. Through an edgework perspective, the mediated risk we see in Mandy's statements can be understood as participants placing themselves at the boundary between safety and danger symbolically, rather than in the traditional physical way. The boundary between order and chaos is approached through exploring dangerous situations, not by entering them, but by interpreting them. This form of engagement with true crime expands on Lyng's (1990) edgework theory by demonstrating that engagement with risk does not require direct participation.

True crime podcasts allow their audiences, which are mostly women, to balance between danger and safety by consuming violent content while maintaining distance. This form of edgework is shaped by what appear to be gendered experiences. For true crime consumers, risk seems to not be experienced as a voluntary challenge to overcome, as many of the examples presented by Lyng. The risk in true crime consumption is more of a structural condition (Heidensohn, 1991; Laurendeau, 2008), where those engaged do not approach danger directly but live with its possibility. True crime consumers often analyze how crime unfolds and consider how it might be avoided, which has been continually demonstrated by my informants across the interviews. This proposes edgework as a thrill-seeking form of risk management shaped by gendered vulnerability. Millicent stated: *"You have to remember that this is a real person's life. It's someone's daughter or friend. It's not just a crazy story,"* which highlights the importance of relational identity. Victims are seen as individuals with their own backgrounds and social networks. These accounts support earlier discussions of classification and moral justification by strengthening moral boundaries and classifying detached engagement as unacceptable. Gender is also a factor in this context, as participants' accounts suggest that women's true crime consumption means confronting fear and risk instead of avoiding it. Other women are more often than not the victims in the reported cases, which creates a symbolic form of edgework for female listeners who recognize the victims as *"someone's daughter,"* like themselves. This adds another dimension by showing how morbid curiosity is shaped by gendered experiences of vulnerability, risk and everyday safety.

However, it is important to highlight that true crime consumption as a way to manage potential risks appears to increase fear and perceptions of risk in a way that influences

listeners' everyday routines. For instance, this increased fear of danger can be seen in the following section of Claire's interview:

> Claire: "*I've listened to true crime podcasts for many years now and honestly, it has affected me. Like in ways I haven't even reflected on until afterwards."*
>
> Interviewer: "*Really? How do you mean? As in, emotionally affected you, or…?"*
>
> Claire: "*No, well, that too [...] but for example, and this is a bit weird, but I used to always sleep naked when I was [during a time in her life] but when I started listening to true crime and I heard about so many cases where people get assaulted at night, then I started wearing clothes to bed in case I needed to like, get up quick and run, I guess?"*

Claire's account here, detailing a shift in personal routines, shows how engagement with true crime could potentially extend beyond emotional reactions and take form within everyday embodied gendered practices (Heidensohn, 1991). What is especially notable in her statement is that the behavioral change takes place in one of the most intimate and private spaces of daily life, during sleep, in her own home. Her decision to start wearing clothes to bed "in case" she needs to escape reflects how an increased awareness of potential risk or violence, through true crime consumption, can shape everyday routines. The possibility of danger becomes integrated into bodily preparedness. In this sense, true crime consumption appears to influence not only how participants think about violence but also how they organize their bodies and behaviors around perceived potential risk (Heidensohn, 1991; Laurendeau, 2008).

While several participants defined their engagement as educational and preventative, accounts like Claire's suggest that repeated exposure to violent narratives also intensifies perceptions of risk. This suggests a potential paradox within participants' engagement. True crime appears to function as a way of managing fear by learning about danger and how to handle it while also increasing fear by making violence feel more urgent and in reach. Mediated engagement with violence could thereby be understood as reducing uncertainty among consumers, but doing so by keeping awareness of threat fear management active in their everyday lives (Oosterwijk, 2017).

Referring back to edgework, this heightened risk or perception of danger further develops the argument that true crime consumption can be understood as a mediated

confrontation with danger. Participants symbolically place themselves at the boundary between safety and violence in order to better understand risk; however, the way in which this appears to produce an increased awareness of danger differs from Lyng's original argument, where edgework often involves thrill, agency and temporary control over danger (Lyng, 1990: 855-857). In the accounts presented here, engagement is instead influenced by gender-based vulnerability and ongoing uncertainty. Participants of this thesis appear to repeatedly confront symbolic danger as a way of making sense of risks they already perceive as part of their reality in a distinctly gendered form of mediated edgework. The edgework proposed in this context understands morbid curiosity toward violent content as preparedness, emotional confrontation and everyday practices of awareness.

