

## Crime Media Exposure and Public Perceptions of Justice: Empathy, Fear, and Punitiveness

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### Abstract

The media is a primary source of public information about crime and justice, yet its portrayals often emphasize violence and sensationalism. This quantitative, cross-sectional study in a Pakistani Adults sample (N = 150) examined how frequency and type of crime-related media exposure (sensationalized news vs. documentary-style true crime) relate to empathy for offenders, fear of crime, and support for punitive versus rehabilitative justice policies. Consistent with cultivation theory, total media consumption positively correlated with punitive attitudes ( $r = .45, p < .001$ ). Sensationalized media exposure negatively predicted empathy ( $\beta = -.35, p < .001$ ) and positively predicted punitiveness ( $\beta = .35, p < .001$ ). Documentary-style media exposure predicted greater empathy ( $r = .33, p < .001$ ) and lower punitiveness ( $\beta = -.19, p = .018$ ). The full regression model explained 42% of variance in punitive attitudes ( $R^2 = .42$ ). Findings indicate that media type moderates cultivation effects, with sensationalized content dehumanizing offenders and documentary narratives fostering rehabilitation support. Media literacy interventions and responsible crime reporting are discussed.

**Keywords:** Crime Media, Empathy, Punitive Attitudes, Fear of Crime, True Crime, Rehabilitation

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## INTRODUCTION

The contemporary media environment is saturated with crime-related narratives, from 24-hour news cycles to true crime documentaries on streaming platforms. However, this prevalence does not produce accurate public knowledge of criminal justice. Instead, media create a "mediated construction of reality" that prioritizes drama and moral simplicity over empirical complexity (Surette, 2021; Greer & Reiner, 2020). The public's understanding of crime is therefore largely second-hand, filtered through the selective gatekeeping and narrative framing of media organizations. This mediated reality is profoundly biased: crime news disproportionately covers violent and interpersonal offenses such as homicide and sexual assault while underreporting more common but less dramatic crimes like white-collar fraud or corporate misconduct (Surette, 2021). This creates a "double distortion"—crime is not only over-reported relative to its actual occurrence, but the *type* of crime reported is systematically unrepresentative of the actual criminal landscape.

The psychological consequences of this skewed representation are best understood through **cultivation theory**, which posits that long-term, cumulative exposure to television and digital media shapes viewers' perceptions of social reality to align with televised portrayals (Gerbner et al., 2002). Heavy consumers of crime-laden media develop what Gerbner termed "**mean world syndrome**" —a psychological state in which the environment is perceived as disproportionately dangerous, violent, and unpredictable (Kort-Butler & Hartshorn, 2022). Such individuals consistently overestimate crime rates, perceive their neighborhoods as less safe, and express greater fear of victimization than light viewers, even when actual crime statistics are controlled (Jackson & Gray, 2019). This cultivated fear is not merely an emotional byproduct but a powerful driver of public opinion that can override statistical evidence of declining crime rates (Dowler, 2003).

Beyond fear, **media framing**—the linguistic and visual choices in crime reporting—profoundly influences emotional responses such as empathy and anger (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Sensationalized frames typically employ a "law and order" narrative that simplifies complex social issues into a binary battle between good and evil. This framing strategically elicits anger and outrage while suppressing empathy and contextual understanding (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Empathy for offenders is particularly vulnerable to this process. Criminals are frequently dehumanized through labels like "monster," "animal," or "predator"—a process that strips individuals of their human qualities and facilitates punitive attitudes by reducing moral concern for the accused (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014). Dehumanization is a well-established psychological mechanism that enables aggression and harsh punishment without the moral discomfort that normally inhibits harming another person (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014). Concurrently, media narratives often construct the "**ideal victim**" —an innocent, blameless, and sympathetic figure—which further polarizes the moral landscape and makes any expression of understanding toward the offender seem like a betrayal of the victim (Chermak, 1995).

The past decade has seen a surge in true crime entertainment on streaming services like Netflix, Hulu, and HBO Max. Unlike traditional crime news, its effects are complex (Fiddler & Costelloe, 2023). While much of it sensationalizes gruesome cases, reinforcing punitive attitudes, a critical documentary-style subgenre—e.g., *Making a Murderer*, *Serial*—exposes justice system flaws such as wrongful convictions, misconduct, and biases. This approach can foster empathy and shift focus from individual evil to systemic failure (Jewkes, 2015). This potential "counter-cultivation effect" (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010) remains understudied, especially outside Western contexts. Research shows heavy crime-media consumption

correlates with support for “tough-on-crime” policies—longer sentences, capital punishment—and reduced backing for rehabilitation (Dowler, 2003; Kort-Butler & Hartshorn, 2022). This fuels “penal populism” (Pratt, 2007): sensational media → public fear → harsh laws → feedback loop eroding rehabilitative ideals. Psychological drivers include perceived threat and belief in a dangerous world (Van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019).

