

Media Coverage of Crime and Its Effects on Thai Audiences' Perceptions of Criminal Suspects and Persons of Interest¹

Chanamon Phansab²

Duangkamol Chartprasert

Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand

Abstract

Due to the rise in crime news reporting, crime narrative consumption, and competitive media environments, the pressure to publish crime news rapidly and appeal to the audiences for engagement may encourage the use of sensationalized and emotionally charged language. Such practices have led to prominent incidents in which media misrepresent criminal suspects and persons of interest, potentially misleading the public and shaping distorted perceptions of suspects' guilt and innocence, which raises both scholarly and societal concerns. To examine the extent to which media coverage influences Thai audiences' perceptions of criminal suspects and persons of interest—a research gap that has yet to be sufficiently explored in Thailand—the study uses Attribution Theory to explore how Thai audiences interpret crime news and assign causal attributions when evaluating individuals involved in criminal investigations. Through the qualitative research method of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Thai news consumers, 15 participants were presented with 20 selected crime news excerpts that varied in language and attributional cues, with an emphasis on dispositional (character-based) versus

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² Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Chanamon Phansab at the Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand, or by email at: chanamon.nsh@gmail.com

situational (context-based) narratives. In-depth interviews were vital in exploring not only what judgments participants formed, but also how and why they formed them, which generated rich qualitative insights. The findings indicate that crime news narratives that focus on dispositional factors lead to confident internal contributions, whereas narratives that incorporate situational contexts lead to more cautious and balanced judgments. The findings suggest that attributional cues embedded in crime reporting play a critical role in shaping the public's interpretations of guilt and responsibility. Thus, the study contributes to the literature by applying Attribution Theory to explain how Thai audiences interpret crime news portrayals of criminal suspects and persons of interest, particularly how dispositional and situational cues shape perceptions of culpability before legal conclusions are reached. It also highlights the ethical implications of responsible crime reporting practices in preventing premature public judgment of culpability.

Keywords: Attribution Theory, Crime News, Audience Perception, Perceived Guilt, Media Effects

Crime is among the most consumed types of media and news content across the world. In Thailand, a crime-related media consumption study surveyed 420 Bangkok respondents and found that the majority of people who consumed crime-related news did so 2–3 days per week (Songkumpol & Khruakham, 2022). Moreover, news consumption in Thailand increasingly takes place in a digital and competitive media environment. According to the Reuters Institute's *Digital News Report 2025*, 88% of Thais consume news online on a weekly basis (Kheokao & Kheokao, 2025). These figures show that crime news narratives can circulate rapidly across online platforms. Moreover, crime reporting attracts audiences and drives engagement due to its emotional intensity and dramatic narratives (Pollak & Kubrin, 2007), and people rely on

media to obtain information about crime (Schildkraut, 2017, as cited in Mann, 2018). As in many countries, crime news in Thailand often includes criminal suspects and persons of interest in the narratives while investigations are still ongoing, especially when cases involve prominent individuals, extraordinary circumstances, or unspeakable acts. Thus, the public is exposed to portrayals of individuals involved in criminal cases long before legal conclusions are reached (Susak Lozanovska, 2023). Additionally, since news outlets may sensationalize stories to gain following in the competitive media environment, they often turn criminal cases into emotional narratives (Nimtupariya & Tapinta, 2021). This transformation carries serious consequences not only for journalistic standards and public interest, but also for the individuals whose lives become the subjects of such coverage. When media reports stories about criminal cases that are under active investigation, it inevitably includes the framing of individuals whose legal status—suspect, person of interest, accused, or merely associated—may still be unresolved, yet the language and narrative choices made can construct meaning and shape public perception (Jugovic, 2017). Thus, audiences' perceptions of the guilt and innocence of criminal suspects and persons of interest can be influenced by media narratives (Entman & Gross, 2008). When done right, the public gets presented with facts in an objective way to form their own opinion. However, when crime narratives are too sensationalized or use clickbait headlines without regard to the individuals involved, they can mislead the public about the guilt and innocence of such individuals. Such cases have been seen in Thailand where individuals who are supposed to be innocent until proven guilty are portrayed otherwise in the media and receive social punishment through trial by media before legal processes are finalized, while those who are culpable get portrayed as victims of circumstance and receive undue sympathy from the public. Such phenomena are not merely academic concerns; they reflect real tensions between freedom of the press and the integrity of the criminal justice system.

Thailand serves as a compelling context to examine these dynamics as its media landscape involves intense competition among media platforms, all of which engage in high-volume crime news coverage. Moreover, there are several high-profile criminal cases in recent years that have illustrated how media portrayal can lead the public to form judgments, assign blame, and extend sympathy toward the individuals involved, particularly the 2022 drowning of actress Tangmo Nida Patcharaveerapong and the 2020 murder of Nong Chompoo Orawan Wongsricha, in which each case demonstrates distinct patterns in how Thai media covered criminal suspects and persons of interest—particularly how one case emphasized dispositional attributional cues and the other emphasized situational attributional cues—and how Thai audiences responded to those portrayals.

With the research objectives of examining how Thai audiences perceive and make judgments about criminal suspects and persons of interest portrayed in crime news coverage and exploring how such portrayals may influence those judgments, the study applies Attribution Theory as its theoretical framework so as to understand audience judgment as a process of causal attribution shaped by language cues provided by the media.

