EXPLORING " THE TRUE CRIME" GENRE IN DIGITAL STORYTELLING ON TIKTOK

THESIS

Submited in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

Gaining the Degree of Bachelor Education in

English Education Department

By:

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the structure and linguistic features of true crime digital storytelling on TikTok. As a rapidly growing platform, TikTok has transformed the way crime narratives are shared, making them more accessible and engaging for audiences. The research employs qualitative content analysis to examine 15 videos from three true crime creators, analyzing how they construct narratives within the platform's short-form format. Findings reveal that true crime storytelling on TikTok follows a structured pattern comprising orientation, events, and reorientation, which enhances audience engagement through suspense, emotional appeal, and dramatic storytelling techniques. The study also identifies key linguistic features, including the use of past and present tense, personal participants, action verbs, chronological connectors, and conjunctions, which align with the characteristics of recount texts. While TikTok provides an innovative space for digital storytelling, ethical concerns arise regarding sensationalism, misinformation, and the potential glorification of criminals. This research contributes to the growing discourse on digital storytelling and its implications for crime representation and language learning.

Keywords: *digital storytelling, true crime, TikTok, linguistic features.*

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my beloved parents and my sister
who never stop encouraging, supporting, and   showing me
their endless love.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Alhamdulillah, praise be to Allah, the Lord of the universe, who has given me the ability to complete my thesis. Shalawat and salam to Prophet Muhammad Saw, the Prophet who has encouraged many people to live a meaningful life.

As an ordinary human being, I realize that without the support, direction, advice, assistance, and encouragement from various parties, this final project would not have been completed. It is impossible to mention one by one the parties who have helped me in writing this final project because the number is very large, both institutionally and individually. On this occasion, I would like to express my deepest appreciation to:

1. Prof. Dr. Fatah Syukur, M.Ag. as the dean of the Education and Teacher Training Faculty.
2. Dra. Nuna Mustikawati Dewi, M.Pd. as the head of English Language Education.
3. Lulut Widyaningrum, M.Pd. as secretary of English Language Education.
4. Vina Darissurayya, M.App Ling. as a mentor, respected lecturer, and advisor in this research, who always gave time and guidance for correction, great motivation and valuable suggestions during the process of preparing and completing this thesis.
5. The deepest gratitude to all lecturers and staff of the English Language Education at Universitas Islam Negeri Walisongo Semarang.

MOTTO

"You will not be able to make everyone happy. Therefore, it
is enough for you to improve your relationship with Allah,
and not to worry too much about people's judgment."

~Imam Syafi'i~

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

This chapter offers an in-depth overview of the study by outlining several essential components that form the basis of the research. It begins with an explanation of the background, providing context and justification for the study. Furthermore, this chapter outlines the research questions that shape the inquiry, the aims that the study intends to accomplish, and the significance, which elaborates on its potential impact in the academic field. This chapter is structured into five main sections: background of the study, research questions, research objectives, significance of the study, and scope and limitation.

A. Background of the Study

In recent years, the integration of digital technologies into language learning has become increasingly prevalent, offering innovative venues for educators to enhance students' language proficiency. Among these technological tools, digital storytelling stands out as a promising method for improving English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' speaking skills. In the context of language learning, digital

storytelling (DST) has gained prominence as an innovative method that integrates linguistic practice with multimodal digital media, offering learners immersive and interactive learning experiences. According to research on (Anderson & Macleroy, 2016), storytelling fosters creative engagement, critical thinking, and linguistic competence by allowing learners to construct and narrate their own stories using digital platforms. The digital storytelling process is deeply rooted in the ability to structure narratives effectively, employing key elements such as plot development, character engagement, and emotional appeal. Studies emphasize that storytelling in a digital format encourages learners to experiment with language, refine their pronunciation, and enhance their narrative coherence through repeated practice and feedback.

This study explores how true crime storytelling has evolved on TikTok, focusing on its structure and linguistic features. Given TikTok's short-form video format, creators modify traditional storytelling techniques to fit time constraints while preserving narrative depth. The genre's popularity on the platform is influenced by several factors. First, there is a widespread public fascination with true crime,

fueled by interest in criminal psychology, real-life mysteries, and the justice system. Second, TikTok's algorithm amplifies engaging and suspenseful content, increasing the likelihood of true crime videos going viral. Third, the platform's accessible content creation tools allow users, regardless of expertise, to produce and share compelling stories with minimal resources. As a result, TikTok has emerged as a significant space for true crime storytelling, combining entertainment, education, and social commentary.

Based on (Kalantari et al., 2023) Digital storytelling (DST) provides a platform for individuals to explore and understand their identities, experiences, and knowledge by offering multimodal and flexible opportunities for self-expression. Digital storytelling has transformed the way narratives are shared and consumed, especially on platforms like TikTok, which allows creators to produce engaging content in bite-sized formats. True crime, a particularly popular genre, captivates audiences by blending factual storytelling with suspense and emotional depth (Sansano, 2022). The storytelling techniques used in true crime content often draw on principles from narrative journalism and cinematic frameworks, emphasizing suspense, character

development, and vivid descriptions to engage audiences (Sansano, 2022).

With the increasing popularity of social media platforms, TikTok has emerged as a powerful medium for digital storytelling. The platform allows users to create and share short-form videos, making it an engaging tool for language learners. Unlike traditional classroom settings, TikTok offers an immersive and dynamic environment where learners can practice speaking, listening, and comprehension skills in authentic contexts. The ability to integrate storytelling with visual and auditory elements provides learners with opportunities to improve their pronunciation, vocabulary, and overall fluency. According to (Al Khateeb, 2019), socially oriented digital storytelling enhances learners' engagement, facilitates collaborative learning, and fosters critical thinking. Moreover, the use of digital storytelling in EFL classrooms has been shown to improve students' motivation, self-expression, and confidence in language use. Among the diverse genres of digital storytelling on TikTok, the true crime genre has gained widespread attention. True crime storytelling involves narrating real-life criminal cases, often incorporating suspenseful elements and detailed

explanations. This genre presents unique linguistic features that can contribute to language acquisition, such as descriptive vocabulary, narrative structures, and persuasive techniques.

Digital storytelling has emerged as a powerful educational tool, integrating multimedia elements to enhance engagement and learning. Research from (Signes Gregori, 2015) highlights that digital storytelling supports various pedagogical approaches by incorporating text, images, and narration, making it particularly useful for language learning. On social media platforms like TikTok, digital storytelling is revolutionizing content consumption and production, particularly within the true crime genre. The multimodal nature of TikTok allows creators to present narratives through a combination of video clips, voiceovers, and text overlays, aligning with the storytelling techniques identified in news discourse research (Chovanec, 2019). These multimodal elements not only captivate audiences but also serve as an interactive tool for language learners, facilitating vocabulary acquisition and comprehension. The combination of spoken and written language in true crime storytelling on TikTok provides a rich linguistic environment, exposing learners to

diverse speech patterns and contextual vocabulary.

Moreover, research on digital storytelling as entertainment content on social media suggests that platforms like Twitter and TikTok enable narrative-driven engagement, fostering a participatory culture where users actively comment, share, and reflect on content (Altamira et al., 2023). This participatory aspect enhances the learning experience by encouraging learners to analyze and discuss stories in English, improving both their comprehension and production skills. By examining TikTok's true crime storytelling through content analysis, this study aims to explore how digital storytelling facilitates English learning. It investigates how linguistic features, narrative structures, and engagement patterns contribute to language acquisition, ultimately demonstrating the educational potential of digital storytelling on social media.

The rise of true crime storytelling on digital platforms has led to increased engagement with cinematic techniques in documentary filmmaking. True crime documentaries have long adopted storytelling strategies commonly found in thriller films, employing suspense, dramatic structures, and

character-driven narratives to captivate audiences. The use of cinematic storytelling in nonfiction raises ethical concerns, as entertainment elements may blur the line between reality and dramatization. These techniques, while effective in creating compelling narratives, influence audience perception of real-life events and shape public understanding of crime and justice (Li et al., 2024).

With the emergence of AI-driven digital storytelling, these cinematic techniques have now extended to social media platforms like TikTok. AI-generated visuals and automated voice overs have allowed content creators to craft engaging crime narratives that attract widespread attention. The use of AI in crime storytelling enhances realism by generating lifelike characters, dramatic reenactments, and mood-driven effects. However, this reliance on AI raises ethical concerns regarding authenticity, as AI-generated elements can sometimes distort real events. While AI enhances engagement and accessibility, its role in crime storytelling necessitates a critical examination of its potential biases and narrative accuracy (أبو العز, 2024).

Beyond its role in entertainment, AI-powered storytelling has significant implications for language learning. Digital storytelling has been found to improve literacy skills by promoting narrative comprehension, vocabulary expansion, and critical thinking. Interactive storytelling, particularly when integrated with AI, provides an adaptive learning experience that caters to individual engagement levels. AI-based systems can predict emotional responses and tailor narratives accordingly, making them effective tools for education. The integration of storytelling and AI offers new opportunities for enhancing second-language acquisition through immersive and dynamic content (Hernandez et al., 2014).

