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Portrayals of Gender and Violence in Online Media and Audience Commentary: An Exploration in the Context of Intimate Partner Homicide

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Abstract

This thesis explores the portrayal of gender in the online interactive news media landscape in the context of intimate partner homicide. Previous research indicates that traditional gender stereotypes of masculinity and femininity are reinforced in news reports (Gill, 2007; Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015; Morgan, 2019). However, while these stereotypical portrayals are well-known in analyses of print media, how gender is presented in the complexities of online reporting (where readers' interactive comments become part of the reading experience) remains largely unexplored. This is problematic, given the large number of individuals using online media to access, and importantly react to, the news (Park et al., 2020; Watkins et al., 2016). While research suggests the way crime is presented in the media influences public perceptions (Davis, 2009; De Vreese, 2005; Schneider, 2012), few studies directly test how media reports shape online comments, particularly in the context of intimate partner homicide.

The question of how (if at all) gender is portrayed in online media reporting of intimate partner homicide is examined across three separate studies. These focus on male/female pairs of offenders and victims as this dyad remains the most commonly reported relationship in media articles in the context of intimate partner violence. Together, these studies bring a mixed methods approach to the understanding of the portrayal of gender. Through a qualitative framing analysis of 121 online articles drawn from four popular media outlets, Study 1 examines how intimate partner homicide is framed in online media in Australia and, importantly, whether the frames and subframes differ across male offender/female victim or female offender/male victim pairs. Study 2 shifts focus from media reports to audience commentary by examining how the audience comments on what is reported, and whether their

comments differ across gender pairs. In this study, the content (theme) and tone (civility) of 371 Facebook comments responding to the articles from Study 1 are analysed using a thematic analysis. Study 3 significantly contributes to the literature on media framing effects by directly testing the impact that news media frames have on audience commentary, using an experimental vignette design with 537 survey respondents. Bivariate and multivariate analyses were used to examine whether the content (theme) and tone (civility) of respondent comments were impacted by the frame of the media and the gender of the offender/victim pair, controlling for respondents' media usage, attitudes, and demographics.

Across the three studies, the results demonstrate that gender matters in media portrayals and audience commentary in the context of intimate partner homicide. This was revealed in a number of ways. First, traditional gender stereotypes continue to shape the portrayals of men and women who either perpetrate, or are victims of, intimate partner homicide even in the online environment. In terms of men, the results overwhelmingly show them being portrayed in accordance with traditional gender stereotypes. However, the portrayal of women seems to be more complex, with results suggesting an adherence to, and a violation of, traditional gender stereotypes. Specifically, when female offenders/victims violate traditional gender stereotypes, they were criticised by the media and commenters. Conversely, female offenders/victims were mostly supported when they adhered to these stereotypes. Second, although thematic portrayals of intimate partner homicide in online media and audience commentary are rare, it was more likely to occur in articles featuring male offender/female victim pairs compared to female offender/male victim pairs. Third, while most comments were written using civil language, comments regarding

male offender/female victim pairs were more likely to feature uncivil language compared to female offender/male victim pairs.

Of particular interest, the experimental study found that respondents' comments to an intimate partner homicide report were influenced by the way in which the report was framed, even when accounting for participant characteristics and attitudes. Significantly, this provides direct evidence that media frames matter in the ways intimate partner violence is reported in the media.

These findings have implications for policy and practice, especially in terms of media guidelines and training around the reporting of violence in intimate relationships. Furthermore, the results highlight the importance of establishing safe communities online and promoting digital media literacy.

Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

(Signed)_____

Emily Wright

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The recent release of the 2022-2023 intimate partner homicide statistics in Australia—which showed an upward jump in homicides in what had been a 30-year decreasing trend (Miles & Bricknell, 2024)—generated considerable news media attention. Around the same time, Australian news media were also reporting on the death of Molly Ticehurst, for which her former partner has been charged. This recent coverage of intimate partner homicide is part of the broader cultural and social context in which the public understands and make sense of this type of violence. In other words, the ways in which intimate partner homicides are reported by the news media—referred throughout this thesis simply as the media—reveal the underpinning cultural assumptions that influence public attitudes and responses (Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013). As a gendered crime (Spencer & Stith, 2020; Stöckl et al., 2013), media reports of intimate partner homicide reinforce cultural understandings of gender which can have widespread impacts across society.

Although there is significant research on the news coverage of intimate partner homicide, there are some key gaps. First, only a limited number of studies have specifically examined whether portrayals of intimate partner homicide in online media articles and online comments differ depending on the gender of the offender/victim. This is surprising, as research suggests that across different types of news stories, including reports of intimate partner homicide, men and women are portrayed differently by the media (Komazec & Farmer, 2020; Morgan & Politoff, 2012), often in ways that are influenced by traditional gender stereotypes (Ameta, 2019; Collins, 2011; Mackie, 2016). Second, how intimate partner homicides are portrayed in the *online* media environment is still in its infancy, yet the public is increasingly reliant upon online media platforms as their primary source of news

(Park et al., 2020; Watkins et al., 2016). Finally, the advent of social media has completely reshaped the media landscape, with the role of audiences shifting from silent consumers to news promoters (e.g., "liking" and sharing news) and content creators (e.g., social media commentary). Despite this shift, few studies examine how and what people write about intimate partner homicides in response to online news reports. Even fewer studies directly examine whether media reports influence online comments. This thesis addresses these knowledge gaps through exploring the portrayal of gender in the online interactive media landscape in Australia in the context of intimate partner homicide.

The Framing of News: A Key Issue to Consider

The first part of this thesis uses framing analysis to examine online media representations of men and women as perpetrators and victims of intimate partner homicide. Framing is the process through which journalists select certain aspects of events and topics they are covering and make those aspects more salient in their reporting (Carlyle et al., 2008; Entman, 1993). Media frames are important to examine since they shape public opinions about crime and increase fear of victimisation (Beckett & Sasson, 2003; Dolliver et al., 2018; dos Santos, 2024), and influence policymaking as media coverage is often used to determine what the public's opinion on crime is likely to be (Beckett & Sasson, 2003; Kennamer, 1992). Indeed, several examples across western nations can be found that suggest that media coverage can affect public opinion, and in turn, the enactment of policy. For example, in Australia, policies and legislation enacted as part of political responses to strong media coverage of violent crime can be seen in so-called "one-punch" (or "coward's punch") homicide laws (Quilter, 2014) and "no body – no parole" laws (Queensland Government, 2017).

Given the gendered nature of intimate partner homicide (Spencer & Stith, 2020; Stöckl et al., 2013), and the influence of media coverage on attitudes, exploring how the media frames intimate partner homicide across gender of perpetrators and victims is useful. There is reason to suspect such portrayals would be influenced by narratives of traditional masculinity and femininity, given such stereotypical gendered narratives are common in media more broadly (Gill, 2007; Richardson & Wearing, 2014). Gender stereotypes are beliefs regarding particular attributes (including traits, physical characteristics, and role behaviours) that distinguish men and women (Santoniccolo et al., 2023; Ward & Grower, 2020). While traditional gender stereotypes offer an oversimplified view of reality and are often untrue (Ellemers, 2018), they are still prevalent in media portrayals (Ward & Grower, 2020) and can lead to harmful myths about men and women (Bates et al., 2019b; Meyers, 1994). This thesis therefore considers the influence of traditional gender stereotypes on media's framing of intimate partner homicide on online platforms.

Online Media: An Influential Media Outlet

Several reasons exist for focusing on the online media environment. Importantly, the lack of research regarding differences across gender in intimate partner homicide in online media is problematic, given the rapidly growing use of the Internet, resulting in consumers changing how they access the news. Historically, consumers accessed the news via radio, television, and/or print media. However, Australian surveys reveal that, of adults who access the news at least once a month (a conservative measure), almost half used some form of online media as their main source of news (Park et al., 2020; Watkins et al., 2016). The online news environment continues to develop amid ongoing debates around whether Facebook and other social media sites should pay for news in Australia and other countries. With the growing

use of online media, there is a need for more research on the representation of violent crime, including homicide, within this medium.

Further, previous research suggests important differences in news reporting between traditional media and online media. Online media has greater time pressures, relies on fewer sources, uses less leg work, and has less originality and initiative compared to traditional media (Fenton, 2009; Phillips, 2011; Reich, 2015). Differences between immediate media (online and radio) and daily media (print and television) also includes structure, editing, and packaging (Machill & Beiler, 2009; Reich, 2015). The immediacy of online news may also increase the likelihood of errors in news reporting (Karlsson, 2011; Salaverría, 2005; Tremayne et al., 2007). Collectively, studies such as these indicate that there could be differences in how online media and print media present the news as well as the topics reported. This suggests that we cannot simply rely on findings from research on print media to inform our understanding of online media.

Another important reason for examining online media is that while in the past online media was perceived as less credible than print media or television news (Payne & Dozier, 2013), research indicates that this is no longer the case (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000; Payne & Dozier, 2013). This is particularly true for young people (Bucy, 2003; Kang, 2009; Liedke & Gottfried, 2022). Research has found that young people find online news to be just as credible as traditional media (Bucy, 2003; Liedke & Gottfried, 2022). This means that public perceptions of crime, particularly whether or not they believe what they read, is not only derived from traditional media but also increasingly from online media.

The Importance of Examining Online Commentary

In addition to examining online media portrayals, this thesis examines the nature and content of online comments in the context of intimate partner homicide. Such a focus is important since online media enables audiences to readily, and instantaneously, interact with the media. By posting online comments expressing their thoughts and opinions, the audience increasingly helps shape the news (Hille & Bakker, 2014). Audience members who consume and participate in the media have been referred to as "produsers": a mix of "producer" and "user" (Bruns, 2003). Unlike traditional readers, "produsers" create news, ideas, and public discussions rather than solely consuming information (Brossoie et al., 2012). Thus, the responsibility of producing news no longer solely rests with news outlets. This can be problematic when considering the impacts of media framing on "produsers", as they may simply be regurgitating potentially incorrect information provided by the media. Up to this point, limited research has examined if this is the case. Specifically, very little research explores whether media frames directly impact the nature and content of comments in the context of intimate partner homicide.

Importantly, online comments create yet another (potentially incorrect) means by which public perceptions of crime are shaped. There is evidence to suggest that individuals can have their attitudes changed simply by reading others' comments (Anderson et al., 2014; Nonnecke et al., 2004). For example, one study found that reading disapproving comments below a neutral news article could influence readers' opinions to also be disapproving of the issue reported (Lee & Jang, 2010). Even if readers disagree with what is written in the comments, they still believe the comments are indicative of broader public opinion (Friemel & Dötsch, 2015; Lee, 2012; Lee & Jang, 2010). This points to the significant influence that comments have.

In the context of gendered violence, and the ways in which violent men and women are portrayed and discussed on social media, little is known about how gender influences the content and tone of social media commentary. Given the pervasive nature of traditional gender stereotypes in media portrayals (Ward & Grower, 2020), it is reasonable to assume social media commentary about intimate partner homicide would also be impacted by gender stereotypes. Furthermore, in broader communications research, the tone (i.e., civility) of comments on social media platforms is considered equally as important as the actual content (Coe et al., 2014; Freelon, 2015; Santana, 2014). Broadly speaking, and outside the realm of violence research, it is known that women are more likely to be described using uncivil language when compared to men (Pain & Chen, 2019; Searles et al., 2020; Wilhelm & Joeckel, 2019), often including offensive language, name-calling, profanities, stereotypes, and sexist terminology (Chen, 2017). No publicly available research has been found that examines the civility of online comments regarding intimate partner homicide and the influence of victim/offender gender. This is a problem, given incivility's role in causing polarisation (Anderson et al., 2014; Kim & Kim, 2019) and close-mindedness (Borah, 2014; Hwang et al., 2018) among its readers.

Research Aims

Given the gaps in knowledge, this thesis aims to understand how (if at all) online media portrayals and audience commentary differ across the gender of offender/victim pairs in the context of intimate partner homicide and whether the frames used by the media influence audience commentary. Three distinct yet related studies were designed to address these aims, namely: 1) gender differences in online media framing; 2) gender differences in Facebook comments; and 3) gender differences and the impact of media frames on audience commentary. Intimate partner

homicide acts as the primary focus in all the studies. Across the studies, this thesis uses a mixed methods approach. Study 1 and 2 primarily use qualitative analyses, while Study 3 uses quantitative analyses.

Study 1: Gender Differences in Online Media Framing

The first study advances knowledge of the ways that intimate partner homicide is framed in online media. It achieves this by focusing on the differences across gender (an area with limited research). As such, the aim of Study 1 is to examine the nature and extent of intimate partner homicide frames in Australian online media, and to examine how these frames differ across the gender of the offender/victim. Data are sampled from media reports published on online platforms across a three-year period in Australia (1 August 2014 – 31 July 2017). Of the 121 articles sampled, 102 featured male offenders and 19 featured female offenders. To examine the differences across gender of the offender/victim pairs, a qualitative framing analysis is undertaken.

Study 2: Gender Differences in Facebook Comments

Study 2 aims to examine whether the content and civility of Facebook comments differ depending on the gender of the offender/victim pairs featured in online articles regarding intimate partner homicide. Very little research has examined audience commentary and how this differs across the gender of offenders/victims in the context of intimate partner homicide. A thematic analysis is conducted to examine the content and civility of Facebook comments across the gender of offender/victim pairs. A sample of 371 comments is drawn from Facebook comments posted by readers in response to the online news reports featured in Study 1. Of the 371 comments, 37 had responded to articles with female offenders and 334 had responded to articles with male offenders.

Study 3: Gender Differences and the Impact of Media Frames on Audience Commentary

Study 3 further advances knowledge on framing effects and online comments by expanding upon Study 2. While Study 2 relies on an existing sample of comments (i.e., comments posted on Facebook in response to online articles published by media outlets), Study 3 extends this research by relying on an experimental vignette methodology. This allows researchers to keep the content of the news article constant (i.e., by using the same intimate partner homicide case), while changing the media frame and the gender of the offender/victim pair. The study also controls for media usage, attitudes, and participant demographics. Theoretically, one would expect that how the media frames news stories would affect audience commentary (Lecheler & De Vreese, 2011; Price & Tewksbury, 1997; Valkenburg et al., 1999). However, it is unknown whether media frames (and the gender of the offender/victim) actually impact the nature and content of people's comments. Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine whether media frames and the gender of the offender/victim pairs affect the theme and civility of comments regarding intimate partner homicide. In Study 3, survey participants are randomly assigned to one of four vignettes, which contains an intimate partner homicide news article. Participants are asked to leave an online comment as they would on social media. Bivariate and multivariate analyses are run to examine whether or not the media frame and gender of the offender/victim pairs influences the theme and civility of comments.

Thesis Outline

This thesis consists of seven chapters. Relevant literature is reviewed in Chapter 2. The chapter critically examines news framing, stereotypical portrayals of gender, media portrayals of intimate partner homicide and related violence, and

audience interaction with news through social media. Knowledge gaps and research questions are outlined, which guide the empirical studies that follow. Chapter 3 describes the methodology used for each of the three studies, including sampling strategies, operationalisations, coding, and analytical approaches. Chapter 4 (Study 1), Chapter 5 (Study 2), and Chapter 6 (Study 3) are the empirical chapters, and they provide the results of the three studies of this thesis. Overall, the findings reveal that men are portrayed as adhering to traditional gender stereotypes, whereas the portrayals of women exhibit greater complexity, depicting both adherence to and violation of traditional gender stereotypes. Findings also demonstrate the rarity with which media and audiences contextualise intimate partner homicide; that audiences are mostly civil; and that the media's frames influence audience comments. Finally, Chapter 7 provides an in-depth discussion of the consolidated research findings derived from the three result chapters. The chapter further outlines research limitations and makes recommendations for future studies. The chapter finishes by providing an overview of the conclusions drawn from this research.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

It is clear from prior research that the media reinforces traditional conceptions of masculinity and femininity in the reporting of news stories (Gill, 2007; Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015; Morgan, 2019). However, although the existence of such stereotypical gender portrayals is well-established through analyses of print news media, how conceptions of gender play out in a more interactive online space is less explored. In particular, only a handful of studies (mostly quantitative) examine how gender is portrayed in online media representations of the offenders/victims of lethal and non-lethal intimate partner violence. Even fewer studies examine online audience commentary of such violence, especially concerning how comments may differ across the gender of the offenders/victims and whether media framing affects online comments. The current thesis addresses these knowledge gaps.

The current chapter is divided into five sections. The first section reviews the extent and nature of traditional gender stereotypes perpetuated in the media. It is important to review this body of work because it serves as the guiding framework that will be used throughout this thesis to analyse, interpret, and discuss findings. In summary, the literature shows that traditional masculine and feminine traits are prevalent in media portrayals (Gill, 2007; Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015; Morgan, 2019). Such stereotypical portrayals by the media can lead to harmful myths about men and women.

As the first study of this thesis examines the ways in which intimate partner homicides are framed in online media and whether such frames differ across the gender of the offender/victim pairs, the second section of this chapter reviews the literature around news framing. This includes how framing is operationalised and what previous studies examining media representations of intimate partner homicide

have found in terms of how such violence is framed. Due to the scarcity of past research, this review has been expanded to include intimate partner violence more generally, femicide, and print media (in addition to online media). Importantly, given the focus on potential differences in how the media frames intimate partner homicides depending on the gender of the offender/victim, gender is emphasised throughout.

The third section of the current chapter reviews research examining audience interactions with online news, again focusing specifically on gender representations of offenders/victims. Such a focus is important, since online comments on media articles have been found to significantly influence audience perceptions (e.g., Lee, 2012; Lee & Jang, 2010; Von Sikorski & Ha nelt, 2016). Nevertheless, very limited research has specifically examined whether and how social media commentary on intimate partner violence media reporting differs depending on the gender of the offender/victim (Komazec & Farmer, 2020). This review sets the scene for the second study of this thesis, which considers Facebook comments on news articles relating to intimate partner homicide and explores whether the comments differ across the gender of offenders/victims.

The fourth section of the current chapter examines the impact of framing effects on audience interaction with online media. Theoretically, one would expect that how the media frames news stories would affect audience commentary (Lecheler & De Vreese, 2011; Price & Tewksbury, 1997; Valkenburg et al., 1999). Through such a lens, victim blaming news framing, for example, would be linked to victim blaming commentary. However, one cannot establish such a link without an experimental approach that controls for audience characteristics. Therefore, the third study of this thesis utilises an experimental research design to examine whether the nature and content of online comments changes depending on the frame of the article

and the gender of the offender/victim, controlling for audience media usage, attitudes, and demographics. This section reviews the very limited amount of published experimental studies which examine news framing and lethal and non-lethal intimate partner violence. The fifth and final section outlines the knowledge gaps and research questions for this thesis.

Section 1: Portrayals of Traditional Gender Stereotypes in the Media

Gender Stereotyping: Background and Context

Stereotyping is something all humans do. It is a psychological mechanism whereby individuals make categorisations so they can understand the world around them (Lippmann, 1965). Stereotyping provides cognitive shortcuts that assist people with making sense of their environment (Ellemers, 2018; Howard, 1984), in particular, by assigning qualities to groups of people based on their demographics, for example, gender, culture, race, and sexual orientation (Eagly & Mladinic, 1989; Kiprotich & Chang'orok, 2017; Six & Eckes, 1991). While stereotyping serves this purpose, it also has the adverse effect of reducing groups of people to a few characteristics and behaviours (Hall et al., 2013). This means that stereotyping ignores the complexity of individuals in favour of a simplified view of groups of people (Six & Eckes, 1991), and rarely communicates accurate information (Kiprotich & Chang'orok, 2017).

Traditional gender stereotypes are beliefs about certain attributes, including traits, roles, behaviours, occupations, and physical characteristics, that differentiate men and women (Biernat, 1991; Johar et al., 2003; Leaper, 2015). They are strong filters in which people process information (Ellemers, 2018; Gilbert, 2002) and stem from norms and expectations that are associated with being male and being female (Six & Eckes, 1991; Walklate, 2018). These norms and expectations are constructed

through social, cultural, and psychological means (Ahl, 2006; Gupta et al., 2009; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Traditional gender stereotypes commonly assign behaviours, attributes, and roles to men and women, resulting in labels of masculine and feminine (Eagly & Mladinic, 1989; Eagly et al., 2020; Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Gupta et al., 2009; Hoffman & Hurst, 1990). Historically, these gender stereotypes have led to harmful beliefs, such as the idea that men should not cry (Boven, 2012; Hess et al., 2000), or that women are unable to pursue certain types of higher education or occupy assertive leadership roles (Eagly & Carli, 2004; Goethals & Hoyt, 2016; Parker, 2015). Traditional gender stereotypes are reinforced and perpetuated through various socialisation agents such as family, media, and education (Heywood, 2022; Lakshmi, 2007; Robin & Rajeev, 2021). However, traditional gender stereotypes (like all stereotypes) do not necessarily reflect reality, but instead are preconceived ideas of how society believes men and women differ from each other and should behave (Ellemers, 2018; Guo, 2022).

It is important to acknowledge critiques of gender role research including the notions of masculinity and femininity. Connell criticises gender role research for its tendency to oversimplify gender roles, adopt static and essentialist perspectives, neglect power dynamics, ignore cultural and historical contexts, and overlook intersectionality (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). For example, research often assumes that certain characteristics are inherently masculine or feminine, without considering the dynamic and socially constructed nature of gender identities (Connell, 2001; Connell, 2005). Further, the conventional understanding of gender roles often portrays a fixed and dichotomous view of masculinity and femininity, neglecting the diversity and fluidity of gender expressions (Connell, 2005; Hyde et al., 2019; Lips, 2020). However, despite scholars' efforts to explore a more

nuanced understanding of how gender is expressed, the media still relies on traditional binary gender stereotypes to portray men and women (Ward & Grower, 2020).

Media Use of Traditional Gender Stereotypes

Traditional gender stereotypes are perpetuated by the wider media. This includes news outlets, and other forms of media such as television programs, movies, video games, and literature (Gill, 2007; Santoniccolo et al., 2023; Ward & Grower, 2020; Wood, 1994). The wider media reinforces traditional gender stereotypes through the depictions of masculinity and femininity (Gill, 2007; Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015; Morgan, 2019; Richardson & Wearing, 2014). This includes through gendered traits, societal and familial roles, and the physical appearances of men and women.

The media often uses masculine traits to describe men and feminine traits to describe women (Collins, 2011; Gauntlett, 2008; Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015; Lauzen et al., 2008; Richardson & Wearing, 2014; Wood, 1994). These traits can be linked to agency and interdependence. Men are stereotypically more agentic, while women are stereotypically more communal (Eagly & Mladinic, 1989; Eagly et al., 2020; Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Gupta et al., 2009; Hoffman & Hurst, 1990). Agency includes traits such as being assertive, competent, independent, rational, competitive, ambitious, and decisive (Eagly et al., 2020; Haines et al., 2016). In contrast, communal traits include being expressive, warm, caring, compassionate, concerned with the welfare of others, helpful, and nurturing (Eagly et al., 2020; Haines et al., 2016). It is important to note that when men and women do not adhere to these traditional gender traits, they are often criticised by the media and society (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002; Ellemers, 2018; Gill, 2007). For example, women who commit

violent crimes are criticised for not adhering to communal traits (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002; Gill, 2007), which will be discussed in more detail further below.

Traditional gender stereotypes are often linked to conventional social roles of men and women (Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Hentschel et al., 2019; Prentice & Carranza, 2002). This includes roles in domestic and workplace environments. Despite the progress made regarding women in the workforce, media representations still portray women as primarily responsible for domestic tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare, whereas men are shown as breadwinners and less involved in household responsibilities (Lauzen et al., 2008; Santoniccolo et al., 2023; Scharrer, 2013). For example, one study examining fictional characters in prime-time television shows found that female characters enact interpersonal roles centred on romance, family, and friends, while male characters are predominantly associated with work-related roles (Lauzen et al., 2008). Furthermore, women are stereotypically portrayed by the media as nurturing mothers and passive cooperative wives (Barnett, 2005; Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002; England et al., 2011; Lloyd & Ramon, 2017; Naylor, 1990). Conversely, television programs such as sitcoms regularly portray fathers as foolish and less capable of running households compared to mothers (Reep & Dambrot, 1994; Scharrer, 2001).

The media also depicts roles associated with power. Women are often portrayed by the media as being passive, weak, dependent on men, and as followers (Collins, 2011; Gill, 2007; Lauzen et al., 2008; Ward, 2016; Wood, 1994). On the other hand, men are often portrayed as powerful, strong, brave, and as leaders (Kiprotich & Chang'orok, 2017; Scarduzio et al., 2017; Wood, 1994). For example, female princesses in Disney movies are often portrayed as submissive damsels in distress that need rescuing by strong, powerful princes (England et al., 2011; Maity,

2014). However, it is important to note that while men are arguably depicted in more favourable ways than women (e.g., as strong, powerful, and brave), they can also be portrayed in undesirable ways. For example, the media uses traditional gendered stereotypes to portray men as violent, aggressive, and as seeking power and control over others (Morgan, 2019). Scholars argue that this normalises violence against women (Meyers, 2004; Wood, 1994).

The media's portrayals of physical appearances and sexual activity are also rife with traditional gender stereotypes. The media often highlights elements of women's physical appearance in particular their beauty, thinness, youth, and sexual appeal (Santoniccolo et al., 2023; Scharrer, 2013; Ward & Grower, 2020). Research reveals that television programs tend to depict women as placing greater emphasis on their appearance (Baker & Raney, 2007; Gerding & Signorielli, 2014; Hentges & Case, 2013), and as facing more frequent judgements based on their looks (Gerding & Signorielli, 2014; Rousseau et al., 2018). For example, television programs targeting youth on platforms such as the Disney Channel, Nickelodeon, and Cartoon Network tend to depict female characters as being concerned with their physical appearance and often receiving comments from others about their appearance (Gerding & Signorielli, 2014). Furthermore, research has found that women are more likely to be objectified in a sexual manner by the media compared to men (McDade-Montez et al., 2017). Women are often sexualised by the media reducing them to objects of desire (Collins, 2011; Ward, 2003), while the media celebrates men who make sexual conquests (Kim et al., 2007; Ward, 2003).

Stereotypical portrayals of gender also exist on social media (Bailey et al., 2013; Döring et al., 2016; Elias & Gurbanova, 2018; Felmlee et al., 2020; Guo et al., 2023). One study examined selfies posted on Instagram and found that those posted

by young women were more likely to include a "kissing pout" implying seduction or sexualisation, while those taken by young men more commonly emphasised their muscles implying strength (Döring et al., 2016). Another study found that when women were bullied or harassed on Twitter (now called X), it was because they failed to embody feminine stereotypes and ideals, such as being physically attractive, nice, or sexually pure (Felmlee et al., 2020). The implied message is that women are deserving of criticism for not adhering to traditional feminine stereotypes.

Harmful Effects of Traditional Gender Stereotypes for Offenders and Victims of Violent Crime

Stereotypical portrayals of femininity and masculinity can influence perceptions of and responses to offenders/victims of crime (Andersen, 2013; Meyer, 2016) and can be especially harmful to certain groups, such as female victims, female offenders, and male victims (Bates et al., 2019b). In terms of female victims of violence, the media often perpetuates harmful myths and stereotypes (Meyers, 1994). For example, when victim blaming language is used in media coverage of intimate partner violence, it suggests that women are responsible (or at least partly responsible) for their victimisation and thus violence against women is not a serious crime (Richards et al., 2011). Previous research suggests that stereotypes have a significant impact on how society views women who experience intimate partner violence (Ayyildiz, 1995; Bauman, 2018; Browne, 1993; Goodmark, 2008; Jenkins & Davidson, 1990); for example, blaming women for staying in violent relationships or not taking action sooner (Goodmark, 2008; Schuller & Vidmar, 1992). People are particularly likely to hold victim blaming attitudes in cases where the victim defies traditional gender stereotypes (Wasarhaley et al., 2017). By portraying women in

stereotypical ways, such as “jezebels” who provoke male violence (Meyers, 2004), stereotypes can become part of the public’s perception of crime (Carll, 2003).

Traditional gender stereotypes in the media also impacts how society views female offenders of lethal and non-lethal intimate partner violence, who are often portrayed as defying traditional gender stereotypes. Female offenders of violence are seen as “doubly deviant” in that they have not only broken the law by committing a violent act but have also violated society’s norms and expectations of what is considered appropriate feminine behaviour (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002; Gill, 2007). Therefore, when a woman’s actions or behaviour contradicts traditional gender stereotypes, their behaviour is seen as even more deviant (Lin, 2012), influencing public perceptions of female offenders (Russell, 2012).

The way the public views male victims is also adversely influenced by traditional gender stereotypes portrayed by the media. As previously discussed, men are often viewed as strong, assertive, independent, brave, and powerful (England et al., 2011; Ottosson & Cheng, 2012; Sharda, 2014). These so-called masculine traits are contradictory to being a victim of violence. An adverse consequence of the perpetuation of such gender stereotypes is that male victims may be reluctant to seek help due to a fear of being perceived as weak or vulnerable (Bates et al., 2019b; Vogel et al., 2011). Ultimately, this can result in under-funded services for male victims (Bates et al., 2019b); male victimisation receiving less attention from researchers, the criminal justice system, and the media (Komazec & Farmer, 2020); and lower societal concerns about male victimisation (Andersen, 2013; Sorenson & Taylor, 2005).

Section 2: Media Framing

Aims, Definitions and Components of Media Framing Research

The understanding of traditional gender stereotypes is important because it affects how the media uses frames to present their stories and ultimately sell news. Framing was originally conceptualised by Erving Goffman, who noted that humans classify, organise, and interpret their own life experiences through primary frameworks to make sense of them (Goffman, 1974). Goffman's (1974) main area of focus was the study of framing in personal interactions and everyday social situations. Nonetheless, his theories on framing have found broad application in diverse fields, including media studies. Since Goffman's original work in the 1970s, the field of framing analysis has grown substantially to become the dominant methodology in communication science (Bryant & Miron, 2004).

Framing is a complex concept, and consequently is defined in many different ways, though these definitions often share characteristics (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Collectively, most definitions suggest that framing is used by the media to assist audiences' understanding of issues by providing meaning and explaining complex ideas in familiar terms (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987; Gitlin, 1980; Hallahan, 1999; Kim et al., 2002; Reese, 2001; Scheufele, 1999). The most cited definition in the area of media framing is that developed by Robert Entman, whose definition is also used in the current thesis. Entman (1993, p. 52) states "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described". Thus, according to Entman, the core of framing encompasses two key aspects, namely selection (focusing on certain aspects of an issue and not others) and salience (making

certain information more noticeable or meaningful to readers, for example, through the use of certain words).

Framing research identifies language and context as important components to be examined when analysing media reporting of issues (such as intimate partner homicide, for example). The first component, namely the language the media uses in their reporting of news stories about particular issues, includes words used in headlines and throughout articles (Gillespie et al., 2013). The formation of frames can be influenced by the inclusion or omission of specific language elements (Entman, 1991; Entman, 1993; Pan & Kosicki, 1993), including "keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgment" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Similarly, Gamson and Modigliani (1989) have illustrated that frames can be discerned by analysing metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, and depictions.

The impact of language becomes particularly evident when examining crime news. For example, language can invoke victim blaming ("the victim was unfaithful"; Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013) or portray the victim as good and innocent ("the victim was a loving daughter"; Collins, 2016; Lloyd & Ramon, 2017). This type of language appearing in headlines and throughout media articles can influence the public's understanding of crime and the victims/offenders involved (Bullock & Cubert, 2002). Thus, framing analyses should examine the language used by journalists to identify key frames (e.g., victim blaming) within data.

The other important component of media framing, namely context, includes analysing whether a news story is framed as episodic or thematic (Bullock, 2007; Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Gillespie et al., 2013; Taylor & Sorenson, 2002). Episodic reporting refers to an article focusing on one particular incident rather than on broader

issues, while thematic reporting places incidences within the larger context (Taylor & Sorenson, 2002). To illustrate further, episodic reporting tends to focus on the *what*, while thematic reporting focuses on the *why* and the *how* (Post et al., 2009).

Media Framing Critiques

It is important to note that despite the frequent use of framing analyses by key media scholars, some critiques exist of this approach. For example, the coding and interpretation processes of framing may be subject to selective bias (Giles & Shaw, 2009; Tankard, 2001), with some scholars arguing that there is a lack of reliability in framing research (Matthes, 2009). Others have argued that some framing studies are vague and fail to specify criteria for the identification of frames (Matthes & Kohring, 2008). Indeed, some definitions do not provide operational steps and those that do (e.g., Entman, 1993) are not always explicitly followed (Matthes, 2009). Another common critique is that some research refers to frames when they are in fact examining the topics of the story (Miller et al., 1998; Powers & Andsager, 1999; Rhee, 1997). For example, so-called frames such as “crime”, “economy” and “education” (Miller et al., 1998) may actually be more illustrative of the *topic* of the article (e.g. crime) rather than *how* the news story is framed (e.g. the use of language to suggest victim blaming) (Matthes, 2009).

Given these criticisms, it is clear that researchers who use a framing analysis need to ensure conceptual, operational and logistical clarity. For example, researchers should ensure that the criteria used to identify frames are clearly specified in order to maintain transparency in the research process and to enable other scholars to replicate their work (thereby increasing reliability). Of course, it is also important to clearly define the concept and operationalisation of framing to ensure that what is investigated are in fact the frames of the articles, and not merely the story topics.

How the Media Portrays Violence: A Review of Empirical Literature

Having described the main components of media framing, the focus now turns to how the media portrays violence. Given violence induces fear of crime and is especially captivating to audiences (Dmitrieva, 2017; Duwe, 2000), it is often overrepresented in media reporting (Chermak, 1994; Dmitrieva, 2017; Roberts & Doob, 1990). The media tends to prioritise sensationalised narratives of lethal and non-lethal intimate partner violence over accurate portrayals, leading to the perpetuation of misconceptions (Talwar, 2023). This section outlines the empirical research in this field as it relates to intimate partner homicide. Given the scarcity of research in this area, this review of literature has further been expanded to include studies that examine femicide (the killing of women by men) and non-lethal intimate partner violence. Importantly, because of the focus on gender across the three studies of this thesis, gender differences in findings are emphasised throughout. Some studies use data sources that feature male and female offenders/victims without clearly distinguishing across gender when discussing their findings (e.g., Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Carlyle et al., 2008; Lindsay-Brisbin et al., 2014). These studies are excluded from this review for the obvious reason that a reader does not know if the results relate to men, women, or both.

The majority of research in this area has focused on male offenders and female victims (e.g., Balica et al., 2020; Bullock, 2007; Gillespie et al., 2013; Karageorgos et al., 2023; Richards et al., 2011; Taylor, 2008). Less research has focused on media framing of female offenders and male victims in the context of intimate partner violence (e.g., Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002; Hanson & Lysova, 2021; Noh et al., 2010; Pelvin, 2017). Even fewer studies have specifically compared the media portrayals of men and women who kill (and their victims). The scant research that has

compared the depiction of male and female offenders/victims of lethal and non-lethal intimate partner violence are mostly quantitative (Carlyle et al., 2014b; Sellers et al., 2014; Wozniak & McCloskey, 2010).

After reading the extant literature, a number of frames emerged in media portrayals of lethal and non-lethal intimate partner violence. One of these frames is specific to the portrayal of offenders, namely bad offender. Other frames are specific to victim portrayals, such as victim blaming or victim supporting. Another frame focuses less on the offenders/victims and more on the context of the homicide, specifically, portraying the violence as episodic as opposed to thematic. These frames were present across portrayals of both males and females as offenders (and their victims, when applicable), though some to a greater extent than others. The identification of these frames is important, as it provides essential information for the deductive coding of online media articles in Study 1. Each of the frames identified are discussed in detail below. While not all of the studies reviewed have explicitly used framing analysis (instead referring to "thematic analysis" or "content analysis"), the terminology "frame" is used throughout this section for consistency.

Offender-Focused Frames. One of the most common frames in previous research into lethal and non-lethal intimate partner violence is portraying the offender as *bad* or criticising the offender (Ballinger, 1996; Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002; Bullock, 2007; Easteal et al., 2015a; Komazec & Farmer, 2020; Lloyd & Ramon, 2017; Mackie, 2016; Noh et al., 2010; Pelvin, 2017; Wozniak & McCloskey, 2010). When offenders are portrayed as bad, they are framed as responsible for their actions and therefore are deserving of punishment (Brennan & Vandenberg, 2009). This frame is common across both male and female offenders. Prevalence rates vary across studies, it is estimated that the offender is blamed or criticised in around 20–50% of

articles with female offenders and 80–90% of articles with male offenders (Komazec & Farmer, 2020; Wozniak & McCloskey, 2010).

Female offenders of lethal and non-lethal violence have been portrayed by the media as evil (Ballinger, 1996), callous and ruthless (Wilczynski, 1991), evil manipulators (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002; Wilczynski, 1991), cold-blooded murderers (Noh et al., 2010), sexual deviants (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002), and bad mothers and wives (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002; Huckerby, 2003; Mackie, 2016; Morrissey, 2003; Naylor, 1990).

Male offenders are also regularly labelled as evil or as monsters by the media (Caputi, 1993; Karageorgos et al., 2023; Morgan & Politoff, 2012). However, they are also frequently portrayed as having an "abnormality", such as narcissism, sociopathy, psychopathy, or a lack of emotion (Karageorgos et al., 2023). Bad offenders are often in line with "ideal criminals" who are "typically men who are poor, psychotic, uneducated or, more recently, immigrants ... or a combination of these" (Custers & Van den Bulck, 2013, p. 98). Another method in which male offenders are criticised by the media is through the use of "othering", by which offenders are portrayed as different from "normal" people (Aldrete et al., 2024; Bullock, 2007; Kelly, 2019). An example of deviating from the norm and consequently being portrayed as bad is having a history of antisocial conduct such as engaging in violence or having encounters with the police (Bullock, 2007). The use of othering can lull readers into a false sense of security, thinking that such offences cannot possibly happen to them if their partner does not fit this description (Bullock, 2007).

A very limited amount of research has compared the bad offender frame across male and female offenders. Previous research found male offenders were more likely to be blamed (92.9%) compared to female offenders (53.3%) (Wozniak &

McCloskey, 2010). Other research has found similar results, with male offenders being more likely to be criticised (83%) compared to female offenders (20%) in online articles (Komazec & Farmer, 2020). Another study also found that the criminal history of a female offender (which suggests that the offender is bad) was more likely to be included in news articles compared to male offenders (Carlyle et al., 2014b). All of this suggests that male offenders are more likely to be blamed and criticised in comparison to female offenders. However, as much of the existing research is quantitative, the nuances across gender lack thorough examination.

Victim-Focused Frames. One of the victim-focused frames is *victim supporting*, which is often enacted in media portrayals of female victims of intimate partner homicide (Chagnon, 2014; Collins, 2016; Lloyd & Ramon, 2017; Wozniak & McCloskey, 2010). Victims are often supported by the media when they are deemed as "good". Good victims are portrayed as entirely innocent, having not caused the harm inflicted upon them in any way, and therefore deserve sympathy from the public (Collins, 2016; Greer, 2007). These good victims are also known in academic literature as "ideal victims" (Bouchard et al., 2020; Gekoski et al., 2012; Gruenewald et al., 2013; Gruenewald et al., 2009). Ideal victims are usually women who are "given the complete and legitimate status of being a victim" (Christie, 1986, p. 18). These victims are more likely to be featured by the media (Bouchard et al., 2020; Gekoski et al., 2012; Gruenewald et al., 2013; Gruenewald et al., 2009).

Although more prevalent for female victims, a small number of studies revealed that the victim supporting frame has also been enacted for male victims (Hanson & Lysova, 2021; Wozniak & McCloskey, 2010). For example, one study found that while female victims were more likely to be portrayed as innocent (92.9%), male victims were still portrayed as innocent in 40% of articles (Wozniak &

McCloskey, 2010). Similarly, another study focusing on male victims of intimate partner homicide found that they were portrayed as underserving of the homicide in approximately half of the articles (Hanson & Lysova, 2021). This occurred by portraying the male victim as a good person or describing them as a "family man" (Hanson & Lysova, 2021).