This study is important because it contributes to both crime news and media effects research by examining how audiences interpret media portrayals of criminal suspects and persons of interest before legal conclusions are reached. The study also makes an academic contribution by applying Attribution Theory to the context of Thai crime news, particularly how dispositional and situational cues in crime narratives shape audience judgments of culpability—a research gap that has yet to be sufficiently explored. In doing so, the study extends the use of Attribution Theory within media and communication research by demonstrating how attributional reasoning functions in audience perception and judgment of criminal suspects and persons of interest in high-profile Thai criminal cases.

Literature Review

In crime news, certain news values shape its newsworthiness, which explains why some cases receive more media and public attention than others. According to Jewkes (2015), there are 12 crime news values: threshold, predictability, simplification, individualism, risk, sex, celebrity or high-status persons, proximity, violence or conflict, spectacle and graphic imagery, children, and conservative ideology or political diversion. Moreover, crime news is an important field in media and communication research because it shapes how audiences perceive their realities. However, studies have shown that crime reporting tends to emphasize sensational and emotional cases, which may distort the public's views of crime and criminals (Pollak & Kubrin, 2007). Therefore, crime news coverage should be understood not only as information about criminal incidents, but also as a constructed narrative that can influence public perceptions of crime and criminal suspects.

Originally formulated by Heider (1958) and later expanded upon by Kelley (1967) and Weiner (1985), Attribution Theory serves as a strong explanatory framework for understanding how audiences process crime news content and form judgments toward the individuals involved. It is a psychological theory that explains how people identify and interpret the causes behind events and behaviors, including their own actions and others' (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967; Weiner, 1985).

As this study examines how crime news narratives emphasize certain aspects of criminal incidents and suspects, Framing Theory is also relevant. Framing refers to how media selects and emphasizes certain aspects of reality to promote certain interpretations and judgments (Entman, 1993). In crime news contexts, frames shape not only what audiences pay attention to, but also how they understand causes of events and assign responsibility. Scheufele (1999) further explains framing as a media effects process involving both media frames and audience interpretation. Therefore, in this study, framing explains how crime news presents attributional cues through framing devices such

as headlines and lexical choices to portray suspects, while Attribution Theory explains how audiences interpret those cues when assigning guilt, blame, or responsibility to the suspects.

In *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*—considered the modern foundation of Attribution Theory—Heider (1958) suggested that people act as "naïve psychologists," as they naturally try to understand and explain why others behave the way they do, constantly interpreting causes behind actions and events in everyday life. People tend to assign causes to behaviors they observe, and this causal explanation is between dispositional (internal) attributions—when people perceive behavior to be caused by a person's persistent qualities such as personality, intentions, and abilities, which is character-based—and situational (external) attributions—when people perceive behavior to be caused by environmental factors outside the person's control such as surrounding circumstances, chance, and social conditions (Heider, 1958). In the context of crime news coverage, this distinction is critical. On the one hand, when crime news coverage emphasizes a suspect or person of interest's character traits, behavioral patterns, personal history, or moral failings (dispositional framing), the audiences are provided with internal causal cues that can influence them to place blame on said suspect or person of interest associated in the crime. On the other hand, when crime news coverage emphasizes external circumstances, contextual pressures, or uncertainty about what actually happened in the incident (situational framing), the audiences are more likely to reserve judgment in placing blame and responsibility on the suspect or person of interest. They may, in turn, blame the surrounding circumstances instead. Studies have shown that the inclusion of certain details in news stories can influence audiences to make certain interpretations. For example, Coleman and Thorson (2002) showed that crime and violence stories that included broader contextual information could shift readers' perceptions of crime and violence.

Furthermore, in order to properly judge whether an individual's behavior should be attributed to the person's characteristics or surrounding circumstances, Kelley's (1967) covariation model further specifies the conditions under which dispositional versus situational attributions are likely to occur, suggesting that a person may draw conclusions about an observed behavior and its causes from various observations at different times. The person may consider three dimensions of information, each of which is ranked from high to low: consensus (whether others behave similarly in the same situation), consistency (whether the person behaves the same way in the same situation across time), and distinctiveness (whether the person behaves the same way in different contexts). In the context of crime news coverage, when crime reporting emphasizes the suspect or person of interest's behavioral pattern across multiple occasions, it presents high consistency and low distinctiveness, potentially inviting dispositional attribution. By contrast, crime reporting that presents a single ambiguous incident with little contextual information offers low consistency and high ambiguity, which should, in principle, restrain audiences' dispositional judgment.