While several studies have explored digital storytelling (DST) as a tool for language learning, much of the existing research focuses on its application in educational settings, particularly for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Prior studies have examined how DST enhances vocabulary, pronunciation, and narrative coherence but have not extensively analyzed how it manifests in real-world digital platforms like TikTok. Moreover, true crime storytelling has been widely studied in the context of

documentaries, podcasts, and news discourse, but its adaptation to short-form video content remains underexplored. Current research lacks a comprehensive investigation into how linguistic features and narrative structures in TikTok's true crime content shape digital storytelling conventions. Additionally, while ethical concerns regarding AI-driven storytelling have been raised, there is limited discussion on its impact on the authenticity and perception of crime narratives in digital spaces. Thus, a gap exists in understanding how true crime storytelling on TikTok differs from traditional formats in both structure and language use.

The reason for the researcher's interest in taking this research is rooted in a previous experiment where the researcher aimed to explore the digital storytelling ability of Wali Songo among students majoring in English education through the TikTok platform. However, many students were reluctant to participate due to a lack of confidence and insufficient speaking skills. This finding aligns with the study by Nair & Yunus (2021), which highlights that while digital storytelling can be a valuable tool in improving students' speaking abilities, its success largely depends on students'

confidence and willingness to engage in storytelling activities (Nair & Yunus, 2021).The reluctance observed in the previous study underscores the need for a deeper exploration of how digital storytelling is structured and how it impacts audience engagement, suspense, and emotional involvement. Furthermore, integrating digital storytelling into language learning requires strategies to boost students' self-efficacy, as confidence plays a crucial role in improving speaking performance. By shifting the research focus to an analysis of true crime storytelling on TikTok, this study aims to contribute to a broader understanding of digital storytelling techniques and their effectiveness in engaging audiences while navigating the ethical considerations of crime narratives.

By focusing on real crime digital storytelling on the TikTok platform—a rapidly expanding but little-studied medium—this study offers fresh insights. This study examines how short-form video restrictions affect storytelling structures and linguistic aspects, in contrast to previous research that focuses on DST in education or long-form criminal narrative. This study offers a novel viewpoint on the development of digital storytelling in the social media

era, specifically in the true crime genre, by concentrating on both structural and linguistic factors.

B. Research Question

Based on the background of the study above, the researcher plans to solve the problem of:

1. What is the generic structure of digital storytelling in the true crime genre on TikTok as presented by the accounts Crime With Kourt, Ray William Johnson, and The Paranormal Files?

2. What linguistic features are used in true crime digital storytelling on TikTok by the accounts Crime With Kourt, Ray William Johnson, and The Paranormal Files?

C. Objectives of the Research

According to the research question, the objective of the research are:

a) To analyze the generic structure of digital storytelling in the true crime genre on TikTok, with a focus on the accounts Crime With Kourt, Ray William Johnson, and The Paranormal Files.

b) To identify the linguistic features used in true crime digital storytelling on TikTok, with a focus on the

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accounts Crime With Kourt, Ray William Johnson, and The Paranormal Files.

D. Significances of Research

The significance of this research is divided into two main aspects: theoretical and practical contributions. Each aspect highlights the potential impact of the study on language learning and teaching, particularly through the integration of digital storytelling on TikTok.

1. **Theoritically**

The researcher hopes that the results of this study provide deeper insights into the use of digital storytelling as a pedagogical tool in EFL learning. This study aims to contribute to the growing body of research on social media as an educational platform, particularly in using TikTok for language acquisition. Additionally, it can offer valuable information for educators and researchers about the effectiveness of digital storytelling in improving students' language proficiency

2. **Practically**

a. **Teachers**

This research can help teachers understand how

digital storytelling, particularly the true crime genre on TikTok, can be integrated into English language teaching. It provides insights into how teachers can leverage social media to create engaging learning activities that improve students' listening comprehension and speaking skills.

b. Researchers

Researchers can use this study as a reference for further investigation into the role of digital storytelling in EFL learning.

c. Student

This study can benefit students by demonstrating how TikTok's true crime storytelling content can be an effective and enjoyable learning resource. It encourages students to use social media platforms as an interactive and immersive tool to develop their English proficiency.

d. University

This research can be a valuable reference for the English Education Department at UIN Walisongo Semarang in enhancing language teaching methodologies. By integrating digital storytelling into the curriculum, the university can adopt innovative, technology-based approaches that align with students' interests and modern learning trends. This study also supports the development

of media literacy and critical thinking skills, preparing students for a more interactive and digitalized learning environment.

E. Limitation of Research

This research focuses specifically on the true crime genre within digital storytelling on TikTok. This focus means the findings may not be generalizable to other genres of digital storytelling or other platforms. Furthermore, the study's concentration on true crime narratives limits its applicability to other forms of content creation and consumption on TikTok. In addition, this study will use content analysis, thus focusing on linguistic features. Therefore, the analysis is limited to the observable elements within the TikTok videos and does not capture audience reception or creator intent beyond what is explicitly presented in the content.

CHAPTER II
RELATED LITERATURE

This chapter presents a review of related literature that supports and contextualizes the current research. It consists of two main sections: previous research and literature review. It begins with an overview of previous studies relevant to digital storytelling and true crime content on TikTok. Following this, the chapter elaborates on the theoretical concepts of true crime, digital storytelling, and the TikTok platform, which form the foundation of the study's analytical framework.

A. Previous Research

In this study, the researcher selected several previous studies related to the analysis of digital storytelling in Tiktok. Some of these studies include:

The first previous study conducted by Yannian (2023) was entitled "Critical Discourse Analysis of News Reports on TikTok." This study utilized Fairclough's three-dimensional analysis model to examine how news discourse about TikTok reflects underlying ideologies and

political stances. By analyzing six news reports from CNN, the study identified linguistic patterns, transitivity, and intertextual references that subtly influenced public perception. The study found that while the reports maintained a degree of objectivity, ideological biases were embedded within the language used, affecting readers' attitudes towards TikTok. The findings highlight the importance of discourse analysis in uncovering hidden biases in digital storytelling (Yannian, 2023) .

The second previous study was conducted by Maryam (2020) with the title "The Analysis of Recount Text Written by Experts and Students." This study examined the structure and linguistic features of recount texts produced by students and experts. The research focused on genre analysis, identifying patterns in orientation, sequence of events, and reorientation within personal recount texts. The study revealed that while expert texts followed conventional genre structures with cohesive linguistic features, student texts often lacked coherence, appropriate tense usage, and lexical variation. The findings emphasize the significance of understanding recount text structures in digital storytelling, particularly

in crafting engaging and grammatically sound narratives (Maryam et al., 2020) .

The third previous study was explored by Jim Anderson and Victoria Macleroy (2016) and was entitled "Multilingual Digital Storytelling: Engaging creatively and critically with literacy". This research was part of a broader project on multilingual digital storytelling (MDST) conducted in London schools. It aimed to investigate how children from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds could creatively and critically engage with literacy through the use of digital storytelling. The study involved workshops where students were encouraged to produce personal digital stories that reflected their multilingual identities, drawing on their home languages and English.The methodology combined qualitative classroom observations, interviews, and analysis of students' digital stories, focusing on the interplay of language, image, voice, and identity. The research was grounded in socio-cultural theory and multimodality, particularly the work of Kress and van Leeuwen, emphasizing the role of multiple semiotic modes in communication and meaning-making. Findings

from the study highlighted that MDST empowers students by validating their linguistic and cultural resources, enabling them to take ownership of their narratives. The process encouraged critical thinking, creativity, and deeper engagement with literacy practices. Teachers also noted increased confidence and participation among students, particularly those from marginalized language communities (Anderson & Macleroy, 2016). This study is relevant to "Exploring the True Crime Genre in Digital Storytelling": Analysis on TikTok, as both research projects analyze how digital storytelling functions as a medium for expression across different contexts. While Anderson and Macleroy's study focuses on educational and multilingual narratives, "Exploring the True Crime Genre in Digital Storytelling" examines narrative structure and language use in the true crime genre on TikTok. Both emphasize the importance of genre awareness and digital multimodality in shaping effective communication and identity construction within storytelling practices .

The fourth previous study by I Ketut Oka Ribawa (2019) with the title "The Analysis of Lexical Choice on Cigarette Advertisements" examines the linguistic and

visual strategies used in cigarette advertisements from English-language magazines and a local newspaper. Using a documentary research method, the study classifies words into two dominant lexical categories—adjectives and verbs—to determine their persuasive function. The research applies theories from Geoffrey Leech, Halliday and Hasan, and Gillian Dyer to analyze verbal messages, contextual influences, and visual representations. Findings indicate that verbs like *come*, *find*, and *have* and adjectives like *satisfying* and *new* are strategically chosen to evoke emotion and consumer interest. Additionally, the study explores how advertisements use situational context (Field, Tenor, and Mode) to structure meaning and engagement, revealing that ads employ gendered imagery, outdoor settings, and color psychology to convey themes of masculinity, adventure, and independence, particularly through the portrayal of the Marlboro Man. This research aligns with Exploring the True Crime Genre in Digital Storytelling: Analysis on TikTok by focusing on media analysis methods, particularly how structure and language features influence audience perception. While Ribawa's study focuses on advertising, both studies employ analytical approaches to examine how specific linguistic

and structural choices shape audience engagement within different media landscapes. Ribawa's findings highlight how print advertisements construct identity and persuade consumers, whereas Exploring the True Crime Genre in Digital Storytelling investigates how generic structures and language features in TikTok storytelling influence audience interaction with crime narratives. Both studies underscore the role of media in shaping public perception through carefully crafted language and structural techniques, contributing to a broader understanding of media communication strategies across different platforms (Ribawa, 2019).

