

Fact or Fiction: Investigating Whether the CSI Effect is a Valid Concern or Popular Myth Have Crime TV Shows Raised Expectations and Demands for Scientific Evidence in Criminal Trials?

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INTRODUCTION

The *CSI* effect is a phenomenon in which forensic science used in criminal investigations has been exaggerated by fiction-based crime TV shows and movies (i.e., *CSI*, *Law and Order*, *Criminal Minds*, etc.), which has influenced public perception on what to expect from real criminal investigations. These TV shows have portrayed an image of what criminal investigations should look like and the type of evidence that is presented in television courtrooms far from what is actually done in reality. Thus, people in the criminal justice system (i.e., prosecutors, judges, lawyers) have attributed an increase in people and juror expectations and demands for more scientific evidence (i.e., DNA, fingerprints) in criminal trials to the *CSI* effect. To investigate this claim of a rise in expectations and demands for scientific evidence, this research study conducted an anonymous, self-administered online survey consisting of about 17 questions that was administered to Salem State University undergraduate and graduate students from all different disciplines ($N = 90$). The survey collected demographic data as well as more specific information about students' crime-based TV shows viewing habits and their demands for scientific evidence in criminal trials.

OBJECTIVES

The main purpose of this study was to investigate whether the *CSI* effect was a valid concern or a popular myth. This study examined respondent perceptions on whether watching crime TV shows has raised expectations and demands for more scientific evidence in criminal trials.

More specifically, the study tried to investigate whether there was a correlation between watching *fiction-based* crime TV shows and higher demands for evidence by analyzing the difference in the levels of demands for evidence between viewers of fiction-based crime shows and viewers of reality-based crime TV shows.

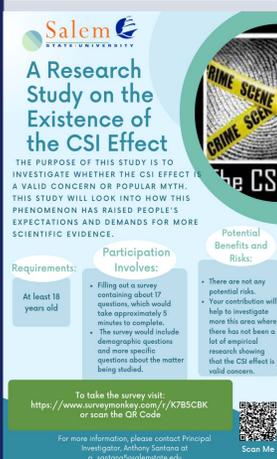
By investigating this, the study would also get information on whether these fiction-based TV shows have, in fact, misled or misinformed people in the ways criminal investigations and court procedures are supposed to be carried out (e.g., the estimated time an investigation should be completed, how fast detectives are supposed to respond to a crime scene, etc.).

METHOD AND PROCEDURE

To collect data and information from participants, the study used an anonymous, self-administered online questionnaire or survey that consisted of 17 questions ranging from demographic questions such as race, gender, and level of education (collected to see if they had any impacts on the *CSI* effect) to more specific questions about students' crime-based TV show viewing habits and their demands for scientific evidence in certain cases. The survey was administered through SurveyMonkey to 90 Salem State University undergraduate and graduate students across all disciplines. The survey, which took approximately 5 minutes to take, was available for about a four-week span during the Spring of 2022, so that the researcher could get as many respondents as possible.

Participant recruitment for this study was accomplished through several means. First, a recruitment flyer for the research study was created, which included a description of the study, requirements for participation, benefits and risks of participation, the survey link and the contact information for the principal investigator. The recruitment flyer and survey link was also posted on the Salem State University Facebook page for the class of 2022. This allowed for the survey to be disseminated to a wider population. Finally, I also reached out to students in my classes this semester (mostly criminal justice students) to recruit additional respondents. This had a significant impact on response rates. Before sending the emails to classmates, the total responses for the survey were 56, and after the emails were sent, the total number of respondents increased to 90.

Study Recruitment Flyer



A Research Study on the Existence of the CSI Effect

THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY IS TO INVESTIGATE WHETHER THE CSI EFFECT IS A VALID CONCERN OR POPULAR MYTH. THIS STUDY WILL LOOK INTO HOW THIS PHENOMENON HAS RAISED PEOPLE'S EXPECTATIONS AND DEMANDS FOR MORE SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE.

Participation Involves:

- Filling out a survey containing about 17 questions, which would take approximately 5 minutes to complete.
- The survey would include demographic questions and more specific questions about the matter being studied.

Potential Benefits and Risks:

- There are no potential risks.
- Your contribution will help to investigate more this area where there has not been a lot of empirical research showing that the CSI effect is a valid concern.

To take the survey visit: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/K785CBK> or scan the QR Code

For more information, please contact Principal Investigator, Anthony Santana at a.santana@salemstate.edu.

The data collected was analyzed in three different sections. The first section summarizes the analysis of the survey results regarding demographic questions. The second section examines the crime TV shows viewing habits of respondents. Finally, the third section summarizes respondent perceptions of how realistic fiction-based crime TV shows are as well as their level of demands for scientific evidence in criminal trials.

