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The True Crime: The Legitimacy of the CSI Effect

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to shed light on the existence of the phenomenon known as the CSI Effect. The CSI Effect is the idea that viewers of crime-based television shows tend to believe they are more knowledgeable in relation to forensic terminology/processes than the average layperson. This notion in turn increases juror expectations of forensic evidence in court, which could result in a multitude of issues. While this paper does not pose the CSI Effect as a “bad” or a “good” thing, it nonetheless considers the consequences of the CSI Effect and the research that has been conducted thus far. In order to gauge public opinion about the CSI Effect and aspects of crime-based shows in general, an anonymous survey (n=249) was conducted where participants were asked to answer a series of five yes or no questions. The results of the study suggested that the public believes that these shows increase juror expectations, yet still find shows to be informative in regard to forensic practices. Additionally, participants also had high expectations themselves when it came to the presentation of DNA evidence in a general court case. In addition to the CSI Effect, other courtroom factors that could impact the judicial system are explored throughout this paper. Policy and educational recommendations are also proposed that could help subdue the stigma surrounding the CSI Effect. Ultimately, the CSI Effect was determined to be present to some extent, and its acknowledgement is required to benefit all sides of the courtroom.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| LIST OF FIGURES | iii |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS..... | iv |
| Chapter 1 - Leave It to the Experts..... | 1 |
| The CSI Effect | 2 |
| Research Questions..... | 3 |
| Importance | 3 |
| Chapter 2 - Literature Review | 5 |
| Historical Development of Forensic Evidence in Popular Culture..... | 5 |
| The CSI Television Franchise and Its Influence..... | 6 |
| Previous Research..... | 7 |
| Public Perception of Forensic Science..... | 9 |
| Chapter 3 - Methodology..... | 11 |
| Design and Approach..... | 11 |
| Data Collection | 12 |
| Results..... | 12 |
| Analysis | 15 |
| Chapter 4 - Myths versus Realities..... | 18 |
| Misconceptions Perpetuated by CSI Shows | 18 |
| CSI Effect versus Other Factors Influencing the Criminal Justice System | 19 |
| Chapter 5 – Recommendations..... | 22 |
| Policy Recommendations | 22 |
| Media Industry Guidelines for Responsible Portrayal of Forensic Science | 23 |
| Chapter 6 – Conclusion | 25 |
| Key Findings..... | 25 |
| Looking Forward | 25 |

LIST OF FIGURES

| | |
|--|----|
| Figure 1. Distribution of Answers to Question 1..... | 13 |
| Figure 2. Distribution of Answers to Question 2..... | 13 |
| Figure 3. Distribution of Answers to Question 3..... | 14 |
| Figure 4. Distribution of Answers to Question 4..... | 14 |
| Figure 5. Distribution of Answers to Question 5..... | 15 |

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Chapter 1 - Leave It to the Experts

Would you prescribe medicine to someone after seeing one season of *Grey's Anatomy*? Would you consider yourself a chef after a few episodes of *Hell's Kitchen*? Would you take to the rooftops in search of mischief after Marvel's newest superhero special? After only a few months of watching *Forensic Files*, I wanted to solve crimes. I stumbled across the show while aimlessly surfing through channels one evening. A singular episode instantly hypnotized me. During one sitting, I soaked in a plethora of information, each scientific word and phrase tickling my brain like a child experiencing their first firework show. I grew obsessed. I enlightened (pestered, perhaps) family, friends, and teachers daily with my newly profound knowledge. *I finally found something I enjoyed enough to spend the rest of my future studying and executing.* I yearned to unravel murder mysteries, crack cold-cases, and acquit the accused; *Forensic Files* portrayed forensic science as a challenging – yet incredibly intriguing – field, so I believed it.

Then, I stepped into reality.

As a current forensic science student, I advocate for a fair justice system and emphasize the use of physical evidence in investigations. However, crime-related television shows inadvertently glorify the investigative process. I pictured evidence as a constant: something that repeated itself in every case and never changed. Fingerprints, gunshot residue, and DNA litter every crime scene and will expeditiously expose the culprit! In the exaggerated world of television, this precisely represents crime scene investigation. Grueling hours of staring into a bright microscope and learning about optical crystallography proved to me that this field involves immense time and effort. I unknowingly fell victim to the CSI effect.

The CSI Effect

According to Amity University Forensic Science Department member Bhoopesh Kumar Sharma, “many people assume that they have a full understanding and knowledge base of crime scene investigation” (1). This statement refers to the recent increase of crime scene investigation shows and correctly defines the CSI effect. To further exemplify this idea, Evan Durnal of the University of Central Missouri Criminal Justice Department paints this picture: “A mysterious green ooze is injected into a brightly illuminated and humming machine; 10 [seconds] later, a printout containing a complete biography of the substance is at the fingertips of an attractive young investigator who exclaims “we found it!”” (2). The flashy imagery within this example accurately depicts the way media warps lengthy and detailed processes into quick and effortless tasks.

