



True crime on social media among young people: Psychological appeal, recommender algorithms, and sustained viewing — An integrative narrative review

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Abstract

The growing popularity of true crime content on digital platforms raises questions about how the psychological appeal of such content interacts with user behavior and platform personalization mechanisms. This article presents an integrative narrative review using four core studies to synthesize two central evidence streams: the psychology of engagement with true crime content and evidence on recommender algorithms and platform characteristics associated with increased exposure or addictive/problematic use among young people. Five studies from Vietnam are used as contextual evidence in the Discussion to clarify the relevance of, and research gaps within, the Vietnamese context; they are not treated as direct evidence on true crime or recommender algorithms. The findings indicate that engagement with true crime is associated with general morbid curiosity and several specific motives. Studies of recommender systems further suggest that personalized content environments may, under specific conditions, amplify exposure to particular types of content, while platform characteristics may be associated with addictive/problematic use. However, none of the studies in the reviewed corpus directly tests the full sequence linking true crime, user interaction, recommendation, repeated exposure, and difficult-to-control viewing. Accordingly, the article proposes a user–content–algorithm framework as a conceptual hypothesis requiring empirical testing.

Keywords: True crime, recommender algorithms, recommender systems, morbid curiosity, problematic use, youth

Introduction

The development of social media platforms driven by personalization mechanisms has substantially changed how young people encounter online content. Users no longer rely solely on active information seeking; they are also continually exposed to content selected by recommendation systems on the basis of behavioral signals and interaction histories. In this environment, recommender algorithms contribute to shaping the streams of content that users continue to encounter. Regehr *et al.* (2025) ^[8] showed that, in the context of misogynistic content and gender-based violence, recommendation systems can increase young people's exposure to harmful content over time. From a different perspective, Qin *et al.* (2022) ^[7] found that system quality and information quality were associated with flow experience, which in turn influenced TikTok addiction behavior. These findings suggest that prolonged or difficult-to-control platform use should be understood by considering both user characteristics and the technological features of the platform.

Among the forms of content that attract attention in digital environments, true crime is particularly noteworthy. True crime encompasses media products concerning real crimes and criminal cases, ranging from fraud, kidnapping, and disappearances to violent offenses and homicide (Perchtold-Stefan, Rominger, Ceh, *et al.*, 2026) ^[5]. Perchtold-Stefan, Rominger, Ceh, *et al.* (2026) ^[5] showed that fascination with true crime is a multidimensional psychological phenomenon. General morbid curiosity was strongly associated with the extent of true crime consumption; among the specific motives examined—authenticity, defensive vigilance, excitement, and emotion regulation—authenticity was the most frequently endorsed. However, when unique variance in true crime consumption was considered, defensive vigilance and excitement remained

significant contributors, whereas authenticity no longer explained unique variance after other factors were controlled. This distinction underscores the need to differentiate between motives that viewers report as important and factors that explain individual differences in the extent of viewing.

Beyond the question of why true crime is appealing, the relationship between affective states and continued viewing also warrants careful consideration. Perchtold-Stefan, Rominger, and Fink (2026) ^[5] used a two-week daily diary design and Bayesian cross-lagged multilevel modeling to examine temporal associations between affect and true crime. The study identified several cross-lagged associations, but all effects fell below the smallest effect size of interest defined by the authors as practically meaningful. Thus, the available evidence does not support interpreting true crime as producing strong or stable emotional effects over time.

When true crime is encountered on platforms that use recommender systems, users' psychological motivations operate within a personalized media environment. Behaviors such as viewing, searching, liking, commenting, sharing, or following accounts generate interaction signals, while recommendation systems may continue to shape the content subsequently presented to users. Regehr *et al.* (2025) ^[8] did not study true crime, and their findings therefore cannot be directly generalized to this content category. Nevertheless, their study provides evidence that recommendation systems can amplify exposure to a particular type of content under certain conditions. This creates a basis for asking whether a similar process may contribute to sustained exposure to true crime following initial interactions.