III. Collective Emotional Responses

Within the interview data, there were patterns of continued engagement with violent content despite the experience being described as emotionally disturbing. The question that arises from these findings is why repeated exposure to disturbing material does not lead to withdrawal. The answer to this question, according to the participants, has to do with the way in which the emotional responses are socially organized. Engagement with violence in this context appears to be managed collectively through shared practices that organize how emotions are experienced, expressed and maintained over time. Ethel stated the following: "*The content is terrible and it does affect you, obviously. Otherwise you'd be a psychopath. But it's like you learn how to deal with it instead of just shutting off completely*." Her wording is important; she does not describe numbness, she describes learning.

My informants acknowledge the emotional weight of violent content, but it still does not lead to disengagement. The statement that participants "*learn how to deal with it*" implies that there is a learning process where they develop competencies over time. In this case, what listeners appear to develop is emotional competence through their collective engagement (Maloney, 2013). They learn how to sit with discomfort, how to process violent narratives and how to continue engaging without becoming overwhelmed. This appears less like desensitization and more like adaptation. This adaptation challenges previous research suggesting that repeated exposure to violence leads to distorted understandings of crime and desensitization toward violence (cf. Bandura et al., 1985; Huesmann et al., 1986; Bushman and Huesmann, 2001; Schmid, 2005; Surette, 2015). According to my informants, engagement does not minimize emotional reactions but organizes the way emotional responses are processed. Importantly, participants repeatedly described this adaptation as

social. As Lena had put it: "*It helps to talk with other people. Like in the Facebook group. It makes you realize that you're not the only person who feels a certain way*." Lena's quote shows the significance of shared interpretation in participants' emotional experiences. Emotional reactions are not processed individually but are shared, discussed, and validated within the community. Within the Facebook group, people seem to create a collective framework where reactions are normalized. Knowing that other people share certain thoughts and feelings turns emotions that might be too overwhelming into something manageable. In this way, fear, sadness, anger and discomfort are processed together as emotions are structured through the collective. This shared emotional processing demonstrates Katz's argument that emotional experiences are shaped through social interaction and meaning-making processes (Katz, 1988: 5-7). Morbid curiosity, in this sense, is sustained not only by interest in violent narratives but also by participation in communities that help members process what they encounter.

This can also be seen if we, once again, revisit the classification boundaries of the community. Participants seem to constantly negotiate how one should feel about content as they classify what is acceptable and what is not. Other than reinforcing a shared subcultural identity, this process of classifications and emotional regulation may also create a shared emotional style that guides the members' engagement with true crime. Certain reactions are encouraged, while others are discouraged. Across all interviews, detachment or dramatization is rejected, as it is seen as dismissing the seriousness of violence. Such norms regarding seriousness of criminal cases structure how participants relate to the violent content they consume. While it may ensure that engagement is morally justified, it might also make continued engagement possible despite discomfort. Participants seem to not be overwhelmed by violent content because their responses are guided and processed collectively by other members of the community.

The collective processing of feelings, as described by the interview data, can be explained with collective endurance. Endurance of participants in the context of disturbing content appears not to rely on desensitization but on the collective organization of emotions. Emotional involvement becomes possible through its involvement in a social context that gives it meaning and validation. According to Maloney's study on online pro-anorexia communities, shared engagement with distressing material can produce collective emotional energy and reinforce group identity (Maloney, 2013: 106-107). True crime communities work in similar ways, as seen when participants describe how they validate personal reactions by

turning them into shared experiences, which, in turn, allows continued engagement through feelings of community and collective endurance.