At the other end of the good/bad victim spectrum is the victim who is blamed for their own demise. *Victim blaming* is common, with previous research showing that between 7% and 64% of media articles in the context of intimate partner violence being coded as blaming the victim in some way (Aldrete et al., 2024; Balica et al., 2020; Bullock, 2007; Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013; Gillespie et al., 2013; Hanson & Lysova, 2021; Lee & Wong, 2019; Richards et al., 2011; Taccini & Mannarini, 2024). Victim blame can be achieved through both direct and indirect techniques (Meyers, 1994; Richards et al., 2011; Taylor, 2008). Direct methods include attributing blame through negative characterisation of the victim, whereas indirect methods involve offering excuses for the *offender* (e.g., alcohol use, poor mental health, or being out of control) (Meyers, 1994; Richards et al., 2011; Taylor, 2008).

Direct victim blaming is commonly seen in media portrayals of women who have fallen victim to male violence (Bagai & Faimau, 2021; Balica, 2017; Balica et al., 2020; Berns, 1999; Bullock, 2007; Davidenko et al., 2023; Evans, 2001; Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013; Gillespie et al., 2013; Lee & Wong, 2019; Lloyd & Ramon, 2017; Maxwell et al., 2000; Mellado & Paz, 2013; Mercer, 2019; Richards et al., 2011; Saroca, 2013; Smith et al., 2019; Sutherland et al., 2016; Tatton, 2023; Taylor, 2008). An example of direct victim blaming is portraying the homicide as a result of a fight, thereby suggesting that the male offender and the female victim are equal participants in the incident (Evans, 2001; Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013; Richards et al., 2011).

Another direct technique of blaming the female victim is questioning why the victim did not leave their abusive partner before the abuse went too far (e.g., Balica et al., 2020; Richards et al., 2011; Taylor, 2008). A further method includes suggesting that a woman's infidelity is to blame for the violence perpetrated against them (Aldrete et al., 2024; Gillespie et al., 2013; Lee & Wong, 2019; Lloyd & Ramon, 2017; Taylor, 2008).

Male victims are also directly blamed. One study found that in 64% of female perpetrated intimate partner homicides, the legitimacy of the male victim was questioned, casting doubt on their status as a legitimate victim (Hanson & Lysova, 2021). This involved blaming the victim for substance use (particularly alcohol), and/or for failing to be a good father, provider, or husband. The victim was also blamed by discussing how the victim provoked the crime to occur, for example, by starting an argument with the offender (Hanson & Lysova, 2021).

Victim blaming can also be *indirectly* implied. Such reporting focuses less on the victim and more on the offender. Previous research has found that female victims are indirectly blamed by excusing male offenders in media reporting. Often the behaviour of male offenders is excused by using sympathetic language to describe the offender (e.g., Lee & Wong, 2019; Taylor, 2008), referring to the offender's mental/physical health problems to in some way excuse their violence (e.g., Bullock, 2007; Lee & Wong, 2019; Taylor, 2008), describing the offender as a good person (e.g., Gilmore, 2019; Karageorgos et al., 2023), discussing their difficult upbringing (e.g., Bullock, 2007), and indicating that the offender had a difficult time dealing with relationship separation and therefore can be excused for acting the way they did (e.g., Balica, 2017; Balica et al., 2020; Bullock, 2007; Evans, 2001; Lloyd & Ramon, 2017; Taylor, 2008).

Similarly, research has found that indirect victim blaming occurs in articles featuring female offenders with male victims of intimate partner violence (Easteal et al., 2018; Komazec & Farmer, 2020; Roberto et al., 2013; Wozniak & McCloskey, 2010). Female offenders are sometimes excused by being portrayed as "battered women" who kill their abusive male partners (Carlyle et al., 2014b; Easteal et al., 2015a; Morgan & Politoff, 2012; Morrissey, 2003; Noh et al., 2010). Female offenders are also excused for mental health issues. For instance, one study revealed that media articles depicted women who kill their partners as irrational or insane in just over one-third of articles (Noh et al., 2010).

Only a limited number of studies have compared the prevalence of victim blaming across gender. One study found victim blaming present across two separate media articles, one featuring a male offender and the other featuring a female offender (Easteal et al., 2018). However, a different study found that male victims were assigned blame in 20% of articles featuring female offenders, whereas no female victims were blamed in articles featuring male offenders (Komazec & Farmer, 2020), suggesting that male victims are blamed more often than female victims.

Context-Focused Frames. Other frames observed in media portrayals of violence do not specifically relate to the offender or the victim. One key example is *episodic reporting*, which is a framing technique that is less about those involved in the homicide, and more about how the homicide incident is portrayed. Episodic portrayals emphasise the particular incident as an isolated problem, as opposed to thematic portrayals which situate a specific incident within the broader societal problem of men's violence against women and/or within the history of violence of that particular relationship (Balica et al., 2020; Brossoie et al., 2012; Bullock, 2007; Easteal et al., 2015b; Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013; Karlsson et al., 2020; Lee & Wong,

2019; McManus & Dorfman, 2005; Post et al., 2009; Richards et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2019; Sutherland et al., 2019; Sutherland et al., 2016; Wozniak & McCloskey, 2010).

Episodic reporting frequently coincides with the use of fact-oriented framing known as the "police frame" (which focuses on the who, what, where, when and how of the homicide; Bullock, 2007) and with portrayals of intimate partner violence as a private matter that should be dealt with behind closed doors (Berns, 1999; Bullock, 2007; Gillespie et al., 2013). The media tends to rely heavily either on law enforcement (e.g. police) or individuals who knew the victim (e.g. family, friends, neighbours) as sources in their reporting of intimate partner violence (Chermak, 1995; Gillespie et al., 2013; Richards et al., 2014). Police and other official sources are often quoted or paraphrased by the media as they know the details of the event and often act as gatekeepers of information (Gillespie et al., 2013; Richards et al., 2011). Educated sources like victim advocates and academic researchers are often underutilised in intimate partner violence reporting (Meyers, 1996; Taylor, 2008). Informed voices could provide valuable context and explanations (i.e., thematic reporting).

Episodic reporting is very common in articles featuring male offenders of intimate partner homicide. For example, one study examining the news coverage of intimate femicide, found that the homicides were portrayed episodically in 75% of news articles (Richards et al., 2011). Another study found even higher rates, with as many as 95% of articles featuring an episodic portrayal of the intimate partner homicide (Bullock, 2007). In contrast, and perhaps expectedly given the high rates of episodic reporting, thematic reporting is rare (Bullock, 2007).

Similar to the reporting of male offenders, violence perpetrated by females is also commonly framed episodically (Easteal et al., 2018; Sellers et al., 2014;

Sweeney, 2012; Wozniak & McCloskey, 2010). While most research does not examine the differences across gender, one study found that when the media does provide some sort of context of the homicide (i.e., thematic reporting), articles featuring female offenders are more likely to include reports of past intimate partner violence by male victims (Wozniak & McCloskey, 2010).

Section 3: Audience Interaction with the Media

The previous section outlined research regarding the framing of intimate partner homicide and related violent offences. That information is particularly relevant for the first empirical study of this thesis, which examines online media frames in the context of intimate partner homicide. However, as argued in the introduction to this thesis, while existent studies of the ways in which media corporations portray crime reveal important information, they neglect to consider how readers interact with the media. Therefore, the second empirical study of this thesis addresses this specific knowledge gap. To understand the state of research in this area, the focus now changes from media framing to audience interaction with the news presented to them in online formats. This section begins by reviewing what we know about audience interaction with online news, before moving on to the actual content of such interactions. Notably, the second empirical study emphasises the importance of examining the influence of the gender of offenders/victims on the audience's interaction with the media. As demonstrated in this section, research has largely failed to specifically compare the differences across male and female offenders/victims in audience commentary relating to intimate partner homicide.

Audience Interaction with Online News

The delivery of media in online formats has significantly changed the ways in which readers interact with the news presented to them. In traditional media outlets

such as print newspapers, readers could only provide feedback via a slow process. They had to mail a letter, which entailed drafting it, sealing it in an envelope, purchasing a stamp, and sending it via post. However, there was no assurance that the letter would be chosen for publication in the printed newspaper. The Internet has substantially modified this process. Today, readers can publish directly to the Internet by instantly uploading comments to newspaper websites or on social media sites. They are no longer solely inactive consumers but can produce instantaneous content in the form of online comments (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011b). While the immediacy of this process has made it faster and simpler for readers to participate in the media, it means that there is less moderation of individual online comments.

The roles of journalists and readers have evolved since the media began reporting online. Journalists were traditionally "gatekeepers", who filtered and shaped the news (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). However, today, the audience increasingly helps shape the news by expressing their thoughts and opinions via posting comments – as long as they follow the terms and conditions of the media platform (Hille & Bakker, 2014). Bruns (2003) refers to audience members who consume and participate in the media as "produsers": a mix of "producer" and "user". These produsers generate news, concepts, and public discussions instead of solely absorbing information (Brossoie et al., 2012). The audience can now read the news and participate in the news production, which means that journalists no longer guard the gate, but instead monitor the news, giving rise to the new term described as "gate watchers" (Bruns, 2011). Commenting on the news allows the audience to add or emphasise certain aspects that, from readers' perspectives, have not been addressed in sufficient detail in the initial online news article (Springer et al., 2015). The audience is able to complement the news with their own opinions and interpretations, which potentially

raises the diversity of viewpoints available to other audience members (Carpenter, 2010). However, this allows misinformation to be spread online (Pennycook et al., 2021).

Not only do audience members comment on news articles, but they also reply to the comments that other readers have posted (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011b). This gives commenters the opportunity to discuss their viewpoints with other audience members (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009; Springer et al., 2015). Research has found that the main reasons someone comments on an online article is to first, express their personal opinion on the subject matter of the news article, and, second, because they want to interact with other readers (Canter, 2013).

Interacting with News via Social Media

The growth of social media, such as blogs, Facebook, and X has increased participatory opportunities for the news audience. International studies have identified that social media is commonly used for accessing and sharing news. For example, a study conducted by the Pew Research Centre found that 62% of adults in the United States read news on social media (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). Another study, also undertaken in the United States, found that 22% of respondents comment on social media news posts in an average week, while a quarter of respondents share news via social media (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2017). These international studies show that many members of the public use social media to read the news.

The use of social media for accessing the news can also be seen in Australia. Australian surveys found that over half of the respondents used social media to access news (Park et al., 2020; Park et al., 2024; Watkins et al., 2016). A particularly popular platform for reading and sharing news in Australia appears to be Facebook. Data from recent Australian surveys reveals that nearly 70% of respondents had used Facebook

for any purpose in the last week before taking the survey (Watkins et al., 2016), while just over half of the respondents identified using Facebook for finding, reading, sharing, or discussing the news (Park et al., 2020).

Although social media users may not always actively seek to read the news, news viewing tends to occur anyway. Previous research has found that 78% of Facebook users see news while on Facebook for other reasons (Matsa & Mitchell, 2014). Social media exposes audiences to news segments that they may not have seen otherwise (Mitchell et al., 2013). One study found that social recommendations impact the audiences' online news consumption (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2005). The study found that consumers of online news were more likely to read a news story when there was a positive recommendation from other online readers (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2005). A study in the United States showed that over half of the respondents who read online news shared links to news articles via email and social media, and three-quarters of online news readers used these links to discover news content (Purcell et al., 2010). A pre-focus group questionnaire found that more than half of the participants received most of their news from other people on social media (Antunovic et al., 2016). Collectively, these results suggest that news is not only consumed through individual browsing, but also through others sharing news online via social media.

The Content of Online Comments

What people comment about news stories matters. Studies indicate that comments made beneath an online media article which are biased, contain factual inaccuracies, and are judgmental in nature can shape readers' understanding of the topic being discussed (Baden & Springer, 2014; Chmiel et al., 2011; Freeman, 2011;

Gearhart et al., 2022; Lee, 2012; Lee & Jang, 2010; Peter et al., 2014; Reader, 2012; Singer, 2010). This shows the importance of understanding the content of comments.

A fairly large body of research has examined online comments posted in reaction to news stories. This research has examined online comments on a wide range of topics such as police use of force (Ash et al., 2019), school shootings (Kien et al., 2019), terrorist attacks (Eriksson, 2016), homicides (Heverin & Zach, 2010; Kounadi et al., 2015; Lewis et al., 2021; Powell et al., 2017; Venäläinen, 2020), suicide (Edwards et al., 2020; Rosen et al., 2019; Sisask et al., 2005) and sexual assault and rape (including the #Metoo movement) (Alaggia & Wang, 2020; Aurrekoetxea-Casaus, 2020; Clay, 2019; Deal et al., 2020; Erickson, 2019; Fairbairn, 2020; Lopez et al., 2019; Orth, 2018; Stubbs & Tolmie, 2008; Suvarna & Bhalla, 2020).

However, only a limited number of studies have examined online comments relating to lethal and non-lethal intimate partner violence, despite the importance of social commentary in shaping attitudes and responses to crime. After reading the extant literature, four key themes emerged relating to lethal and non-lethal intimate partner violence: 1) bad offender; 2) victim blaming; 3) victim supporting; and 4) emphasising intimate partner violence as a problem (thematic reporting). Less prevalent themes also emerged including extending sympathies to family and friends, criticising the media's portrayal of the news story, and the failure of the criminal justice system which are discussed further below. The key themes found in research on online comments seem to mirror the frames found in media reporting (discussed earlier), though very few studies have explicitly examined this connection (see further below).

The following section reviews the research on online comments in the context of intimate partner violence. Although few studies have explicitly examined differences in the content of online comments across the gender of the offender/victim, whenever possible these differences are emphasised throughout.

Bad Offender.[1] The first theme found in online comments relating to intimate partner violence is bad offender, which is when the offender is criticised or blamed (Brossoie et al., 2012; Carlyle et al., 2019; Komazec & Farmer, 2020; Whiting et al., 2019). A study examining intimate partner violence posts on Instagram, which did not distinguish the results by gender, found that the vast majority of posters (94.2%) blamed the offender (Carlyle et al., 2019). However, other studies have found offenders are blamed less frequently. For example, one study, that also did not distinguish by gender, found only 6.5% of commenters blamed the offender (Brossoie et al., 2012). Another study examined online comments on news stories relating to the film stars Amber Heard and Johnny Depp, where Mr Depp was accused of perpetrating intimate partner violence (Whiting et al., 2019). The study found only 9% of the commenters blamed the alleged offender Mr Depp (Whiting et al., 2019).

There is scant research exploring gender-based differences for the bad offender theme. Komazec and Farmer (2020) compared how male and female offenders who commit family violence (including intimate partner violence) are portrayed in Facebook comments. This study found that male offenders were blamed in 11–48% of comments featuring a male offender who was violent against his female intimate partner. The number of commenters who blamed the offender varied based

[1] This theme has occasionally been referred to as offender blaming in previous research. However, this thesis uses the term bad offender in order to maintain consistency with other scholars' terminology when examining media framing in the context of intimate partner violence.

on the tone of the news article. Female offenders were blamed slightly less frequently (in 13–38% of comments) (Komazec & Farmer, 2020). This study suggests that comments differ depending on the offender's gender, though clearly more research is needed.

Victim Blaming. The second theme seen in audience commentary is victim blaming. Similar to the way in which the media blames victims (Meyers, 1994; Richards et al., 2011; Taylor, 2008), comments include both direct and indirect victim blaming tactics. Research has found direct victim blaming occurs in online comments relating to both male (Aragbuwa, 2020) and female victims (Whiting et al., 2019). To give an example, the study examining the Heard/Depp case found that commenters used direct victim blaming tactics such as attacking Ms Heard's character, suggesting she has flawed motivations for accusing Mr Depp of intimate partner violence (e.g., seeking attention or being a "gold-digger"), and listing details to try to undermine her account (Whiting et al., 2019). Other research found a few commenters directly blamed female victims for intimate partner homicides by asserting that they held little sympathy for the victim, or that the victim was having an affair (Brossoie et al., 2012). Another study found that both male and female victims were blamed; however, male victims were more likely to be blamed compared to female victims (Komazec & Farmer, 2020). Here, commenters usually indicated that the male victim "deserved it"; in contrast, female victims were blamed for not leaving the relationship or for not doing something to prevent their victimisation (Komazec & Farmer, 2020).

As argued in this thesis (and elsewhere, see e.g., Meyers, 1994; Richards et al., 2011; Taylor, 2008), excusing the offender is a form of indirect victim blaming. Interestingly, Brossoie et al. (2012) found that both male and female victims are indirectly blamed by excusing their offenders. However, different rationales were

used to excuse offender behaviour for male and female offenders. Commenters commonly excused female offenders as incompetent or "crazy", while male offenders were excused as being in poor health, stressed out, doing their best under pressure, and their actions were frequently romanticised as acts of love and desperation (Brossoie et al., 2012). In reference to the Heard/Depp case, Mr Depp was excused by commenters by asserting that he is a good person (Whiting et al., 2019).

Interestingly, while research has found victim blaming to be present in online comments, some research has also found a call to stop victim blaming on social media (Belotti et al., 2020; Carlyle et al., 2019). One study examined posts relating to intimate partner violence on Instagram and found that victims were blamed in 7% of posts, however, 12.3% of posts called for victim blaming to stop (Carlyle et al., 2019). Unfortunately, that study did not distinguish between male and female offenders. Another study examined violence against women (including femicide) and found a call to not victim blame in Tweets (Belotti et al., 2020). The study found that commenters stated that women should not be blamed for wearing short skirts, having casual lifestyles, or having emancipatory attitudes (Belotti et al., 2020). The call to not victim blame has also been seen in research that examined Tweets relating to a stranger femicide, where a woman was killed walking home at night (the homicide of Jill Meagher) (Powell et al., 2017). An example of such a Tweet is: "Women are not to blame for violent attacks—whether in the street or in the home!" (Powell et al., 2017).

Victim Supporting. The third theme found in previous research is victim supporting (Brossoie et al., 2012; Komazec & Farmer, 2020). Previous research has found victim supporting or victim sympathising to be present in online comments in various degrees for male and female victims. One study examining online comments

regarding intimate partner violence in late life found that only 6.5% of commenters had written victim supporting comments by saying that the female victim was an unwilling participant in the violence (Brossoie et al., 2012). No male victims were supported in this study. Furthermore, Komazec and Farmer (2020) found up to 40% of commenters sympathised with female victims, while less than 4% of commenters sympathised with male victims. This suggests that female victims are more likely to receive sympathy and support from commenters compared to male victims. Additionally, the research revealed that commenters used a more emotional tone, showing greater empathetic and caring language, when writing comments regarding female victims compared to male victims (Komazec & Farmer, 2020). Research also observed commenters expressing sympathy for victims through the articulation of their grief (Barnes, 2016; Komazec & Farmer, 2020; Powell et al., 2017). For example, in a study that did not differentiate between gender, comments were sometimes used as an emotional outlet for commenters to publicly cope with their grief (Barnes, 2016).

Emphasising Intimate Partner Violence as a Problem (Thematic Reporting). The fourth theme seen in previous research examining online comments is emphasising intimate partner violence as a societal problem, or thematic reporting (Belotti et al., 2020; Brossoie et al., 2012; Carlyle et al., 2018). As previously mentioned, in the media context, episodic reporting refers to newspapers focusing on one particular incident rather than on the broader issues at hand, while thematic reporting places the incident within a larger societal context (Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Carlyle et al., 2018; Taylor & Sorenson, 2002). Interestingly, there is mixed findings regarding the prevalence of thematic and episodic reporting in online comments regarding intimate partner violence.

Some studies have found that online comments are more aligned with a thematic rather than an episodic style of reporting. This stands in stark contrast to the media's portrayal of such violence, where episodic reporting is more prevalent than thematic reporting. One study examining messages concerning intimate partner violence on Pinterest—across all posts, not just those responding to news articles—found that the majority of "pins" (82.9%) used a thematic style of reporting, while only 8% used an episodic style of reporting (Carlyle et al., 2018). Another study examining Tweets relating to femicide found the theme "gender violence is your business" to be prominent, which indicates that society as a whole is responsible for preventing intimate partner violence (Belotti et al., 2020). On the other hand, another study provides contrary results, finding an episodic style of reporting to be more prevalent than a thematic style of reporting (Carlyle et al., 2019). This particular study examined the portrayal of intimate partner violence across Instagram posts, and found that the majority of posts (43%) attributed responsibility for preventing intimate partner violence to the victims (episodic), and a further 21.4% of posts recognised the offender as responsible (episodic) (Carlyle et al., 2019). Only 28.5% of posts attributed responsibility to the community or society (thematic) (Carlyle et al., 2019). Furthermore, another study revealed that on Facebook news pages and online news websites, even fewer commenters (only 8.2%) engaged in discussions about abuse and emphasised its seriousness (Whiting et al., 2019). Given the mixed findings in the literature, more research is warranted.

Other (Less Prevalent) Themes. A limited number of previous studies have found other less prevalent themes when examining online comments relating to intimate partner violence. In the interest of transparency, and because some of these themes are prevalent in this thesis (see Chapter 6), these are also reviewed here. For

example, one study found that the vast majority of comments included extending sympathies to family members and friends (Brossoie et al., 2012). This included the commenter offering sympathies to those who had to cope with the aftermath of a homicide (Brossoie et al., 2012). Some commenters also conveyed their condolences by using words that reflect religious practices, such as expressing that they would pray for family members of the victim (Brossoie et al., 2012). Furthermore, another study that examined comments regarding a familicide-suicide case found that 13.8% of commenters criticised the media's portrayal of the story (Sisask et al., 2012). These commenters critiqued the content and style of the media coverage, often citing other media channels (Sisask et al., 2012). Finally, research has also found that some commenters discussed how the criminal justice system has failed (Komazec & Farmer, 2020). Here, the commenters criticised or discussed a lack of faith in the criminal justice system or police (Komazec & Farmer, 2020).

The Tone of Online Comments: Incivility

So far in this section, the focus has been on the *content* of online comments (i.e., what is being said). In broader communications research, the *tone* of comments on social media platforms has received increasing attention, with researchers finding that comments are sometimes polarising and uncivil in how they are phrased (Coe et al., 2014; Freelon, 2015; Papacharissi, 2004; Santana, 2014; Schweiger, 2014). This widening research on the tone of comments has been particularly prominent in comments about political debates. This body of research has identified that incivility is common (Coe et al., 2014; Freelon, 2015; Papacharissi, 2004; Santana, 2014; Su et al., 2018). How this influences the way intimate partner homicide is understood is less well examined. As discussed earlier, journalists were traditionally gatekeepers of reader commentary on news content (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009), but the audience now

increasingly helps shape the news by expressing their thoughts and opinions through social media posts (Hille & Bakker, 2014). As a result, the production of news is no longer solely the responsibility of journalists and news outlets. While commenters are subject to the rules of the platforms on which they are commenting, this interactive media setting has created more opportunities for public debate and, consequently, incivility has spread faster and more widely than ever before (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). This section outlines the definition and research regarding incivility.

Defining Incivility. The definition of incivility (and conversely, civility) has been debated by scholars. What many seem to agree upon is the relative subjectivity involved when coding for these concepts. It has been noted, for example, that both incivility and civility are "very much in the eye of the beholder" (Herbst, 2010, p. 3). Incivility is difficult to define, because what one person constitutes as uncivil, another may deem as appropriate. Importantly, it is not *what* people say, but *how* they say it which determines incivility (Brooks & Geer, 2007; Mutz & Reeves, 2005).

Civility has been defined as the absence of hostility (Ksiazek & Springer, 2018). It is also defined as arguing one's own point of view while still respecting the views of others (Hwang et al., 2018). Civility enhances democratic conversation (Hwang et al., 2018; Papacharissi, 2004), and is reasonable and respectful (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). Often a comment is coded as civil when incivility is found to be absent (Blom et al., 2014; Coe et al., 2014; Ksiazek, 2016; Rains et al., 2017).

Many researchers have debated whether incivility and impoliteness are equivalent or separate concepts (Masullo Chen et al., 2019; Papacharissi, 2004; Rowe, 2015; Su et al., 2018). Although many scholars suggest that incivility is the same as impoliteness (Chen & Ng, 2017; Coe et al., 2014; Hwang et al., 2018; Kim & Masullo Chen, 2021; Mutz & Reeves, 2005), others, such as Papacharissi (2004) suggest that

incivility and impoliteness should be examined separately. For these scholars, incivility is defined as threats to democracy or people, as opposed to rudeness or impoliteness (Papacharissi, 2004). In other words, impoliteness involves showing disrespect for others, while incivility is showing disrespect for democracy (i.e., liberal civil society) (e.g., Borah, 2014; Naab & Kalch, 2017; Reader, 2012; Rowe, 2015). The majority of literature suggesting that impoliteness and incivility are separate concepts has focused on comments relating to political news articles, which results in a focus on threats to civil society (democracy) as distinguishing incivility from impoliteness.

In contrast, researchers who argue that impoliteness and incivility are the same, or at least related concepts, have tended to examine a wider range of social topics. For example, one study found that personal-level incivility (i.e., impoliteness by using either insulting language/name-calling, obscene language, or emotional language/displays) was perceived by survey responders as more uncivil compared to public-level incivility (i.e., violating norms of political and deliberative processes) (Muddiman, 2017). Thus, separating incivility from impoliteness is difficult as uncivil behaviour often overlaps with impolite behaviour (Sanyal, 2019).

The current study uses a definition of civility that encompasses both personal-level incivility and public-level incivility. The definition used comes from the work of (Coe et al., 2014, p. 660), who defines incivility as "features of discussion that convey an unnecessarily disrespectful tone toward the discussion forum, its participants, or its topics". According to this conceptualisation, there are five key forms of incivility:

1. *Name-calling*: refers to mean-spirited or disparaging words directed at a person or group of people.

2. *Aspersion*: refers to disparaging words against an idea, plan, policy, or behaviour.
3. *Lying*: includes expressing or implying that an idea, plan, or policy is disingenuous.
4. *Vulgarity*: refers to profanity or language that would be considered improper in professional discourse.
5. *Pejorative for speech:* involves disparaging remarks about the way someone communicates.

Coe et al.'s (2014) definition and conceptualisation of incivility is frequently used by media scholars (e.g., Prochazka et al., 2016; Rains et al., 2017; Rohlinger & Vaccaro, 2021; Ziegele et al., 2017). This widespread usage among scholars highlights its relevance and applicability in understanding incivility in online comments.

Extent of Incivility in Online Comments. The estimated extent of incivility in online platforms varies considerably across studies. Previous research (outside the context of intimate partner homicide) has found that 14–40% of comments on newspaper websites or social media are uncivil (Coe et al., 2014; Freelon, 2015; Papacharissi, 2004; Santana, 2014; Su et al., 2018). This variance may reflect the difficulty in defining exactly what incivility is. When considering the five forms of incivility, Coe et al. (2014) found that the most prevalent form of incivility was name-calling (14%). The other forms of incivility occurred less frequently: vulgarity (3%), aspersions (2.6%), pejorative for speech (1.9%), and lying (1.7%).

Research has also found that the prevalence rate of incivility differs across story topics, sources, platforms, organisational commenting policies, and journalist participation (Coe et al., 2014; Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011a; Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011b; Ksiazek, 2016; Szabó et al., 2021). Hard news stories, such as stories

about crime, the economy, politics, and taxes, were more likely to exhibit uncivil comments compared to soft news stories, such as those related to health, lifestyle, and technology (Coe et al., 2014). For example, crime (a hard news topic), is more likely to feature uncivil comments (25.3% of comments) compared to soft news stories. Other studies have also found that hard news stories such as those about political events or issues (Szabó et al., 2021) and controversial topics (such as gun control; Ksiazek, 2016) are more likely to feature uncivil comments.

Gender and Incivility in Online Comments. Previous research demonstrates that both men and women have been described using uncivil language in online comments (Rheault et al., 2019; Southern & Harmer, 2021). However, women are more likely to be described using uncivil language when compared to men (Chen, 2017; Pain & Chen, 2019; Searles et al., 2020; Van Duyn et al., 2021; Wilhelm & Joeckel, 2019). Uncivil messages towards women typically contain offensive language, name-calling, profanities, stereotypes, and sexist terminology (Chen, 2017). High-profile females such as politicians (Carson et al., 2023; Proust & Saldaña, 2022; Rheault et al., 2019; Rossini et al., 2021; Southern & Harmer, 2021), popular YouTube influencers (Döring & Mohseni, 2020; Wotanis & McMillan, 2014), and journalists (Chen et al., 2020; Pain & Chen, 2019) are more likely to be described using uncivil comments when compared to their male counterparts. However, some research indicates that females lacking prominence are not at a higher risk of being described uncivilly compared to men (Rheault et al., 2019; Southern & Harmer, 2021). Interestingly, other research also suggests that male commenters are more prone to receiving uncivil replies to their comments (Ellis, 2015; Küchler et al., 2023; Proust & Saldaña, 2022), but this is likely due to incivility being present in the original comment (Proust & Saldaña, 2022). No previous research has been found

which specifically examines the influence of the gender of offenders/victims of intimate partner homicide on civility and comments.

Impact of Incivility in Comments. Uncivil comments can have negative impacts. Research shows that uncivil comments posted below an online news article can affect readers' perceptions of the issue discussed (Baden & Springer, 2014; Lee, 2012; Lee & Jang, 2010; Peter et al., 2014; Reader, 2012; Singer, 2010; Waddell, 2018). For example, in one study, uncivil comments led people to perceive a news story as being less credible (Waddell, 2018). Incivility can also result in closed-mindedness (Borah, 2014; Hwang et al., 2018), arouse emotions in readers such as anger (Gervais, 2015; Kim & Kim, 2019; Smith et al., 2010), cause polarisation (Anderson et al., 2014; Kim & Kim, 2019), weaken political trust (Borah, 2014; Mutz & Reeves, 2005), and cause media distrust which can affect a news organisation's reputation (Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Nielsen, 2014). Further, incivility can also discourage or deter others from participating and discussing the news (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011b; Muddiman et al., 2020; Springer et al., 2015). Conversely, civility minimises social tension and enables individuals to engage in constructive debate (Kingwell, 2021). Ultimately, fostering a culture of civility in public discourse is essential for promoting informed and respectful exchanges that contribute to a healthier society.

Section 4: Framing Effects on Audience Interaction

The previous sections have highlighted recurring themes in media framing of intimate partner violence and how the general public comments on such articles in online platforms, including social media. It appears that the framing and themes are gendered, though further research is needed to explore this. The current section of this chapter changes focus by examining the effect frames have on audience perceptions

and interactions with online media. This section sets the scene for the third empirical study of this thesis, which examines whether the nature and content of online comments changes depending on the frame of the article and the gender of the offender/victim, controlling for audience media usage, attitudes, and demographics.

What Are Framing Effects and Why Are They Important?

Framing effects refers to the impact that framing has on the audience. Research regarding framing effects focuses on the media's role in shaping public opinion (Reese, 2007). It examines how differences in an issue's presentation or framing can affect how the audience perceives and understands a certain topic or issue (Lecheler & De Vreese, 2011; Price & Tewksbury, 1997; Valkenburg et al., 1999). Framing is often seen as an extension of agenda-setting as it not only tells an audience *what* to think about particular issues (here, intimate partner homicide), but also tells the audience *how* to think about that issue (Scheufele, 2000). A frame controls how the audience understands and remembers a topic (Entman, 1993). The recurring frames that the media presents to the public shape the way issues are understood by the public (Sieff, 2003). In other words, the more frequently a crime is shaped in a certain way by the media, the more likely it is for the public to understand the crime in this way. Despite this, to date little research has examined how framing affects online comments in the context of intimate partner homicide.

Empirical Studies

To truly understand the effects of framing, it is important to use experimental studies wherein certain variables (e.g., content) are held constant whereas others (e.g., frames and the gender of offender/victim) are varied. Few studies have used such approaches to examine news framing and lethal and non-lethal intimate partner violence. This section focuses specifically on seven papers (from five separate

studies) that have used experimental designs. Two of these focused on the framing of male offenders (Carlyle et al., 2014a; Palazzolo & Roberto, 2011); one on the framing of female offenders (Bauman, 2018); and four (three of which are from the same study) compared the framing of male and female offenders (Savage et al., 2022; Savage et al., 2017a; Savage et al., 2017b; Scarduzio et al., 2017). However, none of the studies specifically examined whether the frames present in articles actually affect how and what people write in online comments on news stories. Instead, the studies focused on how news frames affect the attitudes of participants.

Victim blaming frames appear to have victim blaming effects. For example, previous research regarding male offenders has assessed the impact of news coverage of intimate partner violence by manipulating the news story (i.e., adding paragraphs containing information about the female victim and male offender) (Carlyle et al., 2014a). This study focused on male offenders/female victims and did not examine female offenders/male victims. Students who were exposed to a news story that portrayed a female victim as responsible were less sympathetic to the victim, compared to students who were exposed to a news story that portrayed the victim as blameless (Carlyle et al., 2014a). When a student was more sympathetic to a victim, the student indicated they were more likely to engage in protective action to help victims of intimate partner violence, and more likely to support public health initiatives (Carlyle et al., 2014a). This highlights how a frame can impact on audience perceptions of victims.

The effects of frames are also apparent for offenders, and such effects appear to be dependent on the gender of the audience. A study examining the impact of news coverage of women who had committed intimate partner homicide found that female participants were likely to view female offenders as victims who acted in self-

defence, while male participants only viewed the offenders as victims if they fit the stereotypical image of a battered woman (Bauman, 2018). This study suggests media frames affect attitudes differently for men and women who read news stories, but fails to examine whether it affects what and how the reader writes about the news story in their own comments online.

A limited number of studies have used an experimental approach by varying a news article relating to an incident of intimate partner violence to compare the effects of framing depending on if the offender is male or female (Savage et al., 2022; Savage et al., 2017a; Savage et al., 2017b; Scarduzio et al., 2017). One study manipulated an intimate partner violence news story by changing the gender of the offender and the type of framing (episodic or thematic) (Savage et al., 2022). The participants were randomly assigned to read one of the news articles and then complete a questionnaire. The research revealed that individuals who read the news article framed thematically featuring a male offender tended to show greater support for public health perspectives (compared to those who read an episodic news article with a male offender, or either a thematic or episodic news story featuring a female offender) (Savage et al., 2022).

On another occasion, the same research team wrote three papers based on an experimental study which examined the severity of violence (Savage et al., 2017a; Savage et al., 2017b; Scarduzio et al., 2017). The researchers used data from a survey that was given to participants after reading one of six intimate partner violence news stories (Savage et al., 2017a; Savage et al., 2017b; Scarduzio et al., 2017). The news story had been varied to change the offender's gender (male/female) and the severity of violence (weak/strong/fatal). Participants rated intimate partner violence stories with male offenders as significantly more serious than female offenders (Savage et

al., 2017b). Participants also believed that male offenders were more likely to have previous involvement in intimate partner violence compared to female offenders (Savage et al., 2017a). It also appears the gender of the participant impacts on framing effects. Female participants were more likely to find higher ratings of responsibility for male offenders compared to female offenders, although male participants found male and female offenders equally responsible (Savage et al., 2017a). Similarly, other studies demonstrate that demographics (Callanan, 2012; Näsi et al., 2021; Smolej & Kivivuori, 2006) and personal experience with victimisation and the criminal justice system (Kort-Butler & Habecker, 2018; Näsi et al., 2021; Pickett et al., 2015; Smolej & Kivivuori, 2006) can shape audiences' understanding of an issue. This highlights the importance of using experimental research where details about participants (e.g., demographics and personal experiences) can be analysed.

Collectively, these studies show that media frames and the gender of the offender/victim can impact audience perceptions about the seriousness of incidents and blameworthiness of victims and offenders. However, as stated previously, none of the studies specifically examine whether the frames present in articles actually affect how (i.e., tone) and what (e.g., content) people write in online comments on news stories. One Australian study that has examined this specific issue found that both the frame of the media article and the gender of the offender/victim can impact on comments (Komazec & Farmer, 2020). Overall, male offenders and male victims of family violence received significantly higher levels of criticism and blame compared to female offenders and victims in online comments (Komazec & Farmer, 2020). Commenters were also more likely to blame the offender when the article criticised the offender (as opposed to being neutral) and were more likely to blame the victim when the article criticised the victim (Komazec & Farmer, 2020). For example, 48%

of commenters blamed the male offender of intimate partner violence if the article criticised the offender, however, only 11% of commenters blamed the male offender if the article was neutral (Komazec & Farmer, 2020). Furthermore, 38% of commenters blamed the female offender of intimate partner violence if the article was critical of the offender, while only 13% of commenters blamed the female offender if the article was neutral. This shows that both gender and framing have an impact on comments. However, the aforementioned study was not experimental and did not control for audience characteristics (e.g., age and gender), so it is not possible to ascertain whether these effects are more prominent among, for example, male commenters compared with female commenters.

Section 5: Knowledge Gaps and Research Questions

Collectively, the empirical and theoretical literature reviewed point to several knowledge gaps in this area. These are presented according to the individual study seeking to fill those knowledge gaps. The current thesis consists of three separate (but related) studies, namely: 1) gender differences in online media framing; 2) gender differences in Facebook comments; and 3) gender differences and the impact of media frames on audience commentary. Intimate partner homicide acts as the primary focus in all of these studies. The primary goal of these studies is to advance knowledge on how gender is portrayed in the online interactive media landscape in the context of intimate partner homicide.

Study 1: Gender Differences in Online Media Framing

Few studies specifically explore how portrayals of men and women who kill their partners might differ. However, it is important to understand gender differences given that intimate partner homicide is a gendered crime (Spencer & Stith, 2020; Stöckl et al., 2013; Taccini & Mannarini, 2024), and the circumstances under which

men and women kill differ substantially (Saunders, 2002; Spencer & Stith, 2020). Research specifically comparing themes and frames across the gender of the offender/victim is rare in the context of intimate partner homicide. In fact, some previous studies use data sources that feature both genders without distinguishing across gender when discussing their findings (e.g., Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Carlyle et al., 2008; Lindsay-Brisbin et al., 2014).

The limited number of studies that have compared the portrayal of male and female offenders/victims of lethal and non-lethal intimate partner violence are mostly quantitative (Carlyle et al., 2014b; Sellers et al., 2014; Wozniak & McCloskey, 2010). However, a focus on quantitative differences does not allow researchers to delve into the nuances of how portrayals of intimate partner violence differ across the gender of the offender/victim, particularly when examining potential variations within frames. One qualitative study does compare differences across gender (Easteal et al., 2018), but this study only focused on the portrayal of one male and one female perpetrator of intimate partner homicide in news articles. Another study examines the overall tone of an article (i.e., offender blaming, victim blaming, or neutral), but does not go further into exploring variations in frames (Komazec & Farmer, 2020). Examining media portrayals qualitatively would allow researchers to examine the nuances in gender differences within frames, for example, by coding subframes.

Many previous studies use framing theory as the overarching explanation for their findings. However, this does not explain why portrayals of men and women by the media may differ. Very few studies that specifically compare the portrayal of male and female offenders/victims of lethal and non-lethal intimate partner violence discuss traditional gender stereotypes (Easteal et al., 2018; Komazec & Farmer, 2020). Traditional gender stereotypes are an important consideration as these

stereotypical portrayals by the media can lead to harmful myths about men and women (Bates et al., 2019b; Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002; Meyers, 1994).

Based on the reviewed literature and existing knowledge gaps, the research question for the first study is: Do frames and subframes of intimate partner homicide incidents featured in online media in Australia differ across the gender of the offender/victim featured? If so, how?

Study 2: Gender Differences in Facebook Comments

Several gaps in the literature exist regarding audience interaction with news reports in the context of intimate partner homicide. While social scientists have conducted a sizeable amount of research on the content of social media feeds such as Facebook and Twitter (now called X) (Wilson et al., 2012), criminologists have been slow to examine this area (Milivojevic & McGovern, 2014). Currently, there is a lack of research into how people discuss intimate partner homicide in their online comments to news stories. This lack of research is concerning. In today's online environment, readers can (and do) publish directly and instantly on the Internet by uploading comments to newspaper websites or on social media sites. Previous studies have found that online comments can influence readers (Ahn, 2011; Baden & Springer, 2014; Chmiel et al., 2011; Freeman, 2011; Lee, 2012; Lee & Jang, 2010; Peter et al., 2014; Reader, 2012; Singer, 2010; Von Sikorski & Ha nelt, 2016). In fact, there is evidence to suggest that readers can have their attitudes changed simply by reading others' comments (Anderson et al., 2014; Nonnecke et al., 2004). It is important to examine online comments because these comments can have a significant impact on how the audience who reads them views social issues, such as violence, and in this case, intimate partner homicide (e.g. Lee, 2012; Lee & Jang, 2010; Von Sikorski & Ha nelt, 2016).

