

Understanding Public Perceptions Towards Offender Profiling

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Abstract

Over the past few decades, there has been extensive research on what offender profiling is and the predictions made using criminal profiles. However, there is minimal exploration on how profilers, also known in the UK as Behavioural Investigative Advisers (BIAs), contribute to criminal investigations, the effectiveness of the technique and on public perceptions towards the concept of offender profiling (Marshall & Alison, 2007). Consequently, this highlights the importance of this study as it will aim to uncover research around the area of offender profiling that has not been delved into as extensively which includes public interpretation towards criminal profiling. Additionally, this research will aim to identify misconceptions of the role of offender profiling whilst exposing how the public's knowledge of crime through crime dramas, documentaries, the news and other media types (also known as crime consumption) can affect the public's perception on investigative psychology.

Key Words: *Offender Profiling; Behavioural Investigative Advisers (BIAs); Police; Beliefs.*

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1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, there has been extensive research on what offender profiling is and the predictions made using criminal profiles. However, there is minimal exploration on how profilers, also known in the UK as Behavioural Investigative Advisers (BIAs), contribute to criminal investigations, the effectiveness of the technique and on public perceptions towards the concept of offender profiling (Marshall & Alison, 2007). Consequently, this highlights the importance of this study as it will aim to uncover research around the area of offender profiling that has not been delved into as extensively which includes public interpretation towards criminal profiling. Additionally, this research will aim to identify misconceptions of the role of offender profiling whilst exposing how the public's knowledge of crime through crime dramas, documentaries, the news and other media types (also known as crime consumption) can affect the public's perception on investigative psychology.

1.1 The focus of this research

This research will focus on initially defining offender profiling and creating an understanding of what profilers do in England and Wales. Through the literature review, examples of cases where offender profiling was applied will be explored (see Willmott et al., 2018) as well as studies conducted by other researchers on police officer's perceptions on profiling and broader police training (e.g. Ryan et al., 2018). Additionally, focus will be drawn upon the question of validity and effectiveness of offender profiling and issues that the technique can produce. The literature review will also provide an insight into how crime consumption can have effects on perceptions of crime and forensic knowledge which leads to exploring misconceptions surrounding offender profiling. This research will focus on how the public understand offender profiling and its contributions to criminal investigations in order to illustrate the effectiveness of criminal profiling and how it is valued. This research will also include throughout acknowledgement of the work of other researchers such as David Canter (2017) and others who have used offender profiling methods such as Willmott and Ioannou (2017) with rioters, who define offender profiling as "the process by which individuals, drawing on their clinical or other professional experience, make judgments about the personality traits or psychodynamics of the perpetrators of crimes". It will also explore the work of other researchers such as Vicary & Zaikman (2017), Williams and colleagues (2023), and Hogan (2019) who explore the links between crime consumption and how it shapes perceptions and knowledge on crime.

With offender profiling being a consistent topic of interest in recent decades (Ainsworth, 2001), it is necessary to mainly focus and draw attention to this study's aim which is to uncover how the public view criminal profiling in furtherance of understanding what it is that the public are interested about and if it is because of the false representations that the media provide or if it is because of genuine

intrigue in how profilers aid the police and the work they contribute. Equally, this research will aim to evaluate through the study if specific sociodemographic factors, different types of crime media and frequency of crime watching can have an influence on public perceptions towards offender profiling.

1.2 The importance of this research

There has been lots of popular and extensive literature published on offender profiling but there is very little known about its current state or findings (Fox & Farrington, 2018) within the public's knowledge. With there being little research on public perceptions towards offender profiling, it is necessary for my study to highlight various demographics responses to criminal profiling in order to contribute to research and to get a more generalised view on public opinions. As there is presumed misunderstandings of offender profiling, this research will be able to provide how the public view the role of BIAs and then compare the data collected to the factual understanding of what profiling is and its support to criminal investigations. This will then illustrate any links between public perceptions and how offender profiling is typically portrayed. Also, considering that there is currently no quantitative data on the general public's understanding of criminal profiling, my research will add to existing literature by providing a new, original scale for 'perceptions of profilers' through quantitative data collection.

As crime content is becoming increasingly popular, which impact public perceptions towards crime (Sowersby et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2023), people are showing more interest in profilers and the work that they do however they are being misled by the crime shows that they consume as BIAs and other profilers such as FBI profilers are not portrayed accurately. This shows a significance for this research as it is important for the public to understand the role of profiling as profilers are a part of tax funding as they are a part of police services (*UNSD — Classification Detail*, 2023) therefore, it is imperative for members of the public to have a greater understanding of what their taxes are contributing towards. Not only is it important for the public to be aware of what they are funding, it is also critical for the public to understand the work that profilers contribute to investigation when they hear cases aided by profilers in the news; this can ensure they make a correct judgement on profilers instead of being lead by the media.

1.3 Defining Offender Profiling

It is important to note that in 2001, the UK replaced the term 'offender profiler' with 'Behavioural Investigative Advisor' (BIA) which they are now known as. This differs from what is known as a Geographical Profiler (see Willmott et al., 2021). It was agreed that investigators would only utilise the services of 'Association of chief police officers (ACPO) approved' BIAs (Alison & Rainbow, 2011). In the UK, every BIA who had been active in the past 12 months had to follow the BIA working conditions presented by ACPO and had to have the work annually audited and evaluated by the ACPO Sub-

Committee for behavioural science which consists of prominent psychologists and senior police officers under the guidance of the ACPO lead for behavioural science (Alison & Rainbow, 2011). The audit panel also had the authority to either renew or revoke the BIAs ACPO approved status for the following year. The ACPO Sub-Committee was used until 2017 when oversight of BIAs was transferred to the National Crime Agency (NCA) (Sigurdardottir et al., 2023). Today, there is no formal audit or evaluation of BIA reports in the NCA however, BIAs must conduct their own peer review process. Sigurdardottir et al, (2023) highlight that there are currently three full-time BIAs used by the NCA, two part-time forensic clinical psychologists (FCPs) and one geographical profiler in the UK and they occasionally consult together to combine their expertise for a report (Willmott et al., 2021). In the United States, profilers are labelled criminal profilers, or they are a part of FBI profilers. The FBI established a Behavioural Science Unit (BSU) where the subject of human behaviour is evaluated in more depth, from this a specialised unit of FBI profilers were formed. Similarly to the UK with BIAs, they assist police investigations however FBI profilers sort through prioritisation of already developed suspects as well as generating new suspects and analyse reoccurring patterns in behaviour (Bumgarner, 2008). Whilst BIAs role is similar, they provide more advice for the police and suggest direction for the investigation.

Although different definitions of offender profiling have been generated, it is generally regarded as “a technique for identifying the major personality and behavioural characteristics of an individual based upon an analysis of the crimes he or she has committed” (Douglas et al. 1986, p.405.). Profiling can be used to support criminal investigations by providing a profile of likely offenders who may have committed a certain crime. Offender profiling, in basic terms, can be defined as “the process of using all available information about a crime, crime scene and a victim to compose a profile of the unknown offender” (Ainsworth, 2001). However, as noted by Fox and Farrington (2018) “there appears to be substantial variation in what is considered to be OP (offender profiling), who is conducting it, the methodology and approach that is used, the findings that are achieved, as well as where and how the results are presented” (p.1248). Due to the variations in defining the role of offender profiling and the slight differences between countries, there has been a lot of scepticism about the utility of profilers and their reliability. In recent decades, criminal profiling has developed scientific methodologies and more specialised profiling services have emerged thus evolving from what was once mere educational guesswork (Chifflet, 2014). Scientific methods can be depicted through thorough observation, reviewing statistical information (Willmott & Oostinga, 2017), and interpreting and adapting results by examining similarities of offender patterns, however it is important to mention that whilst there is an element of science being used, any discipline that involves interpreting human behaviour cannot be referred to as pure scientific methods (Turvey, 2002) therefore intuition can still be regarded as an

element to offender profiling.