Moreover, Weiner's (1985) extension of Attribution Theory introduced the dimensions of locus (whether the cause of a person's behavior is internal or external), stability (whether the cause of a person's behavior is stable over time), and controllability (whether the person can control that behavior). In the context of crime news reporting, these dimensions further refine the kinds of blame and responsibility the audiences may place on the suspect or person of interest. When crime news emphasizes that a person could and should have behaved differently (that their behavior was internally caused, stable, and within their control), audiences may be more likely to assign high blame to the individual. Conversely, when news coverage provides uncontrollable or circumstantial factors, audiences may be less likely to assign high blame to the individual. When applied to crime news consumption and its effects on Thai audiences' perceptions of

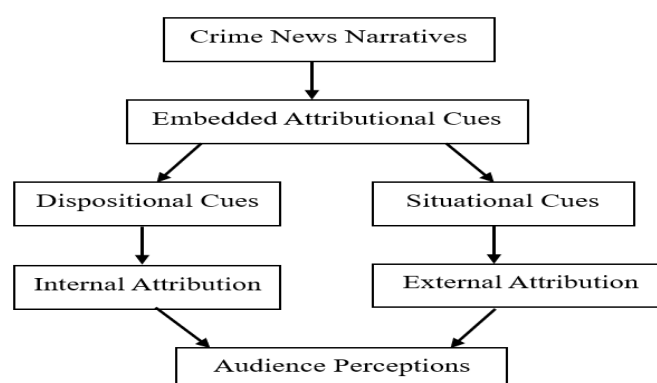
criminal suspects and persons of interest, these components of Attribution Theory provide an analytical framework for examining how crime news coverage can guide audiences toward particular interpretations of suspects using dispositional and situational cues that may shape whether audiences assign guilt and responsibility to the suspects or consider broader situational circumstances. In particular, the study draws on Heider's (1958) internal (dispositional) versus external (situational) attributions to examine what is suggested as the cause of the crime and the inclusion of suspects' nature and situational contexts as well as Kelley's (1967) covariation model and Weiner's (1985) attributional dimensions to examine the descriptions of suspects' behaviors in high-profile Thai criminal cases that possess high crime news values.

Previous empirical studies have shown that how news is presented and the language choices used can influence how audiences assign blame and responsibility. For example, Knobloch-Westerwick and Taylor (2008) found that the use of active versus passive voice in news language affected readers' causal attributions and judgments of blame, in which active voice verbs led to more blame to the individuals. Similarly, Albrecht and Nadler (2022) showed that the composition of crime news articles influenced readers' perceptions of offenders' moral blameworthiness and punishment, in which readers placed more blame and wished for higher punishment for offenders when their morally questionable behavior was included in the news. However, much of this research has been conducted outside the Thai media and cultural context and has focused more on media content than on how audiences themselves explain their interpretations of crime news. Moreover, there is still little research in the Thai crime news context presented in the English language. This study addresses these gaps by using in-depth interviews to examine how Thai audiences interpret dispositional and situational cues in real Thai criminal case coverage and how these cues shape audience perceptions, and by presenting it in the English language for a more global reach.

Based on the reviewed literature, this study proposes the following conceptual framework to explain how attributional cues in crime news narratives may shape audience perceptions of criminal suspects and persons of interest. Specifically, crime news narratives may contain dispositional cues, such as emphasis on the suspect’s characteristics, or situational cues, such as references to environmental factors. These cues guide how audiences interpret the causes of actions and events, in which dispositional cues may encourage internal attributions, leading audiences to place blame and responsibility on the suspect, while situational cues may encourage external attributions, leading audiences to consider broader circumstances before forming judgments. Thus, the framework proposes that attributional cues in crime news narratives shape audience perceptions of the suspect’s culpability.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research approach using semi-structured, in-depth interviews as the data collection method because the objectives of the study seek to gather underlying insights from Thai audiences, rather than make statistical generalizations. According

to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative research is grounded in studying phenomena that are within their natural settings and interpreting them in terms of the meanings that participants bring to them. Thus, this method is suitable for this study, as it allows for the exploration of how Thai audiences interpret crime news content and how their perceptions influence their judgments. Moreover, the semi-structured, in-depth interview format combines the advantages of having guided predetermined questions needed for this study to ensure that key themes related to Attribution Theory are addressed while allowing the flexibility to explore any insights that may arise (Eppich et al., 2019).

Case and News Excerpt Selection

Two high-profile Thai criminal cases were selected as stimuli for the interviews. These cases were selected purposively to represent distinctions between crime types, suspect profiles, media coverage styles, and public outcomes, and to allow the comparison of cases where crime news framing differed substantially in its dispositional and situational emphasis.

The two selected cases are:

Case 1: The Tangmo Case – The case involved the death of actress Tangmo Nida Patcharaveerapong who, on the night of February 24, 2022, fell from a speedboat into the Chao Phraya River and drowned. In the early stages of the investigation, media coverage extensively generated intense speculation about the other five boat passengers who were her personal manager, friends, and acquaintances, while legal conclusions had not been reached. Although all five passengers were later charged, two were acquitted, two were convicted of reckless operation of a boat causing death and operating a boat without a valid license, and one was convicted of disposing of waste in the river and filing a false police report (Bangkok Post, 2025a).

Case 2: The Uncle Pol Case – The case involved the death of a three-year-old girl, Nong Chompoo Orawan Wongsricha, who disappeared on May 11, 2020, and was found dead

and unclothed in a forest on Phu Lek Fai Mountain three days later. The then key suspect, Uncle Pol Chaipol Wipa, Nong Chompoo's uncle by marriage, was elevated to celebrity status through media coverage and public sympathy, gaining popularity and work in the entertainment industry. Uncle Pol was later found guilty of premeditated murder, child abduction, and body concealment (Bangkok Post, 2025b).