The small amount of literature examining lethal and non-lethal intimate partner violence comments predominantly fails to directly compare the differences across the gender of the offender/victim. Currently, only one journal article (Komazec & Farmer, 2020) specifically compares male and female offenders/victims when examining social media comments concerning intimate partner violence. However, this article does not extensively explore the qualitative nuances of gender differences in online comments. Another study does offer a very limited comparison of male and female offenders but examines the public's comments on news sites featuring intimate partner violence against the elderly and does not explore social media comments (Brossoie et al., 2012).

A very limited amount of research has examined incivility in comments in the context of intimate partner homicide. This is concerning as uncivil comments can have adverse impacts, such as causing a story to be less credible (Waddell, 2018), causing closed-mindedness (Borah, 2014; Hwang et al., 2018), arousing negative emotions (Gervais, 2015; Kim & Kim, 2019; Smith et al., 2010), causing polarisation (Anderson et al., 2014; Kim & Kim, 2019), weakening political trust (Borah, 2014; Mutz & Reeves, 2005), and causing media distrust (Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Nielsen, 2014). In addition, no publicly available studies have been found that examine the impact of the gender of the offender/victim on incivility in articles in the context of intimate partner homicide.

Based on the reviewed literature and existing knowledge gaps, the research question for the second study is: Does the content and civility of Facebook comments differ across the gender of the offenders and victims featured in the online articles?

Study 3: Gender Differences and the Impact of Media Frames on Audience Commentary

In addition, gaps also exist in the literature concerning framing effects and the impact news frames may have on the nature and content of online comments. As previously discussed, research has found that media framing has an impact on how the public understands and perceives issues. Some previous research has examined how the media frames intimate partner homicide (Bullock, 2007; Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Carlyle et al., 2008; Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013), and the effects media frames may have on the cognitions of people reading articles (Lecheler & De Vreese, 2011; Price & Tewksbury, 1997; Valkenburg et al., 1999). However, we do not know whether media frames actually impact the nature and content of people's comments. Thus, we do not know whether certain types of frames (e.g., victim blaming) are likely to produce certain types of comments (e.g., victim blaming).

Critics of the effects of framing highlight a number of considerations that need to be incorporated into research such as in the current thesis. Of particular importance to this thesis is the argument that prior knowledge and personal experiences (e.g., intimate partner violence victimisation) affect the influence that framing has on audiences (Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Rhee, 1997; Van Gorp et al., 2009). In other words, both media frames and personal experiences shape the audience's interpretation of media. Another critique of framing effects is that it can be difficult to distinguish between actual content and frames (Otieno et al., 2013), although some researchers have tried to separate content from framing effects by only examining the headline, introduction, and concluding paragraphs of the news article (Price & Tewksbury, 1997; Valkenburg et al., 1999). Furthermore, Von Sikorski and Schierl

(2012) tried to separate content from framing effects by varying only those sentences that contained frame-relevant information.

Given these critiques, it is important for research which examines the effects of framing on the audience to consider the impact that prior knowledge and personal experience has. One of the ways this can be done is by surveying the audience regarding their prior knowledge and personal experience. It is also important for researchers to consider that it can be difficult to determine what is content and what is actual framing. This can be solved by using the same content and changing the media frame in an experimental vignette survey.

Previous studies have changed the framing of a news article and surveyed the reader's perception to show the effects of framing. Collectively, these studies show that media frames and the gender of the offender/victim can impact on how the audience views an issue. However, none of these studies examined whether media frames and the gender of the offender/victim impact on online comments in the context of intimate partner homicide. Only one study examines the effects of frames and gender on online comments regarding family violence (including intimate partner homicide) (Komazec & Farmer, 2020). However, this study does not control for audience characteristics (e.g., age and gender) and attitudes. In addition, as mentioned previously, no studies have been found that examine the impact of the gender of the offender/victim on incivility in articles featuring intimate partner homicides.

Given these research gaps, the third study utilises an experimental research design to examine whether the nature and content of online comments change depending on the frame of the article and the gender of the offender/victim. The study also controls for media usage, attitudes, and participant demographics. Study 3 answers the following research questions: 1) Do media frames affect the theme and

civility of comments?; 2) Does the gender of the offender/victim pair affect the theme and civility of comments?; and 3) Does the gender of the offender/victim pair and media frame interact to affect the theme and civility of comments?

Chapter Summary

Traditional gender stereotypes serve as the lens that will be used to interpret and discuss the results in this thesis. Existent research of media frames associated with lethal and non-lethal intimate partner violence revealed frames that focus on offenders, victims, and the context of homicides. The very limited amount of research examining online comments relating to lethal and non-lethal intimate partner violence found four key themes: bad offender; victim blaming, victim supporting; and emphasising intimate partner violence as a problem (thematic reporting). Other less prevalent themes include extending sympathies to family and friends, criticising the media's portrayal, and the failure of the criminal justice system. Previous research has also found that framing impacts on public perceptions of crime. However, research has not specifically examined whether the frames present in news articles actually affect how (i.e., tone) and what (i.e., content) people write in online comments on news stories.

The following chapter discusses the methods used in this thesis. The first study examines how media reports of intimate partner homicides are framed and whether the frames and subframes differ across the gender of the offender/victim pair. This is achieved through a mixed methods approach, whereby the data are analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The second study changes focus to how people respond to media articles (i.e., via online comments). Facebook comments regarding intimate partner homicides are analysed by conducting a thematic analysis. The third study also focuses on reader comments but uses an experimental vignette

methodology to examine whether media frames and the gender of the offender/victim pairs impact on the theme and civility of comments.

Chapter 3: Methodology

As outlined in Chapter 2, while the literature has come a long way in terms of examining how intimate partner violence is portrayed in the media, there remains a lack of understanding in how frames and subframes qualitatively differ across gender of the offender/victim pairs for online reports of intimate partner homicide in Australia. Further research is also needed on the content (i.e., what is written) and tone (i.e., how it is written) of social media commentary, especially if such commentary differs across gender of intimate partner homicide offender/victim pairs. Research is also needed to ascertain if media frames affect social media comments, and if such effects differ for male and female offender/victim pairs. This thesis addresses these knowledge gaps through three separate but related studies.

Study 1 focused on how intimate partner homicide is framed in online media in Australia and, importantly, whether frames and subframes differed across male offender/female victim or female offender/male victim pairs. Study 2 went one step further by examining how the audience comments on what is reported in these online articles and whether or not their comments differed across gender pairs. Study 3 took an experimental approach by using a vignette design to examine whether or not audience comments differed depending on the frame and the gender pairs while controlling for attitudes and participant demographics. This chapter presents the methodology of each of these three studies.

Study 1: Gender Differences in Online Media Framing

Study 1 examined how reports of intimate partner homicides were framed in online media in Australia and whether the frames and subframes used in these media reports differed across the gender of the featured offender/victim pair. This was achieved through a mixed methods approach, whereby online media articles were

analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively (although the former to a lesser extent). Ethical approval was obtained by the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee before the commencement of this research (reference number: 2017/1004).

Data Source and Sampling Procedure

This study examined Australian online articles reporting on intimate partner homicides. The sample of articles was drawn from four online news sites with the highest readership in Australia at the time the study was conducted, namely news.com.au, ABC News Online, Ninemsn,[2] and Yahoo7[3] (Watkins et al., 2016). At the time of data collection, the news delivered on these sites was available free of charge to consumers (Watkins et al., 2016). This study examined articles published during a 3-year period between 1 August 2014 and 31 July 2017. The start date was chosen as important updates were made to the Australian news reporting guidelines on that date (Australian Press Council, 2014). These updates clarified the Statement of Principles, including that reasonable steps must be taken to ensure information is accurate, and that there must be a fair and balanced presentation of facts. By choosing this start date, it ensured that all articles in the sample were subject to the same reporting guidelines.

Google News was used to identify the online articles. Google News is a news aggregator that allows users to search for news content, use multiple keywords and phrases, select a date range, and select the source(s). Recent research has used Google News when examining intimate partner violence and online media (Komazec & Farmer, 2020). Further, research suggests that Google News is useful in obtaining a

[2] Ninemsn is now known as nine.com.au.
[3] In early 2018, Yahoo and Seven separated, however, the news articles were found prior to this separation.

larger quantity of online media stories compared to LexisNexis (Weaver & Bimber, 2008), which is another platform that offers access to news articles.

This study used a random sampling strategy to select online news articles featuring intimate partner homicide. This allowed each published article an equal chance of being selected, thereby increasing the likelihood of creating a sample that is representative of the full extent of intimate partner homicide articles published on any of the four sites selected for this study. Between 100 and 200 newspaper articles are considered a manageable sample for analyses aimed at identifying the content or themes of articles (Gould, 2004). Based on these guidelines, a target sample size of 120 online articles was used.

Microsoft Excel was used to randomly generate dates between 1 August 2014 and 31 July 2017. The first date randomly generated in Microsoft Excel was selected in Google News, after which searches were conducted for key terms and the four online news sites. The key terms were homicide, homicides, kill, killed, killing, killings, kills, manslaughter, manslaughters, murder, murderer, murderers, murdering, murders, provocation, shooting, shootings, shot, shots, stab, stabbed, stabbing, strangled, strangulation, and violence. All of the online articles resulting from the search were then read to ensure they met the inclusion parameters for the study. This was because the search also brought up articles which reported on forms of homicide other than intimate partner homicide (e.g., stranger homicide) and non-lethal violence. Any articles that did not feature intimate partner homicide were excluded from the study. Intimate partner homicide was defined in the current study as a homicide where the offender and victim share a current or former intimate relationship (Bryant & Cussen, 2015), a definition that aligns with criteria that is used within the Australian and legal welfare context and international research. The process of random selection

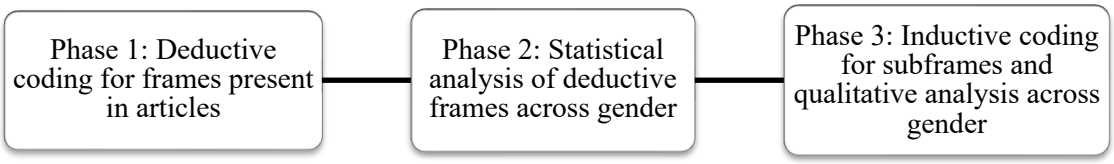
of publication dates was repeated until the target sample size was reached. Appendix A shows the dates searched, the number of results that appeared, and the number of online articles analysed. All of the articles from the final date that met the search parameters were included in the sample, which resulted in a total sample size of 121 online news articles. Of the 121 articles, 102 articles (84.3%) featured male offenders and 19 articles (15.7%) featured female offenders.[4] The articles were imported into *NVivo* (version 12), which is a software program that enables the user to store and manage qualitative data, as well as code themes and conduct qualitative analyses.

Coding and Analysing Frames

This study consisted of three phases (see Figure 3.1). During the first phase, a deductive qualitative framing analysis was used to ascertain whether four well-established frames were present in the online articles. The second phase involved a statistical analysis to examine whether the frames differed across gender. In the third phase, an inductive qualitative framing analysis was used to identify gendered subframes. The following section presents the steps involved in the three phases.

Figure 3.1

Steps Involved in Coding and Analysing Frames and Subframes in Study 1



Phase 1: Deductive Coding for Frames Present in Articles. In the first phase, a qualitative framing analysis was undertaken in *NVivo* to identify the frames

[4] The focus of this study is pairs presented as male/female as this remains the most commonly reported relationship in media articles. Thus, any news article relating to same-sex pairings was eliminated from the study. In this instance, two articles with same-sex parings were excluded.

used in the articles. In this study, framing is defined as selecting some aspects of a perceived reality, and making them more salient in the text (Entman, 1993), in line with previous studies (Bouzerdan & Whitten-Woodring, 2018; Bullock, 2007; Easteal et al., 2015b; Matthes, 2009). This definition encompasses two key aspects: selection (focusing on certain aspects of an issue and not others) and salience (making certain information more noticeable or meaningful to readers, for example through the use of certain words) (Entman, 1993).

The 121 articles were examined using a deductive approach, whereby four predetermined frames derived from theory and prior research were used to guide the analysis (David & Baden, 2017; Linstrom & Marais, 2012; Matthes, 2009; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Although a limitation with deductive processes is that new frames might be overlooked (Matthes & Kohring, 2008; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000), it was chosen for the current study because of pre-existing empirical frameworks depicting intimate partner homicide (as reviewed in Chapter 2; e.g., Bullock, 2007; Carlyle et al., 2014a; Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013; Gillespie et al., 2013; Richards et al., 2011). A further rationale for using a deductive approach is its replicability and ability to cope with large samples (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000).

While prior research has identified the media's use of a range of frames depicting intimate partner homicide, the current study examined the presence of four prominent frames: *bad offender*, *victim blaming*, *victim supporting*, and *episodic reporting*. These four frames were selected because of their conceptual significance and because only a limited amount of research has previously examined the differences across gender in these frames. It is argued in this thesis that these frames are particularly problematic in terms of perpetuating harmful perceptions of intimate partner homicide. Analysing the bad offender frame enables researchers to examine

how the media portrays individuals involved in a homicide as culpable (Bullock, 2007; Komazec & Farmer, 2020), potentially influencing public perceptions of guilt or wrongdoing. Additionally, it is crucial to investigate the victim blaming frame, because this frame can perpetuate harmful social perceptions, particularly regarding violence against women (Meyers, 1994; Meyers, 1996). Victim blaming narratives may impede empathy and support for those who have suffered harm (Anastasio & Costa, 2004; Meyers, 1996). This also highlights the necessity to examine whether the victim supporting frame is prominent in media articles. Examining episodic reporting is important for recognising when media coverage may be overly focused on isolated incidents, which may hinder discussions about policy changes that can address underlying societal problems (Gross, 2008; Iyengar, 1991).

The four frames were operationalised based on previous research. The bad offender frame was coded for in articles that criticised or blamed the offender (e.g., likening them to a monster) (Bullock, 2007; Komazec & Farmer, 2020; Wozniak & McCloskey, 2010). The victim blaming frame was coded for in articles that indirectly or directly blamed the victim. Indirect tactics involve providing excuses for the offender (e.g., mental health issues, alcohol use, or being out of control), whereas direct victim blaming tactics involve blaming the victim through negative characterisation of the victim (Meyers, 1994; Richards et al., 2011; Taylor, 2008). The victim supporting frame was coded via two ways – by describing the victim's positive characteristics and/or by portraying the homicide as sad or tragic (Collins, 2016; Lloyd & Ramon, 2017; Wozniak & McCloskey, 2010). Episodic reporting was coded when articles focus on the single homicide incident rather than on broader societal issues involving intimate partner violence, such as the importance of

prevention efforts (Bullock, 2007; Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Gillespie et al., 2013; Taylor & Sorenson, 2002).

The articles were coded based on the written language in the headline and the main body of the article. This included looking at individual words, phrases, and sentences (Entman, 1991; Entman, 1993; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Pan & Kosicki, 1993). The written text was coded both in terms of its explicit meaning (manifest content) and implied meaning (latent content) to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the content and to ensure a more robust and insightful analysis (Cash & Snider, 2014). A manifest approach involves detecting themes from the surface meanings of the data (David & Baden, 2017). Manifest content is the explicit meaning and does not look beyond what was written in the media articles. Conversely, a latent approach involves examining the underlying ideas and assumptions of the data (David & Baden, 2017). For example, the explicit meaning of an offender described as "evil" is being immoral or wicked (manifest content). On the other hand, discussing how an offender sobbed in court might imply they are remorseful (latent content).

Phase 2: Statistical Analysis of Deductive Frames Across Gender. Once the deductive process was completed, the second phase involved a statistical analysis to examine whether the frames coded for in the deductive process differed across the gender of the offender/victim pairs. The gender of the offender/victim pairs was firstly recorded in *NVivo*. The gender of the offender/victim pairs and the frames were then imported from *NVivo* into *IBM SPSS Software 29* (*SPSS*). Chi-square tests were used to test for potential differences in the frames across gender. The test was chosen as it allows for the comparison of two distributions of categorical variables, testing whether any patterns are due to chance (Pallant, 2013). Yate's Correction for

Continuity was used, as this compensates for the overestimation of the chi-square value in 2 × 2 tables (Pallant, 2013). Fisher's Exact Test was used for frames where the cells had an expected count less than "5". Given Fisher's Exact Test does not generate a test statistic, only the p-values were reported for these variables. The size of the difference (or effect) between the distributions was also examined. The phi coefficient value was calculated to examine the effect size for 2 × 2 tables (Pallant, 2013). The interpretation of the effect size follows the recommended guidelines (0.10 = small, 0.30 = medium, 0.50 = large; Cohen, 1988).

Phase 3: Inductive Coding for Subframes and Qualitative Analysis Across Gender. The third phase involved coding for gendered subframes using a qualitative framing analysis. While quantitative analyses can reveal differences in the prevalence of main frames, an in-depth coding of subframes as they differ by gender is important to more fully understand the deeper meaning of the text (see e.g., Macnamara, 2005). Importantly, such an analysis addresses the lack of available research examining differences in how gender is portrayed in lethal violence involving intimate partners. Given the lack of previous research that has examined differences across gender, an inductive approach was used to identify the subframes. An inductive approach focuses on identifying the frames (or in this case, subframes) that emerge from the data itself (David & Baden, 2017; Linstrom & Marais, 2012; Matthes, 2009; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Using an inductive approach allows for flexibility in finding new subframes (Matthes & Kohring, 2008; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000), which, due to the limited amount of previous research, is particularly important when examining the differences across gender.

The articles were read several times to explore the qualitative differences across gender. The four frames were examined to identify subframes to compare

gender. Similar to above, the articles were coded based on the language used in the articles. Both manifest and latent content were analysed. The news articles were firstly read to generate preliminary codes. Subsequent re-readings were conducted to refine or introduce new codes. These codes were then organised into subframes to highlight the qualitative differences across gender (see Chapter 4 for further details). Given the interconnections between observations, analysis, and conclusions in inductive analysis, and that the coding process is such a big part of the results, the coding is not discussed here.

Coding Reliability

One key critique of framing research is the potential lack of reliability in terms of the coding (Matthes, 2009). Coder reliability refers to the consistency of the coding (Richards, 2009). One method of increasing reliability is for the researcher to engage in frequent debriefing sessions with academic experts to put their work through peer scrutiny (Shenton, 2004). Therefore, the coding was discussed with the research team on numerous occasions and modified in line with their recommendations and feedback. In addition, the current study specifically examined inter-rater reliability, to ensure the coding manual was easily followed and devoid of ambiguity. A research student external to the project independently coded 10% of the articles for frames using a coding manual. The results showed a high level of consistency (88%). Nevertheless, a few issues did arise, such as whether excusing an offender forms part of the victim blaming frame or if it should be coded as a separate frame. These issues were discussed both with the independent coder and with the research team, and the frames were amended accordingly (e.g., it was decided that excusing an offender would form part of the victim blaming frame).

Study 2: Gender Differences in Facebook Comments

Study 1 focused on media framing by examining online news articles. Study 2 changed focus to how people *respond* to those articles. This was achieved by examining Facebook comments in which readers responded to online articles about intimate partner homicide. Given the focus on gendered portrayals in this thesis, the comments were analysed across gender, i.e., whether the intimate partner homicide involved male offender/female victim pairs or female offender/male victim pairs. Two aspects of the comments were examined: content and civility. As such, the analysis focuses not only on *what* (i.e., the theme) is discussed, but also *how* (i.e., the tone, namely civility) it is discussed. The data were examined by conducting a thematic analysis of Facebook comments. The Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee granted ethical approval prior to the commencement of this research (reference number: 2017/1004).

Data Source

The second study relied on a sample of online comments made by readers in response to online news reports of intimate partner homicide. To do this, Study 2 used the same online news articles that were collected and analysed for Study 1, namely 121 Australian online articles featuring intimate partner homicides that were reported by the media for three years (between 1 August 2014 and 31 July 2017). As discussed previously, these were randomly selected from the four online news sites with the highest readership in Australia at that time (news.com.au, ABC News Online, Ninemsn, and Yahoo7) (Watkins et al., 2016).

Sampling Procedure

The procedure of collecting the sample to be analysed consisted of a number of steps. First, the online articles from Study 1 were located on Facebook in order to

collect the online comments. Facebook was selected because many online news sites (including news.com.au, ABC News Online, Ninemsn, and Yahoo7) do not allow readers to comment on some (or all) articles posted on their own websites, however, users were able to comment on the article on the news sites' Facebook pages. Furthermore, Facebook is the predominant social media site used in Australia by the public to find, read, share, or discuss news (Watkins et al., 2016).

The second step was to search for each of the individual articles on Facebook. This was done by selecting the source in Facebook (news.com.au, ABC News Online, Ninemsn, and Yahoo7) and then searching for the title of the article, offender name, or victim name to find the specific article. The online media sites only post a selection of the sampled news articles on their associated Facebook pages. Given that the focus of this study was to examine reader comments on those articles that do make it to online platforms where commentary is possible (e.g., Facebook), if a specific article was not located in Facebook, it was excluded from the study. Twenty of the original 121 online news articles were located on Facebook.

Third, a preliminary examination of comments on articles relating to intimate partner homicide revealed that some articles attract in excess of 400 comments while others attract much fewer comments. For practical reasons it was not possible to analyse all of the comments, even though the number of articles was only 20, therefore, a sample of comments was drawn. For logistical reasons it was decided that a maximum of 400 comments be analysed. A sample of 20 comments were drawn for each article (20 comments x 20 online articles = 400 comments). Facebook allows a user to view "all comments", "most relevant comments" or "new comments". This study utilised the 20 "most relevant" comments because this includes the comments with the most views, reactions, and replies. When browsing Facebook, the majority of

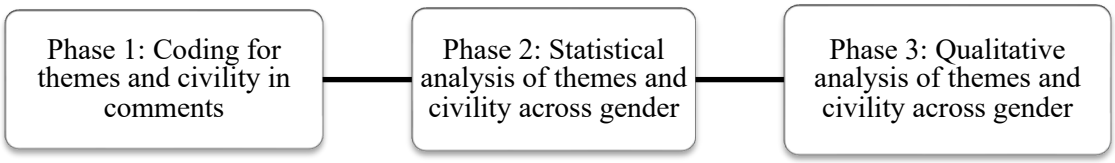
users will see the "most relevant" comments first. In cases where fewer than 20 of these comments were available, all were used. This resulted in a sample of 371 comments, ranging in length from one word to 243 words (though most were relatively short; median = 17 words). Of the 371 comments, 37 had responded to articles with female offenders and 334 had responded to articles with male offenders. The comments were then imported into *NVivo*.

Coding and Analysing Themes and Civility

Similar to Study 1, this study consisted of three phases (see Figure 3.2). In the first phase, an inductive thematic analysis was used to identify the themes in comments. The presence of incivility within each theme was also coded for. During the second phase, a statistical analysis was completed to examine whether the themes and civility differed across gender. In the third phase, differences across gender for the themes and civility were examined qualitatively. The following section presents the steps involved in these three phases.

Figure 3.2

Steps Involved in Coding and Analysing Themes and Civility in Study 2



Phase 1: Coding for Themes and Civility in Comments. A thematic analysis was conducted in *NVivo*. Thematic analysis is a commonly used technique to identify, analyse and report themes derived from qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A theme encompasses what is important about the data set and outlines patterned responses from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A thematic analysis has several advantages including flexibility, ease of use, and the ability to clearly

summarise and interpret textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The study followed the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) for how to conduct a thematic analysis. These steps are familiarising oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes.

Given that so few studies examine comments in the context of intimate partner homicide, an inductive approach was used. The data were read to generate preliminary codes. The comments were then re-read several times to explore whether themes should be modified or if additional themes should be added. Similar to Study 1, both manifest and latent content was coded as part of the thematic analysis. While a range of themes was found, seven prominent themes emerged. These themes are: 1) *bad offender,* 2) *victim blaming,* 3) *victim supporting,* 4) *sympathy with family,* 5) *lenient criminal justice response,* 6) *critiquing media's portrayal,* and 7) *emphasising intimate partner violence as a problem*. It is worth noting that these themes were also seen in previous studies examining comments relating to intimate partner violence (Aragbuwa, 2020; Bou-Franch, 2013; Brossoie et al., 2012; Carlyle et al., 2019; Komazec & Farmer, 2020; Whiting et al., 2019).

Importantly, in addition to coding for themes, the presence of incivility within each theme was examined using a deductive approach. This was achieved by using Coe et al.'s (2014) operationalisation of incivility because it is frequently used by media scholars (Prochazka et al., 2016; Rains et al., 2017; Rohlinger & Vaccaro, 2021; Ziegele et al., 2017). Here, incivility is defined as "features of discussion that convey an unnecessarily disrespectful tone towards the discussion forum, its participants, or its topics" (Coe et al., 2014, p. 660). According to Coe et al.'s (2014) conceptualisation, there are five key forms of incivility:

- *Name-calling* – refers to mean-spirited or disparaging words directed at a person or group of people.
- *Aspersion* – refers to disparaging words against an idea, plan, policy, or behaviour.
- *Lying* – includes expressing or implying that an idea, plan, or policy is disingenuous.
- *Vulgarity* – refers to profanity or language that would be considered improper in professional discourse.
- *Pejorative for speech* – involves disparaging remarks about the way someone communicates.

In this study, comments were coded as uncivil if they had at least one of these five forms of incivility. These forms are not mutually exclusive because a comment could contain more than one type of incivility (e.g., a comment could contain both vulgarity and name-calling). A comment was coded as civil when none of the five forms of incivility were present. It is important to note that comments were coded as civil or uncivil based on their entirety (i.e., if any portion of the comment was deemed uncivil, the entire comment was coded as uncivil).

Phase 2: Statistical Analysis of Themes and Civility Across Gender. Similar to Study 1, in the second phase, statistical differences across the themes and civility for the gender of the offender/victim pairs were examined. Following the same steps as Study 1 (see above), the statistical analyses consisted of chi-square tests using Yate's Correction for Continuity or Fisher's Exact Test depending on the data. Effect sizes (using the phi coefficient value) were interpreted according to Cohen's (1988) guidelines.

Phase 3: Qualitative Analysis of Themes and Civility Across Gender.

Importantly, the differences across gender were also examined qualitatively. The themes of comments were examined to identify any subthemes to compare gender (via an inductive thematic analysis). Rather than including a separate discussion on civility, this aspect of communication is discussed within each theme to examine gender, because the delivery of a comment (i.e., the tone) represents such a fundamental aspect of communication. Thus, given that civility provides significant meaning and interpretation of a message, civility is discussed within each of the themes to compare the gender of the offender/victim pairs, as opposed to being siloed.

Coding Reliability

Similar to Study 1, to increase reliability coding was discussed with the research team on numerous occasions and modified in line with their recommendations and feedback (as a form of peer scrutiny; Shenton (2004)). In addition, the same research student (external to the project) who independently coded 10% of the articles for frames (see Study 1 above) also coded the comments for themes and civility. The results showed a high level of consistency for the themes (93%) and a moderately high level of consistency for civility (74%). Some issues did arise, for example, whether using a disparaging tone against the media amounted to name-calling or aspersion (it was decided to code as the latter). Another example is whether commenters calling for the reinstatement of capital punishment should be coded as bad offender, criticising the criminal justice system, or both (it was decided that examples such as this one be coded as criticising the criminal justice system unless the commenter specifically discussed how the specific offender should be killed). These issues were discussed both with the independent coder and with the research team, and the coding instructions were clarified accordingly.

Study 3: Gender Differences and the Impact of Media Frames on Audience Commentary

The last study of this thesis (Study 3) also focused on online comments. The main difference is the methodology used. While Study 2 relied on an existing sample of comments (i.e., comments that had been posted on Facebook in response to actual online articles), Study 3 extended this research by relying on an experimental vignette methodology. As discussed in Chapter 2, one critique of framing effects is that it can be difficult to determine if it is the content or the frame that impacts the public's perception of an issue. Therefore, a vignette design was selected for Study 3 as this allows the researcher to keep the content of the news article constant (i.e., by using the same intimate partner homicide case) while changing how it is framed. It allows the researcher to examine how different frames impact on the content of online comments.

Vignettes are stories or short descriptions about individuals/situations that are presented to respondents (usually within a survey) to examine their judgement about the scenarios (Atzmüller & Steiner, 2010; Rooks et al., 2000; Rossi et al., 1974). Vignette surveys are commonly used in psychology, sociology, education, and marketing (Atzmüller & Steiner, 2010). They are often used in quantitative research but have also been used in qualitative research (Atzmüller & Steiner, 2010; Barter & Renold, 1999). Using vignettes allows researchers to explore beliefs and attitudes induced by a stimuli (Rahman, 1996) and evokes genuine participant responses while allowing for the control and manipulation of selected variables (Silva et al., 2019). Vignette research usually has at least one of three purposes: 1) to elicit reactions and responses to stimulus, 2) to understand individual perceptions, beliefs and attitudes, or 3) to explore new areas of research or sensitive topics (Barter & Renold, 1999; Hazel,

1995; Hughes, 1998; McInroy & Beer, 2022). All of these aims were present in the current study.

Study 3 had three main research objectives. First, to examine whether media *frames* affect the theme and civility of comments. Second, to examine whether the *gender* of the offender/victim pairs affects the theme and civility of comments. Finally, to examine how the *gender* of the offender/victim pairs and media *frame* interact to affect the theme and civility of comments.

For feasibility reasons, this study focused on two frames: bad offender and victim blaming. While it would have been ideal to include a broader number of frames, expected sample size and time constraints limited the number of frames used in the vignettes. The bad offender frame was selected because of its high prevalence in the online articles in Study 1 and the comments in Study 2. It is also commonly featured in media research exploring violence (e.g., Bullock, 2007; Carlyle et al., 2019; Easteal et al., 2015a; Komazec & Farmer, 2020; Lloyd & Ramon, 2017; Noh et al., 2010; Pelvin, 2017; Wilczynski, 1991; Wozniak & McCloskey, 2010). The second frame, victim blaming, was selected because of its high prevalence in the online articles in Study 1. While victim blaming was less prevalent in Study 2, previous research has shown a high prevalence in online comments (Komazec & Farmer, 2020; Whiting et al., 2020), which means it warrants further attention. The victim blaming frame is also important to examine because such framing can lead to continuation of harmful social perceptions with regard to violence against women (Meyers, 1994; Meyers, 1996). Finally, the selection of these two frames was supported by the findings in Studies 1 and 2, which revealed important differences in terms of the prevalence and nature of the frames across gender of the offender/victim pairs.

Sampling Frame and Data Collection

Respondents were recruited via Facebook. When compared to traditional recruitment methods, recruiting via Facebook can be more affordable, have shorter recruitment periods, and provide better representation (Whitaker et al., 2017). A paid advertisement was placed on Facebook. The advertisement ran for approximately one month. Facebook uses an algorithm to determine who will see the advertisement that is based on the amount paid to display the advertisement. The advertisement appeared on Facebook users accounts who were 18 years old and over and lived in Australia. Once a respondent clicked on the advertisement, they were redirected to the survey.

This research was conducted in accordance with ethical approval granted by the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee (reference number: 2019/133). Respondents were asked to provide informed consent (by ticking a box) prior to beginning the survey. The survey preamble indicated the voluntary nature of participation, stating that respondents were not required to respond to every question and could withdraw from the survey at any point. The survey was completed anonymously and contact information for support services related to intimate partner violence was provided to respondents.

The survey was administered on the website LimeSurvey, which is an online survey tool. Each respondent was randomly assigned to one of four vignettes upon entering the survey. The vignettes featured an intimate partner homicide news article edited specifically for the current study but based on an existing online news article ("Woman dies, man in custody after double shooting on suburban road in Hobart," 2015, May 15). This was to avoid the vignette not feeling “real” – which is a limitation of vignette research (Marques Nascimento Macêdo & Bispo, 2023;

Sampson & Johannessen, 2020). The existing article was edited to reflect a bad offender or victim blaming frame.

The vignettes varied on two dimensions: type of media frame (bad offender or victim blaming frame) and gender of the offender/victim pairs (male or female). This resulted in four scenarios: 1) a bad offender frame with a male offender/female victim pair, 2) a bad offender frame with a female offender/male victim pair, 3) a victim blaming frame with a male offender/female victim pair, and 4) a victim blaming frame with a female offender/male victim pair. Male/female pairs were used in the vignettes because adding another dimension to the vignettes was not feasible, as this would have required significantly more respondents participating in the study. The bad male offender scenario is presented in Table 3.1. The other scenarios can be found in Appendix B.

Table 3.1

Male Offender/Female Victim, Bad Offender Frame

Man in custody after a cowardly and vicious shooting on suburban road in Hobart

A 37-year-old woman has died after a brutal daylight shooting on a main Hobart road on Thursday afternoon.

Police said the 38-year-old man, the woman's estranged partner, allegedly confronted her in her car and fired several shots from a shortened rifle, hitting her in the face.

She was taken to hospital but later died.

Inspector Jenkins said the killing was "brutal, premeditated and senseless" and said that man had not expressed any remorse for his actions.

He said the "cold-blooded murder" showed a "total disregard for the sanctity of life".

Police said a passing motorist restrained the man until they arrived at the scene at New Town, in Hobart's north. The witness described the murder as “horrific and shocking to see”.

The Huon Valley man will appear in court on Friday charged with murder.

Police were called to the area to respond to reports of shots being fired on Risdon Road near the Brooker Highway about 3:15pm (AEST).

Inspector Jenkins said officers were on the scene within minutes.

"There's been a number of witnesses that have observed what has happened and they've been very forthcoming to the attending police," he said.

"There's nothing to indicate that there's anyone else involved, apart from the parties that were here."

He said the man’s actions were a "cowardly and vicious attack" on a woman.

There were children playing at a nearby soccer field at the time of the incident.

Risdon Road was closed to traffic between Albert Road and the highway.

The area was treated as a crime scene and police have appealed for more witnesses.

Respondents were asked to read the vignette and then leave an online comment as they would on social media. Participants were subsequently asked questions about their media and social media usage, criminal justice attitudes, and

demographics (see operationalisations below). The aim was to obtain a sample size of at least 50 respondents per scenario across four frames, totalling at least 200 participants. This sample size was aimed for because, as a rule of thumb, to detect differences between groups at conventional levels of significance ($p < .05$) and power (80%), at least 30 participants per cell is required (Cohen, 1988).

A total of 639 respondents participated in the online survey, were over 18, and lived in Australia (the requirements for participation). However, providing a comment on the article (i.e., the vignette) was not compulsory for respondents. Given the focus on online commentary in the current study, respondents who did not leave a comment were excluded from the sample ($n = 49$). In addition, respondents were asked "how was the victim killed?" to check if they had read the article. This attention check looks for inattentive respondents to remove their answers, which ensures high quality data (Abbey & Meloy, 2017). This means respondents who answered this question incorrectly were eliminated from the sample ($n = 3$). A total of 537 (84%) respondents wrote a comment on the article they had read, completed the whole survey (i.e., all the questions), and correctly answered how the victim was killed. This was the sample used in the current study.

Measures

This study examined a variety of measures including dependent, independent, and control variables. The ways in which these variables were operationalised are described below. The dependent variables are described first, followed by the independent variables, and the control variables.

Dependent Variables. The respondents' comments were coded using a deductive thematic analysis. This was conducted in *NVivo* and imported into *SPSS*. Two characteristics of the comments were examined, namely what the comment was

about (theme) and the tone of the comment (civility). Specifically, the comments were coded for 1) victim blaming, 2) bad offender (i.e., criticising the offender), and 3) incivility.

Unlike Study 2, which examined a broad range of themes, the themes coded for in the current study were limited to two: victim blaming and bad offender. This was done in order to examine whether the theme of the comments matched the media frame presented in the vignette, for example, whether the victim blaming media frame resulted in victim blaming comments. In terms of coding, respondents that criticised and/or blamed the offender in comments, for example by desiring retribution, using name-calling, or criticising the offender's behaviour, were coded as bad offender comments, in line with Study 2. A comment was coded as victim blaming if either *direct* victim blaming techniques or *indirect* victim blaming techniques (excusing the offender) were present, which aligns with past research (Meyers, 1994; Richards et al., 2011; Taylor, 2008). In terms of civility, comments were coded as uncivil if they contained at least one of the five forms of incivility: name-calling, aspersion, lying, vulgarity, or pejorative for speech (Coe et al., 2014), and coded as civil if they did not contain any of these five forms (see relevant section for Study 2, in which this operationalisation was discussed further).

Independent Variables. As previously discussed, the vignettes varied on two dimensions: type of media frame and gender of the offender/victim pairs. Therefore, the two independent variables are 1) gender of the offender/victim pairs (male or female), and 2) media frame (bad offender or victim blaming). What constitutes bad offender and victim blaming frames has been outlined above.

Control Variables. Several control variables were included in the study. Some of these variables were constructed by the research team, while others were

drawn from existing literature. These variables were specifically chosen as research suggests that prior knowledge, characteristics, and personal experiences can shape audience understanding of an issue or topic (Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Rhee, 1997; Van Gorp et al., 2009). Specifically, the type of media consumed (e.g., online or traditional media) (Näsi et al., 2021; Ray & Kort-Butler, 2020), personal experience such as prior victimisation (Kort-Butler & Habecker, 2018; Näsi et al., 2021; Smolej & Kivivuori, 2006), prior experience with the criminal justice system (Pickett et al., 2015), and demographics including age, ethnicity, and education (Callanan, 2012; Näsi et al., 2021; Smolej & Kivivuori, 2006) can impact views of crime.

Online Media Main Source of News. Respondents were asked "what is your main source of news?" (drawn from Watkins et al., 2016). Respondents could select either television news, radio news, print news, online news via websites, online news via social media, or other (where they could list their main source). Those who selected either online news via websites or online news via social media were coded as "1". All other responses were coded as "0".

Has Commented on Social Media. Respondents were asked "how often do you comment on an online news article on social media?" Respondents could choose from never, rarely, sometimes, or often. Those who selected never were coded as "0", while all other responses were coded as "1".

Confidence in Legal System. Respondents were asked "how much confidence do you have in the courts and legal system?" (drawn from Roberts & Indermaur, 2007). Respondents could select none, some, or a lot. Those who selected none were coded as "0", while those who selected some or a lot were coded as "1".

Believes Crime has Increased. Respondents were asked "over the last 2 years, do you think that a) crime has decreased, b) crime has stayed the same, or c) crime

has increased?" (drawn from Roberts & Indermaur, 2007). Responses that indicated crime has increased were coded as "1", while responses that indicated crime had either decreased or stayed the same were coded as "0". This variable had a high level of multicollinearity and was therefore removed from the analyses (see analytical strategy below for more detail).

Wants Harsher Sentences. Respondents were asked if "the death penalty should be the punishment for murder" and if "people who break the law should be given harsher sentences" (drawn from Roberts & Indermaur, 2007). For each question, respondents could select strongly disagree, disagree, somewhat disagree, neutral, somewhat agree, agree, or strongly agree. If a respondent selected somewhat agree, agree, or strongly agree for either question, they were coded as "1". All other responses were coded as "0".

Fear of Crime. Respondents were given eight crimes (sexual assault, car-jacking, getting mugged, getting beaten up, being knifed or shot, getting murdered, being burglarised while at home, and being burglarised while no one is home) and asked to indicate if they were worried about this crime happening to themselves on a scale of never, rarely, somewhat frequently, and frequently (drawn from Dowler, 2003). A scale was created based on their response (possible range: 0–24). Higher scores indicate higher levels of fear of crime. The scale showed good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .864).

Intimate Partner Violence Victimisation. Respondents were asked whether they had previously been a victim of domestic violence (drawn from Dowler, 2003). The term "domestic violence" (as opposed to intimate partner violence) was used in the survey as the Australian public is more familiar with this terminology. While the term domestic violence may include violence between other family members in

previous literature, domestic violence is usually understood in Australian public discourse as violence occurring within current or past intimate partner relationships (Coumarelos et al., 2023). Those who answered yes were coded as "1", and those who answered no were coded as "0".

Awareness of Intimate Partner Violence. Respondents were given a range of scenarios and asked to comment on whether these amounted to intimate partner violence. An example scenario is, "one partner controls the social life of the other partner by preventing them from seeing family and friends". These scenarios are all forms of intimate partner violence and were drawn from the Australian Attitudes to Violence Against Women survey (Harris et al., 2015). The responses were coded as "1" if the respondent indicated that all the scenarios amounted to domestic violence. The responses were coded as "0" if the respondent selected that one or more of the scenarios did not amount to domestic violence.