The contributions that psychologists make to aid the police in criminal investigations are mostly known and widely understood as 'offender profilers' (Canter, 2017). However, it is important to note that this is applied to offender profiling in the United States as in the United Kingdom, profilers have to be approved. Profilers consult with law enforcement, prosecutors and defence attorneys on specific issues in a case such as providing relevant interpretations to a crime scene behaviours and victimology (Turvey, 2011); profilers who also are forensic psychiatrists and psychologists also can act as a researcher to use their knowledge of behavioural sciences to contribute to research in applied offender profiling which is an area that is neglected by all disciplines (Turvey, 2011; Willmott & Ioannou, 2017). Profilers have access to various resources, such as the evidence and intelligence already collected by the police, to compile a criminal profile. Whilst offender profilers are provided to help uncover the unknown offender, it can also help establish other aspects common to that crime such as "victimology, modus operandi, physical evidence, autopsy results, and other factors" (U.S Department of Justice, 1992).

Offender profiling is not only about establishing an idea of who the offender may be, it also explores the differentiation of motivational factors (see Willmott et al., 2018 for a review on theories of motivation) reoccurring behavioural patterns, and the geographic relevance of crime locations (Kocsis & Palermo, 2016). Typically, criminal profiling is often assumed to be relevant for only serious, serial, or sexual crimes however that is not always the case as it can be applied to various crimes such as burglary, fraud, arson or abuse (Youngs, 2008; Filkin et al., 2022; Fray et al., 2022). Consequently, offender profiling used to be evaluated as a method that was limited in certain cases such as high volume crimes such as burglary compared to serial homicides or sexual crimes (Ainsworth, 2001; Willmott et al., 2018).

Petherick & Brooks (2021) categorise the way profiling is conducted into three ways: induction, abduction, and deduction. These each rely on scientific methods in criminal profiling which moves away from the idea that offender profiling is based upon assumptions and guesswork. Petherick & Brooks (2021) explain this approach as "theories are developed based on research and experience (induction), which are then examined in light of the current case to determine which may or may not be true given the available evidence (abduction), and attempts are then made to falsify those that remain through hypothesis testing and revision (the scientific method that in ideal scenarios would lead to deduction)" (p. 697). Other approaches that profilers use are clinical and statistical methods. Clinical techniques incorporate aspects of the profiler's intuition, knowledge and experience to form predictions whereas in contrast statistical predictions are based upon descriptive and inferential

statistical models gained from analysis of offenders characteristics who have committed similar crimes (Brewer & Douglass, 2019). This evaluation proves criminal profiling to be an intrinsic, rigorous process and is far more thorough than people believe.

1.4 Crime consumption link to the study

Criminal profiling gained its popularity with the public through televised crime dramas such as *Criminal Minds* and *Mindhunter*, however, the real-world role of offender profiling is widely unknown (Fox et al., 2020) as the public are not as exposed to cases where profiling has been used and profilers are not extensively reported in the media. Vicary and Zaikman (2017) investigated whether students' crime intake (through the amount of crime shows and hours watched) affected their forensic knowledge if asked how they would commit a robbery. Individuals who are more involved in the crime shows they watch, meaning that they would guess what would happen next while the show was on, or look information up online about what they watched, were more calculated and applied more forensic knowledge when asked what precautions they would take if they were to commit a robbery. On the other hand, results showed that hours spent watching crime shows as well as interacting with numerous crime dramas plus documentaries did not have a direct impact on whether forensic knowledge was applied or not (Vicary & Zaikman, 2017). This suggests that crime shows can encourage those who watch them to expand their knowledge of forensics and perhaps extend their knowledge to offender profiling, but it is not necessarily a definite factor that influences the public on their perceptions of the subject matter. This study adds that there is still a lot to be uncovered about behavioural investigative advisers (BIAs) and it may not be learnt through crime shows although there is somewhat of an influence that crime shows can have and if they do not portray roles, such as the role of a profiler, correctly then audiences could potentially obtain an unrealistic ideology of offender profiling.

As previously emphasised, there is a lack of research into public understanding of criminal profiling. Although, as mentioned, whilst there is not a direct link between watching crime shows and public perceptions, it can be inferred that some knowledge is obtained from them (Vicary & Zaikman, 2017). Due to this, it is suggested that potential misconceptions stem from viewing crime shows such as *Sherlock Holmes*, and *Cracker* as the public have grown fascinated by what is displayed in these types of shows and could be looking to them as somewhat truthful (Ainsworth, 2001). However, as Ainsworth (2001) implies, the work of profilers is considered different to what is portrayed in the media therefore suggesting that the public sometimes turn to the shows they watch that include criminal profiling for information more than the news as television shows make the role appear exciting with a near 100 percent success rate.

Following this chapter, there will be a literature review, which will help to provide more in depth understanding of the main topics being analysed in this study. The aim will be to show the key concepts and how they are portrayed in existing literature but also to reveal what areas are missing and require more attention to fill gaps in the literature surrounding our understanding of public perceptions towards the role of offender profilers.

2. Literature review

2.1 Offender profiling in real life cases

Offender profiling may not be recognised by some of the public as a crucial element of police investigations as members of the public are not often exposed to cases where offender profilers have been used or are at least not aware that profilers have aided the case. Dr Paul Britton, Lee Rainbow and David Canter are amongst the small amount of people who were used as profilers. Sigurdardottir et al., (2023) details one of the most notorious cases for injustice in the UK which was aided by then profiler, Dr Paul Britton, who produced a psychological profile to attempt to apprehend the suspect. In July 1992, Rachel Nickell was murdered, and the police employed the services of Dr Britton (before approved profilers known as BIA's were established in England and Wales) who concluded that the murderer had deviant sexual fantasies (see Willmott et al., 2018). Dr Britton then assisted the police into implementing an undercover operation that aimed to manipulate the main police suspect at the time, Mr Stagg, into making self-incriminating comments (Sigurdardottir et al., 2023). Mr Stagg became the prime suspect of the case and Dr Britton was asked to make the profile fit to the main suspect which allegedly assumed that he had these deviant sexual fantasies. By the time the case reached the trial, Mr Stagg had already spent over one year in custody before being acquitted as the trial judge was highly critical of Dr Britton's involvement and excluded the entrapment evidence (Sigurdardottir et al., 2023). The judges critique predominantly focused on the technique used to incriminate Mr Stagg as an undercover female officer was tasked with gaining a confession from Mr Stagg through writing and meeting with him over a prolonged period of time and was described as a 'honey trap' however Mr Stagg consistently denied the allegations and the policewoman eventually resigned due to the trauma she endured from this unethical approach (Tong et al., 2009). Due to the negative response from this case, it projected a damaging reputation for offender profiling and led it to be a less respected technique despite the strategy being formed by the police alongside the profile. However, it was fortunate that the technique was opposed before Mr Stagg could have endured further injustice. The events of this case were followed by the public which could have affected perceptions of offender profiling due to the negative backlash that the use of Dr Britton's profile caused.

Another example of where profilers were used in aiding police investigations was the 'Beltway Snipers'

case in 2002, however, the profile given had a negative impact on the case. There were several shootings terrorising the Washington D.C area with a sniper rifle where innocent people were being murdered. The FBI profilers on the case announced that the suspect was most likely an employed but disgruntled white man in his 20s or 30s and likely in a white van based on information that was available to them that had already been gathered by the police that were working the case (MacMillan, 2017). In spite of that being the profile given, the offenders were eventually apprehended and did not match the profile; they were unemployed black men, ages 17 and 40 and were in a blue sedan. Despite the car being noticed at the crime scenes and pulled over by the police, the suspects were not further questioned due to not matching the profile (MacMillan, 2017). This shows how an incorrect profile can have devastating effects as the police were led down the wrong path therefore allowing the men to murder more innocent people before being arrested.

In contrast, there have been cases where profiling has been a positive support and has ultimately led the police to arresting the correct offender. The case of 'The Mad Bomber' who is now known as George Metesky, was aided by profiler Dr James Brussel. In 1956, Dr Brussel was asked to create a psychological profile with information that was collected about the case. Once the profile was complete, it was distributed to various newspapers which led to an employee leading the police to George Metesky. The profile claimed that "the Mad Bomber would be apprehended while wearing a 'double-breasted suit' and this proved accurate" (Ramesh, 2021, p. 35). When the police went to George Metesky's house to arrest him, he initially opened the door in pyjamas but was ordered to get dressed and when he reappeared, he was in a double breasted suit which was buttoned as Dr Brussel anticipated (Roberts, 2021). Due to Dr Brussel aiding the investigation, it reflected positively on offender profiling and psychological profiling became a more legitimate form of law enforcement (Ramesh, 2021). This case was crucial to the respectability of criminal profiling as it was the first instance in which profiling was used. Therefore, despite the risk of inaccuracies in offender profiling, it can also be a key component in police investigations.