## Rationale of Study

Despite extensive scholarship on media and fear, and separate literatures on dehumanization and penal populism, three significant gaps remain. **First**, few studies have simultaneously compared sensationalized news media and documentary-style true crime within the same quantitative design, measuring their differential associations with empathy and punitiveness. **Second**, the mediating role of empathy between media type and punitive attitudes remains undertheorized and empirically under-tested. Most prior research has focused on fear as the primary outcome, neglecting the specific process of dehumanization (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014). **Third**, the majority of prior research has been conducted in Western, predominantly North American, contexts; there is a need for replication in other cultural settings such as Pakistan, where media consumption patterns and criminal justice attitudes may differ. The present study addresses these gaps by employing a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design with a Pakistani adult sample. Specifically, this research moves beyond the broad concept of “fear” to investigate the specific process of dehumanization and its relationship to media typology. This study addressed the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** How do total crime media consumption and sensationalized media consumption relate to empathy for offenders and punitive attitudes?
- **RQ2:** Does documentary-style media consumption predict greater empathy and support for rehabilitation compared to sensationalized media?

Based on the theoretical frameworks of cultivation theory, framing, dehumanization, and penal populism, the study tested the following hypotheses:

- **H1:** Frequent consumption of crime-related media is positively associated with stronger support for punitive sentencing.
- **H2:** Higher exposure to sensationalized crime content is negatively associated with levels of empathy for offenders.
- **H3:** Exposure to balanced, documentary-style media is associated with higher support for rehabilitative justice measures (i.e., documentary media → higher empathy → lower punitiveness).

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

A quantitative, cross-sectional correlational design was employed. This design was selected to measure the strength and direction of relationships between crime-related media consumption habits (independent variables) and psychological attitudes toward offenders and justice policy (dependent variables) at a single point in time. The design also allowed for the inclusion of political orientation as a covariate in multiple regression analyses to isolate the unique contribution of media variables.

### Participants

A convenience sample of 150 adults was recruited through digital platforms. The sample comprised 102 women (68.0%) and 48 men (32.0%), with a mean age of 32.5 years (SD = 11.2, range = 18–68 years). Participants were recruited via social media platforms (Facebook and WhatsApp) and email distribution lists targeting general adult populations in urban and semi-urban areas of Pakistan.

**Sample size justification.** An a priori power analysis using G\*Power (Faul et al., 2009) indicated that for a multiple regression with four predictors, a medium effect size ( $f^2 = .15$ ),  $\alpha = .05$ , and power = .80, a minimum sample of 85 participants was required. Our sample of 150 exceeds this threshold, providing adequate statistical power.

**Inclusion criteria** required participants to be aged 18 years or older and possess sufficient English literacy to comprehend and complete the survey instruments independently. **Exclusion criteria** included individuals under the age of 18 and those who failed to provide informed consent prior to survey initiation. No compensation was offered for participation

**Instrumentation** Data were collected using a multi-part psychometric survey comprising five instruments, each selected or adapted to capture specific dimensions of media consumption and psychological orientation toward the justice system.

1. **Demographic Questionnaire** A self-constructed demographic section recorded participant characteristics, including age (in years), gender (male, female, or prefer not to say), and highest level of education completed (ranging from "less than high school" to "postgraduate degree"). Additionally, the single-item Political Orientation Scale described above was included in this section. Political orientation was measured as a covariate because ideological background is a known predictor of punitiveness in the literature (Van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019).

2. **Adapted Crime Media Exposure Scale (ACMES)** Exposure to crime-related media was assessed using an adapted version of frequency-based media scales (Dowler, 2003). The ACMES is an 8-item instrument requiring participants to report their consumption habits on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *never*, 5 = *very often*). The scale was divided into two distinct sub-dimensions: **Sensationalistic Media Subscale (4 items)**: Items measured consumption of local TV crime news, cable news analysis programs, tabloid-style true crime shows (e.g., *Live PD*, *Cops*), and social media crime clips with dramatic narration. In this sample, the subscale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .81$ ). **Documentary/Balanced Media Subscale (4 items)**: Items focused on investigative journalism programs, long-form print crime reporting (e.g., *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*), critical true crime documentaries (e.g., *Making a Murderer*, *The Staircase*), and narrative podcasts such as *Serial*. This subscale also showed strong reliability ( $\alpha = .79$ ).