When research on the psychology of true crime is considered alongside work on recommender algorithms and addictive/problematic use, an integrative hypothesis can be

formulated: the psychological appeal of true crime may promote initial attention and interaction; these interactions become behavioral signals within a personalized system; personalization may then alter the subsequent content environment; and repeated exposure may create further opportunities for viewing and interaction. However, the available evidence does not support the conclusion that recommender algorithms directly cause “true crime addiction,” nor is there sufficient basis for treating true crime addiction as an independent clinical construct.

In Vietnam, studies have documented social media addiction, problematic Internet use, and associations with psychological well-being among adolescents and young people (Dam *et al.*, 2023; Doan *et al.*, 2022; Nguyen *et al.*, 2023, 2025; Vu & Nguyen, 2024)^[1, 2, 3, 4, 10]. However, these studies primarily address social media or Internet use at a general level and do not directly examine true crime or recommender algorithms. They are therefore better treated as contextual evidence for discussing the relevance of the topic and research gaps in Vietnam, rather than as a body of findings equivalent to direct evidence on true crime and recommender systems.

Accordingly, this review focuses on two central questions: (1) Which psychological factors are associated with the appeal of, and continued engagement with, true crime? and (2) What does the existing evidence on recommender algorithms and platform characteristics suggest about the maintenance of exposure and use? Drawing on these two evidence streams, the article develops a user–content–algorithm framework and then discusses its implications for research on young people in Vietnam.

Method

1. Design and Aims of the Review

This article uses a narrative review design with an integrative, concept-driven synthesis. An integrative approach is appropriate when the aim is to connect evidence and perspectives from different lines of research to develop a new understanding or conceptual framework, rather than to synthesize a single unified effect (Snyder, 2019; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005)^[9, 11]. In this study, the aim is not to estimate a pooled effect size or synthesize prevalence estimates, but to compare and connect distinct evidence streams in order to develop an explanatory framework. Because the evidence base was assembled purposively rather than through a systematic search and screening process, the review is intended as a conceptual synthesis rather than as a systematic or scoping review.

2. Scope and Selection Principles

Four core studies were purposively selected to represent the article's two central evidence domains: (1) two studies on true crime, focusing on motives, psychological correlates, affect, and patterns of consumption (Perchtold-Stefan, Rominger, Ceh, *et al.*, 2026^[5]; Perchtold-Stefan, Rominger, and Fink, 2026)^[5]; and (2) two studies on recommender algorithms, system characteristics, or addictive use among

young people (Qin *et al.*, 2022; Regehr *et al.*, 2025)^[7, 8]. Five studies conducted in Vietnam on social media addiction, problematic Internet use, and patterns of social media use (Dam *et al.*, 2023; Doan *et al.*, 2022; Nguyen *et al.*, 2023, 2025; Vu & Nguyen, 2024)^[1, 2, 3, 4, 10] were used as contextual evidence in the Discussion to clarify the relevance of the topic and research gaps in the Vietnamese context. The core evidence set was not intended to be exhaustive. Non-peer-reviewed popular-science sources were not included in the evidentiary corpus.

3. Guiding Questions and Data Extraction Framework

The review was guided by three questions: (1) which psychological factors are associated with the appeal of, and continued engagement with, true crime; (2) how have recommender algorithms and system characteristics been studied in relation to increased exposure or addictive/problematic use among young people; and (3) what conceptual framework could integrate these two evidence streams to guide research directly addressing true crime within personalized social media environments. For each core study, the following information was extracted: context, sample, design, focal variables, main findings, and the direct or indirect relevance to the guiding questions.

