The Impact of Media Narratives on Public Perception of Psychopathy: An Analysis of Accuracy and Misrepresentation

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the influence of media portrayals of psychopaths and psychopathic traits on public perceptions and understanding of these characteristics in real-world contexts. With the increasing popularity of true crime and crime-focused media—including television shows, films, podcasts, and online content—psychopathic characters have become common figures in popular culture. However, existing literature consistently reveals that these portrayals frequently diverge from clinically recognized diagnostic criteria for psychopathy. To explore this issue in greater depth, a survey was conducted involving 36 voluntary participants recruited to assess the relationship between media consumption of psychopathic characters and the accuracy of their understanding of psychopathic traits. The survey collected detailed information on participants' exposure to various forms of media—including television shows, movies, podcasts, and online content—featuring characters portrayed as psychopaths or exhibiting psychopathic behaviors. The results indicated that only 44.4% of respondents demonstrated an accurate understanding of psychopathic traits as defined by clinical standards, while a majority of 55.6% were unable to correctly identify these characteristics. To determine whether this distribution of correct and incorrect responses was statistically meaningful, a binomial test was applied. The test yielded a p-value of 0.618, indicating that the observed distribution did not significantly differ from what might be expected by chance alone. In other words, the accuracy of participants' understanding appeared to be no better than random guessing. These findings indicate that despite widespread exposure to media depictions of psychopaths, such portrayals neither substantially improve nor diminish the public's accurate knowledge of clinically valid psychopathic traits. The study underscores the limited impact of popular media on fostering realistic public understanding of psychopathy.

KEYWORDS: psychopathy, public perception, media effects, media narratives, accuracy of depiction, misrepresentation, true crime media, psychopathic traits, mental health stigma, diagnostic criteria, media influence, public understanding, criminal psychology

Introduction

Plot-defined portrayals of psychopaths have become increasingly widespread across various media platforms, including television, film, and podcasts. While television and film often depict entirely fictionalized psychopathic characters designed to advance dramatic narratives, many podcasts employ documentary-style formats that interweave the host's personal commentary and subjective analysis. This study aims to investigate the extent to which these fictional and commentary-driven representations influence the public's understanding of the clinically established diagnostic criteria for psychopathy.

Examining the impact of media portrayals on societal perceptions of psychopathy is essential, as media serve as a primary informational source for much of the general population. Misconceptions stemming from sensationalized or opinion-based content can distort public understanding, eclipsing empirically grounded knowledge of psychopathic traits and behaviors. These misrepresentations carry serious consequences, including the perpetuation of stigma that may hinder access to appropriate mental health interventions, as well as the potential to shape law enforcement practices, courtroom proceedings, and juror decision-making. Addressing these challenges highlights the urgent need for improved media literacy and more accurate, evidence-based portrayals of psychopathy to support informed public dialogue and promote fairness within clinical and legal frameworks.

Literature Review

The Prevalence of Psychopathy in True Crime Media and Its Influence on Public Fascination

True crime has become a dominant and often polarizing genre across contemporary media, spanning television, film, and digital platforms. Series such as *Criminal Minds*, *Prodigal Son*, and *Hannibal*, along with films like *The Silence of the Lambs* and *American Psycho*, have cemented psychopathic characters as enduring cultural icons. Meanwhile, the rise of true crime podcasts such as *My Favorite Murder* has further expanded public engagement with portrayals of psychopathic offenders. Americans spend an average of three hours daily watching television alone (Krantz-Kent, 2018), not including time on social media and streaming platforms. This pervasive media presence has fueled a widespread fascination, embedding dramatized depictions of psychopathy deeply within the public imagination.

However, despite their widespread appeal, media portrayals of psychopathy frequently suffer from significant inaccuracies and distortions. Many depictions prioritize sensationalism and dramatic exaggeration over fidelity to empirical psychological science, often relying on reductive or misleading interpretations of psychopathic traits. Such portrayals reinforce enduring stereotypes that deviate

substantially from clinical conceptualizations, thereby perpetuating misconceptions about the nature, etiology, and manifestations of psychopathy.

These misrepresentations not only shape public perceptions but may also impede informed societal discourse and influence policy decisions in ways that are misaligned with evidence-based understandings. Addressing the substantial gap between popular media portrayals and scientific knowledge is essential for fostering more nuanced, accurate, and responsible public conceptions of psychopathy.

