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Crime Television Viewership and Perceived Vulnerability to Crime among College Students

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The University of Southern Mississippi

Crime Television Viewership and Perceived Vulnerability to Crime among College
Students

by

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Abstract

This study focused on college students' viewership of the crime drama television shows *NCIS*, *Law and Order*, *Criminal Minds*, and *CSI* as well as students' perceived vulnerability to crime. The aim of the study was to determine if there is a relationship between the viewing of crime dramas and perceived vulnerability, based on the theories of mean world syndrome and cultivation. The study also examined the platform viewers used to watch crime dramas, whether that was streaming services or other options such as cable or satellite television. The chosen platform was also compared with perceived vulnerability to crime.

To collect this data, a survey was done at The University of Southern Mississippi and was comprised of 99 respondents. Responses were collected over a week's time. The results indicated that respondents who viewed certain crime dramas had a higher perceived vulnerability to crime than respondents who had never viewed those shows. The results were mixed as to which television platform corresponded with higher perceived vulnerability to crime. Additionally, women were found to perceive themselves as more vulnerable than men do.

Keywords: cultivation theory, mean world, crime TV, crime drama, vulnerability, college students

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“The television set has become a key member of the family, the one who tells most of the stories most of the time. Its massive flow of stories showing what things are, how things work, and what to do about them has become the common socializer of our times.”

George Gerbner, 1980

Media scholar George Gerbner refers to the television as a “member of the family,” and most would agree that it has become just that in the decades following its invention. It can be argued that television actually represents several members of the family: the primary household television, the computer, and the smart phone. Nowadays there are many ways to consume media, it seems to permeate every part of our lives. Gerbner proposed that society’s vast consumption of television contributes to its cultivation of certain ideas and beliefs (1969). He also developed the idea of a “mean world syndrome,” in which people are cultivated by violence on television to believe that if given the chance, most other people would take advantage of them (1980).

Violence is clearly prevalent in many of the television programs consumed by viewers. Even in children’s shows, conflict often presents itself in a physical manifestation. Gerbner researched the link between a mean world syndrome and exposure to violence on television, and many other studies followed suit in the years after Gerbner’s original publications. However, violence is far more prevalent on certain television shows than others. Fictional shows such as *Law and Order*, *NCIS*, *Criminal Minds*, and *CSI* were created to tell stories about crime and thus consist of violence and narratives about violent crime in greater quantities. These types of programs are widely available to audiences on a variety of different media platforms. Crime dramas in

particular are a “transnational commodity” that cross borders despite language and cultural differences (Klinger, 2018). Research has been done to test crime dramas specifically, rather than simply television programs that present violence. For example, studies done by Wakshlag and Weaver in 1986 and more recently by Jamieson and Romer in 2014 show a relationship between crime dramas and fear of crime.

In following with Gerbner’s theory of cultivation and mean world syndrome, these crime drama programs could potentially affect a viewer’s ideas about the world, and specifically his or her ideas on how likely he or she is to be a victim of crime.

Wakshlag and Weaver coined this concept “perceived vulnerability to crime” and created a way to test Gerbner’s mean world theory (Wakshlag & Weaver, 1986). This study will examine the relationship between viewership of crime dramas and perceived vulnerability to crime in college students. It will also evaluate the relationship between the platform used to view the crime drama and perceived vulnerability to crime. The goal is to determine if perceived vulnerability changes based on the viewing of crime dramas and the platforms used to view them.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Cultivation Theory

In 1969, George Gerbner first proposed his theory of cultivation through mass media. He hypothesized that prolonged exposure to media would ultimately cultivate shared beliefs among a “public.” In other words, cultivation means that a group of people will hold distinct conceptions about the world based on the most repetitive and prevalent ideas disseminated by a medium (Shanahan, 1999). Gerbner specifically applied this theory to television. His emphasis on the importance of television in the daily lives of the public cannot be exaggerated. He states that television’s significant influence can be attributed to its unique ability to “streamline, amplify, ritualize, and spread into hitherto isolated or protected subcultures...of mass produced information and entertainment” (Gerbner, 1976). Additionally, in closing his 1976 article on television and violence, Gerbner compared the relationship of television and the public to the early relationship of church and state: the church guided and cultivated the decisions and beliefs of the government more than any other entity.

In developing his theory of cultivation, Gerbner deviated quite severely from the common research discourse at the time, which was concerned with direct media effects such as propaganda and persuasion research (Shanahan, 1999). He was not interested in explaining the influence of particular message elements, but rather he took a macro-systems approach which was motivated by evaluating the whole media landscape over time and how that influences people in their daily lives (Potter, 2014). Gerbner stated in his 1969 publication that his concern throughout his discussion on cultivation was not

about specific purposes like education or persuasion or with “direct communication effects” as he calls them.