Direct Contact with Criminal Justice System (Self or Family). Respondents were asked, "have you had any direct contact with police and criminal courts yourself" and "has a close family member had any direct contact with police and criminal courts". Responses were coded as "1" if respondents answered "yes" to either one of these questions. All other responses were coded as "0".

Gender. Respondents were asked to indicate their gender. Responses were coded as either "0" (male) or "1" (female).[5]

Age. Respondents were asked to enter their age (continuous variable).

[5] Respondents were asked to indicate their gender in the survey. Only six respondents indicated that they did not identify as male or female. In order to ensure the variable reached the recommended 10% threshold (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013), only those who selected male or female were included in the analysis.

Identifies as Indigenous. Respondents were asked whether they identified as an Indigenous Australian. Responses were coded as either "1" (identified as Indigenous) or "0" (did not identify as Indigenous).

University Degree. Respondents were asked "what is your highest level of education". Respondents could select less than Year 12, Year 12, certificate, diploma, bachelor's degree, postgraduate degree, or PhD. Responses were coded as "1" if they selected either bachelor's degree, postgraduate degree, or PhD. All other responses were coded as "0".

Analytical Strategy

Data were analysed using *SPSS* (version 29). First, bivariate analyses were run to examine whether the media frame (victim blaming/bad offender) and the gender of the offender/victim pairs were associated with the theme or civility of comments made by respondents. Following the same steps as Study 1 and 2 (see above), the statistical analyses consisted of chi-square tests using Yate's Correction for Continuity. Effect size (using the phi coefficient value) was interpreted according to Cohen's (1988) guidelines.

Second, multivariate analyses were run to examine whether or not the media frame and gender of the offender/victim pairs influences comments while controlling for a range of variables that might be associated with respondents' attitudes about victim and offender blame (see control variables above). Separate logistic regressions were conducted that examined the predictors of victim blaming comments, and the predictors of bad offender comments. Within each set of regressions, four separate models were run: 1) media frame as predictor, 2) gender of offender/victim pairs as predictor, 3) the main effects module (both media frame and gender as predictors), and 4) interaction effect of media frame and gender.

Due to the low number of uncivil comments (5.2%), multivariate models were not used to examine the civility of comments (see Tabachnick and Fidell (2013) for a discussion on the preferred 90/10 split in the dependent variable for robust estimates); therefore, only bivariate analyses were run for civility. As well as the bivariate analyses discussed previously, crosstabulation of media frame, gender of offender/victim pairs, and civility of comments were run to gain insight into the possible interaction between gender and media frame.

Before conducting the logistic regressions, the variables were checked for multicollinearity, influential cases, and distribution. Tolerance values and Pearson's r were inspected to assess for multicollinearity. None of the variables exhibited low tolerance values (less than .1), which would have suggested high correlations with other variables in the model (Pallant, 2013). For Pearson's r, a threshold of .3 was used, with scores above this threshold indicating a medium correlation (positive or negative) between variables (Cohen, 1988). The correlation analyses revealed three potentially problematic variables.[6] One of the control variables, namely *believes crime has increased*, was too highly correlated (i.e., $r > 0.3$) with three other variables (confidence in legal system, wants harsher sentences, and fear of crime). Given these variables measure various aspects of punitive attitudes (Dowler, 2003; Roberts & Indermaur, 2007), it was decided the variable *believes crime has increased* could be removed without jeopardising controlling for respondents' punitive attitudes. In contrast, the decision was made to retain two other variables, namely *comments on social media* and respondent *age*, despite a correlation coefficient of above 3 ($r = 3.44$). These variables were retained given their conceptual and empirical importance

[6] The correlation results table can be found in Appendix C.

in the current study. Cook's distance was used as a measure of influence. Values above 1 indicate a case that may be influencing the model (Field, 2013). None of the variables had values above 1 in this study. In addition, the variables were inspected for distribution. These preliminary analyses revealed that few respondents identified as Indigenous (4.3%), so this variable was not included in the multivariate analyses given it did not reach the recommended 10% threshold (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).

The logistic regressions were checked for the presence of outliers. Standardised residuals above 3 are cause for concern (Field, 2013). When examining the logistic regressions featuring victim blaming comments, initial analyses revealed four outliers with a standardised residual above 3 in two or more of the regression models. However, when the regressions were run without the outliers, the results were ostensibly the same (in terms of model fit and significant variables); therefore, the outliers were retained in the regressions. When examining the logistic regressions featuring bad offender comments, initial analyses revealed 18 outliers with a standardised residual above 3 in two or more of the regression models. Because removing the outliers significantly improved the models in terms of fit (e.g., Nagelkerke R^2), the regression models with the outliers removed are presented in the results.

Nagelkerke R^2 and the area under the ROC curve were used to examine model fit, and these values are presented in the results tables. Nagelkerke R^2 measures the proportion of variation in the dependent variables explained by the regression models (Field, 2013). Values closer to 1 indicate higher effects (Field, 2013). The area under the ROC curve measures the model's ability to discriminate between those who experience the outcome of interest versus those who do not (Hosmer et al., 2013). An area under the curve of above .7 is considered acceptable (Hosmer et al., 2013).

The odds ratio (Exp[B]) and confidence intervals were analysed in the logistic regressions (Field, 2013). The conventional .05 threshold (Field, 2013) was used to indicate statistical significance. To interpret the direction of the significant interaction effect, odds ratios were manually computed and compared for the gender of the offender/victim pairs across the type of frame used in the article. The interaction was calculated by multiplying the gender odds ratio by the interaction ratio of odds ratios: b(g1)*b(g#f) (Norton et al., 2004; UCLA: Statistical Consulting Group, n.d.).

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the methodology of the three studies. Study 1 used a mixed methods approach, whereby the frames were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively, although the former to a lesser extent. Study 1 analysed 121 articles featuring intimate partner homicides from Australia's four online news sites with the highest readership rates at that time (news.com.au, ABC News Online, nine.com.au [previously called ninemsn], and Yahoo7). Importantly, the differences across gender were examined using a qualitative framing analysis, as this allows researchers to understand the deeper meanings of a text (Macnamara, 2005).

Study 2 examined Facebook comments responding to online articles featuring intimate partner homicides. Given the focus on gendered portrayals in this thesis, the comments were analysed across gender, i.e., whether or not the intimate partner homicide involved male offender/female victim pairs or female offender/male victim pairs. Two aspects of the comments were examined: content and civility. Content was analysed using a thematic analysis to establish the main themes present. Civility was analysed using Coe et al.'s (2014) operationalisation of incivility.

Study 3 used an experimental vignette design where respondents were recruited via Facebook. Each respondent was randomly assigned to one of four

vignettes that featured an intimate partner homicide news article. Bivariate analyses were first used to examine whether the media frame (victim blaming/bad offender) and the gender of the offender/victim pairs were associated with the theme or civility of respondents' comments. Multivariate analyses were then run to examine whether or not the media frame and gender of the offender/victim pairs influenced comments while controlling for a range of variables that might be associated with respondents' attitudes about victim and offender blame.

Chapter 4: Results Study 1 – Gender Differences in Online Media Framing

This chapter outlines the results of Study 1, which sought to examine if and how media frames and subframes of intimate partner homicides differ depending on whether the homicide incidents reported on involve male offender/female victim pairs or female offender/male victim pairs. A mixed-methods approach was used, analysing the frames through both quantitative and qualitative means, with the primary emphasis on the latter. This chapter focuses on the prevalence and contextualisation of intimate partner homicide frames and subframes in online media across different gender pairs (male/female offender, male/female victim).

As described in the methodology chapter, this study analysed 121 articles featuring intimate partner homicides from four Australian online news sites with the highest readership rates (news.com.au, ABC News Online, nine.com.au [previously called ninemsn], and Yahoo7). All articles featured pairs that were presented as male/female, which means that all male offenders portrayed in the articles had killed female victims, and vice versa. Of the 121 articles, 102 articles featured male offender/female victim pairs and 19 articles featured female offender/male victim pairs. Frames and subframes were identified through framing analysis (see Chapter 3). This chapter starts with discussing the differences in prevalence rates of the four main frames across gender, before moving on to qualitative differences of frames and subframes across gender.

Differences in Prevalence Rates of Main Frames Across Gender

The deductive framing analysis focused on four main frames in the data, three of which relate to how offenders/victims were portrayed (*bad offender*, *victim blaming*, and *victim supporting*), while the fourth frame relates to how the media framed the homicide event (*episodic reporting*). How these frames were

operationalised in the current study and the intricate ways in which they differ across gender pairs will be explained further, later in the chapter. Across the sample as a whole (i.e., without considering gender), the episodic reporting frame was by far the most common of the four frames (81%), followed by the bad offender frame (49.6%), victim supporting (43%) and victim blaming (36.4%) frames (see Table 4.1). These frames were not mutually exclusive (e.g., a media article could feature the bad offender frame and the victim supporting frame simultaneously).

Table 4.1

Intimate Partner Homicide Frames (n = 121)

	Overall % (*n*)	**Male Offenders/ Female Victims % (*n*)**	**Female Offenders/ Male Victims % (*n*)**	**χ^2 (df)**	***p***	**Effect Size**
Bad offender	49.6 (60)	52.9 (54)	31.6 (6)	2.132 (1)	.144	-.155
Victim supporting	43.0 (52)	47.1 (48)	21.1 (4)	3.423 (1)	.064	-.191
Victim blaming	36.4 (44)	31.4 (32)	63.2 (12)	5.687 (1)	.017	.240
Episodic reporting	81.0 (98)	78.4 (80)	94.7 (18)	^	.120	.151

Note. Continuity correction is reported, while effect size was calculated using Phi.
^ Fisher's Exact Test was used where cells had an expected count less than five.

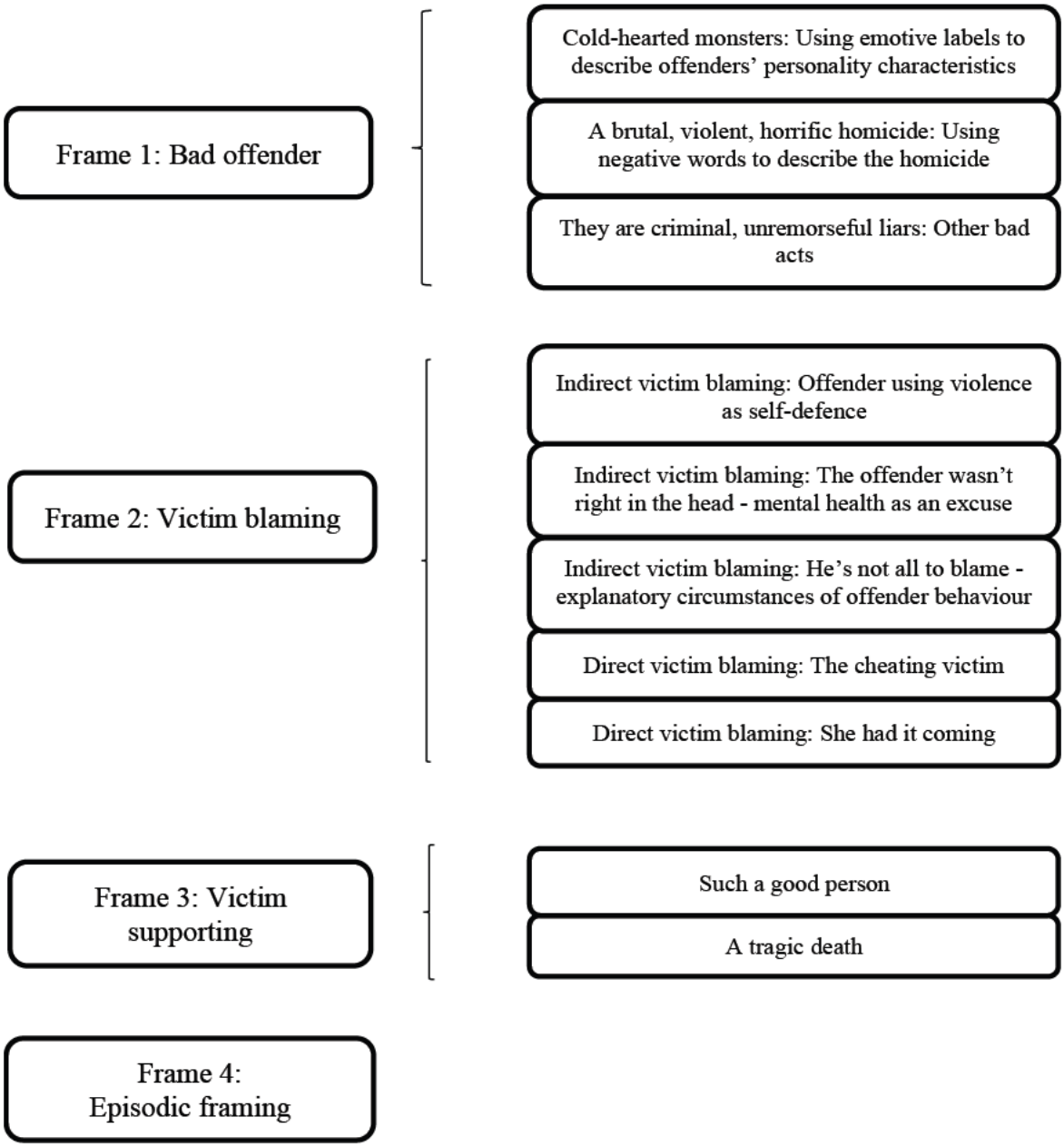
The bad offender and victim supporting frames were more commonly coded for in cases of male offender/female victim pairs (see Table 4.1). On the other hand, the victim blaming and episodic reporting frames were more commonly coded for in cases of female offender/male victim pairs. However, only one of these associations showed a statistically significant difference across gender, namely the victim blaming frame (χ^2 (1, n = 121) = 5.687, p = .017, *phi* = .240). Here, the findings revealed that female victims are statistically less likely to be blamed for their own deaths compared with male victims (31.4% versus 63.2% respectively).

Qualitative Differences of Frames and Subframes Across Gender

Having reviewed the prevalence rates across gender pairs, this results chapter now turns to the qualitative analysis. Although parts of the following sections refer to percentages, the emphasis of the analyses is on qualitative portrayals using a framing analysis, to enable an understanding of the deeper meanings of the articles sampled and their content (Macnamara, 2005). The section begins with the bad offender frame, followed by the victim blaming, victim supporting, and episodic reporting frames. Within the four frames, subframes emerged from the framing analysis, and these are also detailed below. Figure 4.1 outlines the frames and subframes coded for in this study.

Figure 4.1

Frames and Subframes in Study 1



Frame 1: Bad Offender

In line with past literature, the bad offender frame was coded for in articles that criticised or blamed the offender (Bullock, 2007; Komazec & Farmer, 2020; Wozniak & McCloskey, 2010). This frame is common, with previous research showing that intimate partner homicide offenders are quite often portrayed by the

media as deviant and blameworthy for their actions (Ballinger, 1996; Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002; Bullock, 2007; Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Easteal et al., 2015a; Komazec & Farmer, 2020; Lloyd & Ramon, 2017; Mackie, 2016; Noh et al., 2010; Pelvin, 2017; Wilczynski, 1991; Wozniak & McCloskey, 2010). Portraying offenders as bad forms part of a method to differentiate offenders from "normal" people. When readers are exposed to portrayals of offenders as bad, they are made to think that intimate partner homicides are only perpetrated by a certain type of person, namely someone who differs from the norm (Bullock & Cubert, 2002). Focusing on offenders' negative characteristics satisfies the public's need to view violence as behaviour that is exhibited by someone different from themselves (Jasinski, 2001). This has the potential effect of lulling readers into a false sense of security because it downplays the fact that intimate partner homicide is perpetrated by offenders who sometimes appear to be normal people. This highlights the importance of understanding how offenders of intimate partner homicides are portrayed.

In the current study, offenders were framed as bad using three key methods: a) using emotive labels, such as evil or cold, to describe the offender; b) focusing on the horrific nature of the homicide act, or c) focusing on the past behaviours of the offender (i.e., not specifically related to the homicide), such as their history of criminal involvement. These subframes are not mutually exclusive and are discussed separately below. In particular, the differences across gender in each of these subframes will be explored.

Cold-hearted Monsters: Using Emotive Labels to Describe Offenders' Personality Characteristics. The first method used to portray offenders as bad involved using emotive labels to describe the (mainly male) offender. The current study found that one-fifth of all articles with male offenders featured this subframe

compared to only one article (about 5%) with a female offender. Importantly, the intensity of the emotive labels ranged quite substantially from milder emotive labels (e.g., smug or cold), to stronger emotive labels (e.g., evil or cowardly).

An example of a strong emotive label frequently found within the current data to describe male offenders was “monster”. For example, in one article a family member of the victim was quoted by the media as saying, “You're a monster, an inhumane, disgusting, poor excuse for a human” (YA170816b), in reference to an offender who had strangled his wife, and then buried her in his parents’ backyard. It has been argued that the cultural fascination with monsters, blasted through media channels across modern-day society, is symptomatic of an underlying fear and anxiety and a need to embody the mythical in a practical and understandable form; in this case, the monstrous male offender who kills his intimate partner (Cohen, 1996). Interestingly, in the current study, no female offender was ever referred to as a monster, nor referred to using strong emotive language at all.

Men were described both in milder and stronger emotive terms. In terms of milder emotive labels, male offenders were described as cold, unemotional, and uncaring. These examples showcase how male offenders may not defy traditional gender stereotypes in the same way female offenders do. Indeed, male offenders were more often portrayed as bad because violence is seen to be part of their nature (Carlyle et al., 2014b). Outside of criminology, previous research has found that men rate lower than women in terms of communality (i.e., having concerns for others, sociability, and emotional sensitivity) (Hentschel et al., 2019). This suggests that men are stereotypically expected to be colder and less caring than women. An example in the current study of a male offender being portrayed as cold is “man strangles wife, begins planning funeral” (NE220216b). This is in reference to a case where a man

strangled his wife because he felt stuck in an unhappy marriage, only to (within a few hours) phone a funeral director to start planning her funeral, and then gave away their cat to an animal shelter. Here, the man's seemingly calculated thoughts post homicide indicates to the reader that the offender lacks emotion and, thus, is a cold person.

While this subframe (emotive labels) is a recurring theme in the articles portraying male offenders, it was much less common in portrayals of female offenders. Instead, the prominent method of discussing female offenders was to refer to the homicide act itself or other bad acts (subframes that are discussed in further detail below). As previously mentioned, this is indicative of a culture in which violence is viewed as being part of a man's nature (Carlyle et al., 2014b). Importantly, the emotive labels used were neither as strong nor as frequent in articles regarding female offenders.

In fact, only one article contained emotive labels to showcase a female offender as bad. In this article, the reader was told that the offender showed a "total disregard for the sanctity of life" (AB080115), suggesting that she was cold-hearted (in other words, bad). Though not common in the current sample, research has shown that violent (or bad) women are often seen as "doubly deviant", referring to the deviance of breaking the law and the deviance of going against the norms and expectations associated with appropriate feminine behaviour (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002). In other words, female offenders are often portrayed as bad because they are seen to violate gender expectations (Pelvin, 2017). The choice of terminology in the article (i.e., "total disregard for the sanctity of life") appears symptomatic of entrenched traditional gender stereotypes that exist in western cultures, such as viewing women as caregiving and gentle as opposed to dominant and aggressive (Biernat, 1991; Williams & Bennett, 1975; Williams et al., 1975). In

the example above, the term "sanctity of life" can be interpreted as part of societal ideological debates around morally contentious issues, such as abortion and euthanasia (Baranzke, 2012). Women's reproductive role in society means that they are viewed as givers of life (Biernat, 1991) and to propose that a woman has a "disregard for the sanctity of life" seems to suggest that she is the antithesis of how a woman should behave. A cold-hearted woman with a disregard for the sanctity of life violates the expectations placed on women in society.

A Brutal, Violent, Horrific Homicide: Using Negative Words to Describe the Homicide. The second method in which offenders were portrayed as bad involved describing the homicide itself using strong and negative emotive language, as opposed to describing the internal characteristics of the offender. Humans often use cognitive shortcuts to quickly make decisions or judgements (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). For example, it is common for people to draw conclusions about a person's character based on their behaviours (Westra, 2020). Therefore, it can be argued that another way of operationalising bad offenders is by examining the words used to describe the offender's behaviour during the homicide, i.e., that the nature of the act reflects the offender's internal characteristics.

The articles in which this subframe occurred often contained language that described the homicide in graphic detail. These articles can be considered highly sensational, a method that is frequently used in news stories (Mott, 1962; Slattery, 1994; Vettehen et al., 2008), partly because it elicits emotional responses from readers (Mott, 1962; Vettehen et al., 2008). Sensational news stories reflect themes of right and wrong, and good and evil because using these descriptors captures the audience's interest (Slattery, 1994). This implies that criticising an offender and discussing their

evil acts is one of the ways the media entices online readers to click on their news article.

This subframe was particularly prominent in articles with male offenders, with one-third of all articles with male offenders featuring the subframe. Examples include "brutally bashing", "horrific triple stabbing", and "violent rampage", all of which point to a bad offender because of their behaviour while committing the homicide. As seen in these examples, adjectives that make use of emotional language (i.e., brutal, horrific, violent) are often inserted (e.g., Nordin, 1979). An example of this subframe is found in an article when the journalist describes a case in which a man killed his ex-girlfriend outside a shopping centre. They had just left court where the offender was banned from having contact with the victim. The journalist wrote that the man had "told his ex-girlfriend she was 'f***ed' before murdering her in a stabbing frenzy" (NE100315). The word frenzy implies that the attack was emotionally charged, wild, and out of control. Further, it also implies a momentary loss of sanity, i.e., that the attacker was in the grips of a temporary madness (Kromm, 2003). The bad offender frame is reinforced through this use of expressive, emotive language when portraying the homicide in such graphic detail.

In stark contrast to males, female offenders were far less likely to be described in this manner (using negative words to describe the homicide). In fact, less than one-fifth of all articles with female offenders featured this subframe. Nevertheless, this subframe was more prevalent for females compared to the previous subframe (using emotive labels to describe internal characteristics of the offender). Notably, when female offenders' acts were described using sensational, emotive language, the words were not as strongly expressed compared to male offenders. For example, a female offender was described as "bludgeoning" the victim. Although such a word may come

across as emotive, the literal translation is to strike someone with a heavy object of some sort.[7] Thus, the noun (bludgeon) is turned into a verb (bludgeoning); however, this lacks an emotively descriptive adjective, such as that observed in the phrase "brutally bashing", which was found in an article with a male offender.

They are Criminal, Unremorseful Liars: Other Bad Acts. The third method in which offenders were portrayed as bad was by either referring to their bad past behaviours (e.g., their criminal history) or critiquing their post-homicide acts (e.g., lying in court). This subframe does not focus on the homicide incident, nor on the offenders' internal characteristics, but rather on the history of the person and their behaviour after committing homicide. This method of enacting the bad offender frame was found in articles with both male offenders and female offenders. Though the prevalence rate across gender is similar, notable qualitative differences are present.

Some articles contained a detailed criminal history of male offenders, such as previous incidents of intimate partner violence towards the victim. Such descriptions signal that the offender is a bad person because of their criminal past. For example, a journalist who wrote about the possibility of bail for a male offender who had killed his female date dedicated a relatively large proportion of the text to describing how violent and aggressive the offender had been in his earlier dealings with police. The journalist wrote of the offender "When he was confronted [by police] it is alleged he twice told the officer to 'f*** off c***'... He was arrested and while he was being placed in the back seat of the police car kicked another officer and had to be sprayed with capsicum spray" (NE091215c). Swearing, identified as a form of non-physical aggression (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008), is seen as an intentionally vindictive action

[7] When dictionary definitions are provided in this thesis, the source is the Macquarie Dictionary (n.d.) as this is regarded as the authoritative reference for Australian English.

intended to convey emotion or a particular message (Wierzbicka, 1987). In this case, the swearing conveys resentment and aggression towards the police officer.

Interestingly, in this subframe no articles featured a discussion of the previous criminal history of female offenders. Although, in one case, the focus turned to the female offender's sexual history. A journalist wrote in one article, that the female offender "allegedly bludgeoned her husband to death with a hammer, fearing he would reveal they were having sex with a teenager" (NE300915b). This discussion of sexual history is consistent with previous research that has found that women are often sexualised by the media (Collins, 2011) and are criticised for being sexual deviants (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002). This issue will be discussed in greater detail in the section detailing the victim blaming frame. Overall, it appears that male offenders are criticised for their criminal history, while female offenders are criticised for their sexual history.

Examples of post-homicide acts that reflect poorly on individuals (and thus coded as bad), included not being remorseful, lying to police and court, being dramatic in court, making friends with other murderers, and trying to sell unsubstantiated stories to the media. Of these, a particularly interesting one is remorse (or the lack thereof). Demonstrating a lack of remorse serves as a means for offenders to justify their use of violence (Dobash & Dobash, 2011), whereas expressing remorse or guilt suggests a person of higher moral character (Stearns & Parrott, 2012). Male offenders were more commonly described in articles as unremorseful in stark contrast to articles featuring female offenders. This could be due to the stereotypical view that women experience feelings of guilt and shame, whereas men are perceived as more proud and, thus, less likely to express these feelings (Plant et al., 2000). Female offenders are viewed as unfeminine and callous if they do not show remorse for their

crimes (Wilczynski, 1991). Notably, the offender was portrayed as unremorseful in only two articles featuring female offender/male victim pairs. In one article, the offender, who was awaiting trial for allegedly killing her fiancé, was described as "happy and cheerful" (NE130914a), suggesting they were unremorseful.

As discussed above, lying to the court or police is an example of bad post-homicide behaviour. The behaviour of lying suggests flawed personality characteristics, such as being deceptive, disrespectful, and immoral (Kupfer, 1982; Wiles, 1988). In the online articles, both male and female offenders were described as liars by the media. However, the words used to describe male offenders as liars were typically stronger compared to those used to describe female offenders. To illustrate, in one article a male offender was described as an "appalling and deceitful witness" (NE300916b), while in an alternative article, a female offender was described as a "self-confessed liar" (AB090914). The media was referring to offenders who were accused of lying in court in both articles. The dictionary meaning of "appalling" is causing dismay or horror,[8] which when used in the article is an emotionally charged adjective that further intensifies the negative perceptions of the liar. On the other hand, the words "self-confessed" suggest that the female offender is aware of and acknowledges her proclivity to lie. While journalists demonstrate in both articles that the offenders were lying, the additional adjective of "appalling" goes further to depict the male offender as a bad person.

Frame 2: Victim Blaming

The second frame coded for was victim blaming. Although the use of the word victim may indicate that this frame is focused solely on what the media reports about victims, it is important to emphasise that the media can also blame victims by

[8] See footnote 7.

discussing the behaviour of offenders. As such, victim blaming can be enacted through both indirect and direct tactics (Meyers, 1994; Richards et al., 2011; Taylor, 2008). Indirect tactics involve providing excuses for the *offender* (e.g., if they have mental health issues, are intoxicated, or are out of control), whereas direct victim blaming tactics involve blaming the *victim* by negatively characterising them (Meyers, 1994; Richards et al., 2011; Taylor, 2008). Both indirect and direct victim blaming techniques were observed in the current dataset. Qualitative differences across gender are discussed below. Five subframes were coded for within this category, three of which were indirect forms of victim blaming, and two of which were direct forms of victim blaming.

Indirect Victim Blaming: Offender Using Violence as Self-Defence. One of the main ways an offender was excused (and a victim indirectly blamed) is through the use of self-defence. In almost half of the online news articles featuring a female offender, journalists referred to the female offender's history of violent victimisation by her intimate male partner. This is consistent with previous research that found the media often emphasises that women who kill their male partners are, in fact, the primary victims of violence (Easteal et al., 2015a; Easteal et al., 2018; Morgan & Politoff, 2012; Morrissey, 2003; Noh et al., 2010; Sweeney, 2012). As noted in the literature, sometimes women see killing their partner as the only method of escaping intimate partner violence (Dutton, 1993; Walker, 2006). The portrayal of abused female offenders in media articles in this study suggests to readers that there was a justifiable reason for the killing. However, the concept of a battered woman killing her partner has been criticised for reinforcing that justice is unavailable through legal remedies, which can lead to an increase in violence as a self-help response (Peterson, 1999). Furthermore, this legal defence can sometimes have unintended consequences,

such as ultimately excusing rather than justifying the offence (Cookson, 2009; Goodmark, 2008). This mindset can be problematic because it may negatively stigmatise women who use the temporary insanity defence and can also prevent women from using battered women syndrome as part of their defence (Noh et al., 2010). Previous research has also found that victims are blamed when questioned as to why they did not leave their abusive partner before the abuse went too far (e.g., Balica et al., 2020; Richards et al., 2011; Taylor, 2008). However, research has shown multiple obstacles and barriers exist which prevent women from leaving their abusers (Anderson, 2003b; Farmer & Tiefenthaler, 1997; Murray, 2008).

In contrast, self-defence was used to a much lesser extent as an excuse for male offenders (3.9%). In one case, a male offender was accused of locking the female victim on his balcony where she allegedly fell to her death. The journalist discussed how the offender alleged that he was physically protecting himself from her violence: “I was the one being repeatedly assaulted, and I did what any sensible person would do by disarming her and separating myself from her” (NE091215b). A key difference is that male offenders who argued self-defence (against killing a female) were always portrayed as reacting in the moment to protect themselves, whereas female offenders who alleged they had been abused were not always reacting in the moment, but were instead reacting to years of abuse. In several online articles featuring male offenders, it was suggested that there had been a cycle of mutual violence. Portraying the killing as a result of a fight suggests that the offender and the victim are equal participants in the incident (Evans, 2001; Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013), though research has suggested otherwise (Westbrook, 2009).

Indirect Victim Blaming: The Offender Wasn’t Right in the Head – Mental Health as an Excuse. Media reports that highlight offenders’ mental illness

provide justification for the murder of intimate partners (Bullock, 2007; Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Kelly, 2019; Lee & Wong, 2019; Meyers, 1994; Taylor, 2008). In the current study, mental health issues were used as an excuse for both female and male offenders. This aligns with past research, which has found that male offenders are sometimes excused by the media when referring to their mental or physical health problems to in some way excuse their violence (e.g., Bullock, 2007; Lee & Wong, 2019; Taylor, 2008). Similarly, past research has also shown that women who kill someone within their own family are often portrayed as "mad" (Noh et al., 2010; Wilczynski, 1991). This portrayal is often used when these women adhere to traditional notions of femininity (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002; Easteal et al., 2015a; Meyers, 1996) and not women who violate traditional gender stereotypes (Morrissey, 2003). Portraying an offender as mad can sometimes have unintended consequences, such as creating or perpetuating negative stigmas around mental illnesses (Anderson, 2003a) and influencing government policy because the media highlights the risk individuals may pose to themselves and others (Hallam, 2002).

The offender's mental illness was not a major feature of the articles. Instead, mental illness was usually mentioned in one sentence in the online news articles for both male and female offenders in this study. For example, "she had previously been held in the Frankland Centre at the Graylands psychiatric hospital" (AB091116b) and "Defence barrister Craig Smith SC told the court that when his client committed the offence he was affected by a mental condition, by the breakdown of the relationship, by the relative lack of certainty as to where he lived" (AB150216a).

Indirect Victim Blaming: He's Not All to Blame - Explanatory Circumstances of Offender Behaviour. Some excuses were solely found in articles with male offenders. One prominent excuse that indirectly blamed victims was the

fact that the male offender had used alcohol or drugs prior to committing the homicide. Previous research has found that the media excuses the offender by stating that the offender had used alcohol or drugs (Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Lindsay-Brisbin et al., 2014; Meyers, 1994; Richards et al., 2011; Taylor, 2008). Here, as the offender was using alcohol or drugs, criminal responsibility is implied to be reduced because the substance may have impacted or influenced their actions. Previous research has found that alcohol is often used as an excuse by a male offender for intimate partner violence because it enables offenders to use drinking as a shield to lessen responsibility (Javaid, 2015). An example of this subframe in the current study is, "The Supreme Court was told Stoeski was in a methylamphetamine-induced psychosis and which led to him having delusional beliefs that Ms Farcich was unfaithful and that Mr Filovski was conspiring against him" (AB040916a). From a legal perspective, temporary deprivations to one's capacity to understand right from wrong due to intoxication are generally not sufficient to reduce criminal responsibility. However, to consumers of news who are unfamiliar with the intricacies of legal matters, the writing in this article suggests that the offender was not in the correct frame of mind as a result of drug use and, therefore, may not be fully responsible for their actions. Interestingly, drinking and intoxication align with several masculine traits such as physical stamina, and risk-taking (Herd, 1997), but are inconsistent with feminine traits like being a nurturing caretaker (Bongers et al., 1998; Herd, 1997). Studies indicate a notable discrepancy in how drinking behaviour is perceived based on gender: while a male offender's drinking serves to excuse his behaviour, contrarily, a female victim's drinking behaviour serves to implicate her as partially responsible (Weiss, 2009). This could stem from societal norms that are more permissive of men drinking compared to women drinking (Bailly et al., 1991;

Lo, 1995; Ricciardelli et al., 2001). Such attitudes could explain why this frame was not seen for female offenders.

As detailed in Chapter 3, the sampling frame included all articles within the specified timeframe, irrespective of the fame or status of the case, offender, or victim. One of the few celebrities in the sample included Oscar Pistorius, a world-famous Paralympian who killed his fiancé in South Africa in 2013. Several of the articles that discussed this particular case featured an indirect victim blaming frame by excusing the offender. To give some examples, Oscar Pistorius was frequently excused by describing his positive attributes in articles: "He's very generous, he's a giving man" (NE040717), or by discussing his physical disability: "A sobbing Oscar Pistorius has shuffled without his prosthetic legs through a Pretoria court to demonstrate how vulnerable he is without his artificial limbs" (AB190916). Often the articles were framed to doubt that the offender intended to kill his partner by claiming that it was an accident.

Direct Victim Blaming: The Cheating Victim. Having discussed the three methods through which victims were indirectly blamed for their demise (by providing excuses or justifications for the offender's actions), the focus now turns to the ways that victims were directly blamed. Female victims (in articles featuring male offenders) were sometimes blamed because they had an affair outside of their relationship with the subsequent perpetrator, or the male offender suspected them of having an affair (3% of all articles with female victims). Previous research has also found that female victims were blamed for alleged affairs in news articles (Aldrete et al., 2024; Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013; Gillespie et al., 2013; Kelly, 2019; Lee & Wong, 2019; Lloyd & Ramon, 2017; Taylor, 2008). Berns (2004) argues that the public often blames the victim for provoking the offender through specific behaviours

including alleged affairs. An example of the cheating victim subframe in the current study is, “Carlie Sinclair was having an affair in the months leading up to her alleged murder at the hands of her partner, Danny Deacon, a court has heard” (NE020515). Such writing focuses attention on the victim’s extramarital affair instead of focusing on the offender and their actions. Research has found that female victims who have affairs are sometimes seen as deserving of violence (Morgan, 2006; Vandello & Cohen, 2003), because men view such conduct as harmful to their honour (Vandello & Cohen, 2003). Women who have affairs go against the stereotypical views that women are submissive, nurturing, gentle, and passive. Furthermore, women are often chastised for becoming sexually involved with someone and are praised for being sexually restrictive (Pines & Friedman, 1998). Fidelity is more often valued in women compared to men, and women are more severely reprimanded for infidelity (Fiske & Stevens, 1993).

In comparison, the current study found that very few male victims were blamed for their infidelity. For example, “Liyanage told the jury her husband regularly had affairs” (AB091215a). This is consistent with masculine stereotypes regarding sexual activity. Frequent sexual activity for men is expected and evaluated more positively compared to women (Endendijk et al., 2020; Hackathorn & Harvey, 2011). On the other hand, sexual passivity is evaluated more positively in women, and women often face criticism for becoming sexually involved in a relationship (Endendijk et al., 2020; Pines & Friedman, 1998). This demonstrates the double standards for men and women regarding sexual activity.

Direct Victim Blaming: She Had it Coming. Another way of placing direct victim blame is by portraying victims as though they “had it coming”. Interestingly, this subframe was exclusively enacted to portray female victims. One way in which

this occurred was by referring to a victim's consumption of alcohol or drugs, which is a common source of victim blaming. Research has found that victims were often blamed by the media when they had consumed alcohol or drugs (Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013; Taylor, 2008).

An illustration in the current study is where a female is referred to in an article as "a daily ice user who always put her habit before the welfare of her children" (NE170816a). In this example, it is interesting how the victim's drug use is mentioned in reference to the absence of caring for her children. Mothers who use drugs are often seen as irresponsible, morally deviant, and unfit for motherhood (Logan, 1999; Malloch, 2004). Similarly, many of the journalists that enacted victim blame discussed the victims as bad mothers or discussed how victims prevented an ex-partner (i.e., subsequent offender) from accessing their joint child(ren). Research suggests that women are portrayed as bad mothers when they do not adhere to traditional gender stereotypes (Easteal et al., 2015a; Weare, 2013). Mothers are culturally expected to prioritise their children's safety and wellbeing above all else (Dunkerley, 2017; Lupton, 2000). Motherhood is viewed as their primary role, responsibility, and identity (Laney et al., 2015; Leung, 2011). By prioritising harmful habits such as drug use over parenting responsibilities and blocking access to coparents, they are essentially betraying what society deems as their fundamental purpose as mothers. Importantly, blaming female victims by referring to their substance use stands in stark contrast with how male offenders were often excused when committing offences while intoxicated.

Frame 3: Victim Supporting

The third frame coded for was victim supporting. The online articles were coded to include this frame via two non-mutually exclusive ways – by describing the

victim's positive characteristics and by portraying the homicide as sad or tragic. Previous research has found that female victims are often portrayed as good or innocent in media portrayals of intimate partner homicides (Collins, 2016; Lloyd & Ramon, 2017; Wozniak & McCloskey, 2010). This frame has also been enacted by the media to a lesser extent for male victims of intimate partner homicide (compared to female victims) (Hanson & Lysova, 2021; Wozniak & McCloskey, 2010).

Such a Good Person. One of the ways an online article was coded as featuring the "such a good person" subframe was when the victim was described positively or as a good person. For example, describing the victim as loving, generous, kind, amazing, beautiful, bright and full of life, and a good or popular member of the community. Good victims are those who are considered deserving of readers' sympathy and are considered innocent, in that they did not do anything to cause the harm inflicted upon them (Greer, 2007). They are empathetically seen by the public as being completely undeserving of their victimhood (Collins, 2016). Previous research has found that victims are often portrayed as good or innocent by the media because this derives a passionate response in readers by fostering sympathy towards the victims (Collins, 2016; Greer, 2007; McShane & Williams, 1992). Many scholars have referred to this as one of the characteristics of being an "ideal victim" (Bouchard et al., 2020; Gekoski et al., 2012; Gruenewald et al., 2013; Gruenewald et al., 2009). An ideal victim is someone who, "most readily are given the complete and legitimate status of being a victim" (Christie, 1986, p. 18). Given the gender stereotype of women being weak and innocent, women are, because of their gender, much more likely to be considered ideal victims (Christie, 1986). This may explain why this subframe was more prominent in online articles featuring female victims.

A key difference across gender is how frequently the subframe occurs in the article. When this subframe is coded for in online articles, it occurs multiple times in articles featuring female victims but only once in articles featuring male victims. The words enacted to describe female victims were also more positively expressed than those enacted to describe male victims. For example, journalists in the current study indicated that a female victim was a "loving, generous person", "beautiful", or a "dedicated mother", whereas journalists may describe a male victim as simply an "amazing" man or a "popular member of the community".

Describing a female victim in this way is consistent with previous research, which has found women are portrayed in stereotypical feminine ways, such as being nurturing, caretakers, gentle, and physically attractive (England et al., 2011; Frey, 2019; Ottosson & Cheng, 2012; Sharda, 2014). Female victims were sometimes described using their physical traits in the current study, such as being beautiful. This is consistent with previous research that found physically attractive victims are "ideal" and, therefore are more likely to feature in media reports (England et al., 2011; Gekoski et al., 2012). Often, a female victim in this subframe was portrayed as a good person because she was a good family member, in particular a good mother. This is consistent with previous research that has found good women are stereotypically seen as nurturing mothers and passive and cooperative wives (Barnett, 2005; Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002; England et al., 2011; Lloyd & Ramon, 2017; Naylor, 1990). At the other end of the spectrum, female victims perceived as being inconsistent with the obedient wife or good mother narrative are sometimes portrayed as deserving of the violence they experience (Belknap, 2007), which is consistent with the victim blaming narrative discussed above. If women do not meet the image of the ideal good woman, then they are likely to be portrayed through stereotypes that

focus on their sexuality or inept mothering (Cripps, 2021), as seen in the victim blaming frame above. Greer (2007) suggested that when men kill, the women they kill are often portrayed as either good (victim supporting) or bad (victim blaming). The good victims are innocent, while the bad victims are seen as culpable in the homicide.