Dramatized television shows create a false impression of real-world situations, unintentionally causing viewers to associate fictional practices, ideas, and characters with reality. Nonfictional shows such as *Forensic Files* are just as guilty; they splice out the actual time it takes to collect evidence which leads the audience to believe that the investigation process requires little time. Simon A. Cole from the University of California’s Department of Criminology supports this notion with a survey regarding forensic scientists’ opinions on the areas that CSI shows distort the most where the “time spent” category received the most attention (3). Understandably, no viewer wishes to sit for hours (realistically days to months) waiting for answers. In reality, viewers generally watch television shows solely for entertainment, so why does an issue persist or even matter?

Research Questions

In the exploration of the CSI Effect, there lies a slew of questions which must be addressed in order to pinpoint its origin. Specifically, there are two main groups at stake: the forensic science community and the rest of society. Undoubtedly, the forensic science community considers this phenomenon to invertedly bias public view about the time and effort which goes into their respective line of work. The general public, however, may not realize the extent to these fallacies, or that they even exist. This thesis will delve into the public's knowledge concerning the CSI Effect and its consequences. Furthermore, it will examine their expectations in regard to evidence and the forensic process as a whole. The following questions will be researched in order to discern the ladder: "Are you familiar with the CSI Effect?", "Do you believe that shows based around investigating crime are accurate?", "Do you believe that crime-based shows are informative in the investigative and/or forensic process(es)?", "In regard to a general court case, would you expect DNA evidence to play a crucial role in reaching a verdict?", and "Do you believe that crime based shows have heightened the expectations of forensic evidence in criminal cases?". These questions intend to share insight on the public's perception of how crime-based television shows are viewed by society.

Importance

The CSI Effect dramatizes the investigation process, yet we must investigate the drama it causes. Luke Georgette claims that "jurors now have excessive expectations of the ability of the prosecution to produce forensic evidence linking the defendant to the crime" (4). On the surface, the CSI effect most directly influences jurors' anticipation and value for substantial proof in

criminal hearings. In response, incorrect convictions, false acquittals, and hung juries, can arise which indirectly impacts all case-associated parties. *Is this the case every time?* Not necessarily: It may not be that the CSI Effect is exclusively beneficial or harmless. However, the importance of the CSI Effect could reside within its own validity.

Within most of the recent research, studies primarily focus on the *problems* that the CSI Effect causes in the courtroom. Yet – from a different perspective – crime television shows expose jurors to an abundance of forensically relevant terminology despite their incorrect portrayal. Crime television shows give the audience a taste of the investigative process without presenting the “boring” portions. Crime television shows **entertain** viewers. Currently, researchers blame jurors for simply enjoying their favorite television series when they should truly inform society of the CSI Effect’s legitimacy.

A mutual understanding would prove to courtroom officials that jurors accept presented evidence (or lack thereof). In fact, Honorable Donald E. Shelton from the Criminology and Criminal Justice Program conducted a survey encompassing the CSI Effect’s control over the courtroom where “There was scant evidence in our survey results that CSI viewers were either more or less likely to acquit defendants without scientific evidence” (5). Such findings verify that the CSI Effect may not trigger as many courtroom concerns as most researchers claim, yet it still holds value in mentioning. Shelton confirms that “it is crucial for judges and lawyers to understand juror expectations for forensic evidence” (5). Jurors must reciprocate this need. Ultimately, Shelton’s research indicates that all areas of the courtroom benefit by acknowledging the CSI Effect’s existence. The CSI Effect must not inflict divisions amongst our justice system, for at the verdict, the decision made should represent one of fairness.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Historical Development of Forensic Evidence in Popular Culture

The perception of forensic science – while viewed mostly through media – revels in society’s obsession with death itself. From an entertainment perspective, viewers have become fascinated with the idea of mystery; when a murder is committed, the questions of “*who did it?*,” “*what happened?*,” “*how did it happen?*,” spark a great deal of interest. However, the first spectacle which catches a person’s eyes is usually the body. Most have never witnessed a deceased individual, yet news stories, television shows, and even video games normalize the concept of death. Dr Ruth Penfold-Mounce of the University of York states that “viewing death within the fictional context of the undead and forensics has made the corpse, particularly the opened and violated corpse, into an acceptable entertainment commodity” (6). Ultimately, it seems that the prevalence of corpses and death are intriguing to the public in the sense that it is observed through a screen where the viewer is safe; the screen adds an element of imagination and comfort.