Audience Admiration for Psychopathic Anti-Heroes: Implications for Public Understanding and Misconceptions

Doyle et al. (2024) demonstrated that participants expressed positive admiration toward characters portrayed as anti-heroes—figures defined by moral ambiguity—and those exhibiting psychopathic traits. This phenomenon suggests that audiences may be drawn to complex, non-conventional characters who challenge traditional moral frameworks, often glamorizing traits such as manipulation, charm, and emotional detachment commonly associated with psychopathy. The preference for such characters could indicate a limited or skewed public understanding of genuine psychopathic behavior, which in reality encompasses a range of detrimental and harmful actions beyond the often sensationalized media portrayals. Alternatively, this admiration might reflect a broader moral ambivalence within society, where the boundaries between right and wrong are perceived as fluid or subjective, allowing for a more sympathetic reception of morally complex individuals.

In relation to the present study, these findings provide critical context for interpreting public perceptions of psychopathy shaped by media exposure. The tendency to positively view psychopathic characters may contribute to misconceptions about the disorder, obscuring the serious psychological and social impairments experienced by clinically diagnosed individuals. Such misunderstandings have implications for public attitudes, policy-making, and clinical practice, highlighting the need for accurate educational efforts and media literacy initiatives that differentiate between fictionalized portrayals and empirical realities of psychopathy. Ultimately, Doyle et al.'s research underscores the importance of scrutinizing media influences as a factor in shaping societal perceptions and potentially perpetuating myths about psychopathic behavior.

Media Misrepresentations of Psychopathy: Inaccuracy and Humanization in Popular Culture

Davis et al. (2020) found that only 21% of cinematic characters labeled as psychopaths would meet clinical diagnostic criteria in reality, highlighting the pervasive inaccuracies in media portrayals. These sensationalized and

oversimplified depictions not only distort public understanding of psychopathy but also risk influencing juries, sentencing decisions, and societal attitudes, thereby undermining fairness and ethical standards within the criminal justice system.

Complementing these findings, Looi et al. (2023) examine the tendency of media narratives to "humanize" psychopathic characters, with a particular focus on the television series *The Sopranos*. While it is accurate that not all individuals with psychopathy are violent, the authors argue that media frequently conflates violent behavior with psychopathy to heighten dramatic tension and sustain audience engagement. By constructing characters who are both violent and psychologically complex, creators invite viewers to empathize with or become fascinated by these figures despite their antisocial behaviors. While effective as a narrative strategy, this approach sacrifices clinical accuracy, thereby perpetuating misleading stereotypes and reinforcing public misconceptions.

Through the dual framing of psychopathic characters as both dangerous and sympathetic, media narratives contribute to a distorted understanding of psychopathy that obscures the severe psychological and social realities associated with the condition. These misrepresentations hinder efforts to cultivate informed public discourse and evidence-based policy. Collectively, the studies by Davis et al. and Looi et al. underscore the critical need for greater responsibility among media producers and highlight the importance of advancing media literacy initiatives. By equipping audiences to critically interrogate fictional representations against scientific evidence, such efforts can mitigate the spread of misconceptions and support more nuanced societal conversations about psychopathy.

Empirical Questions

This study aims to further investigate the representation of psychopathy in media and its impact on public understanding of psychopathic behavior. Utilizing surveys administered to voluntary participants, the research will assess individuals' levels of media consumption related to psychopathic characters and evaluate their corresponding perceptions and knowledge of psychopathy. The primary objective is to determine whether media portrayals convey sufficiently accurate and clinically grounded information to enable audiences to form realistic and informed conceptions of psychopathic traits and behaviors. Based on the identified literature gaps, this study addresses these empirical questions:

1. To what extent does the quantity of media consumed featuring psychopathic characters (or characters exhibiting psychopathic behaviors) influence individuals' understanding of clinically defined psychopathy, either positively or negatively?

2. Does exposure to such media provide viewers with sufficient knowledge to accurately identify and describe the core attributes of psychopathic individuals?

3. Has viewing media portrayals of psychopathic characters altered participants' perceptions of psychopathy in real-world contexts?
4. How accurately do participants perceive media representations of psychopathy to reflect clinical realities?
5. How confident are participants in their own understanding of psychopathy and its defining characteristics?