On the other hand, in the current study, male victims were never discussed in terms of their nurturing capabilities. Instead, they were portrayed as being physically strong and as popular members of the community. This is consistent with men stereotypically being portrayed as strong and powerful leaders that are to be admired, not for their family values, but for their authority, determination, and popularity (England et al., 2011; Ottosson & Cheng, 2012; Sharda, 2014).

A Tragic Death. The second way an online article was coded as featuring the victim supporting frame is by portraying the death as sad or tragic, often through the use of graphic and descriptive details. This was quite a common subframe for female victims (over one-quarter of all articles with female victims), but not for males (only one article with a male victim). In the current study, an example is an article where a female victim is described as someone who had become "just another terrible statistic, having her life tragically cut short very brutally" (YA250915). The journalist goes on to describe how the victim's body was buried under a concrete slab inside a tool shed. Similar to the bad offender subframes (discussed previously), it is the graphic detail that further establishes this subframe. The tragic death subframe differs from the bad offender subframe because the focus here is on the victim and not the characteristics or behaviour of the offender. Again, connections can be made to Christie's "ideal victim" concept, with previous research finding that victims are considered "worthy" of being portrayed as a victim if their loss was portrayed by the media as a tragic waste (Gekoski et al., 2012; Greer, 2007). Thus, the victim is worthy of compassion.

Another example of the use of graphic details in this study includes, "Sixteen thumping sounds could be heard and then another 13 more as Patea smashed Ms Brown's face with a 7.8kg fire hydrant metal plate, the court was told. Moaning and 'Lionel stop' could be heard and Ms Brown kicked out her legs as she was beaten" (NE301115). Such language evokes emotions. The use of graphic violence in news articles can cause a sense of outrage and frustration (Collins, 2016), which leads to readers feeling sympathetic towards the victim. Previous research has found that news articles featuring crimes against worthy victims often contain language depicting graphic violence (Collins, 2016). Underserving victims, or those who do not fit the ideal victim profile, inspire less sympathy from readers because they are perceived as likely to have contributed to their deaths (Gekoski et al., 2012).

As noted, a key difference across gender is that only one article with a male victim contained the tragic death subframe, compared to over one-quarter of articles featuring female victims. The online article where the media enacted the tragic death subframe for a male victim concerns a woman who had killed her husband after having an alleged psychotic episode. Interestingly, the media portrays the death as tragic for both the offender and the victim. This is different from articles with female victims in this subframe, in which the media only portrayed the death as tragic for the victim and not the offender.

Frame 4: Episodic Reporting

The fourth and last frame was episodic reporting. A news story is framed as either episodic (focuses on one particular incident) or thematic (places the incident within the larger context) (Bullock, 2007; Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Gillespie et al., 2013; Taylor & Sorenson, 2002). In the current study, episodic reporting was by far the most prevalent form of reporting, a finding that aligns with past research (e.g.,

Balica, 2021; Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Carlyle et al., 2008; Easteal et al., 2018; Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013). This fourth frame is less about the offender and victim, and more about the context of intimate partner homicides.

Male offender/female victim pairs were less commonly coded as episodic compared to female offender/male victim pairs. Correspondingly, while thematic reporting was rare (compared to episodic reporting), it was more common in articles featuring male offender/female victim pairs. In the current study, thematic reporting in articles with female victims was illustrated through discussions of how intimate partner violence is an issue in Australia and how many women are victims of abuse. Often the victims' family members are used to highlight the need to bring attention and change to intimate partner violence, raise money for intimate partner violence prevention, protect future victims by punishing offenders of intimate partner homicides, and to discuss the White Ribbon Day initiative[9]. For example, "Sixty-two women have died in 2015 and its only September. That's almost two women a week… And this is all happening against a backdrop of women's refuges being closed, as calls to the national crisis assistance line go unanswered due to lack of funding, and we rely on a system that turns women away, in their moment of greatest need" (AB220216). By referring to intimate partner homicide statistics, the media highlights the need to increase funding for violence against women and situates specific incidences within the broader context of violence against women.

Only one news article with a male victim featured a thematic portrayal of the homicide. The media discussed how changes to legislation could allow the convicted female offender to appeal her verdict. Interestingly, while the media discussed the

[9] White Ribbon Day is an international annual event dedicated to raising awareness about domestic violence and promoting gender equality, with a focus on preventing violence against women.

benefits of changing the legislation, the focus was on the female offender and not the male victim. Intimate partner homicide (and non-lethal violence) has been steadily gaining recognition as a significant policy focus in Australia, as demonstrated by numerous initiatives undertaken at both national and state levels (Queensland Government, 2016; Sutherland et al., 2019). The initiatives tend to focus more on women and children as victims of intimate partner violence, which could explain why more articles with male offender/female victim pairs feature a discussion of intimate partner violence as a social problem.

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlines the results of Study 1. The results show that intimate partner homicides are framed differently in online media depending on the gender pairs. In terms of prevalence, the bad offender and victim supporting frames were more commonly coded for in cases of male offender/female victim pairs. On the other hand, the victim blaming, and episodic reporting frames were more commonly coded for in cases of female offender/male victim pairs, although only the victim blaming frame showed a statistically significant difference across gender. Contextually, the results also show qualitative differences across gender. These differences could often be linked to traditional gender stereotypes. For example, male offenders were more often portrayed as bad, which could be because violence is seen to be part of their nature (Carlyle et al., 2014b). On the other hand, female offenders could be portrayed as bad because they were seen to violate gender expectations (Pelvin, 2017).

As argued earlier within this thesis, studies of the ways in which the media portrays intimate partner homicide are important. However, this study neglects to consider how readers interact with the media. Such a focus is important given that online comments on media articles significantly impact audience perceptions (e.g.

Lee, 2012; Lee & Jang, 2010; Von Sikorski & Ha nelt, 2016). This is examined in the second empirical study of this thesis.

Chapter 5: Results Study 2 – Gender Differences in Facebook Comments

The previous chapter outlined the results of Study 1, which examined how frames and subframes differ across gender in the sample of online news articles featuring intimate partner homicide. The results showed clear differences when male versus female offenders/victims were portrayed. Such findings are important, especially given that media portrayals could lead to distorted views of intimate partner homicide and impact on future policy. However, while studies of how media corporations portray crime are important, they overlook how readers interact with the media. In today's online environment, readers can (and do) publish directly to the Internet by instantly uploading comments to newspaper websites or on social media (Canter, 2013). Examining online news comments by readers is important because comments can have a significant impact on how the audience who reads them views issues, including crime and violence (e.g. Lee, 2012; Lee & Jang, 2010; Von Sikorski & Ha nelt, 2016).

This chapter outlines the results of Study 2, which examined Facebook comments responding to online articles featuring intimate partner homicide. Given the focus on gendered portrayals in this thesis, the comments were analysed across gender, i.e., whether the intimate partner homicide involved male offender/female victim pairs or female offender/male victim pairs. Two aspects of the comments were examined: content and civility. As such, the analysis focuses not only on *what* (i.e., the theme) is discussed, but also *how* (i.e., the tone, namely civility) it is discussed. Content was analysed using a thematic analysis to establish the main themes present. Civility was analysed using Coe et al.'s (2014) operationalisation of incivility (see Methodology chapter). While intercoder reliability showed a moderately high level of consistency for civility (74%), it is important to remember that civility is "very much

in the eye of the beholder" (Herbst, 2010, p. 3). The coding of comments as civil or uncivil was made on the basis of the comment as a whole, not according to specific sections of the comment (i.e., if any portion of the comment was deemed uncivil, the entire comment was coded as uncivil). This is, of course, a limitation of the current research and ways forward will be discussed later in the discussion chapter.

As explained in the methodology chapter (Chapter 3), Study 2 relies on a sample of Facebook comments posted by readers in response to online news reports of intimate partner homicides. For reasons of consistency and feasibility, the current chapter relies on the same online articles analysed in Study 1. However, given that news outlets only post some, rather than all, of their online articles on social media, the study was limited in scope to those articles that had been posted to Facebook. Of the original 121 online news articles in the sample, only 20 (16.5%) had been posted on Facebook by news outlets.[10] Two of the articles featured female offenders, while 18 of the articles featured male offenders. Although less than 20% of the original sample were posted on Facebook, these articles are particularly interesting because of the increasing reliance on social media to find news, meaning these articles are likely to be key sources of information about events and issues for many readers (Watkins et al., 2016).

Due to the high volume of comments posted in response to these articles (to give an example, one of the stories generated a total of 520 comments), a sample of 20 "most relevant" comments were drawn for each article. Facebook allows a user to view "all comments", "most relevant comments" or "new comments". As discussed in Chapter 3, this study used the 20 "most relevant" comments because this includes the

[10] Though it would be of interest to examine the nature of the stories that make it onto social media platforms in comparison to those that do not (see e.g., research by Kümpel et al., 2015), such a focus is outside the scope of the current study.

comments with the most views, reactions, and replies. This process resulted in a total of 371 comments (as some articles had fewer than 20 "relevant comments"), which forms the sample for this analysis. Each of these comments was posted on Facebook within a week of the respective article's publication. Although the comments ranged in length from one word to 243 words, they were generally relatively short (median = 17 words). Of the 371 comments, 37 (approximately 10%) had responded to articles featuring female offenders and 334 (about 90%) had responded to articles featuring male offenders. The results of the analyses are presented below in two main sections: the first focuses on whether statistically significant gender differences exist in the comments and the second emphasises the qualitative differences in themes and civility.

Differences in Prevalence Rates of Key Themes and Civility Across Offender/Victim Gender

Inductive coding resulted in seven key themes emerging (see Table 5.1). Some of these themes are similar to the media frames studied in Study 1 (namely *bad offender*, *victim blaming*, and *victim supporting*). Other themes were not prominent (or not present) in the media frames, including *sympathy with family*, *lenient criminal justice response*, *critiquing media's portrayal*, and *emphasising intimate partner violence as a problem*. The operationalisation of each of these is discussed in further detail in the next section. Initial analysis showed that the themes generally did not overlap, most likely due to the comments' short word count. Nevertheless, approximately one-quarter of the comments were coded for in more than one theme (e.g., bad offender and lenient criminal justice response), meaning the themes are not mutually exclusive.

Table 5.1

Themes of Intimate Partner Homicide Comments (n = 371)

	Overall % (*n*)	**Male Offender/ Female Victim % (*n*)**	**Female Offender/ Male Victim % (*n*)**	**χ^2 (df)**	***p***	**Effect Size**
Bad offender	44.5 (165)	46.4 (155)	27.0 (10)	4.312 (1)	.038	-.117
Victim blaming	6.2 (23)	5.4 (18)	13.5 (5)	^	.066	.101
Victim supporting	15.4 (57)	17.1 (57)	0.0 (0)	6.206 (1)	.013	-.142
Sympathy with family	8.6 (32)	9.6 (32)	0.0 (0)	^	.058	-.102
Lenient criminal justice response	17.3 (64)	18.3 (61)	8.1 (3)	1.748 (1)	.186	-.081
Critiquing media's portrayal	6.7 (25)	6.0 (20)	13.5 (5)	^	.090	.090
Emphasising intimate partner violence as a problem	7.0 (26)	7.2 (24)	5.4 (2)	^	1.000	-.021

Note. Continuity correction is reported, while effect size was calculated using Phi.
^ Fisher's Exact Test was used where cells had an expected count less than five.

In terms of prevalence, the themes bad offender, victim supporting, sympathy with family, lenient criminal justice response, and emphasising intimate partner violence as a problem were more commonly coded for in cases of male offender/female victim pairs (compared to female offender/male victim pairs). On the other hand, the victim blaming and critiquing media's portrayal themes were more commonly coded for in cases of female offender/male victim pairs (compared to male offender/female victim pairs). Bivariate analyses revealed statistically significant gender differences for only two of the themes. The bad offender theme was statistically more likely to be coded for in comments relating to male/female pairs compared to female/male pairs (46.4% versus 27.0%; χ^2 (1, n = 371) = 4.312, p = .038, *phi* = -.117). Comments coded as victim supporting were also statistically more common when the article was written about a male offender/female victim pair (17.1% versus 0.0%; χ^2 (1, n = 371) = 6.206, p = .013, *phi* = -.142).

In addition to coding for content, the comments were also coded for civility or lack thereof (see Table 5.2). Incivility is conceptualised as comments that have an unnecessarily disrespectful tone towards the discussion forum, its participants, or its topics (Coe et al., 2014). As discussed in Chapter 3, comments were coded as uncivil if at least one of the five forms of incivility was found: name-calling, aspersion, lying, vulgarity, and pejorative for speech (Coe et al., 2014). These categories are not mutually exclusive because a comment can contain more than one type of incivility (e.g., a comment could contain both vulgarity and name-calling). A comment was coded as civil when none of the five forms of incivility were present.

Table 5.2

Civility of Intimate Partner Homicide Comments (n = 371)

	Overall % (*n*)	**Male Offender/ Female Victim % (*n*)**	**Female Offender/ Male Victim % (*n*)**	**χ^2 (df)**	***p***	**Effect Size**
Civil	61.5 (228)	59.3 (196)	81.1 (30)	5.794 (1)	.016	.134
Uncivil	38.5 (143)	40.7 (136)	18.9 (7)			
Name-calling	32.9 (122)	34.7 (116)	16.2 (6)	4.369 (1)	.037	-.118
Aspersion	6.7 (25)	7.5 (25)	0.0 (0)	^	.156	-.089
Vulgarity	5.1 (19)	4.8 (16)	8.1 (3)	^	.420	.045

Note. Continuity correction is reported, while effect size was calculated using Phi.
^ Fisher's Exact Test was used where cells had an expected count less than five.

Bivariate analyses revealed that comments on news reports covering female offenders were statistically more likely to be coded as civil (see Table 5.2). More than four-fifths of comments relating to female offenders featured civil language compared to just over half of comments relating to male offenders (χ^2 (1, n = 371) = 5.794, p = .016, *phi* = .134). Of Coe et al.'s (2014) five forms of incivility, only three were

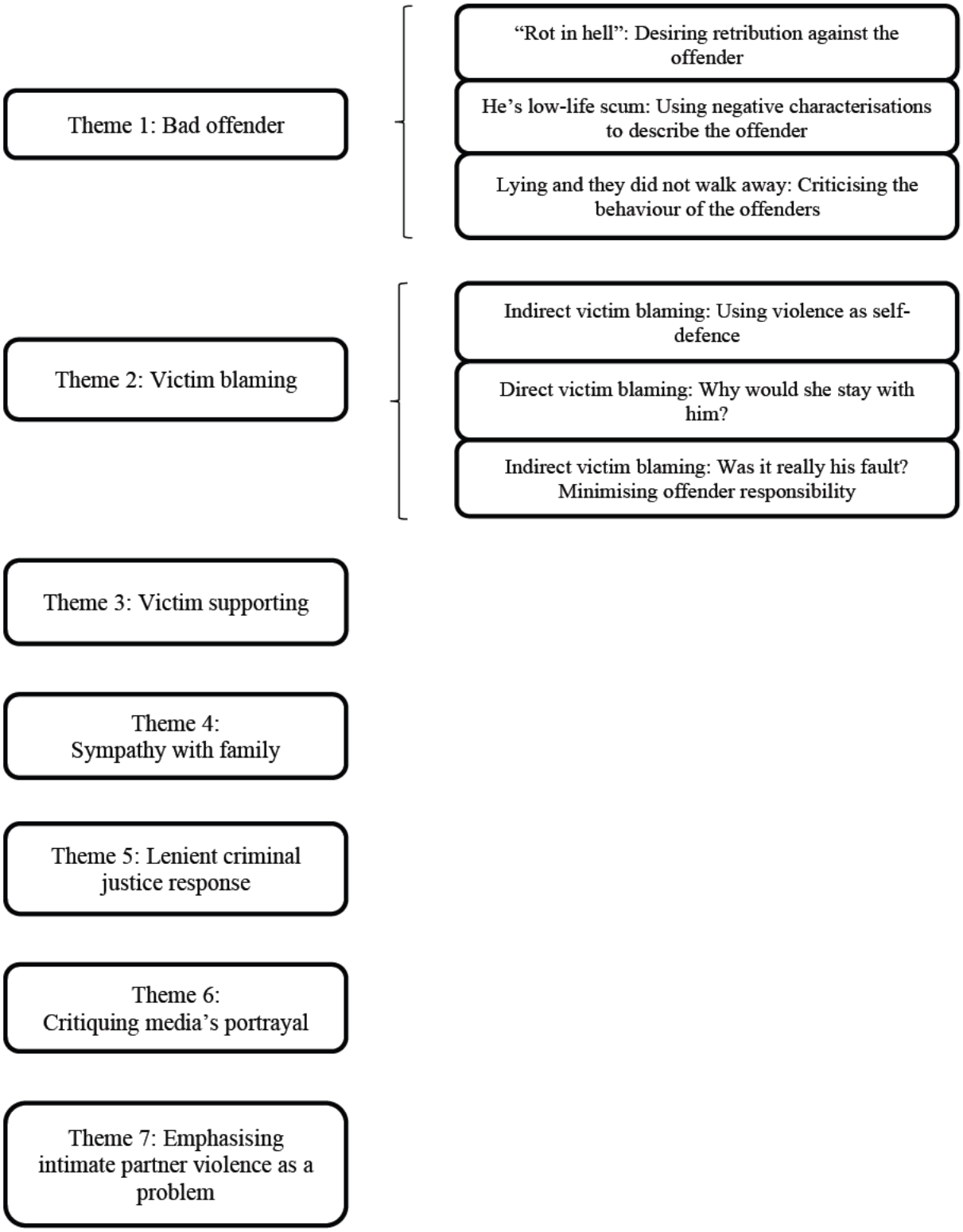
observed in the current dataset, specifically name-calling, aspersion, and vulgarity. In other words, lying and pejorative for speech were not found in the current study. The most common form of incivility was name-calling (32.9% of all comments). This was also the only form of incivility that reached statistical significance in the bivariate analyses, with comments about male offenders more likely to feature name-calling compared to comments with female offenders (34.7% vs. 16.2%; χ^2 (1, n = 371) = 4.369, p = 0.37, *phi* = -.118).

Qualitative Differences in Key Themes and Civility Across Gender

Having reviewed the prevalence rates across gender pairs, this chapter now turns to the qualitative analysis. This section highlights the qualitative differences in the content (themes) and tone (civility/incivility) of Facebook comments, depending on the gender of the offender/victim featured in the online articles. The three themes relating specifically to offenders or victims are discussed first, namely the bad offender, victim blaming, and victim supporting themes. Subsequently, the following themes are discussed: sympathy with family, lenient criminal justice response, critiquing the media's portrayal, and emphasising intimate partner violence as a problem. Within two of the themes, subthemes emerged from the analyses, and these are also detailed below. Figure 5.1 outlines the themes and subthemes found in this study.

Figure 5.1

Themes and Subthemes (if Present) in Study 2



Rather than including a separate discussion on civility, this aspect of communication is discussed within each theme, because the delivery of a comment (i.e., the tone) represents such a fundamental aspect of communication. Civility (or lack thereof) concerns *how* something is written as opposed to *what* is written. For example, while a comment could be written in such a way that is critical and blaming of an offender (bad offender theme), the author may do so using civil language. Thus, as civility provides significant meaning and interpretation of a message, it is discussed within each of the themes, as opposed to being discussed separately.

Theme 1: Bad Offender

In line with past literature, the bad offender theme was coded for in comments that criticised and/or blamed the offender (Brossoie et al., 2012; Carlyle et al., 2019; Komazec & Farmer, 2020; Whiting et al., 2019). This theme was more common in comments about male offenders than female offenders. The analyses revealed three key methods (i.e., subthemes) in which offenders are portrayed as bad: desiring retribution against the offender, using negative characterisations to describe the offender, and criticising the behaviour of the offender. These are discussed in separate sections below. Interestingly, bad offender was the only theme in this study that was coded to have more uncivil comments than civil comments.

"Rot in Hell": Desiring Retribution Against the Offender. One of the ways in which an offender was negatively portrayed in the comments was by using words and phrases indicative of the commenter desiring retribution against the offender. More than half of the comments in the bad offender theme featured the subtheme desiring retribution against the offender. While this was a common theme in comments about male offenders, it was very rare in comments about female offenders. In fact, only one commenter desired retributive consequences for the

female offender: “well hopefully a long jail sentence for her” (NE300915b). This comment is particularly interesting given its tone. While the commenter clearly wants justice to be served, they express this desire using civil language.

This stands in stark contrast to the comments about male offenders, with commenters wanting capital punishment reinstated (abolished in Australia in 1985), long prison sentences (especially a life sentence), and physical retribution. Two-thirds of such comments were coded as using uncivil language. To give an example typically seen in this subtheme, one commenter wrote: “rot in hell” (NE060215). Such language conjures up images of pain and torture akin to Dante’s Inferno (Jewkes, 2014), showing a desire for severe punishment for the offender. Even in comments where hell was not specifically mentioned as a punishment, suffering was still emphasised: “Nah death would be an easy way out, he can spend the rest of his days locked up in a concrete cell” (YA170816b). These examples clearly illustrate the intensity with which commenters desire retributive justice. Other commenters wished for the infliction of harm, and even death, onto the offender, as in the following example, “Ex bikie ha What a joke! Lock him up and let the other life pests at him” (NE301115). This commenter seems aware that prisons can be violent places (see e.g., O'Donnell & Edgar, 1998; Wolff et al., 2007). The wording is uncivil, as illustrated through the use of words such as “let the other life pests at him”. In particular, the words “life pests” are mean-spirited, which amounts to incivility, specifically name-calling (Coe et al., 2014).

While the majority of comments featuring male offenders in this subtheme were written using an uncivil tone, some were coded as using a civil tone, such as “Lock him up for life” (AB040916b). This comment is quite typical for how someone would comment using a civil tone in this subtheme. Here, the commenter is also

wishing for the offender to spend the remainder of their life in prison, however, they express this using civil language that is neither mean-spirited nor disrespectful towards the offender. This civil comment is similar to the one comment featuring a female offender in this subtheme (discussed above).

He's Low-life, Scum: Using Negative Characterisations to Describe the Offender. Another way that an offender was criticised in the comments was by commenters using negative characterisations to describe the offender. These comments were always coded as being written with an uncivil tone. Interestingly, this subtheme was only present in comments on articles with male offenders, who were described using a plethora of negative characterisations. For example, the word "scum" was used numerous times, such as, "Enjoy prison you low life scum!!!!!" (AB150216b). The word "scum" demonstrates incivility through name-calling and is a term used to show disgust and revulsion for people's supposed bad or immoral qualities (Tyler, 2008), which makes sense given the more direct and literal translation of scum being a layer of foul or extraneous matter on a liquid.[11] Characterising someone as "scum" accentuates the commenter's disgust with the offender's actions.

A similar uncivil term sometimes used in the comments was "evil". The word "evil" is often used to describe the state of mind of the offender which is completely devoid of empathy or concern for the victim (in this case, the evil male offender who killed his female intimate partner) (Hering, 1997). Both these descriptions (scum and evil) show a strong critique of offenders because of the cultural understanding of the words. The characterisations are disparaging towards the offender, and thus fall into the uncivil subcategory of name-calling (Coe et al., 2014). Some other examples of

[11] See footnote 7.

uncivil name-calling seen in the current study include monster, bully, dog, idiot, lowlife, oxygen thief, sicko, and stupid.

Lying and They Did not Walk Away: Criticising the Behaviour of the Offenders. Another way offenders were depicted negatively in the comments was through criticism of their behaviour, such as highlighting the existence of alternatives to murder or highlighting the offender's dishonesty. This subtheme was found in comments concerning both male and female offenders. In fact, almost all commenters that criticised a female offender were found in this subtheme.

One way of critiquing the behaviour of both male and female offenders involved discussing how offenders had alternative options instead of resorting to lethal violence. Interestingly, approximately half of the comments were coded as being written with a civil tone while half were coded as being written with an uncivil tone, and this was the case for both male and female offenders. An example of a civil comment concerning a male offender is, "Why couldn't he just put her in a home where she could be looked after properly?" (YA090216). In this particular case, a husband killed his wife by pushing her wheelchair into a pool, with the supposed intent of not wishing to care for her given her physical disability. A similar comment was written about a female offender, "Before you bludgeon someone to death with a hammer you do have the choice to walk away" (NE300915b). Both of these examples were coded as civil language. The word bludgeon was coded as civil as it is a verb used to describe beating something with a heavy object. This can be compared to an uncivil comment concerning a female offender, "pathetic excuse for murder in the first degree" (NE300915b). This comment was written in response to a case where the media suggested that the offender killed her husband because she did not want anyone to find out they were having sex with a teenager. The words "pathetic excuse for

murder" in the comment demonstrates uncivil language by disparaging the offender, which is a form of incivility (name-calling). Similarly, male offenders were described this way (i.e., uncivilly).

Another way in which the behaviour of both male and female offenders was criticised was by suggesting that offenders had lied to the police or the courts about their level of involvement or intent in relation to the homicide. While both male and female offenders were portrayed as lying, a noticeable gender difference appeared in terms of civility. When discussing that female offenders had lied, commenters were always coded as using a civil tone. For example, one commenter suggested that a female offender was being untruthful by writing "Why would anyone keep a hammer in their bedroom? Sounds fishy" (NE300915b). The term "fishy" suggests that the commenter suspects that the offender is lying. While the offender alleges that she used the hammer in self-defence against her abusive husband, the commenter is questioning why a hammer was in the bedroom when such items are typically kept in sheds or garages. Thus, the commenter is inferring that the homicide was premediated. However, the delivery of this message is coded as civil because the language is polite and not mean-spirited or disparaging.

While some commenters also used a civil tone when discussing how a male offender had lied, most were coded as using uncivil tones. For example, one commenter casts doubt on the offender's defence that the death of his partner was an accident, "At the start he denied having anything to do with her death; he sobbed and moaned his innocence all along. NOW his lawyer claims he might have 'accidentally' killed her. Oh, come on!" (NE131215). The words "he sobbed and moaned" and "oh, come on!" are indicative of mean-spirited language against the offender which is a type of incivility (name-calling) (Coe et al., 2014). Another example is:

> The right result for a special type of predator. He thought he had outsmarted everyone. Thank goodness justice was reinstated for a poor woman whose lying, cheating arrogant a***hole of a husband thought he could discard her like trash in the local river and deny it. (AB211015)

The phrase "he thought he had outsmarted everyone" is indicative that the offender was lying. The word "a***hole", despite the use of asterisks, clearly demonstrates both vulgarity and name-calling and is therefore uncivil.

Some commenters also criticised both male and female offenders by drawing conclusions about the offender's lack of intellect by criticising their behaviour. An example relates to comments around a female offender's choice of last meal prior to her execution for murder in the United States. In particular, the offender's choice of a diet drink seemed to be of interest to commenters. The undertone of these comments is that the offender should not be concerned about consuming sugar if she is about to be executed. By drawing connections between her seemingly illogical last meal request and her incompetence at evading detection, the commenters infer to the reader that the offender is unintelligent. Most of these comments used uncivil language, such as "Why the hell would you get a DIET drink when your [*sic*][12] about to be executed No wonder she got caught" (NE091215d). In this context, the word "hell" is used as an expression of strong emotion (Hugou, 2017), and is considered vulgar under Coe et al.'s (2014) definition. This can be compared to a civil comment: "Why did she have a diet softdrink with her last meal? Don't think you would be too worried about the calories would you?" (NE091215d). Here, the commenter is also questioning why the offender asked for a diet drink but is using a civil tone.

[12] *Sic* is included when any incorrect spelling, punctuation, or grammar in a comment may confuse readers.

Theme 2: Victim Blaming

The second key theme that emerged from the coding of comments was victim blaming, which was more commonly coded for in cases involving male victims than female victims (see Table 5.1 earlier). Similar to the media framing analyses in Study 1, both *direct* victim blaming techniques and *indirect* victim blaming techniques (excusing the offender) were coded into this theme to align with past research that emphasises both techniques as part of a larger pattern of victim blaming tactics (Meyers, 1994; Richards et al., 2011; Taylor, 2008). These two techniques are discussed within each of the separate subthemes below.

Within the theme of victim blaming, a number of subthemes emerged. These subthemes showed clear differences across the gender of the offender/victim in the ways that victim blaming was seen. Comments relating to female offenders always concerned the idea that the male victim had previously abused the female offender, blaming the victim for causing their own demise. This did not occur in comments relating to articles featuring male offenders/female victims. On the other hand, male offenders had their responsibility minimised, and female victims were often blamed for not leaving the abusive relationship. This is discussed more fully in the next sections.

Indirect Victim Blaming: Using Violence as Self-Defence. One of the ways an offender was excused (i.e., indirectly blaming the victim) was by referring to the offender's use of lethal violence as a form of self-defence. In the victim blaming theme, comments relating to female offenders always referred to the male victim's previous abuse of the female offender. Interestingly, this subtheme was not seen when the offender was male (female victim). In most comments, civil language was coded, such as "If these details are all true she deserves a medal" (NE300915b). However,

although the comments were mostly civil, many commenters implied criticism of the offender: "Yeh [*sic*] just leave out of the heading that he was allegedly highly abusive and was coercing her" (NE300915b). While this commenter is criticising the media (discussed as a separate theme further below), they are also making reference to the idea that the offender killed her husband because he was abusive. This implies that the offender was compelled to kill her husband to protect herself from further abuse.

Civil language was very common within this subtheme. In fact, only one comment was coded as being written with an uncivil tone: "What a perverted piece of work this man is! He obviously had pushed her too far!" (NE300915b). The language in this example shows derision for the male victim, calling him "perverted" (a form of name-calling). In this particular case, the online article detailed how the female offender had killed her abusive husband who, among other things, had allegedly made her participate in sexual encounters with other women. Although this commenter directly lays blame on the male victim, they also excuse the female offender ("he obviously pushed her too far").

Direct Victim Blaming: Why Would She Stay with Him? So far, the commenters have responded to and excused female offenders for reportedly killing their intimate male partners in self-defence. Another way in which intimate partner violence featured in the victim blaming theme was when commenters assigned blame to the victims for remaining in violent relationships that turned fatal. Commenters often expressed that women were at least partially at fault for entering and remaining within violent relationships. Contrarily, in comments about reports of female offenders, none of the male victims were blamed for not leaving their female partners.

Comments in this subtheme were often coded as being written with an uncivil tone. One commenter wrote the following about the homicide of a female victim:

“Shocking death but if you play with fire you're gonna get burnt. Why would you have a child with the lowlife” (NE301115). Here the commenter blames the victim for getting herself into the situation and implies that she is at fault for not leaving the offender. However, the commenter writes this without alluding to the multiple obstacles and barriers that prevent women from leaving their abusers (Anderson, 2003b; Farmer & Tiefenthaler, 1997; Murray, 2008). The use of the word “lowlife” to describe the offender is indicative of name-calling. Another commenter said, “If he was such a bad husband why on earth was she living with him ???? why didn't she take her precious children and get the hell out! She might still be alive” (NE131215). This commenter uses the word “hell” which can be considered vulgar, and in turn uncivil, because it is not considered proper in professional discourse (Coe et al., 2014). In common language, words such as "hell" are often used as expletives to express strong emotions such as anger, frustration, or disbelief (Blakemore, 2015; Hoeksema & Napoli, 2008).

Nevertheless, not all comments were coded as having an uncivil tone. For instance, one commenter wrote: “Domestic violence, this is what you get if don't quit unhappy disrespect and bulling relationship” (AB211015). While this commenter still places blame on the female victim for not leaving the relationship, the tone is polite and does not involve name-calling or hostility towards either party.

Indirect Victim Blaming: Was it Really His Fault? Minimising Offender Responsibility. Some comments were worded in a way that casted doubt on the offender’s responsibility, thereby indirectly blaming the victim. This subtheme was only observed in comments about male offenders and their female victims. Doubt was communicated in a variety of ways, such as suggesting a possible case of mistaken identity or that the offender was simply acting on the request of the victim by

committing euthanasia. Similarly, some suggested that the incident may have been an accident.

Regardless of their content, the tone of the majority of comments in this subtheme was civil. Typical of these comments is: “But how can you be sure he actually did it?” (NI310816). This commenter seems to doubt the actus reus, i.e., the objective element of the crime, without which a legal conviction cannot be handed down. While the focus here seems to be on the (lack of) weight of the evidence, these types of comments minimise (or excuse) offender responsibility. In another example, the commenter seems to refer to the “witch hunt” that can sometimes follow individuals who have been found innocent but where there is still uncertainty in people’s minds as to whether the offender is responsible: “Everyone saying he's looking for he's [*sic*] next "victim" victim of what ? He was proven innocent ?” (YA110717). While expressing a certain level of accusation against other commenters, the tone here is polite as opposed to disparaging or mean-spirited, which suggests the comment is written with a civil tone (Coe et al., 2014).

Another means of introducing doubt was to show sympathy towards the offender, again using civil language. An example of this is a comment about Oscar Pistorius, the world-famous Paralympian who killed his fiancé:

> Trying to save his girlfriend from an intruder...he has to go through this hell! Like to see someone without prosetics [*sic*] be so brave, but something you can expect from an athlete. Do people really believe they had an argument and he shot Reeva. This is a terrible terrible situation. Really the best outcome is Mr Steencamp talks with Oscar and try and get some closer [*sic*], I truly believe he will see Oscar did not intentionally shoot his daughter (AB190916).

This example displays sympathy for the offender by doubting that he intentionally killed the victim. In other words, the commenter is doubting the mens rea, i.e., the intention or knowledge of wrongdoing that constitutes part of a murder conviction. The example indicates that the offender was trying to protect the victim and suggests that the fact that he uses prosthetic limbs makes his action even more courageous. The commenter also suggests that this is a tragedy because the offender is "going through hell" and being punished for trying to defend the victim. However, the comment is still written with a civil tone because the word "hell" is not used as profanity, but is instead used to indicate that the offender is suffering.

Only one comment was coded as uncivil within this subtheme. However, this comment was uncivil due to the tone (name-calling) used to describe women in general and not the offender. The commenter doubts the male offender's responsibility, saying:

> Women want equality but when they do something stupid it's always the man's fault. He was brutalized by the media. He has a right to come out and set the record straight. He has a right to live his life. He has a right to date (NE071215).

The commenter is referring to an incident where the offender was acquitted of killing his Tinder date after he locked her outside on his balcony, and she fell to her death. In this example, the commenter uses uncivil language when discussing women.

Theme 3: Victim Supporting

At the other end of the spectrum from victim blaming, is victim supporting. Indeed, most of the Facebook comments that included a reference to the victim did so with positive portrayals (the exception being the victim blaming comments discussed

above). All comments coded as victim supporting were about female victims. None of the comments examined for male victims included victim supporting language.

The vast majority of comments in this theme were coded as having a civil tone. More than half of the comments that were coded as supporting the female victim referred to "rest in peace" or "RIP", such as: "So sad they all need to be thrown in jail. poor woman RIP Jodie" (YA250915). The example here is demonstrating sympathy for the victim using civil language and is typical for how victims were described in this theme. The theme aligns with how the media often portrays victims of violence as good or innocent, which generates a passionate response from readers by creating sympathy towards the victim (Collins, 2016; Greer, 2007; McShane & Williams, 1992). A similar example is, "RIP Beautiful lady...." (YA250915). Here the commenter further refers to the victim as "beautiful", which was a common feature in other comments as well. Previous research has demonstrated that commenters sometimes describe a female victim as beautiful when expressing sympathy for the victim and demonstrating an outpouring of grief (Barnes, 2016; Komazec & Farmer, 2020; Powell et al., 2017).

Those few comments within the victim supporting theme that did contain elements of incivility (namely name-calling and vulgarity) did not direct the uncivil language towards the victim. Rather, the uncivil tone appears to have been used as a method of expressing anger and frustration at either the killing or the media's reporting of the homicide. This involved the use of swearing, such as in the following example involving a homicide of a transgender woman killed by her male partner. Swearing is coded as vulgarity as per Coe et al.'s (2014) operationalisation. In this case, the commenter used the word "bs":

> No PERSON deserves to be hurt or killed by their partner. Sex, gender, race, none of this matters. Transphobia ? Why bring this bs into it. Poor Mayang was killed; Mayang's death was undeserved and Mayang should be mourned with respect (AB091014).

The commenter is clearly showing sympathy to the victim, seen especially in their use of the words “Poor Mayang” and “should be mourned with respect”. Sympathy often involves caring about others (Darwall, 1998). Another example of swearing can be seen in the use of “fken”: “R.I.P....beautiful beautiful girl...fken [*sic*] heartbreaking..xxx” (NE301115). Again, in this example, the incivility was not targeting the victim, but instead used as an expression of frustration and anger that the victim was killed.

Theme 4: Sympathy with Family

The theme sympathy with family includes comments where commenters express sympathy to the victim’s family. Individuals may feel sympathy for the family because they can imagine themselves, or their own family members, in the position of the victim’s family (Johnson-Laird & Oatley, 1989). In the current study, commenters only expressed sympathy to the victim’s family regarding articles with female victims and never for male victims. The large majority of comments in this theme were coded as civil, as in the following example: “Heart goes out to all family and friends” (YA250915). While this comment was relatively broad in terms of who they mentioned (family and friends), some commenters expressed concerns for specific members of the victims’ families, such as their children, as in the following example, “I just feel so sorry for his daughters. He took their mother, and in doing so changed their lives irrevocably forever. I hope they gain some peace” (NE131215).

The very small number of uncivil comments only arose when the commenter would also write disparaging remarks against the offender, which is a type of incivility. An example of this is, “the heartache and devastation he has caused her family, loved ones and the people who tried to help save her will be everlasting. He is the lowest form of life” (AB150216b). The commenter is expressing sympathy for the female victim’s family and loved ones. However, the commenter also refers to the offender as the lowest form of life. Therefore, this comment (in its entirety) is coded as uncivil (name-calling).

Theme 5: Lenient Criminal Justice Response

The themes identified thus far, have focused on the actors involved in the homicide. The next theme that emerged from the inductive coding process is lenient criminal justice response. These are cases where commenters express the opinion that the criminal justice response was not sufficiently retributive. On the surface, this theme might appear similar to the subtheme of retribution against the offender. Looking more closely, however, it becomes apparent that this theme focuses on the failure or weaknesses of the criminal justice system rather than the offender deserving harsh punishment. Although, it is worth noting that there is sometimes a crossover between the two themes (i.e., a commenter would criticise the criminal justice system and, also, express that the offender deserves a harsher punishment). Overall, this theme was more commonly seen in comments relating to articles with male offender/female victim pairs, compared to female offender/male victim pairs.

In this theme, commenters often expressed a desire for capital punishment to be reinstated in Australia. This was seen in comments regarding both male and female offenders. In fact, all of the comments on articles featuring female offenders in this theme were coded as calling for capital punishment and always used a civil tone. An

example of this relates to an article where the female offender is awaiting execution in the United States, “I wish Australia had the death penalty still” (NE091215d). Some of the commenters who expressed a desire for the use of capital punishment for male offenders were also civil in their phrasing, such as, “Bring back the death penalty life for a life” (YA250915). Though both commenters expressed a desire for the reinstatement of an antiquated and harsh form of punishment, neither of these examples are disparaging or disrespectful. At the same time, however, neither see past the retributive goals of the criminal justice system nor consider utilitarian goals such as rehabilitation.

Though some commenters who expressed a desire for capital punishment as a justice response to male offenders were coded as civil in their tone, the majority (two-thirds) were coded as uncivil. The following is an example of an uncivil comment that featured name-calling:

> The justice system got it right he doesn't deserve to walk around in the community ..... however for this oxygen thief to sit in jail at the expense of tax payers is wrong on every level. Bring back the death penalty plain and simple! (AB150216b).

This comment also exemplifies the relatively prevalent overlap between the two themes: lenient criminal justice response and bad offender. Calling for the death penalty to be reinstated is criticising the criminal justice system for not allowing capital punishment and, therefore, falls under the lenient criminal justice response theme. However, the commenter also refers to the offender as an “oxygen thief” (uncivil tone) and says that this offender does not deserve to be in the community, which forms part of the bad offender theme. As seen in the above example, the uncivil part of the comment is actually expressed as part of the bad offender theme.