The camera pans past the corpse, possibly with a knife in its chest or visible gunshot wound, to the detectives or scientists who will guide the viewer through the investigatory process. Forensic evidence has become prevalent most notably through crime-based television shows which dramatize and condense the lengthy and scientific aspects of investigation. In doing so, it captures its audience, where when the culprit is brought to justice, the viewers feel a sense of accomplishment as well. Penfold-Mounce adds that the most common shows consist of “*CSI, NCIS, Cold Case, Waking the Dead, The Body Farm and Silent Witness.*” He notably attributes a majority of this influence to the *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* television show and claims “it is

estimated that 40% of the science on CSI does not exist and most of the rest is performed in a way that crime lab personnel can only dream about” (6).

The CSI Television Franchise and Its Influence

Unsurprisingly, the CSI Effect earns its title from the *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* television show. The show itself aired from 2000 to 2015 and the franchise includes a multitude of spinoffs such as *CSI: Miami*, *CSI: Cyber*, and *CSI: NY*. While other television series contribute to the misinformation and lack of perspective surrounding forensic processes, the *CSI* series and its spinoffs have likely had the most profound impact. According to an article titled *CSI: From Television to the Courtroom*, “more than sixty-million people are believed to watch *CSI* every week” (7). Undoubtedly, this number is exceedingly high and was reported in 2012; with the access to reruns on cable and streaming services, it is likely that most people have been exposed to at least some form of this show in their lives. This reinforces the commonality of the CSI Effect in the sense that the series itself is exceptionally renowned and widespread.

The writer of the previously mentioned article, Caroline L. Kinsey, reports that *CSI* “portrays forensic science as infallible and absolute and depicts forensic examiners as super sleuths whose scientific wizardry encompass every area of forensic science” (7). While this may be true, it is worth noting that while *CSI* and other crime-based shows cut out the “boring” or unentertaining processes present in forensic investigations, they still demonstrate the principles of forensic science to the viewer: they answer – to some extent – the “how” portion of forensic science. They allow the audience to associate a specific aspect of forensic science and where it might be applied, regardless of if the process is completely accurate. For example, if blood is

found at a crime scene, a viewer may suspect that the investigators will use that to generate a DNA profile. While they may not show the extraction, polymerase-chain reaction, and amplification processes for entertainment purposes, the viewer can still garner some knowledge. While beneficial in this facet, this abbreviation has undeniable consequences in the real world; *CSI* may shed light on forensic science yet raises the expectations of its applications in a courtroom setting.

Previous Research

The research done on the CSI Effect thus far has been limited to two main ideas: it is a dire issue, and it is not. While this thesis examines both ends, it will mainly serve to prove its existence instead of addressing whether or not it holds weight as being labeled as a “problem.” Nevertheless, it is pertinent to discuss these perspectives.

Firstly, there have been a number of researchers who have attempted to pinpoint the CSI Effect as a concern. For example, a study was conducted by researchers at the Arizona State University which tested two main hypotheses which the CSI Effect relates to: “burdening the prosecution by creating greater expectations about forensic science than can be delivered” and “burdening the defense by creating exaggerated faith in the capabilities and reliability of forensic science” (8). In their study, they prepared a mock transcript and presented it to 48 Arizona State University students who, once finished reading the transcript, answered a questionnaire regarding both the trial as a whole and the forensic evidence (8). The students were grouped in terms of how frequently they watch CSI-like crime shows where results indicated “forensic science viewers were more critical of the forensic evidence presented in our trial” and “forensic

science viewers expressed marginally more confidence in their verdicts” (8). It is evident, based on this small-scale study alone, that there could be a dilemma at hand with both juror expectations as well as the belief that CSI viewers better understand the work of forensic scientists than a non-CSI viewer.

On the other hand, some papers have discredited the influence of the CSI Effect in the courtroom due to a lack of measurability; it proves difficult to collect data on this interesting phenomenon and this fact alone has led to researchers to disprove its notoriety. In a 2006 study by Kimberlianne Podlas (a professor of Media Law at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro) titled *The “CSI Effect” and Other Forensic Fictions*, the author claims that the impact of the CSI Effect on the judicial system is not “grounded in case studies or statistical data” (9). Interestingly enough, this paper was published only a year before the previous source, which included a case study on the CSI Effect (both papers were published nearly two decades ago during which numerous studies may have been produced). However, the author’s main point is that there is little to substantiate the theory regarding real world, empirical evidence. Podlas concludes with “What is labeled a CSI Effect may more accurately be described as a rationalization embraced by law enforcement who find themselves on the losing side of a prosecution” (9). In other words, Podlas considers the CSI Effect to be an excuse; while crime-based shows may heighten the expectations of a jury, it should be the work of the judicial system which ultimately convinces them in one direction or another.