Data and Methodology

Sampling/Participants/Demographic

This study employed a 2x2 factorial, between-subjects to rigorously investigate the relationship between participants' accuracy in identifying clinically recognized psychopathic attributes and the frequency with which they consumed media featuring characters explicitly portrayed as psychopaths. In this design, participants were categorized based on two independent variables: (1) high versus low frequency of media consumption involving psychopathic characters, and (2) high versus low accuracy in identifying psychopathic traits. This methodological approach enabled a systematic analysis of potential interaction effects between media exposure and diagnostic accuracy, providing insights into whether increased exposure to psychopathy-related media content enhances or impairs the public's understanding of genuine psychopathic characteristics. By employing this factorial design, the study sought to clarify whether frequent consumption of dramatized or fictionalized portrayals influences individuals' ability to differentiate between sensationalized media depictions and empirically validated diagnostic criteria, thereby informing broader discussions on media literacy and public education regarding psychopathy.

Individuals who accurately identify psychopathic attributes and frequently consume psychopathic character media.	Individuals who accurately identify psychopathic attributes and do not frequently consume psychopathic character media.
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Figure 1. Frequency of Psychopathic Character Media Consumption and Accuracy of Psychopathic Attributes

Note: This is a 2x2 factorial design between the accuracy of identifying psychopathic attributes and the frequency of psychopathic character media consumption.

Data Analysis

The study sample consisted of 36 voluntary participants residing in the Utah County, Utah, area. Recruitment was conducted on a fully voluntary basis, with

individuals self-selecting to participate without any form of coercion or incentive. This approach upholds ethical research principles by fostering genuine engagement and ensuring that participation was based on free and informed choice. Due to the survey's anonymous design, no identifying demographic information—such as gender, age, educational attainment, or occupation—was collected. This decision helped minimize potential confounding variables and reduced biases related to sociodemographic characteristics. All responses were collected via a secure online survey platform, which facilitated convenient access, encouraged participation, and maintained data integrity. Exclusive reliance on digital data collection further ensured participant anonymity and protected individual privacy throughout the research process. This methodological design aligns with ethical standards for human subjects research by prioritizing confidentiality and mitigating the risk of social desirability bias or self-censorship in responses. Consequently, the voluntary and anonymous nature of participation strengthened the validity and reliability of the data, supporting an unbiased exploration of public perceptions of psychopathy as influenced by media exposure.

The study utilized Google Forms to develop and distribute an online survey comprising 11 questions designed to assess participants' media consumption habits, personal familiarity or relationships with individuals diagnosed with psychopathy, and their knowledge of psychopathic attributes based on established clinical criteria. Participation required access to a mobile device for survey completion, and researchers likewise employed mobile devices to collect and analyze the responses. This approach ensured broad accessibility, streamlined data collection, and enabled efficient, real-time aggregation and analysis of participant responses within a secure and user-friendly digital environment.

Procedures

This study utilized a survey instrument consisting of 11 questions, developed via Google Forms to address the central empirical research objectives. The survey was distributed through multiple channels, including social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, as well as direct messaging applications shared by both researchers and participants, enabling wide and diverse participant recruitment. Participants completed the survey anonymously, with all responses securely stored within the Google Forms system upon submission. Upon completion of data collection, responses were exported to Microsoft Excel for systematic organization and analysis. Excel was employed to produce graphical visualizations that elucidated patterns and trends within the dataset. Responses were scored according to predetermined criteria specific to each item, with several questions utilizing ranking scales—such as ordering media consumption frequency or quantifying exposure levels—to facilitate quantitative analysis.

Participants also responded to "fill-in-the-blank" questions, identifying attributes they associated with psychopathy. These responses were assessed for

accuracy by comparison to the diagnostic criteria defined in the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5). This methodical scoring approach ensured that evaluations of participant knowledge were grounded in established clinical standards, thereby bolstering the validity and reliability of the study's findings.

Results

Interpretation of Findings

To evaluate response accuracy in Table 2, each individual participant answer was carefully examined by researchers and served as the decisive factor for classifying responses as either accurate or inaccurate. Accurate responses included traits such as "lack of empathy" and "manipulative tactics," which correspond to established clinical diagnostic criteria for psychopathy. In contrast, responses such as "serial killer" and "violent" were categorized as inaccurate, recognizing that while some individuals with psychopathy may display violent behavior, violence itself is neither a diagnostic criterion nor representative of all psychopathic individuals.