A total of 20 online news excerpts, with 10 excerpts from each selected case, were purposively selected and used in this study. The news excerpts were selected from established Thai online news platforms that provided substantial coverage of the selected cases, including Khaosod Online, Amarin TV, Thairath Online, Manager Online, Naewna, Kom Chad Luek, Thai PBS, Dailynews Online, MCOT, and Thansettakij Digital. They were mainly drawn from the early stages of each case's investigation, when legal conclusions had not yet been reached and public understanding of the cases and suspects was still largely dependent on media coverage. For the Tangmo case, the excerpts were selected from news coverage published between February and April 2022. For the Uncle Pol case, the excerpts were selected from news coverage mainly published between June and September 2020. This period was selected because it allowed the study to examine how criminal suspects and persons of interest were portrayed while legal processes were still pending.

The selection criteria required the excerpts to: (1) portray criminal suspects or persons of interest; (2) be published while investigations were still ongoing; (3) contain sufficient narrative detail to allow analysis of portrayals and attributional cues; (4) contain clear dispositional and/or situational attributional cues; and (5) come from established online news platforms. To ensure variation, excerpts reflecting different portrayals and attributional cues were intentionally selected.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were recruited using a combination of purposive and convenience sampling, as this approach ensured that participants were readily accessible for interviews while meeting the predetermined criteria of the study (Palinkas et al., 2015). The inclusion criteria required participants to be adult Thai news consumers who regularly consumed crime news through online news platforms. In total, 15 participants were interviewed, consisting of eight women and seven men aged between 22 and 62. All participants had completed at least a bachelor's degree and consumed crime news through online news platforms at least once a week. Data collection terminated at thematic saturation, when no new significant issues or recurring themes emerged from the interviews. All participants provided informed consent. Interviews were conducted in Thai and subsequently translated for analysis.

Research Instrument and Data Collection

The research instrument consisted of a semi-structured interview guide and selected crime news excerpts used as interview stimuli. The news excerpts were selected based on qualitative textual analysis findings from an earlier phase of the research. The interview questions were constructed based on the study's research objectives, conceptual framework, and key concepts from Attribution Theory using Heider's (1958) dispositional versus situational attributions, Kelley's (1967) three dimensions of the covariation model—consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness, and Weiner's (1985) attributional dimensions of locus, stability, and controllability. To ensure the quality of the instrument and trustworthiness, the interview guide was reviewed by a peer with relevant academic expertise to assess the clarity, appropriateness, and alignment of the questions with the study objectives. A pilot test was also conducted with seven participants who shared similar characteristics with the target participants. The pilot participants were not included in the final sample. Feedback from the

expert review and pilot test was used to revise the wording, sequence, and clarity of the interview questions before the main data collection was conducted.

Each interview session included the presentation of each case's selected news excerpts from online news sites that varied in causal language cues and elements drawn from Attribution Theory concepts. This allowed for within-case and across-case comparison. The process was followed by predetermined questions designed to elicit participants' interpretations, attributions, and perceptions toward the criminal suspects and persons of interest portrayed in the crime news excerpts. The questions addressed how participants interpreted the behavior and character of individuals featured in the coverage, what they believed to be the most likely causes of their behavior, whether they believed the individuals involved were guilty or innocent and to what degree, and how the news coverage itself influenced their perceptions.

The participants' responses were recorded through detailed written notes taken during each interview. The notes were reviewed and worked on immediately after each session to capture key meanings as accurately as possible.

Data Analysis

Interview data were translated and subjected to thematic analysis following the framework established by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis process involved interview data familiarization, initial code generation, theme search, theme revision, theme naming, and report production. In essence, first, the interview notes and translated responses were repeatedly read to gain a full understanding. Second, initial codes were generated based on the participants' interpretations of dispositional and situational cues. Third, related codes were grouped into broader themes that reflected emerging patterns of perceptions and judgments. Fourth, the themes were reviewed in relation to the research objectives and conceptual framework. Fifth, the themes were refined and named to reflect the key attributional patterns found in the data.

Finally, the findings and supporting examples were interpreted in relation to Attribution Theory and the relationship between crime narratives and blame attribution.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, several steps were taken. First, an audit trail was maintained by documenting the development of the interview protocol and stimulus materials drawn from prior qualitative textual analysis findings, the news excerpt selection process, coding decisions, and theme development. Second, reflexivity was taken into account by considering how the researcher's knowledge of the case outcomes and media portrayals constructed in other time periods could influence data interpretation. Thus, to uphold the trustworthiness of the study, consultation was conducted with a peer with relevant academic expertise, who reviewed the clarity and alignment of the interview questions, reviewed the data interpretation, and provided feedback to improve the research process. Lastly, the findings were grounded in participants' responses, and supporting examples were used to ensure that the interpretation remained true to the data.

Ethical Considerations

While formal ethical approval was not required by the researcher's institution because the study involved minimal risk and collected no identifiable private information, this study was conducted in accordance with ethical research principles for human participants. Prior to the interviews, participants were fully informed of the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw at any time, and their anonymity. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. To further protect participant confidentiality and welfare, no identifying information was collected or included in the findings, and the interviews were not audio- or video-recorded. Participants were also advised that the research was academic in

nature and that their expressed opinions had no legal implications. Finally, all interview data were securely stored solely for academic use.

