

**Pointing Fingers: Moral Judgements and Law Enforcement Perception in Online True
Crime Communities**

by

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Abstract

In the digital age, civilian interest in criminal cases has seen an upsurge over the past few years, leading to speculation, misinformation, and action on the part of online users. The November 2022 murder of four college students sent shockwaves across online communities, stoking widespread interest and drawing thousands to a single forum on *Reddit*. This study sought to analyze digitally-based civilian policing, addressing the current rise of online true crime communities. Leveraging Haidt and Graham's Moral Foundations Theory (2007), this study examined the psychological processes that may be involved in public information consumption and online behaviour in response to criminal cases. The present research sought to understand whether the ubiquity of criminal cases in online spaces led citizens to participate in websleuthing forums as an outlet for moral judgement. We proposed that moral foundations language would be prevalent in *Reddit* discussions regarding the Idaho University criminal case and would be associated with police attitudes. Data was collected from the largest *Reddit* forum pertaining to the case. Both quantitative analyses (independent sample t-tests) and inductive methods (using Pennebaker et al.'s 2022 Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count Program and qualitative description) were used. Results demonstrated that fairness-related language was more prevalent in posts pertaining to law enforcement. Findings may advance knowledge on community engagement with law enforcement, and the broader scheme of internet culture relative to moral-psychological phenomena.

Keywords: Moral foundations, true crime, websleuth, online, case, attitudes

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Pointing Fingers: The Role of Moral Judgements and Authority in Online True Crime Communities

In November of 2022, the University of Idaho in Moscow (ID) sent shockwaves across North America and the internet with the tragic murder of four students at an off-campus residence. The case left investigators and the public grappling for answers. The victims were Madison Mogen (21), Kaylee Goncalves (21), and Xana Kernodle (20), along with Ethan Chapin (20). Despite the severity of the incident, no immediate suspect was named, and the murder weapon, believed to be a large fixed-blade knife, left room for the public to imagine the severity and anonymity of the crime. The unsolved homicide drew significant attention, prompting thousands of tips to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Nearly seven weeks later, with the community anxious and speculation rampant, an arrest was made in Pennsylvania. The apprehended individual was revealed to be a doctoral student in criminal justice.

Amid the ongoing investigation, concerns emerged about communication with the victims' families. A parent expressed frustration during an interview with *NBC's "TODAY"* show, revealing that information about the police interest in a Hyundai Elantra came to her at the same time as it did the public—highlighting perceived gaps in communication. The police spokesperson emphasized the belief that the incident was a targeted attack but clarified uncertainty regarding whether the residence or its occupants were the specific target. The department actively worked to dispel online speculation and confirmed clearing specific individuals of police interest. Notably, the two housemates present during the attack who had been sleeping at the time had been cleared of police suspicion, adding a layer of complexity to the ongoing investigation. The build-up of partial releases of evidence, vague clarifications, and dissent from victims of the family stirred public tension leading up to the arrest of a suspect in this case. There is a paucity of research on the issue of public

engagement with criminal cases on social media, as most literature involving police-online civilian interactions involved extralegal pedophile-hunting communities, or politically-motivated crimes (Hadjimatheou, 2021; Nhan et al., 2017). The purpose of the present study was to examine public engagement with a high-profile case via the social media platform *Reddit* and examine the role of police perceptions and moral intuitions in sharing information.

Media

In an age where information is readily accessible, media outlets have adapted to best meet the demands of a culture that values information and the ways in which said information is presented to us. *Infotainment* is the phenomenon of edited, formatted information presented to the general public as a means of entertainment. It emphasizes and enables a takeaway of subjective information over that of objective fact through a combination of news features, entertainment, and advertising. The blend of fact versus fiction in *infotainment* has led to a vested interest on the part of the public, blurring the lines between authority and civilian roles in criminal prosecution, resulting in individuals feeling they have a stake in these cases. *Infotainment* in the context of criminal cases debuted in the 1990s with the rise of the ‘media trial’, and the sensationalization of criminal cases via news media has remained steadfast since. The current literature has pointed towards media exposure – via sources such as news radio – correlating positively to fear of crime and police attitudes (Shin & Watson, 2024).