3. **Empathy Toward Offenders Scale (ETOS)** To measure the psychological capacity for compassion toward individuals who have committed crimes, a 10-item scale was utilized. The ETOS assessed two related but distinct dimensions: **affective empathy** (emotional sharing and feeling *for* the offender) and **cognitive empathy** (understanding the offender's perspective and life circumstances). Items were adapted from existing empathy measures (Davis, 1983) and modified specifically for the offender context. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Several items (e.g., "Offenders who commit violent crimes do not deserve any sympathy," "People who break the law have forfeited their right to compassion") were reverse-coded to ensure that higher composite scores consistently represented higher levels of empathy for offenders. The scale achieved a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .82, indicating good internal consistency.

4. **Attitudes Toward Punishment and Rehabilitation Scale (ATPRS)** The final instrument was a 12-item scale designed to measure the participant's philosophical stance on the goals of the criminal justice system. The ATPRS pitted **punitive/retributive attitudes** (the belief that punishment serves as a moral necessity and deterrent) against **rehabilitative attitudes** (the belief that addressing root causes such as poverty,

addiction, and lack of education is the primary goal of justice). Responses were measured on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*), with higher composite scores indicating a stronger preference for punitive measures. This instrument demonstrated the highest reliability in the study ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

5. **Political orientation** was measured as a covariate using a single-item 7-point Likert scale (1 = *very liberal*, 7 = *very conservative*). The sample demonstrated a mean political orientation score of 4.12 (SD = 1.55), indicating a central distribution with a slight lean toward conservative viewpoints. Although single-item measures have known limitations, this approach has been widely used in public opinion research (Van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019).

### Procedure

Prior to data collection, approval was obtained from the competent authority. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the American Psychological Association's Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (APA, 2017). The survey was constructed using Google Forms (Google LLC, Mountain View, CA). The final survey link was distributed via digital platforms, including Facebook, WhatsApp groups, and university email lists, over a four-week period (February–March 2024). Upon clicking the survey link, participants were first presented with a detailed **informed consent form**. Participants were required to select "I have read the above information and agree to participate" to proceed. Participants who selected "I do not agree to participate" were redirected to a thank-you page and exited the survey. After providing informed consent, participants completed the demographic questionnaire first. Then all items within each scale were presented in fixed order, but participants could not return to previous pages once they advanced, reducing missing data due to backtracking and revision. Participants were required to answer all items before proceeding to the next section; this forced-response format resulted in zero missing data across all 150 included cases. Upon completion of the survey, data were automatically exported from Google Forms to a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet (Microsoft Corp., Redmond, WA). The data were then imported into IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28, IBM Corp., Armonk, NY) for statistical cleaning and analysis.

### Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. No identifying information was collected. Participants were accurately informed of the study's purpose. Data are stored on a password-protected computer accessible only to the research team.

### RESULTS

Prior to hypothesis testing, all variables were examined for accuracy of data entry, missing values, and compliance with statistical assumptions. No missing data were present in the final analytic sample ( $N = 150$ ) due to the forced-response format of the online survey. Univariate outliers were assessed using standardized z-scores; no cases exceeded the conventional threshold of  $\pm 3.29$  (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). Skewness and kurtosis values for all continuous variables were within acceptable ranges ( $|\text{skewness}| < 2$ ,  $|\text{kurtosis}| < 7$ ), indicating approximate normality (Curran et al., 1996). Internal consistency reliability was acceptable for all multi-item scales. The Sensationalistic Media subscale ( $\alpha = .81$ ), Documentary Media subscale ( $\alpha = .79$ ), Empathy Toward Offenders Scale ( $\alpha = .82$ ), and Attitudes Toward Punishment and Rehabilitation Scale ( $\alpha = .88$ ) all met or exceeded the conventional threshold of .70 (Nunnally, 1978). Political orientation was significantly correlated with punitive attitudes ( $r = .41$ ,  $p < .001$ ), with more conservative participants reporting higher punitiveness; therefore, political orientation was retained as a control variable in the regression analysis.