Public Perception of Forensic Science

The public perception of forensic science is a complex combination of fascination, skepticism, and reliance. The prevalence of and need for forensic evidence within the courtroom have created an obsession with the public to desire more. Forensic evidence tells a story in which testimony cannot; it can prove facts and details about a crime scene without a witness, or where witnesses are unreliable. Compared to other branches of science, it is completely unique in the sense that it combines various scientific techniques in order to reach a singular goal. The public can more readily understand the significance of a name without knowing the entirety of its process. For example, simply saying the suspect's DNA was used to convict them is much more straightforward than in contrast, describing the intricate complexities behind DNA, and the hours of procedures done in order to link a suspect to that DNA sample. The public's fixation upon forensic science stems from its own nature; it is used to solve "mysteries" which will unquestionably draw attention due to society's yearning for entertainment and the satisfaction of a just outcome.

As stated, forensic science is not a science in itself. Instead, it is an applied science which can be used in a courtroom setting in order to bring about righteous justice. While a forensic scientist may specialize specifically in fingerprints, DNA, toxicology, ballistics, et cetera, one would be hard-pressed to find someone who is proficient in every science applied in forensics. Interestingly, the public has a particularly strong fascination with DNA since its widespread implementation. In a recent study titled *Public beliefs about the accuracy and importance of forensic evidence in the United States*, researchers determined that "individuals in the United States hold a pessimistic view of the forensic science investigation process, believing that an error can occur about half of the time at each stage of the process" (10). The study focused on

multiple aspects of the subjects' view on forensic science, and specifically questioned them on their beliefs regarding different disciplines of forensic science. In their findings, they reported that "respondents believe that forensics are far from perfect, with accuracy rates ranging from a low of 55% for voice analysis to a high of 83% for DNA analysis, with most techniques being considered between 65% and 75% accurate" (10). These statistics suggest that DNA analysis is in fact one of the most reliable forms of evidence to jurors/the public. This is a double-edged sword: the public may be more enticed to believe an argument if DNA evidence is present, yet it undoubtedly shows that there is more of an expectation for DNA evidence to be presented, when it may be absent or of little use. Despite hesitation amongst the public in varying forensic disciplines, the authors assert that the "respondents still believe that forensic evidence is a key part in a criminal case with about 30% believing that the absence of forensic evidence is enough for a prosecutor to drop a case, and roughly 40% believing that when forensic evidence is present, it is enough to convict a defendant" (10). This information exposes the double standard of forensic science in the eyes of the public where skepticism and reliance overlap.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

Design and Approach

In order to understand the public's knowledge and opinion on the CSI Effect and crime-based television shows in relation to forensic science, an anonymous survey was conducted with five questions requiring a "yes" or "no" response. The questions included in the survey were those previously mentioned in the introduction portion of this thesis:

1. Are you familiar with the CSI Effect?
2. Do you believe that shows based around investigating crime are accurate?
3. Do you believe that crime-based shows are informative in the investigative and/or forensic process(es)?
4. In regard to a general court case, would you expect DNA evidence to play a crucial role in reaching a verdict?
5. Do you believe that crime-based shows have heightened the expectations of forensic evidence in criminal cases?

The goal of this study was to not only gain insight on public opinion, but to also assess the existence of the CSI Effect. The simplicity of this survey allowed for participants to easily share their thoughts without a detailed explanation.

Question 1 simply asks the subject if they are aware of the CSI Effect. Questions 2 and 3 are more directed towards the public's opinion on crime-based shows in relation to the forensic science aspect; the questions seem similar but are showcasing the difference between perhaps the plot of a show versus the forensic procedures presented in a show. Question 4 weighs the public opinion specifically on DNA evidence and its reliability in the courtroom. Finally, question 5

asks the subject to think about how crime-based shows may impact the presentation and/or presence of forensic evidence in the courtroom.

Data Collection

As mentioned, the data in this study was obtained through a five-question, anonymous survey. The survey itself was arranged on Google Forms, where participants were able to voluntarily click a link to take the survey without a time restriction. The link to the survey was posted on several social media platforms (Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook) in order to reach the widest range of individuals. The only information collected from participants were their responses; no personal or contact information was submitted. The survey was open from January 11, 2024, until January 19, 2024. In total, 249 volunteers recorded answers. The data was summarized through Google Forms in a pie-chart arrangement with corresponding percentages in each section of the chart.

Results

For question 1, “are you familiar with the CSI Effect,” only 28.1% of respondents reported “yes” while the other 71.9% responded with “no”, as seen in Figure 1 (n=249).