This era saw a shift away from typical legal settings, with high-profile legal cases increasingly being played out beyond courtrooms on television screens and in newspapers. Cases such as that of Richard Ramirez – the Night Stalker – sensationalized gruesome details and captured the public's attention, transforming offenders into spectacles beyond judicial procedures. The media enabled intense public discussion, imposing views of guilt or innocence through headlines and selective coverage. Such cases and their concurrent media

coverage fostered a strong public fascination with violent crime, wherein individuals became interested in examining this violent ‘other’ and how it relates to society on a wider scale (Dowler & Muzzatti, 2006). The media trial marked a shift wherein legal narratives were no longer restricted to experts, but became an integral element of popular media, ushering in an era dominated by the court of public opinion.

Exposure to criminal cases has been part of media consumption for decades now, yet there was a recent evolution from passive public discussion to active participation on the part of everyday citizens. Opportunities to participate across media sites have allowed them to become the connecting line between crime and social phenomena (Yardley et al., 2016). The sensationalization of criminal cases can be understood in relation to processes journalists used to stoke the average citizen’s desire to consume specific high-profile crimes (Greer and McLaughlin, 2012).

Participatory discussions have manifested on multiple media sites, but one of the most popular is *Reddit*. *Reddit* is an online platform that operates as a public discussion forum, known for its diverse and extensive range of communities – each of which can function independently. These individual communities are also known as *subreddits*. Users of this site can easily create accounts and participate in discussions, share content, and interact with others on the niche topics they are interested in. With millions of users, easy access to a group that shares your interests, and the ability to freely engage with users without the divulgence of personal information, *Reddit* is the perfect forum for those interested in true-crime.

Websleuthing

Websleuthing is a phenomenon directly linked to infotainment – a defining concept in the nature of true crime interest. Websleuthing is an increasingly popular activity where individuals gather in networked spaces to analyze a diverse array of cases. Participants

engage in various levels of amateur detective work, encompassing activities such as searching for information, uploading documents, images, and videos, commenting, debating, theorizing, analyzing, and identifying suspects. Following this collection, users attempt to communicate this information with law enforcement, organizations, and individuals linked to the cases. A distinguishing feature of this activity is its extralegal nature; it operates independently from official law enforcement entities and is instead representative of the average person's perspective.

Amateur, civilian detectives have found their communities within digital, contemporary culture and can now easily join like-minded people. Any person with an interest in crime and a smartphone, laptop, or tablet can now go online and connect with others in crowdsourced amateur investigations (Yardley et al., 2018). It is important to strain out the term 'vigilante' in reference to websleuths, as Trottier argues they are not violations of authority, but manifestations of the values and norms of digital cultures, which are in turn linked to our everyday belief systems (Trottier, 2016; Yardley et al., 2016).

Digitally-based civilian policing has been reviewed in the literature on a 'can they', 'should they' basis. There are reviews on implications for new-age policing and how their relationship can be ambivalent or antagonistic. The widespread and evolving nature of the websleuth is still a fairly new concept in criminal and social science-related research. It typically works on a case-by-case basis, most of which we have seen through general and continuous reactions to 'everyday' crime, terrorism, or underground networks of crime (Myles et al., 2020; Hadjimatheou, 2021).

We must pause to consider how the demographic under study may be distinct. Although data collected from anonymous public platforms yield few identifying features, the individuals in these forums are classified as your 'everyday citizens.' This classification is largely due to the fact that these forums, by nature, are designed with a selection bias in that

they are created to draw together the opinions of individuals without formal stakes in law enforcement. Although many users have cited parallel qualifications (security guards, relationships with police officers, etc.), they collectively understand themselves as civilians.

The present study may diverge from previous analyses in that we considered the moral drive for users who involved themselves in this specific case. Concepts such as retributive vigilantism have been explored in the literature over the past decade; many examined forums or cases where individuals were drawn to online communities with the purpose of solving cases. These cases have not necessarily accounted for the sharp increase in popularity in the ‘true crime’ community. Where previous studies have explored civilian policing on the internet, few have explicitly outlined the mainstream popularization in gruesome cases. The Idaho case was an instructive case study because it examined the collective effort to fill in what we hypothesized were the ‘moral gaps’ through public discussion, beyond users who named a Person of Interest (POI). This study did not seek to cast blame on any particular party, be it the media, law enforcement, or websleuths themselves. The goal was to understand the psychological processes that contributed to the everyday citizens’ consumption and perceived stakes in criminal cases.