It is also important to note that Gerbner made little distinction in the way of which genre or which type of television is the most influential in our overall “cultivation.” He believed that factual or fictitious programming both have the ability to cultivate equally and even interrelate (1969). After proposing his initial theory of cultivation, Gerbner and his associates set out to discover whether his theory proved true through a multitude of studies. Actual records of crime were measured against amounts of crime and violence on television in many of Gerbner’s studies, and each time he found that rates of violence on television were always higher than actual rates of violent crime (Potter, 1993). Because of these findings, he predicted that people who had high amounts of television viewing would perceive the world as mean and violent. Gerbner found initially that while it was unknown whether prolonged exposure to television created a deep sense of fear or aggression, it did create a general sense of danger and mistrust, especially when related to heavy viewership (1976).

In order to fully understand cultivation theory, it is important to recognize the emphasis Gerbner placed on what he called “cultural indicators.” In short, a cultural indicator is an element that contributes to the overall effect of television in cultivating our beliefs (Potter, 1993). They can be evaluated from two different perspectives: topic and order. Topic refers to specific themes which are continually evaluated using cultivation theory, like violence, crime, racism, and homosexuality (Potter, 1993). These themes are commonly reinforced on television, and thus there are many studies evaluating these in particular. No one has attempted to define the whole scope of cultural indicators, and thus

there are many topics that have not been explored at length outside of the very common ones like violence and crime.

Order refers to the way cultivation is measured in a study (Potter, 1993). First order questions refer to questions that ask subjects about estimates on the prevalence of certain topics. These questions are straightforward and are represented quantitatively. Second order questions ask about beliefs or ideas such as “Do you think the world is an inherently bad place?” Some research suggests that while first order questions are not necessarily problematic, second order questions may only be effective and reliable when evaluating individuals with a high “need to evaluate” (Coenen, 433).

Gerbner’s theory of cultivation is also reliant on the assumption of non-selective viewing. He assumes that cultivation occurs from everyday viewing of major TV networks, and that viewers watch based on “the clock not the program” (Potter, 1993). However, it was 1979 when Gerber proposed this theory, and obviously viewership habits have changed since then. James Potter proposed that perhaps cultivation needs to be conceptualized differently in regard to non-selective viewership (1993). Since it has been 50 years since Gerbner first published his theory, it is natural that the theory has evolved slightly.

Gerbner and his associates introduced the idea of mainstreaming in 1980 as a response to earlier research. This element of the theory states that certain groups of society may be more susceptible to certain types of cultivation (Gerbner et al. 1980). Mainstreaming accounts for the fact that when certain groups have commonalities, their presence in a cultivation study can skew results. Outside of Gerbner’s work, other researchers throughout the years have begun to apply cultivation theory in diverse ways.

Some studies now use a micro-systems approach to cultivation theory. For example, researchers like Grabe and Drew as well as Hawkins and Pingree believe that cultivation of a mean and scary world is facilitated more by violent television viewing rather than just television viewing in general, as Gerbner first proposed (Potter, 2014; Grabe & Drew, 2007; Hawkins & Pingree, 1980). Others such as Diefenbach and West and Calzo and Ward simply decided to explore different topics of cultural indicators outside of the typical themes of violence and crime, such as gender, mental illness, and sexuality (Potter, 2014; Diefenbach & West, 2007; Calzo & Ward, 2009).

Mean World Syndrome

Building on the theory of cultivation, Gerbner and his colleagues developed the idea of “mean world syndrome” and thus the Mean World Index in 1980 in their Violence Profile no. 11. The concept of the syndrome is that television and the stories told through it create a “mythical world” in the home (Gerbner, 1980). Gerbner argued that because of this mythical world that television creates, and because a large theme that television reiterates is violence, that people are more likely to believe others would take advantage of people if they got the chance and that most people are just looking out for themselves (Gerbner, 1980). Gerbner and his colleagues tested this through the index, and found that the more television a viewer consumes, the more likely they are to express mistrust of others (1980).

Wakshlag and Weaver tested this “mean world theory” in a study in 1986. They tested the relationship between viewing general television programming and people’s perceived vulnerability to crime, and found that there was little correlation. However, they also compared perceived vulnerability to crime with crime specific programs, and

found that the two were strikingly related (1986). Additionally, a study done in Ireland about the relationship between newspaper readership and beliefs about a “mean world” showed that the more people read the newspaper, the stronger their beliefs were about a mean world (O’Connell & Whelan, 1996). Although this study was not about television viewership, the researchers wanted to see if mean world theory applied to other sources of media as well.

In 2003, Romer et al. were curious about why although crime rates were going down at the time in the U.S., public belief in the prevalence of crime was increasing. Through their study, they confirmed that viewing television news can be related to fear and concern about crime (Romer et al., 2003). This additionally supports the idea of mean world beliefs caused by television exposure, although specifically by television news exposure. Nabi and Sullivan tied the theories of cultivation and “reasoned action” together to test whether ideas about a “mean world” would affect a person’s likelihood to take protective measures to prevent crime against themselves (2001). A “reasoned action” implies that an attitude must be reflected by a behavior, so if people held an attitude about a mean world, their behavior would reflect that idea. Their results showed that while there was no direct relationship between a mean world attitude and protective measures, television viewing in general was related to a tendency to take protective measures (Nabi & Sullivan, 2001).