RESULTS

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Demographic Variables

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Female	47	65.28%
Male	23	31.94%
Non-binary	4	5.56%

Age		
18-29 years old	59	81.94%
30-39 years old	3	4.17%
40-49 years old	3	4.17%
50+ years old	7	9.72%

Ethnicity		
Asian/Pacific Islander	4	5.63%
Black or African American	7	9.86%
Hispanic or Latino	13	18.31%
Native American/Alaska Native	1	1.41%
White	47	66.20%
Others	3	4.23%

Level of education		
High school diploma, GED or equivalent	25	34.72%
Trade/technical/vocational training	0	0
Some college credit, no degree	31	43.06%
Associate's degree	9	12.50%
Bachelor's degree	10	13.89%
Master's degree	3	4.17%
Doctorate	1	1.39%

Majors		
Art, Music, or Dance	0	0
Business	5	8.20%
Criminal Justice, Sociology, or other Social Science	26	42.62%
Education	5	8.20%
Humanities	9	14.75%
Nursing or Healthcare	2	3.28%
Social Work	3	4.92%
Physical Sciences	6	9.84%
Psychology	8	13.11%

Figure 1. % of Respondents Who Watch Specific Fiction-Based Crime TV Shows

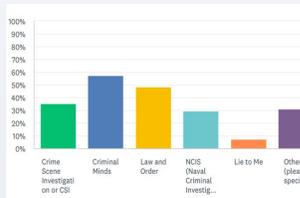


Figure 2. % of Respondents Who Watch Specific Reality-Based Crime TV Shows

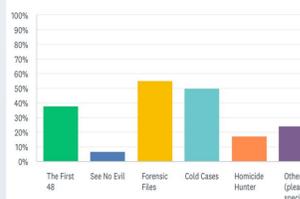


Figure 3. Respondent Frequency of Watching Fiction-Based Crime TV Shows

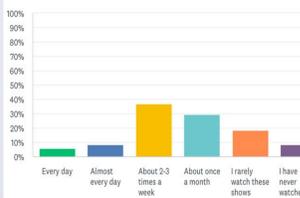


Figure 4. Respondent Frequency of Watching Reality-Based Crime TV Shows

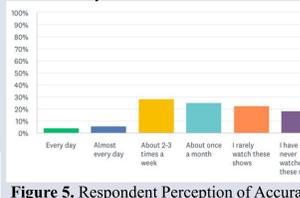


Figure 6. Respondent Perception of Estimated Time an Investigation Should be Completed

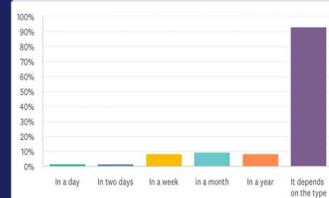


Figure 8. Respondent Participation in Jury Duty

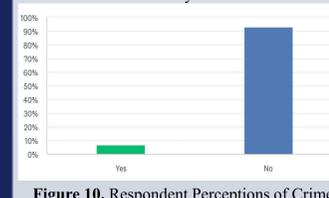


Figure 10. Respondent Perceptions of Crime TV Shows Influence on Knowledge of Criminal Investigations



Figure 5. Respondent Perception of Accuracy of Fiction-Based Crime TV Shows

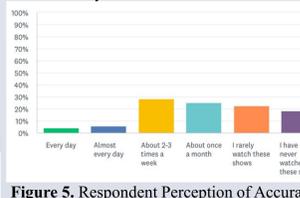


Figure 7. Respondent Expectations of Scientific Evidence in Criminal Trials By Case Type

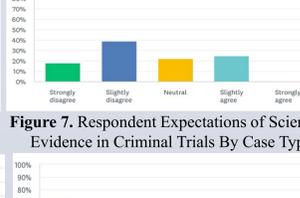
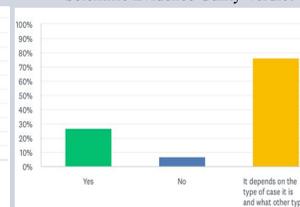


Figure 9. % of Respondents Demanding Scientific Evidence Guilty Verdict



LIMITATIONS

- Limitations to this project include:
- The findings are limited to one state university in one state in the Northeast.
 - Missing data as some respondents skipped some questions.
 - The sample size was relatively small ($N = 90$).

CONCLUSIONS

The results indicate that both viewers of fiction-based crime TV shows and viewers of reality-based crime TV shows had very similar expectations and demands for scientific evidence in criminal trials. There was no significant correlation between watching *fiction-based* crime shows and higher demands for scientific evidence as most respondents understood the inaccuracies portrayed in fiction-based TV shows. The findings suggest that the way that popular media has portrayed criminal investigations has not unrealistically raised expectations and demands for scientific evidence, especially as a condition for a guilty verdict. Thus, no support for the *CSI* Effect was found in the present study.

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