A binomial test was employed to determine whether exposure to media portrayals of psychopathic characters significantly affected participants' accurate recognition of clinically validated psychopathic attributes. Out of 36 participants, 16 (44.4%) demonstrated accurate understanding, whereas 20 (55.6%) did not. Under the null hypothesis assuming a 50/50 chance of accurate versus inaccurate responses, the p-value of 0.618 indicated no statistically significant deviation. These results imply that media representations of psychopathic characters do not significantly influence the public's accurate comprehension of psychopathy. Participants were equally likely to identify psychopathic traits correctly or incorrectly, suggesting that media exposure neither meaningfully improves nor impairs realistic understanding of psychopathic characteristics.
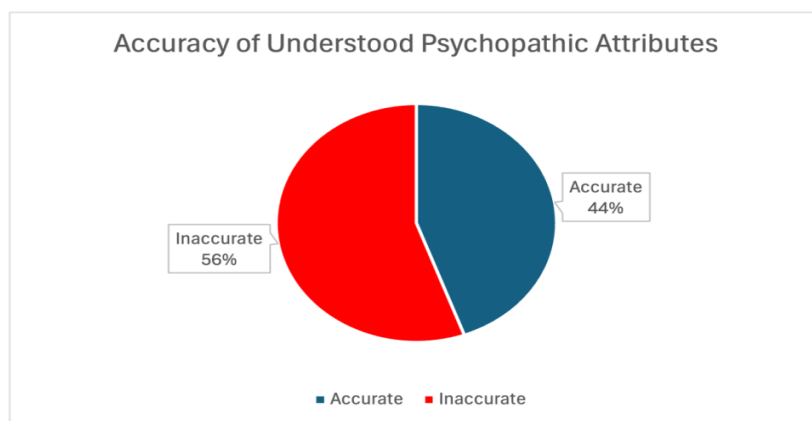

Figure 2. Accuracy of Understood Psychopathic Attributes

Note: The Percentages of Participants Who Were Deemed to Accurately or Inaccurately Understand Realistic Psychopathic Attributes (N=37).

Among the participants in Table 3, 22% initially reported that they did not consume media featuring characters explicitly identified as psychopaths. However, further inquiry revealed a discrepancy: when asked to specify media they had encountered with psychopathic characters, none indicated a complete absence of exposure. This inconsistency implies that, despite some participants not consciously recognizing or labeling these characters as psychopathic, all had, in fact, engaged with media portrayals of psychopathic individuals. Therefore, it was determined that media consumption involving psychopathic characters was effectively universal within the sample, albeit with varying degrees of participant awareness or recognition.
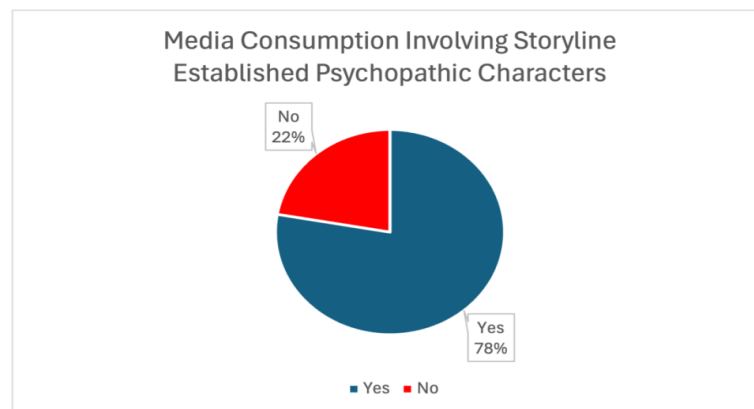

Figure 3. Media Consumption Involving Storyline Established Psychopathic Characters

Note: How many participants reported having seen media involving at least one character that was specifically detailed to have psychopathic attributes or diagnosed with psychopathy (N=37).