Jamieson and Romer tested Gerbner’s “mean world syndrome” by measuring the relationships between violence in crime dramas specifically, actual prevalence of crime, and public perception of prevalence of crime as well as the public’s fear of crime (Jamieson & Romer, 2014). They found that while violence in crime dramas did not

predict the public's opinion on actual prevalence of crime, it was correlated with a fear of crime in general (Jamieson & Romer, 2014). These results are consistent with Gerbner's idea of mean world cultivation.

Critiques of Cultivation Theory and Mean World Syndrome

Since its creation, cultivation theory has been tested repeatedly and there are many critiques of the theory that currently exist. Gerbner predicted that if a person was exposed to violence in TV, that person would be more likely to fear crime. Studies done by Wakshlag and colleagues are consistent with a view that is quite the opposite. The results from their 1983 study support the notion that the more apprehensive a viewer is (i.e. the more they fear crime), the more crime TV excites them and the more crime TV they will willingly expose themselves to (Wakshlag et al., 1983). It essentially is a reversal of Gerbner's cultivation theory. When Wakshlag performed additional studies, he and his team discovered that when viewers were divided into two groups, one exposed to a crime documentary and the other not exposed to a crime documentary, the group with the exposure willingly chose to view more shows with justice in them after that, such as crime dramas (1983).

Similarly, in 2016 Jöckel and Früh hypothesized that mean world beliefs were not only caused by media exposure, but also by pre-disposed beliefs related to political and moral conservatism. They found weak evidence that crime TV consumption or conservatism led directly to mean world beliefs. However, they proposed from their results that the relationship between the three is best modeled in a re-enforcing spiral, in which mean world beliefs enforce conservatism, conservatism enforces crime TV consumption, and vice versa. This research aligns with Wakshlag and colleagues' idea of

selective exposure: that viewers can re-inforce their own mean world beliefs, rather than blindly being cultivated by television (Wakshlag et al., 1983).

Doob and Macdonald acknowledged the fact that Gerbner and his colleagues had repeatedly controlled for possible confounding variables in their studies, but also noted that every confounding variable cannot always be accounted for. They predicted that one variable that Gerbner had never accounted for-- actual rate of crime in certain neighborhoods-- could be responsible for the apparent “cultivation effect” (1979). Through their research, they did find that residents of high-crime neighborhoods were more likely to be fearful of victimization, and that residents of high-crime neighborhoods consumed more television than low or medium crime level neighborhoods (Doob & Macdonald, 1979). It should be noted that Gerbner and colleagues published their idea of “mainstreaming” shortly after this study was conducted, which also speaks to the issue of certain groups being more susceptible to cultivation.

Bridges et al. conducted a study in which they found no correlation between viewing time and fear of crime among a group of college students (1987). However, they did find that female respondents generally were more fearful and that there was a slight correlation between viewership time of females and their fear of crime, as predicted by cultivation theory (Bridges et al., 1987). In fact, the mean total score was 15 points higher for heavy viewers than it was for light viewers. Generally, though, their study exhibited another instance in which cultivation theory was not fully supported.

Television Viewership by College Students

A key concept in Gerbner’s research on cultivation was “non-selectiveness,” or the idea that the viewer is exposed to whatever programming is appearing on television at

that scheduled time (1976). In the 1970s and 1980s this was a logical concept, because television was only available to the masses through regularly scheduled TV programming. Viewers could only be cultivated by what they saw, and what they saw had to be what was on TV at the times they were able to watch. However, since that time, viewership habits of the public have changed dramatically due to alternative viewing methods.

In the years since Gerbner's original publications, researchers have noted the need to re-evaluate the concept of non-selectiveness. Potter said that although television networks still had regularly scheduled programming, many viewers were utilizing VHS players to selectively watch television and movies (Potter, 1993). When DVRs and the Internet were developed, there were again new avenues from which viewers could watch television. Particularly among millennials, viewership of television shows through these mediums was rising as early as 2009 (Damratoski et al., 2011).

In 2016, almost half (49 percent) of the U.S. population subscribed to a streaming service such as Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime, etc. (Digital Democracy Survey, 2016). In the same survey, researchers discovered that 90 percent of millennials and 88 percent of Generation Z had "binge-watched" a television show (Digital Democracy Survey, 2016). This means that the vast majority of college students in 2016 had participated in a viewing method very different than the one first described by Gerbner. Furthermore, in the same year 34 percent of Generation Z and 38 percent of Millennials reported being weekly binge-watchers, meaning that they consumed three or more television episodes in one sitting (Digital Democracy Survey, 2016). These results show that college-aged people, millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) and members of Generation Z (born

from 1997 and beyond), have unique viewing habits that are not necessarily in sync with Gerbner's original concept of "non-selectiveness."

Many crime dramas are available to young people to watch on various kinds of platforms. Some of the more popular and accessible shows include *Law and Order*, *CSI*, *Criminal Minds*, and *NCIS*, and thus those programs will be tested in the current study. Because the role of viewing of crime television among young people needs to be more fully explicated in order to understand how it aligns with existing ideas on cultivation theory, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ₁: Will overall television viewing affect perceived vulnerability to crime?

