

MEDIA INFLUENCE ON CRIME PERCEPTION: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY ON PUBLIC FEAR, MORAL PANIC, AND CRIMINAL POLICY FORMATION

DR. YOGESH BABU THUNGA^{1*}, DR. VIVEK S KANADE², PAUL RAJ³,
CHANDANA DEKA⁴, SANJAY SURIN⁵, DR. SUHAS DURGADASRAO
PATHAK⁶

^{1*}DEAN, SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES, IIP PDF, INNOVATOR, ERU- USA & ERC- INDIA, GOWHATI, ASSAM, INDIA.
THUNGA.yogesh@gmail.com

²ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, DR. MOONJE INSTITUTE OF MANAGEMENT AND COMPUTER STUDIES, NASHIK.,
SAVITRIBAI PHULE PUNE UNIVERSITY PUNE, MAHARASHTRA, ORCHID ID-0000-0001-7006-1069,
KANADE.vivek23@gmail.com

³ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, AND HOD, PG DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY, JYOTI NIVAS COLLEGE AUTONOMOUS,
BENGALURU, boothali@gmail.com

^{4(A)}RESEARCH SCHOLAR, CHANDIGARH UNIVERSITY chandanadeka531@gmail.com

^(B)ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, FORENSIC SCIENCE, ASSAM DOWN TOWN UNIVERSITY

⁵ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, SYMBIOSIS CENTRE FOR MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION, SYMBIOSIS INTERNATIONAL
(DEEMED UNIVERSITY) PUNE, INDIA. ORCID ID: [HTTPS://ORCID.ORG/0000-0001-9519-2348](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9519-2348) snjsurin@gmail.com

⁶SWAMI RAMANAND TEERTH MARATHWADA UNIVERSITY, NANDED, MAHARASHTRA, S R T M UNIVERSITY,
NANDED, EMAIL: suhas4303@gmail.com

Abstract

This study investigates how media shapes public perceptions of crime, fuels fear, sustains moral panic, and influences criminal policy, with broader implications for governance and sustainable social environments. Drawing on a survey of 200 respondents from urban and semi-urban areas, the research examined associations between media exposure, perceptions of crime, and policy preferences. Findings indicate that online news portals and television were the most frequent sources of crime-related information, while newspapers were less influential. Respondents widely agreed that media exaggerates crime (mean = 3.8) and heightens fear (mean = 3.7), contributing to a climate of public anxiety. This heightened fear was directly linked to support for stricter laws (mean = 3.9), reflecting elements of penal populism, even though respondents also recognized the importance of evidence-based policymaking. Levels of trust in institutions were moderate, while skepticism about political misuse of crime news was notable, highlighting governance challenges when policy is shaped more by perception than by evidence. These results demonstrate that media functions not only as an information channel but also as an active agent in constructing fear and shaping reactive policy responses. By situating crime perception within a broader environmental and governance framework, the study underscores that media influence extends beyond criminology to affect institutional legitimacy, governance quality, and sustainable community resilience. Policy recommendations emphasize balanced reporting, reliance on empirical data in policymaking, and promotion of media literacy to mitigate moral panic and strengthen resilience against fear-driven governance.

Keywords: Media Influence; Fear of Crime; Moral Panic; Penal Populism; Policy Formation

INTRODUCTION

Media is critical in influencing the way people and communities view crime. It frequently serves as the main information source on the criminal activity to the masses, and the manner in which it frames, its frequency, and sensationalism, the media plays a significant role in shaping attitudes towards safety and justice. This is not limited to objective reporting but rather to the formation of subjective fears and the perception of crime by the people is often not the same as the real crime statistics [1]. Repeated exposure to crime related materials may increase fears and instil greater fear in citizens and this idea would strengthen the belief that the society is more unsafe than it might be [2].

This interaction between media and the perception of people is not just a communication problem, but has a wider social and policy consequence. Media-based accounts may turn into moral panic, which generates a fear atmosphere, compelling policymakers to act in reaction. Criminal cases of high profile, which are enhanced by the news coverage, are usually in a position to influence the judicial decisions and policy orientation and therefore the strong influence of the opinion of the people mediated through the news channels [3]. In addition, the issue of media trust and confidence becomes a significant consideration when it comes to the way people perceive crime-related information and whether they believe or question the media-driven discourse [4].