Another way that commenters critiqued the criminal justice system was by implying that the sentence length was insufficient or too lenient, without specifically mentioning capital punishment as a desired justice response. This was only seen in comments featuring male offenders. Almost all of these comments were coded as being written with a civil tone. An example concerning an article where the offender pled guilty to killing his ex-partner is, “He might get life. He will appeal and then get a reduced sentence. The laws are so lenient in this country” (NE301115). Though civil, this comment exemplifies the lack of legitimacy and trust commenters expressed about criminal justice responses to intimate partner homicide involving male offenders. Similarly, another commenter used the word “inadequate” to describe the sentence of a man who received a 12-year custodial sentence for killing his intimate partner (NE260217).

While rare, some commenters expressing that sentence lengths were insufficient wrote comments with an uncivil tone. As an example, the following commenter used a vulgar term when expressing their concern about what they perceived to be an insufficient sentence length for manslaughter, where the defence team argued the killing occurred during a porn re-enactment, “12 years for raping and killing someone, ffs” (NE260217). The acronym “ffs” stands for “for f*ck’s sake”. Such phrases, though perhaps common in online communities, are coded vulgar because it is not proper in professional discourse (Coe et al., 2014).

Another way commenters critiqued the criminal justice system for being too lenient was by referring specifically to the appeal process/outcome. In all of these comments, the commenters referred to one case, namely a well-known Australian case where a husband (Baden-Clay) killed his wife. The Queensland Court of Appeal downgraded the original murder conviction to manslaughter; however, the High Court

reinstated the murder conviction. Commenters mostly used a civil tone here. Examples include, “Justice! Great respect for the High Court. No respect whatsoever for Queensland's Court of Appeal” (AB211015), and “there should be a royal commission into the Queensland court system allowing Baden-Clay to win his appeal for a lesser sentence!!!” (NE131215). While these commenters are criticising the Court of Appeal, they are not using a disparaging tone. On the other hand, a very small number of comments featured an uncivil tone. An example is, “So it should…What sort of asshead judge declares manslaughter” (NI310816). The word “asshead” clearly demonstrates both vulgarity and name-calling and is, therefore, coded as uncivil.

Theme 6: Critiquing Media’s Portrayal

Another key theme within the comments was critiquing the media’s portrayal of the homicide. This theme was more frequent in comments on articles featuring female offender/male victim pairs compared to male offender/female victim pairs. In this theme, all of the comments featuring a female offender were coded as being written with a civil tone, while just over half of the comments featuring a male offender were written with an uncivil tone.

For comments on articles with female offenders, commenters always criticised the heading of the article. This included referring to the heading as “clickbait” or “slander”. Clickbait refers to headings or links that aim to entice readers to open and read the content, a common technique used in online news given the pursuit for page views (Chen et al., 2015). Such financially driven practices can blur the lines between fiction and fact and spread fake news on the Internet (Silverman, 2015). As stated above, all of the comments concerning female offenders were coded as civil. For example, “The header is slander” (NE300915b). Here, the heading of the article is,

"Doctor 'killed husband with hammer' after their sex with teen". However, upon reading the article, it is alleged that the female offender was forced to have sex with the teenager and killed her husband because he was abusing her. The commenter is criticising the heading for not providing the same context as the article. However, the commenter is using civil language to critique the media.

Comments relating to articles with male offenders also featured critiques of headings; however, commenters mostly used uncivil tones. One comment featured both aspersion and name-calling: "what a stupid heading they labeled him a monster…Of course he is" (YA170816b). Here referring to the heading as "stupid" is considered aspersion under Coe et al.'s (2014) operationalisation because it is disparaging towards the media's choice of words. As discussed in Chapter 3, aspersion involves disparaging words against an idea, plan, policy, or behaviour (while name-calling involves disparaging words against a person). The commenter is also criticising the offender by calling him a "monster", which means the comment is also coded as name-calling.

In comments featuring male offenders, commenters also criticised other aspects of the media, and more than half of these comments were coded as being written with an uncivil tone. The commenters were critical towards the media for sensationalising the homicide, missing information from their reports, promoting propaganda, and causing "trial by media." For example, one commenter referred to a case where a husband killed his wife after she converted from Islam to Christianity: "Typical propaganda media spewing out hate and bigotry" (YA250517). The commenter is indicating that the way the media framed the case causes hatred and prejudice towards people who follow Islam. The phrase "spewing out" indicates that

the commenter is disparaging the media (as opposed to a person) and is, therefore, uncivil (aspersion).

Some civil comments were also written about articles with male offenders. For example, one commenter criticised the media in the following way: "This was a truly tragic event and the sensationalism used by some media outlets is truly reprehensible" (AB091014). Although the commenter is criticising the media, they are not using mean-spirited or disparaging words which means this comment is coded as civil. Another example of a civil comment concerns an article explaining how the media was allowed to use cameras during Oscar Pistorius' trial: "This whole trial was a farce, from the media circus to the judge allowing that prosecutor the make himself the centre of all things" (AB040916b). The comment (including the word "farce"), while critical, is not disparaging or mean-spirited and can be used in professional discourse and is, therefore, coded as civil. The term "media circus" can refer to a trial receiving a large amount of publicity due to a defendant's prominence (Stephen, 1992), something which can negatively impact a defendant's right to a fair trial (Meringolo, 2010; Stephen, 1992; Walton, 1997).

Theme 7: Emphasising Intimate Partner Violence as a Problem

The last theme to emerge through the inductive coding process was emphasising intimate partner violence as a problem. This theme comprises comments where individuals specifically discussed intimate partner violence or intimate partner homicide as a problem in society as opposed to focusing solely on the circumstances surrounding the individual homicide. This theme resembles thematic reporting by the media, in that it focuses on the larger context of intimate partner violence and homicide. Although some of the comments in the lenient criminal justice system theme also focus on the broader context (rather than on an individual homicide

covered in a news story), the difference is that the lenient criminal justice system theme focuses on the perceived weakness or failure of the criminal justice system, whereas the theme emphasising intimate partner violence as a problem focuses on the common occurrence of intimate partner violence and the need for society to take greater preventative measures. This was not a common theme overall and was only seen in a small number of comments for both male offender/female victim pairs and female offender/male victim pairs.

Some commenters highlighted that intimate partner violence/homicide is unacceptable and more needs to be done to prevent it. Notably, this sentiment was expressed solely in comments related to male offenders and not female offenders. The majority of these comments were written with an uncivil tone. An example of a comment where the commenter suggests more effort should be undertaken to prevent intimate partner homicide is:

> Something more needs to be done to these disgusting so called men killing women an [*sic*] kids every week , it has to stop every day on the news there's another women or daughter being killed my [*sic*] a pethitic [*sic*] week [*sic*] male ,, then they get to go into protection in jail (YA250915).

The comment is coded as uncivil due to the use of mean-spirited words (pathetic and weak) to refer to the offender (Coe et al., 2014). The comment further exemplifies the co-occurrence of themes. In this case, the comment clearly acknowledges that intimate partner violence is a problem in society. However, within the same comment, the perceived leniency of the criminal justice system is also highlighted, through the commenter's lament about the offender's likely placement on a protection order in custody. When commenters highlighted that intimate partner violence/homicide is unacceptable, only one comment was coded as civil, namely, "honour killings are not

acceptable here or anywhere!". While the commenter is criticising intimate partner homicides (specifically honour killings) and stating that these homicides are unacceptable, they are using a civil tone to do so.

Another way that commenters emphasised intimate partner violence as a problem was by discussing the common occurrence of intimate partner violence/homicide. This was done for both male and female offenders. For male offenders, just over half of these types of comments were coded as civil, including, "It's depressing the number of children and adults being murdered by the people who were closest to them" (YA90216). An illustration of an uncivil tone includes, "Another victim of domestic violence Charge the parents with murder too ,disgusting excuse of parents" (YA250915). The commenter is discussing a case where the body of the victim was found buried in the backyard of the offender's parents' house. The phrase "another victim of domestic violence" points to the common occurrence of such violence, while the phrase "disgusting excuse" equates to name-calling (i.e., incivility) towards the parents of the offender. On the other hand, comments were mainly coded as civil when the offender discussed was female, for example, "Is this the fifth or six man to die from domestic violence this year so far??" (NE300915b). This comment was coded as civil; however, the complexities of this comment are acknowledged because this comment could also be interpreted as being sarcastic for someone aware of the high rates of intimate partner violence affecting women.

Some commenters also expressed incomprehension and confusion about what motivates people to commit lethal violence. This was also coded for comments regarding both male and female offenders. These comments were always written with an uncivil tone for female offenders but were written with a mix of uncivil and civil tones for male offenders. One commenter discussing a homicide perpetrated by a

female offender said, “Wtf is wrong with people and relationships these days. It's infuriating” (NE300915b). The phrase “wtf” (i.e., “what the f*ck”) was coded as vulgar as it is not proper in professional discourse which is an indication of incivility (Coe et al., 2014). Male offenders were also discussed in similar ways. For example, “for god sake wat [sic] is happening here” (YA250915). The phrase “for god’s sake” was coded as vulgar using Coe et al.’s (2014) definition and is, therefore, uncivil. Although, one commenter used a civil tone when discussing a male offender, saying, “Why are men like this?” (NE260217). Again, this commenter is questioning why a male offender would kill his partner but is civil due to the lack of a disrespectful tone.

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlines the findings of Study 2. The results show that intimate partner homicide comments differ depending on the gender pairs. In terms of prevalence, the themes bad offender, victim supporting, sympathy with family, lenient criminal justice response, and emphasising intimate partner violence as a problem were more commonly coded for in cases of male offender/female victim pairs. On the other hand, the victim blaming and critiquing media’s portrayal themes were more commonly coded for in cases of female offender/male victim pairs. However, it is worth noting that only the bad offender and victim supporting themes showed statistically significant differences across gender. Comments also showed statistically significant differences across incivility; comments featuring female offender/male victim pairs were more commonly coded as civil (compared to male offender/female victim pairs).

Contextually, the results also show qualitative differences across gender. Within each of the themes, gender pairs were portrayed differently. For example, in the victim blaming theme, female offenders were excused for using violence as self-

defence. On the other hand, males were excused when commenters doubted or minimised their responsibility. Furthermore, incivility also differed across gender within the themes. For example, in the criticising the media's portrayal theme, all of the comments regarding articles featuring female offender/male victim pairs were written with a civil tone. On the other hand, less than half of the comments regarding articles featuring male offender/female victim pairs were written with a civil tone.

Many of the media frames were also observed in the comments, but the extent to which comments were influenced by the frames is unknown. In theory, the framing of news stories by the media would likely impact on audience commentary (Lecheler & De Vreese, 2011; Price & Tewksbury, 1997; Valkenburg et al., 1999). However, without using an experimental approach that controls for audience characteristics, establishing such a link is difficult. One aspect that was not examined in Study 2 was the extent to which comments are influenced by the frames. Although this could be examined using the data available, a much stronger approach would be to control for audience characteristics given that prior knowledge and personal experiences affect the influence that framing has on audiences (Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Rhee, 1997; Van Gorp et al., 2009). The third empirical study of this thesis therefore examines whether the nature and content of online comments change depending on the frame of the article and the gender of the offender/victim while controlling for media usage, attitudes, and participant demographics. The results of the third study are presented in the next chapter.

Chapter 6: Results Study 3 – Gender Differences and the Impact of Media Frames on Audience Commentary

Thus far, the results of this thesis have demonstrated that the gender of the offender/victim pair of an intimate partner homicide matters in how the media reports the incident online (Study 1) and how readers (or the audience) comment on the reporting of such offences (Study 2). As these were descriptive analyses, the logical next step is to examine whether audience commentary is directly influenced by the media framing of intimate partner homicide and the gender of the offender/victim pair. Study 3, therefore, uses an experimental vignette design and statistical analyses to examine whether the content (theme) and tone (civility) of online comments made by respondents are impacted by the frame of the media and the gender of the offender/victim pair, while controlling for respondents' media usage, attitudes, and demographics.

This study has three research questions: 1) do media *frames* affect the theme and civility of comments?; 2) does the *gender* of the offender/victim pair affect the theme and civility of comments?; 3) does the *gender* of the offender/victim pair and media *frame* interact to affect the theme and civility of comments? This chapter reports the findings.

A Brief Synopsis of the Methods

As described in Chapter 3, Study 3 is a quantitative study that used an online vignette survey where respondents were recruited via Facebook. Each respondent was randomly assigned to one of four vignettes that featured an intimate partner homicide news article constructed specifically for the current study. The vignettes varied on two dimensions: type of media frame (bad offender or victim blaming frame) and gender of the offender/victim pair (male or female). This resulted in four vignettes: 1) a bad

offender frame with a male offender/female victim pair, 2) a bad offender frame with a female offender/male victim pair, 3) a victim blaming frame with a male offender/female victim pair, and 4) a victim blaming frame with a female offender/male victim pair. Male/female pairs were used in the vignettes for two reasons. First, these remain the most commonly reported relationships in media articles. Second, adding another dimension to the vignettes was not feasible, because this would have required significantly more respondents participating in the study.

Similarly, for feasibility reasons, only two frames were chosen for the vignettes. While it would have been ideal to include a broader number of frames, the expected sample size and time constraints limited the number of frames used in the vignettes. The first frame – bad offender – was selected because of its high prevalence in the online articles in Study 1 and the comments in Study 2, and it is commonly featured in media research exploring violence (e.g., Bullock, 2007; Carlyle et al., 2019; Easteal et al., 2015a; Komazec & Farmer, 2020; Lloyd & Ramon, 2017; Noh et al., 2010; Pelvin, 2017; Wilczynski, 1991; Wozniak & McCloskey, 2010). The second frame – victim blaming – was selected because of its high prevalence in the online articles in Study 1. Although victim blaming was observed to be less common in Study 2, previous studies have indicated its significant prevalence in online comments (Komazec & Farmer, 2020; Whiting et al., 2020), underscoring the need for further attention and investigation. The victim blaming frame is also important to examine because such framing can lead to the continuation of harmful social perceptions of violence against women (Meyers, 1994; Meyers, 1996). Finally, the selection of these two frames was validated by the results from Studies 1 and 2, which uncovered notable variations in the prevalence and nature of the frames and themes across the gender of the offender/victim pair.

Respondents used LimeSurvey, an online survey tool, to participate. Respondents were asked to read the vignette and then write an online comment. Questions were also asked about their media usage, criminal justice attitudes, and personal characteristics. These questions reflect other variables that could be related to the types of comments made (see Chapter 3 for further details).

The respondents' comments were coded using a deductive thematic analysis. Two characteristics of the comments were examined, namely what the comment was about (theme) and the tone of the comment (civility). Unlike Study 2, which examined a wide variety of themes, the themes coded for in the current study were limited to two: victim blaming and bad offender, in order to examine whether the theme of the comments matched the media frame presented in the vignette. In other words, to determine whether or not the victim blaming media frame resulted in comments that blamed the victim and whether or not the bad offender media frame resulted in comments that were critical of the offender. In terms of coding, respondents' comments that criticised and/or blamed the offender (e.g., by desiring retribution, using name-calling, or criticising the offender's behaviour) were coded as bad offender, in line with Study 2. A comment was coded as victim blaming if either direct victim blaming techniques or indirect victim blaming techniques (excusing the offender) were present, which aligns with past research (Meyers, 1994; Richards et al., 2011; Taylor, 2008). In terms of civility, comments were coded as uncivil if they contained at least one of the five forms of incivility: name-calling, aspersion, lying, vulgarity, or pejorative for speech (Coe et al., 2014), and coded as civil if they did not include any of these five forms. More details about the coding can be found in Chapter 3.

Descriptive Statistics of Variables and Sample Characteristics

A total of 639 respondents participated in the online survey; however, providing a comment on the article (i.e., the vignette) was optional for respondents. Considering the focus on online commentary in this study, respondents who did not submit an online comment were excluded from the sample. A total of 537 (84%) respondents wrote a comment on the article they had read and completed the whole survey, which is the sample used in the current study.

Table 6.1 presents the descriptive statistics for variables examined in the study across the sample overall and within the four vignettes. In terms of socio-demographics, most respondents were female and had not completed a university degree. The average age was 44.5 years. Most respondents reported online media as their main source of news and had commented on social media posts in the past. The majority of respondents reported confidence in the criminal justice system and reported having direct experience with the criminal justice system (either themselves or their families). They reported that they believed sentences for people who commit crimes should be harsher than they currently are. The average score for the "fear of crime" scale (possible range: 0–24) was 8.66, which indicates that respondents were not generally fearful of being a victim of crime. Half the respondents had been victims of intimate partner violence themselves. Further, the majority had a good awareness or understanding of what constitutes intimate partner violence, as measured by their responses to various intimate partner violence scenarios.

Table 6.1

Descriptive Statistics of Variables Used in Model (n = 537)

	Bad offender frame: Male offender/female victim	**Victim blaming frame: Male offender/female victim**	**Bad offender frame: Female offender/male victim**	**Victim blaming frame: Female offender/male victim**	**Total**
	n (%)	*n* (%)	*n* (%)	*n* (%)	*n* (%)
Respondent experiences/attitudes					
Online media main news source (1=yes)	113 (83.1)	112 (88.2)	104 (86.0)	124 (81.0)	453 (84.4)
Has commented on social media (1=yes)	110 (80.9)	102 (80.3)	96 (79.3)	121 (79.1)	429 (79.9)
Confidence in legal system (1=yes)	97 (71.3)	98 (77.2)	93 (76.9)	117 (76.5)	405 (75.4)
Wants harsher sentences (1=yes)	90 (66.2)	73 (57.5)	72 (59.5)	97 (63.4)	332 (61.8)
Fear of crime	M:8.57 (SD:4.58)	M:8.91 (SD:5.00)	M:8.70 (SD:4.86)	M:8.50 (SD:4.60)	M:8.66 (SD:4.75)
Intimate partner violence victimisation (1=yes)	71 (52.2)	70 (55.1)	69 (57.0)	60 (39.2)	270 (50.3)
Awareness of intimate partner violence (1=yes)	125 (91.9)	106 (83.5)	101 (83.5)	130 (85.0)	462 (86.0)
Direct contact with CJS (self or family) (1=yes)	100 (73.5)	84 (66.1)	81 (66.9)	108 (70.6)	373 (69.5)
Respondent demographics					
Gender (1=female)	111 (81.6)	109 (85.8)	94 (77.7)	128 (83.7)	442 (82.3)
Age	M:46.44 (SD:13.08)	M:43.95 (SD:14.46)	M:42.18 (SD:13.45)	M:45.23 (SD:15.01)	M:44.55 (SD:14.11)
University degree (1=yes)	51 (37.5)	54 (42.5)	59 (48.8)	69 (45.1)	233 (43.4)
Type of comment					
Victim blaming	4 (2.9)	25 (19.7)	34 (28.1)	65 (42.5)	128 (23.8)
Bad offender	27 (19.9)	12 (9.4)	15 (12.4)	11 (7.2)	65 (12.1)
Uncivil	17 (12.5)	6 (4.7)	5 (4.1)	1 (0.7)	29 (5.4)
Total *n* (%)	136 (25.3%)	127 (23.6%)	121 (22.5%)	153 (28.5%)	537 (100.0%)

Note. Continuous variables are presented with mean and standard deviation (instead of number and percentage).

The word length of respondents' comments ranged between one and 361, but most respondents provided relatively short comments, with the median length of comments being 17 words (M = 25; SD = 32). Overall Table 6.1 shows that victim blaming was coded in almost one-quarter of the comments (23.8%). On the other hand, the bad offender theme was coded less frequently overall (12.1%). The large majority of the comments were mutually exclusive (only one comment featured both a victim blaming and a bad offender comment). In terms of civility, the vast majority of the comments were coded as civil (94.6%), with only a small proportion coded as uncivil (5.4%).

The study relied on a randomised method of vignette allocation, which was achieved through randomising the vignettes when a respondent entered the survey. Given the randomisation of participants into one of the four vignettes, it would be expected that the sub-samples would be similar across characteristics, for example, a similar gender proportion would be expected across the four vignettes. For methodological rigour, bivariate analyses were also conducted to ascertain whether or not a similar proportion of respondent demographics and experiences/attitudes was seen across the vignettes (descriptive statistics presented in Table 6.1, bivariate results available in Appendix D). As expected, results show no statistically significant differences in the respondent demographics. Of the respondent experiences and attitudes, only one variable showed statistically significant differences. Namely, whether or not a respondent reported previous intimate partner violence victimisation. Those who read the vignette with female offenders and the victim blaming frame were less likely to have been victims of intimate partner violence (see Appendix D). This difference highlights the importance of controlling for experiences of intimate partner violence, which is achieved in the regression models presented below.

Do Media Frames and the Gender of the Offender/Victim Pair Affect the Theme and Civility of Comments?

The results are divided into three sections based on the three dependent variables: 1) victim blaming theme in the comments, 2) bad offender theme in the comments, and 3) civility of comments. Within each section bivariate analyses were first used to examine whether the media frame (victim blaming/bad offender) and the gender of the offender/victim pair were associated with the theme or civility of comments made by respondents.[13] Multivariate analyses were then run to examine if the media frame and the gender of the offender/victim pair influences comments while controlling for a range of variables that might be associated with respondents' attitudes about victim and offender blame. This includes media usage, attitudes towards criminal justice, fear of crime, attitudes towards intimate partner violence, and respondent demographics. Separate regressions were conducted that examined the predictors of victim blaming comments (Table 6.2), and the predictors of bad offender comments (Table 6.3). Within each set of regressions, four separate models were run: a) media frame as predictor, b) gender of offender/victim pair as predictor, c) both media frame and gender as predictors, and d) interaction effect of media frame and gender.

It was not possible to use multivariate models to examine the civility of comments due to the low number of uncivil comments (5.2%; see Tabachnick and Fidell (2013) for a discussion on the preferred 90/10 split in the dependent variable for robust estimates). Therefore, only descriptives and bivariate analyses are presented for civility (Table 6.4).

[13] The bivariate results (chi-squares) table can be found in Appendix E.

Victim Blaming Theme in the Comments

The first set of analyses examined the presence of victim blaming in the respondent comments. Chi-square analyses revealed that respondents more commonly blamed the victim when the article had a victim blaming frame compared to when the article had a bad offender frame (32.1% versus 14.8%) (χ^2 (1, n = 537) = 21.291, p < .001, *phi* = .203). The analyses also showed that respondents were significantly more likely to blame the victim where the article featured female offender/male victim pairs (36.1%) compared to male offender/female victim pairs (11%) (χ^2 (1, n = 537) = 45.214, p < .001, *phi* = .295). These bivariate findings suggest that the media frame and gender of the offender/victim pair influences victim blaming in respondent comments.

Turning to the multivariate analyses, overall, the four models fit the data well, as indicated by Nagelkerke R^2 and the area under the ROC curve. Models 2–4 had an area under the curve of above 0.7, which is considered acceptable (Hosmer et al., 2013), while Model 1 had an area under the curve of 0.67. Initial analyses revealed four outliers with a standardised residual above 3 in two or more of the regression models (see Chapter 3 for further information). However, when the regressions were run without the outliers, the results were ostensibly the same. Therefore, the outliers were retained in the regressions.

Model 1 examined the impact of the media frame when controlling for respondent characteristics and attitudes (Table 6.2). Respondents who read a victim blaming article were almost three times (OR = 2.88) more likely to have written a victim blaming comment compared with respondents who read a bad offender article, controlling for all other factors in the model. One of the control variables (confidence in the legal system) was also statistically significant (OR = 0.60).

Table 6.2

Predictors of Media Frames and Offender/Victim Gender on Victim Blaming Comments (n = 537)

	Dependent Variable: Victim Blaming Comments									
	Model 1: Media Frame					Model 2: Offender/Victim Gender Pair				
	B (S.E)	Wald	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% CI	B (S.E)	Wald	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% CI
Media Frame and Gender of Offender/victim										
Victim blaming frame (1=yes)	1.06 (0.22)	22.49	<.001	2.88	1.86-4.47					
Female offender/male victim (1=yes)						1.60 (0.24)	44.26	<.001	4.95	3.09-7.93
Female offender x victim blaming frame										
Respondent Experiences/Attitudes										
Online media main source of news (1=yes)	-0.13 (0.29)	0.20	.658	0.88	0.50-1.55	-0.04 (0.30)	0.02	.881	0.96	0.53-1.71
Has commented on social media (1=yes)	-0.26 (0.29)	0.78	.376	0.77	0.44-1.37	-0.26 (0.29)	0.76	.382	0.77	0.43-1.38
Confidence in legal system (1=yes)	-0.51 (0.25)	4.24	.039	0.60	0.37-0.98	-0.52 (0.25)	4.13	.042	0.60	0.36-0.98
Wants harsher sentences (1=yes)	0.35 (0.24)	2.09	.148	1.42	0.88-2.29	0.31 (0.25)	1.57	.210	1.36	0.84-2.21
Fear of crime	0.01 (0.02)	0.34	.559	1.01	0.97-1.06	0.01 (0.02)	0.36	.548	1.01	0.97-1.07
Intimate partner violence victimisation (1=yes)	-0.03 (0.23)	0.02	.897	0.97	0.62-1.52	-0.02 (0.24)	0.01	.933	0.98	0.62-1.56
Awareness of intimate partner violence (1=yes)	-0.13 (0.30)	0.20	.653	0.88	0.49-1.57	-0.16 (0.30)	0.27	.605	0.85	0.47-1.55
Direct contact with CJS (self or family) (1=yes)	0.10 (0.25)	0.16	.693	1.10	0.68-1.78	0.03 (0.25)	0.02	.900	1.03	0.63-1.70
Respondent Demographics										
Gender (1=female)	-0.17 (0.29)	0.33	.565	0.85	0.48-1.50	-0.01 (0.30)	0.00	.976	0.99	0.55-1.78
Age	0.00 (0.01)	0.32	.573	1.00	0.99-1.02	0.01 (0.01)	0.94	.333	1.01	0.99-1.02
University degree (1=yes)	-0.18 (0.22)	0.66	.417	0.83	0.54-1.29	-0.31 (0.23)	1.89	.169	0.73	0.47-1.14
Constant	-1.39 (0.65)	4.51	.034	0.25		-1.95 (0.70)	7.78	.005	0.14	
Model statistics										
-2 Log likelihood	554.149					526.768				
Nagelkerke R^2	9.6%					16.6%				
Model $\chi 2$	35.674					63.056				
Sig.	<.001					<.001				
Model prediction rate	76.4%					76.0%				
ROC	.673					.727				

	Dependent Variable: Victim Blaming Comments									
	Model 3: Main Effects Model					Model 4: Model with Interaction				
	B (S.E.)	Wald	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% C.I.	B (S.E.)	Wald	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% C.I.
Frame and Gender										
Victim blaming frame (1=yes)	1.04 (0.23)	19.60	<.001	2.82	1.78-4.47	2.24 (0.56)	15.92	<.001	9.39	3.13-28.22
Female offender/male victim (1=yes)	1.58 (0.25)	41.75	<.001	4.88	3.02-7.88	2.73 (0.55)	24.24	<.001	15.36	5.18-45.56
Female offender x victim blaming frame						-1.61 (0.63)	6.60	.010	0.20	0.06-0.68
Respondent Experiences/Attitudes										
Online media main source of news (1=yes)	-0.02 (0.30)	0.01	.940	0.98	0.54-1.77	-0.07 (0.31)	0.05	.816	0.93	0.51-1.70
Has commented on social media (1=yes)	-0.29 (0.30)	0.92	.338	0.75	0.41-1.35	-0.30 (0.30)	1.01	.314	0.74	0.41-1.33
Confidence in legal system (1=yes)	-0.58 (0.26)	4.97	.026	0.56	0.34-0.93	-0.60 (0.26)	5.31	.021	0.55	0.33-0.91
Wants harsher sentences (1=yes)	0.35 (0.25)	1.88	.170	1.41	0.86-2.32	0.36 (0.25)	2.04	.153	1.43	0.88-2.34
Fear of crime	0.02 (0.03)	0.40	.529	1.02	0.97-1.07	0.01 (0.02)	0.35	.553	1.01	0.97-1.07
Intimate partner violence victimisation (1=yes)	0.15 (0.25)	0.37	.541	1.16	0.72-1.88	0.08 (0.25)	0.09	.760	1.08	0.67-1.75
Awareness of intimate partner violence (1=yes)	-0.11 (0.31)	0.12	.729	0.90	0.49-1.65	-0.05 (0.31)	0.03	.865	0.95	0.52-1.73
Direct contact with CJS (self or family) (1=yes)	-0.01 (0.26)	0.00	.977	0.99	0.60-1.65	0.04 (0.26)	0.02	.876	1.04	0.62-1.74
Respondent Demographics										
Gender (1=female)	-0.15 (0.31)	0.25	.616	0.86	0.47-1.56	-0.12 (0.31)	0.14	.707	0.89	0.49-1.63
Age	0.01 (0.01)	0.56	.455	1.01	0.99-1.02	0.01 (0.01)	0.92	.338	1.01	0.99-1.03
University degree (1=yes)	-0.30 (0.23)	1.61	.205	0.74	0.47-1.18	-0.32 (0.23)	1.83	.176	0.73	0.46-1.15
Constant	-2.44 (0.72)	11.60	<.001	0.09		-3.42 (0.85)	16.18	<.001	0.03	
Model statistics										
-2 Log likelihood	505.919					498.059				
Nagelkerke R^2	21.7%					23.6%				
Model $\chi 2$	83.904					91.764				
Sig.	<.001					<.001				
Model prediction rate	77.5%					78.0%				
ROC	.760					.765				

Model 2 estimates the impact of the gender of the offender/victim pair while controlling for respondent characteristics and attitudes. It was found that of all the variables included in the model, only the gender of the offender/victim pair and one of the control variables (confidence in the legal system: OR = 0.60) were statistically significant, as shown in Table 6.2. Respondents who read an article featuring a female offender (male victim) were almost five times (OR = 4.95) more likely to have written a victim blaming comment compared with respondents who read an article with a male offender (female victim), controlling for all other factors in the model.

Models 1 and 2 focused on the predictors of media frame and the gender of the offender/victim pair separately. The next step was to examine whether the gender of the offender/victim pair moderates the impact of media frame on the likelihood of a victim blaming comment. This was achieved by running two separate models, one with the main effects only (i.e., inclusion of both offender/victim gender pair and frame; Model 3) and one with the main effects *and* the interaction term (Model 4). In Model 3 (Table 6.2), both gender and the media frame were shown to be statistically significant (OR = 4.88 and OR = 2.82, respectively). Similar to Models 1 and 2, one of the control variables (confidence in the legal system), was also statistically significant (OR = 0.56).

Model 4 assessed the interaction of gender and the media frame, while controlling for respondent characteristics and attitudes when respondents wrote victim blaming comments. The model fit remained similar to Model 3 though with slight improvements ($\chi^2 = 7.861$, $p = .005$), indicating that adding the interaction had a small improvement on the fit. As shown in Model 4, the interaction term (gender x frame) was statistically significant, as were the individual predictors (gender: OR = 15.36, and frame: OR = 9.39), and the control variable confidence in the legal system

(OR = 0.55). This suggests that the gender of the offender/victim pair does moderate the relationship between the framing and the likelihood of the respondent making a comment that blamed the victim.

To interpret the direction of the significant interaction effect, odds ratios were manually computed and compared for the gender of the offender/victim pairs across the type of frame used in the article.[14] Results revealed that when a bad offender frame was used in the vignette, the odds of the outcome being a victim blaming comment were 15.36 times greater for female offender/male victim pairs compared to male offender/female victim pairs. However, when a victim blaming frame was used in the vignette, the odds of the outcome being a victim blaming comment was only 3.07 times greater for female offender/male victim pairs compared to male offender/female victim pairs. These findings suggest that male victims are more commonly blamed compared to female victims when either frame (bad offender or victim blaming) is used.

Bad Offender Theme in the Comments

Using a similar approach as for the victim blaming comments, the following analyses examine the respondent comments that were coded as bad offender. Chi-square analyses revealed that respondents were statistically more likely to write bad offender comments when there was a bad offender frame (16.3%) compared to a victim blaming frame (8.2%) (χ^2 (1, n = 537) = 7.575, p = .006, *phi* = -.124). Further, respondents more commonly wrote bad offender comments when there was a male offender/female victim pair compared to a female offender/male victim pair (14.8% vs 9.5%, respectively), although this did not reach statistical significance (χ^2 (1, n =

[14] The interaction was calculated by multiplying the gender's odd ratio by the interaction's ratio of odd ratios: b(g1)*b(g#f) (Norton et al., 2004; UCLA: Statistical Consulting Group, n.d.)

537) = 3.112, *p* = .078, *phi* = -.082). These bivariate findings suggest that the media frame influences respondents writing bad offender comments, but the gender of the offender/victim pair does not.

The multivariate analyses are reported in Table 6.3. Overall, the four models fit the data well, as indicated by Nagelkerke R^2 and the area under the ROC curve. The area under the curve is above 0.7, which is considered acceptable (Hosmer et al., 2013). Initial analyses revealed 18 outliers with a standardised residual above 3 in two or more of the regression models (see Chapter 3 for further information). As removing the outliers significantly improved the models in terms of fit (e.g., Nagelkerke R^2), the models are reported with the outliers removed. The sample size for the current analyses is therefore *n* = 519.

Model 1 examined the impact of the media frame when controlling for respondent characteristics and attitudes. Results show that the estimated effect of the media frame was statistically significant. Respondents who read a bad offender article were six times more likely (OR = 6.66) to have written a bad offender comment compared with respondents who read a victim blaming article, controlling for all other factors in the model. Four control variables (online media main source of news: OR = 6.38, wants harsher sentences: OR = 2.48, direct contact with the criminal justice system: OR = 0.38, and respondent has university degree: OR = 0.32) were also statistically significant (while age of respondent met a $p < .10$ threshold: OR = 1.03).

Table 6.3

Predictors of Media Frames and Offender/Victim Gender on Bad Offender Comments (n = 519)

	Dependent Variable: Bad Offender Comments									
	Model 1: Media Frame					Model 2: Offender/Victim Gender Pair				
	B (S.E.)	Wald	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% CI	B (S.E.)	Wald	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% CI
Article Characteristics										
Bad Offender frame (1=yes)	1.90 (0.42)	20.41	<.001	6.66	2.93-15.16					
Male offender/female victim (1=yes)						0.67 (0.34)	3.77	.052	1.95	0.99-3.82
Male offender x bad offender frame										
Respondent Experiences/Attitudes										
Online media main source of news (1=yes)	1.85 (0.76)	5.94	.015	6.38	1.44-28.36	1.73 (0.75)	5.31	.021	5.64	1.29-24.58
Has commented on social media (1=yes)	0.82 (0.60)	1.85	.173	2.28	0.70-7.43	0.59 (0.59)	1.02	.314	1.80	0.57-5.69
Confidence in legal system (1=yes)	-0.38 (0.37)	1.02	.313	0.69	0.33-1.43	-0.40 (0.36)	1.26	.261	0.67	0.33-1.35
Wants harsher sentences (1=yes)	0.91 (0.44)	4.19	.041	2.48	1.04-5.92	0.86 (0.43)	4.03	.045	2.37	1.02-5.48
Fear of crime	-0.03 (0.04)	0.66	.415	0.97	0.90-1.04	-0.03 (0.04)	0.69	.406	0.97	0.90-1.04
Intimate partner victimisation (1=yes)	0.56 (0.38)	2.22	.137	1.75	0.84-3.68	0.55 (0.36)	2.36	.124	1.74	0.86-3.52
Awareness of intimate partner violence (1=yes)	0.37 (0.59)	0.40	.527	1.45	0.46-4.56	0.55 (0.57)	0.95	.330	1.74	0.57-5.31
Direct contact with CJS (self or family) (1=yes)	-0.97 (0.39)	6.16	.013	0.38	0.18-0.82	-0.77 (0.36)	4.44	.035	0.46	0.23-0.95
Respondent Demographics										
Gender (1=female)	-0.38 (0.45)	0.71	.399	0.68	0.28-1.66	-0.56 (0.43)	1.65	.199	0.57	0.24-1.34
Age	0.03 (0.01)	3.44	.064	1.03	1.00-1.06	0.02 (0.01)	2.35	.126	1.02	0.99-1.05
University degree (1=yes)	-1.14 (0.41)	7.80	.005	0.32	0.14-0.71	-1.00 (0.40)	6.11	.013	0.37	0.17-0.81
Constant	-6.63 (1.38)	22.97	<.001	0.00		-5.33 (1.29)	17.11	<.001	0.00	
Model statistics										
-2 Log likelihood	246.957					269.607				
Nagelkerke R^2	27.1%					18.5%				
Model $\chi 2$	68.417					45.767				
Sig.	<.001					<.001				
Model prediction rate	91.1%					91.1%				
ROC	.834					.784				

	Dependent Variable: Bad Offender Comments									
	Model 3: Main Effects Model					Model 4: Model with Interaction				
	B (S.E.)	Wald	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% C.I.	B (S.E.)	Wald	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% C.I.
Frame and Gender										
Bad offender frame (1=yes)	1.86 (0.42)	19.48	<.001	6.44	2.82-14.73	2.32 (0.79)	8.60	.003	10.13	2.16-47.58
Male offender/female victim (1=yes)	0.56 (0.36)	2.46	.117	1.75	0.87-3.52	1.10 (0.85)	1.69	.194	3.01	0.57-15.93
Male offender x bad offender frame						-0.68 (0.94)	0.52	.470	0.51	0.08-3.21
Respondent Experiences/Attitudes										
Online media main source of news (1=yes)	1.86 (0.76)	5.92	.015	6.40	1.44-28.53	1.83 (0.76)	5.74	.017	6.22	1.39-27.73
Has commented on social media (1=yes)	0.78 (0.61)	1.64	.200	2.17	0.66-7.13	0.79 (0.61)	1.70	.192	2.20	0.67-7.22
Confidence in legal system (1=yes)	-0.38 (0.38)	1.03	.311	0.68	0.33-1.43	-0.39 (0.38)	1.07	.301	0.68	0.32-1.42
Wants harsher sentences (1=yes)	0.86 (0.44)	3.76	.053	2.37	0.99-5.66	0.87 (0.44)	3.86	.049	2.40	1.00-5.73
Fear of crime	-0.03 (0.04)	0.61	.434	0.97	0.90-1.05	-0.03 (0.04)	0.66	.418	0.97	0.90-1.04
Intimate partner violence victimisation (1=yes)	0.55 (0.38)	2.12	.146	1.74	0.83-3.66	0.51 (0.38)	1.74	.187	1.66	0.78-3.53
Awareness of intimate partner violence (1=yes)	0.32 (0.59)	0.29	.588	1.37	0.43-4.34	0.34 (0.59)	0.34	.558	1.41	0.45-4.47
Direct contact with CJS (self or family) (1=yes)	-0.96 (0.39)	5.97	.015	0.38	0.18-0.83	-0.93 (0.39)	5.59	.018	0.39	0.18-0.85
Respondent Demographics										
Gender (1=female)	-0.42 (0.45)	0.86	.354	0.66	0.27-1.60	-0.41 (0.45)	0.83	.362	0.66	0.27-1.61
Age	0.02 (0.01)	2.67	.102	1.02	1.00-1.05	0.02 (0.01)	2.73	.099	1.02	1.00-1.05
University degree (1=yes)	-1.07 (0.41)	6.77	.009	0.34	0.15-0.77	-1.08 (0.41)	6.84	.009	0.34	0.15-0.76
Constant	-6.68 (1.38)	23.52	<.001	0.00		-7.06 (1.49)	22.30	<.001	0.00	
Model statistics										
-2 Log likelihood	244.433					243.883				
Nagelkerke R^2	28.1%					28.3%				
Model $\chi 2$	70.941					71.492				
Sig.	<.001					<.001				
Model prediction rate	91.5%					91.5%				
ROC	.844					.842				

In contrast, Model 2, which assessed the impact of the gender of the offender/victim pair (Table 6.3), showed that the gender of the offender/victim pair was not a significant predictor of whether respondents would write bad offender comments (however, it did meet a less conservative $p < .10$ threshold: OR = 1.95). Similar to Model 1, four control variables (online media main source of news: OR = 5.64, wants harsher sentences: OR = 2.37, direct contact with the criminal justice system: OR = 0.46, and respondent has university degree: OR = 0.37) were statistically significant.