RQ_{2a}: Will the viewing of *NCIS* affect perceived vulnerability to crime?

RQ_{2b}: Will the viewing of *Law and Order* affect perceived vulnerability to crime?

RQ_{2c}: Will the viewing of *Criminal Minds* affect perceived vulnerability to crime?

RQ_{2d}: Will the viewing of *CSI* affect perceived vulnerability to crime?

RQ_{3a}: Will the viewing platform for *NCIS* affect perceived vulnerability to crime?

RQ_{3b}: Will the viewing platform for *Law and Order* affect perceived vulnerability to crime?

RQ_{3c}: Will the viewing platform for *Criminal Minds* affect perceived vulnerability to crime?

RQ_{3d}: Will the viewing platform for *CSI* affect perceived vulnerability to crime?

RQ_{4a}: Will the viewing of other crime dramas affect perceived vulnerability to crime?

RQ_{4b}: Will the viewing platform for other crime dramas affect perceived vulnerability to crime?

RQ5: Will age affect perceived vulnerability to crime?

RQ6: Will gender affect perceived vulnerability to crime?

RQ7: Will race affect perceived vulnerability to crime?

Chapter 3: Methods

The current study employed a survey which was performed entirely online. Data was collected from December 2, 2019 to December 10, 2019. The survey was distributed to college students at the University of Southern Mississippi. The study measured overall television viewing and perceived vulnerability to crime, as well as viewing of crime dramas such as *NCIS*, *Law and Order*, *Criminal Minds*, and *CSI*. Respondents were also asked which viewing platforms they used to watch crime dramas. The intent of the study was to see if there is a relationship between these variables and perceived vulnerability to crime.

Sampling

The survey was done through Qualtrics, and respondents were recruited through a variety of ways. Students in introductory-level mass communications classes were asked to participate, and additionally, students were recruited through social media from various student organizations on the University of Southern Mississippi's campus. Although this sample cannot be considered representative of the entire USM student population, it does include responses from a variety of students on campus.

Survey Design

Once students agreed to participate in the study they were provided with a link to the Qualtrics survey. They were then asked to agree to the terms of the study through a standard informed consent document. This study was approved through the Institutional Review Board at the University of Southern Mississippi, and adhered to all recommended protocols. If the respondent agreed to the terms of the study, they were then directed to

the beginning of the survey. Respondents were first asked to enter their age, gender, and race.

The next set of questions measured perceived vulnerability to crime (Wakshlag & Weaver, 1986). These items were compiled from several previously published studies (Bryant et al., 1981; Doob & Macdonald, 1979; Wakshlag, Vial, & Tamborini, 1983). Items in this section asked general questions about the respondents' fear of being a victim and it also gave scenario-based questions such as "If you were to walk by yourself in a local park each night for a month, what do you think the chances are that you would be the victim of a serious crime?" Respondents answered these 14 questions on a five-point scale, ranging from "Not at all" to "Extremely".

Next, respondents were asked about their television viewing. The first question asked about frequency of overall television viewing. The answer options were "Never, Sometimes (several times in a year), Frequently (several times a month), or Very Frequently (several times a week or everyday)." This question format was repeated throughout the remainder of the survey to evaluate the frequency at which respondents watch the television shows *NCIS*, *Law and Order* (Criminal Intent or Special Victims Unit), *Criminal Minds*, and *CSI*. There was also a question asking about the frequency at which respondents view other crime dramas besides the ones mentioned in the survey.

Finally, the survey included questions about the viewing platforms that respondent's use. The question asked: "What form of media do you use to view this television show (*show being evaluated*)? Check ALL that apply." Respondents were given a list of viewing platforms like "satellite television," "cable television," "Netflix," "Hulu," "other internet streaming service," etc. This question was asked for each of the

crime dramas evaluated: *NCIS*, *Law and Order*, *Criminal Minds*, and *CSI*. The final question asked what viewing platforms respondents used to watch other fictional crime television shows not previously mentioned. After respondents completed this section they were thanked for their time in responding to the survey. They were also notified that their response had been recorded.

Chapter 4: Results

The sample initially included 101 respondents, but two were removed for repeated inconsistent answers (example: responding “I have never seen *NCIS*” on one question and then indicating that they “frequently” watch *NCIS* on a separate question). The remaining sample was made of 99 respondents, eighty-five% were white ($N = 84$) and fifteen% were Black or African American ($N = 15$). Twenty-seven of the respondents were male and 72 were female. The mean age of the sample was 20 years old ($SD = 1.26$) with ages ranging from 18 to 23 years old. The sample included only students at The University of Southern Mississippi.

Before analyzing the results, reliability for the perceived vulnerability to crime scale was tested. The scale was found to be reliable at the $\alpha = .87$ level. After reliability was tested, normality was evaluated for the scale variables. All were found to be non-normal (skewness outside -1 and 1, or kurtosis outside -1 and 2, as well as visible non-normality) except for one variable (the frequency of how often respondents viewed “other fictional crime dramas.”) In order to continue with these variables in the analysis, they were all broken down into two categories, representing high and low presence of the variable. The low category included responses that indicated that the respondent had never viewed the television show. The high category grouped the responses “sometimes,” “frequently,” and “very frequently” into one category indicating that the respondent had viewed the television show.