The interdependence between media, governance and sustainability has been on the increase in the past years, and this has widened the area of debate. Studies on environmental, social, and governance (ESG) challenges have demonstrated the role of social media in influencing the attitudes and policy orientations of the population, which demonstrates that

media discourse is central not only in crime reporting but also in the general governance [5]. Likewise, the media treatment of environmental governance demonstrates that narratives affect the way societies judge institutions and policy structures, and that communication practises are associated with sustainable development and the common good [6]. Crime perception as mediated by media in this sense must be interpreted as belonging to the broader social context which shapes community resilience and systems of governance.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To analyze how media representations influence public fear of crime
2. To examine the processes through which media generates and sustains moral panic
3. To assess the impact of media-induced perceptions on criminal policy formation
4. To evaluate crime perception as a determinant of social and governance environments

LITERATURE REVIEW

Media and Crime Reporting

The interaction between media and crime coverage has been long studied with the help of such theoretical approaches as the cultivation theory, which states that the long-term media exposure develops the perception of the social reality, which tends to develop the overstated perceptions of the prevalence of crime [7]. In the same manner, agenda-setting theory focuses on the way media has a priority on issues and makes people pay attention to some aspects of crime, even when they are not actually prevalent [8]. In line with this, the framing theory describes how the media dramatises and contextualises crime by selectively focusing and constructing narratives, and thus shapes the way people interpret crime [9]. In addition to theory, research has repeatedly discovered that news reporting tends to be sensational, dramatic, and exaggerated in terms of crime as a tactic to capture the attention of the audience [10].

Public Fear of Crime

One of the most important effects of media crime coverage is the impact on the fear and safety levels of people. This dynamic is based on the classic idea of moral panic. The classic book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* by Cohen showed how media can be used to increase fear levels, stereotype and label groups as dangerous [11]. Similar processes are also emphasised in more recent case studies: youth crime has often been portrayed as a cause of social panic [12]; the coverage of terrorism has shown how the identity of perpetrators can transform framing between criminality and pathology [13]; and the case of drug use has been presented as a moral threat in the discourse of the population [14]. These studies all together affirm that media influences not only awareness but also disproportionate fear of crime, which is not always in line with the real crime rates.

Moral Panic: Frameworks and Global Case Studies

In addition to the individual cases, moral panic has been investigated in various fields. As an example, cyber-organised crime has been packaged as an instance of moral panic, even though there is comparatively little empirical evidence of its magnitude [15]. Penal populism in Central and Eastern Europe has interacted with nationalism to create criminal policy based not so much on empirical crime data but on political exploitation of the fear of the people [16]. This aligns with critiques of penal populism in global contexts, where public demand for harshness often undermines rational policymaking [17]. Similarly, criminological scholars argue that the rise of penal populism undermines expertise and evidence, instead privileging political expediency and media narratives [18]. These case studies underscore how media-amplified fear translates into political capital and policy shifts.

Media–Policy Nexus

The nexus between media influence and policy outcomes is most visible in the erosion or reinforcement of public trust in institutions. Research shows that the way media frames policing significantly affects how citizens perceive legitimacy, authority, and accountability of law enforcement [19]. When combined with the processes of sensationalized reporting, moral panic, and penal populism, such perceptions contribute to reactive, fear-driven policy making. This underscores the crucial need to examine how media-induced fears not only distort public opinion but also shape the governance landscape. While the literature has extensively explored media effects, fear of crime, moral panic, and penal populism, there remains a lack of empirical studies explicitly linking media-induced fear to moral panic and subsequent policy formation within an environmental sciences perspective. In particular, the integration of crime perception into broader discussions of the social environment, governance, and sustainability is underdeveloped. Addressing this gap is critical for situating crime perception as not merely a criminological issue, but as part of the wider environmental and social context in which societies function.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a quantitative, survey-based empirical research design to examine the influence of media on public perceptions of crime, the generation of moral panic, and its implications for criminal policy formation. The approach is cross-sectional, collecting responses at a single point in time, and emphasizes statistical analysis of the associations between media consumption, fear of crime, and policy attitudes.