2.2 Effectiveness and issues surrounding offender profiling

Research surrounding the effectiveness of offender profilers has thus far investigated very little on the effects profiles have on investigators' judgements (Marshall & Alison, 2007). Despite the training a profiler would receive, they have to be careful to make sure that their personal opinions are not reflected in their work. Profilers can be subjected to issues such as bias, transference, and projection (Turvey, 2011) which can affect a profilers decision making process. Profilers, like all human beings, are not exempt to thoughts or feelings of a certain way especially when surrounding a case that could have a related factor to their personal life or moral values. Alison and Canter (1999) emphasise that

inferences based on opinion could be subjected to all the “distortions, biases and shortcomings associated with the frailties of human decision making” (p. 29). However, profilers are cautioned to keep themselves both mentally and physically healthy and are encouraged to confer with colleagues that can help to reduce bias, transference and other issues (Turvey, 2011). Rainbow and Gregory (2011) argue that the use of BIAs in the UK “can offer SIOs [senior investigative officers] an additional perspective and decision support throughout a serious crime investigation through the pragmatic application of behavioural theory, research and experience” (p. 33) also they are considered to be positive and an essential step in incorporating specialised expertise in policing (Petherick & Brooks, 2020). However, it is unclear what methods BIAs go through when they develop a profile to assist in an investigation (Petherick & Brooks, 2020) therefore it is difficult to assess how reliable their work is as there is an uncertainty to how their conclusions are met. There is a level of belief in profiling’s effectiveness more from those who work alongside profilers as Brewer and Douglass (2019) suggest that “profiling’s effectiveness may come from witnessing a case that was solved after the creation of a profile” (p. 19). Whilst there are many examples of profiling in true crime stories that claim criminal profiling to be effective and have a level of accuracy, there is still a lot of caution on confirming the validity of profiling techniques as a vast amount of true crime biographies are written by profilers themselves (Vettor et al., 2014). Therefore, the question of offender profiling being a useful tool is still debated but arguably any approach or advantage is needed in apprehending dangerous and violent offenders e.g. those with psychopathic tendencies (see Boduszek et al., 2019).

2.2.1 Police perceptions towards the effectiveness of Offender Profiling

There have been a few studies that delve into the exploration on the validity of offender profiling. These studies evaluate police perceptions and no recent studies have covered this topic hence the significance of this study to provide a recent outlook on perceptions other than the police view offender profiling. Copson (1995) sampled 184 police investigations that were aided by the use of offender profiling in the UK. The findings resulted in the majority of investigators viewing the profilers as useful in helping the case and would seek advice from profilers in the future. Similar results were found in a study in the Netherlands conducted by Jackson et al., (1993) that investigated whether Dutch police officers are satisfied or not with the profiles provided in the study. The officers declared that they would be content with the profiles apart from two officers. This implies that offender profiling can be beneficial to police investigations. A Canadian study by Snook et al., (2007) conducted a qualitative study where 51 police officers working in major crime divisions were recruited as participants to explore their view on criminal profiling. Results showed that majority of the participants reported that they believed profilers are valuable as an investigative tool and they improve an investigator’s understanding of a case (Snook et al., 2007). Moreover, profiling was

portrayed in a positive light from the responses that were given by these officers and appears to be beneficial to criminal investigations. However, some limitations were exposed as officers highlighted that there is a risk that criminal profilers can misdirect an investigation and advice should be carefully evaluated (Snook et al., 2007). Overall, in these studies police officers relay a more supportive view for profilers however this does not mean that there is not doubts to the method. On the other hand, in an attempt to uncover police psychologist's perceptions towards police psychology (including offender profiling), Bartol (1996) conducted a survey of 152 police psychologists which resulted in 70% not feeling comfortable with profiling and seriously questioned its validity and usefulness. One particularly well known police psychologist considered criminal profiling as "virtually useless and potentially dangerous" with many others then commenting that much more research needs to be done before the process becomes a useful tool (Bartol, 1996, p.79). A study in the UK explored further the effectiveness of profilers. Gekoski & Gray (2011) recruited 11 police officers who had directly worked with a profiler to participate in a qualitative study about the usefulness of profilers. Each of the police officers ranked between Detective Inspector and Detective Chief Superintendent. The interview consisted of 35 questions where participants were asked about the details of the first case they worked with a profiler, the details of the profile itself and whether the advice was considered operationally useful; additionally, they were asked about their overall impressions of profiling. Many officers reported that they initially overestimated the work of the profilers and assumed that they would solve the case however in contrast, there was an increased work load and other lines of enquiry were downgraded in priority (Gekoski & Gray, 2011). Furthermore, almost half of the officers questioned the usefulness of the advice given by the profilers as they stated that "it may be true but how's it helping" as well as they felt that the advice given was "simply common sense, or stating the obvious" and that "it could have come from any intelligent professional with some knowledge in the field" (Gekoski & Gray, 2011, p. 110). This conveys that whilst this can suggest that profiles can be somewhat effective, they do not necessarily add more insight or information to investigations than what the police are already uncovering.

2.3 Crime consumption and its effects on attitudes towards crime

The idea of crime based TV shows having an influence on factors related to the criminal justice system is known as the 'CSI effect' (Vicary & Zaikman, 2017). The notion of the 'CSI effect' originated from the television programme *CSI: Crime Scene Investigations* which displayed a variety of homicide and complex cases which were often solved through the use of highly technical, scientific-based, forensic evidence (Khanna & Resnik, 2020). Initially, the 'CSI effect' was specifically applied to jurors as they started to expect specialised scientific evidence such as DNA tests and fingerprint analysis instead of more traditional evidence such as eye witness testimonies and often regarded non-scientific evidence

as an insufficient amount of evidence to produce a verdict (Khanna & Resnik, 2020). However, the effect has gained much popularity in research and can be associated with the opinion that people's attitudes and behaviours can be influenced by television which can be reflected by Gerber's (1969) cultivation theory. Cultivation theory is the idea that television and the media can help to shape an individual's reality of the world through certain ideas, images, or values (Vicary & Zaikman, 2017). This can be applicable to crime television. The way certain aspects in criminal investigations, crime scenes, or roles in the criminal justice system are portrayed in television shows, can be considered by the public as accurately portrayed which consequently leads them to subconsciously see these portrayals as reality. Individuals who immerse themselves in shows such as *CSI: Crime Scene Investigations* may start to have a warped sense of reality and could be considered as naïve to the actual processes that occur in everyday life (Lodge & Zloteanu, 2020).

Crime shows can be shown to have an impact on perceptions as for instance, Vicary & Zaikman (2017) explore that the watching of crime shows by jurors might favour the defendant due to the increasing jurors' expectations concerning forensic evidence that is presented to them in a trial. Jurors may not be satisfied with the more commonly used types of evidence such as witness statements therefore making them less likely to render a guilty verdict when high-tech forensic analysis is not conducted that they see in crime shows. On the other hand, jurors might favour the prosecution if forensic evidence is presented as they may deem it to be more credible. This can be applied to the general public as juries are made up of members of the public so it can be suggested that crime shows can alter one's views on the functionality of the criminal justice system. Tapscott's et al, (2011) study further evidenced this claim as they produced a study evaluating the CSI effect and its impact on jury decision making as well as observing the participants crime drama consumption. The results from this study reported that participants who were "classified as heavy crime drama viewers held significantly higher expectations for scientific and forensic evidence than did light crime drama viewers"(p. 71) and it was also uncovered that heavy crime drama viewers had a greater knowledge of the criminal justice system (Tapscott et al., 2011).