Respondents were able to select multiple responses for the question “What form of media do you use to view this television show?” which was asked for each of the television shows tested. These responses were also broken down into categories. The first

category included the respondents who had never viewed that television show. The second category included “other” viewing platforms including satellite television, cable, and “other” responses. The third category was “streaming services” which included Netflix, Hulu, streaming from a network website, and other internet streaming services. If the respondent selected a majority of their responses to be in the “streaming services” category, they were placed in that category. Likewise, if they selected a majority of their responses to be in the “other” category, they were placed respectively.

Research Question 1 asked if overall television viewing would affect perceived vulnerability to crime. A one-way ANOVA was used to test this research question. The results showed that there was no significance in the model $F(1, 99) = 1.98, p = .16$. Therefore, there was no evidence that the amount that respondents watch television in general affects their perceived vulnerability to crime.

Research Question 2a asked if the viewing of the television show *NCIS* would affect perceived vulnerability to crime. A one-way ANOVA was used to assess this question. There was no significance in the model $F(1, 99) = .38, p = .54$. No evidence therefore exists indicating that the viewing of the television show *NCIS* affects a respondent’s perceived vulnerability to crime.

Research Question 2b inquired about if the viewing of the television show *Law and Order* would affect perceived vulnerability to crime. A one-way ANOVA was also used to test this research question. The model held no significance $F(1, 99) = .84, p = .36$. This demonstrates that there is no evidence that viewing *Law and Order* affects perceived vulnerability of crime within respondents.

Research Question 2c assessed whether the viewing of the television show *Criminal Minds* would affect respondents' perceived vulnerability to crime. A one-way ANOVA was used to test this question. The mean perceived vulnerability of crime for respondents who had never viewed *Criminal Minds* was 3.06 (SD = .71). The mean perceived vulnerability of crime for respondents who had viewed *Criminal Minds* was 3.41 (SD = .63). There was significance within the model $F(1, 99) = 7.04, p < .01$. These results indicate that the respondents who had viewed the show *Criminal Minds* were more likely to perceive themselves as vulnerable to crime as opposed to those who had not seen the show.

Research Question 2d asked about if the viewing of the television show *CSI* would affect perceived vulnerability to crime. A one-way ANOVA was utilized to test this question. The model held no significance $F(1, 99) = 2.89, p = .09$. This demonstrates that there is no evidence that viewing the television show *CSI* affects perceived vulnerability of crime within respondents.

Research Question 3a asked if the viewing platform the respondent used to watch *NCIS* would affect perceived vulnerability to crime. A one-way ANOVA was used to assess this research question. There was no significance in the model $F(1, 99) = .72, p = .49$. No evidence therefore exists indicating that the viewing platform used to watch *NCIS* affects a respondent's perceived vulnerability to crime.

Research Question 3b assessed if the viewing platform the respondent used to watch *Law and Order* would affect their perceived vulnerability to crime. A one-way ANOVA was used to test this research question. The mean perceived vulnerability of crime for respondents who had never viewed *Law and Order* on any platform was 3.17

(SD = .66). The mean perceived vulnerability of crime for respondents who had viewed *Law and Order* primarily through streaming services was 3.47 (SD = .67), and the mean for respondents who viewed *Law and Order* primarily through other platforms was 3.13 (SD = .64). There was significance within the model $F(1, 99) = 4.15, p < .01$. These results demonstrate that respondents who used streaming services to view *Law and Order* were more likely to perceive themselves as vulnerable to crime, followed by respondents who had never viewed *Law and Order* and then by respondents who watched *Law and Order* through other platforms.

Research Question 3c inquired about if the viewing platform the respondent used to watch *Criminal Minds* would affect their perceived vulnerability to crime. A one-way ANOVA was used to analyze these results. The mean perceived vulnerability of crime for respondents who had never viewed *Criminal Minds* on any platform was 3.06 (SD = .71). The mean for respondents who had viewed *Criminal Minds* mostly through streaming services was 3.33 (SD = .69), and the mean perceived vulnerability for respondents who viewed *Criminal Minds* primarily through other platforms was 3.57 (SD = .48). There was significance within the model $F(1, 99) = 4.27, p = .02$. These results indicate that respondents who used other platforms to view *Criminal Minds* were more likely to perceive themselves as vulnerable to crime, followed by respondents who primarily used streaming services and then by respondents who had never viewed *Criminal Minds*.

Research Question 3d asked if the viewing platform for *CSI* would affect perceived vulnerability to crime. A one-way ANOVA was also used to test this research question. The results showed that there was no significance in the model $F(1, 99) = 1.95,$

$p = .15$. Therefore, there is no evidence that the viewing platform respondents use to watch *CSI* affects their perceived vulnerability to crime.