Population and Sampling

The population for this study consisted of adult individuals (aged 18 years and above) from both urban and semi-urban areas. A stratified random sampling technique was applied to ensure representation across key demographic categories

such as age, gender, and residential area. A total of 200 respondents participated in the survey, which provides sufficient statistical power for descriptive and inferential analysis while maintaining feasibility.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire was divided into five sections:

- **Section A (Demographics)** – Age, gender, and residential area.
- **Section B (Media Consumption)** – Frequency and source of news consumption across television, newspapers, online portals, and social media.
- **Section C (Perceptions of Crime & Fear)** – Respondents' perceptions of crime prevalence, change over time, personal safety, and fear of crime.
- **Section D (Media Influence & Moral Panic)** – Perceptions of media exaggeration, public fear creation, offender portrayals, pressure on authorities, and panic escalation.
- **Section E (Policy Attitudes & Trust in Institutions)** – Support for stricter laws, evidence-based policymaking, trust in institutions, and concerns about political misuse of crime news.

Most items used a five-point Likert scale (ranging from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree” or equivalent categorical levels), while demographic and media frequency questions were measured using multiple-choice options.

Data Collection Procedure

The survey was administered both online and offline to capture a diverse pool of respondents. Each participant was informed about the study's purpose, and their consent was obtained before participation. The questionnaire required approximately 10–12 minutes to complete. Responses were collected over a period of four weeks.

Data Analysis

The collected data from 200 respondents were coded and analysed using SPSS 22. Initially, descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, and mean scores were computed to provide an overview of the demographic distribution, patterns of media consumption, and general perceptions of crime. This was then succeeded by inferential statistical methods such as correlation and regression analysis to test the magnitude and direction of associations between media exposure, fear of crime, and support of various policy measures. Comparative tests were also used to determine the differences in perceptions between demographic groups including gender and residential area using cross-tabulations and analysis of variance (ANOVA). This combined methodology was successful in ensuring that the analysis did not only explain tendencies in the data but also examined the hypothesised relationships between media influence, public fear, moral panic and attitudes towards criminal policy formation.

Ethical Considerations

Data collection was preceded by ethical approval. All participants were guaranteed voluntary participation, anonymity and confidentiality. No personal identifiers were gathered and data were utilised only in the context of academic research.

RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

A total of 200 respondents participated in the study, with ages ranging between 18 and 65 years ($M = 36.2$, $SD = 10.4$). The demographic analysis revealed a relatively balanced gender distribution, with males forming the majority at 54%, followed by females at 43.5%, and a smaller proportion (2.5%) identifying as “other.” The residential profile showed that most respondents were from urban areas (57.5%), while 42.5% resided in semi-urban locations. These distributions are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Distribution of Respondents (N = 200)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	108	54.0
	Female	87	43.5
	Other	5	2.5
Residential Area	Urban	115	57.5
	Semi-Urban	85	42.5
Age (years)	Mean (SD)	36.2 (10.4)	–
	Range	18–65	–

The age distribution is visualized in Figure 1, which shows that the majority of respondents fell within the 25–40-year age group, followed by those between 41 and 55 years. Very few respondents were above 60 years, suggesting that younger and middle-aged populations were more represented in this study. This distribution is consistent with similar social surveys where younger populations tend to respond more actively to questionnaires, particularly in urban contexts.