The last previous study was conducted by Kelli S. Boling (2019) and was entitled "True Crime Podcasting: Journalism, Justice or Entertainment?". This study was published in the "Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media" and critically examined the true crime podcast genre through a cultural lens. Boling's research focused on the influence of podcasting on public opinion, the justice system, and the evolving media landscape. Through qualitative interviews with four key true crime podcast producers—Colin Miller

(Undisclosed), Bill Rankin (Breakdown), Amber Hunt (Accused), and Madeleine Baran (In the Dark)—the study explored the dual roles of podcasters as both journalists and advocates.The methodology involved in-depth interviews that averaged 36 minutes each, aiming to gain insights into podcast production, journalistic objectivity, and public engagement. The research questions addressed how podcasters see themselves within the criminal justice reform movement, how they balance advocacy and objectivity, and how emerging podcasting tools allow them to engage audiences in unique ways. Boling found that true crime podcasts serve not only as entertainment but also as platforms for public education and activism. The study concluded that podcasting has played a significant role in influencing legal proceedings and raising awareness about systemic injustices. The findings suggest that true crime podcasters often view themselves as educators, using narrative storytelling to inform audiences about the legal system and potential miscarriages of justice. This study is relevant to "Exploring the True Crime Genre in Digital Storytelling: Analysis on TikTok" as both analyze the genre structures and audience interaction in modern digital formats. While

Boling focuses on audio-based storytelling in podcasting, the TikTok study examines video-based narratives. Both studies underscore the transformative power of genre-specific storytelling in influencing public discourse and shaping justice-related narratives in digital spaces (Boling, 2019).

B. Literature Review

This section reviews relevant literature on true crime, digital storytelling, and the TikTok platform to provide a theoretical foundation for understanding how true crime narratives are constructed and disseminated in the digital age.

a) True Crime

True crime has long been a popular genre that blends elements of journalism, criminology, and entertainment. Traditionally, it has focused on recounting real-life criminal cases, often emphasizing violent crimes such as homicide, with a strong reliance on forensic details and suspense-driven storytelling. Yardley (2018) argues that true crime often reinforces societal norms about victimhood and justice by constructing hierarchies of

victimization. White, middle-class women are frequently portrayed as "ideal" victims, while marginalized groups receive less attention. This selective storytelling can distort public perceptions of crime and influence both media consumption and criminal justice policies. Additionally, true crime narratives have been criticized for their sensationalist approach, which prioritizes gripping storytelling over ethical considerations, raising concerns about how crime victims and offenders are depicted (Yardley et al., 2019).

The article by Rachel Franks (2016) offers a comprehensive exploration of the evolution and adaptability of the true crime genre, arguing that its enduring popularity stems from its ability to reinvent itself in response to cultural and technological shifts. Franks positions true crime as a genre that blends factual storytelling with entertainment, rooted in public fascination with crime, morality, and justice. Franks adopts a straightforward definition: true crime presents a narrative about criminal acts based on fact rather than fiction. It is characterized by its claim to truth, citing specific times, places, and people, and often mimicking

the tone of professional reportage. This blend of news and narrative allows the genre to serve both informative and entertainment purposes. True crime is driven by a tension between shock and education, and by an audience's desire to both witness the horror and pronounce moral judgment. The genre maintains a persistent interest in murder—especially serial murder— and often reflects societal values and anxieties through its portrayals of crime (Franks, 2016).

With the rise of digital media, true crime has evolved beyond traditional books and television into new platforms, particularly podcasting. This shift has allowed for more in-depth storytelling and interactive audience engagement. Witmer and Dowling (2024) explore how true crime podcasts have created active online communities that extend beyond passive listening. Podcasts such as *Serial* and *Up and Vanished* have popularized a participatory approach, where listeners contribute to discussions and sometimes even investigations. This new form of "participatory journalism" enables audiences to collaborate in crime-solving, often through social media and online forums.

However, this engagement raises ethical concerns, particularly regarding misinformation and interference with official investigations (Witmer & Dowling, 2024).

The true crime genre, while widely popular, raises significant ethical concerns, particularly regarding privacy, confidentiality, and the portrayal of mental illness. Scott, Robertson, and Freckelton (2020) examine how true crime stories, especially those written by professionals like psychiatrists, can contribute to the stigmatization of individuals with mental illness and retraumatize victims' families. They highlight cases where real names and personal histories were disclosed in true crime books, sparking public outrage and legal debates. The authors argue that when forensic psychiatrists published sensationalized narratives outside academic contexts, they risk compromising ethical principles, such as patient confidentiality and informed consent. Additionally, they warn against the entertainment-driven nature of true crime, which often prioritizes gripping storytelling over responsible reporting. The public's fascination with crime is undeniable, yet the ethical responsibility of authors and media professionals remains crucial in shaping public perceptions of crime, justice, and

mental health. As true crime continues to evolve, maintaining ethical integrity while satisfying audience interest is a challenge that demands careful consideration (Scott, 2020).

b) Digital Storytelling

Digital storytelling has revolutionized how narratives are shared, particularly in the true crime genre. The rise of participatory journalism and social media platforms has enabled audiences to engage with crime stories in new and interactive ways. Digital storytelling allows for the blending of traditional crime reporting with multimedia elements such as videos, podcasts, and user-generated content. This transformation has led to a more immersive experience, where audiences not only consume stories but also participate in discussions and investigations. Platforms like TikTok have played a significant role in this shift, enabling creators to present true crime cases in concise, engaging formats while fostering a sense of community and collaboration (Y. T. C. Yang et al., 2022). The impact of digital storytelling on true crime is evident in its ability to make complex legal cases accessible to the public, democratizing crime

analysis and broadening the reach of investigative efforts.

The emotional appeal of digital storytelling enhances its effectiveness in true crime narratives. By incorporating audiovisual elements, personal testimonies, and reenactments, digital stories create a sense of immediacy that captivates audiences. This technique aligns with the "politics of emotion," where storytelling is designed to evoke strong feelings, thereby increasing engagement and social impact (Kalantari et al., 2023). On platforms like TikTok, where short-form content dominates, creators must condense intricate cases into compelling narratives that maintain accuracy while holding audience attention. However, this approach raises ethical concerns, as the line between responsible storytelling and sensationalism becomes increasingly blurred. The virality of true crime content on digital platforms can sometimes lead to misinformation, invasion of privacy, or retraumatization of victims and their families. Therefore, ethical considerations must be integrated into digital storytelling

practices to ensure respectful and responsible content creation.

Digital storytelling (DST) has emerged as a powerful method for sharing narratives across various domains, particularly on social media platforms. Musfira (2022) defines DST as the practice of telling stories through digital means, incorporating multimedia elements such as videos, images, and interactive components to enhance audience engagement . Initially applied in education, community development, and therapy, DST has expanded to marketing, journalism, and advocacy. On social media, DST enables brands, organizations, and individuals to create compelling narratives that resonate with audiences, fostering deeper emotional connections. The thematic review conducted by Musfira (2022) highlights the effectiveness of DST in marketing, professional training, and social campaigns, showcasing its versatility in digital communication . However, ethical concerns, including misinformation, biased representation, and audience manipulation, remain significant challenges (Musfira et al., 2022). As DST continues to evolve, its role in shaping online discourse

and influencing public perception underscores the need for responsible storytelling practices. The integration of DST into digital platforms like TikTok further amplifies its reach, making it a critical tool for engaging modern audiences.

The ethical challenges of digital storytelling in true crime are particularly significant due to the genre's reliance on real-life cases. Scholars argue that the rapid dissemination of crime-related content can lead to misrepresentations and the exploitation of victims for entertainment purposes (Scott, 2020). Digital storytelling on platforms like TikTok further complicates these issues, as users often engage in amateur crime analysis without professional oversight. This trend, while fostering collective engagement, can also result in harmful consequences, including false accusations and public harassment. To address these concerns, creators and platforms must implement guidelines that prioritize factual accuracy, consent, and the dignity of those affected by crime. As digital storytelling continues to evolve, striking a balance between audience engagement

and ethical responsibility will be crucial in shaping the future of the true crime genre.