**Table 1:** *Descriptive Statistics for Demographic and Primary Study Variables (N = 150)*

Variable	M	SD	Range
Age	32.50	11.20	18–68
Political Orientation	4.12	1.55	1–7
Total Media Exposure	3.45	0.88	1.2–5.0
Sensationalistic Media	3.21	0.95	1.0–5.0
Documentary Media	2.98	1.02	1.0–5.0
Empathy for Offenders	2.85	0.91	1.0–4.9
Punitive Attitudes	3.62	0.84	1.5–5.0

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and observed ranges for all demographic and primary study variables. The sample consisted of 150 participants with a mean age of 32.50 years (SD = 11.20, range = 18–68 years), representing a broad adult demographic. Political orientation, measured on a 1–7 scale (1 = *very liberal*, 7 = *very conservative*), yielded a mean of 4.12 (SD = 1.55), indicating that the sample was centrally distributed with a slight lean toward conservative viewpoints. Regarding media consumption, participants reported a moderate level of total crime media exposure (M = 3.45, SD = 0.88 on a 1–5 scale). When examining specific genres, sensationalistic media consumption (M = 3.21, SD = 0.95) was slightly higher than documentary media consumption (M = 2.98, SD = 1.02), suggesting that tabloid-style or traditional news formats remain the more common source of crime information for the public. Analysis of the attitudinal variables revealed a notable discrepancy between punitive and rehabilitative inclinations. Punitive attitudes received a relatively high mean score of 3.62 (SD = 0.84), whereas empathy toward offenders resulted in a lower mean score of 2.85 (SD = 0.91). This suggests that, on average, participants leaned more toward retributive justice than toward empathetic understanding of offenders. Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to examine the bivariate relationships between media consumption variables and psychological attitudes.

**Table 2:** *Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations for Study Variables (N = 150)*

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Total Media Exposure	3.45	0.88	—					
2. Sensationalistic Media	3.21	0.95	.71**	—				

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
3. Documentary Media	2.98	1.02	.42**	.18	—			
4. Empathy for Offenders	2.85	0.91	-.38**	-.52**	.33**	—		
5. Punitive Attitudes	3.62	0.84	.45**	.49**	-.28**	-.61**	—	
6. Political Orientation	4.12	1.55	.21*	.25*	-.03	-.12	.21*	—

Note. N = 150. \*p < .05. \*\*p < .001.

Table 2 presents the full correlation matrix. Consistent with H1, total crime media exposure was significantly and positively correlated with punitive attitudes (r = .45, p < .001), indicating that higher frequency of crime media consumption is associated with a stronger preference for harsh sentencing. Consistent with H2, sensationalistic media consumption demonstrated a strong, significant negative correlation with empathy for offenders (r = -.52, p < .001) and a strong positive correlation with punitive attitudes (r = .49, p < .001). These findings suggest that exposure to dramatic or tabloid-style crime coverage is associated with reduced compassion for offenders and increased endorsement of retributive justice. In contrast, documentary media consumption displayed a divergent pattern of association. It was significantly and positively correlated with empathy for offenders (r = .33, p < .001) and significantly negatively correlated with punitive attitudes (r = -.28, p < .001). These results support H3, indicating that balanced, investigative media formats may be associated with a more compassionate and less retributive outlook. Political orientation showed a significant positive correlation with punitive attitudes (r = .21, p = .012), confirming that more conservative leanings are associated with a preference for tougher criminal justice policies. Political orientation was not significantly correlated with empathy for offenders (r = -.12, p = .142) or documentary media consumption (r = -.03, p = .712), but it was positively correlated with sensationalistic media consumption (r = .25, p = .002).

**Table 3: Group Comparisons for Punitive Attitudes and Empathy by Media Consumption Level and Preference**

Comparison	Group	n	M	SD	T	P	Cohen's d
Punitive Attitudes (Total media exposure)	High consumers	75	4.01	0.75	5.91	.001	0.97
	Low consumers	75	3.23	0.81			
Empathy for	High	75	2.51	0.85	4.65	.00	0.76



Comparison	Group	n	M	SD	T	P	Cohen's d
Offenders(Total media exposure)	consumers					1	
	Low consumers	75	3.19	0.88			
Punitive Attitudes(Media preference)	Sensationalism-preferring	72	3.91	0.77	4.09	.001	0.74
	Documentary-preferring	53	3.35	0.84			