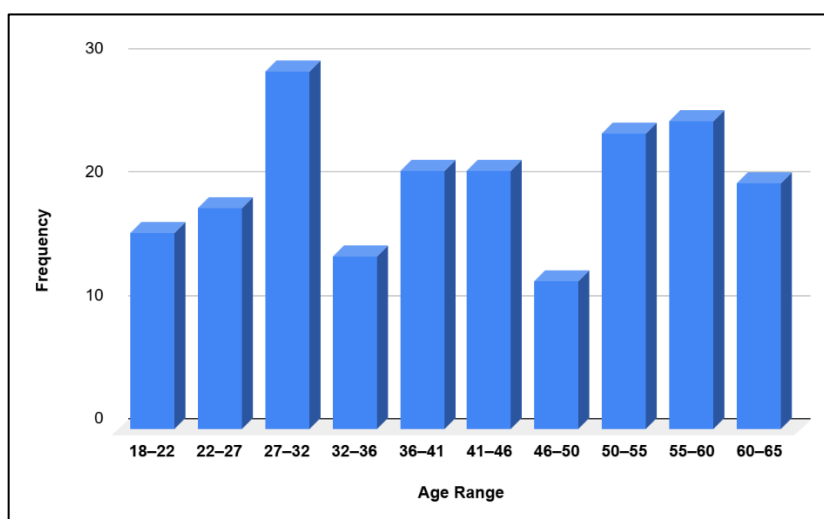


Figure 1. Age distribution of respondents

Media Consumption Patterns

The results of media consumption indicated substantial engagement across multiple platforms. As shown in Table 2, online news portals emerged as the most frequently accessed source of crime-related information, with a mean score of 3.6 on the 5-point scale. Television also remained highly relevant ($M = 3.4$), with respondents reporting regular exposure several times per week. Social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter registered an average score of 3.2, highlighting their growing role in shaping crime-related perceptions. Newspapers, while still consumed, lagged behind digital and broadcast media with a mean score of 2.8.

Table 2. Frequency of Media Consumption Across Platforms (N = 200)

Media Source	Mean (1-5)	SD	Most Frequent Response
Television News	3.4	1.2	Several times a week
Newspapers	2.8	1.1	Occasionally
Online News Portals	3.6	1.3	Daily
Social media	3.2	1.4	Several times a week

Figure 2 illustrates these findings, showing that digital platforms (online portals and social media) outperformed traditional print media, with television still maintaining strong relevance. The findings suggest that crime perception today is shaped predominantly by real-time and visually engaging platforms, which may amplify immediacy and emotional intensity compared to traditional print reporting.

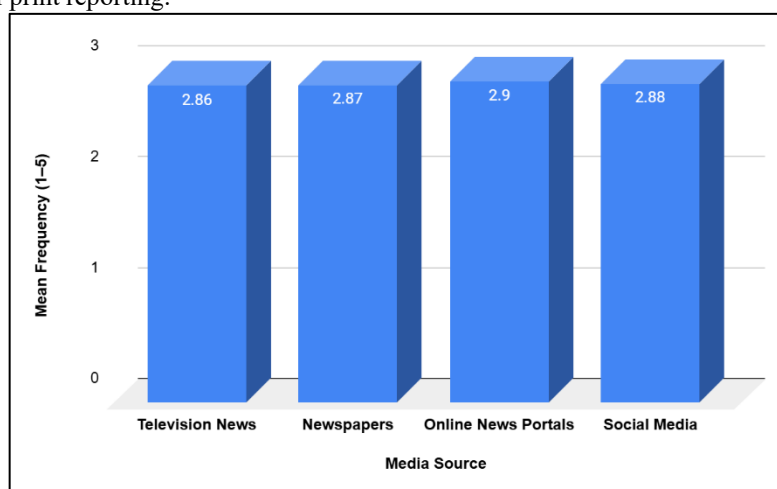


Figure 2. Average frequency of media consumption by platform

Perceptions of Crime, Moral Panic, and Policy Attitudes

Perception-related results revealed the significant role of media in shaping fear of crime, moral panic, and policy preferences. As summarized in Table 3, respondents moderately to strongly agreed that crime is often exaggerated in media coverage ($M = 3.8$), and that such coverage contributes to public fear ($M = 3.7$) and escalation into broader social panic ($M = 3.6$).

Fear of personal victimization was evident: respondents reported frequent worries about becoming victims of crime ($M = 3.6$) and a heightened sense of unsafety when walking alone at night ($M = 3.5$). These findings reflect how mediated exposure translates into subjective vulnerability.

Table 3. Perceptions of Crime, Media Influence, and Policy Attitudes (N = 200)

Item	Mean (1–5)	SD
I often worry about becoming a victim of crime	3.6	1.2
I feel unsafe walking alone at night	3.5	1.1
Media coverage makes me more fearful	3.7	1.3
Media exaggerates the seriousness of crime	3.8	1.2
Media creates unnecessary fear	3.7	1.2
Media pressure influences policy action	3.5	1.3
Media-driven fear escalates into public panic	3.6	1.2
Support for stricter laws	3.9	1.1
Policies should be evidence-based	3.6	1.0
Trust in police and judiciary	3.4	1.2
Politicians misuse crime news	3.7	1.3