Findings

This section presents the findings from semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with 15 participants, aged between 22 and 62, who were presented with online news excerpts from the Tangmo case and the Uncle Pol case. The excerpts were purposively selected to vary in their causal language cues, reflecting the three concepts of Attribution Theory: Heider's (1958) dispositional-situational distinction, Kelley's (1967) covariation model (consensus, consistency, distinctiveness), and Weiner's (1985) attributional dimensions of locus, stability, and controllability. The thematic analysis of the interview data revealed three emerging themes: (1) dispositional language cues and confident attribution, (2) situational language cues and suspended judgment, and (3) trust in media as a judgment cue. The themes reported in this section were retained because they appeared repeatedly across participant responses: dispositional cue and situational cue responses appeared in both cases, while trust in media emerged most prominently in the Uncle Pol case. The themes are illustrated through case-based discussion and representative participant responses. Table 1 summarizes these themes, the key attributional cues presented in the excerpts, and the main participant response patterns from the two cases. The participant counts are included to show the recurrence of each response pattern and to clarify how participants' judgments differed across the two cases.

Table 1

Summary of Themes and Participant Response Patterns

Theme	Case	Number of Participants	Main Response Pattern
4.1 Dispositional Language Cues and Confident Attribution	Tangmo	13/15	Confidently viewed the passengers as suspicious, blameworthy, bad characters, or involved in some wrongdoing, but not necessarily murder-related, rather some foul play worth hiding.
	Uncle Pol	10/15	Viewed Uncle Pol sympathetically, as unlikely to be guilty, as innocent, or as already exonerated.
4.2 Situational Language Cues and Suspended Judgment	Tangmo	2/15	Suspended judgment of guilt and considered Tangmo's death to likely be an accident.
		6/15	Suspended judgment on the passengers and considered other explanations that could result in Tangmo's death and difficulties in finding her, but eventually suspected the passengers anyway upon viewing other excerpts that emphasized suspicion.
	Uncle Pol	8/15	Initially suspended judgment of possible guilt and innocence altogether upon learning about evidence uncertainty and prior family conflicts, but later leaned toward sympathy, suspended judgment of guilt, and formed favorable judgment upon seeing other sympathy-oriented excerpts.
4.3 Trust in Media as a Judgment Cue	Uncle Pol	10/15	Indicated that media coverage influenced their perception of Uncle Pol as innocent, sympathetic, or unlikely to be guilty.
		6/15	Specifically stated that they trusted the media to have factual information and insights to portray Uncle Pol in such a positive light.

As shown in Table 1, participant counts indicate the number of participants who expressed each response pattern, and some response patterns are nested and not mutually exclusive, as participants made different judgments after viewing certain excerpts and attributional cues. Nevertheless, participant response patterns differed across the two cases. In the Tangmo case, all 15 participants formed some type of judgment after viewing the excerpts. 13 participants viewed the boat passengers as suspicious or possibly involved in some wrongdoing after viewing excerpts that emphasized dispositional cues, while two participants considered the situational cues, suspended their judgment of the passengers' guilt, and viewed Tangmo's death as more likely to be accidental. Among the 13 participants who were suspicious of the passengers, six temporarily considered situational explanations and reserved their judgment toward the passengers, though not for long, as the suspicion-oriented excerpts produced stronger dispositional judgments.

In the Uncle Pol case, participant responses were more varied. Ten participants viewed Uncle Pol as unlikely to be guilty and expressed sympathy toward him. Among these 10 participants, eight temporarily suspended judgment because of uncertainty surrounding the evidence and prior family conflicts introduced in the news excerpts, while two maintained a favorable view of Uncle Pol without suspending judgment. The remaining five participants did not fit into either of the two attributional themes, as two expressed doubts about Uncle Pol's possible involvement but were not confident enough to make a firm judgment of guilt, while three could not form a judgment regardless of the cues and preferred to wait for further information. This differs from the Tangmo case, where all participants formed some degree of judgment.

Moreover, trust in media also emerged differently across the two cases. In the Tangmo case, participants did not explicitly state that they formed judgments because they trusted the media. However, in the Uncle Pol case, the same 10 participants who viewed him favorably

indicated that the way he was covered in the news influenced their perceptions. Among them, six participants specifically stated that they trusted the media to have more factual information and insight than they did which led them to accept the favorable portrayal of Uncle Pol.

Dispositional Language Cues and Confident Attribution

In both cases, when participants were presented with news excerpts that employed dispositional language—framing that emphasizes the criminal suspects’ or persons of interests’ character, personality, or inherent nature—they produced strong and largely uniform attributional responses with confidence and a reduced tendency to consider alternative explanations.

In the Tangmo case, when participants were presented with online news excerpts from the early stages of the incident with language cues that emphasized the boat passengers’ dubious character and distant personality—such as how they seemed calm, did not cry, delayed reporting, gave inconsistent testimonies, and went home too early while the rescue team was still looking for Tangmo—they strongly and uniformly developed dislike and suspicion as well as placed responsibility on the boat passengers right away. They drew inferences about the individuals’ dispositions and used those inferences to place blame on the individuals. 13 participants perceived the boat passengers as people of bad character, or bad friends to Tangmo, with words such as “terrible friends,” “sketchy,” and “liars.” For instance, one participant stated,

“They were definitely hiding something. Otherwise, who would react in such a way and give contradictory statements like that? Especially when their friend had just drowned.” (Participant 6)

Another remarked,

“What kind of friend would leave you at such a time? A guilty one.” (Participant 14)

These 13 participants not only attributed blame to the passengers with confidence, but they also expressed that the passengers' character revealed by the behavior was, in itself, a sufficient basis for concluding guilt, though not directly of murder but of some foul play that was worth hiding.