> Ethel: "*In the beginning, it was a bit difficult to listen sometimes. It was very heavy and a lot to take in. But now I can take it better. I know it sounds insane but it's not because I care less, but because I understand it better [...] That's why I think it's so good to talk to members in the Facebook group sometimes. Because they understand it too*."
>
> Interviewer: *"Do you mean that people who aren't listeners don't understand it then?"*
>
> Ethel: *"Not in the same way. I mean, I tend to tell my partner [sambo] about cases I listen to […] but he doesn't understand it in the same way, so he can't really comfort me like people in the community can."*

In this part of her interview, Ethel explicitly rejects desensitization and defines her repeated engagement as reorganized through an increased collective understanding. Understanding, in this sense, becomes a form of emotional competence that is learned. Through shared discussion, emotional reactions seem to become normalized socially and therefore easier to cope with (Collins, 2004; Maloney, 2013). The way that participants describe coping with their emotions with the help of the community suggests that prolonged exposure to violence is based on collective endurance and not decreased sensibility to the content. The morbid curiosity continues because there exists a social space where people can discuss and respond to the violence, suggesting that curiosity toward violent content works as a practice that is learned, shaped and maintained through participation (Becker, 1963; Katz, 1988; Maloney, 2013; Sandberg & Ugelvik, 2016). Morbid curiosity can thus be understood as something that is not a temporary and impulsive attraction, but an ongoing practice dependent on shared norms and interpretations.

Concluding Discussion

This thesis has explored how morbid curiosity toward graphic content is collectively organized through shared norms, moral justification and interactions within Swedish digital true crime podcast communities. The findings suggest that morbid curiosity toward violent crime may not best understood as an individual attraction to disturbing material, as it is often labelled by the public (Becker, 1963; Whitehead, 2022: 64). In the Swedish true crime podcast context, morbid curiosity appears as a socially organized cultural practice, shaped through collective interpretative worlds, moral justification and classification, subcultural identity formation and shared emotional processing (Becker, 1963; Ferrell et al., 2008; Sandberg & Ugelvik, 2016). The interview accounts suggest that listeners do not approach violence as spectacle alone, nor as passive entertainment, but as mediated material based on a narrative structure/storytelling, emotional closeness with victims and shared discussions within community spaces (Seltzer, 2008). This supports cultural criminological perspectives that present engagement with violence and harm as socially produced through shared meaning-making, representation and emotional interpretation (Ferrell et al., 2008; Sandberg & Ugelvik, 2016).

Across the interviews, the participants repeatedly described their engagement using reflective and purposeful terms. They framed their true crime consumption as a way to understand violence, recognize warning signs and achieve emotional closeness to the victims by defining them as more than a number on the statistics. Violent narratives were often discussed as objects in need of acknowledging and understanding, rather than something to indulge in for pleasure. Participants also engaged in moral self-presentation by consistently distinguishing themselves from listeners who, according to them, consume true crime for thrills or entertainment purposes. Through repeated use of contrasting words such as “we” and “those,” participants constructed symbolic boundaries separating what they consider to be legitimate curiosity from morally questionable engagement (Becker, 1963). This boundary work is analytically important because it shows how acceptable forms of morbid curiosity are socially classified, morally justified and collectively maintained through shared interpretation and interaction within the community (Lamont, 1992; Hier, 2002).

The findings further suggest true crime communities act as subcultural spaces where members collectively regulate how violence should be interpreted, discussed and emotionally approached. In the context of this thesis, it is through Facebook discussions that members appear to validate one another’s interpretations, reinforce shared norms and reject

unacceptable forms of engagement, often those focusing on sensationalism and dramatization or disrespect toward victims. In this sense, the community works as a moral and emotional interpretive space where curiosity about violence is structured through informal regulation rather than an individual's curious impulse alone. Morbid curiosity is maintained socially through participation in a community with shared expectations, symbolic boundaries and collective interpretive practices (Becker, 1963; Maloney, 2013). This finding supports subcultural perspectives, which argue that communities create their own maps of meaning through symbolic distinction, boundary maintenance and collective identity formation (Clarke et al., 1976; Andersen, 2023).