Research Question 4a assessed if the viewing of crime dramas other than the ones tested would affect perceived vulnerability to crime. To analyze these results, a one-way ANOVA was used. The mean perceived vulnerability to crime for respondents who had never viewed another crime drama was 2.88 (SD = .65). The mean for respondents who had viewed other crime dramas was 3.34 (SD = .67). There was significance within the model $F(1, 99) = 8.09, p < .01$. The results indicate that respondents who had viewed another crime drama were more likely to perceive themselves as vulnerable to crime than were respondents who had never viewed another crime drama.

Research Question 4b asked if the viewing platform respondents used to view crime dramas other than the ones tested would affect perceived vulnerability to crime. A one-way ANOVA was used to test this question. The mean perceived vulnerability of crime for respondents who had never viewed another crime drama on any platform was 2.86 (SD = .66). The mean for respondents who had viewed other crime dramas mostly through streaming services was 3.39 (SD = .65), and the mean perceived vulnerability for respondents who viewed other crime dramas primarily through other platforms was 3.11 (SD = .72). There was significance within the model $F(1, 99) = 5.26, p < .01$. These results indicate that respondents who used streaming services to view other crime dramas were more likely to perceive themselves as vulnerable to crime, followed by respondents who primarily used other platforms and then by respondents who had never viewed other crime dramas.

Research Question 5 investigated if age would affect the respondents' perceived vulnerability to crime. A Pearson's correlation was performed and the model indicated that there was not a significant correlation between these two variables $r(99) = .15, p = .13$. This indicates that there is no evidence of a correlation between age and perceived vulnerability to crime.

Research Question 6 asked if gender of the respondent would affect perceived vulnerability to crime. A one-way ANOVA was used to analyze these results. The mean perceived vulnerability to crime for males was 2.68 (SD = .55) and the mean for females was 3.45 (SD = .61). The model was significant $F(1, 99) = 32.64, p < .01$. This demonstrates that females were more likely to perceive themselves as vulnerable to crime than were males.

Research Question 7 inquired about if the race of the respondent would affect perceived vulnerability to crime. A one-way ANOVA was also used to test this research question. The model held no significance $F(1, 99) = 1.04, p = .31$. This demonstrates that there is no evidence that race affects perceived vulnerability of crime within respondents.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Fictional crime dramas permeate television, from primetime TV spots to entire shows available on streaming services like Netflix and Hulu. For viewers, crime dramas are almost unavoidable and many people enjoy and indulge in this genre. The current research specifically evaluated the shows *Law and Order*, *NCIS*, *Criminal Minds*, and *CSI*. These programs along with many others are available on a wide array of platforms. Thus, this research is relevant and pertinent because it questioned not only whether viewing these crime dramas would affect a person's perceived vulnerability to crime, but also if the platform used to view them would affect perceived vulnerability.

Perceived vulnerability is based on George Gerbner's original theory of cultivation and his later research on mean world syndrome, which both hypothesize that the more people are exposed to violence on television, the more they will be cultivated to fear crime from others. In the current study, evidence exists that respondents who had viewed crime dramas were more likely to perceive themselves as vulnerable to crime than were respondents who had never viewed crime dramas. For instance, the results show that respondents who had viewed the show *Criminal Minds* had a higher average perceived vulnerability score opposed to those who had never seen *Criminal Minds*.

Respondents were also asked about their viewing of other crime dramas, as many other shows exist and thus could cultivate fear besides the ones tested. Evidence shows that people who had viewed crime dramas other than the ones tested were more likely to perceive themselves as vulnerable to crime than were those who had never viewed other crime dramas. Results for questions asking about the crime dramas *Law and Order*, *CSI*, and *NCIS* were not significant and thus cannot support the previous evidence. Overall,

the results indicate that viewers who responded that they have seen crime dramas are more fearful of victimization than those who reported not viewing crime dramas.

These results align with Gerbner's original research about mean world syndrome. The more viewers are exposed to a "mean world" through television, the more likely they are to mistrust others and consider themselves as potential victims of the crimes. Additionally, the results support Wakshlag and Weaver's findings. When they compared crime specific programs and perceived vulnerability, as was done in the current study, Wakshlag and Weaver found that the two were "strikingly related" (Wakshlag & Weaver, 1986).

The results of the current study also concur with research done in 2014 by Jamieson and Romer, where they concluded that viewership of crime dramas relates to an increase in fear of crime in general. Alternatively, these results regarding exposure to crime dramas do not align with the results from the 1987 study done by Bridges and his colleagues. Although they tested college students, as did the current study, they found no correlation between viewing time and fear of crime. These results do not necessarily imply that viewing crime dramas is a direct cause of a higher perceived vulnerability, but rather that the two are related. Other variables could contribute to this relationship.

Another contributing variable could be gender. The current study found that females were more likely to perceive themselves as vulnerable than were males. Similarly, in a 1987 study by Bridges et al., female respondents were generally more fearful and there was shown to be a slight correlation between viewership time of females and their fear of crime. However, 73 percent of respondents in the current study were female, and only 27 percent were male. More research needs to be performed to evaluate

if women really have a higher perceived vulnerability than men. Although age and race could also be factors that affect perceived vulnerability to crime, the results of the current study for these variables were not found to be significant.