In the Uncle Pol case, dispositional language cues that appeared prominently in early-stage media coverage emphasized Uncle Pol's hard-working nature, relatable identity as a small-town man, and as a grieving uncle seeking justice in a highly emotional and sensationalized manner, coupled shortly after with news coverage of his participation in commercial endorsements, celebrity "aura" from a young age, and activities in the entertainment industry. Such news excerpts portrayed Uncle Pol's character as a humble and family-loving man. When presented with these news excerpts from the early stages of the investigation, 10 participants formed sympathy for him and viewed him as unlikely to be guilty, and only two participants expressed negative doubts about his involvement in the crime. When asked further why they confidently perceived Uncle Pol as innocent and did not place much blame on him, the 10 participants revealed that it was in fact because of how he was covered in the news. For instance, one participant stated,

"Looking at these news excerpts, I thought he had already been exonerated.

I mean, we would think the reporters knew more than us about the case, and if the news they presented was about his rise to stardom in such a wholesome way and of the support he got on a daily basis from hundreds of people, I would think that was an innocent man." (Participant 2)

Another participant also shared similar views and added,

"A lot of these reports did not even mention his status as a suspect or anything about the case. They just focused on his cry for justice for his niece.

I thought he was a victim of circumstance. If someone who didn't know about the case saw these, they would think it was news about a celebrity."

(Participant 3)

Although both cases' excerpts contained dispositional language cues, participants' perceptions of suspicion, blame, and guilt differed depending on the direction of the character inference, which demonstrates the influence of media framing.

Situational Language Cues and Suspended Judgment

In contrast to news reports that emphasized dispositional language cues, news excerpts that employed situational language—framing that focuses on the complexity of events, external pressures faced by individuals, limitations of available evidence, or the chaotic circumstances of the incident—evoked different attributional responses from participants. When exposed to situationally framed excerpts, participants were more likely to suspend judgment, express uncertainty, and articulate alternative explanations that located causation outside the individuals involved.

In the Tangmo case, situational attributions were less dominant than their dispositional counterparts in the early-stage coverage. Even though some news excerpts did include external circumstances surrounding the incident, such external factors were less focused on in the news content. However, when presented with online news excerpts that incorporated the darkness and confusion on the river that night, poor visibility, difficulties of conducting a river search in strong currents, accidental conditions on the speedboat, alcohol consumption, and media pressure, participants were more reluctant to place blame. For example, one participant said,

"They had been drinking. If they were drunk, accidents could have happened, but then the passengers kept changing stories on how much alcohol they had consumed, so I don't know." (Participant 1)

Another also stated,

“If the river were that dark, how on Earth would you be able to find anything?” (Participant 10)

With phrases such as “boating accident,” “unfortunate event,” and “dark river” embedded in the excerpts, eight participants were more careful in their judgment of blame to the individuals and more willing to consider external factors that might have caused Tangmo’s death, rather than foul play by the boat passengers. However, for six of these eight participants, their suspended judgment did not last, as other dispositional language cues focusing on the passengers’ character and demeanor at the time were more overwhelming.

In the Uncle Pol case, situationally framed excerpts from the early coverage period that emphasized the poverty of his, also Nong Chompoo’s, family’s community, the absence of resources, the rural and mountainous geography complicating the investigation, the limited forensic evidence available in the early-stage investigation, and the pressure Uncle Pol and the family received, produced strong situational attribution among eight participants. Especially when presented with news coverage containing words and phrases such as “poor living conditions,” “rural,” and “family,” coupled with extensive coverage of Uncle Pol pleading in tears for justice and sympathy for his family, participants found it not only convincing but emotionally compelling. One participant stated,

“I really thought how would someone who had so little do anything to cause more hardship to his family? To me, Uncle Pol in these excerpts seemed like a victim under all that pressure.” (Participant 15)

Another remark:

“My heart truly broke for him and all of Nong Chompoo’s family. I felt nothing but sympathy for them and wished for the culprit to be caught.”

(Participant 14)

These responses illustrate the power of situational framing not merely to suspend blame, but also to constitute an affirmative account of innocence. When asked further why participants were reluctant to place blame and suspicion on Uncle Pol, one participant stated,

“Seeing how he was so poor with little help, I reserved my judgment even though I knew he was a suspect.” (Participant 7)

Similar views were shared across the same participants who viewed Uncle Pol in a positive light, showing how sympathetic situational framing of news excerpts with situational language cues that focused on dire external circumstances played a role in shaping the audiences’ perceptions of guilt and innocence and led them to reserve judgment.