Attitudes toward criminal policy also reflected the influence of public fear. Respondents showed strong support for stricter laws ($M = 3.9$), suggesting that heightened perceptions of insecurity can translate into backing punitive measures. At the same time, there was recognition that policies should be evidence-based ($M = 3.6$), pointing to an awareness that fear-driven policymaking may not always be effective. Trust in formal institutions ($M = 3.4$) was moderate, indicating a degree of skepticism, while the belief that politicians misuse crime news for electoral gains ($M = 3.7$) was relatively high. Figure 3 illustrates the relationship between perceptions of fear and policy preferences. It shows that those who reported higher worry about crime and greater influence of media fear were also more likely to support stricter criminal policies, demonstrating the direct policy implications of mediated perceptions.

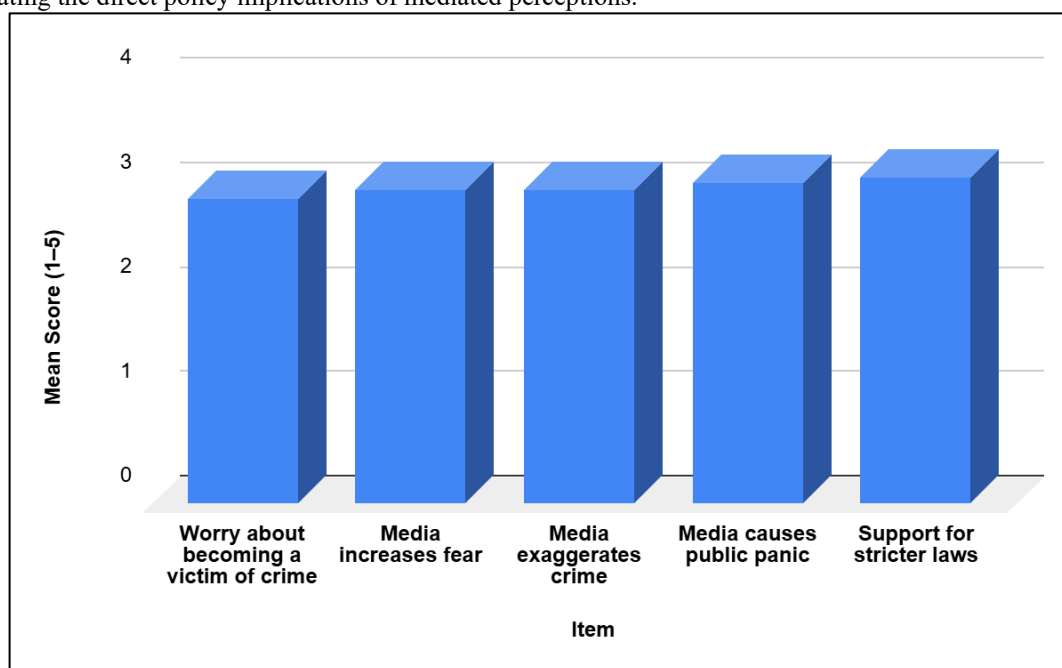


Figure 3. Selected mean scores on media influence, fear of crime, and support for punitive policies

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the powerful role of media in shaping perceptions of crime, intensifying fear, and generating conditions that sustain moral panic. Respondents demonstrated heightened concern about victimization and insecurity in their daily lives, even when actual crime rates are not rising at the same pace. These results are consistent with previous scholarship emphasizing that fear and control are often mediated through cultural and media processes, producing social climates where public anxiety becomes a driver of governance and policy [20]. The results prove the point that media is not merely a passive conveyor of information but also an active participant in the process of building the fear of the masses by demonstrating that frequent media exposure was linked to exaggerated crime perceptions by the respondents.

This study also supports the previous research on moral panic in modern settings. Results showed that participants were in strong agreement that media over-report crime and creates fear, which is consistent with the study on school shootings, where sensationalised news coverage has enhanced localised and generalised anxiety among the population [21].

Similarly, this paper established that fear-induced perceptions were correlated with demands of stricter criminal policies, which is consistent with the finding of Oakley that moral panic tends to justify hasty and even disproportionate enforcement policies [22]. These findings coupled with the current literature highlight the sustainability of moral panic as a paradigm to explain the social construction and political mobilisation of crime.