Clearly, viewership habits have changed since Gerbner's original publications in the 70s and 80s on cultivation and mean world syndrome. Nowadays viewers are not limited to watching the television programs that happen to be on at the time. Instead, people are cultivated by the shows they choose to watch on DVRs and streaming services. The current study accounted for this and also inquired if the platform used to view the crime dramas tested would affect perceived vulnerability to crime. The platforms tested were broken into two categories: streaming services and "other" platforms. The options in the streaming services category included any platform used via the internet such as Netflix, Hulu, other internet streaming services, and network websites. Options in the "other" category included platforms like cable and satellite television.

After evaluation, the results for three questions pertaining to platform usage were found to be significant. In two of the questions, respondents who used streaming services to view crime dramas were found to perceive themselves as vulnerable to crime more often than those who used other platforms or those who had never viewed the crime dramas. Streaming services are unique in the fact that viewers can choose when, where, and how much of a particular show to watch. Research shows that college-aged students in particular are prone to binge-watching through streaming services (Digital Democracy Survey, 2016). This could perhaps account for the increased perceived vulnerability. If

someone is exposed to large amounts of a fear-inducing show in small windows of time, they may be more susceptible to believing themselves vulnerable to crime.

The results of the question asking about the crime drama *Criminal Minds* showed that respondents who used “other” platforms for viewing were more likely to perceive themselves as vulnerable to crime than were respondents who used streaming services or who had never seen the show. This could be due to Gerbner’s idea of “non-selectiveness,” which states that viewers are cultivated by certain TV shows because they have limited freedom in choosing what shows they consume (1976). When using platforms like satellite television and cable, viewers are more limited in what they view than they are with streaming services because specific television shows only appear on certain channels and at particular times. Therefore, if *Criminal Minds* happens to be on one of the few channels a viewer watches at the certain times they watch that channel, they may be more likely to be cultivated by the show and experience higher levels of perceived vulnerability to crime. Additional research would need to be performed to test this explanation and to evaluate if viewers are affected more by streaming services or other platforms in regard to perceived vulnerability.

Some limitations of the current study should be noted. Respondents were primarily female. Additionally, respondents were mostly white and only two races (white and African American or Black) were represented. These demographics are not representative of the student population at The University of Southern Mississippi, nor of most college campuses in general. The sample was drawn from students involved in on-campus groups such as Greek life or other clubs and from students who were taking media-related classes. These groups are also not representative of the larger population of

college students. Although these limitations exist, the current study provided a baseline for evaluating perceived vulnerability to crime in college students based on their viewing of various crime dramas.

Little research exists evaluating perceived vulnerability in college students, particularly based on crime drama viewership. Due to this fact, further research needs to be done testing crime dramas specifically. The current study tested four different crime dramas, *Law and Order*, *CSI*, *Criminal Minds*, and *NCIS*. These are shows that are easily available to viewers through streaming services as well as cable and satellite television. However, there are a multitude of other crime dramas available on these platforms. Future research should evaluate a wide array of different crime dramas.

Streaming services and binge-watching may play a part in perceived vulnerability to crime. Additional research should evaluate if the use of streaming services affects perceived vulnerability when exposed to specific crime dramas other than the ones tested in the current study. Evaluating how often and in what quantities viewers “binge-watch” crime dramas may also be helpful in providing explanations for perceived vulnerability to crime.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Television has been shown to be a cultivator of ideas and beliefs in today's society through mediums such as news media, documentaries, movies, or fictional TV programs. Whether or not television is a cultivator of mean world syndrome has been tested time and time again, with various types of television programs. Crime dramas permeate all television platforms, and viewers are likely to consume them in a least some quantity. Viewing these crime dramas can change peoples' ideas about the world around them, and they may even make them fear becoming a victim of crime themselves. Cultivation occurs unconsciously, and it is up to viewers to recognize that the television programs they consume can deeply affect their worldview.

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Appendix A

Survey Part 1- Demographics

1. What is your age?
 - a. (enter age)
2. What is your gender?
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Other
3. What is your race?
 - a. White
 - b. Black or African American
 - c. American Indian or Alaska Native
 - d. Asian
 - e. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 - f. Other

Survey Part 2- Perceived Vulnerability Scale by James Weaver and Jacob Wakshlag

Responses were reported on a scale ranging from not at all (1) to extremely (5)

1. How likely is it that you personally will be a victim of some type of violent behavior?
2. How fearful are you that some harm will befall you someday because of someone's act of violence?
3. To what extent are crimes of violence a serious problem where you live now?
4. How likely do you think it is that you or one of your close friends will have their apartment, dorm room, or house broken into during the next year?
5. How often do you decide not to walk alone at night because you are afraid of being the victim of a violent crime?