Model 3 (main effects model) assessed the impact of gender of the offender/victim pair and the media frame separately (without the interaction; Table 6.3). The media frame remained statistically significant (OR = 6.44), while the gender of the offender/victim pair was not statistically significant (at either the .05 or .10 thresholds). Three control variables (online media main source of news: OR = 6.40, direct contact with the criminal justice system: OR = 0.38, and respondent has university degree: OR = 0.34) were statistically significant (while wanting harsher sentences met a $p < .10$ threshold: OR = 2.37).

Finally, the analyses considered if the gender of the offender/victim pair moderates the impact of media framing on the likelihood of the respondent writing a bad offender comment. Even though gender was not a significant predictor in Model 3, a model with an interaction effect was still run for the purposes of thoroughness. Model 4 assessed the interaction of gender and the media frame, while controlling for respondent characteristics and attitudes when respondents wrote bad offender comments. The model fit was not improved by the addition of the interaction ($\chi^2 = .551$, $p = .458$). As expected, given that the separate individual effect of gender of the offender/victim pair was not significant in Model 3, Model 4 found that the

interaction was not statistically significant. Media frame (OR = 10.13) and four control variables (online media main source of news: OR = 6.22, wants harsher sentences: OR = 2.40, direct contact with the criminal justice system: OR = 0.39, and respondent has university degree: OR = 0.34) were statistically significant (while age of respondent met the $p < .10$ threshold: OR = 1.02). Altogether, these results suggest that the gender of the offender/victim pair does not moderate the relationship between the media framing and the likelihood of the respondent writing a bad offender comment.

Civility of Comments

As previously discussed, it was not possible to use multivariate models to examine civility due to the low prevalence of uncivil comments. Just over 5% of the respondents' comments were coded as uncivil.[15] Thus, only descriptive and bivariate analyses (where appropriate) are used in this section.

The results show statistically significant differences across the civility of the comments when examining the media frame and the gender of the offender/victim pair separately.[16] Although the majority of the comments were civil, respondents were significantly more likely to write uncivil comments if there was a bad offender frame (8.6%) compared to a victim blaming frame (2.5%) (χ^2 (1, n = 537) = 8.484, p = .004, *phi* = -.134). Respondents were also significantly more likely to write uncivil comments if there were male offender/female victim pairs (8.7%) compared to female offender/male victim pairs (2.2%) (χ^2 (1, n = 537) = 10.042, p = .002, *phi* = -.145).

[15] The percentage of uncivil comments coded in the current study is significantly lower compared to previous research (e.g., Su et al., 2018). This will be discussed further in Chapter 7 (Discussions Chapter).

[16] The bivariate results (chi-squares) table can be found in Appendix E.

The next step was to examine whether or not the gender of the offender/victim pair moderates the impact of the media frame on the likelihood of writing an uncivil comment. This was done by using a crosstabulation of media frame, gender of the offender/victim pair, and civility of comments to provide insight into any interaction between the gender of the offender/victim pair and media frame (Table 6.4). Given the small cell sizes, bivariate analyses are not used. However, the pattern hints that an uncivil tone was coded more frequently in comments relating to male offender/female victim pairs (4.7%) as opposed to female offender/male victim pairs (0.7%) within the victim blaming frame. Similarly, within the bad offender frame, uncivil comments were coded more frequently in comments relating to male offender/female victim pairs (12.5%) as opposed to female offender/male victim pairs (4.1%). While no definitive conclusions can be drawn given the small cell sizes, it would hint that there is an interaction between gender and frame.

Table 6.4

Interaction of Media Frame and the Gender of the Offender/Victim Pair on Civility in Comments (n = 537)

	Civil Comments *n* (%)	**Uncivil Comments *n* (%)**
Victim Blaming Frame		
Male offender/female victim	121 (95.3)	6 (4.7)
Female offender/male victim	152 (99.3)	1 (0.7)
Bad Offender Frame		
Male offender/female victim	119 (87.5)	17 (12.5)
Female offender/male victim	116 (95.9)	5 (4.1)

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the results of Study 3. Where appropriate, bivariate and multivariate analyses were run to examine whether or not the media frame and the

gender of the offender/victim pair in the vignettes affect the theme or civility of respondent comments. The first part of the results concerned the victim blaming theme in comments. First, the analyses revealed that respondents more commonly blamed the victim when the article had a victim blaming frame compared to a bad offender frame. Secondly, the analyses showed that respondents more commonly blamed the victim where there were female offender/male victim pairs compared to male offender/female victim pairs. Finally, the analyses showed that the gender of the offender/victim pair and the media frame interacts to influence the respondent comments. Respondents are more likely to blame victims when the victim is male (female offender) and there is a victim blaming frame.

The second part of the results concerned the bad offender theme in comments. The results showed statistically significant differences for the media frame but not for the gender of the offender/victim pair. Respondents more commonly wrote bad offender comments when there was a bad offender frame as opposed to a victim blaming frame. The results also found that respondents more commonly wrote bad offender comments when there was a male offender/female victim pair as opposed to a female offender/male victim pair; however, this was not statistically significant in either the bivariate or multivariate analyses. The interaction (gender x frame) was not a significant predictor of whether respondents would write bad offender comments.

The final part of the analyses examined civility in respondent comments. While multivariate analyses could not be run, bivariate analyses showed statistically significant differences across the civility of the comments when examining the media frame and the gender of the offender/victim pair separately. Respondents were significantly more likely to write uncivil comments if a bad offender frame had been used compared to a victim blaming frame. Respondents were also significantly more

likely to write uncivil comments where there were male offender/female victim pairs compared to female offender/male victim pairs. Further patterns also suggest that respondent comments were more likely to use an uncivil tone for male offenders within both the victim blaming frame and the bad offender frame.

Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusion

This thesis explored the portrayal of gender in the online interactive media landscape in the context of intimate partner homicide. While research has come a long way in terms of examining how intimate partner violence is portrayed in media internationally (and, to a certain extent, in Australia), how conceptions of gender play out in the more interactive online space is less explored. Limited studies (mainly quantitative) have compared how gender is portrayed in online media representations of offenders/victims of lethal violence. Even fewer studies examine online audience commentary of such violence, specifically regarding how comments may differ across the gender of the offenders/victims and whether media framing affects online comments. This is concerning given the increasing extent to which audiences are consuming news on social media platforms. This thesis addressed these knowledge gaps through three separate but related studies.

Across the three studies, this thesis demonstrates that gender matters in both media portrayals and audience commentary in the context of intimate partner homicide. What follows is a brief summary of each study, its research questions, and individual results. However, the task of a discussion chapter is to illuminate overarching themes across the studies and to contextualise these within the broader literature. The summary section is therefore relatively brief, and is followed by a more in-depth analysis of the main findings and contributions of this body of work.

Brief Overview of Studies and Individual Results

Study 1 used framing analysis to examine the prevalence and qualitative differences across gender of the offender/victim in 121 articles published across four online media outlets. The following research question guided this study: Do frames and subframes of intimate partner homicide incidents featured in online media in

Australia differ across the gender of the offender/victim featured? If so, how? The bad offender and victim supporting frames were more commonly coded for in cases of male offender/female victim pairs, while the victim blaming and episodic frames were more commonly coded for in cases of female offender/male victim pairs.

The results showed qualitative differences across gender, which were often linked to traditional gender stereotypes. For example, male offenders were criticised for their criminal history, whereas female offenders were criticised for their sexual history. Female victims were often blamed for drinking alcohol or taking drugs while male offenders were excused for being under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Female victims were portrayed positively when exemplifying qualities of being a good family member (especially a good mother), whereas male victims were portrayed positively when showcasing physical strength and popularity within the community. These are some of the examples of qualitative differences across gender which will be discussed in greater detail below.

Study 2 used thematic analysis to examine 371 Facebook comments responding to the online articles analysed in Study 1. Two aspects of the comments were examined: content (theme) and tone (civility). The research question for the second study was: Does the content and civility of Facebook comments differ across the gender of the offenders and victims featured in the online articles? In terms of prevalence, the themes of bad offender, victim supporting, sympathy with family, lenient criminal justice response, and emphasising intimate partner violence as a problem were more commonly coded for in cases of male offender/female victim pairs. Conversely, the themes of victim blaming and critiquing media's portrayal were more commonly coded for in cases of female offender/male victim pairs. Analyses

also revealed that comments on news reports covering female offenders were more likely to be coded as civil compared to male offenders.

Contextually, the Study 2 results also showed qualitative differences across gender. Within each of the themes, gender pairs were portrayed differently. For example, in the victim blaming theme, female offenders were excused for using violence as self-defence. On the other hand, male offenders were excused when commenters doubted or minimised their responsibility for a variety of reasons. Similar to Study 1, the differences in how men and women were portrayed in social media commentary can be linked to stereotypical portrayals of gender. Furthermore, incivility also differed across gender within the themes. For example, in the theme of criticising the media's portrayal, all of the comments regarding articles featuring female offenders were written with a civil tone. In contrast, just over half of the comments featuring male offenders within the same theme were conveyed with an uncivil tone.

Study 3 used an experimental vignette design to examine whether the content (theme) and tone (civility) of online comments made by Australian survey respondents (n = 537) were impacted by the frame of the media and the gender of the offender/victim pair, controlling for respondents' media usage, attitudes, and demographics. The research questions guiding this study were: 1) Do media frames affect the theme and civility of comments?; 2) Does the gender of the offender/victim pair affect the theme and civility of comments?; and 3) Does the gender of the offender/victim pair and media frame interact to affect the theme and civility of comments?

Statistical analyses revealed that respondents more commonly blamed the victim when the article had a victim blaming frame, while respondents more

commonly wrote bad offender comments when there was a bad offender frame. The analyses also showed that respondents more commonly blamed the victim when there were female offender/male victim pairs compared to male offender/female victim pairs. While results showed that respondents more commonly wrote bad offender comments when there were male offender/female victim pairs, this was not statistically significant. Study 3 also examined civility in respondents' comments. Respondents were significantly more likely to write uncivil comments if there was a bad offender frame (compared to a victim blaming frame) or male offender/female victim pairs (compared to the female offender/male victim pairs).

Discussion of Main Findings

Across the three studies, the results demonstrate that gender matters in media portrayals and audience commentary in the context of intimate partner homicide. Five overarching observations will be discussed. The first two main findings relate to how traditional gender stereotypes shape the portrayals of men and women who either perpetrate, or fall victim to, intimate partner homicide. In terms of men, the results overwhelmingly show them portrayed in accordance with traditional gender stereotypes. However, the portrayal of women seems to be more complex and diverse, with results suggesting either an adherence to, or violation of, traditional gender stereotypes. The third main finding across this thesis is that thematic portrayals of intimate partner homicide in online media and social commentary are rare, which is problematic, though not completely unexpected based on prior findings in the research literature. The fourth main finding is that media frames influence audience comments. Although the effect of framing on people's behaviour might be expected, few studies have specifically tested these assumptions for audience commentary in the context of intimate partner homicide. The final main finding is that comments were

mostly civil. This finding expands upon previous research by examining civility and intimate partner homicides specifically.

Finding 1: Portrayals of Men Who Kill (or Are Killed by) Intimate Partners Adhere to Traditional Gender Stereotypes

This thesis found that the portrayal of both male offenders and victims almost always adheres to traditional gender stereotypes. Gender stereotypes are beliefs about certain attributes (including traits, physical characteristics, role behaviours, and occupations) that differentiate men and women (Biernat, 1991; Johar et al., 2003; Leaper, 2015; Santoniccolo et al., 2023; Ward & Grower, 2020). Traditional gender stereotypes offer an oversimplified view of reality (Ellemers, 2018). Men are regularly represented by the media in a stereotypical portrayal of masculinity (Gauntlett, 2008; Gill, 2007; Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015; Morgan, 2019; Richardson & Wearing, 2014; Wood, 1994). Traditional masculine traits include power, dominance, aggression, sexual prowess, emotional restraint, and risk-taking (Scharrer, 2013; Ward & Grower, 2020). Despite the fact that academic literature shows that masculinity is nuanced (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), traditional ideas of masculinity and gender stereotypes are still prevalent in media portrayals (Ward & Grower, 2020).

Adherence to traditional gender stereotypes is particularly evident in the language used to enact the bad offender frame/theme. Across the studies, male offenders were more commonly criticised compared to female offenders. This finding is consistent with past research in this field (see e.g., Komazec & Farmer, 2020; Wozniak & McCloskey, 2010), although the current study digs deeper into the ways in which men and women are criticised. Stereotypical masculine traits can support a male offender's portrayal of bad behaviour. Male offenders may be portrayed as bad

because violence is frequently perceived to be inherent to their nature (Carlyle et al., 2014b; Gerber, 1991).

Almost paradoxically, the language used by the media and in audience commentary to excuse men as perpetrators and justify their actions also adhered to traditional gender stereotypes. For example, one common excuse discussed was that the male offender was under the influence of drugs or alcohol, suggesting a temporary inability to control their actions. This is a frequent excuse seen in media reporting of intimate partner violence (Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Lindsay-Brisbin et al., 2014; Meyers, 1994; Richards et al., 2011; Taylor, 2008). However, such excuses were only placed on male offenders as opposed to female offenders in this thesis. This portrayal adheres to traditional gender stereotypes, with drinking and intoxication consistent with many masculine traits, such as physical stamina and risk-taking (Herd, 1997). This is especially true in Australia's drinking culture, where alcohol plays a central role for men in terms of making and maintaining social connections (Gambles et al., 2022; Iwamoto & Smiler, 2013; Reifman et al., 2006), and research has found that a male offender's drinking behaviour serves to socially excuse his responsibility for violence and other crimes (Tomsen & Crofts, 2012; Weiss, 2009).

The portrayal of male victims by the media and audience commentary is also consistent with traditional gender stereotypes. For example, very few male victims were supported in the media articles, while no male victims were supported in audience commentary. It can be difficult for male victims to be supported by the public, because social expectations say men should be self-reliant and powerful, which opposes the idea that men can be victimised by women (Andersen, 2013; Barber, 2008; Bates et al., 2019b; Hanson & Lysova, 2021; Javaid, 2017). Research has found that stereotypical views of men and manliness prevent men from being

taken seriously as victims of violent crimes and from being seen as legitimate victims of crime (Andersen, 2013; Barber, 2008; Bates et al., 2019a; Hanson & Lysova, 2021; Javaid, 2017). In the small number of media articles in this thesis that did support male victims, males were portrayed as physically strong and popular members of the community. This aligns with the stereotypical portrayal of men as strong and authoritative leaders, admired not for their family values but for their authority, resolve, and popularity (England et al., 2011; Ottosson & Cheng, 2012; Sharda, 2014).

Similarly, very few male victims were blamed for their infidelity in media articles. This also aligns with prevalent masculine stereotypes about sex. Frequent sexual activity for men is expected and viewed more favourably in comparison to women (Endendijk et al., 2020; Hackathorn & Harvey, 2011). Conversely, women often face criticism for engaging in sexual relationships, with sexual restraint being viewed more positively (Endendijk et al., 2020; Pines & Friedman, 1998). This highlights the existence of a double standard in society regarding sexual activity for men and women.

While the portrayal of male offenders and victims adheres to traditional gender stereotypes, there was a notable exception. Infrequently, media outlets referred to mental illness in the case of male offenders of intimate partner homicide. In terms of gender stereotypes, mental illness is not associated with traditional masculine ideals (Johnson et al., 2012; Krumm et al., 2017). Instead, mental illness in men has, historically at least, been associated with weakness, vulnerability, and powerlessness (Rochlen et al., 2010; Rondet et al., 2015). Research suggests that men might face challenges in acknowledging or identifying mental health issues such as depression because of masculinity norms, which includes self-reliance, restriction of emotion,

and toughness (Addis, 2008; Magovcevic & Addis, 2008; Mahalik & Rochlen, 2006). These stereotypes can lead to a negative stigmatisation of mental health and deter men from seeking assistance (Mahalik & Rochlen, 2006; Pederson & Vogel, 2007; Vogel et al., 2011).

Finding 2: Portrayals of Women Who Kill (or Are Killed) by Intimate Partners Both Adhere to and Violate Traditional Gender Stereotypes

Contrary to portrayals of men, which showed adherence to traditional gender stereotypes, portrayals of women were much more complex. The current thesis found that when women *violate* traditional gender stereotypes, female offenders were criticised and female victims were mostly blamed by the media and audience commentary. Conversely, female offenders were excused, and female victims were supported when they *adhered* to traditional gender stereotypes. This finding is supported by previous research that has found that women who adhere to traditional gender stereotypes are evaluated more positively compared to those who challenge gender expectations (Eagly & Mladinic, 1989; Ellemers, 2018).

The media often presents a stereotypical portrayal of femininity (Collins, 2011; Gauntlett, 2008; Lauzen et al., 2008; Richardson & Wearing, 2014; Wood, 1994). Stereotypical feminine traits include being physically weak, emotional, submissive, dependent, nurturing, gentle, compassionate, passive, fearful, ashamed, warm, vulnerable, in need of protection, and powerless (Deaux & Lewis, 1984; England et al., 2011; Frey, 2019; Ottosson & Cheng, 2012; Prentice & Carranza, 2002; Sharda, 2014). Regularly, these stereotypes portray women as subordinate to men (Eagly & Mladinic, 1989). Further, the narratives are associated with interdependence and agency. Women are stereotypically more communal (e.g., supportive, compassionate, and warm), while men are stereotypically more agentic

(e.g., ambitious, assertive, independent, and competitive) (Eagly & Mladinic, 1989; Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Gupta et al., 2009; Hoffman & Hurst, 1990; Santoniccolo et al., 2023).

The results of this thesis demonstrate that female offenders were criticised when they violated traditional gender stereotypes but were excused when they adhered to traditional gender stereotypes, demonstrating the polarisation of female deviance. Women's violence is viewed as out of place and inexplicable (Morrissey, 2003; Weatherby et al., 2008). Therefore, the media uses stock narratives to portray women's lethal violence so the audience can understand the event (Morrissey, 2003; Pelvin, 2017). Naylor (1990, p. 5) states: "Whilst male deviance is seen to exist on a continuum, female deviance is polarised: Madonna/whore, the gentler sex or the more deadly species: Snow White/the Wicked Queen." This demonstrates that the stock narratives used by the media often relate to good versus evil (Morrissey, 2003).

Female offenders were less likely to be portrayed as bad compared to male offenders, a finding that is in line with previous research (Komazec & Farmer, 2020; Wozniak & McCloskey, 2010). However, female offenders who are portrayed as bad often violate gender expectations (Pelvin, 2017). Women are often seen as child-producing, loyal, caregiving, and gentle (Biernat, 1991; Williams & Bennett, 1975; Williams et al., 1975), and these female offenders violate these expectations. Female offenders of violence are perceived as "doubly deviant" because they have not only broken the law by engaging in violent behaviour, but have also failed to conform to societal norms and expectations regarding what constitutes "appropriate" feminine conduct (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002; Gill, 2007). Therefore, when women's actions or behaviours contradict traditional gender stereotypes, they are seen as more deviant and, subsequently, are more likely to feature in media reports (Lin, 2012).

An example of a woman who violates traditional gender stereotypes and is consequently portrayed as bad is a sexually immoral woman. The results of this thesis showed that female offenders are criticised for their sexual history and female victims are blamed in media articles for having affairs. This discussion of sexual history is consistent with previous research that has found that women are often sexualised by the media (Collins, 2011) and are criticised for being sexual deviants (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002). This also aligns with prior research indicating a tendency to blame female victims for alleged affairs in news coverage (Aldrete et al., 2024; Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013; Gillespie et al., 2013; Kelly, 2019; Lee & Wong, 2019; Lloyd & Ramon, 2017; Taylor, 2008). Fidelity is often more valued in women compared to men, and women are more severely reprimanded for infidelity (Fiske & Stevens, 1993). In society, women are frequently criticised for engaging in sexual relationships and are praised for exercising sexual restraint (Pines & Friedman, 1998). Research has found that female victims involved in extramarital affairs may be perceived as deserving of violence (Morgan, 2006; Vandello & Cohen, 2003), because men perceive such behaviour as a threat to their honour (Vandello & Cohen, 2003). Women who engage in affairs challenge traditional stereotypes that portray them as submissive, nurturing, gentle, and passive.

On the other hand, female offenders were excused through the use of self-defence and mental illness in this thesis. Previous research found that women who kill their abusive partners are either portrayed as mad or bad (Easteal et al., 2015a; Noh et al., 2010). To understand female violence, the media frequently interprets the event by channelling the information into one of these two easily comprehensible narratives (Barnett, 2006; Jones, 2003; Pelvin, 2017). The results of this thesis demonstrate that the media and commenters portrayed female offenders who had killed their abusive

partner as victims (and were therefore excused). If a woman is viewed as the victim or as lacking agency, she is often portrayed as mad (Morrissey, 2003). Portrayals of mad offenders are often utilised when women adhere to stereotypical notions of femininity (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002; Easteal et al., 2015a; Meyers, 1996), or in other words, are stereotypically feminine. Mad women are likely to receive sympathy for their actions and are seen as less deserving of punishment compared to bad women (Brennan & Vandenberg, 2009; Easteal et al., 2015a).

Female victims were supported when they adhered to traditional gender stereotypes. As previously mentioned, female victims were more likely to be supported in media articles and commentary compared to male victims. Interestingly, commenters were also sympathetic to the family members of female victims but never sympathised with the family members of male victims. Stereotypical views of women include that they are physically weak, dependent, caring, kind, beautiful, and powerless (England et al., 2011; Frey, 2019; Ottosson & Cheng, 2012; Sharda, 2014). These traits are consistent with being a good or ideal victim (Christie, 1986). Sometimes, a female victim was portrayed as a good person by the media because she was a good family member, in particular a good mother. This is consistent with previous research that has found that good women are stereotypically viewed as nurturing mothers and passive and cooperative wives (Barnett, 2005; Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002; England et al., 2011; Lloyd & Ramon, 2017; Naylor, 1990). All of this suggests that female victims receive support when they conform to traditional gender stereotypes.

In contrast, a female victim was often blamed by the media and audience commentary when she violated traditional gender stereotypes. For example, some female victims were blamed in media articles for drinking alcohol or taking drugs.

Drinking and intoxication are inconsistent with feminine traits, such as being a nurturing caretaker (Bongers et al., 1998; De Visser & McDonnell, 2012; Herd, 1997). Research has found that while a male offender's drinking behaviour serves to excuse his responsibility (see discussion in the previous section), interestingly, a female victim's drinking behaviour serves to implicate her as partially responsible (Weiss, 2009). This could be because public attitudes are more permissive of men drinking compared to women (Bailly et al., 1991; Lo, 1995; Ricciardelli et al., 2001). While women's drinking has become more acceptable to the public in more recent years, society still often perceives it as unacceptable for women to be drunk (Hutton et al., 2016; Lyons & Willott, 2008).

Interestingly, sometimes a female victim was blamed by the media and audience commentary despite her adherence to female gender stereotypes. For example, female victims were blamed for "having it coming". This includes for not leaving a relationship or for preventing an ex-partner from having access to their children. Women often face blame in abusive relationships regardless of whether they leave or remain in the relationship. Society commonly criticises women for staying in abusive situations, questioning their decisions, and reinforcing harmful stereotypes about victims of abuse (Anderson, 2003b; Berns, 2004; Farmer & Tiefenthaler, 1997; Murray, 2008). On the other hand, if a woman does leave, she may also encounter judgement or blame for not keeping the family together (Hurtado, 1989; Monterrosa, 2021). In the current thesis, commenters often expressed that women were at least partially at fault for entering and remaining in violent relationships. According to traditional gender stereotypes, women are responsible for keeping the family together, and may be labelled as homewreckers if they leave (Hurtado, 1989; Monterrosa, 2021). Similar findings have been discussed in the literature on comments relating to

family violence, where female victims are blamed because they did not leave or did not somehow prevent their own victimisation (Komazec & Farmer, 2020).

Finding 3: Media and Social Commentary Rarely Contextualises Intimate Partner Homicide

The third overarching observation across this thesis is that the reporting of intimate partner homicide (whether by the media or the audience) was rarely contextualised. Instead, most of the reporting and commentary was focused on a singular incident of violence (i.e., episodic reporting). Thematic reporting, whereby incidents are placed within a larger context, was rare in the media articles. This comes as no surprise, given past research has long shown episodic reporting as a common framing technique by the media across a variety of crime reporting contexts, including intimate partner violence (Bullock, 2007; Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Gillespie et al., 2013; Taylor & Sorenson, 2002). The reasons for such reporting are generally a consequence of ingrained journalistic routines and practices, and the structure and operations of media organisations. For example, episodic reporting does not require journalists with subject-matter expertise (Iyengar, 1990), which is cost-saving for media organisations. Thematic reporting also lacks the sensationalism typically required by the media (Gilmore, 2019). In other words, episodic reporting sells news. Thus, the finding of this thesis that online media reporting of intimate partner homicide is episodic as opposed to thematic comes as no surprise and is consistent with what is to be expected (although it is problematic).

Although the finding that the media often uses episodic reporting is to be expected based on past research, a key contribution of this thesis is the examination of episodic reporting in social commentary. The results of this thesis found that a small number of commenters (7.0%) emphasised intimate partner violence as a problem,

thereby contextualising the incident on which they were commenting. This demonstrates that most commenters did not emphasise intimate partner violence as a problem. Surprisingly few studies have explored this topic. The findings of one key study are particularly relevant to the current discussion. The study focused on the allegations of intimate partner violence by Amber Heard against Johnny Depp. Although this celebrity case may have been sensationalised, the case can tell us something about how people comment on intimate partner violence cases in social media. The study revealed that few commenters (only 8.2%) actually engaged in discussions about intimate partner abuse and emphasised its seriousness (Whiting et al., 2019). In recent years, widely publicised social media movements, for example, the #MeToo movement, have garnered significant public interest and prompted extensive conversations about violence against women (Fairbairn, 2020). However, the current thesis analysed comments written before the rise of these social media movements. A more recent study examining Tweets relating to femicide found the theme "gender violence is your business" to be prominent, wording which indicates that society as a whole is responsible for preventing intimate partner violence (Belotti et al., 2020). Future research is needed to examine whether there has been a change in people's attitudes and thoughts about intimate partner violence in online comments since the rise of social media movements such as #MeToo.

The thematic portrayals in media and online commentary emphasising intimate partner violence as a problem were not evenly distributed across gender. Articles featuring male offender/female victim pairs were more likely to include the thematic frame (one-fifth of articles) compared to female offender/male victim pairs (only one article out of 19 articles). Similarly, commenters more commonly critiqued the criminal justice system when there were male offender/female victim pairs (e.g.,

saying the sentence length is insufficient or critiquing the court appeal process). Intimate partner homicide (and non-lethal violence) has increasingly been recognised as a high policy priority in Australia, as evidenced by various national and state initiatives (Queensland Government, 2016; Sutherland et al., 2019). These initiatives tend to focus more on women and children as victims of intimate partner violence, which could explain why more of the articles with male offenders/female victims feature a discussion of intimate partner violence as a social problem. This demonstrates that some commenters recognise male intimate partner violence/homicide as a problem and emphasise that more needs to be done to prevent it.

Calling out intimate partner violence on social media can educate others, create dialogue, and increase understanding of the prevalence and impact of intimate partner violence (Dragiewicz & Burgess, 2016; Usher et al., 2021). The lack of thematic reporting is concerning given the high prevalence of intimate partner violence in Australia and the strong correlation between prior instances of violence in a relationship and intimate partner homicide (Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety, 2022; Webster, 2016). Framing a homicide thematically allows the audience to recognise the incident as intimate partner violence, gain a stronger understanding of intimate partner violence, and show how the public can become part of the solution (Brossoie et al., 2012). The lack of thematic reporting suggests a disconnect between an individual homicide and the social context of intimate partner violence. Portraying a homicide in an episodic manner can increase the likelihood of the public assigning blame to an individual rather than recognising society’s responsibility for such lethal violence (Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013; Palazzolo & Roberto, 2011). Fairbairn and Dawson (2013) suggest

that portraying intimate partner homicide at an individual level may create a belief system that violence against women is unpreventable. Proper contextualisation by the media is necessary to educate the public on the dynamics of intimate partner violence (Gillespie et al., 2013). Therefore, it is important for the media to frame intimate partner homicide thematically to inform the public that it is a social problem and not just an individual one.

Finding 4: Frames Impact Comments

Another significant contribution of this thesis is the finding that media frames influence audience commentary. Very few studies to date have explicitly tested whether reading a news story framed in a particular way makes a person more likely to respond to that story using similar themes in their commentary. Frames shape how the audience understands and remembers a topic (Entman, 1993), especially when repeated (Sieff, 2003). In other words, the more often the media portrays crime in a specific manner, the greater the likelihood that the public will perceive crime in that same light. The effects of framing matters, since incorrect framing of crime can lead to distorted perceptions of crime, offenders, victims, and the criminal justice system (Beckett & Sasson, 2003; Dolliver et al., 2018; Gruenewald et al., 2009; Indermaur & Hough, 2002; Peelo, 2006; Reiner, 2002). Even further, media audiences not only use but also actively produce ideas and news (known as “produsers”, see Bruns, 2003), which means their commentary is also influential in shaping public opinion about crime (e.g., Gearhart et al., 2022; Lee, 2012; Lee & Jang, 2010; Von Sikorski & Ha nelt, 2016). In the context of intimate partner homicide, this is important because it can lead to further misconceptions about the nature and context of such violence.

This thesis found clear evidence of framing effects. Respondents (i.e., commenters) more commonly wrote bad offender comments when there was a bad

offender frame in the media article compared to a victim blaming frame. Similarly, respondents more commonly blamed the victim in comments when there was a victim blaming frame compared to a bad offender frame. This is consistent with a previous study (which was not experimental), where researchers examined whether Facebook comments were impacted by media articles pertaining to family violence, and found comments were more likely to blame an offender when the article criticised the offender and more likely to blame the victim when the article criticised the victim (Komazec & Farmer, 2020). Of course, more things impact how and what people post online than simply how the article they just read was framed. Critics of the research on framing effects highlight that both media frames *and* personal experience shape the audience's interpretation of media (Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Rhee, 1997; Van Gorp et al., 2009). Given this critique, this thesis accounts for prior knowledge and personal experience by surveying the respondents and using an experimental approach to control for audience demographics and attitudes. With very few existing studies examining the effects of media frames on audience commentary, these findings significantly advance knowledge in this field. The results of this thesis clearly suggest that media framing can have impacts beyond simply shaping people's attitudes about topics but also on how they communicate with others around them. In today's online world, where opinions spread fast (Wang et al., 2011; Zhu et al., 2020) and misinformation is common (Del Vicario et al., 2016; Fernandez & Alani, 2018), it is important to understand the flow-on effects of media framing.

Although media frames (or the gender of the offender/victim pairs) had the largest effect size, this thesis found that other variables also statistically increased the likelihood of victim blaming and/or offender blaming. Respondents who did not have a university degree and whose main source of news was online media, were more

likely to write bad offender comments. Higher education cultivates diverse perspectives and critical thinking skills (Machado & Carvalho, 2020; Tiruneh et al., 2014), potentially resulting in more informed viewpoints; whereas those lacking such education might resort to anecdotal or less informed opinions, possibly resulting in more critical comments towards the offender. Previous research has found that individuals struggle to successfully evaluate online news claims, sources, and evidence (Donald, 2016; McGrew et al., 2018), which is concerning considering the increasing dependence on online news sources (Park et al., 2022; Watkins et al., 2016). Research indicates that an increased dependence on social media for news could contribute to a decline in overall knowledge levels (Cacciatore et al., 2018; Van Erkel & Van Aelst, 2021). For example, research suggests that social media does not increase knowledge of issues, as these platforms personalise users' timelines, creating echo chambers that impede learning by constraining the introduction of new information (Cinelli et al., 2021; Klinger & Svensson, 2015; Stroud, 2011). As a result, unlike consumers of traditional media who encounter a broad range of topics, those who follow news on social media experience a more tailored and issue-specific news intake (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2021). In essence, the personalised nature of social media news consumption undermines a comprehensive understanding of important societal issues, including intimate partner homicide.

The findings of this thesis also suggest that respondents who lack confidence in the criminal justice system, desire harsher sentences, and those who have not had direct contact with the criminal justice system were more likely to write bad offender or victim blaming comments. It is a common observation in the literature that the public tends to have a punitive orientation towards criminal justice (Cullen et al., 2000). In fact, those advocating for harsher sentences frequently argue that offenders

should be held accountable for their actions in order to receive their just deserts (Carlsmith et al., 2002). This suggests that commenters might employ criticism towards offenders to underscore their demand for accountability and justice. These types of comments appear to focus on the retributive goals of the criminal justice system but overlook more utilitarian goals such as rehabilitation. Another contributing factor that can lead to someone being more critical of offenders/victims is their lack of direct interaction with the criminal justice system. Research indicates that individuals who lack this first-hand experience, are more likely to have their views shaped by external sources such as media portrayals, societal norms, and the opinions of friends and family (Davis & Dossetor, 2010; Pickett et al., 2015; Roberts, 1992). This reliance on second-hand information can result in misconceptions about crime and the criminal justice system (Davis & Dossetor, 2010; Roberts, 1992), potentially leading to a more critical stance towards offenders/victims.

The finding that media framing affects what and how people post online is clearly problematic, as are the findings that certain characteristics of commenters make them more likely to post in a certain way. This might lead to the conclusion that people simply repeat the news media they read. However, the findings from Study 2 suggest that there is some hope beyond such a conclusion. In Study 2 some commenters (around 7%) actually *critiqued* the media's portrayal of homicides, a finding that aligns with similar research (Sisask et al., 2012). Such criticism was often directed towards the heading of the article, and more commonly occurred for female offender/male victim pairs. Given the limited word space available in headings, frames are often used and reinforced as simplistic story-telling devices to lure people into reading the article. Illustrative of the criticism is one commenter's post calling the following header "slander": "Doctor 'killed husband with hammer' after their sex

with teen" (NE300915b). Upon reading the article, it becomes clear that the heading is overly simplistic and sensationalistic. The case involved a female offender who allegedly killed her husband in response to sexual abuse whereby she was forced to have sex with a teenager. The article's headline fails to capture this crucial context, a point of contention for the commenter. Pointing attention to the deficits in media headings is seen across various platforms online. For example, the feminist activist Gilmore is known for her #fixedit campaign on Twitter (as X was then known) and various social media platforms, in which she "fixes" news headlines (Gilmore, 2019). Her work demonstrates how media headings can be rewritten to accurately portray intimate partner homicides. This includes removing excuses for the offender and removing victim blaming language. An example of this is changing a news article heading from "man who killed wife over Facebook posting jailed for life" to "man who chose to murder his wife jailed for life" (Gilmore, 2019, p. 118). Such efforts shed light on the importance of responsible and accurate reporting in sensitive matters like intimate partner violence.

Finding 5: Commenters were Mostly Civil

This thesis found that commenters were mostly civil. This is consistent with previous research (outside of criminology) that found 60–86% of comments are civil (Coe et al., 2014; Freelon, 2015; Papacharissi, 2004; Santana, 2014; Su et al., 2018). However, prior research has focused on other topics such as politics and little research has examined comments in the context of intimate partner homicide specifically. This is concerning since levels of incivility vary across topics (Coe et al., 2014; Ksiazek, 2016), and the gender of the person being discussed in the comments (Chen, 2017; Pain & Chen, 2019; Searles et al., 2020; Van Duyn et al., 2021; Wilhelm & Joeckel, 2019). This thesis filled this knowledge gap by examining civility in Facebook

comments in the context of intimate partner homicide (Study 2) and examining whether the gender of the offender/victim pair and media frame affect the civility of comments (Study 3).

The online interactive space enables uncivil behaviour. While individuals tend to be more cautious about offending others in face-to-face interactions, the anonymity and physical distance afforded by online platforms often facilitates more aggressive and uncivil behaviour (Antoci et al., 2019; Santana, 2014). Research indicates that the characteristics of individuals engaging in online discussions, such as their personality, attitudes, and emotions, as well as the nature of the online environment itself, can play significant roles in driving uncivil comments (Kümpel & Rieger, 2019, as cited in Frischlich et al., 2021). Moreover, individuals who witness uncivil behaviour from others are more prone to engaging in uncivil behaviour themselves (Frischlich et al., 2021; Proust & Saldaña, 2022).

It is important to study the civility of comments, given uncivil comments can have adverse impacts. Research shows that comments posted below an online media article that are one-sided, factually incorrect, uncivil, and judgemental can influence readers' perceptions of the issue discussed (Baden & Springer, 2014; Chmiel et al., 2011; Freeman, 2011; Lee, 2012; Lee & Jang, 2010; Peter et al., 2014; Reader, 2012; Singer, 2010; Waddell, 2018). For instance, one study found that uncivil comments caused individuals to perceive a news story as less credible (Waddell, 2018). Uncivil comments can also lead to closed-mindednesses (Borah, 2014; Hwang et al., 2018), evoke negative emotions such as anger in readers (Gervais, 2015; Kim & Kim, 2019; Smith et al., 2010), cause polarisation (Anderson et al., 2014; Kim & Kim, 2019), reduce political trust (Borah, 2014; Mutz & Reeves, 2005), and generate distrust in the media which can impact the reputation of a news organisation (Mutz & Reeves,

2005; Nielsen, 2014). Incivility can also discourage or dissuade others from engaging in news-related discussions (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011b; Springer et al., 2015). Conversely, civility reduces social friction and enables people to engage in constructive debates (Kingwell, 2021).

It is notable that the percentage of uncivil comments coded in the experimental study (Study 3; 5.4%) was significantly lower compared to previous research (e.g., Su et al., 2018), and to the level of incivility coded in Facebook comments in Study 2 (38.5%). This was surprising as anonymous comments, as used in Study 3, tend to be more uncivil (Nielsen, 2014; Santana, 2014). However, the controlled nature of experimental settings may make it more likely for someone to write a civil comment compared to an uncivil one. This is because participants in research settings are aware that they are being observed or are part of a study, which can lead them to adhere to social norms and expectations for polite and respectful behaviour (Grimm, 2010; Muddiman et al., 2020). This consideration is discussed further in the limitations section below.

While the results of this thesis suggest that commenters were mostly civil, this was dependent on various factors. Circumstances arose where commenters were less civil. For example, this thesis revealed that respondents were significantly more likely to write uncivil comments if there was a bad offender media frame compared to a victim blaming media frame. This could be because bad offender comments tend to be more prevalent when there is a bad offender frame. Bad offender comments were more likely to feature an uncivil tone as demonstrated in the second study of this thesis. Interestingly, this was the only theme in the comments that was coded to have more uncivil comments than civil comments. Although this thesis did not seek to understand the particular processes that led people to respond in uncivil ways,

observations made about the types of frame and comments that are more likely to invoke incivility might hint at answers. Incivility is frequently fuelled by strong emotions (Frischlich et al., 2021; Gervais, 2017) and emotional responses serve as motivation to comment on articles online (Barnes, 2015). When individuals experience intense feelings such as anger and hate, they are more likely to express themselves in an uncivil manner (Fischer et al., 2018; Gervais, 2017). Hate emerges when a situation is perceived as unjust (Fischer et al., 2018). For example, this thesis found a desire for justice led to harsh and critical comments directed towards the offender, such as, "rot in hell" (NE060215). When individuals feel strongly about a topic or issue, such as an offender of an intimate partner homicide, they may be more prone to expressing their emotions (especially anger and hate) in a less restrained and more uncivil manner.

The results of this thesis also demonstrate that comments regarding male offender/female victim pairs were more likely to feature uncivil language compared to female offender/male victim pairs. Indeed, the language used was much more likely to be uncivil whenever men were criticised as offenders in comparison to women, even when discussing similar underlying mechanisms. For example, women's lying was described using civil terms, while the same behaviour in men was described using uncivil terms. These findings contradict past research that has either found that both men and women are described using uncivil tones in online comments (Rheault et al., 2019; Southern & Harmer, 2021) or that women are more likely to be harassed online due to their gender (Chen, 2017; Van Duyn et al., 2021). For example, high-profile females such as politicians (Proust & Saldaña, 2022; Rheault et al., 2019; Rossini et al., 2021; Southern & Harmer, 2021), popular YouTubers (Döring &

Mohseni, 2020; Wotanis & McMillan, 2014), and journalists (Chen et al., 2020; Pain & Chen, 2019) are more likely to be described using uncivil tones in comments.