To further illustrate the associations of media exposure, participants were divided into high and low media consumption groups based on a median split on the Total Media Exposure scale (median = 3.45). Independent-samples t-tests were conducted to compare the two groups on punitive attitudes and empathy for offenders. As shown in Table 3, high consumers reported significantly higher punitive attitudes and significantly lower empathy for offenders compared to low consumers. Both effect sizes were large (Cohen's d = 0.97 and 0.76, respectively). Similarly, participants were grouped by media preference based on whether their sensationalistic media subscale score exceeded their documentary media subscale score (sensationalism-preferring group, n = 72) or the reverse (documentary-preferring group, n = 53); participants with equal scores (n = 25) were excluded from this specific comparison. Those who favored sensationalized content showed markedly higher punitive attitudes than those who preferred documentary-style media (see Table 3).

**Multiple Regression Analysis** A multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to predict punitive attitudes from media consumption types (sensationalistic and documentary), empathy for offenders, and political orientation. Preliminary checks confirmed that the assumptions of linearity, independence of errors, homoscedasticity, and normality of residuals were met. Multicollinearity was assessed using variance inflation factors (VIFs), which ranged from 1.12 to 1.89, all well below the conventional threshold of 10 (Cohen et al., 2003), indicating no problematic multicollinearity. The Durbin-Watson statistic was 1.94, indicating independence of residuals. The full regression model was statistically significant,  $F(4, 145) = 26.18, p < .001$ , and accounted for 42% of the variance in punitive attitudes ( $R^2 = .42$ ; 95% CI for  $R^2$  [.31, .52]). The adjusted  $R^2$  was .40, indicating that the model would explain 40% of the variance in the population. Table 4 presents the unstandardized coefficients (B), standard errors (SE), standardized coefficients ( $\beta$ ), t-values, p-values, and 95% confidence intervals for each predictor. Empathy for offenders emerged as the strongest negative predictor of punitive attitudes, suggesting that the dehumanization process may be a key psychological mechanism linking media consumption to punitive policy preferences. Sensationalistic media and political orientation were significant positive predictors of punitiveness, while documentary media was a significant negative predictor.



**Table 4: Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Punitive Attitudes (N = 150)**

Predictor	B	SE	B	t	p	95% CI
(Constant)	4.12	0.35		11.77	< .001	[3.43, 4.81]
Sensationalistic Media	0.31	0.07	.35	4.43	< .001	[0.17, 0.45]
Documentary Media	-0.16	0.06	-.19	-2.40	.018	[-0.28, -0.04]
Empathy for Offenders	-0.38	0.07	-.41	-5.43	< .001	[-0.52, -0.24]
Political Orientation	0.11	0.04	.21	2.92	.004	[0.03, 0.19]

Note. N = 150. R<sup>2</sup> = .42. Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = .40. F(4, 145) = 26.18, p < .001. CI = confidence interval.

**DISCUSSION**

This study empirically examined the relationship between crime-related media consumption and public attitudes toward offenders and justice policies in a Pakistani adult sample. The evidence confirms that both the volume and type of crime media consumed have significant, measurable effects on empathy for offenders and support for punitive versus rehabilitative justice philosophies. The sequence of results—from descriptive patterns to bivariate relationships, group comparisons, and regression analyses—reveals a coherent picture in which media genre moderates cultivation effects in culturally specific ways.

Before discussing the hypothesized relationships, it is instructive to consider the descriptive landscape of the sample. Participants reported moderate to high levels of total crime media exposure, with sensationalistic media consumption slightly exceeding documentary-style consumption. This pattern aligns with recent Pakistani research documenting the proliferation of crime-based content across digital platforms. A study by Yousaf et al. (2025) found that Pakistani viewers actively consume morally complex and taboo media content, often navigating cognitive dissonance between their viewing habits and conservative cultural norms. The slightly higher preference for sensationalistic formats observed in this sample may reflect the greater accessibility of tabloid-style crime news on Pakistani television and social media compared to investigative documentaries, which remain less common in local media landscapes.

More striking was the attitudinal profile: punitive attitudes were substantially higher than empathy for offenders. This discrepancy suggests a general societal lean toward retributive justice among Pakistani adults—a pattern consistent with broader tendencies in collectivist, honor-oriented cultures where crime is often framed as a violation of social and moral order rather than a systemic issue (Pratt, 2007). A letter published in *The Express Tribune* (Fatima, 2025) noted that Karachi residents have become increasingly desensitized to crime reports, with shocking crimes failing to evoke emotional reactions unless heavily sensationalized. This "empathy drought" in public responses to crime news may be both a cause and consequence of the low empathy scores observed in this sample.