Meanwhile, this study builds on the previous research by placing the media-induced fear in a wider environmental and governance framework. Not only did the respondents report their own insecurity, but also lacked trust in institutional responses, which is consistent with the previous results that media exposure may intensify anxiety and social discomfort [23]. This shows that the fear of crime is not a phenomenon that exists at the individual psychological level only but has broader social consequences, determining the community integration and institutional legitimacy. Therefore, the perception of crime is to be interpreted as a factor of social environment, which affects the quality of governance and eventually the sustainability of safe communities.

The existence of penal populism and reactive policymaking can be considered one of the most obvious policy implications of the findings. The fact that respondents firmly support the idea of stricter laws despite recognising the significance of evidence-based policy proves the conflict between perception-driven and research-driven criminal policy. This is reminiscent of previous criticisms that political institutions tend to cash in on media-enhanced fears, to implement punitive action, instead of basing their actions on criminological knowledge [24]. These results lead to the question of the strength of the system of governance and its capacity to balance between democratic responsiveness and rational policymaking.

In order to overcome these challenges, a number of suggestions can be drawn. First, there is a necessity of responsible media practises. The media and journalists must not engage in imbalanced sensationalism in reporting crime, but must strive to report crime in a balanced and contextualised manner that portrays the true trends and not exaggerations of exceptional cases. Second, the paper highlights the need to enhance evidence-based policy frameworks, where the legislative reaction is based on empirical data on crime and criminological studies, as opposed to fearful reaction. This would minimise the chances of distorting the policies due to moral panic. Third, media literacy among the masses is an important measure towards countering the impact of exaggerated reporting. This will enhance accountability and critical literacy as suggested by Al-Najjar, which will enable the citizens to be more critical in assessing the truthfulness of news, and this will reduce the chances of panic reactions [25].

Lastly, the general applicability of the findings to society should be emphasised. Fear of crime caused by the media does not only affect the criminal justice policies but also the quality of governance and community sustainability. Fear as policy-making leads to a lack of social cohesion, loss of trust in institutions, and jeopardizes resilience over time. With crime perception being placed in the broader context of environmental sciences, this paper emphasises the fact that security and governance are part of sustainable development and well-being. The response to media-induced moral panic is therefore not only a criminological issue, but also a very important challenge of establishing resilient and sustainable societies.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the role of media in creating perceptions of crime, creating fear, and perpetuating moral panic, with specific reference to its policy implications and its applicability to governance and community welfare. The findings show that media exposure significantly increases the insecurities of the populace, creating inflated images of crime that are converted into increased fear and popularisation of punitive action, even in cases where objective crime levels do not warrant such reactions. The results are consistent with cultivation, agenda-setting, and framing theories and offer empirical support that media-based narratives serve as a trigger of penal populism and reactive policymaking. Importantly, the study extends existing scholarship by situating crime perception within the broader social environment, linking it to governance quality and sustainability an approach seldom considered in prior research. Policy implications are clear: there is a pressing need for responsible media practices that avoid sensationalism, a stronger reliance on evidence-based policy over perception-driven responses, and the promotion of media literacy to enable citizens to critically assess crime reporting and resist panic-driven reactions. At the same time, the study highlights that unchecked fear can erode trust in institutions, distort democratic processes, and undermine social cohesion, making this not merely a criminological concern but a governance and sustainability challenge. While the study is limited by its cross-sectional design and reliance on self-reported data, it contributes to interdisciplinary debates by demonstrating that media, crime perception, and governance are deeply interconnected. Future research should adopt longitudinal and cross-cultural approaches to assess how these dynamics evolve and shape global policy environments.

REFERENCES

- [1] Champagne-Buckley, L., 2019, "Media Influence on Perceptions of Crime," Master's thesis, University of Houston-Clear Lake.
- [2] Bolger, M. A., and Bolger, P. C., 2019, "Predicting Fear of Crime: Results from a Community Survey of a Small City," *Am. J. Crim. Justice*, 44(2), pp. 334–351.
- [3] Srivastava, A., and Yadav, D. S., "Public Opinion Shaping Justice: Analyzing the Impact of Media on High-Profile Criminal Cases."
- [4] Boateng, F. D., and Kaiser, K., 2019, "Trust and Confidence in Media and Criminal Justice Institutions," *Int. J. Offender Ther. Comp. Criminol.*, 63(12), pp. 2213–2233.
- [5] Liu, M., Luo, X., and Lu, W. Z., 2023, "Public Perceptions of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) Based on Social Media Data: Evidence from China," *J. Clean. Prod.*, 387, p. 135840.