Moral Foundations Theory

This study sought to examine the Idaho Quadruple Homicide through the lens of Haidt and Graham’s (2007) Moral Foundations Theory. This theory posits that there are five psychological foundations of morality, which were labeled as harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity (Haidt & Graham, 2007). These five foundations are based on the concept of moral domain, where there are subjective judgments on the rules we follow, and bidirectional expectations that we presume are followed in our social relationships (Turiel, 1983). The primary use of moral psychology in cases of crime can be linked to the concept that morality serves as a protective barrier between what we see

as wrongdoing, and ourselves (Haidt & Graham, 2007; Huey et al., 2013; Yardley et al., 2018).

The harm/care foundation is linked to the aversion to seeing suffering in others, the linked approval of those who prevent or relieve harm, and the flipped disapproval of those who may cause or exacerbate harm. Fairness/reciprocity is linked to the importance of individual rights and equality in treatment. Ingroup/loyalty refers to the recognition and protection of those considered one's ingroup and negative feelings toward those who fail to aid ingroup members or put them in harm's way. Authority/respect refers to the admiration of a hierarchical structure, wherein 'good' leaders are valued, and 'bad' leaders have negative associations, including that of being inept. Finally, purity/sanctity is linked to the social and biological processes of disgust (Haidt & Graham, 2007).

The moral foundations hypothesized to be most relevant in normative and non-normative events are: harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, and ingroup/loyalty. These three foundations in particular, have shown evidence for being the most applicable across political subgroups in North American cultures (Graham et al., 2009; Haidt & Graham, 2007). The link to harm/care can be rooted in the observation of individuals having their lives taken with intention. Fairness/reciprocity can be linked to one of the well-communicated aspects of the Idaho case: that the victims were innocent. Finally, the ingroup/loyalty foundation is likely relevant given that four college students, similar to any other young adult in North American/European spheres, were harmed by someone 'other' and malicious.

The authority foundation is likely to encompass attitudes toward police. Research suggests that public perceptions of police legitimacy have four main dimensions: lawfulness, distributive fairness, procedural fairness, and effectiveness (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012). The latter factor may be particularly relevant to websleuthing. If laypersons believed the police

would be unable to make progress in solving a heinous crime, they might feel increased pressure to speculate on the case.

The Current Study

With the rise of social media, we have seen the creation – and growth – of niche interest communities. It was important for the present study to not only follow communities of digital policing independently, but concurrently with popular culture. True crime communities exist across several platforms, chief among those being *YouTube*, podcast sites, *TikTok*, and *Reddit*. This particular area of interest has gradually branched out from niche communities and become integrated into what we would consider ‘popular culture’. Civilian interest in criminal cases was not stoked solely by ‘current coverage’, and we found that many people tend to seek out information about ‘popular’ criminal cases. The purpose of this study diverged from previous literature on websleuthing in that our aim was not to define the phenomena or frame the validity of the behaviour, but to conceptualize how mainstream interest in crime exemplified the personal stakes that everyday individuals placed on cases to which they have no direct connection. The current study construed ‘websleuthing’ as reactions taken by those with a vested interest in sensational crime, who had a need to reconcile perceived moral betrayals and further attitudes on police capability.

This study used the 2022 Idaho Student Homicides as a case study, for which prosecutors are currently bringing a suspect to trial. The relevance of this particular case was rooted in the victims’ background, compounded by the circumstances of the crime itself. All four of the victims were students aged 20-21 years old and had their lives taken in a gruesome manner, in their own home, for what appeared to be no reason. Without a suspect in sight, a *subreddit* channel was created within days of the case going public, and thousands of users flocked to discuss the facts and possibilities related to this crime. A vital aspect of this case was linked directly to who the victims were: a group of young adults in the early

stages of their postsecondary careers who had vibrant personal lives. These were your ‘kids-next-door,’ the faces you went to school with, and saw at the store – not dissimilar from members of any person’s own community. In this paper we examined the mediatization of a criminal case, individual consumption of this information, and finally carrying opinions to a public forum to discuss and take action upon. Our interest was in dissecting the relationship between information perception and online behaviour.