c) Tiktok

TikTok has rapidly emerged as a dominant platform for digital storytelling, revolutionizing how narratives are created, shared, and consumed. The platform's short-form video format and algorithm-driven content distribution have made it a powerful tool for engagement across various domains, including entertainment, education, and social activism. According to Puspita Dewi (2023), TikTok enhances digital storytelling by offering an accessible and interactive medium where users can creatively express ideas and share compelling narratives (Dewi, 2023) . This accessibility has allowed the true crime genre to flourish, as users craft engaging crime-related content that is easily digestible for mass audiences. The ability to integrate multimedia elements such as text overlays, voice narration, and video reenactments further enhances storytelling, making TikTok an ideal space for digital crime narratives. Beyond its function as an entertainment platform, TikTok has played a significant role in disseminating information and shaping public

discourse. Zhu (2020) highlights how TikTok has been effectively used for public health communication, demonstrating its ability to influence audience perceptions through strategic content creation (Zhu et al., 2020). This suggests that the platform's algorithm can be leveraged to amplify awareness of social issues, including criminal justice cases and investigative storytelling. True crime content creators use TikTok not only to retell cases but also to engage audiences in discussions about legal ethics, unsolved mysteries, and forensic science. The interactive nature of TikTok, which enables direct responses through comments and duets, fosters a participatory form of storytelling where viewers can contribute theories and insights. This participatory model mirrors broader trends in digital activism, where social media users collaborate to analyze and publicize cases that might otherwise receive little mainstream attention. The infrastructuralization of TikTok as a platform has further solidified its influence on digital storytelling. Zhang (2021) discusses how TikTok has evolved beyond entertainment into an integrated media ecosystem that encompasses e-commerce, online education, and even governmental communication strategies (Zhang, 2021). This transformation has

implications for the true crime genre, as TikTok's role in content monetization and data-driven storytelling affects how crime narratives are shaped and distributed. With its sophisticated recommendation algorithm, TikTok personalized content feeds, ensuring that crime-related videos reach highly engaged audiences. However, this algorithm-driven content distribution also raises ethical concerns, particularly regarding the sensationalization of crime and the potential for misinformation. As true crime storytelling continues to thrive on TikTok, it is crucial to consider both the opportunities and challenges the platform presents in shaping public perceptions of crime and justice. Through its digital infrastructure, TikTok not only redefines storytelling formats but also influences societal engagement with crime narratives in unprecedented ways.

TikTok has emerged as a leading platform for short-form digital storytelling, revolutionizing how content is created, consumed, and shared. Yang, Zhao, and Ma (2019) explain that TikTok's success stems from its sophisticated recommendation algorithm, interactive features, and ability to cater to a highly engaged audience, particularly young users. The platform's ease of use,

combined with its ability to incorporate music, filters, and editing tools, allows creators to craft compelling narratives within seconds. This accessibility has made TikTok a powerful medium for various content genres, including true crime storytelling, where users recount criminal cases, discuss legal issues, and even contribute to crowdsourced investigations (S. Yang et al., 2019). Additionally, TikTok's emphasis on viral trends and participatory engagement fosters community interaction, enhancing the way digital narratives unfold. However, concerns over content accuracy, misinformation, and ethical storytelling practices persist, particularly within genres like true crime. As TikTok continues to evolve, its role in shaping digital narratives—through algorithm-driven content and audience participation—demands critical examination to ensure responsible storytelling practices that balance entertainment with ethical considerations.

CHAPTER III
RESEARCH METHOD

This chapter describes the research methods applied in this study. It consists of research design, research setting, research participant, procedure of data collection, and data analysis.

A. Research Design

This research was conducted using a qualitative content analysis approach, which is particularly effective for exploring the complexities of digital storytelling within the true crime genre on TikTok. Qualitative content analysis allows researchers to systematically interpret and analyze textual and visual data, focusing on the meanings and patterns that emerge from the content (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In this study, the primary aim was to investigate how true crime narratives are constructed and presented on TikTok, emphasizing the generic structure and language features that engage audiences. By analyzing 15 TikTok videos from three creators, each contributing five videos, the research sought to uncover the storytelling techniques that captivate viewers and influence their perceptions of real-life crime events. This qualitative

approach is well-suited for understanding the social and cultural contexts that shape digital narratives, as it provides insights into the emotional and psychological dimensions of audience engagement (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The research design also aligns with the principles of narrative inquiry, which emphasizes the importance of stories in understanding human experiences and the meanings individuals derive from them . By focusing on the narratives presented in TikTok videos, the study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on digital storytelling and its implications for true crime representation in contemporary media.

B. Research Setting

This study was conducted on the social media platform TikTok over the course of one month in January 2025. The digital setting of this research involves the collection and analysis of content from selected TikTok videos within a specific time frame. The data were obtained from three true crime content creators on TikTok, with each creator contributing five videos to the dataset. The study explores the digital storytelling structure and lexicogrammatical aspects present in these videos. Given the nature of the platform, the research setting is entirely online, relying on video content

analysis and the use of NVivo for data organization and coding.

C. Research Participant

The participants in this study were three top content creators specializing in true crime storytelling on TikTok: Ray William Johnson (RWJ), Crime With Kourt (CWK), and The Paranormal Files (TPF). These creators were selected based on specific criteria that highlight their influence and reach within the platform. One of the main indicators for their selection was their level of popularity, as reflected in their large number of followers and consistently high engagement rates. Each of these creators has successfully built a strong personal brand in the true crime genre, gaining millions of views on their videos. Their ability to attract and maintain a dedicated audience demonstrates their expertise in delivering compelling narratives that resonate with TikTok users.

- Ray William Johnson (RWJ): Although widely known for his earlier work in comedy and viral video commentary, RWJ has expanded his content to include true crime storytelling, using

his signature engaging style to analyze and present cases in a way that captivates audiences.

- Crime With Kourt (CWK): A dedicated true crime content creator, CWK is known for in-depth case breakdowns and a unique storytelling approach that combines thorough research with engaging delivery, making complex criminal cases accessible to a wide audience.

- The Paranormal File (TPF): Blending true crime with paranormal elements, TPF explores unsolved cases, eerie disappearances, and supernatural aspects linked to real-life crimes. Their content appeals to viewers interested in both true crime and paranormal investigations.

Another key factor in selecting these participants was the virality of their content. The chosen creators frequently have their videos appear on the *For You Page (FYP)*, which is TikTok's algorithm-driven feature that promotes popular and engaging content to a wider audience. This consistent visibility on the FYP indicates that their storytelling style, use of language, and video presentation effectively capture user interest and

engagement. Their presence on the FYP also suggests that their content meets TikTok's algorithmic preferences, making them highly relevant figures in the true crime storytelling community.

Additionally, the participants were chosen because their videos exemplify the most viewed and widely discussed true crime narratives on TikTok. By analyzing their content, this study aims to explore how successful true crime storytellers structure their narratives, use language, and engage with their audiences. Their videos serve as a primary source of data, offering valuable insights into the techniques and patterns that define digital storytelling in the true crime genre. The selection of these creators ensures that the study focuses on widely recognized and impactful content, allowing for a deeper understanding of the storytelling strategies employed by top creators in the field.

D. Data Source

The data needed in this study are TikTok videos that exemplify the true crime genre, focusing on the storytelling techniques employed by content creators. The

data will be collected from 15 TikTok videos produced by three selected content creators known for their engagement with true crime narratives. The selection of these creators will be based on their popularity and the frequency of their true crime content, ensuring a representative sample of the genre on the platform. The researchers will utilize purposive sampling to identify these creators, as this method allows for the selection of participants who meet specific criteria relevant to the study's focus on digital storytelling in true crime (Tongco, 2007). This approach not only enhances the relevance of the data but also ensures that the analysis captures a diverse range of storytelling styles and techniques used in the genre.

In analyzing the selected TikTok videos, the researchers focused on the generic structure and language features of the storytelling presented. The Generic Structure Theory will guide the analysis by providing a framework for understanding how these narratives are constructed, including elements such as orientation, complication, and resolution. Additionally, the study will examine language features such as tone, style, and rhetorical devices, which are crucial in shaping audience

engagement and emotional response. The application of these theories will allow for a comprehensive understanding of how true crime stories are adapted for digital platforms like TikTok, where brevity and impact are essential. By employing purposive sampling and established theoretical frameworks, the study aims to contribute to the growing body of research on digital storytelling and its implications for the true crime genre in contemporary media (Campbell et al., 2020).

E. Procedure of Data Collection

The data collection process for this study began in January, following a structured approach to gathering, transcribing, and analyzing digital storytelling in the true crime genre. The process involved several key steps:

a) Video Selection and Data Storage

The first stage involved identifying and selecting the fifteen most-viewed videos from the three chosen true crime content creators. These videos were carefully selected based on their view count to ensure that only the most widely consumed content was analyzed. The videos studied have a duration from 3 to 8 minutes Once

identified, the videos were saved for further transcription and coding.

b) Transcription and Data Coding

After saving the selected videos, the next step was transcription. The spoken narratives in the videos were transcribed into text format to facilitate in-depth analysis. The transcribed data were then coded using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software. NVivo was used to categorize the generic structure and language features present in the storytelling techniques of the content creators. The use of thematic coding helped identify patterns and recurring narrative structures, allowing for a systematic exploration of storytelling elements in the true crime genre. The process of transcribing and coding follows Creswell's (Creswell, 2008) qualitative research framework, which emphasizes the importance of systematically organizing and analyzing textual data to uncover meaningful themes. By using NVivo, the study ensures an accurate and structured analysis of digital storytelling techniques.

c) Documentation

To further strengthen the research, visual documentation

was also conducted. Screenshots from the analyzed videos were captured to provide additional context to the storytelling techniques being examined. These visual elements serve as supplementary data that reinforce the narrative analysis. Documentation, as described by Barkhuizen et al (2014) is a crucial tool in qualitative research as it helps preserve and verify the authenticity of the data (Barkhuizen, 2014). By systematically following these steps, this study ensures a rigorous and comprehensive approach to analyzing digital storytelling within the true crime genre on TikTok. The combination of purposive sampling, thematic coding, and visual documentation enhances the credibility and depth of the research findings.