Among the media listed in Table 4 featuring psychopathic characters, the television series *Dexter* was the most commonly referenced by participants. Further analysis of media consumption patterns showed that television series were the preferred format among respondents, while podcasts were the least frequently consumed medium (see Figure 6). Importantly, the data confirmed that all participants had engaged with at least one of the example programs, either by watching or listening.
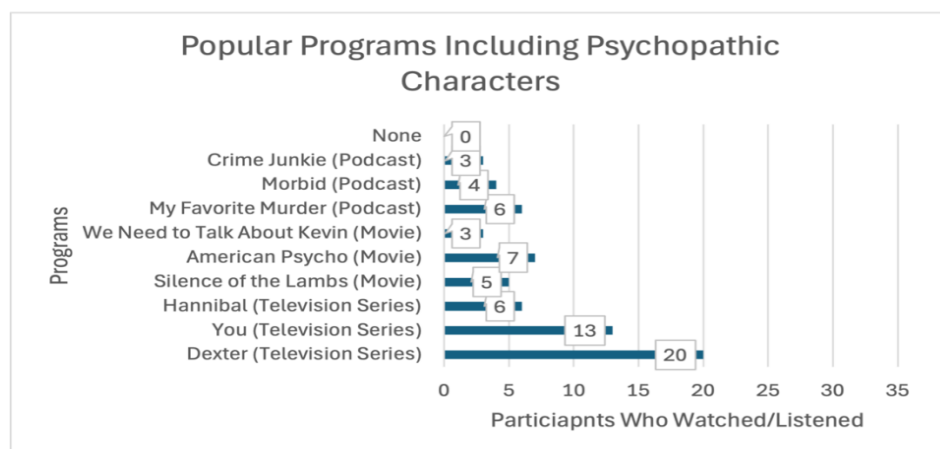

Figure 4. Popular Programs Including Psychopathic Characters

Note: Participant results of consumed media that includes a character with plot-defined psychopathic attributes (N=37).

As indicated in Table 5, participants reported a mean confidence level of 3.8, reflecting a prevalent sense of limited self-assurance in accurately identifying psychopathic traits. This moderate level of confidence suggests considerable uncertainty among respondents regarding their understanding of the clinical features that define psychopathy. Such uncertainty may stem from broader deficiencies in public education and access to accurate, evidence-based information, which are often compounded by the inconsistent, sensationalized, or dramatized depictions of psychopathic behavior prevalent in popular media. These findings highlight the critical need to improve media literacy and disseminate clearer, scientifically grounded resources, enhancing public knowledge and confidence in recognizing psychopathic attributes based on validated diagnostic criteria.
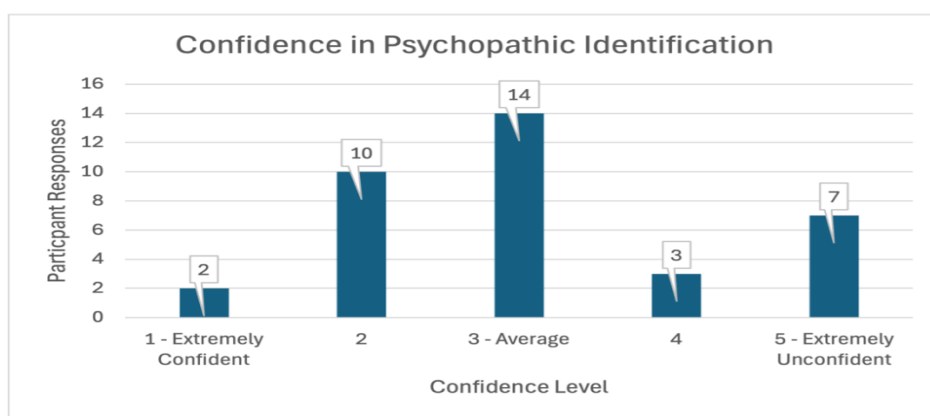

Figure 5. Confidence in Psychopathic Identification

Note: The exact number of participants who responded to each level of confidence in their ability to accurately identify psychopathic attributes (N=37).