The findings also reveal an important ambivalence within morbid curiosity toward violent content. Participants often talked about true crime as educational and consumed for awareness. Across all interviews, engagement was described as a way to understand danger, identify warning signs and prepare for potential risks in everyday life. Yet this orientation toward preparedness appears to come with a side effect. Greater awareness may increase caution, but it may also cause an increased perception of threat and fear among listeners. This increased fear was seen in the ways that informants described altering their everyday behaviors after learning more about potential dangers through true crime engagement. Participants also described balancing emotional closeness and distance by remaining close enough to feel empathy for victims while maintaining enough distance to avoid becoming overwhelmed. Thus, morbid curiosity toward violent content appears embedded between understanding and anxiety, empathy and fear, proximity and control. This suggests curiosity toward mediated violence as a complicated phenomenon. It can be understood not as a straightforward fascination with graphic details or simple preparation, but as a socially organized practice shaped by emotional complexities and contradictions.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings suggest a mediated form of edgework defined by gendered experiences of vulnerability rather than thrill-seeking. Unlike Stephen Lyng's original formulation, where individuals voluntarily approach risk for intensity and control (1990), participants of this thesis approach symbolic danger through mediated narratives because violence is understood as a realistic risk tied to women's everyday lives. Their engagement is less oriented toward excitement and more toward understanding vulnerability, anticipating danger and emotionally preparing for possible harm. Through mediated encounters with violence, listeners seem to symbolically place themselves at the boundary between safety and danger while maintaining physical distance from it (Lyng, 1990; Laurendeau 2008; Seltzer, 2008). This finding develops on Lyng's (1990) traditional

edgework theory by exemplifying a way in which engagement with danger takes mediated, interpretive and gendered forms. In this context, true crime engagement appears less oriented toward thrill-seeking and more toward understanding, anticipation and emotional preparedness.

Although the findings presented in this thesis provide insightful perspectives on how participants understand and organize their engagement with true crime, such accounts should not be treated as transparent reflections of private motives. Interview accounts should also be understood as forms of self-presentation, which is influenced by broader moral expectations surrounding interest in violence. As discussed throughout the analysis, participants were highly aware of the stigma attached to consuming violent content, particularly the assumption that true crime consumers are attracted to sensationalism, thrill or graphic details (cf. Whitehead, 2022: 64). Their repeated distinction between "we" and "those" could therefore also have been used as identity management. By framing their own engagement as reflective, respectful and educational, participants create morally legitimate versions of themselves while distancing themselves from socially stigmatized forms of consumption. In this sense, the boundary-making between acceptable and unacceptable engagement may act as a way for true crime podcast listeners to protect themselves from moral judgment. This does not necessarily make the informants' accounts false or insincere. Rather, one should understand how explanations of morbid curiosity are socially shaped and presented through narratives of legitimacy, responsibility and ethical awareness. Morbid curiosity should thereby also be understood as a product of active efforts to define, justify, and morally position one's own attraction to violent content in relation to how such attraction is socially perceived.

The findings of this thesis suggest that morbid curiosity toward violent crime is best understood as a collective cultural practice through which listeners interpret harm, negotiate morality, regulate emotional responses and make sense of potential vulnerability in everyday life. Rather than reflecting a deviant, impulsive fascination with violence, morbid curiosity in this thesis presents as a socially organized way of understanding danger, confronting fear and collectively making violence meaningful within a contemporary context. Taken together, the findings of this thesis answer the research question *how is morbid curiosity toward graphic content collectively organized through shared norms, moral justification and interactions within Swedish digital true crime podcast communities?* by proposing that morbid curiosity toward graphic content is collectively organized through interpretive community, moral classification, collective emotional endurance and gendered mediated edgework.

I. Limitations

Although this thesis contributes with valuable insights into how morbid curiosity toward violent crime is collectively organized within Swedish digital true crime podcast communities, there are limitations that should be acknowledged. Perhaps most importantly, the empirical material is based on a small qualitative sample of eight participants. The purpose of this study was analytical depth through longer interviews rather than statistical width. With the smaller sample, the informants were able to provide richer accounts of how they, as listeners, interpret violence, justify engagement and negotiate moral boundaries. Still, a small sample limits the generalizability of a study's findings into broader contexts (Bryman, 2018). The patterns identified here should therefore be understood as contextually situated rather than representative of all true crime audiences. Adding to this, the sample of eight people consisted entirely of women. While this initially appeared as a limitation in terms of representation, it also became an important analytical strength. Participants repeatedly framed engagement through gendered vulnerability and threat awareness as a mediated form of edgework shaped by gendered risk (Lyng, 1990; Laurendeau; 2008). Although the female perspective proved to be relevant for this thesis' findings, it also means that male perspectives remain unexplored.

