

“This is gonna sound really bad, but...”: Feminist Politics and Stigma Management in True Crime Podcast Fandoms

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Background

- **Social Context:** The mid-2010s saw a surge in digital activism focused on resisting misogyny and gender-based violence, creating an ecosystem where women were empowered to voice discontent
- **Emergent Media:** Within this climate, true crime podcasts (TCPs) exploded in popularity as a genre primarily created and consumed by women.
- **The Gap:** While existing surveys indicate that women and non-binary listeners utilize TCPs for escape, safety, and social interaction, we lack a comprehensive understanding of the long-term engagement and the specific life lessons that listeners derive from these stories.

The Current Study

This study uses qualitative methods (interviews) to explore the "how" and "why" of listener engagement and its connection to themes of powerlessness and stigma management.

Methods

Virtual semi-structured in-depth interviews with true crime podcast listeners recruited from three active true crime podcast subreddits. Inclusion criteria: 1) > 18 years, 2) reside in the U.S., and 3) listen to at least one true crime podcast.

Participants (N = 14)

- Average age: 36 (min = 22, max = 54)
- Gender: 13 Female, 1 Nonbinary
- Race: 12 white, 1 Black, 1 Half-White Half-Chinese



Findings: Contesting the Gender Hierarchy and Stigma Management

Most participants started listening to true crime podcasts during their surge in popularity in the mid-to-late 2010s. Three main themes emerged in the data that characterize the utility of TCPs: processing and expressing anger, engaging in gendered collective memory processes, and learning about safety. In each of these themes, participants both resist and reinforce gendered stigmas.

Process and Expressing Anger

"Fuck politeness", powerful men abusing women, rigid gender role expectations

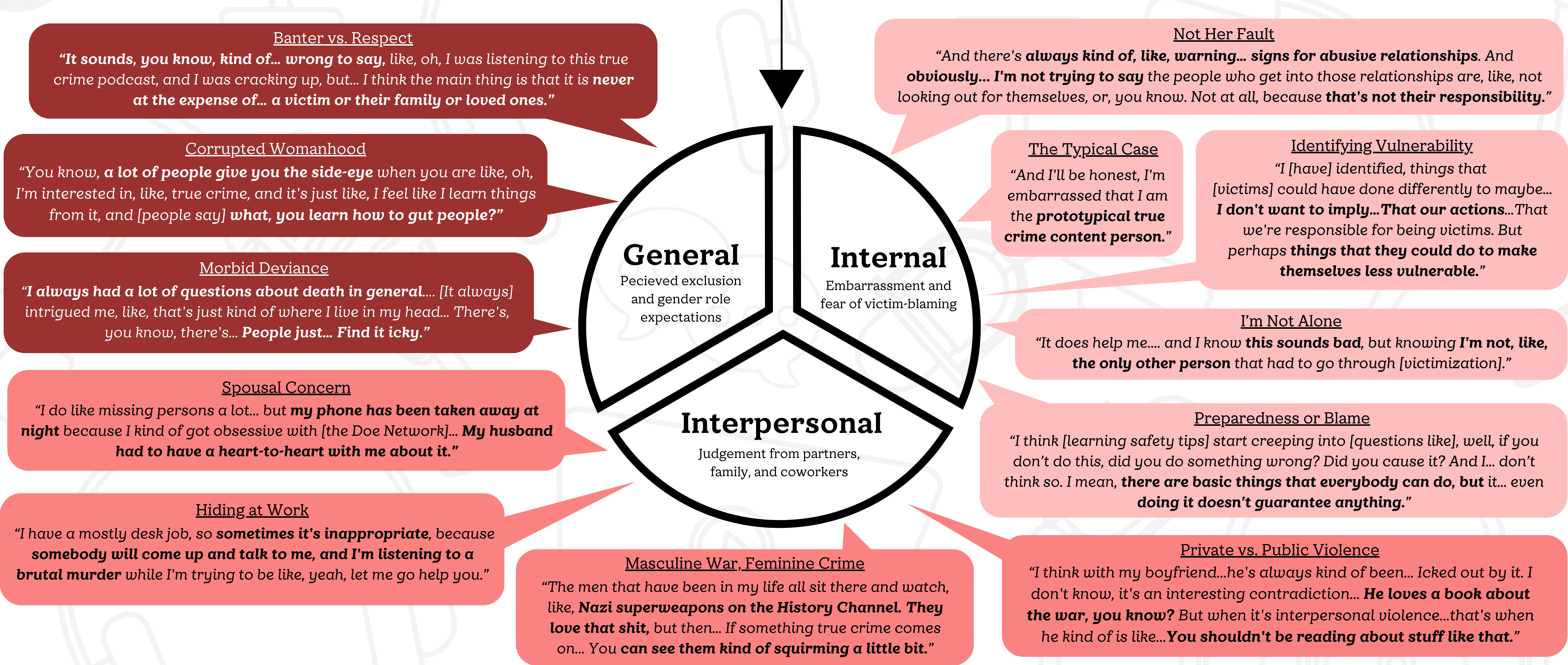
Gendered Collective Memory

Gender solidarity through learning about and remembering cases of female victims

Safety: Threats and Tactics

Skepticism and distrust of institutions, tactics for avoiding victimization by strangers

However, even as participants are empowered by TCPs, they confront general, interpersonal, and internal stigma that complicates their relationship to TCPs and the true crime genre.



Conclusion

Exploration into the motivations of TCP listeners reveals that female and nonbinary TCP fans confront gendered stigma on general, interpersonal, and internal levels.

1. **General:** Resistance to the expectations for what women should and should not be interested in.
2. **Interpersonal:** Judging from the people in their lives, particularly men who do not support their consumption of TCP.
3. **Internal:** Concern that the utilitarian safety tactics could be construed as victim-blaming

TCP listeners occupy a state of constant negotiation over the perceptions and implications of true crime content.

The stigma that women and nonbinary people experience reflects themes of feminist resistance characteristic of the mid-2010s political landscape and an overall lack of control over institutional and interpersonal injustice.