Hypotheses

The broader research question this study engaged was whether the intense public discourse surrounding criminal cases on social media could be understood as everyday citizens’ using websleuthing forums as vessels for moral judgements. Specifically, we sought to examine perceptions of authority related to information-sharing behaviour on online true-crime forums. We predicted that moral foundations (MF) language would be prevalent in the *Reddit* discussion forum regarding the Idaho University Criminal Case, with the foundations of authority and harm being most prevalent. We predicted that people who used MF language would be significantly more likely to express negative police perceptions and to share unverified information.

Method

Information was collected via the social media platform *Reddit*. *Reddit*’s public accessibility, and the forum’s timeline being parallel to the criminal case unfolding, made the data collected relevant to the current research question. The study was conducted through the collection and coding of data from a *subreddit* about the University of Idaho Homicides. We identified a *subreddit* with a large number of followers and scraped data from the top 200 posts. Users were given identification codes so as to further anonymize the information collected. Exclusion criteria included posts with low engagement, measured through the number of upvotes and comments on respective posts. An analysis of the posts made within

the chosen *subreddit* determined the mean levels of engagement and determined concrete numbers for inclusion and exclusion. The chosen forum for data collection (*Reddit*) explicitly shares information with no expectations of privacy. This is outlined by the user agreement, which states that the information they post will be publicly accessible. Users can delete their posts, data, or information from the website at any time (*Reddit Inc, 2023*).

Coding

We conducted a summative content analysis of *Reddit* posts about the Idaho murder case using a combination of domain dictionaries (which contained words found to represent constructs), deductive human coding, and inductive strategies. There were three significant coding variables of interest: use of moral foundations language, general topic, and perceptions of police.

Results

Deductive Content Analysis

First, one coder read each post to flag mentions of law enforcement. Of the 200 posts, 57 were observed to have mentioned law enforcement with carrying titles (e.g. cops, police, LE, etc.). Next, three independent coders read these posts and indicated whether the post was favourable toward law enforcement (1), unfavourable (-1), or neutral (0). Out of the 57 posts flagged for law mention of law enforcement, 38 were neutral, 15 were favourable, and 4 were unfavourable towards law enforcement. Cohen (1960) suggested that Kappas between .41 and .60 could be considered moderate, with .61-.80 indicating substantial agreement and above .80 indicating near-perfect agreement. Inter-rater reliability was strong ($\kappa = .97$).

Next, Graham et al.'s (2009) iteration of the Moral Foundations Dictionary was used to conduct a keyword search (see Appendix) with the Linguistic Inquiry and Wordcount program (LIWC; Pennebaker et al., 2015). One coder read each flagged instance for contextual validation following Yamamoto et al. (2023).

Abductive Content Analysis

LIWC (Pennebaker et al., 2015) was used to analyse underlying themes within the top 200 posts from the Idaho case *subreddit*. Common content words were identified alongside their frequency, which were then grouped into themes with the assistance of an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA; principal axis factoring and oblique rotation). Examining a rotated component matrix (see Table 1) and a scree plot yielded 7 significant word clusters.

The EFA was an extension of the data collected through LIWC. Here, the data were further broken down to link word clusters (e.g. speculation, 'BK', killer) and identify themes within the compiled posts (see Table 2). We then examined bivariate relationships between the identified themes and presence of moral foundations language to assist with generation of themes. The themes were identified as: speculation, motives, evidence, Kaylee (victim name), miscellaneous, the crime, and news/anecdotes.

Main Analysis

We conducted an independent-samples t-test to examine whether people who expressed negative sentiment toward law enforcement would use more MF language. Results demonstrated that posts pertaining to law enforcement were significantly more likely to contain fairness-related language ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 1.20$), as compared to those that did not refer to law enforcement ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 1.09$), $t(197) = -2.21$, $p = .028$, Cohen's d 95% CI [-0.65, -0.04].