F. Data Analysis

This analysis employed the interactive model of qualitative data analysis as proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which encompasses three main components: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles et al., 2014). To facilitate this process, NVivo software is utilized for efficient data management and analysis.

1. Data Reduction

The initial phase of data analysis involves data reduction, which refers to the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the data that appear in written-up field notes or transcriptions. In this study, data reduction begins with the selection of 15 TikTok videos from three top true crime content creators, with five videos chosen from each creator based on the highest number of views. These videos are then transcribed verbatim to capture the complete narrative and linguistic elements. Using NVivo, the transcribed data are imported into the software, where coding is conducted to identify and categorize segments of data that pertain to the research focus—specifically, the generic structures (such as orientation, complication, resolution) and language features employed in the storytelling. This systematic coding facilitates the organization of data into meaningful clusters, allowing for the emergence of patterns and themes relevant to the true crime genre on TikTok.

2. Data Display

Following data reduction, the next step is data display,

which involves organizing and assembling the information in a way that permits conclusion drawing and action. In this study, data display is achieved through various NVivo features that allow for the visualization of coded data. Matrices and charts are generated to illustrate the frequency and distribution of identified generic structures and language features across the selected videos. For instance, a matrix coding query can be used to cross-tabulate the occurrence of specific narrative components (e.g., orientation, complication, resolution) with each content creator, providing a clear visual representation of storytelling patterns. Additionally, word frequency queries and word clouds can be utilized to highlight prevalent lexical choices and rhetorical devices, offering insights into the linguistic styles characteristic of true crime storytelling on TikTok. These visual displays serve to condense the data into an accessible format, enabling a more straightforward interpretation of complex qualitative information.

3. Conclusion

The final component of the interactive model is conclusion drawing and verification, which entails

interpreting the displayed data to derive meaningful findings and verifying the validity of these conclusions. In this research, conclusions are drawn by analyzing the patterns and themes identified during the data reduction and display stages. For example, if the analysis reveals that all three content creators consistently employ a particular narrative structure or linguistic style, this could suggest a genre convention within TikTok's true crime storytelling. Verification of conclusions involves revisiting the data to ensure that interpretations are grounded in the evidence and considering alternative explanations to account for any discrepancies. Throughout this process, NVivo's capabilities facilitate the systematic examination and validation of findings, ensuring that the conclusions drawn are both credible and trustworthy.

CHAPTER IV
FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This chapter outlines the research results along with their analysis. The findings are presented to address the research questions by offering supporting evidence collected during the study. The discussion section provides a deeper interpretation of these results, emphasizing their relevance to the research aims.

A. Finding

This section discusses the generic structure of true crime digital storytelling on TikTok, focusing on three key elements: orientation, events, and reorientation.

a. Generic Structure

True crime storytelling has undergone a significant transformation with the rise of digital platforms, particularly TikTok. This short-form video platform allows creators to compress complex, real-life crime stories into engaging, suspenseful clips that captivate a vast audience. Unlike traditional crime documentaries or investigative journalism, TikTok's storytelling follows a highly structured pattern that

enhances audience engagement through emotional immersion and suspense-building techniques. This study explores the structure of true crime in digital storytelling, particularly focusing on three key elements: orientation, events, and reorientation. By analyzing these components, we gain a deeper understanding of how digital crime storytelling functions, how it influences audience perception, and how it continues to evolve within social media culture.

a) Orientation

In true crime storytelling, orientation serves as the foundation of the narrative, establishing the who, what, when, and where of the case. It introduces key figures such as victims, suspects, and investigators while providing essential background information. On TikTok, orientation is often delivered in a fast-paced and gripping manner, ensuring that viewers are immediately drawn into the story. True crime storytellers begin the video with dramatic hooks, such as in the RWJ Video 5 *"Imagine you're on a flight, and the pilot suddenly decides to crash the plane."* These opening lines serve to instantly capture attention, a crucial factor in digital storytelling where audiences have short attention spans.

A common trend in the orientation phase is the use of juxtaposition—presenting an event as ordinary before revealing its sinister twist. For example, in the Ashley Reeves case, the story begins with a seemingly mundane event: a teenage girl going for a job interview. However, as the story unfolds, the audience quickly realizes that her plans were far from innocent. This sharp contrast between expectation and reality creates a compelling lead-in to the main conflict. Similarly, in other cases, a simple weekend camping trip or a routine walk home at night turns into a terrifying crime scene. This technique builds anticipation and primes the audience for the unfolding drama.

True crime storytelling on TikTok often starts by providing crucial details to establish the context of the case. For instance, in CWK Video 1, the storyteller introduces the main subject: "*On April 27th, 2006, 17-year-old Ashley Reeves told her parents that she was going to a job interview.*" This information not only sets up the background (who, when, where) but also invites the audience to focus on the mystery that will unfold.

Additionally, many TikTok true crime creators use timestamps and real-life footage to strengthen the realism of their stories. By integrating actual case files, security footage, or photos of the victims and suspects, they provide an immersive experience that makes the narrative feel more authentic. Orientation often employs direct-address storytelling, in which the narrator speaks directly to the viewer, making the audience feel as if they are personally involved in uncovering the mystery. This emotional connection increases viewer investment and encourages engagement through comments, likes, and shares.

Another critical element of orientation is foreshadowing. Many stories subtly hint at the forthcoming tragedy or horror. For instance, in the case of a missing person, the storyteller might include details about how the victim was reluctant to go out that night or how they made an ominous final phone call. These small yet powerful details contribute to the overall suspense, making the audience eager to see how the events will unfold.

b) Event

Once the orientation has established the background, the event section drives the tension and propels the narrative forward. In TikTok true crime storytelling, this is the segment where the conflict escalates, clues emerge, and shocking revelations occur. Events are typically presented in a series of sequential discoveries, maintaining a fast-paced delivery that mimics the intensity of real-life crime investigations.

One of the most common patterns in this phase is progressive suspense-building. The crime is not revealed in its entirety at once; instead, each piece of information is strategically placed to maximize anticipation. In cases of murder, kidnapping, or mysterious disappearances, events are framed around the investigation process, where each new discovery heightens the stakes. For example, in a missing person case, the story may begin with concerned family members reporting the individual as missing. Then, tension escalates when their car is found abandoned, personal belongings are discovered in strange locations, and finally, CCTV footage reveals them interacting with a suspicious figure.

Another crucial feature of the event phase is the revelation of deception. Many true crime TikTok stories include instances where initial narratives are proven false, leading to a more complex web of lies and deceit. In several analyzed cases, suspects initially deny involvement, only for incriminating evidence to surface, forcing them to change their stories. For instance, in the Ashley Reeves case, Samson Shelton initially pretended he had no knowledge of her whereabouts, only to later confess in graphic detail. This shifting narrative adds an extra layer of complexity, keeping the audience engaged.

A particularly effective technique used in digital crime storytelling is the inclusion of micro-cliffhangers at the end of each event segment. TikTok creators often leave their audience hanging with lines such as *"But what they found next will shock you…"* or *"Then, something happened that no one expected…"*. These techniques create suspense, ensuring viewers stay engaged throughout the entire video—or even return for a multi-part series.

The event phase typically introduces escalating tension and key developments in the crime. For example, in CWK

Video 1, the story moves from Ashley's seemingly ordinary actions to a horrifying revelation: "But in all reality, Ashley was actually going to meet up with 26-year-old Samson Shelton, a driver's ed teacher who had previously taught at her middle school" . This sudden shift from normal to sinister builds suspense.

Similarly, RWJ Video 5 uses suspense through escalation: "One day, she and Grandpa are at home, and I guess she needs more money. Or maybe she's just ashamed to tell Grandpa that she's in so much debt from gambling." The narrative builds as Grandma's desperation leads to murder, keeping the audience engaged.

Furthermore, investigative breakthroughs and law enforcement strategies play a central role in the event section. Whether it is DNA evidence, a crucial witness testimony, or an unexpected confession, these elements introduce the turning point in the narrative. Some cases also incorporate unexpected survival stories, such as in CWK Video 1 when Ashley Reeves was found miraculously alive after being left for dead for over 30 hours. These dramatic twists enhance the emotional stakes and deepen audience engagement.

TikTok true crime creators also emphasize public reaction and conspiracy theories that arise during the event phase. In some cases, missing persons' families use social media to gather information, leading to real-time audience participation. These elements blur the line between passive storytelling and interactive engagement, making viewers feel like they are part of the investigative process.

c) Reorientation

The reorientation phase serves as the conclusion of the narrative, summarizing the resolution of the case, its legal outcomes, and its broader implications. This phase is crucial because it provides closure to the audience while reinforcing the emotional and moral dimensions of the story. However, depending on the nature of the case, reorientation can either provide a sense of justice or leave the audience with lingering questions.

One of the most common elements of reorientation is the discussion of legal consequences. True crime stories on TikTok frequently end with details about the sentencing of criminals, the reactions of victims' families, and the broader societal impact. For instance, in the CWK Video 1 on Ashley

Reeves case, the narrative concludes with the sentencing of Samson Shelton, emphasizing the justice served. However, in other cases, reorientation highlights the failures of the justice system, where perpetrators receive surprisingly light sentences or remain free due to lack of evidence.