Additionally, Hayes & Levett (2013) conducted a study that explored the 'CSI effect' and how it can create real life biases. The results from this study concluded that those who watch crime shows are more likely to view crime shows as both accurate and educational, specifically surrounding forensics psychology and crime dramas. This could be viewed as problematic as crime shows are known to exaggerate reality as for example, cases get solved quickly and the offender always gets caught which is not necessarily always the case in real life (Hogan, 2019). With a vast majority of the general public having limited direct experiences with victimisation or the criminal justice system, individuals are more

likely to form their perceptions from other sources which includes the media (Chiricos et al., 2000). This highlights the issue of the media being a primary source as it portrays an inaccurate depiction of crime and the criminal justice system, therefore people's perceptions about the system are skewed by this inaccurate information (Rhinebereger-Dunn et al., 2015). It is important to note that the majority of the public will have some form of interaction with crime consumption. Crime dramas and tv shows are not the only platform where the public involve themselves with the world of crime but can also receive information through news networks. By listening to the radio, the news often covers criminal cases that are happening in today's society therefore the public are always digesting some form of crime content whether they consciously know it or not. A news network presents a criminal case in a different way than a crime drama may present a similar case (Hogan, 2019). Whilst the news may be delivering a more accurate account of how the criminal justice system functions, it may leave out or only focus on key elements of a case and often portrays the negative elements of an investigation therefore altering the public's perspectives on the police or the justice system itself. The news media selects what to report depending on newsroom imperatives at the time as well as shaping a story for more consumption (Ray & Kort-Butler, 2019). More shocking cases such as mass shootings or politically related crimes receive more coverage in the media therefore exposing consumers to exceedingly violent or extreme crime (Ray & Kort-Butler, 2019). Not only does the media and television shows have an impact on public perceptions towards crime, but recent studies have also begun to evaluate podcasts, specifically true crime podcasts, as an influence of public opinions. Frederick (2022) focused a study on true crime podcasts and the type of variety of cases and issues faced by the criminal justice system and society that podcasters of true crime discuss. Findings from this study raised the concern of moral panic among listeners as violent crime is often discussed therefore creating an impression that violent crime is increasing when that is not the general trend in decades (Frederick, 2022). Also, representations of gender in true crime podcasts have led listeners to have an increasing fearful perception towards crime as women are often portrayed as victims and over sexualised in true crime podcasts as well as women being "taught to self-police to prevent victimization" (Frederick, 2022, p. 36). This is problematic as according to Frederick (2022), some true crime podcasts are creating more fear of crime especially by female listeners which could lead to a distrust towards the police as women are being conveyed as victims but have to be their own protection therefore suggesting that the police are not providing enough protection for women.

2.4 Misconceptions of offender profiling

While there is a lack of research assessing public misconceptions towards profilers, it can be inferred that misconceptions surrounding the role of offender profiling could arguably be due to crime consumption. The public often believe that profiling is a tool that is reliable and helps to contribute to

high conviction rates, however, these assumptions come from shows such as *Criminal Minds*, *CSI*, *Mindhunters*, and *Sherlock Holmes* (Lyness, 2018). This can have an extreme negative effect as due to the misconception that criminal profiling and forensic evidence is accurate, jury decision making is being influenced by the presence of forensic evidence and behavioural testimonies and it is effecting the verdict that is returned (Scobie et al., 2018). The public may expect forensic evidence to be a forefront of evidence in trials due to crime watching therefore cases that do not present any forensic evidence may change the verdict of the trial (Tapscott et al., 2011). Television shows like *Criminal Minds*, portray profilers using their initiative and guesswork as well as the profile rarely being inaccurate, and the offender is almost always apprehended when in reality this is not the case as scientific methods are used and the information provided by law enforcement is heavily relied upon.

It can be argued that the public are misled and not always shown accurate information about offender profiling as the police do not release any information about the accuracy of the profiles when they are used (Lyness, 2018). The public are then unaware of how BIAs aid real life cases as it is not covered as much in cases and often cases are only sensationalised when errors are made. The public are restricted in where they can access knowledge about offender profiling, unless they engage with research about BIAs and the work they do. Criminal profiling is not largely discussed in the news and when it does apply to a case, it is not always stated that offender profiling was involved. Hence, the public turn to true crime documentaries and crime drama tv shows which often overexaggerates investigative psychology as they are produced for entertainment purposes which then leads to misconceptions and uncertainty on what offender profiling is. There are also assumptions underlying offender profiling methods. Some of these can be labelled as 'consistency assumption' and 'homology assumption' (Mokros & Alison, 2002). The 'consistency assumption' is that the actions of an offender are consistent across offences; the behavioural variation across offences for any given offender is smaller than the behavioural variation between different offenders (Kebbell & Davies, 2006). Mokros & Alison's (2002) study evaluated the behavioural consistency of 100 British male stranger rapists, results supported the idea of behavioural consistency as they indicate that there were lower levels of variance within a series of offences than between random sets of offences. The 'homology assumption' is defined by Kebbell and Davies, (2006) as "similar offence styles have to be associated with similar offender background characteristics" (p. 153). These outline assumptions that occur within offender profiling and shows that misconceptions are not only portrayed through crime consumption and public opinion.

2.5 Public perceptions towards the Police

Due to the lack of understanding and views of offender profiling by the public, it is interesting to evaluate how this reflects on public perceptions towards the police considering that profilers work

closely alongside the police. As noted, the media has a strong impact on public attitudes towards crime, this is also applicable to opinions of the police. Chan and Chan, (2012) study reflected that media types can influence a more negative view towards the police due to the media reporting police misconduct or focusing on bleak aspects of policing however, findings showed that the news is not solely responsible and other media types such as television and social media can be a factor. Social media as a variable for affecting public perceptions towards the police can be reflected in recent studies. Oglesby-Neal et al., (2019) examined a numerous amount of 'tweets' from Twitter before and after the death of Freddie Gray in 2015 in Baltimore, who died after suffering from a spinal injury whilst in police custody. Results showed that public sentiment towards the police became significantly more negative after Gray's death and during protests (Oglesby-Neal et al., 2019). This suggests that the public's opinions can be fuelled by others' responses and members of the public will follow how others respond whether that is in a positive or negative way. The public's fear of crime and being victimised also creates doubts towards the police as many believe that the police could be doing more to reduce crime after evaluating crime statistics (Nair et al., 2012). The study by Nair et al., (2012) conveyed that participants that were more educated read more newspapers and interacted more frequently with the media and were found to be the cohort that reported more distrust in the police than the participants who did not tend to interact with the media therefore supporting Chan and Chans' (2012) claims. However, Callanan and Rosenberger (2011) contradict this by suggesting that crime based programmes and other forms of media such as the news, significantly increases confidence in the police. This idea of the media as an influence can be applied to the effect of public perceptions towards offender profiling as media that portrays profiling can change how the public understand criminal profiling. Subsequently, in terms of offender profiling, it can be insinuated that the news enables more negative perspectives whereas crime fiction can generate a more positive view as it distorts reality.

Public perceptions can also be reliant on personal experiences and interactions with the police in communities. Communities supported by positive police presence allows the public to have a more optimistic attitude towards the police (Awan et al., 2018). On the other hand, a negative experience with the police can alter any future perceptions. It is suggested that first hand experiences with crime were more important than the media in shaping individual's opinions of the police (Callanan & Rosenberger (2011). Callanan and Rosenberger (2011) conducted a study that produced findings that victims and those with an arrest experience were not affected by crime related media consumption compared to those with little to none personal interactions with the police or crime. Additionally, consumption of crime related media increased confidence in the police among White respondents, but had no effect on Latinos or African-Americans (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011) signifying that

perceptions can differ between ethnicities. This finding could potentially suggest that members of the public who have been a target of criminal profiling would apprehend a more cautious view of profilers especially if an individual has been wrongfully profiled. More recent studies have exposed that different sociodemographic factors can produce different perceptions towards the police for example, racial and ethnic minority groups and lower levels of education equally individuals who have been exposed to police victimisation and prior criminal involvement reported more negative views of the police (Jackson et al., 2021).

2.6 Study rationale and aims

The research analysed lacks portrayal of public perceptions towards offender profiling hence the intention of this study to provide an insight into how the public view offender profiling. The variance in approaches to profiling has brought up some inconsistencies which could question its validity (Petherick & Brooks, 2020). This has led to researchers, the police and forensic professionals alike, to question offender profiling as an investigative tool which suggests a sense of unreliability about the topic. Despite this, some studies and real life cases have proved that offender profiling can be a useful tool especially now that it has started to integrate the use of more scientific and evidence based methods. A key factor to note is the effect of crime based watching has on perceptions. Whilst the research lacks evidence of public perceptions towards offender profiling, an insight into attitudes of the public can be inferred by the perceptions that are construed through crime consumption. Equally, public perceptions towards the police has been examined in an attempt to infer if these perceptions could correlate to how the public view offender profiling. However, this is not enough to explore how the public interpret profilers and BIAs and it is notably missing from current research. Therefore, it emphasises the importance of this research as it will explore the public's perceptions towards offender profiling through quantitative measures and ultimately filling a gap in literature.