Consistent with the first hypothesis, total crime media exposure was positively associated with punitive attitudes. This finding reinforces decades of cultivation theory research (Gerbner et al., 2002) and aligns with recent empirical confirmations in diverse cultural contexts (Dowler, 2003; Kort-Butler & Hartshorn, 2022). Heavy viewers of crime-laden media develop "mean world syndrome"—a perception of the environment as

disproportionately dangerous and violent—which in turn makes punitive measures appear necessary for self-preservation (Jackson & Gray, 2019). In the Pakistani context, where actual crime rates in cities like Karachi remain concerning, media cultivation may interact with lived experiences of insecurity to amplify punitiveness beyond what either factor alone would predict. A recent study on crime content consumption among Pakistani young adults found that heavy viewers of crime-based media reported significantly higher fear levels and adopted more precautionary behaviors compared to casual viewers (NUST, 2024). This supports the cultivation mechanism underlying the first hypothesis: frequent exposure cultivates perceived threat, and perceived threat motivates support for harsh justice responses.

The results strongly supported the second hypothesis, revealing a robust negative relationship between sensationalistic media consumption and empathy for offenders. This finding underscores the psychological impact of media framing. Sensationalized narratives that dehumanize offenders through labels such as "monster" or "predator" facilitate what Haslam and Loughnan (2014) term dehumanization—the stripping away of human qualities that normally inhibit aggression and punitive responses. These findings empirically demonstrate what O'Connor and Joffe (2020) and Chermak (1995) have argued theoretically: media framing that erases the socio-economic context of an offender's life directly diminishes public capacity for compassion. This process may be particularly potent in Pakistani society, where honor-based cultural frameworks and collectivist values can amplify moral outrage when offenders are portrayed as violating communal norms. Tufekci (2025), writing on the effects of viral violent content on social media, observed that graphic crime videos are often consumed as "viral snuff films," reducing tragedy to voyeuristic content and dehumanizing both victims and viewers. The repeated replay of such content, she argues, generates calls for "collective retribution and vigilante justice" rather than systemic solutions—a pattern directly mirrored in the finding that sensationalized media consumption predicts lower empathy and higher punitiveness.

Perhaps the most nuanced finding was the support for the third hypothesis. Documentary-style media consumption was positively associated with empathy for offenders and negatively associated with punitive attitudes. This confirms that not all crime media is created equal (Jewkes, 2015). When narratives provide socio-economic context, explore systemic failures (e.g., wrongful convictions, prosecutorial misconduct), and humanize offenders by presenting their life histories, they can cultivate a more sophisticated public understanding that challenges the "mean world" syndrome (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). This "counter-cultivation" effect has been documented in Western contexts (Fiddler & Costelloe, 2023), but the present study provides evidence for its relevance in Pakistan as well. Critically framed documentaries—both international productions such as *Making a Murderer* and Pakistani investigative journalism pieces—may foster what Latty and MacMillan (2025) term "radical empathy" in reporting, an approach that prioritizes understanding survivors' and even offenders' humanity over sensationalism. The Oscar-winning Pakistani documentary *Saving Face* (Junge & Obaid-Chinoy, 2012), which explored acid violence survivors' struggles for justice, exemplifies how documentary storytelling can shift audience focus from individual monstrosity to systemic failures and shared humanity.

The group comparison analyses provided additional insight into the magnitude of media effects. Participants with high total media consumption reported substantially higher punitive attitudes and significantly lower empathy for offenders compared to low consumers. These large effect sizes suggest that the cumulative impact of crime media consumption on justice attitudes is substantial—comparable in magnitude to well-established psychological

effects such as the impact of violent media on aggression (Anderson et al., 2010). Similarly, participants who preferred sensationalistic content over documentary content reported markedly higher punitive attitudes. This finding aligns with a recent Pakistani study examining the glamorization of crime-based content among young adults, which found a moderate positive correlation between finding villainous characters appealing and exhibiting aggressive attitudes (DefinePK, 2025). The authors noted that "complex, emotionally layered villains, particularly those with traumatic backstories, resonate strongly with young audiences, sometimes blurring the lines between entertainment and ethical endorsement" (DefinePK, 2025, Abstract section). This resonates with the observation that media preference—not just total consumption—critically shapes attitudinal outcomes.