Additionally, reorientation often contrasts the fate of different individuals involved in the crime, raising questions about fairness in legal proceedings. Some cases highlight disparities in sentencing by comparing similar cases with drastically different outcomes. A recurring trend in TikTok storytelling is the comparison of cases like the Menendez Brothers' trial with other instances of domestic violence or self-defense killings, sparking debates about racial, gender, and class biases in the legal system.

In unresolved or missing person cases, reorientation shifts toward public speculation and ongoing investigations. Many stories end with open-ended conclusions, urging viewers to contribute information, follow ongoing trials, or even participate in online advocacy campaigns. Some TikTok creators use their platforms to raise awareness about unsolved

cases, prompting audiences to take action by sharing posts or contacting relevant authorities.

The reorientation phase provides closure, often with a reflection on the case's outcome or the broader implications. In CWK Video 1, the reorientation concludes with Ashley's survival: "Samson was arrested, where he pleaded guilty to attempted murder. He was sentenced to 20 years in prison but was released a couple of months ago after having only served 17." Similarly, RWJ Video 3 wraps up with a reflection on the pilot's arrest: "Joe's arrested. And I don't have a mugshot, but here is a photo of him detained. And he's charged with 83 counts of attempted murder and reckless endangerment." These final thoughts offer a sense of justice, even though the cases often leave viewers questioning deeper societal issues or the fairness of the legal outcomes.

Reorientation also includes emotional reflections, where storytellers comment on the long-term impact of crimes. This may involve discussing how victims' families continue to seek justice, how certain cases changed public policy, or how individuals affected by crimes cope with trauma. By doing

so, true crime creators ensure that the story remains impactful beyond its initial entertainment value.

True crime storytelling on TikTok follows a distinct three-part structure: orientation, events, and reorientation. By analyzing this structure, we gain insight into how digital storytelling techniques shape audience engagement, suspense, and emotional involvement. As TikTok continues to serve as a dominant platform for crime storytelling, it raises further ethical questions about sensationalism, misinformation, and the role of audience participation in justice narratives. The popularity of true crime content is not a new phenomenon. As noted by Boling (2019), true crime media, including podcasts, have significantly impacted public perception and even influenced legal proceedings. This phenomenon mirrors the way TikTok true crime creators build engagement, as they combine investigative storytelling with interactive audience participation. However, as Boling (2019) also points out, the blending of journalism, advocacy, and entertainment creates ethical dilemmas, particularly regarding objectivity and the risk of sensationalizing crime narratives (Boling, 2019). The rise of true crime storytelling on TikTok underscores the need to balance compelling

storytelling with responsible reporting, ensuring that ethical considerations remain at the forefront of digital crime narratives.

b. Language Feature

Figure 4.1 Word Cloud Frequency Language Feature

The analysis of word frequency in the true crime digital storytelling videos on TikTok reveals several patterns that align with the language features of recount text. The primary components of recount text include the presence of personal participants, chronological connections, action verbs, past tense and present tense usage, and conjunctions .

a) Personal Participants

Personal participants in recount texts refer to individuals, groups, or entities involved in the story. The dataset highlights several key personal participants frequently mentioned in the analyzed content.

Table 4.1 Word Frequency Personal Participant

Word	Frequency
Grandma	59
Police	54
People	29
Family	16
Friend	16
Woman	14
Goldbreg	32
Ashley	30
Andrew	18
Samson	16
Annie	14

Words such as *police* (54 occurrences), *grandma* (59), *people* (29), *family* (16), *woman* (14), and *friend* (16)

indicate that the storytelling emphasizes individuals directly connected to the narrative. For example in TPF video 3 , the sentences " *But for some **people**, that just wasn't enough*". Furthermore, specific names like *Goldberg* (32), *Ashley* (30), *Andrew* (18), *Samson* (16), and *Annie* (14) suggest a personalized recount of events, aligning with the recount text structure where the retelling focuses on real individuals. For example in RWJ Video 1 the sentence " *And one day, her videos catch the attention of this guy who will call **Goldberg***"

b) Chronological Connection

Chronological connections in recount texts help maintain the sequence of events.

Table 4.2 Word Frequency Chronological Connection

Word	Frequency
starts	19
start	21
happened	19
eventually	17
later	14
around	20

The frequent use of words like *starts* (19), *start* (21), *happened* (19), *eventually* (17), *later* (14), and *around* (20) suggests that the storytellers use temporal markers to guide the audience through the progression of the events. Such as in the example in RWJ video 4 which states " *And **eventually**, police find him in Beverly Hills, and Bam, they arrest him.* "

c) Action Verbs

Action verbs are a critical component of recount texts as they drive the narrative forward.

Table 4.3 word frequency action verb

Word	Frequency
Found	29
Getting	18
Going	19
Murder	15
Started	24
Think	13

The data contains verbs such as *found* (29), *getting* (18), *going* (19), *murder* (15), and *started* (24) and *think* (13). These verbs indicate physical or investigative actions central to true crime storytelling, emphasizing the recounting of past

incidents. For example in the CWK video 3 in the sentece *"*

Because of how much attention that the Menendez brothers'
*story is **getting**, it's caused me to really compare the two*
cases, and I just can't help but notice how similar they are."

d) Tenses
a) Past Tense Usage

Table 4.4 word frequency past tense

Word	Frequency
Found	29
Happened	19
Started	15

The dataset reveals frequent words such as *found* (29),
happened (19), *started* (15).This confirms that narrators
structure their storytelling in past tense, adhering to the
conventions of recount text. For example in the CWK video
5, the sentence *"Annie Mae's body was **found** two months
later, and the FBI quickly ruled that she died of exposure"*
illustrates the use of the past tense verb *found* to describe a
concluded event.

b) Present Tense

Table 4.5 word frequency present tense

Word	Frequency
Starts	19
Getting	18
Going	19

The dataset contains present tense verbs such as starts (19), getting (18), and going (19), which indicate actions happening in the present. These verbs contribute to the immediacy and engagement of the story , making the recount more dynamic and vivid. For example on RWJ Video 1 in the sentence *" He **starts** trying to get her attention in the comments*."

e) Conjunctions

Table 4.6 word frequency conjunction

Word	Frequency
Eventually	17
Later	14
Still	34

Conjunctions serve to connect ideas and ensure coherence in recount texts. The dataset includes words like *eventually* (17), *later* (14), and *still* (34), which function as connectors between ideas, reinforcing the logical flow of information.

In summary, the analysis confirms that the digital storytelling of true crime on TikTok employs linguistic patterns that align with the structure of recount text. The presence of personal participants, chronological sequencing, action-driven verbs, past tense narration, and conjunctions ensures that the storytelling remains engaging and informative. . For example in TPF Video 1 the sentence "*But it's **still** that video is just so frightening, and it really is scary to think of what could have happened if she didn't get the door closed and locked just in time.*"

B. Discussion

This section discusses the structure and language features used in true crime digital storytelling on TikTok, highlighting how narrative and linguistic elements contribute to audience engagement and effective information delivery.

a) **Generic Structure**

The findings of this study reveal that true crime storytelling on TikTok follows a distinct three-part structure that enhances audience engagement. The orientation, event, and reorientation framework is highly effective in maintaining suspense and emotional investment. However, beyond the structural elements, there are broader implications regarding the impact of this storytelling approach on digital audiences, ethical considerations, and the evolving role of social media in crime discourse.

One of the most significant aspects of TikTok's true crime storytelling is its ability to blur the lines between entertainment and factual reporting. While creators strive to present true crime narratives accurately, the sensationalized and dramatized nature of storytelling raises concerns about misinformation. Given that TikTok's algorithm rewards engagement, creators are incentivized to use dramatic hooks, cliffhangers, and shocking revelations, sometimes at the expense of nuanced reporting. This can lead to oversimplified interpretations of complex cases, where viewers receive curated content that prioritizes engagement over depth. The

brevity of TikTok videos—often limited to a few minutes—means that creators must condense intricate legal and investigative details, which risks distorting reality. This connects with the concept of audience emotional engagement in storytelling, as discussed in *Emotion-Based Interactive Storytelling with Artificial Intelligence*. The source highlights how AI-driven storytelling shapes narratives dynamically to evoke desired emotional responses. Similarly, TikTok creators tailor their content to maximize emotional impact—using dramatic hooks and cliffhangers to maintain viewer interest—rather than ensuring comprehensive and nuanced reporting. Additionally, the AI-based approach in the source discusses predicting audience emotional reactions and adjusting storytelling accordingly. TikTok's algorithm functions similarly, favoring content that elicits strong emotional responses, thereby reinforcing sensationalized storytelling over balanced discourse. This emphasis on emotional engagement in digital storytelling aligns with concerns about misinformation in true crime TikTok, where narratives may be curated to maximize emotional impact rather than present factual accuracy (Hernandez et al., 2014).