This research will focus specifically on the research question 'how do the public perceive the role of offender profiling?'. This will explore the role of BIAs and their contributions to criminal investigations. Additionally, this study is interested in exploring whether attitudes and perceptions towards offender profiling are influenced by the amount of crime that the participants consume including for example crime dramas and documentaries.

This question will be addressed through three main research objectives:

1. The first objective of this study is to examine contributions that profilers make towards criminal investigations and if they are effective.
2. The second objective is to explore the effects of crime consumptions on the public's

knowledge of crime and investigative psychology.

3. The final objective is to evaluate the public's existing view on public perceptions on offender profiling.

These objectives will aim to be achieved by reviewing existing literature as well as exposing what is missing from current research. The last objective will be conveyed through quantitative research which will be provided in the form of a questionnaire for this study and will aim to fill a gap in current literature as well as create more of an insight and understanding into how the public perceive offender profiling in England and Wales.

3. Methodology:

3.1 Study design

In order to gain an understanding of public perceptions towards offender profiling, this study uses a quantitative methodology. This is established in the form of a survey which was produced on 'Online Surveys'. As Ahmed et al. (2019) outlines, quantitative research is used to generate knowledge and create understanding about the social world. Quantitative research is often used in social science studies as they are concerned about the study of people and quantitative methods allow researchers to gather large, varying samples (Ahmed et al., 2019) to gain insight into public perceptions. This solidifies that for this study, quantitative measures are the most effective as it can gain a more generalised view of public perceptions and can efficiently analyse different variables to determine how the public view offender profiling. Qualitative measures would be more restricted in this study as it focuses more on individual responses instead of a population of people.

As the study aims to determine public perceptions, quantitative methods are more favourable than other research methods as it can access a larger sample population therefore achieving more of an insight to public perceptions. It can reach a broad variety of demographical groups due to the simplicity of the sampling methods used. Consequently, this allows for the study to get an understanding of public perceptions unlike qualitative methods which use focus groups and a small sample. By using an online survey through quantitative methods a wider population can be reached considering the use of the internet by the majority of the public, surveys can be easily distributed (Wardropper et al., 2021).

3.2 Sampling procedure and sample

In order to recruit participants, convenience sampling was used; this was done by distributing the survey through social media and sent out to family and friends. This then created effectively a snowball

sample as due to the nature of social media, once people had access to the survey link they could distribute the questionnaire to others. Snowball sampling is an effective sampling method as it quickly increases participants without the researcher having to send the survey to each individual participant (Parker et al., 2019) therefore making this the most effective sampling method for this study as it can easily reach members of the public and perhaps generate a more diverse sample. As mentioned, social media was the main site used to distribute the survey; this included: Facebook, WhatsApp, LinkedIn and Instagram. The inclusion criteria required all participants to be over the age of 18 in regards to ethical considerations.

In total, 153 participants completed the survey. Participants included a good proportion of males (67; 43.8%) and females (86; 56.2%). Participants had a varying age range with the youngest participant being of the age 18 and the oldest participant being 79 years old. The mean participant age was 39.80. Nearly all of the respondents were Caucasian (146, 95.4%), however some ethnicities were disclosed as South Asian Heritage (4, 2.6%) and Black or Dual Heritage (3, 2.0%). Participants were asked to disclose their educational background which included, below a university degree (54, 35.3%), currently studying for a university degree (41, 26.8%), a university degree (36, 23.5%), and above a university degree (22, 14.4%).

3.3 Scale development

Research surrounding public perceptions towards profilers has not been a topic that has been extensively covered, especially through the use of quantitative data collection. Therefore, for this study, it required the development of a new and original scale. Designing the *Perceptions Of Profilers Scale (POPS)*, to analyse public perceptions towards the work of profilers, was challenging as it was made to identify factors that have not been measured before. Despite this, it ensures an importance to this study to fill a gap in literature hence the need for an original scale. Also, it then can be referred to in future research. To ensure that the scale has validity, the Perceptions Of Police Scale (Nadal & Davidoff, 2015) was consulted and adapted by rewording the statements used in their scale and modified to fit perceptions of profilers that this study was focused on. The initial draft of the scale went through multiple iterations to make sure that the scale will be able to produce the required data for the research. As the Perceptions Of Police Scale (Nadal & Davidoff, 2015) offered similarities to the scale that was being created, the *Perceptions Of Profilers Scale* also adopted a 5 point Likert scale.

3.4 Data collection procedures

The questionnaire for this research project was created on a platform named 'Online Surveys'. However, prior to distributing this survey, ethical considerations were addressed in order to move

forward (as described in the ethical considerations section below). A few of these ethical documents (Participant Information Sheet and Informed Consent Sheet) were included on the first page of the survey to ensure that participants had the relevant information on this research project and how their answers would be used. It also gave them the option to agree with the regulation and continue with the survey or to exit and not continue any further with the study. It also ensured that participants under the age of 18 would not participate in regard to ethical procedures. Once consent is obtained, participants were asked to answer the Perceptions Of Profilers Scale, demographic questions and crime consumption questions in that particular order. The answering process for the questionnaire took approximately 10 minutes to complete (between 5 to 15 minutes to complete). Once the participants answered all the sections, they would be presented with the debrief page which gave them relevant contact details of the researcher and supervisor in case the participant had any questions. It also contained necessary links for further information or support associated with the study. Once participants reached the debrief page the survey would be complete, and they would be thanked for their participation.

3.5 Measures

3.5.1 Perceptions Of Profilers Scale (POPS)

The perceptions of profiler's scale (POPS) was developed for the purpose of this study in order to gain the understanding of how the participants view profilers and their role in offender profiling. As mentioned in how the scale was developed, the scale was an adaptation of the Perceptions Of Police Scale (Nadal & Davidoff, 2015) to ensure validity. This scale included 12 questions which were measured through the use of a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (5 = *strongly agree*, 4 = *agree*, 3 = *somewhat agree*, 2 = *disagree*, and 1 = *strongly disagree*). By using *somewhat agree* instead of neutral, it forces the participants to make a decision and produce a stand point on each statement in the scale. Total scores ranged from 12 to 58, the higher scores mean that participants have a more positive perception of profilers.

3.5.2 Demographic Questions

Demographic questions were asked to participants in order to discover their age, gender and ethnicity. This was so it could become apparent if public attitudes varied depending on the demographic. Participants were grouped by age, gender; female (0), male (1), and ethnicity; White (1), South Asian Heritage (2), Black or Dual Heritage (3). Participants were also asked to disclose their educational background where options included: below a university degree (1), currently studying for a university degree (2), have a university degree (3), and above a university degree (4). Those who answered

currently studying for a university degree were asked an additional question of what course they are studying. This was asked in order to identify if those who do courses related to crime such as Criminology, Psychology, Sociology, and Law, among others, had more knowledge on the role of profilers and have a greater understanding on their perceptions to offender profiling than other courses.

3.5.3 Crime Consumption Questions

The participants were asked three questions on how many hours of true crime content do they consume weekly, how many hours of crime fiction content do they consume weekly and what type of crime content do they engage with most frequently. They were prompted with types of crime content which were grouped as crime dramas (1), crime documentaries (2), podcasts (3), news media (4), books (5), and social media (6), lastly there was a category for those who reported that they did not interact with any crime content, this was labelled as none (7). These questions are key to the study as it will unveil whether those with more consumption of crime had more of an understanding of offender profiling or if it will show that there is more misconceptions surrounding the topic due to crime dramas. It will also expose whether participants misconceptions depend on what media mode they most frequently consume crime content on.