Trust in Media as a Judgment Cue

This theme most clearly emerged in the Uncle Pol case. In the Tangmo case, participants did not explicitly state that they formed judgments due to their trust in media, since their judgments were more directly linked to the behavioral and character cues presented in the news excerpts. However, in the Uncle Pol case, 10 out of 15 participants indicated that the media’s portrayals of Uncle Pol influenced their reluctance to place blame on him. Among these participants, six specifically stated that they trusted the media to have more insight into the case and its investigation than ordinary audiences. These participants interpreted the favorable tone, repeated sympathetic coverage, limited emphasis on Uncle Pol’s suspect status, and repeated coverage of Uncle Pol’s rise to stardom as signals. In other words, they assumed that if the media portrayed Uncle Pol positively, it likely had sufficient reason to do so. This suggests that trust in media operated as an additional interpretive cue that reinforced favorable attribution and reduced suspicion toward Uncle Pol. In addition to the given responses from Participants 2, 3, and 15 regarding the Uncle Pol case, another participant explained that the news crew’s

extended presence in the village and many interviews with Uncle Pol and other villagers created confidence in the coverage. The participant stated,

“The news crew was there for a long time. They knew what was going on. I relied on their updates.” (Participant 8)

This response shows that participants expected reporters to be informed, trusted their judgment, and relied on their coverage to obtain information about the case. However, this pattern was not evident in the Tangmo case, which suggests that trust in media may vary across cases and become especially influential when audiences perceive news coverage as closely connected to the case and informative.

Discussion

Across the two high-profile Thai criminal cases, the findings of this study demonstrate that crime news framing operates as a structured mechanism of causal inference. The way crime news language positions criminal suspects and persons of interest—whether as agents of character-driven action or as subjects of circumstance—determines not only whether audiences assign blame, but also the confidence and degree of that blame. These findings both confirm and extend the existing literature on media framing, attribution, and crime news perception, ultimately suggesting that media and causal language use have the power to influence audiences’ perceptions of criminal suspects and persons of interest.

In the Tangmo case, when presented with dispositional language cues, the majority of participants quickly developed apparent dislike and suspicion toward the portrayed individuals involved in the case. When news coverage focused on the individuals’ suspicious acts and dubious personalities, participants assigned blame to them because they believed the individuals had something to hide; thus, the passengers must have been guilty of something,

though not directly of murder. When the participants associated the passengers with someone of bad character who acted oddly and suspiciously around the incident, participants were largely confident that the passengers were guilty of something related to the incident. These perceptions are in line with Kelley's (1967) consensus dimension of the covariation model since the participants assigned the passengers' behavior to be opposite to what others would do—low consensus—as they believed that others would not have given inconsistent testimonies or left their drowned friend in that situation. The perceptions also reflect Heider's (1958) dispositional attribution and Weiner's (1985) locus dimension as the participants viewed the passengers' behavior and its cause as character-based and internal. They believed that only someone who did something wrong would have that suspicious demeanor and that it would take someone terrible to react the way the passengers did. However, when presented with situational language cues, participants were more reluctant to place blame on the passengers. They considered factors such as alcohol consumption, poor visibility in the dark river, and accidental conditions, as these external factors were presented in the news excerpts. When the participants expressed the possibility that the incident was an accident and attributed the passengers' failure to rescue Tangmo to unfortunate circumstances, it reflects Heider's (1958) situational attributions, where language cues can direct people's focus to external factors leading them to incorporate those factors into consideration and reserve judgment when attributing responsibility. These views also reflect Weiner's (1985) dimension of controllability, as participants considered that the cause of Tangmo's death and the passengers' involvement in it might have been accidental due to the alcohol consumption of all individuals on board, including Tangmo. Participants also suggested that the passengers' inability to locate Tangmo might have resulted from the dark river conditions and strong currents that night, factors they perceived to be beyond the passengers' control. Nevertheless, these views were overpowered by the dispositional language

cues that highly focused on the passengers' poor character and odd demeanor on the night. Hence, the findings revealed new insights that even with the presence of situational language cues, dispositional language cues exerted a stronger influence on participants' judgments than situational language cues. Once participants had formed negative character inferences about the passengers, the inclusion of situational explanations was often insufficient to alter their perceptions. Even when external factors were presented as potential explanations for the behavior or outcome, participants still continued to express suspicion and attribute responsibility to the individuals involved in the end.

In the Uncle Pol case, prominent dispositional language cues that appeared in the early-stage media coverage prompted the majority of participants to develop sympathy and perceptions of innocence toward Uncle Pol. With news excerpts that showed Uncle Pol's character as a grieving uncle seeking justice for his niece, rural villager living in poverty, humble family-loving man, and celebrity in the making, participants were quick to perceive him as innocent and a victim of circumstance, with little suspicion cast on him. These perceptions can be explained by Heider's (1958) dispositional attribution. Because the news coverage heavily emphasized positive dispositional language cues when portraying Uncle Pol's character, participants believed Uncle Pol's internal characteristics as a family-loving man to be the cause of his behavior and outcome—innocence of wrongdoing and a victim of circumstance. Thus, the news coverage influenced the participants to make dispositional attribution in a positive way, which led to the participants developing undue sympathy for Uncle Pol. However, it is important to note that these participants' perceptions were also strongly influenced by their trust in what the media presented them, as they believed that the media would not have portrayed someone guilty in such a positive light; thus, the person must not have been guilty. This notion can be explained by Garusi et al.'s (2025) news media trust study,