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to analyze and dissect the online interactions within true crime communities, specifically in reference to a recent quadruple homicide in Moscow, Idaho. Using Haidt's (2007) Moral Foundations Theory, our research sought to parse out the psychological 'drive' behind the individuals who involve themselves in criminal case discourse. We predicted that there would be significantly greater moral language used within

posts pertaining to law enforcement. We also predicted that police perception would be a significant factor in the discussion, and attitudes would be primarily negative (i.e., ostensibly spurred individuals to seek online communities to discuss their grievances).

When coding for perceived police attitudes, the data reflected a largely neutral or positive mention of police within the relevant posts. This diverged from our initial hypothesis, where we predicted that there would be a largely negative perception of police, with the assumption that negative perception was a contributing force for individuals to seek out public forums. This finding could possibly be linked to the resolution (i.e., arrest of the person-of interest) of the case, which occurred seven weeks following the release of public information regarding the case. It is possible that this case represents a norm in police attitudes regarding mediatized cases or is indicative of a different variable not measured by the present study (e.g., victim demographic, case resolution, perceived police action, etc.).

Following the meaning extraction method (Pennebaker et al., 2022), we gathered the most frequent words and used exploratory factor analysis to interpret the co-occurrence of said language that occurred within each post. Exemplar posts were qualitatively described and resulting factors correlated with moral foundations language use to assist interpretation. This analysis resulted in seven themes: speculation, evidence, Kaylee (victim name), a miscellaneous theme, the crime, and news/anecdotes.

Implications

The data derived from this study may have the potential to advance our understanding of websleuthing, particularly in the realm of online true-crime involvement and the associated psychological phenomena. By delving into the intricacies of websleuthing forums and the public's engagement with real criminal cases, this study contributed to the expanding discourse around police reliance on the public for information and how they have the capacity to hinder investigations. Uncovering the complexities and motivations behind these online

communities is relevant for comprehending the broader implications of true-crime fascination in the digital age. The same findings also have the potential to add to the literature regarding the sensationalization of criminal cases via media outlets, and the platforms through which criminal-case and police attitudes seem to be cultivated. The use of the specific platform analyzed in this study (*Reddit*) also widens the potential options for measuring and analyzing contemporary civilian attitudes regarding crime and police via social media platforms. The findings may shed light on the reasons, moral underpinning, and attitudes associated with participation in these discussions. Moreover, understanding the interplay of media, public discourse, and individual perceptions of justice can offer valuable insights into the evolving structure of true-crime online communities.

The study also applied basic psychological theory to a real-world, contemporary phenomenon. Websleuthing behaviour is a relatively newer concept, which can have significant ramifications for people connected to a case. For instance, true-crime enthusiasts may flood tiplines with unhelpful information or share personal details about ‘suspects’ who have not been named as formal persons of interest. This study has the potential to add to the foundations of future literature regarding true crime interest in popular culture and its resulting implications – positive, negative, or neutral – can inform policies taken by police departments to maintain the integrity of criminal case information as it pertains to their investigations and to victims’ families. The results of this study will also be used to craft larger-scale experiments and establish processes to examine the psychological functions and consequences of websleuthing.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is its reliance on a single case study (i.e., the Idaho Homicides) and its corresponding internet forum. It is important to note that the discourse surrounding true crime cases can vary from case to case, depending on circumstances such as

the nature of the crime, the level of media attention, victim demographics, and case resolution. By focusing specifically on the University of Idaho case, we were only able to analyze a small subset of the broader online true crime community. Future research would benefit from larger-scale experiments and eventual meta-analysis. Due to the nature of this specific study, we cannot infer causation. However, the findings are an important first step in systematically analysing the psychology behind the rise of 'true crime' online.

Another limitation involves the size of the study itself. Given the number of posts analysed and the specificity of the case, only a subset of the online true crime community could be analysed. Though the research question prompts a look into a specific online community, it is crucial to recognize the selection bias within the data. Only a specific population uses *Reddit*; and since we do not have access to information about personal characteristics due to the forum being anonymous, it is safe to assume the conclusions drawn from this data cannot be generalised to the overall population. The data found in this study can be beneficial in constructing later experiments regarding websleuthing, online forums, and civilian perception of criminal activity.