3.6 Ethical considerations

Ethics in social science research is vital to protect both the researcher and the participants due to the nature of the sensitive topics that some social science research can delve into. Research ethics has to do with norms, values, and practices concerning the collection, analysis, and dissemination of scientific findings about the world (Bos, 2020). Ethical procedures for this study follows Loughborough Universities guidelines. This consisted of completing a LEON form, a risk assessment form, ethics awareness form, a questionnaire booklet of the questions being asked and the form included in the questionnaire; these were the participant information sheet, informed consent sheet and the study debrief. These ethics documents were reviewed by the ethics committee. Approval had to be received before starting any data collection for this study to ensure that all ethical safeguards and codes of conduct for human participants were being adhered to.

The participant information sheet (Appendix B.3) outlined what the aims and purpose of the study are and what the participants are going to be expected to do. It also ensured that participants would be over the age of 18 (according to ethical guidelines) and detailed how responses recorded would be protected. It also disclosed that all answers would be anonymous to protect participants identity. Participants were also made aware that should they wish to, they can withdraw from the survey at any time.

Following the participant information form, participants were asked to read the informed consent form (Appendix B.2) to verify if they understood everything that was being asked of them and the details of the study. At this point, participants could decide whether to continue or voluntarily agree to take part in the survey. After completion of the questionnaire, participants were brought to the debrief page (Appendix B.4). This thanked the participants for their time and the design of the study was reconveyed. Additionally, support services were provided as well as a website if they wanted further information on the topic. The researcher and supervisor's details were provided so any questions or concerns could be addressed. In summary, all ethical procedures were followed meticulously to assure that the questionnaire was portrayed in the best way possible.

3.7 Analytical procedure

In order to analyse the data gathered within this survey, the data was transferred into SPSS data software. From there the data were cleaned, computed and prepared for analysis. This involved, for example, calculating the total for the scores from the Perceptions Of Profilers Scale (POPS). The total scores from the POPS would demonstrate the views that the participants have towards offender profiling. Descriptive statistics were calculated for all continuous variables including the mean and standard deviations also frequency distributions were calculated for all categorical variables.

For further analysis of public perceptions, multiple linear regression analysis was used to explore the various independent variables had on the influence of attitudes towards criminal profiling. Multiple linear regression allows the researcher to compare the independent variables on the outcome variable (Clark et al., 2021). This included the demographic attributes (gender, age, and educational background including university degree course) and crime consumption questions. These factors were then tested against the POPS to see how they shape public perceptions.

4. Results

Descriptive statistics including means and standard deviations for continuous study variables including age, hours spent each week watching true crime and crime fiction content, and Perceptions of Profilers Scale scores are presented in Table 1. Data indicates that participants on average consumed 2.71 hours of true crime content per week and 2.76 hours of crime fiction content each week. The range of scores show that this varied substantially among some participants who watched very little through to 15-36 hours of such crime content each week. Data also indicates that the mean POPS score (41.01) shows that most participants had a generally positive perception of profilers as higher POPS scores mean greater positive support for profilers. Additionally, participants average age was almost 40 years old.

Table 1.*Descriptive statistics for continuous study variables (n = 153)*

Variable	Mean	SD	Range	Minimum	Maximum
Age	39.80	18.96	61.00	18.00	79.00
POPS	41.01	6.93	46.00	12.00	58.00
Hours consuming true crime	2.71	4.14	36.00	00.00	36.00
Hours consuming crime fiction	2.76	3.35	15.00	00.00	15.00

Key: POPS = Perceptions of Profilers Scale total scores

Frequency distributions are included in Table 2 alongside broader demographic information which includes gender, ethnicity, education status, current student status, student course type, and type of crime content consumed for the complete sample. Results showed that participants mainly consumed crime dramas (48.4%), then crime documentaries (24.8%) as the most popular form of crime content and interacted the least with podcasts (3.3%) and social media (1.3%).

4.1 Group differences in POPS scores

To investigate whether POPS scores vary between different participant groupings, comparisons between mean POPS scores were examined based on student course (Table 3) and type of crime content participants engage with (Table 4). Of the participants who said that they were current students (N = 43), the course to which they were currently enrolled indicates Social Sciences and Humanities students recorded a lower POPS score (M = 37.25), whereas students who study Design and Creative Arts courses displayed a higher POPS score (M = 44.20).

Table 2.*Demographic information and frequency distributions for the participant sample (n = 153)*

Variable	N (%)
Gender	
Female	86 (56.2%)
Male	67 (43.8%)
Ethnicity	
White (Caucasian)	146 (95.4%)
South Asian Heritage	4 (2.6%)
Black or Dual Heritage	3 (2.0%)
Highest form of education	
Below a university degree	54 (35.3%)
Currently studying for a uni degree	41 (26.8%)
A university degree	36 (23.5%)
Above a university degree	22 (14.4%)
Current student	
No	110 (71.9%)
Yes	43 (28.1%)
Student course	
Social science & Humanities	20 (13.1%)
Engineering & Business	10 (6.5%)
Design & Creative Arts	5 (3.3%)
Science & Sport Science	8 (5.2%)
None	110 (71.9%)
Type of Media Crime Content	
Crime Drama	74 (48.4%)
Crime Documentary	38 (24.8%)
Podcast	5 (3.3%)
News Media	17 (11.1%)
Books	9 (5.9%)
Social Media	2 (1.3%)
None	8 (5.2%)

Table 3.*Comparing mean POPS Score based on students course. (N = 43)*

Student course	Mean	SD	N (%)
Social science & Humanities	37.25	6.043	20 (13.1%)
Engineering & Business	37.50	6.502	10 (6.5%)
Design & Creative Arts	44.20	3.834	5 (3.3%)
Science & Sport Science	41.25	8.345	8 (5.2%)

Key: perceptions of profilers scale (POPS).

Data for the entire sample (N = 153) displayed in Table 4 below, indicates that participants whose preferred form of crime content was crime drama (M = 42.27) or crime documentaries (M = 41.05) displayed a higher POPS score compared to those who predominantly engage with crime podcasts (M = 37.20) and crime content on social media (M = 37.50). Examination of these mean scores suggest that where participants consume their crime content may influence the perspectives that they have towards offender profiling and profilers.

Table 4.*Comparing mean POPS Score based on type of crime content. (N = 153)*

Type of crime content	Mean	SD	N (%)
Crime Drama	42.27	6.258	74 (48.4%)
Crime Documentary	41.05	7.562	38 (24.8%)
Podcast	37.20	6.760	5 (3.3%)
News Media	38.35	7.802	17 (11.1%)
Books	38.33	6.708	9 (5.9%)
Social Media	37.50	.707	2 (1.3%)
None	41.00	7.728	8 (5.25%)

Key: perceptions of profilers scale (POPS).

4.2 Correlations between all study variables and POPS scores

Pearson correlations between all study variables are presented in Table 5. Correlational analyses display moderate to strong significant associations between age, current students, and high crime fiction consumption and their POPS scores, indicating that there is a correlation between these variables and attitudes towards offender profiling within the current sample. Also, age appears to have a significant correlation between current students and crime fiction consumption indicating age is a dictating variable in this particular study sample.

Table 5.

Pearson's Correlations between all study variables.

Variable	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1.POPS_TS	x					
2.Age	.00***	x				
3.Gender	.45	.34	x			
4.Student	.01**	.00***	.22	x		
5.True crime consumption	.22	.36	.15	.19	x	
6.Crime fiction consumption	.04*	.01**	.46	.28	.00**	x

Key: POPS_TS = perceptions of profilers scale. *indicates $p < 0.05$; **indicates $p < 0.01$; ***indicates $p < 0.001$.

4.3 Multiple linear regression of predictors of perceptions towards offender profiling

Multiple regression analysis modelled the effects of age, gender, current students, hours spent each week consuming true crime content, and hours spent each week consuming crime fiction content, as predictors of perceptions towards offender profiling (Table 6). Analysis revealed that out of these variables, age ($\beta = 0.397 < 0.05$) is a statistically significant predictor of perceptions of profilers scale (POPS) scores; the higher the participants age indicated a higher POPS score. However, the regression expressed that the other four variables were not statistically significant predictors of POPS scores overall.

Table 6.

Multiple Linear Regression analysis of five predictor variables association with POPS score.

	<i>R</i> ²	<i>B</i>	<i>β</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>CI</i> (95%)
Model	.16***				
Age		.145	.397*	.037	.073 / .218
Gender		-.478	-.034	1.065	-2.583 / 1.626
Student		.819	.053	1.515	-2.176 / 3.814
Hours consuming true crime		-.157	-.094	.131	-.417 / .102
Hours consuming crime fiction		.177	.086	.166	-.151 / .505

POPS_TS = perceptions of profilers scale. *indicates $p < 0.05$; **indicates $p < 0.01$; ***indicates $p < 0.001$.

