

The “Missing White Woman Syndrome” in Top True Crime Podcasts

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Introduction

While other forms of true crime have been shown to overrepresent harm against White women and children, no study to date has examined whether White missing women/girls are overrepresented in true crime podcasts compared to women/girls of color. **This overrepresentation of harm against White women/girls in the media has been dubbed the *Missing White Woman Syndrome*.**

Media portrayals of crime matter because the general public may learn about crime, victims, and perpetrators from the media (Davies et al. 2008). Further, inaccurate, repetitive messages about crime can impact consumers’ perceptions about crime and the justice system (Morgan et al. 2015). **True crime podcasts are worthy of analysis due to their growing popularity, ability to center diverse voices and stories, and accessibility to both creators and listeners.**

Project Objectives

In this study, data from four of the top listened-to podcasts in the U.S. were examined with two goals in mind:

- 1) to determine whether White women and girls are overrepresented in true crime podcasts about missing women/girls, and
- 2) to report on the overarching themes, if any, found in podcast episode titles and descriptions for episodes that feature missing women/girls.

Data Collection & Methods

Data from Edison Research (2021) noted the 50 podcasts in the U.S. with the highest listenership between July 1, 2020 and June 30, 2021. Of these top 50 podcasts, seven fit into the true crime category and covered different cases within their episodes. *Lore*, *Last Podcast on the Left*, and the *Dateline NBC* podcast were excluded from the sample. **The final sample consisted of episodes from four different “top” true crime podcasts—*Crime Junkie*, *My Favorite Murder (MFM)*, *Criminal*, and *Morbid*.**

Destiny Duran* and I then determined whether the episodes included information about one or more missing women or girls. To create the database, we Google searched the names of the victims, perpetrators, and/or crimes included in the episode descriptions and titles and noted whether any of the people involved with the case was a missing woman/girl. In the end, **85 episodes across the four podcasts** seemingly discussed one or more missing women/girls. Then, **data from multiple sources (e.g., missing persons posters, news articles) were used to determine the missing women/girls’ race.**

In order to examine episode descriptions and titles, I conducted an **inductive qualitative content analysis** of the 85 episode descriptions and titles using MaxQDA, a qualitative coding software.

References

- Davies, Pamela, Francis, Peter, and Chris Greer. (2008). *Victims, Crime and Society*. SAGE.
- Edison Research. 2021. “The Top 50 Most Listened to Podcasts in the U.S. Q2 2021.” <https://www.edisonresearch.com/the-top-50-most-listened-to-podcasts-in-the-u-s-q2-2021/>
- Morgan, Michael, James Shanahan, and Nancy Signorielli. 2015. “Yesterday’s New Cultivation, Tomorrow.” *Mass Communication and Society* 18(5): 674–99.

Results

Research Question 1: Across the 85 episodes in the sample, **87.1% of them included at least one missing White woman or girl.**

Amongst the 39 episodes that focused on a single missing woman/girl, **30 (76.1%)** of them focused on a missing White woman/girl, three were about a Black missing woman/girl, four were about a missing Latina, and two were about a missing Asian woman/girl. **There were no standalone episodes about a missing Indigenous woman or girl.** Amongst the 46 episodes that seemingly covered multiple missing people, a whopping **95.7% included at least one missing White woman/girl.**

Research Question 2: Across podcasts, episode titles tended to have their own style and tone. **Episode descriptions tended to use *sensationalistic language*, *casual/relaxed language*, and conveyed a *continued mystery*.** The *sensationalistic language* and *continued mystery* themes both served to grab the listeners’ interest. The *casual/relaxed language* theme seemed to point to a close relationship between the host(s) and their listeners. **Some casual/relaxed language arguably bordered on “flippant”— which arguably trivializes violence against women and obscures the very real harm these women/girls faced.**

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