This contradictory finding is particularly interesting. Previous research has not examined how the gender of the offender/victim impacts on the civility of comments in the context of intimate partner homicide. It is possible that male offenders were described using uncivil tones more frequently because they adhere with stereotypical views of offenders. Christie (1986) notes that stereotypical offenders are often portrayed as male, big, bad, and violent. Commenters may feel that this alignment between male offenders and stereotypical expectations provides justification for using uncivil language towards male offenders. Although prior research (outside the context of intimate partner violence) suggests that women are more frequently described using uncivil language compared to men (Chen, 2017; Van Duyn et al., 2021), it can be speculated that commenters in this thesis may perceive female offenders as acting in self-defence against an abusive male partner. Research shows that women who kill their male partners sometimes resort to homicide as a way of protecting themselves (Bourget & Gagné, 2012; Suonpää & Savolainen, 2019). As a result, commenters may reason that it is not the female offender's fault for killing their partner and consequently may exhibit more restraint in using uncivil language towards them. Another possible explanation is that commenters' demographics and attitudes could impact whether they are more likely to be uncivil towards male offenders. However, multivariate analyses could not be run for civility in Study 3 due to the low number of uncivil comments. All of this suggests further research is needed in this area to examine why male offenders were more commonly described using uncivil language compared to female offenders.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this research have important implications for policy and practice. These implications include reviewing existing media guidelines, providing training and other resources to media professionals, improving social media content moderation, and educating the general public about the potential harmful effects of the media.

Implications for Media Guidelines

This thesis shows that the media influences social media commentary and perpetuates harmful gender stereotypes which highlights the importance of considering media guidelines. The Australian Press Council (2014) is the main body overseeing standards of media reporting in Australia, and it outlines the Statement of General Principles which applies to Australian print and online media. The Australian Press Council does not have the power to issue monetary penalties, but instead can call for apologies, retractions, or corrections from the media. An example of a general principle is for reporters and media organisations to ensure that news material is accurate and does not omit key facts. Specific standards also apply to certain issues, such as suicide, although no such standards specific to family and intimate partner violence exist. Instead, the Australian Press Council, as well as government departments and other organisations (e.g., Our Watch), set out *advisory* guidelines which are neither mandatory nor enforceable.

It is important to note that the media does not always follow the current advisory guidelines published by the Australian Press Council. For example, the guidelines state that journalists should avoid blaming victims and using sensationalised language, and recommend providing information about the context of intimate partner violence incidents including statistics about intimate partner violence

(Australian Press Council, 2014). However, this thesis shows most media articles used episodic reporting and that victim blaming was present. This is concerning as proper contextualisation of the homicide (i.e., thematic reporting) is needed to educate the public about intimate partner violence (Gillespie et al., 2013), and victim blaming can lead to the continuation of harmful social perceptions with regard to violence against women (Meyers, 1994; Meyers, 1996). However, media guidelines alone may not be sufficient to change reporting practices (Sutherland et al., 2017). It is recognised that a wider cultural shift is needed to change media practices across the industry. Therefore, strategies for encouraging media professionals to follow these guidelines are also needed (see section below discussing media training, resources, and incentives).

Gender stereotypes are largely absent in the current advisory guidelines. It is important to include gender stereotypes in the advisory guidelines to reduce the risk of harmful stereotypes being perpetuated in the media's framing of intimate partner homicide. Our Watch, an Australian not-for-profit organisation that aims to prevent violence against women and children, explicitly states in their media guidelines that harmful gender stereotypes should be avoided (Our Watch, 2019). However, the Australian Press Council's advisory guidelines do not mention gender stereotypes (Australian Press Council, n.d.). Given the Australian Press Council is the main body overseeing standards of reporting in Australia, it is recommended their guidelines be amended to demonstrate that gender stereotypes should be avoided in media reporting in general and in intimate partner violence and homicide reports specifically. For example, to avoid perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes, this thesis shows that the media should refrain from implying that female offenders or victims are more blameworthy for violating gender norms, such as drinking, being sexually active, or

not adhering to nurturing roles. Whether offenders and victims adhere to or violate stereotypes, this thesis has found that the use of traditional gender stereotypes shapes the media's frames. However, these stereotypes impact on perceptions and responses to offenders and victims of crime (Andersen, 2013; Meyer, 2016), which can be harmful to certain groups such as female victims, female offenders, and male victims (Bates et al., 2019b). Reframing intimate partner homicide in the media might avoid some of these harmful effects. Collaboration with media professionals is needed on potential changes as research suggests that guidelines are more likely to be effective when developed in collaboration with media professionals (Easteal et al., 2022; Morgan & Politoff, 2012; Sutherland et al., 2016; Sutherland et al., 2017).

Implications for Media Training, Resources, and Incentives

One way to encourage adherence to media guidelines is to provide training and education for media professionals (Easteal et al., 2022; Sutherland et al., 2016; Sutherland et al., 2017). Journalists may be unaware of media guidelines or how to implement them (Sutherland et al., 2016; Uibu, 2023). The value of educating media professionals is demonstrated in a recent study in which media professionals were enrolled in a training program that informed media professionals on best practices for reporting violence against women (Easteal et al., 2022). Those who attended the training program had improved reporting practices such as having a reduction in using sensationalised language.

Education could occur in university curriculums, through short courses for media professionals, or through on-the-job training (Morgan & Politoff, 2012; Sutherland et al., 2017). Based on the findings of this thesis, training could involve emphasising the need to avoid victim blaming and harmful gender stereotypes while encouraging the use of thematic reporting. Research has shown that training should be

provided in a flexible manner with options for various times, durations, and delivery methods (such as online and in person) to better align with the dynamic nature of the news cycle (Sunderland et al., 2023). However, extending training to every media professional may be an expensive endeavour. An economical alternative is to have a designated intimate partner violence reporter who receives training on how to adhere to the media guidelines of family and intimate partner violence (Easteal et al., 2022).

Another way to encourage media professionals to follow media guidelines is to provide resources and incentives. In order for resources to be utilised, media professionals need to know that the resources exist, find them valuable, and be able to access them with ease (Morgan & Politoff, 2012). Some journalists have indicated they are unable to locate the advisory guidelines (Uibu, 2023), suggesting the need to provide media professionals with resources on where to find the guidelines. Guidelines can be an effective tool in improving media reporting, but only if they are disseminated and engaged with by media professionals (Skehan et al., 2006; Sutherland et al., 2017). One beneficial resource is providing quality examples of how to report intimate partner violence (Morgan & Politoff, 2012). For example, providing context to the homicide event through thematic reporting, which this thesis has highlighted as important. Examples of poor-quality reporting could also be provided to illustrate what should be avoided when covering intimate partner homicide (Easteal et al., 2022), including instances that subtly perpetuate victim blaming narratives, even if these are not immediately obvious. Media professionals can then use these examples to guide their own reporting. Our Watch (n.d.) also offers a quarterly newsletter via email to journalists who want to improve their media reporting on violence against women. The newsletter shares best-practice reporting, research on intimate partner violence, and opportunities for professional development. It is

recommended that media professionals subscribe to this newsletter. It could also be beneficial to provide incentives to media professionals for following guidelines (Easteal et al., 2022; Sunderland et al., 2023). This could include recognising and awarding journalists for accurately reporting on violence and following media guidelines. Our Watch (n.d.) currently awards one journalist each year for excellent reporting of violence against women, but this could be increased and promoted more widely.

Implications for Social Media Comment Moderation

The results of this thesis demonstrate that harmful traditional gender stereotypes and portrayals of intimate partner homicide were also seen in audience commentary. This is concerning because online comments can affect readers' perceptions of the issues discussed (Gearhart et al., 2022; Lee, 2012; Reader, 2012; Singer, 2010; Von Sikorski & Ha nelt, 2016). This thesis has shown that media frames influence audience commentary. Therefore, amending media guidelines, and providing training and resources for journalists should improve the framing of intimate partner homicide, which should then in turn improve the content and tone of intimate partner homicide comments. Nevertheless, it is important to consider other strategies to ameliorate intimate partner homicide comments and establish safer online communities.

One of the ways to establish safer online communities is by the moderation of comments. Moderation plays an important role in providing safer online communities (Gorwa et al., 2020; Kuo et al., 2023). Moderators manage discussions and determine rules that commenters should follow (Edwards, 2002), including deleting or hiding comments (Kalsnes & Ihlebæk, 2021). Research has illustrated various approaches to moderation such as engaging in dialogue, implementing pre- or post-moderation

measures, closing comments during certain hours, restricting discussion topics, modifying or removing content, and enforcing sanctions against rule violators (Ihlebæk & Krumsvik, 2015; Ruiz et al., 2011; Singer et al., 2011). As the current thesis has shown, some comments on intimate partner homicide are problematic, both in terms of their content and uncivil tone, suggesting the need for moderation practices in this space. For example, research indicates that uncivil comments can diminish the perceived credibility of news stories (Waddell, 2018), lead to close-mindedness (Borah, 2014; Hwang et al., 2018), and cause polarisation (Anderson et al., 2014; Kim & Kim, 2019). Instituting clear civility guidelines could prove beneficial in curtailing incivility and instead ensure open and respectful discussions among individuals with differing viewpoints, a crucial aspect in contemporary democratic societies (Lück & Nardi, 2019).

However, moderation is not a simple task. According to Gillespie (2010), no moderator is neutral, as the act of moderation necessitates value-based assessments. These values are often outlined in documents like guidelines or rules, serving as a basis for moderators to enforce various forms of sanction or intervention (Kalsnes & Ihlebæk, 2021). Some moderators enforce strict rules, while others favour a more liberal approach based on freedom of speech (Ihlebæk & Krumsvik, 2015). Moderators need to strike a balance between preventing harm done by comments and freedom of expression (Karlina, 2021).

Recent developments in Australia have drawn attention to moderation practices of news organisations. The data used in this thesis was collected prior to the landmark court case involving Dylan Voller, a teenager whose detainment in a youth detention centre in Australia received extensive media reporting after mistreatment allegations. Dylan Voller filed lawsuits against three media organisations in Australia,

alleging defamation resulting from comments posted by Facebook users in response to online articles (Englezos, 2022; Pull ter Gunne, 2020; Walkington & Bradshaw, 2022). In 2021, the Australian High Court found that media organisations are publishers of the comments posted by third-party users on their public Facebook pages (*Fairfax Media Publications Pty Ltd v Voller*, 2021). This means they are held liable for Facebook comments posted by the public which includes any that are defamatory (*Fairfax Media Publications Pty Ltd v Voller*, 2021). Another Australian legal case also found that if a platform becomes aware of defamatory content but neglects to take action to remove it, the platform will be deemed to have endorsed that content and may be held responsible for any resulting damages (*Barilaro v Google LLC*, 2022; Englezos, 2022). In response to cases such as these, organisations have introduced new moderation practices. For example, Facebook has introduced a new feature that enables users and organisations to disable comments on posts, which was not previously an option. Further, ABC News has implemented a practice restricting users to only post comments within a limited timeframe, allowing ABC to moderate these comments. It is likely moderation practices such as these will help foster a safer online community.

Implications for Public Education

The previous sections have focused on how the media can improve reporting practices and moderate comments. However, the media is not solely responsible for informing the public about crime and intimate partner violence. Shifting public perceptions of intimate partner violence to more closely align with reality also requires public education from government departments and educational organisations. This is important as research reveals that Australians' media literacy falls below the global average, trailing behind both the United Kingdom and the

United States (Park et al., 2018). Specifically, 68% of Australian adults exhibit either low or very low levels of media literacy (Park et al., 2018). These statistics are concerning considering the large number of individuals who access the news through social media in Australia (Park et al., 2020; Watkins et al., 2016). Digital media literacy empowers individuals to navigate, comprehend, and thoughtfully evaluate online journalistic sources (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, 2019). Research also shows that enhancing media literacy skills improves resilience to fake news (Moore & Hancock, 2022). Therefore, improving digital media literacy will assist individuals with evaluating news reports concerning intimate partner homicide and related crimes. For example, Study 3 showed that when news reports use victim blaming frames, it influences commenters to write victim blaming comments. However, if improved media literacy enables the public to evaluate news reports more effectively, this could impact their comments, with some commenters potentially pointing out that victim blaming should be avoided.

Some organisations currently offer educational materials and resources aimed at enhancing digital media literacy in Australia (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, 2019; Sutton, 2019). For example, the Be Connected program by the Australian government offers online tools and in-person training sessions aimed at enhancing the digital competencies of elderly Australians (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, 2019). Furthermore, the ABC facilitates their Media Literacy Week, the Media Education Partnerships initiative, and provides a variety of educational materials (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, 2019; Sutton, 2019). However, the low levels of media literacy in Australia suggest more needs to be done.

Several options exist to enhance digital media literacy. After conducting a digital platform inquiry, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (2019) suggested that digital media literacy can be improved in the community by delivering resources and training through community centres, libraries, schools, and seniors centres to ensure individuals are well equipped to identify and scrutinise unreliable news encountered through digital platforms. While the Australian school curriculum does include education about media literacy, research suggests this was developed in the pre-digital era (Notley & Dezuanni, 2019) and therefore needs updating (Nettlefold & Williams, 2018; Notley & Dezuanni, 2019). Furthermore, the Be Connected program (previously mentioned) could be extended from elderly Australians to the wider public by establishing a comparable website and network of partners focused on digital media literacy education (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, 2019). Improvements such as these will equip individuals with the skills needed to navigate and critically assess information encountered online in the context of intimate partner homicide.

Public campaigns can also be a powerful tool for enhancing public education on intimate partner homicide, helping to shift perceptions by recognising harmful narratives like victim blaming (Campbell & Manganello, 2006; Wang, 2016). Findings from this thesis indicate that victim blaming goes beyond direct blame towards the victim and also includes excusing the offender's behaviour—something the public may not always recognise as a form of victim blaming. By highlighting these nuanced aspects, campaigns can educate individuals on what constitutes victim blaming and promote the avoidance of harmful attitudes and beliefs. Currently, there are some initiatives such as White Ribbon Day and the Purple Bench Project that play a crucial role in raising awareness of intimate partner violence (Seymour, 2018).

These campaigns draw attention to societal impacts, personal stories, and preventative measures (Seymour, 2018). These initiatives could serve as a catalyst for media coverage that encourages thematic reporting on intimate partner violence and could help reduce victim blaming. This can lead to a broader understanding of intimate partner homicide, ultimately contributing to cultural change and policy reform.

Limitations and Future Research

This thesis adds significant knowledge in terms of our understanding of gender portrayals in the online interactive space. Nevertheless, some limitations warrant discussion. Broadly, these limitations fall into five categories: study focus, sampling strategies, data source, coding decisions, and data analyses. Directions for future research are identified throughout this section.

This thesis centred on gender and did not explore alternative aspects of a person's cultural and social identity (such as race and social status) that can impact on media framing and audience commentary. Additionally, this thesis did not explore how these identities intersect with gender. An intersectionality framework (Crenshaw, 2013; Rosenberger et al., 2023; Singh & Bullock, 2020) suggests the importance of understanding how these identities overlap and accumulate to shape media narratives and public perceptions. To give an example, race and gender both play a significant role in how the media portrays homicide (Brennan & Vandenberg, 2009; Paulsen, 2003; Sorenson et al., 1998). Research has found that media portrayals of white female offenders are more favourable (i.e., more likely to provide excuses for the offender) compared to minority female offenders (Brennan & Vandenberg, 2009). Similarly, research has found differences in how the media portrays female victims of violent crimes based on their socioeconomic status (Collins, 2016; Jackson, 2013). For instance, female victims who were killed by their intimate partners were often

depicted as more deserving of their death if they were uneducated and resided in poor neighbourhoods (Collins, 2016). Further investigation is necessary to delve deeper into the intersection of gender and other factors in online media framing and its impact on audience commentary.

For feasibility reasons, this thesis also focused solely on pairs that were presented as male/female. This is because male/female pairings continue to be the most commonly reported relationship in media articles in the context of intimate partner violence. However, research suggests differences in how the media portrays intimate partner violence occurring in same-sex relationships compared to male/female pairings (Estes & Webber, 2021). Individuals who are attracted to the same sex or other gender identities face damaging stereotypes and prejudices regarding their sexual orientations (Blashill & Powlishta, 2009; Lehavot & Lambert, 2007). Therefore, additional research is needed to examine how the media and audience commentary portrays intimate partner homicide occurring in same-sex relationships and those with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations.

The current thesis focused on the reporting of intimate partner homicides in online news sites in Australia. However, it must be acknowledged that the media landscape in Australia (and elsewhere) is highly diverse in terms of reporting style, editorial stance, culture, and quality of reporting (Baum & Zhukov, 2019; Deuze, 2003; Humprecht & Büchel, 2013; Rosenberg, 2007; Sjøvaag & Ohlsson, 2019). Similarly, government funded media organisations would be expected to differ from those that are privately owned and operated (Baum & Zhukov, 2019; Sjøvaag & Ohlsson, 2019). Thus, one would expect to see different reporting patterns across different news sites. The current study however, only analysed the sample as a whole and did not distinguish between news sites. In other words, the analyses did not

examine whether media frames and themes in audience commentary were influenced by the media sources being used (i.e., news.com.au, ABC News Online, Ninemsn, or Yahoo7). Research indicates that various news sites frame intimate partner violence differently (e.g., Braber, 2015; Lloyd & Ramon, 2017). Furthermore, online comments may also differ depending on the online platform being used (Humprecht et al., 2020; Knustad, 2018; Su et al., 2018). For example, commenters were more likely to use uncivil language when commenting on news websites compared to Facebook (Knustad, 2018). Other research has found that Facebook comments differed depending on the political leaning (e.g., conservative or liberal) of the news outlet (Su et al., 2018). Evidently, forthcoming research should consider the impact of news sites and other platforms when exploring gender differences in online media and audience commentary.

Previous research has examined the sources used by the media in intimate partner violence reporting (e.g., Gillespie et al., 2013; Richards et al., 2011). Findings indicate that the media often relies on law enforcement or people who knew the victim as sources rather than informed sources such as victim advocates and academic researchers (Chermak, 1995; Gillespie et al., 2013; Richards et al., 2014). The sources used by the media were not examined as this was outside the scope of the research question. However, it is recognised that media sourcing practices have a critical role in shaping the context and manner in which intimate partner violence is reported. (Chermak, 1995; Gillespie et al., 2013; Richards et al., 2014). Therefore, future research should explore how media sourcing practices intersect with the gender of the offender/victim and influence the portrayal of intimate partner violence.

Study 2 focused on Facebook comments related to intimate partner homicide reports but did not explore the interactions between commenters or how these

interactions influenced the comment space. Analysing how people engage with one another on social media can provide insights into public attitudes, beliefs, and social norms around issues (in this case, intimate partner homicide) (Ksiazek et al., 2016; Lew & Stohl, 2023; Von Sikorski & Ha nelt, 2016). However, commenter interactions were beyond the scope of investigation of this thesis. Understanding these dynamics could reveal how public discourse is shaped and potentially identify areas for intervention or public education concerning intimate partner homicide. Therefore, it is crucial for future research on intimate partner homicide comments to also explore the interactions between commenters.

In addition to limitations relating to the focus of the studies, the sampling strategies used also need to be considered. Importantly, male offenders were overrepresented in the samples analysed as part of Study 1 and Study 2. In Study 1, 19 of the articles featured female offenders and 102 featured male offenders. This was because the study used a random sampling strategy to select online news articles, which ensured that every published article within the timeframe had an equal chance of being selected. Doing so increased the likelihood of creating a sample that is representative of the full extent of intimate partner homicide articles. It is unsurprising that fewer articles featured female offenders given that female offenders are less likely to commit intimate partner homicides compared to males (Bricknell, 2023; Cussen & Bryant, 2015). Similarly, fewer comments responded to articles with female offenders in Study 2 compared to male offenders. This is because Study 2 used the same articles derived from Study 1. Of the 371 comments, 37 had responded to articles with female offenders and 334 had responded to articles with male offenders. Future research interested in media frames and audience commentary in the context of

intimate partner homicide (or non-lethal violence) should consider using over-sampling strategies to increase the representation of female offenders in the sample.

This thesis relied on the written text of online article as the data source. However, this overlooks the role of visuals when exploring media frames (Matthes, 2009; Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). While research focusing on visuals and framing in the context of intimate partner violence is growing (e.g., Carlyle et al., 2019; Lloyd & Ramon, 2017), further exploration is still needed in this area (D'Angelo, 2017). This is because visuals are prominent in online media coverage (Powell et al., 2015), and have a strong impact on how individuals view issues (Powell et al., 2015; Vafeiadis et al., 2020). Further, online communication has been enriched by the inclusion of graphical icons, such as emojis, which convey emotions and attitudes (Konrad et al., 2020). In fact, Facebook allows users to "react" to posts or other comments with reaction emojis (e.g., love, humour, surprise, sadness, or anger) (Le Busque et al., 2019). Limited research has examined the use of emojis when discussing intimate partner violence (e.g., Usher et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2022). All of this suggests that future research should also examine visuals, including emojis, when exploring gender differences in media and audience portrayals.

A further challenge stems from the age of data. There have been some recent social movements and legal proceedings that may impact on the content and tone of online comments. Social media movements such as #MeToo have sparked considerable public interest and online discussion about violence against women (Fairbairn, 2020). Nevertheless, this thesis analysed comments that predated the emergence of this social media movement. In addition, the Dylan Voller court case found that media organisations are liable for Facebook comments posted by the public on the media's Facebook page (*Fairfax Media Publications Pty Ltd v Voller*, 2021).

This legal case also occurred after the online comments were sampled in this thesis. Following these social movements and legal proceedings, further investigation is warranted to assess whether there has been a shift in individuals' attitudes and perceptions in the context of intimate partner violence in online commentary.

Another challenge for this thesis was the use of an experimental vignette design approach in the third study where respondents were asked to leave a comment as they would on social media. This approach was chosen as it allows researchers to use the same intimate partner homicide incident while altering the media frame. It also permits researchers to control for media usage, attitudes, and participant demographics. However, the experimental design did not provide respondents with the same "real world" Facebook experience, meaning that respondents could not see other comments and participate in dialogue as they could in real life. Therefore, future experimental approaches could be amended to encourage more authentic interactions by allowing an ongoing dialogue between commenters. For example, a Facebook post could be simulated where respondents can see other comments and can contribute their own comments in turn. As discussed previously, the experimental setting likely contributed to the lower-than expected number of uncivil comments in Study 3 (Grimm, 2010; Muddiman et al., 2020). Providing a simulation of a Facebook post that is truer to life may enable respondents to provide more realistic (and potentially uncivil) comments.

A number of decisions were made around the coding of data, some of which may require further consideration in future research. For example, in the analyses, the coding of comments as civil or uncivil (Study 2 and Study 3) was determined based on the entirety of the comment rather than specific segments within it. Consequently, if a commenter used uncivil language towards the offender, but in the same comment

used civil language towards the victim, the whole comment was coded as uncivil. Moving forward, researchers could consider coding segments within comments as civil or uncivil instead of evaluating the comment as a whole. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that in real-life scenarios, if any segment of a comment contains uncivil language, the entire comment may be moderated or removed.

Another challenge in terms of coding is the cultural and social meaning of words and phrases. To illustrate, attitudes toward swearing can vary widely within societies (Hagen, 2013; Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; Stapleton, 2020). In general, Australia is known for having a relatively relaxed attitude toward swearing compared to some other cultures (Doherty et al., 2018; Goddard, 2015; Leitner, 2004). Swearing is often seen as a normal part of informal dialogue and may be used for emphasis, humour, or to express strong emotions (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). Therefore, many individuals would not necessarily consider swearing to be uncivil. In the current thesis, swearing was coded as uncivil language as per Coe et al.'s (2014) definition of incivility (vulgarity: profanity or language that would be considered improper in professional discourse). Although professional discourse is not typically expected on social media, this definition was followed as it is frequently used by media scholars when examining online comments including Facebook (Prochazka et al., 2016; Rains et al., 2017; Rohlinger & Vaccaro, 2021; Ziegele et al., 2017), and similar operationalisations facilitate comparisons across studies. However, strictly categorising all swearing as uncivil may overlook the nuances of online communication, where the intent behind words often matters as much as the words themselves (dos Reis et al., 2018). Relying heavily on swearing as a marker of incivility could lead to over-moderation, where comments are flagged or removed even when they do not pose a real threat to discourse quality. Future studies could

consider the intention and emotion behind the use of language such as swearing to determine whether an online comment should be considered uncivil.

Due to the low number of uncivil comments in Study 3, it was not possible to run multivariate analyses for civility. Not being able to control for respondent attitudes and demographics presents challenges. For example, the finding that male offenders (compared to female offenders) were more likely to be described by commenters using uncivil language was an unexpected outcome according to prior research (Chen, 2017; Van Duyn et al., 2021). Conducting multivariate analyses would have assisted in understanding whether respondents' demographics and attitudes influenced this. Furthermore, a high number of respondents in the survey indicated they had previously been victims of intimate partner violence. This high number could be due to the recruitment style of the survey (i.e., via Facebook) or the topic (those who experience intimate partner violence may be more likely to complete the survey). The lack of multivariant analyses means this variable was not controlled for when analysing incivility. This is concerning as prior victimisation can influence perceptions of crime (Kort-Butler & Habecker, 2018; Näsi et al., 2021; Smolej & Kivivuori, 2006), potentially affecting the civility of comments. Therefore, future research should ensure sufficient sample sizes to enable multivariate analyses on civility. It is important to consider these limitations when interpreting the findings of this thesis. Nevertheless, this thesis significantly advances our understanding of how gender is portrayed in online interactive spaces.

Conclusion

This research has made significant contributions to the literature on portrayals of gender and violence in online media and audience commentary. This thesis aimed to understand whether and how portrayals in online media articles and online

comments differ by the gender of the offender/victim. These differences are explored in the context of intimate partner homicide, which affects women more than men and is a significant public health concern. Only a limited number of studies, primarily quantitative, have compared how the gender of the offender/victim pairs influence online portrayals of intimate partner homicide. Even fewer studies have considered the content (i.e., what is written) and tone (i.e., how it is written) of online comments, particularly regarding whether variations in commentary exist based on the gender of intimate partner homicide offender/victim pairs. Furthermore, this thesis significantly contributes to the literature on media framing effects, by exploring the impact that media frames have on audience commentary. Although media frames affect public perceptions of crime, there has been very little research specifically investigating whether media frames directly influence the content and tone of online comments.

Across the three studies, findings highlight the significance of gender in both media portrayals and audience commentary in the context of intimate partner homicide. Traditional gender stereotypes heavily influence how the men and women involved in such incidents are portrayed, whether as offenders or victims. Portrayals of men overwhelmingly aligns with stereotypical masculine traits. However, portrayals of women exhibit greater diversity, depicting both adherence to and violation of traditional gender stereotypes. Moreover, analyses indicate a scarcity of thematic depictions of intimate partner homicides in online media and audience commentary. This lack of contextualisation is concerning as it hinders public understanding of the dynamics of intimate partner violence. Despite this, the majority of comments feature a civil tone. Regarding media framing effects, results from the experimental study demonstrate that media frames can influence audience

commentary, even after accounting for individual commenter characteristics and attitudes.

The knowledge gained from this thesis has implications for policy and practice. In particular, the findings demonstrate the need to consider the current media advisory guidelines and highlight the need for further training and resources for media professionals. Furthermore, the findings emphasise the importance of establishing safe communities online and promoting digital media literacy.

Appendix A

Appendix A shows the dates searched, number of results that appeared, and the number of online articles selected.

Table A1

Identifying Online News Articles for Study 1

Date Searched	Number of Results	Number of Articles Selected
30/9/16	49	3
27/11/14	61	1
23/4/15	62	0
31/3/15	62	1
5/1/16	61	0
2/11/14	39	1
1/12/16	66	1
23/5/17	75	0
23/3/16	74	1
20/9/14	15	0
3/2/17	60	1
13/4/16	67	1
26/1/17	50	0
13/2/16	33	0
10/6/16	54	0
16/12/14	68	0
29/8/15	22	0
15/11/14	28	0
15/3/16	69	0
7/12/15	65	1
11/12/14	52	0
11/8/15	67	0
12/6/17	53	0
20/6/17	65	4
14/9/15	44	2
4/11/14	45	0
20/9/15	41	0
9/10/14	85	1
22/2/17	49	3
23/10/14	50	0
2/12/16	64	0
25/5/17	71	3
23/8/15	45	0
25/8/15	60	0

16/9/14	60	0
30/10/15	49	1
17/5/15	39	1
3/2/16	70	1
13/9/14	24	3
28/10/16	59	0
6/12/14	36	0
7/2/17	73	0
6/3/16	49	0
4/7/17	70	4
28/10/16	repeat (59)	0
9/11/16	65	2
12/3/15	62	1
3/10/14	54	0
29/8/15	22	0
14/12/15	58	2
9/12/15	88	7
24/11/16	80	3
23/1/15	46	0
2/5/15	32	1
17/7/16	36	2
18/4/17	73	0
22/11/15	74	1
17/10/15	33	0
30/8/16	100	2
9/9/16	67	1
2/5/15	repeat (32)	0
22/2/15	33	1
5/11/14	59	0
10/4/17	95	1
25/2/17	33	1
14/10/16	44	0
3/1/16	35	0
23/10/15	56	1
11/11/14	76	1
22/10/15	78	0
17/7/15	58	1
20/11/15	47	0
2/2/15	47	1
8/1/15	50	2
13/2/16	35	0
7/6/17	86	1
13/5/15	49	2
20/12/14	26	0
11/7/16	75	0
22/2/16	67	3

28/12/16	39	1
25/9/15	48	1
4/9/16	44	2
26/2/17	54	4
7/8/14	63	1
20/9/16	76	0
14/7/16	64	0
15/2/16	50	2
19/9/16	76	1
14/8/15	49	0
21/10/15	64	1
10/3/15	50	1
9/10/16	30	2
20/1/17	82	0
9/9/14	54	2
22/7/17	41	1
20/1/15	64	0
8/6/16	45	1
1/3/17	78	3
2/9/14	60	0
12/5/16	62	0
12/1/15	44	0
9/8/16	56	2
15/6/16	100	3
8/9/15	42	0
10/10/15	29	0
18/12/16	52	0
22/5/17	65	0
29/11/14	21	0
31/8/16	66	3
2/1/15	14	0
27/2/16	31	0
29/7/16	38	0
10/9/15	64	0
5/12/16	68	0
7/6/15	28	0
5/1/16	repeat (61)	0
31/3/16	58	0
4/10/16	52	0
12/7/15	40	0
8/8/14	18	1
6/2/15	19	1
21/5/15	28	2
11/7/17	29	2
30/9/15	18	3
30/11/15	24	3

9/2/16	24	2
17/8/16	80	5

Appendix B

Appendix B shows the four vignettes used for Study 3: 1) a bad offender frame with a male offender/female victim pair, 2) a bad offender frame with a female offender/male victim pair, 3) a victim blaming frame with a male offender/female victim pair, and 4) a victim blaming frame with a female offender/male victim pair.

Table A2

The Four Vignettes Used for Study 3

Male Offender/Female Victim, Bad Offender Frame

Man in custody after a cowardly and vicious shooting on suburban road in Hobart

A 37-year-old woman has died after a brutal daylight shooting on a main Hobart road on Thursday afternoon.

Police said the 38-year-old man, the woman's estranged partner, allegedly confronted her in her car and fired several shots from a shortened rifle, hitting her in the face.

She was taken to hospital but later died.

Inspector Jenkins said the killing was "brutal, premeditated and senseless" and said that man had not expressed any remorse for his actions.

He said the "cold-blooded murder" showed a "total disregard for the sanctity of life".

Police said a passing motorist restrained the man until they arrived at the scene at New Town, in Hobart's north. The witness described the murder as “horrific and shocking to see”.

The Huon Valley man will appear in court on Friday charged with murder.

Police were called to the area to respond to reports of shots being fired on Risdon Road near the Brooker Highway about 3:15pm (AEST).

Inspector Jenkins said officers were on the scene within minutes.

"There's been a number of witnesses that have observed what has happened and they've been very forthcoming to the attending police," he said.

"There's nothing to indicate that there's anyone else involved, apart from the parties that were here."

He said the man’s actions were a "cowardly and vicious attack" on a woman.

There were children playing at a nearby soccer field at the time of the incident.

Risdon Road was closed to traffic between Albert Road and the highway.

The area was treated as a crime scene and police have appealed for more witnesses.

Male Offender/Female Victim, Victim Blaming Frame

Man in custody after tragic shooting on suburban road in Hobart

A 37-year old woman, described as a "controlling monster", was shot by her estranged partner – a man who was allegedly physically and emotionally abused by the woman for decades.

Police said the 38-year-old man, the woman's estranged partner, allegedly confronted her in her car and fired several shots from a shortened rifle, hitting her in the face.

She was taken to hospital but later died.

The family said the killing was a result of ongoing issues of abuse. The man was trapped, by a woman who fit the classic profile of a domestic abuser —repeatedly assaulting and bad-mouthing him, and threatening him.

Friend and former co-worker, Kerri Burke, said "he's literally one of the kindest souls I ever met, he must have been in survival mode."

Police said a passing motorist sheltered the man until they arrived at the scene at New Town, in Hobart's north. The witness described the murder as "tragic".

The Huon Valley man will appear in court on Friday charged with murder.

Police were called to the area to respond to reports of shots being fired on Risdon Road near the Brooker Highway about 3:15pm (AEST).

Inspector Jenkins said officers were on the scene within minutes.

"There's been a number of witnesses that have observed what has happened and they've been very forthcoming to the attending police," he said.

"There's nothing to indicate that there's anyone else involved, apart from the parties that were here."

There were children playing at a nearby soccer field at the time of the incident.

Risdon Road was closed to traffic between Albert Road and the highway.

The area was treated as a crime scene and police have appealed for more witnesses.

Female Offender/Male Victim, Bad Offender Frame

Woman in custody after a cowardly and vicious shooting on suburban road in Hobart

A 37-year-old man has died after a brutal daylight shooting on a main Hobart road on Thursday afternoon.

Police said the 38-year-old woman, the man's estranged partner, allegedly confronted him in his car and fired several shots from a shortened rifle, hitting him in the face.

He was taken to hospital but later died.

Inspector Jenkins said the killing was "brutal, premeditated and senseless" and said the woman had not expressed any remorse for her actions.

He said the "cold-blooded murder" showed a "total disregard for the sanctity of life".

Police said a passing motorist restrained the woman until they arrived at the scene at New Town, in Hobart's north. The witness described the murder as “horrific and shocking to see”.

The Huon Valley woman will appear in court on Friday charged with murder.

Police were called to the area to respond to reports of shots being fired on Risdon Road near the Brooker Highway about 3:15pm (AEST).

Inspector Jenkins said officers were on the scene within minutes.

"There's been a number of witnesses that have observed what has happened and they've been very forthcoming to the attending police," he said.

"There's nothing to indicate that there's anyone else involved, apart from the parties that were here."

He said the woman’s actions were a "cowardly and vicious attack" on a man.

There were children playing at a nearby soccer field at the time of the incident.

Risdon Road was closed to traffic between Albert Road and the highway.

The area was treated as a crime scene and police have appealed for more witnesses.

Female Offender/Male Victim, Victim Blaming Frame

Woman in custody after tragic shooting on suburban road in Hobart

A 37-year old man, described as a "controlling monster", was shot by his estranged partner – a woman who was allegedly physically and emotionally abused by the man for decades.

Police said the 38-year-old woman, the man's estranged partner, allegedly confronted him in his car and fired several shots from a shortened rifle, hitting him in the face.

He was taken to hospital but later died.

The family said the killing was a result of ongoing issues of abuse. The woman was trapped, by a man who fit the classic profile of a domestic abuser —repeatedly assaulting and bad-mouthing her, and threatening her.

Friend and former co-worker, Kerri Burke, said "she's literally one of the kindest souls I ever met, she must have been in survival mode."

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The Huon Valley woman will appear in court on Friday charged with murder.

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"There's been a number of witnesses that have observed what has happened and they've been very forthcoming to the attending police," he said.

"There's nothing to indicate that there's anyone else involved, apart from the parties that were here."

There were children playing at a nearby soccer field at the time of the incident.

Risdon Road was closed to traffic between Albert Road and the highway.

The area was treated as a crime scene and police have appealed for more witnesses.

Appendix C

Appendix C shows Pearson's correlation for variables in Study 3.

Table A3

Pearson's Correlation for Variables used in Study 3 (n = 537)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. Media frame	-														
2. Gender of the offender/victim	0.08	-													
3. Online media main source of news	0.00	-0.03	-												
4. Has commented on social media	-0.01	-0.02	0.05	-											
5. Confidence in legal system	0.03	0.03	0.00	-.168**	-										
6. Believes crime has increased	0.00	0.00	-.093*	.115**	-.336**	-									
7. Wants harsher sentences	-0.02	0.00	-0.06	.103*	-.208**	.378**	-								
8. Fear of crime	0.01	-0.02	0.08	0.08	-.127**	.325**	.278**	-							
9. Direct contact with CJS (self or family)	-0.08	-0.07	-0.06	.189**	-.127**	.123**	0.01	.106*	-						
10. Awareness of intimate partner violence	-0.05	-0.05	0.05	0.00	0.08	0.06	0.05	0.05	0.04	-					
11. Intimate partner violence victimisation	-0.02	-0.01	0.04	.172**	-.153**	0.03	-0.02	-0.04	.295**	-0.01	-				
12. Gender	0.06	-0.03	0.04	-0.01	-0.04	.115**	.108*	.227**	.183**	.123**	0.01	-			
13. Age	0.01	-0.05	-.119**	.344**	-.116**	.195**	0.08	-.117**	.138**	0.04	.140**	-0.08	-		
14. Identifies as Indigenous	-0.06	-0.01	0.04	-0.01	-0.03	0.00	-0.02	0.04	.118**	0.01	.100*	0.07	-0.05	-	
15. University degree	0.01	0.07	-0.03	-0.08	.177**	-.188**	-.209**	-.133**	-0.07	0.03	-0.06	0.04	0.01	0.02	-

Note. * $p < .05$ level (2-tailed). ** $p < .01$ level (2-tailed).

Appendix D

Appendix D shows the results of the bivariate analyses for Study 3 to ascertain whether or not a similar proportion of respondent demographics and experiences/attitudes was seen across the vignettes.

Table A4

Respondent Demographics and Experiences/Attitudes Differences across the Vignettes (n = 537)

	χ^2 (df)	*p*	Effect Size	*F* (df)	*p*
Respondent demographics					
Age				0.194 (3, 533)	.901
Identifies as female	3.092 (3)	.378	.076		
University degree	3.562 (3)	.313	.081		
Respondent experiences/attitudes					
Online media main news source	3.083 (3)	.379	.076		
Has commented on social media	0.182 (3)	.980	.018		
Confidence in legal system	1.666 (3)	.645	.056		
Wants harsher sentences	2.544 (3)	.467	.069		
Fear of crime				2.159 (3, 533)	.092
Intimate partner violence victimisation	11.085 (3)	.011	.144		
Awareness of intimate partner violence	5.414 (3)	.144	.100		
Direct contact with CJS (self or family)	2.174 (3)	.537	.064		

Note. Chi-squares are reported for categorical variables while ANOVA are reported for continuous variables.

Appendix E

Appendix E shows the results of the bivariate analyses (chi-squares) for Study 3 to examine whether the media frame (victim blaming/bad offender) and the gender of the offender/victim pair were associated with the theme or civility of comments made by respondents.

Table A5

Impact of Media Frames and Offender/Victim on Comments

	Bad Offender Frame % (*n*)	**Victim Blaming Frame % (*n*)**	**Male Offender % (*n*)**	**Female Offender % (*n*)**	**χ^2 (df)**	***p***	***n***	**Effect Size**
Comment theme								
Victim blaming (vs not)	14.8 (38)	32.1 (90)			21.291 (1)	<.001	537	.203
			11.0 (29)	36.1 (99)	45.214 (1)	<.001	537	.295
Criticising offender (vs not)	16.3 (42)	8.2 (23)			7.575 (1)	.006	537	-.124
			14.8 (39)	9.5 (26)	3.112 (1)	.078	537	-.082
Comment civility								
Uncivil (vs civil)	8.6 (22)	2.5 (7)			8.484 (1)	.004	537	-.134
			8.7 (23)	2.2 (6)	10.042 (1)	.002	537	-.145

Note. Continuity correction is reported, while effect size was calculated using Phi.

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