5. Discussion

The goal of the current study was to provide an insight into public perceptions towards offender profiling by analysing a variety of variables that may impact public opinions of the topic. This study can be considered important to current research as this study has provided a gap in the literature by exploring public perceptions towards offender profiling. Additionally, the survey included an original scale, Perception Of Profilers Scale (POPS), to identify perceptions of profilers which will be able to be used in future research to extend this study to a larger scale.

Despite exploring several variables in relation to POPS scores, findings indicated that age was a significant factor in determining perceptions towards profiling. POPS scores found that participants generally had a positive view of offender profiling which supports finding from other studies that proved that police officers often support offender profiling and have positive attitudes towards the technique (Snook et al., 2007; Copson, 1995). Therefore suggesting the public and police knowledge is more in favour of offender profiling than eradicating it as an investigative tool. Pearson correlations found that there was a significant association between age and current students. In spite of this, the

regression analysis did not find current students to be of importance. In this study, participants were asked to provide what course they were studying and those who stated that they were enrolled in a Social Science and Humanities course, recorded a lower POPS score which indicated that they regard profilers in a more negative view. This could be due to Social Science and Humanities students being exposed to a more realistic and accurate representation of profiling as they are taught more about the criminal justice system and functions within it compared to other courses. Petherick (2014) discusses that teachings of crime and specifically criminal profiling is provided to students of Criminology (which is regarded as a Social Science). Although there are differences between course types and POPS scores, there could be an indication between education and age. Overall, findings showed that older participants generated a higher POPS score which signifies that they have a more positive view on profilers therefore inferring those younger participants had a more moderate to negative view of offender profiling. It can be interpreted that this could be linked to education as younger people are more typically in education as Greiwe and Khoshnood (2022) study also discovered that more educated participants tend to hold fewer positive attitudes towards criminal profiling and are less affected by the distorted version of reality displayed in television shows. However, this contradicts Jackson et al., (2021) as lower levels of education generally had the more negative view therefore suggesting that respondents with a higher education have more positive views although this study was applied to police perceptions thus insinuating that offender profiling and the police are not necessarily regarded on the same level by the public. Whilst the current study does not necessarily show education or current students to have an effect on perceptions, the correlation to age as a significant variable could suggest that they intertwine on a small scale.

Whilst participants crime consumption did not result to be a significant variable to how the respondents perceive offender profiling, it is interesting to note that crime fiction was the most frequently engaged with type of crime content. Findings showed that those who consumed crime dramas and documentaries received a higher POPS score which reflects that they had a more positive attitude towards profilers. This is reflected in a study by Greiwe and Khoshnood (2022) who conducted a study about fictional crime consumption having effects on perceptions of criminal profiling; they proved their hypothesis to be accurate that high engagement with fictional crime related television shows tends to associate more positive attitudes and a higher acceptance towards criminal profiling as an investigative tool. However, as previously mentioned, crime fiction had minimal effect on perceptions towards profiling therefore the findings from this study contradicts other research that highlights the belief that crime fiction consumption can have impact on attitudes towards offender profiling and crime (Bolton, 2019; Lodge & Zloteanu, 2020; Vicary & Zaikman, 2017). Findings also showed that participants who used podcasts as a main interaction for crime consumption had a lower

POPS score which indicates that they have more negative perceptions of offender profiling. This correlates with the findings from Frederick (2022) as true crime podcasts encourage more fear of crime therefore hypothesising that this finding can be related to other associations with crime and police investigations such as offender profiling.

5.1 Limitations and future recommendations

The above findings should be interpreted in light of some limitations. Firstly, findings may not be considered as a general perspective throughout the UK given that the sample population is not fully representative of the diverse range of ethnic minorities, gender identities and does not include different sexualities which exist in the vast population of the UK, similar to other opportunistic samples in published research (Conroy et al., 2023; Ioannides & Willmott, 2023). This is potentially due to the small amount of time allocated to data collection (Lindsay et al., 2023). If the survey was able to be shared more widely, then more demographics would be able to be represented. Despite the questionnaire asking about different demographic questions, there are only male and female representatives as well as an extremely minimal amount of representatives who were not Caucasian. For future research, it is important to reach more diversities to get a greater understanding on public perceptions and more accurate findings could be conveyed. Equally, future research would then be able to explore how demographics could have a potential effect on public perceptions. For example, this study lacked diversity in ethnicities therefore it could not be further scrutinised where as if this was developed further, future research could explore racial identity or BAME responses to offender profiling. Another limitation in this study was due to the smaller sample size of the survey. This could be caused by the minimal amount of time allocated to data collection or the nature of snowball sampling reaching a limit. Consequently, findings from this study should be proceeded with caution as if there was a larger sample size then different findings could be produced and enhanced. The nature of this sample can be considered biased so we cannot be sure that this is the general public. It would be recommended that future research can conduct a similar study however on a larger scale to evaluate if there are other significant factors for perceptions of offender profiling such as potentially providing evidence for crime consumption having more of an impact or sociodemographic factors. Whilst it is noted that sample size and representations is a limitation in this research, it is important to note that there are no other current studies exploring public perceptions of offender profiling in England and Wales therefore this study constitutes as the first insight into how the public view offender profiling. Hence, this research can be used as a template for future research and the original scale used in the survey can be used in other quantitative research that may explore perceptions towards offender profiling.

Quantitative methods have many advantages to them especially when produced in the form of a survey as it can be easily distributed and effectively reaches large sample populations therefore achieving the ability to collect large amounts of data (Abdullah & Raman, 2001) hence being an effective choice for gaining understanding of the general public's view on a matter in this case being offender profiling. However, it is not without its disadvantages as questionnaires do not allow participants to share their opinions freely and any ambiguities cannot be clarified so questions have to be phrased carefully in order for there to be no confusion (Abdullah & Raman, 2001). Also, since questionnaires often rely on volunteered participants, there is a risk of a small response rate and respondents can retract their consent at any point throughout completion. Future research could be recommended to provide this study as a mixed methods study as whilst the quantitative measures can provide a more generalised opinion, qualitative measures will be able to provide more intricate detail on where the public form their perceptions and their impressions on offender profiling.

5.2 Implications of research

While there is research surrounding the topic of offender profiling and the current study adds to how offender profiling is perceived, there are implications emerging from this study. There is a concern on areas within offender profiling particularly surrounding the method profilers use and the utility is continuously questioned. In light of this, research papers could aim to consult BIAs on how they produce the advice that is given to aid investigations and more clear statistics on success rates on cases where profiling has been used. Equally, media such as the news should report these findings detailing the success alongside the mistakes produced by BIAs therefore the public can access this information easily and educate themselves on trustworthy representations rather than resorting to crime fiction to outline offender profiling which this current study and other research has labelled to be an over exaggeration of how profilers are in reality.

6. Conclusion

Despite the highlighted limitations, this study builds on existing literature in several ways however, most importantly by creating a new outlook into offender profiling by exploring and understanding public perceptions. This study makes use of an original developed scale named the POPS scale, where perceptions of profiling are assessed through 12 statements and then analysed alongside demographic and crime consumptions variables. With evidence that public perceptions are reflecting a more positive attitude towards offender profiling and being significantly associated with age, with hints towards current students and crime fiction consumption, this study concludes that future research must aim to produce this study on a larger scale to either further confirm these claims or explore further other variables which could have significance. In addition, future research should provide

information directly obtained from BIAs should be made accessible by the public detailing the process that they use to form advice for police investigations and the success rates of cases that use BIAs in order to prove effectiveness of the technique. Whilst cases aided by offender profiling have been mentioned in research alongside many studies exploring the topic of offender profiling and its variations between countries, there are elements that still requires more in depth investigation such as the question of validity surrounding offender profiling. Despite these topics requiring further attention, this current study has fulfilled its aim of examining public perceptions and can be used as a solid foundation to be explored by future researchers to extend upon.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Questionnaire booklet

A.1 Demographic questions

1. **Age**

Please enter your age in years in the box below

2. **What Gender do you identify as?**

Male
Female
Transgender
Non-Binary
Gender-fluid
Other (Please specify)
Prefer not to say

3. **Please specify your ethnicity below** (e.g. White British, Black British, British Asian etc.)