4. Synthesis Method and Interpretive Principles

Because the studies differ substantially in content, samples, and analytic methods, the evidence was synthesized narratively and organized thematically rather than statistically pooled. Evidence was organized into two domains: (1) the appeal and psychological dynamics of true crime consumption; and (2) recommender algorithms, system characteristics, and addictive/problematic use. The two domains were then integrated at the conceptual level. The guiding interpretive principle was to distinguish direct evidence clearly from integrative inference: findings from true crime studies were used only to characterize true crime; findings from recommender-systems studies were generalized only within the content type and design examined in the original study; and links between the two domains were presented as hypotheses requiring empirical testing. The Vietnamese studies were not counted as part of the core synthesized results.

Results

1. Characteristics of the Core Studies and the Structure of the Two Evidence Streams

The four core studies form two complementary evidence streams. Two studies directly examining true crime provide evidence on motives, psychological correlates, and the dynamics between affect and viewing behavior. Two studies of platform environments provide indirect evidence on recommender algorithms, system quality, flow, and addiction behavior. This distribution indicates that none of the studies in the corpus tests the full sequence linking true crime, user interaction, recommendation, repeated exposure, and difficult-to-control viewing.

Table 1: Overview of the Four Core Studies.

Study	Context/sample	Design	Main focus	Role in the review
Perchtold-Stefan, Rominger, Ceh, <i>et al.</i> (2026) ^[5]	Total N = 571; analytic n = 307–571; predominantly young, highly educated sample	Survey-based multivariate study; ANOVA, PCA, regression	Motives; morbid curiosity; psychological correlates; safety/well-being; formats	Direct evidence on motives and psychological correlates of true crime engagement

Perchtold-Stefan, Rominger, and Fink (2026) ^[5]	n = 199; data collected in 2024	Two-week daily diary; Bayesian cross-lagged multilevel modeling	Temporal associations between affect and true crime viewing	Direct longitudinal evidence on true crime and affect
Regehr <i>et al.</i> (2025) ^[8]	10 young adults (18–25); >1,000 TikTok videos; school leaders/safeguarding staff in England and Wales	Mixed methods: interviews, algorithmic analysis, expert consultation	Recommender systems; misogyny/gender-based violence; well-being	Indirect evidence of content amplification under specific experimental conditions
Qin <i>et al.</i> (2022) ^[7]	n = 659 Chinese adolescents (10–19 years)	Cross-sectional survey; PLS	Information quality; system quality; flow; TikTok addiction behavior	Indirect evidence on platform characteristics and addictive use

2. Psychological Factors Associated With the Appeal of and Continued Engagement With True Crime Content

Perchtold-Stefan, Rominger, Ceh, *et al.* (2026)^[5] showed that general morbid curiosity is a strong correlate of the extent of true crime consumption. Among the specific motives examined, authenticity was the most frequently endorsed, followed by defensive vigilance, excitement, and emotion regulation. However, in models explaining the extent of true crime consumption, defensive vigilance and excitement accounted for additional variance beyond morbid curiosity, whereas authenticity no longer made a unique contribution after other factors were controlled. Across a broader set of variables, gender, income, fear of crime, and antagonism explained unique variance in overall true crime consumption. These findings highlight the distinction between motives that participants report as important and factors that explain individual differences in viewing levels.

The longitudinal evidence warrants a more cautious interpretation. Perchtold-Stefan, Rominger, and Fink (2026)^[5] reported that anxiety on a given day predicted violent true crime consumption on the following day, whereas violent true crime consumption on a given day predicted positive affect on the following day. However, neither effect exceeded the smallest effect size of interest ($\beta = .10$). Thus, the study does not provide evidence for a strong or clearly practically meaningful affect–true crime feedback loop over the observation period.

3. Evidence on Recommender Algorithms, Platform Characteristics, Increased Exposure, and Addictive Use

Regehr *et al.* (2025)^[8] showed that, within their experimental setup, recommender systems were associated with substantial changes in young people's content environments. In the algorithm analysis, the proportion of misogynistic content on the For You feeds of experimental archetype accounts increased from 13% to 56% after five days. Together with interview data and discussions with school leaders, the authors interpreted these findings as a process through which harmful content can be amplified and normalized. However, the study focused on misogyny and gender-based violence; therefore, its findings demonstrate the potential for content amplification in a specific context rather than showing that true crime is amplified in the same way.