Additionally, all participants were active listeners of Swedish true crime podcasts and members of a digital Facebook discussion group. Podcast listening encourages narrative immersion, while the digital community creates spaces for collective interpretation, moral negotiation and emotional processing. These conditions have likely strengthened the forms of shared meaning-making identified in this thesis. Audiences who, for instance, consume true crime through documentaries or books may define their engagement differently. The findings should therefore be interpreted as specific to podcast-based community engagement rather than true crime consumption as a whole.

A final limitation relates to the nature of interview data. As we have already discussed in the previous section, participants consistently framed their engagement in morally reflective terms by emphasizing empathy, understanding, awareness and respect for victims while distancing themselves from forms of engagement described as sensational or thrill-seeking. This repeated distinction between "we" and "those" suggests interview accounts also involve moral self-presentation and identity work (Sandberg, 2013). It should therefore be considered that participants might purposely position themselves against the stigmatized image of the voyeuristic true crime consumer. At the same time, this does not necessarily weaken the findings presented. This moral positioning is itself analytically

meaningful because it reveals how legitimate forms of morbid curiosity are socially constructed, morally justified and collectively maintained within the community.

II. Future Studies

The findings in this thesis introduce several directions for future research on the true crime genre. Primarily, future studies should study digital true crime communities through longer-term ethnographic observation for deeper and more generalizable findings (Aull Davies, 2008: 151-153). While this study combines interviews with more contextual-level observations, deeper and longer ethnographic immersion within discussion groups would give richer insight into how norms are created and reproduced in everyday interactions. Through ethnographic observations, such data could deepen understanding of how moral boundary work operates as an active collective process in practice, rather than relying on retrospective interview accounts.

Since all the informants in this study were female, future research should address the gendered dimensions of morbid curiosity toward true crime more directly. The findings suggest women's engagement with true crime is closely tied to lived vulnerability, risk awareness and emotional preparedness (Heidensohn, 1991; Laurendeau, 2008; Vicary & Fraley, 2010). True crime narratives appear to work as informal resources for perceived danger by adapting to survival strategies. Comparative studies examining male listeners, mixed-gender communities or queer audiences would clarify whether this mediated edgework shaped by vulnerability reflects a specifically gendered dimension of engagement or another pattern in true crime consumption.

Furthermore, future studies could benefit from exploring the emotional ambivalence within morbid curiosity. As has been discussed, participants continuously framed their true crime engagement as educational and reflective, yet their accounts also revealed contradictions. Increased awareness of risks through true crime engagement may encourage preparedness, but it may also increase fear and perceptions of threat. Emotional proximity to victims appears to encourage empathy, but repeated emotional closeness also creates burden and discomfort among consumers. Future research should therefore explore such contradictions, as this would deepen understandings of how mediated violence affects consumers' everyday lives.

Comparative research across media formats would also be valuable as a future research direction, since it could help determine how different modes of true crime engagement might affect the morbid curiosity toward violent content. Participants in this

study repeatedly highlighted seriousness and collective discussion while rejecting dramatized reenactments and other forms of sensationalized crime media. This finding suggests that different true crime media forms might invite different moral perspectives on violence. Comparing podcast communities with consumers of, for instance, dramatizations or documentaries would help to better understand how media form might structure moral classification, emotional proximity and collective interpretation.

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Appendix

Information Letter for Participants

Engagement With Violence in True Crime Podcast Communities

Researcher
Lisa Pham
Lund University
Department of Sociology
[Redacted contact information]

Supervisor
Cecilia Nordquist
Postdoctoral Fellow
Department of Sociology
[Redacted contact information]

Purpose of the study

The study aims to examine how people engage with violence through true crime podcasts and related digital communities in a Swedish context. The focus is on interaction practices, moral justifications and emotional responses.