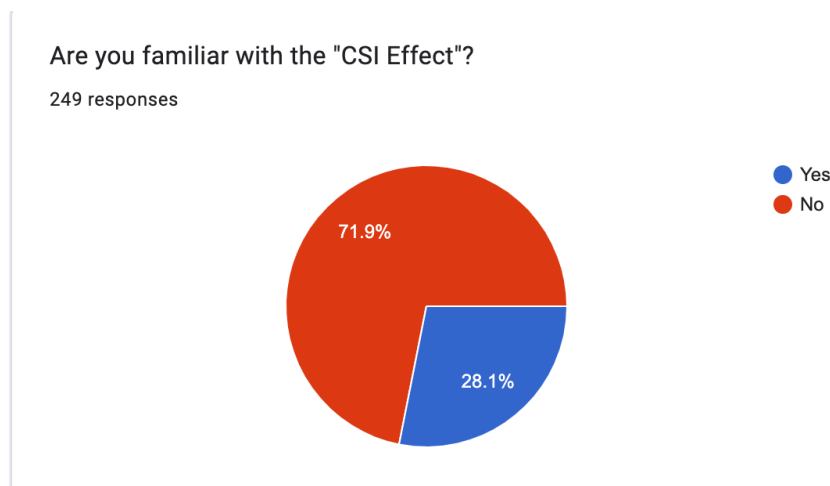


Figure 1. Distribution of Answers to Question 1

For question 2, “do you believe that shows based around investigating crime are accurate,” 29.3% of respondents answered “yes” while 70.7% of respondents answered “no” as seen in Figure 2 (n=249).

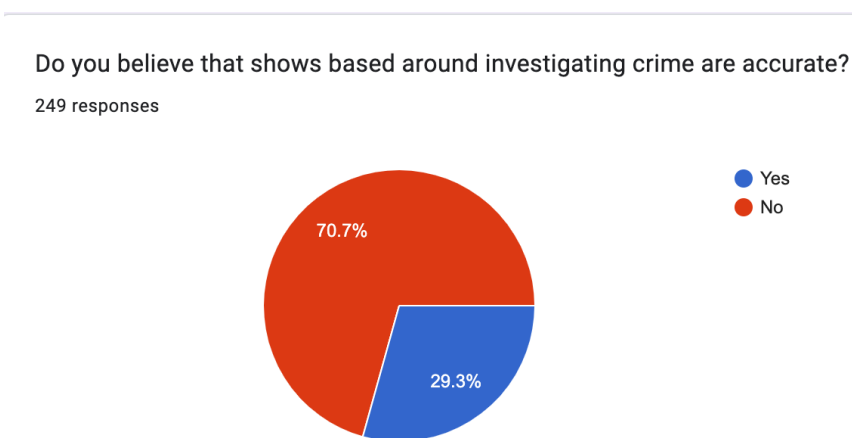


Figure 2. Distribution of Answers to Question 2

For question 3, “Do you believe that crime-based shows are informative in the investigative and/or forensic process(es),” 61.8% of respondents answered “yes” while 38.2% of respondents answered “no” as seen in Figure 3 (n=249).

Do you believe that crime based shows are informative in the investigative and/or forensic process(es)?

249 responses

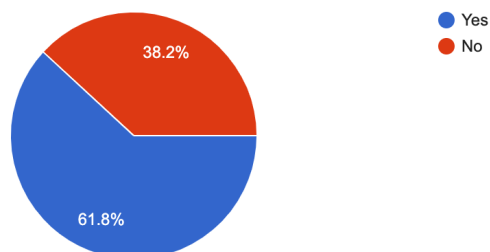


Figure 3. Distribution of Answers to Question 3

For question 4, “In regard to a general court case, would you expect DNA evidence to play a crucial role in reaching a verdict,” 86.7% of respondents answered “yes” while only 13.3% of respondents answered “no” as seen in Figure 4 (n=249).

In regard to a general court case, would you expect DNA evidence to play a crucial role in reaching a verdict?

249 responses

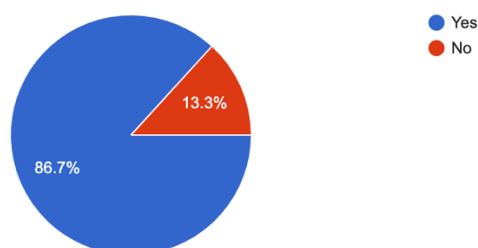


Figure 4. Distribution of Answers to Question 4

For question 5, Do you believe that crime-based shows have heightened the expectations of forensic evidence in criminal cases,” 89.6% of respondents answered “yes” while only 10.4% of respondents answered “no” as seen in Figure 5 (n=249).

Do you believe that crime based shows have heightened the expectations of forensic evidence in criminal cases?