Qin *et al.* (2022)^[7] examined the issue from the perspective of platform characteristics and addiction behavior on TikTok. Among 659 Chinese adolescents, system quality had a stronger effect than information quality on flow experience, and flow experience had both direct and indirect effects on TikTok addiction behavior. This finding reinforces the argument that addictive use is related not only

to user characteristics but also to experiences generated by the system. Nevertheless, the study did not examine true crime and did not test the recommender algorithm as an independent variable; it therefore serves only as indirect evidence regarding the platform-characteristics component of the integrative framework.

4. Linking the Appeal of True Crime, User Interaction, and Content Personalization: A User–Content–Algorithm Framework

Drawing on the two evidence streams, this article proposes a conceptual framework comprising a sequence of linked processes: (1) motives and psychological characteristics related to true crime facilitate initial attention or selection; (2) viewing, searching, liking, commenting, sharing, or following generate interaction signals; (3) recommender systems may use these behavioral signals to personalize content feeds; (4) personalized feeds may alter the probability of exposure to similar content; and (5) new exposure creates further opportunities for subsequent viewing and interaction. This process is hypothesized to form a user–content–algorithm feedback loop.

The proposed framework is not derived from a single study and has not been directly tested in relation to true crime. Rather, it results from integrating direct and indirect evidence of differing relevance. Accordingly, the links in the framework should be understood as hypotheses for future testing rather than as established causal pathways.

Discussion

1. From the Appeal of True Crime to the Hypothesis of a User–Content–Algorithm Feedback Loop

The synthesis suggests that explanations of true crime viewing on social media should avoid two forms of reductionism: treating viewing primarily as the product of a fixed individual preference, or treating the recommender algorithm as an independent cause of continued viewing. Direct evidence on true crime indicates that content selection is associated with morbid curiosity and specific motives, whereas evidence on recommender systems indicates that users' content environments can change over the course of platform use. Considered together, these two evidence streams motivate a plausible hypothesis of an interactive process in which users generate signals for the system and the system, in turn, alters users' opportunities for subsequent exposure.

Crucially, the existing evidence does not establish the relative contribution of three factors: pre-existing preferences, active search, and algorithmic personalization. A user may repeatedly encounter true crime because they actively search for it, because the recommendation system increases similar content after initial interactions, or because both processes operate simultaneously. The primary value of the proposed framework therefore lies in identifying

variables that should be measured concurrently in future research.

2. Limits of the Concept of “True Crime Addiction” and Its Distinction From Addictive/Problematic Use

An important conclusion of this review is that frequent true crime viewing should not be equated with addiction. The core literature provides evidence on TikTok addiction behavior and related system characteristics (Qin *et al.*, 2022) ^[7], but none of the studies included in this review establishes true crime addiction as an independent construct. Accordingly, the expression “true crime addiction,” when used descriptively, should not be interpreted as the name of a disorder or diagnostic category; it can only refer informally to experiences of repetitive, prolonged, or difficult-to-stop viewing.

Conceptually, it is important to distinguish among interest/preference, habitual use, problematic use, and functional impairment. High frequency or long duration of use does not, in itself, demonstrate a problematic/addictive pattern; research on difficult-to-control behavior should also assess indicators such as loss of control and functional impairment. This distinction helps avoid pathologizing a media preference while also strengthening the precision of future measurement.

3. Implications of the User–Content–Algorithm Framework for Research on Young People in Vietnam

Studies conducted in Vietnam provide important empirical evidence concerning social media addiction, problematic Internet use, and psychological well-being among adolescents and young people. Doan *et al.* (2022) ^[2] described patterns and correlated factors of social media addiction; Dam *et al.* (2023) ^[1] examined associations among problematic/addictive use, FOMO, negative online experiences, mental health, and quality of life; Nguyen *et al.* (2023) ^[3] analyzed problematic Internet use in relation to individual and neighborhood characteristics; Nguyen *et al.* (2025) ^[4] focused on patterns of social media use and psychological well-being; and Vu and Nguyen (2024) ^[10] examined factors influencing social media addiction among Vietnamese adolescents.