As presented in Table 6, among the media formats surveyed—including television series, movies, podcasts, and internet content—television series emerged as the most frequently utilized medium. This was followed in descending order by movies, internet-based media, and, lastly, podcasts, which represented the least commonly consumed format among participants.
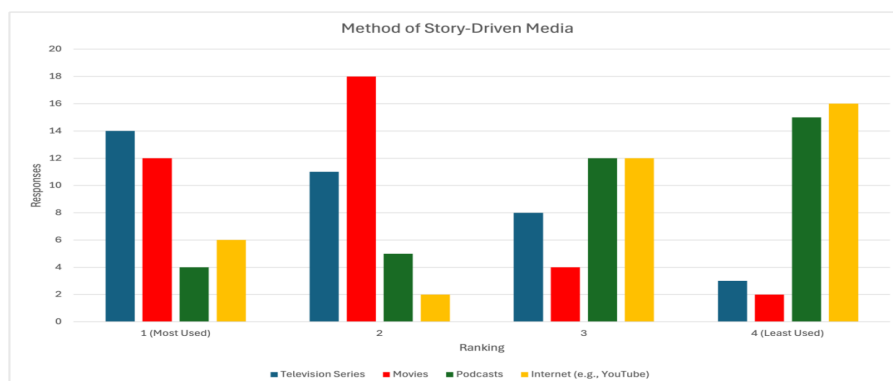

Figure 6. Method of Story-Driven Media

Note: The responses and rankings of participants based on their preferred method of media consumption (N=37).

Discussion

This study revealed that, despite all participants reporting consumption of media featuring psychopathic characters, there was no statistically significant influence of such media exposure on their accurate understanding of psychopathic traits as defined by clinical standards. This absence of a significant correlation contrasts with the findings of Davis et al. (2020), who noted that only 21% of media characters identified as psychopaths would meet formal diagnostic criteria, implying that media inaccuracies might be expected to negatively affect public comprehension. Conversely, the results align more closely with Looi et al. (2023), who highlighted the tendency of media to "humanize" psychopathic figures by attributing non-diagnostic traits, thereby creating unrealistic portrayals that can obscure accurate public perceptions.

A key limitation of this study is the relatively small sample size, which restricted statistical power and may have impacted the generalizability and reliability of the conclusions. Additional methodological limitations include the use of convenience sampling, dependence on self-reported data, and constraints related to time and resource availability. These factors collectively warrant cautious interpretation of the findings. The results suggest that portrayals of psychopathy in entertainment media may exert limited influence on the public's precise understanding of psychopathic characteristics. Future research should consider examining how various media formats—such as documentaries versus fictionalized dramas—differentially shape perceptions of psychopathy. Furthermore, investigating demographic factors (including age, gender, and educational background) could provide valuable insights into how diverse audiences interpret media representations and form their understanding of this complex psychological disorder.

Conclusion/Limitations/Future Scope

This study investigated the impact of media narratives on public perceptions of psychopathy, with a particular focus on the accuracy of these portrayals and their influence on the public's understanding of psychopathic traits. Despite participants' widespread exposure to media featuring psychopathic characters, the results revealed no statistically significant relationship between media consumption and the accurate identification of clinically valid psychopathic attributes. These findings suggest that dramatized and sensationalized media representations neither markedly improve nor diminish the public's ability to recognize psychopathy in line with established diagnostic criteria.

These results contribute to a nuanced and evolving body of literature examining the complex role of media in shaping public conceptions of psychological disorders. While prior studies have underscored the potential for media inaccuracies to foster public misconceptions, the present findings highlight a

degree of resilience in public perception, suggesting that audiences may not passively internalize misleading characterizations. Nonetheless, these conclusions must be interpreted cautiously in light of methodological constraints, including a limited sample size, regional specificity, reliance on convenience sampling, and the use of self-reported data.

The implications of this research are significant for media creators, educators, and mental health professionals. The persistence of inaccurate portrayals in popular media underscores the importance of advancing media literacy efforts aimed at fostering critical analysis of entertainment content. In addition, integrating discussions of media representations into educational and clinical contexts may help mitigate misconceptions and promote a more evidence-based understanding of psychopathy.

Future research should build upon these findings by utilizing larger and more demographically diverse samples, examining cross-cultural differences, and exploring the specific impacts of different media formats (e.g., documentaries, fictional narratives, true crime series). Furthermore, investigating the moderating effects of demographic variables—such as age, gender, and educational background—could offer valuable insights into how different audiences engage with and interpret media portrayals of psychopathy. Ultimately, bridging the gap between sensationalized media narratives and empirically grounded understandings of psychopathy will require collaborative efforts among scholars, media professionals, and mental health practitioners to foster a more accurate and socially responsible public discourse.

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