The regression analysis revealed the unique contribution of each predictor while controlling for others. Empathy for offenders emerged as the strongest negative predictor of punitive attitudes, suggesting that the dehumanization process is the key psychological mechanism linking media consumption to punitive policy preferences. This finding has important forensic implications: individuals with low empathy for offenders may be predisposed to endorse harsh sentences regardless of evidence, a bias that jury selection processes should consider. Sensationalistic media and political orientation were significant positive predictors of punitiveness, while documentary media was a significant negative predictor. The independent contribution of political orientation—even after accounting for media habits and empathy—is noteworthy. More conservative participants reported higher punitiveness, consistent with prior research (Van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019). In the Pakistani context, where political conservatism is often associated with traditional honor codes and strong state authority preferences, this relationship may be particularly pronounced. Yousaf et al. (2025) noted that Pakistani viewers exhibit "selective moral outrage" in response to media content, with political and religious values moderating what content is deemed acceptable or objectionable.

**Theoretical Implications** These findings refine cultivation theory in three ways. First, media effects are not monolithic; genre and narrative framing critically moderate cultivation outcomes. Second, dehumanization—operationalized as reduced empathy—emerged as a key mediating mechanism. Third, this study extends cultivation research to a non-Western, Muslim-majority context, demonstrating that cultivation effects transcend cultural boundaries while interacting with local value systems.

**Practical Implications** For forensic psychology and legal practice: The findings provide evidence of pre-trial biases. During voir dire, attorneys could inquire about media consumption habits. Brief judicial instructions contextualizing sensationalized coverage could partially counteract cultivation effects.

**For policymakers:** The study serves as a caution against penal populism—legislation crafted in response to media-fueled public outrage rather than empirical data. Policies should be informed by crime statistics and rehabilitation efficacy research, not media-cultivated fear.

**For media professionals and educators:** The findings advocate for media literacy initiatives, school-based curricula teaching identification of dehumanizing language, and responsible journalism guidelines that reduce dehumanizing frames and provide socio-economic context.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

While this study provides critical insights into the relationship between media consumption and justice-related attitudes, several methodological constraints must be acknowledged. **First**, the cross-sectional design precludes definitive causality. Importantly, individuals with pre-existing punitive attitudes may selectively gravitate toward sensationalized content (self-

selection bias) rather than media consumption causing punitiveness. Future research should employ longitudinal panel designs or experimental paradigms that randomly assign participants to view different media types. **Second**, the convenience sample (predominantly female, recruited online) limits generalizability. Pakistani adults without internet access, rural populations, and residents of other provinces are underrepresented. Future research should employ stratified random sampling across Pakistan's diverse provinces. **Third**, the study relied on self-reported media consumption, which may introduce recall bias and social desirability effects. Future research could use passive viewing logs or experience sampling methods. **Fourth**, the study did not directly measure fear of crime. Future research should include validated fear of crime scales to test whether fear mediates the media-to-punitiveness pathway. **Fifth**, quantitative methods identify patterns but cannot illuminate the subjective "why" behind dehumanization. Future inquiries should adopt mixed-methods approaches, utilizing semi-structured interviews or focus groups.

## Conclusion

In an era of unprecedented media saturation, the type of crime narrative we consume has measurable consequences for empathy, fear, and support for justice policies. This study demonstrated that sensationalized media cultivates dehumanization and punitiveness, while documentary-style narratives can foster empathy and rehabilitation support. These effects were robust in a Pakistani adult sample, extending cultivation theory beyond its traditional Western settings and demonstrating the relevance of media effects research in non-Western, Muslim-majority contexts. The findings carry urgent practical implications. For forensic psychologists and legal professionals, they reveal pretrial biases that may compromise juror impartiality. For policymakers, they serve as a warning against penal populism—the enactment of harsh legislation driven by media-fueled moral panics rather than evidence. For media professionals and educators, they advocate for responsible journalism and comprehensive media literacy initiatives. Ultimately, fostering a critically discerning public—equipped to recognize dehumanizing frames, question sensationalized narratives, and seek out contextual, humanizing stories—is not merely an academic exercise. It is a necessary precondition for a more just, humane, and evidence-based criminal justice system. The choice of which stories we tell, and how we consume them, directly shapes the health of our justice system and the character of our society.

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