which suggests that audiences rely on journalists to be truth tellers, so the audiences willingly suspend their uncertainty and vulnerability and trust journalists to give them the objective truth. Furthermore, when presented with situational language cues, participants continued to see Uncle Pol as innocent even though some of them were aware that Uncle Pol was a suspect in the case. They developed even more sympathy for him, especially when exposed to news coverage about fans coming to support him, his dire living conditions and hardship, the pressure he received, and the uncertainty in the investigation and insufficient evidence at the time. These views can be interpreted through Kelley's (1967) consistency dimension of the covariation model. When participants repeatedly saw news excerpts about Uncle Pol in a positive light and saw that his plea of innocence was consistent across time, their perception of his innocence became strengthened. Again, it is crucial to note that this was partly due to the trust participants had in the media that repeatedly portrayed Uncle Pol as an innocent grieving man with support from fans and a celebrity in the making. Overall, this case illustrates how positive media portrayals, both dispositionally and situationally, can shape audience perceptions and contribute to favorable judgments of an individual.

The above findings carry specific implications for the Thai media ecosystem in which both cases unfolded. The Thai media landscape—characterized by intense commercial competition and a strong tradition of emotionally driven crime coverage, both with dispositional language cues and situational language cues—creates conditions that can influence the audiences' attribution of guilt and innocence as well as their overall perceptions toward the criminal suspects and persons of interest in ongoing investigations as identified in this study. The implications extend beyond these individual cases. When media routinely produces either unwarranted guilt or unwarranted sympathy attributions, it can create a public culture in which the evaluation of individuals associated with the crimes is governed by media narratives rather

than by legal due process and evidence. This culture has consequences for the individuals involved, public interest, and Thai criminal justice system.

Specifically, the findings contribute to Attribution Theory by extending its application to audience interpretation of crime news during periods of legal uncertainty by showing that crime news narratives can operate as attributional environments that guide audience judgment of criminal suspects and persons of interest. The study also adds new knowledge by showing that dispositional cues do not always lead to blame in the same way. The study shows that positive dispositional cues led to sympathy, while negative dispositional cues encouraged suspicion in the crime news context. Another theoretical contribution is the identification of media trust as an additional cue that interacts with attributional reasoning. This suggests that audience attribution in crime news is shaped not only by dispositional and situational cues within the crime narratives, but also by the audiences' willingness to rely on the media's selection, emphasis, and presentation of information. The findings also provide practical recommendations for crime reporting. First, journalists should avoid overly suggestive dispositional language that frames individuals as suspicious or sympathetic without sufficient evidence since these portrayals can influence audience attribution, whether negatively or positively. Second, crime reports should clearly state the legal status of individuals involved to avoid disassociation of suspects from the crime. Finally, news coverage should provide sufficient situational context as the study shows that it can encourage more cautious judgment which should be strived for during open-case investigations to avoid premature judgment of culpability and trial by media.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

In terms of limitations and directions for future research, while the sample size of 15 Thai news consumers for interviews allowed for in-depth exploration of audience

interpretation, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalized to all Thai audiences. Thus, future research could expand the study by including a larger group of participants and conducting the research quantitatively to examine whether dispositional cues, situational cues, and media trust have measurable effects on audience perceptions of guilt, blame, responsibility, sympathy, and innocence. Moreover, the study is limited to high-profile Thai criminal cases as these cases have wider impacts on the portrayed individuals and the audiences. However, audience responses may differ in lower-profile cases, different types of crime, or cases involving different social groups. Therefore, future research could be done on different types of crimes, suspect profiles, and lower-profile cases to limit the participants' prior knowledge of the case. Finally, the study has broader interdisciplinary relevance as it connects media and communication studies with psychology, criminology, journalism ethics, and legal studies by showing how crime news narratives may shape public judgment before legal decisions are finalized. It also has international relevance since similar journalistic and legal concerns that exist in Thailand also exist in other countries. Therefore, the conceptual framework of crime news narratives, attributional cues, audience attributional reasoning, and media trust may be useful for comparative studies across different countries and media cultures.

Conclusion

This study examined how crime news framing shapes audience perceptions of criminal suspects and persons of interest and influences audience judgment of the individuals' guilt and innocence, using the Tangmo case and the Uncle Pol case as empirical contexts. Through the integrated lens of Attribution Theory using Heider's (1958) dispositional-situational distinction, Kelley's (1967) covariation model, and Weiner's (1985) attributional dimensions, the findings demonstrate that attributional language cues embedded in crime news can determine the

direction, confidence, and intensity of audience judgment. When crime news narratives center on negative dispositional factors—framing behavior as a reflection of poor personal character and personality—audiences are more inclined to assign internal blame and arrive at confident perceptions of guilt. Similarly, crime narratives that focus on positive dispositional factors may lead audiences to view the portrayed individuals in a favorable light and even perceive them as innocent. Conversely, when crime reporting incorporates situational context, acknowledging the complexity of circumstances and the limitations of available evidence, audiences exercise greater caution and arrive at more balanced assessments of responsibility. However, the study also revealed that dispositional language cues may outweigh situational language cues in influencing audience judgments and that media trust is a crucial factor in shaping audience perceptions of individuals portrayed in crime news coverage. Overall, these findings underscore the critical role that attributional cues embedded in the language and structure of crime reporting play in shaping how the public interprets, judges, and ultimately render informal verdicts on the portrayed criminal suspects and persons of interest in ongoing investigations.

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