249 responses

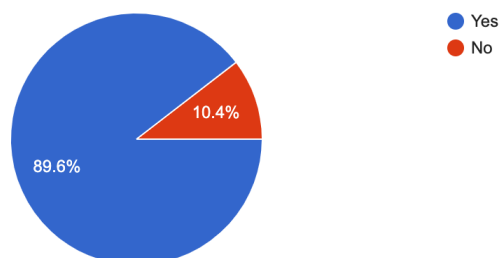


Figure 5. Distribution of Answers to Question 5

Analysis

Question 1 (Figure 1) gives a starting point as to where the public stands on the idea of the CSI Effect. While the majority of respondents were unfamiliar with this theory, more than a quarter reported being aware of its existence, highlighting that although those most affected are typically defense or prosecution teams, a fair number of people are still cognizant of its presence. In regard to awareness about the CSI Effect, it would be generally beneficial if a majority of the public recognized that what they see on television is not always true, especially crime-based shows. While this is not the fault of the viewer – and little blame is to be placed on television broadcasters – it is certainly something which should be emphasized in lieu of the CSI Effect's consequences.

Question 2 (Figure 2) gauges the public's view about the accuracy of crime-based shows, and the question itself is seemingly open for interpretation by the participant. For example, a majority of the participants in this survey reported that crime-based shows are inaccurate; whether they believe the plot and/or scenarios presented in the show are erroneous is unknown,

yet there is insight to be seen in relation to Question 3 (Figure 3), where a majority of the participants indicate that specifically the investigative process(es) portrayed are informative. While there is a distinction to be made in the relation between something being “accurate” versus “informative,” it is nonetheless intriguing to see these differing distributions. This also supports the argument that the CSI Effect in its totality may not be as detrimental as some research proposes. While these shows themselves may be highly dramatized for the sake of entertainment, they nonetheless bare a base-level picture of forensic and investigatory terminology even if they may not be entirely correct in their applications to the real world. Viewers most likely are not watching *CSI* in order to learn scientific reasoning. However, in relation to the other studies and this data, viewers may be more critical of real-world scenarios in which they believe they understand these concepts because they have seen them on television.

In the modern age of forensic science, DNA evidence is held to a high standard. Like fingerprints, the DNA of a person is an individualizing characteristic which is able to pinpoint a suspect from an entire population. In question 4 (Figure 4), it is abundantly evident that the public believes that DNA is an integral part in reaching a verdict. Interestingly enough, in the previously mentioned study, *Public beliefs about the accuracy and importance of forensic evidence in the United States* (10), 83% of respondents felt that DNA analysis was accurate, while in this study, a similar 86.7% of respondents felt that DNA evidence would be crucial in reaching a verdict. Whether this is a mere coincidence or not, it is nevertheless remarkable to see the value that the public holds in regard to DNA evidence. In relation to the CSI Effect, it is important to note that DNA evidence is not always a “coup de grace” factor. While the majority of the public may think that if a crime happens and DNA is found, the case is immediately solved, this is not always the case. A thorough investigation will require all aspects of a scene to

reach a conclusion. For example, if a suspect lives with the victim, their DNA is likely to be all over the scene, thus rendering DNA evidence useless. Additionally, DNA evidence may be highly degraded or simply not found during a scene. Given the data of this study, it is alarming that the majority of the public would expect DNA evidence to be an essential factor in a general court case. However, these results are also a product of the participants' interpretation of a "general court case," where it could be proposed that a more heinous crime such as a murder or sexual assault may raise expectations for evidence compared to perhaps vandalism or shoplifting.

Finally, question 5 (Figure 5) measures the public's view on heightened expectations of forensic evidence in the courtroom due to crime-based shows: essentially the CSI Effect. Astoundingly, a whopping 89.6% of respondents agreed that yes, these shows do enact an increased anticipation of forensic evidence in criminal trials. This question may be one that few have pondered on their own while watching a crime-based show, yet it is refreshing to see that, when put into perspective, these shows can skew the minds of the audience into believing the inflated depictions of forensic capabilities. Of course, in dramatized crime-based shows there will be a smoking gun, hundreds of perfectly preserved fingerprints, and bloody shoe impressions because that is what keeps viewers entertained. As this data suggests, the public realizes that due to the exaggerated nature of these shows, a jury might expect a crime scene to contain all of these components and when they are absent, the jury may become skeptical or curious as to why.