6. How dangerous do you think it is for a female driver of a car to pick up a male hitch-hiker, who is a stranger, after dark?
7. What do you think the chances are that if you were to walk alone in the area around where you live each night for a month that you would be a victim of a serious crime?
8. If a child were to play alone in the park each day for a month, what do you think the chances are that they would be the victim of a violent crime?
9. If you were to walk by yourself in a local park each night for a month, what do you think the chances are that you would be the victim of a serious crime?
10. What do you think the chances are that you, one of your family, or one of your close friends might be the victim of an assault during the next year?
11. You've lived alone in a small community for many years and you know most of the people and places in town. At 11 PM you arrive home and find your front door unlocked. You don't remember if you locked it that last time you left home. How concerned would you be that you might be assaulted?
12. You are driving to visit friends. On your way, you get lost in a small rural town. It's dark out, and since there are no other lights on anywhere, you go into a bar to ask for directions. How concerned would you be that you might be assaulted?
13. You are home alone at night watching television. It is a pleasant evening and your windows are open. You hear some whispering voices outside, but you don't know exactly where they came from. How concerned would you be that you might be assaulted?
14. You're walking home from work at 1 AM. Three men, obviously drunk, are walking toward you. No one else is around. How concerned would you be that you might be assaulted?

Survey Part 3- Crime Drama Viewership

1. In general, how often do you watch television? (Netflix, satellite television, cable, Hulu, other streaming service, etc.)
 - a. Never

- b. Sometimes (several times in a year)
 - c. Frequently (several times a month)
 - d. Very Frequently (several times a week or everyday)
2. How often do you watch the television show *NCIS*?
- a. Never
 - b. Sometimes (several times in a year)
 - c. Frequently (several times a month)
 - d. Very Frequently (several times a week or everyday)
3. What form of media do you use to view this television show (*NCIS*)? Check ALL that apply.
- a. I never view *NCIS*.
 - b. Satellite Television (Dish, Direct TV, etc.)
 - c. Cable television
 - d. Netflix
 - e. Hulu
 - f. Other internet streaming service
 - g. Network website (ABC, NBC, etc.)
 - h. Other
4. How often do you watch the television show *Law and Order* (Criminal Intent or Special Victims Unit)?
- a. Never
 - b. Sometimes (several times in a year)
 - c. Frequently (several times a month)
 - d. Very Frequently (several times a week or everyday)
5. What form of media do you use to view this television show (*Law and Order*)? Check ALL that apply.
- a. I never view *Law and Order*.
 - b. Satellite Television (Dish, Direct TV, etc.)
 - c. Cable television
 - d. Netflix
 - e. Hulu

- f. Other internet streaming service
 - g. Network website (ABC, NBC, etc.)
 - h. Other
6. How often do you watch the television show *Criminal Minds*?
- a. Never
 - b. Sometimes (several times in a year)
 - c. Frequently (several times a month)
 - d. Very Frequently (several times a week or everyday)
7. What form of media do you use to view this television show (*Criminal Minds*)?
Check ALL that apply.
- a. I never view *Criminal Minds*.
 - b. Satellite Television (Dish, Direct TV, etc.)
 - c. Cable television
 - d. Netflix
 - e. Hulu
 - f. Other internet streaming service
 - g. Network website (ABC, NBC, etc.)
 - h. Other
8. How often do you watch the television show *CSI*?
- a. Never
 - b. Sometimes (several times in a year)
 - c. Frequently (several times a month)
 - d. Very Frequently (several times a week or everyday)
9. What form of media do you use to view this television show (*CSI*)? Check ALL that apply.
- a. I never view *CSI*.
 - b. Satellite Television (Dish, Direct TV, etc.)
 - c. Cable television
 - d. Netflix
 - e. Hulu
 - f. Other internet streaming service

- g. Network website (ABC, NBC, etc.)
- h. Other

10. How often do you watch any other fictional crime television shows?

- a. Never
- b. Sometimes (several times in a year)
- c. Frequently (several times a month)
- d. Very Frequently (several times a week or everyday)

11. What form of media do you use to view these other fictional crime television shows? Check ALL that apply.

- a. I never view other fictional crime television shows.
- b. Satellite Television (Dish, Direct TV, etc.)
- c. Cable television
- d. Netflix
- e. Hulu
- f. Other internet streaming service
- g. Network website (ABC, NBC, etc.)
- h. Other

Appendix B

Office of Research Integrity



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NOTICE OF INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD ACTION

The project below has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services regulations (45 CFR Part 46), and University Policy to ensure:

- The risks to subjects are minimized and reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered involving risks to subjects must be reported immediately. Problems should be reported to ORI via the Incident template on Cayuse IRB.
- The period of approval is twelve months. An application for renewal must be submitted for projects exceeding twelve months.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: IRB-19-418

PROJECT TITLE: Crime Television Viewership and Fear of Victimization among College Students

SCHOOL/PROGRAM: Communication Studies, Criminal Justice, Forensic Sci

RESEARCHER(S): Madison Seymour, Lindsey Maxwell

IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Approved

CATEGORY: Expedited

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

PERIOD OF APPROVAL: September 30, 2019

Donald Sacco, Ph.D.

Institutional Review Board Chairperson