Furthermore, audience participation and the viral nature of TikTok crime storytelling contribute to a unique but sometimes problematic aspect of digital true crime culture. Unlike traditional media, where stories are primarily consumed passively, TikTok fosters high levels of interactivity, with users actively engaging in discussions, sharing theories, and even attempting to contribute to ongoing investigations. While this democratization of crime discussions can raise awareness of cases, it also introduces the risk of public misinterpretation and digital vigilantism. The rapid spread of theories and speculations can lead to misinformation, false accusations, and unnecessary distress for victims' families. There have been instances where TikTok sleuths have misidentified suspects or made baseless allegations, affecting real-life investigations. The rapid spread of user-generated true crime narratives on TikTok fosters an environment where amateur investigations, digital vigilantism, and misinformation thrive. This aligns with the findings of Shejuti (2023), who identifies that TikTok-related crimes often emerge from performance crimes, copycat crimes, and fame-driven criminal activities. As observed in cases of online sleuthing and speculative storytelling, these digital practices contribute to the blurring of entertainment

and real-life criminal investigations, often leading to real-world consequences such as false accusations and distress for victims' families (Shejuti, 2023).

The emotional and psychological impact of true crime storytelling on audiences is another crucial factor to consider. Many TikTok crime stories rely on emotive language, eerie music, and suspenseful editing techniques to heighten engagement. While these techniques make content more compelling, they also create a thrill-seeking culture around crime narratives. Some viewers consume true crime content for entertainment without fully considering the real-life trauma behind the stories. The normalization of violent crime narratives raises ethical questions about whether victims' experiences are being exploited for views. Moreover, there is concern that prolonged exposure to such content may desensitize audiences to violence, making crime feel like a spectacle rather than a real issue affecting real people. According to Pâquet (2018), forensic rhetoric in true crime narratives persuades audiences by integrating rational and emotional appeals, mapping out rhetorical spaces that structure memory and create compelling narratives. The use of emotive language, eerie music, and suspenseful editing in

TikTok crime stories aligns with the techniques employed in true crime media such as *Serial* and *Making a Murderer*, where audiences are drawn into the narrative through emotional engagement (Pâquet, 2018). This emotional connection often leads to a form of "juridification," where viewers feel empowered to investigate and analyze crime cases themselves, blurring the lines between entertainment and ethical considerations. The normalization of violent crime narratives and prolonged exposure to such content may, as Pâquet (2018) suggests, shape audience perceptions of justice and truth, sometimes prioritizing sensationalism over factual accuracy.

From an ethical standpoint, the way crimes and criminals are portrayed on TikTok is an ongoing debate. In some cases, narratives frame criminals as fascinating, mysterious figures, inadvertently creating a cult of personality around perpetrators. This trend is particularly visible in cases involving young or conventionally attractive offenders, where some audiences develop sympathy or even admiration for individuals responsible for heinous acts. This phenomenon, often called "criminal glorification," has been widely criticized as it shifts focus away from victims and

justice, instead romanticizing those who commit crimes. Additionally, some content creators fail to obtain proper permissions or consider the wishes of victims' families, further complicating the ethical dimensions of this genre. The ethical debate surrounding the portrayal of crimes and criminals on TikTok aligns with concerns about the glorification of violence, as discussed in the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) rulings. According to Sobol (2024), the ECtHR has assessed how certain narratives, particularly those that glorify violent acts, might shift public perception and desensitize audiences. The concept of "glorification" of violence, whether through fascination with offenders or the romanticization of crime, has been a subject of legal scrutiny, as seen in cases where the court evaluates whether such portrayals contribute to a culture of violence or undermine justice. Sobol (2024) further argues that the categorization of content as glorification or justification of violence often leads to ethical dilemmas regarding freedom of expression versus the harm principle, where speech that indirectly endorses criminal acts can have broader societal implications (Sobol, 2024).

However, despite these concerns, true crime storytelling on TikTok has positive societal implications as well. It has become a powerful tool for raising awareness about lesser-known cases, advocating for victims' rights, and highlighting flaws in the justice system. Some creators use their platforms responsibly by encouraging discussions about systemic issues, wrongful convictions, and unsolved crimes, sometimes even leading to real-life action and policy change. The virality of these stories has, in some instances, resulted in renewed public interest in cold cases, prompting law enforcement to revisit unresolved investigations. The positive societal implications of true crime storytelling on TikTok can be analyzed through the lens of Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT). According to Meng and Leung (2021), TikTok engagement is driven by various motivations, including information-seeking and sociability (Meng & Leung, 2021). The study found that users actively engage with short-form video content to gain knowledge and participate in discussions, which aligns with the role of true crime storytelling in raising awareness about lesser-known cases and systemic issues. Moreover, TikTok's interactivity and navigability features allow content creators to foster meaningful discussions and mobilize public interest,

potentially leading to real-life action, such as policy change or renewed investigations into cold cases (Meng & Leung, 2021). This suggests that TikTok serves not only as an entertainment platform but also as a digital space for advocacy and community-driven efforts.

In conclusion, TikTok's true crime storytelling is a complex digital phenomenon that merges entertainment with real-world crime discourse. While its structured storytelling approach effectively captivates audiences, it also raises concerns about misinformation, ethical storytelling, audience desensitization, and the potential glorification of criminals. As this genre continues to evolve, there is a growing need for responsible content creation, critical media literacy among audiences, and clearer ethical guidelines to ensure that true crime storytelling remains informative rather than exploitative. Social media has undeniably transformed the way true crime is consumed, and understanding its impact will be crucial in shaping the future of digital storytelling.

b) **Language Feature**

The findings from the analysis demonstrate that true crime storytelling on TikTok follows the conventional

structure of recount texts. This aligns with the nature of the genre, which revolves around retelling past events in a structured, engaging manner. The presence of specific linguistic markers confirms the adherence to recount text features, highlighting how digital storytellers utilize language to create compelling narratives.

1. Use of Personal Participants

The frequent mention of personal participants indicates a strong focus on individuals involved in the events. True crime storytelling often centers around victims, perpetrators, law enforcement, and witnesses, making personal references essential for narrative engagement. The appearance of specific names, such as *Ashley*, *Andrew*, and *Goldberg*, suggests that these stories involve detailed character-driven elements, which help audiences connect emotionally with the content. The frequent mention of personal participants in true crime storytelling aligns with the narrative focus on character-driven engagement. According to Peters (2020), true crime narratives revolve around individuals, particularly victims and perpetrators, to evoke emotional responses from audiences. Peters (2020) explains that the genre's popularity is closely tied to the public's fascination with real-life figures, particularly serial killers, whose identities and stories shape

the structure of the narrative. The detailed inclusion of specific names and personal references strengthens audience engagement by fostering a sense of familiarity and emotional investment in the case, further driving the cultural obsession with crime narratives (Peters, 2020).

2. Chronological Sequencing in Storytelling

The presence of chronological connectors such as *later*, *eventually*, and *starts* reflects how creators structure their narratives to maintain coherence. Unlike fictional storytelling, true crime stories must follow a logical timeline to ensure clarity. The use of sequencing markers supports audience comprehension, guiding them through different phases of the story from orientation to resolution. The use of chronological connectors in true crime storytelling aligns with the principles of narrative coherence. According to McAdams (2006), a well-structured narrative must maintain temporal coherence, which ensures that events unfold in a logical sequence to facilitate comprehension. McAdams (2006) explains that coherent narratives help audiences make sense of complex stories by providing clear causal connections between events, guiding listeners from the beginning to the resolution. This structured approach is

particularly crucial in true crime storytelling, where factual accuracy and clarity are necessary to present real-life events in an engaging yet understandable manner (McAdams, 2006).

3. Action Verb

The frequent use of action verbs such as *found*, *murder*, *getting*, and *started* illustrates the dynamic nature of true crime storytelling. These verbs help drive the narrative forward, emphasizing key developments in the cases being discussed. Since true crime content often involves criminal acts, investigations, and resolutions, the emphasis on actions aligns with the expectations of the genre.

4. Tenses

1) Past Tense

Given that true crime storytelling recounts past events, the prevalence of past tense markers like *found* and *happened* is expected. This aligns with traditional recount text structures, where past tense is necessary to describe events that have already taken place. The consistent use of past-tense narration reinforces the authenticity of the stories being told. The prevalence of past tense markers in true crime

storytelling aligns with the role of past tense in narrative communication. According to Verhagen (2019), the past tense plays a crucial role in intersubjective coordination, helping narrators and audiences establish a shared understanding of past events. Verhagen (2019) argues that the past tense 'curtails' the immediate argumentative applicability of a represented situation, meaning that past-tense narration situates events within a structured temporal framework rather than the present communicative moment. This function reinforces the authenticity of true crime storytelling, as it signals to the audience that the events being recounted are not part of an unfolding present but are instead grounded in past occurrences (Verhagen, 2019)

2) Present Tense

The dataset reveals a significant presence of present tense verbs, such as starts (35 occurrences), getting (29 occurrences), and going (29 occurrences). These verbs indicate actions happening in real-time, contributing to the immediacy of the storytelling. By using the present tense, digital storytellers create a sense of urgency and direct involvement, making their narratives more engaging for the audience. This linguistic choice allows viewers to experience

events as if they are unfolding before them, rather than being distant recollections of the past.