Chapter 4 - Myths versus Realities

Misconceptions Perpetuated by CSI Shows

CSI shows, while amusing and mesmerizing, often perpetuate misconceptions about forensic science that can distort public understanding. One prevalent fallacy is the portrayal of forensic investigations as quick, seamless processes that always lead to conclusive results. In reality, forensic analysis is often time-consuming and meticulous, requiring thorough examination and interpretation of evidence. For example, crime-based shows display these processes as being highly efficient; there is typically an abundance of evidence, and a suspect is usually brought to justice. Clearly, this is not always the case. In a paper titled *The effectiveness of forensic evidence in the investigation of volume crime scenes*, researchers declare that “Due to the length of the investigation process and the many factors influencing outcomes at various stages, there are numerous factors that can lead to attrition in a case” where attrition is “the discrepancy between the number of crimes committed, and the number of crimes subsequently prosecuted” (11). In an attrition-related study, it was found that “27% of cases remained undetected, due to suspect’s being eliminated from the scene for legitimate reasons” and “in those cases, where a crime was detected and charged, 11% of cases resulted in no suspect conviction” (12). This illustrates that although crime occurs, there may not always be a conviction (as seen on TV); there are multiple aspects that can influence a case which forensics/the investigation process may fall short on uncovering evidence.

In contrast to crime-based television, real world cases – from investigation to verdict – take months, even years to complete. Take for example the O.J. Simpson trial: a nationwide case which left Americans glued to their televisions. The murder of Nicole Brown Simpson and

Ronald Goldman occurred on June 12, 1994, and a not guilty verdict was reached by the jury on October 3, 1995: over an entire year in length (13). However, a series on streaming services, *The People v. O.J. Simpson: American Crime Story*, is a fast-paced documentary consisting of ten episodes each spanning about an hour in runtime. It is clearly difficult to create a binge-worthy series that consists of every moment throughout the entirety of a case of this magnitude, and thus it is shortened to appeal to an audience. Additionally, this case was one of the largest criminal hearings in history; even a person with the fame and public status of O.J. Simpson still had to wait a great deal of time to hear a verdict. In other criminal cases, this process will most likely be even longer and not warrant enough notoriety to be deserving of an entire series. Furthermore, anthology series such as *Forensic Files* consist of smaller scale crimes, which are condensed into half-hour shows; while informative, they also cut out portions of these processes. Ultimately, the major misconception about crime shows contribute to the CSI Effect in the sense that they significantly reduce the amount of time and effectiveness of the investigation and forensic analysis processes which lead viewers to believe that anything not shown is not as important.

CSI Effect versus Other Factors Influencing the Criminal Justice System

In addition to the possible impact the CSI Effect could have on the criminal justice system, there are a number of other factors which can have an influence on the criminal justice system. One such factor is socioeconomic status: income level and access to legal representation can profoundly influence the outcomes of criminal cases. In the book *The Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Prison*, authors Jeffrey Reiman and Paul Leighton state “when crimes are defined in law, the system concentrates primarily on the predatory acts of the poor and tends to exclude

or deemphasize the equally or more dangerous predatory acts of those who are well off” (14).

This statement suggests that the prosecution of crime is a product of the criminal justice system being more vigilant of actions committed by poorer citizens. This idea is reiterated through the implicit bias present with all aspects of the courtroom, and even society as a whole in their beliefs about crime. For example, if the two main suspects in a murder case were a homeless person and a renowned surgeon, a jury, judge, and even the public may be biased into believing the person of a higher socioeconomic status (the surgeon) is less likely to be the culprit. To substantiate this illustration, a 2006 survey by the National Center for State Courts found that Californians believe the level of fairness in state courts is least for those with low incomes and non-English speakers and nationally, 62% of Americans believe the courts favor the wealthy (15). While the CSI Effect is more likely produce higher expectations of evidence presented by expert witnesses, the bias derived from socioeconomic status in relation to the criminal justice system negatively impacts the defendant which could result in wrongful sentences or convictions.

A further component which may influence the criminal justice system stems from policing practices. In recent years, there has been a noticeable stigma between the public and police agencies; media headlines and anti-police movements have generally portrayed law enforcement agencies as troublesome or unreliable. In fact, in a study conducted from 2011 to 2016 examining archival news media clips on policing ($n = 200$), “media coverage over time has used a more negative tone in discussing police–citizen interactions” (16). Public distrust of policing may impact decision making and judgement at the local, state, and federal judiciary levels, however, there is more to be discussed when considering police training in relation to evidence collection and the investigation process. For example, while police officers undergo an

immense amount of preparation to perform their everyday jobs, when it comes to assessing and documenting a crime scene, how equipped are they? For example, Dr. Richard English of *The Police Chief Magazine* notes “Some agencies do not have formal crime scene units, and use detectives, deputies, police officers, and property and evidence custodians to respond to and process crime scenes” (17). This is an alarming statement in regard to the CSI Effect, where if the evidence collected at a scene is not substantial enough to convince a jury, or if evidence was missed or documented incorrectly, false verdicts may be reached. English goes on to claim that “in many cases, these personnel are simply not qualified,” where the investigation process is perhaps the most important process for a victim (17). Ultimately, a lack of police training in crime scene investigation can have a plethora of consequences including wrongful convictions, case backlogs, the erosion of public trust, and an increase in hazard to officers’ safety.