- [6] Mazzarino, J. M., Turatti, L., and Petter, S. T., 2020, "Environmental Governance: Media Approach on the United Nations Programme for the Environment," *Environ. Dev.*, 33, p. 100502.
- [7] Busselle, R., and Van den Bulck, J., 2019, "Cultivation Theory, Media, Stories, Processes, and Reality," *Media Effects*, pp. 69–82.
- [8] Naser, M. A., 2020, "Relevance and Challenges of the Agenda-Setting Theory in the Changed Media Landscape," *Am. Commun. J.*, 22(1).
- [9] Tewksbury, D., and Scheufele, D. A., 2019, "News Framing Theory and Research," *Media Effects*, Routledge, pp. 51–68.
- [10] Arbaoui, B., De Swert, K., and Van der Brug, W., 2020, "Sensationalism in News Coverage: A Comparative Study in 14 Television Systems," *Commun. Res.*, 47(2), pp. 299–320.
- [11] Cohen, S., 2019, "Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of Mods and Rockers (1972–2002)," *Crime and Media*, Routledge, pp. 461–482.
- [12] Silcox, J., 2022, "Youth Crime and Depictions of Youth Crime in Canada: Are News Depictions Purely Moral Panic?," *Can. Rev. Sociol.*, 59(1), pp. 96–114.
- [13] Betus, A. E., Kearns, E. M., and Lemieux, A. F., 2021, "How Perpetrator Identity (Sometimes) Influences Media Framing Attacks as 'Terrorism' or 'Mental Illness'," *Commun. Res.*, 48(8), pp. 1133–1156.
- [14] Murji, K., 2020, "The Agony and the Ecstasy: Drugs, Media and Morality," *The Control of Drugs and Drug Users*, CRC Press, pp. 69–85.
- [15] Lavorgna, A., 2019, "Cyber-Organised Crime: A Case of Moral Panic?," *Trends Organ. Crime*, 22(4), pp. 357–374.
- [16] Kerecsi, K., "Penal Populism Versus Penal Nationalism: Criminal Policies in Central and Eastern Europe."
- [17] Pratt, J., and Miao, M., 2022, "Penal Populism: The End of Reason," *Get Your Knee Off Our Necks: From Slavery to Black Lives Matter*, Springer International Publishing, Cham, pp. 111–140.
- [18] Garland, D., 2021, "What's Wrong with Penal Populism? Politics, the Public, and Criminological Expertise," *Asian J. Criminol.*, 16(3), pp. 257–277.
- [19] Mustafaj, M., and Van den Bulck, J., 2021, "The Media and Our Perceptions of the Police," *The Rowman & Littlefield Handbook of Policing, Communication, and Society*, pp. 213–227.
- [20] Kadir, Z. K., 2025, "Fear and Control: Rethinking Criminal Policy through the Lens of Moral Panic," *Int. J. Law Anal.*, 3(2), pp. 201–218.
- [21] Elsass, H. J., Schildkraut, J., Haenfler, R., Klocke, B. V., Madfis, E., and Muschert, G. W., 2021, "Moral Panic, Fear of Crime, and School Shootings: Does Location Matter?," *Sociol. Inq.*, 91(2), pp. 426–454.
- [22] Oakley, C. J., 2024, "Moral Panic in the Modern Era: The Effects of Moral Panic on Policy Implemented Through the Field of Law Enforcement."
- [23] Shoulders, G., 2020, "Media Exposure to Crime, Fear of Crime, and Social Interaction Anxiety," Ph.D. dissertation, Walden University.
- [24] Baldwin-Edwards, M., Blitz, B. K., and Crawley, H., 2019, "The Politics of Evidence-Based Policy in Europe's 'Migration Crisis'," *J. Ethn. Migr. Stud.*, 45(12), pp. 2139–2155.
- [25] Al-Najjar, A., 2020, "Public Media Accountability: Media Journalism, Engaged Publics and Critical Media Literacy in the MENA."