Furthermore, the frequent use of present tense verbs enhances the dynamic and vivid nature of the recount. Instead of presenting a detached, retrospective narration, storytellers immerse their audience in the unfolding events, fostering a stronger emotional connection. This technique is particularly effective in the true crime genre, where suspense and tension play a crucial role. The real-time feel of these narratives keeps viewers engaged, reinforcing the power of digital storytelling in capturing and maintaining audience attention.

5. Conjunctions

Maintaining conjunction in storytelling is crucial for audience engagement. The use of conjunctions like *eventually*, *still*, and *later* allows for seamless transitions between events. This linguistic feature ensures that the storytelling remains fluid, helping the audience follow the logical progression of the narrative. The use of conjunctions in storytelling aligns with the concept of narrative grammar in sequential discourse. According to Cohn and Kutas (2017), conjunctions in visual narratives function not only as connectors between events but also as grammatical markers

that facilitate mental updating and structural coherence. Their study suggests that the processing of conjunctions engages both combinatorial grammar mechanisms and comprehension strategies, ensuring that audiences can smoothly follow the logical flow of the narrative. This supports the idea that conjunctions like *eventually, still,* and *later* are essential in maintaining narrative fluency, as they guide the audience through different phases of a story (Cohn & Kutas, 2017).

Overall, the analysis confirms that the language features of recount texts are prevalent in true crime digital storytelling on TikTok. Storytellers strategically employ personal participants, chronological sequencing, action verbs, past tense narration, and conjunctions to construct compelling narratives. This suggests that digital storytelling in the true crime genre remains consistent with established linguistic patterns, making it an effective medium for retelling real-life events in an engaging and structured manner.

CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This chapter presents the conclusions drawn from the analysis and offers suggestions for future research on true crime digital storytelling on TikTok

A. Conclusion

Based on the findings and discussions, true crime storytelling on TikTok follows a structured approach that enhances audience engagement. The genre relies on a three-part framework consisting of orientation, event, and reorientation, ensuring clarity and coherence in narrative delivery. The orientation phase sets the context by introducing key figures, establishing background details, and using gripping hooks to capture audience attention. This phase often employs foreshadowing, juxtaposition, and direct-address storytelling to create an immersive experience. Through this structured approach, TikTok storytellers effectively maintain suspense and emotional involvement while guiding the audience through the unfolding crime story.

Furthermore, the event phase drives the tension and narrative progression by revealing key developments, escalating suspense, and incorporating investigative breakthroughs. TikTok creators strategically use micro-cliffhangers, dramatic revelations, and law enforcement strategies to sustain engagement. This phase often highlights deception, shifting suspect narratives, and real-time audience participation, which blurs the line between entertainment and interactive storytelling. The presence of action verbs, chronological markers, and direct audience engagement contributes to the dynamic nature of digital storytelling.

Lastly, the reorientation phase provides resolution by summarizing legal outcomes, discussing justice implications, and reflecting on the broader societal impact. TikTok true crime storytelling often sparks debates about systemic flaws, sentencing disparities, and ethical concerns surrounding crime reporting. The combination of past and present tense usage, along with strong personal participant references, reinforces the authenticity of the narratives. Ultimately, the digital storytelling of true crime on TikTok demonstrates how language features, structural elements, and audience

engagement shape the genre, making it a powerful medium for crime discourse in the social media era.

B. Suggestion

Although this study provides valuable insights into the structure and language features of true crime storytelling on TikTok, it is limited in scope and data sources. Future research should expand the dataset by analyzing a broader range of creators and cases to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how digital storytelling evolves across different platforms and audiences. Additionally, incorporating interviews with content creators and audience members could provide deeper insights into the motivations behind storytelling choices and viewer engagement. This qualitative approach may help uncover ethical considerations and the impact of sensationalized narratives on public perception.

Moreover, future studies should explore the role of TikTok's algorithm in shaping the popularity of true crime content. Since engagement-driven algorithms influence which stories gain traction, understanding their impact on narrative trends and audience reception would be beneficial.

Further research can also investigate the psychological effects of consuming true crime content on social media, examining whether prolonged exposure contributes to desensitization or increased fear of crime. By addressing these aspects, future research can contribute to the ethical and responsible development of digital storytelling practices in the true crime genre.

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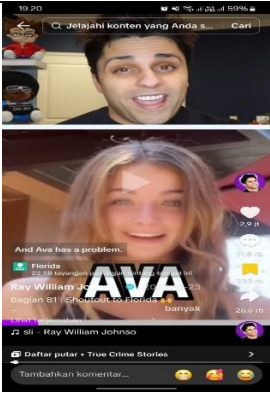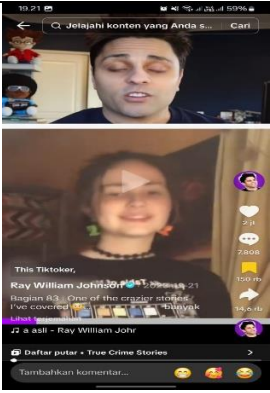
https://doi.org/10.1177/1741659018799375

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 : Video Data

Ray William Johnson 1: https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSrdXuQVT/	
Ray William Johnson 2: https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSrdX34tR/	

Ray William Johnson 3: https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSrdXTnoj/	
Ray William Johnson 4: https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSrd4MSX3/	
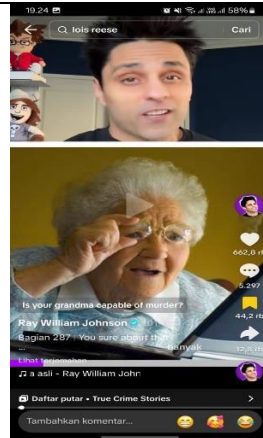
Ray William Johnson 5: https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSrdX vMNa/	
Crime With Kourt 1: https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSrd4 QJHw/	

Crime With Kourt 2: https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSrd4P4SV/	
Crime With Kourt 3: https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSrd45cNC/	

4

Crime With Kourt 4: https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSrd4cn1L/	
Crime With Kourt 5: https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSrd47xfS/	

The Paranormal Files 1: https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSrd4vkWj/	
The Paranormal Files 2: https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSrd47D4u/	
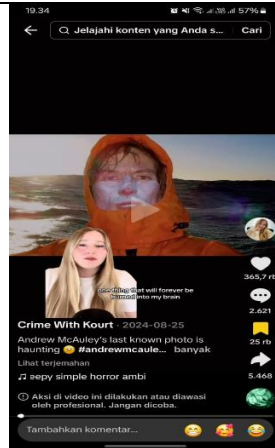
The Paranormal Files 3: https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSrdV8e7s/	
The Paranormal Files 4: https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSrdVho2n/	
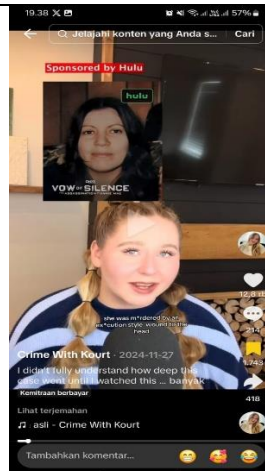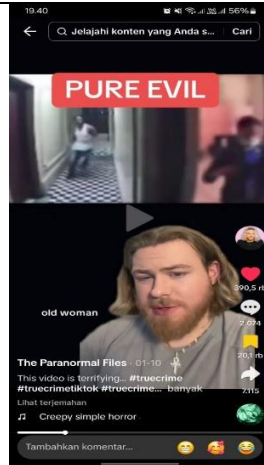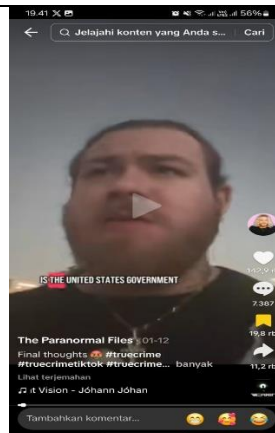
The Paranormal Files 5: https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSrdV C3vu/	

Appendix 2 : Data Transcript

Draft:**https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1XVI9wYrp**
0Jo0JYuxbC1fSJA3VfQceEjT?usp=drive_link

Appendix 3 : Word Frequency Query Results

Word	Length	Count	Weighted Percentage (%)
grandma	7	59	001
police	6	54	001
spirit	6	40	001
really	6	37	001
still	5	34	001
goldberg	8	32	000
ashley	6	30	000
found	5	29	000
people	6	29	000
kayak	5	26	000
years	5	26	000
point	5	23	000
start	5	21	000
around	6	20	000
going	5	19	000
happened	8	19	000
night	5	19	000
starts	6	19	000
things	6	19	000
andrew	6	18	000
everyone	8	18	000
getting	7	18	000
never	5	18	000
eventually	10	17	000

family	6	16	000
friend	6	16	000
little	6	16	000
prison	6	16	000
samson	6	16	000
house	5	15	000
murder	6	15	000
started	7	15	000
tiktok	6	15	000
actually	8	14	000
allegedly	9	14	000
annie	5	14	000
later	5	14	000
something	9	14	000
video	5	14	000
woman	5	14	000
school	6	13	000
suddenly	8	13	000
think	5	13	000
anyone	6	12	000
demons	6	12	000
dustin	6	12	000
government	10	12	000
money	5	12	000
phone	5	12	000
problem	7	12	000

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5. Universitas Islam Negeri Walisongo Semarang