The value of these studies for the present review lies in their role as contextual evidence: they document addictive/problematic use in Vietnamese samples, but they focus primarily on social media or Internet use at a general level. None of the studies in the present corpus examines true crime or recommender algorithms in the Vietnamese context. A content-specific research approach could therefore extend the existing literature by examining which types of content young people view, which motives are associated with their choices, how they interact with that content, and how their feeds change following those interactions.

True crime provides a suitable case for testing such a content-specific approach because international evidence has identified relevant motives and psychological correlates. However, there is no basis for assuming that motives or patterns observed in international samples will be reproduced in the same way in Vietnam. Research in Vietnam should therefore be designed as an independent empirical test rather than as an assumed extension of findings obtained elsewhere.

4. Evidence Gaps and Directions for Future Research

A central evidence gap is the lack of studies directly testing the interaction among content characteristics, user psychology, and recommender systems. Future research should prioritize designs capable of establishing the temporal ordering of exposure, interaction, recommendation, and continued viewing. Digital diary and longitudinal designs could track changes in behavior and affect; audit studies or controlled-account experiments could examine how feeds change following specified interaction patterns; and combining self-report data with digital trace data could help distinguish users' subjective perceptions of “being recommended more content” from actual changes in the content presented.

A particularly important variable is the source of exposure: active search versus algorithmic recommendation. If users repeatedly and actively search for true crime, high exposure cannot be attributed primarily to the algorithm. Conversely, if the proportion of true crime in the feed increases following initial interactions while active search is controlled, the recommendation-based feedback hypothesis would receive stronger empirical support. Future studies should simultaneously measure motives, active search, interaction signals, exposure, viewing duration, and indicators of loss of control or functional impairment when examining difficult-to-control viewing.

5. Limitations of the Present Review

This review has several limitations. First, the four core studies were purposively selected to represent the two central evidence streams and were not identified through a systematic search; therefore, the review cannot claim comprehensive coverage of the literature. Second, only two studies directly examined true crime, whereas the evidence on recommender algorithms and addictive use is indirect. Third, the studies differ substantially in samples, designs, platforms, and outcomes, precluding quantitative pooling or direct comparison of effect sizes. Fourth, the review did not conduct a risk-of-bias assessment; the user–content–algorithm framework should therefore be regarded as a conceptual synthesis rather than as a model supported by formally graded evidence.

The five Vietnamese studies were used as contextual evidence in the Discussion and did not contribute directly to the core synthesis of results. This approach was intended to avoid extrapolating from social media addiction/problematic Internet use in general to true crime or recommender algorithms when the original studies do not support such inferences.

Conclusion

This review connects two relatively distinct evidence streams: the psychology of engagement with true crime and research on recommender algorithms and platform characteristics associated with increased exposure or addictive use. Direct evidence indicates that the extent of true crime consumption is associated with general morbid curiosity as well as other motives and psychological correlates, whereas evidence on recommender systems suggests that certain types of content can be amplified and that exposure can become increasingly personalized during platform use. However, there is no direct evidence that recommender algorithms cause “true crime addiction.”

The main contribution of this article is the proposed user–content–algorithm framework as a hypothetical structure for organizing future research questions. The framework emphasizes that viewing behavior should be understood through the interaction among user motives, behavioral signals, personalization mechanisms, and subsequent exposure, while clearly distinguishing active search from algorithmic recommendation. In Vietnam, existing research provides empirical evidence on social media addiction, problematic Internet use, and psychological well-being, but direct evidence linking true crime with recommender systems is absent from the reviewed corpus. This gap is well suited to future longitudinal studies, audit or experimental designs, and research using digital trace data.

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