Chapter 5 – Recommendations

Policy Recommendations

Policy recommendations for legal institutions dealing with the CSI Effect should focus on addressing misconceptions about forensic evidence while ensuring fair trials and upholding the integrity of the criminal justice system. Firstly, an education and training program for judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, and even jurors would be beneficial in increasing awareness about the limitations of forensic evidence and the reality of criminal investigations. Such training could allow legal professionals to effectively address and counteract the CSI Effect during trials in addition to teaching them how to manage jurors' expectations by presenting evidence in a neutral manner. Another approach could focus on the requirement of expert witnesses to provide clear explanations of the reliability and limitations of the evidence they present. This would allow jurors to make more informed decisions without the influence from media portrayal. Finally, implementing pre-trial procedures, such as voir dire questioning of jurors, may identify and address potential bias related to the CSI Effect. Such procedures could involve surveying jurors about their exposure to crime-based shows in addition to their prior understanding of forensic evidence.

A second avenue to attempt to educate the public on the CSI Effect and its consequences could involve implementing forensically relevant curriculum into schools and universities. By integrating lessons (or entire courses) focusing on forensic science and criminal investigation into perhaps science and/or social studies at the high school and undergraduate levels, students would learn the limitations and capabilities of forensic evidence. Furthermore, it may be beneficial for students to participate in hands on learning experiences; mock crime scene

investigations or forensic science workshops could engage students in the practical application of forensic techniques and investigative methods. Additionally, schools and universities could partner with local law enforcement agencies, forensic laboratories, or criminal justice organizations to facilitate experiential learning opportunities and promote collaboration between academia and the criminal justice field. The CSI Effect is a phenomenon that must be acknowledged, and the most direct way to do so lies within the education of society about its existence.

Media Industry Guidelines for Responsible Portrayal of Forensic Science

The media industry plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of forensic science through its portrayal in various forms of entertainment, including television shows, movies, and books. To mitigate the potential negative effects of the CSI Effect, media producers and creators can adhere to guidelines for responsible portrayal of forensic science. Firstly, crime-based media should strive for accuracy and realism in the depiction of forensic science techniques, procedures, and technologies. Creators should collaborate with forensic experts and professionals in order to ensure that portrayals of forensic science are grounded in scientific principles and reflect real-world practices. To further extend this proposal, educational elements could be incorporated into media productions. For example, crime-based television shows could offer supplementary materials with their series such as behind-the-scenes documentaries or online resources that connect to specific episodes involving forensic methods. In a more straightforward approach, television shows could provide context and clarification to help audiences distinguish between entertainment and reality; disclaimers or brief messages before or

after media presentations to remind viewers that the portrayal of forensic science may be dramatized or fictionalized for narrative purposes. While educating the public through legal institution policies and schooling, it is ultimately crime-based shows which berth the CSI Effect. Therefore, it is equally pertinent that the media industry contributes to a more informed and nuanced understanding of the role of forensic evidence in criminal investigations.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

Key Findings

Within the study conducted, it appears that the public sees the line between fact and fiction when it comes to crime-based dramas, yet they still hold high expectations when it comes to evidence presented in court. The results prove that while a majority of the public is unaware of the CSI Effect, they still realize its implications. Other studies have been consistent with the findings in this thesis; however, the question must still be answered: does the CSI Effect truly exist? Based upon the data collected in this research, along with a thorough literature review and comparison to other courtroom factors, it is apparent that the CSI Effect exists to some extent. The increase of jurors' expectations of forensic evidence in a courtroom setting in addition to the prevalence of crime-based television supports the notion that viewers feel more knowledgeable simply from watching these shows. Despite opponents and supporters of the CSI Effect being posed as a major issue, it is still pertinent that the CSI Effect's existence is acknowledged by both sides of the courtroom; it would not be detrimental if the judiciaries and the public were informed on the limitations of forensic science. The importance of the CSI Effect lies in its validity. By emphasizing its legitimacy, all areas of the courtroom benefit.

Looking Forward

When we correctly recognize the implications of the CSI Effect, we pave the way for an unbiased judicial system, a more intelligent jury, and an overall better understanding of the investigative process. Most people uninvolved in the investigative process fail to recognize the

means of evidence collection where dramatized crime shows only highlight interesting – and mainly false – aspects. No group truly holds the blame; a collective effort must surmount the blurriness between the fallacies and realities of crime scene investigation. The lives of the falsely accused may lie within the hands of the jury. A jury plagued by the CSI Effect may demand multiple fingerprints, substantial DNA evidence, and clear-cut eyewitness testimony to come to a decision. Informing the misinformed could effectively improve our judicial system and restore order in the court.

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