4. **What is your highest form of education?**

Below a university degree
Currently studying for a university degree
A university degree
Above a university degree

5. **If you are currently a university student please write what course you are enrolled on below**

A.2 Crime consumption questions

1. Approximately how many hours do you spend each week consuming **true crime** content (e.g. watching shows, listening to podcasts or reading about it)?
2. Approximately how many hours do you spend each week consuming **crime fiction** content (e.g. watching shows, listening to podcasts or reading about it)?
3. What **type of crime content** do you engage with most frequently? E.g., televised crime dramas, crime documentaries, podcasts, news stories, books etc?

A.3 Perceptions Of Profilers Scale (POPS) (Developed by Allchorne-Page & Willmott, 2024)

Scale scoring info - 12 items, unidimensional (e.g. one total score), scored on a 5 point Likert scale (no reversed scored items).

- (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Somewhat Agree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

1. Offender profilers are highly useful to police investigations.

2. Profilers play a key role in keeping the public safe from offenders.
3. Criminal profilers are unbiased in the profiles that they create.
4. Profilers are respected by the public for the work that they do.
5. Offender profilers never discriminate against one group of people in their opinion.
6. Profilers give objective science-based conclusions about who an offender is likely to be.
7. Police officers generally consider profilers to be an important part of criminal investigations.
8. Profilers generate reliable conclusions about likely offenders approximately 90% of the time.
9. Crimes would be solved quicker if the police had greater support from offender profilers.
10. Through their analysis of crime scene behaviours, profilers can reliably work out who the culprit is likely to be.
11. Profilers make use of the latest research into offending behaviours, when providing police with their opinion.
12. Nowadays offender profiling is more about science and technology than the opinion and intuition of individual profiles.

Appendix B: Ethics Approval and Documentation

B.1 Subcommittee approval

Project Title: Understanding Public Perceptions About Offender Profiling

Project ID: 16901

Dear Poppy,

The proposal above has a FAVOURABLE ethics decision based on review by the project supervisor.

Studies can be moved online without requiring an amendment, unless this substantially changes the study in which case an amendment is required.

- You are required to report any incidents that have an adverse effect using the Adverse Events Report form in LEON.
- If you make changes to the study please refer to the guidance on submitting [amendments](#).
- Please refer to the guidance on [collecting data on sex and gender](#).
- Random spot-checking of submissions is conducted to ensure compliance with the ethics process. You may receive feedback but you are not expected to wait for this.

This decision applies to activity undertaken from the date of this email until 21/03/2024 (*however, please note that if this date has already passed this decision is invalid - you should contact your School*). If the study continues beyond the stated end date you should submit a request for an extension.

Please contact your School if you have any queries regarding this decision.

Kind regards

B.2 Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Section

Please tick the box at the bottom of this online page if all of the following apply:

The purpose and details of this study have been explained to me.

I understand that this study is designed to further scientific knowledge and that all procedures have received a favourable decision from the Loughborough University Ethics Review Sub-Committee.

I have read and understood the information sheet and this consent form.

I have had an opportunity to ask questions about my participation.

I understand that taking part in the survey is anonymous, only non-identifying demographic information will be collected including age and gender.

I understand that this questionnaire includes questions about perceptions towards profilers and crime consumption but that I will not be asked about personal experiences of victimisation or criminal trials.

I understand that I am under no obligation to take part in the study and can withdraw during the survey by closing the browser but will not be able to withdraw once my responses have been submitted at the end of the questionnaire.

I understand that information I provide will be used for the student's dissertation and that the findings from this research could be published in the future in a scientific publication or presentation. If this were to happen, I understand that I would never be personally identifiable and will remain anonymous at all times.

Consent to Participate

I voluntarily agree to take part in this study

B.3 Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Section

Understanding public perceptions about offender profiling.

Welcome and thank you for considering taking part in this online survey.

Before you decide if you wish to take part, we would like you to understand why the research is being conducted and what it would involve for you. Please contact one of the researchers using the contact details below if you have any questions or would like more information about any aspect of this study.

What is the purpose of the study and why?

The purpose of this study is to gain information relating to public attitudes towards offender profiling and how profilers can support criminal investigations. This is an important research area because it will help us to better understand what the general public think about offender profiling and will uncover misconceptions on the work of profilers whilst proving the significance of profiling in criminal investigations.

Who is doing this research?

This study is part of a student research project supported by Loughborough University. The study will be undertaken by Poppy Allchorne-Page.

What will you be asked to do?

You will be asked to complete a brief anonymous online questionnaire, which should approximately 10 to 20 minutes to complete. You do not need to do anything before completing the study. Please note that this questionnaire includes questions about perceptions towards profilers and crime consumption. Whilst you will not be asked about personal experiences of being criminally profiled, it is important that you understand what the study is about before agreeing to take part.

Are there any inclusion or exclusion criteria?

You must be over the age of 18 and have the capacity to fully understand and consent to this research in order to take part. You must also have a good command of written and spoken English to take part in this brief study.

Data Protection Privacy Notice

Loughborough University will be using information/data from you to undertake this study and will act as the data controller for this study. This means that the University is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly. No identifiable personal information will be collected and so your participation in the study will be confidential. The anonymous data will be used in student dissertations. No individual will be identifiable in any report, presentation, or publication. All information will be securely stored on the University password-protected computer systems. Anonymised data will be retained until the final project marks have been verified, expected around July of next year. Your data will be stored no longer than one year in total.

Once I take part, can I change my mind?

After you have read this information and asked any questions you may have (contact information to the research team is provided below), if you are happy to participate, please read the consent page and confirm your consent by checking the tick box at the bottom of the page. You can withdraw from the survey at any time by simply closing the web browser. This will be taken by the researchers to mean that you no longer wish for your data to be included in the study and we will remove your responses from the final data file before analysis begins. Please note, as the survey is anonymous once you have submitted the survey it will not be possible to withdraw your data from the study.

If I have some more questions; who should I contact?

- Poppy Allchorne-Page, School of Social Sciences and Humanities, Loughborough University, Loughborough, Leicestershire, LE11 3TU, P.V.Allchorne-Page-21@student.lboro.ac.uk

What if I am not happy with how the research was conducted?

If you are not happy with how the research was conducted, please contact the Secretary of the Ethics Review Sub-Committee, Research & Enterprise Office, Hazlerigg Building, Loughborough University, Epinal Way, Loughborough, LE11 3TU. Tel: 01509 222423. Email: researchpolicy@lboro.ac.uk

The University also has policies relating to Research Misconduct and Whistle Blowing which are available online at <https://www.lboro.ac.uk/internal/research-ethics-integrity/research-integrity/> .

If you require any further information regarding the General Data Protection Regulations, please see: <https://www.lboro.ac.uk/privacy/research-privacy/>

Free and impartial support service information

If you feel that you would benefit from speaking to free and impartial support services after taking part in this study or more generally based on any experiences that are affecting you, please make use of the contact information below:

Government information:

Web: [Forensic Information Databases annual report 2021 to 2022 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/612222/Forensic-Information-Databases-annual-report-2021-to-2022.pdf)

Samaritans:

Telephone: 116 123

Email: jo@samaritans.org

Web: <https://www.samaritans.org/?nation=wales>

B.4 Debrief Form

Study Debrief

The questionnaire is now complete, and your data has been submitted. Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. The answers you have given will contribute towards a BSc Criminology dissertation project.

The study was designed to examine differences in public perceptions and attitudes towards offender profiling and how profilers can support criminal investigations. In some cases offender profiling is highly useful in aiding police investigations however it is widely misinterpreted by the general public. Your participation will greatly help us to better understand variation in public perceptions towards profiling as attitudes towards profilers in existing literature is missing.

What support is available to you?

I hope you found participating in this study an interesting and positive experience. However, the nature of the topic could potentially be sensitive and upsetting for some people. If you feel the experience has left you feeling upset or distressed in any way, please use the provided contact details below for free and impartial support.

- **Government information:**

Web: [Forensic Information Databases annual report 2021 to 2022 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/612222/Forensic-Information-Databases-annual-report-2021-to-2022.pdf)

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If you are not happy with how the research was conducted, please contact,

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