Why your participation matters

There is no direct personal benefit, but your participation matters as you listen to true crime podcasts or take part in related online discussions. Therefore, your experiences are invaluable and support academic research within sociology and anthropology.

Participation involves:

- One interview, held online or in person.
- Duration around 60 minutes.
- Questions focus on listening habits, discussions and reflections on violent content.
- No obligation to discuss personal experiences of crime or trauma.

Your participation is always voluntary. You decide whether to take part. You can skip questions without giving reasons. You also have the right to withdraw participation at any point before data analysis is finalized.

The interviews will be conducted in Swedish, but the thesis is written in English. Your statements might be presented in the final work through the researcher's own translation.

Recording and data handling

- Audio recording will be used for accurate transcription.
- Transcripts remove names and identifying details.
- Data storage follows GDPR and university data protection routines.
- Material is used for academic purposes only, in thesis work and scholarly publications.

Confidentiality

- Personal data is protected and anonymized.
- Pseudonyms will be used to replace details that could be identifying.

Questions or concerns

If you have any further questions about the study, please contact the researcher. Contact the supervisor with concerns about rights, ethical conduct or participant welfare.

Consent Form

Engagement With Violence in True Crime Podcast Communities

Please read and confirm each statement.

- I have received clear information about the study.
- I understand that my participation is fully voluntary.
- I understand my rights to withdraw.
- I consent to audio recording.
- I understand the anonymized use of interview material in academic work
- I agree to participate in the study.

Date:

Name:

Email address:

Signature:

_____

Researcher
Lisa Pham
Lund University
Department of Sociology
[Redacted contact information]

Supervisor
Cecilia Nordquist
Postdoctoral Fellow
Department of Sociology
[Redacted contact information]

Interview Guide

Engagement With Violence in True Crime Podcast Communities

The original interview guide is written in Swedish. The following is my own translation. This is only a guide for semi-structured interviews; the actual interviews may therefore have deviated somewhat.

Welcome!

- Remind the participant about the study's purpose + their right to skip questions and withdraw their participation at any time.
- Assure confidentiality and anonymity.
- Fill out consent form.
- Do you have any questions regarding the interview procedure?

If you agree to the aforementioned, I will start the audio recording now. Do you agree?

Demographic information

- Age
- Gender identity

Introduction and background

- How did you first become interested in true crime podcasts?
- How often do you listen to true crime podcasts?
- How active are you in the online community?

Engagement with true crime podcasts and the community

- Can you describe your typical listening experience? (e.g., alone, with friends, in specific settings)
- What types of true crime stories or storytelling styles do you prefer? Why?
- What role does the online podcast community play for you and your true crime listening experience? Elaborate!
- Do you ever feel like discussions within the community influence your own interpretations of the genre or specific episodes/cases?
- Have you ever encountered disagreements about engagement with true crime content?

Thoughts on & curiosity toward graphic content

- How would you describe your curiosity toward true crime content?
- What is it that draws you to engage with content involving crime?
- Can you describe a specific episode or case that had a strong impact on you?
    - How and why?
- What purpose do you think graphic descriptions of violence serve in storytelling?
- Have you ever felt overwhelmed after listening?
    - If yes, what did you do?

Opinions on appropriate interest in graphic content

- In your opinion, what makes true crime consumption acceptable?
- Do you think there's a difference between being fascinated by the crime itself and the storytelling around it?
- How important is it to you to respect the victims of the crimes discussed?
    - Can you describe how this influences your listening?
- Do you ever critique the way a podcast presents a crime story?
    - If so, what aspects do you focus on?
- Do you think true crime content creators have a responsibility to limit graphic details?

Reflections on victims, perpetrators and justice

- How do you think about the victims of the crimes discussed in these podcasts?
- How do you perceive the perpetrators of these crimes?
- Do you think true crime podcasts contribute to a better understanding of justice or injustice in society?
- Have you ever changed your views on crime, punishment, or victims after listening to true crime podcasts?

Closing questions

- Is there anything we haven't discussed that you think is important to mention related to your true crime listening experience?
- Would you like to add or clarify anything from our conversation today?
- Do you have any questions for me about the study or its purpose?

Thank you for your participation!