Conclusion

Within online true crime communities, as exemplified through one created for the Idaho homicides, users appear to engage with one another using moral language as they discuss details of the case – be it the victims or the perpetrator. The dominance of fairness language out of the foundations in posts pertaining to law enforcement coupled with the relatively neutral/positive leaning of that discourse implies that forum members see police as an important vehicle for justice. This study has the potential to lay the groundwork for future research regarding contemporary interest in true crime, and its resulting online manifestations.

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Table 1*Factor Loadings for Meaning Extraction Analysis*

	Rotated Component Matrix						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
speculation	.912						
bk	.871						
killer	.787						
family							
crime		.615					
case		.447					
true		.446					
people		.442					
under		.401					
information		.326					
called							
evidence							
theory			.605				
see			.584				
outside			.549				
house			.523				
long			.427				
look			.332				
place			.323				
trying							
things							
friends							
thought				.583			
read		-.335		.564			
kaylee		-.331		.498			
sure		-.382		-.468			
left		-.364		-.443			
https			-.367	.410			.342
multiple		-.336		-.405			

media			
murder			
social			
door			
nothing		.693	
edit		.659	
post		.602	
âôm		.511	.374
said		.437	
right	-.331	.428	
don			
phone			.702
time			.578
knew			.483
thinking			.477
roommates			-.327
guy			
find			
victims			
news			.649
murders		.414	.602
night			.546
person			.395
happened			
scene			
call			
hope			

Table 2*Frequent Words and Exemplars for Factors*

Words	Exemplars	Correlations
Speculation Bk killer	K's father has been silent for a few days now, I hope this means... Absolutely no speculation will be allowed on our sub regarding the surviving roommates or family of BK being involved... LE is owed an apology...	Fairness Loyalty Authority Positive affect
Crime Case True People Under information	It's now being reported that [defendant] was under tremendous pressure in the weeks and months leading up to the November 13th homicides... [Defendant] just went back to class and finished the semester after the murders Source: https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/suspect-in-deaths-of-idaho-students-was-a-wsu-student-police-say/ This is purely speculation. The more I think about this crime, I wonder if he only had one person in mind (ie Maddie) and...	Anger
Theory See Outside House Long Look place	confirmed by K's dad. confirmed k and m died in the same bed. 20 news organizations joining forces to oppose gag order https://apnews.com/article/idaho-state-government-law-enforcement-crime-0118f189f18ea76194b752e211becd1f This should be interesting Probable Cause Affidavit Megathread 2.0 The Probable Cause Affidavit has been released...	Loyalty
Thought Read Kaylee https	I thought it would be good to differentiate information sourced from police from that leaked by family, coroner, or posters alleging to be in the know... I just have trouble believing he'd make so many careless judgments calls... First I want to say that whatever mental issues BK has, he knows the difference between right and wrong and...	Null
Nothing Edit Post Said right	There are some articles out there outlining how they eventually matched the DNA at the scene... Person Of Interest in Idaho Murders Arrested in Pennsylvania Near Pocono Mountains...	Positive affect

Phone Time Knew thinking	Do we think Bryan will have an alibi set up for himself or simply say he was sleeping? An alibi at that time will actually ... Did you all see the clip from the upcoming episode of 48 Hours? Also, my long running theory is that he may well have been in the house with a mask and costume... Justice? I hope we can agree that we want justice for Xana, Ethan, Madison, and Kaylee...	Null
News Murders Night person	When I was a senior in high school, I was asked to house sit for a family friend for about a week while they were out of town...Please be kind to DM. I've been in her shoes... 20 news organizations joining forces to oppose gag order https://apnews.com/article/idaho-state-government-law-enforcement-crime-0118f189f18ea76194b752e211becd1f This should be interesting Taxi driver who dropped off Idaho murder victims breaks silence https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11570071/Private-taxi-driver-dropped-Idaho-roommates-says-ordinary.html...	Negative affect Sad Needs