

DEPICTIONS AND PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER, VIOLENCE, AND CRIME
IN TRUE CRIME MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

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IN TRUE CRIME MEDIA

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Public interest in true crime media (TV series, documentaries, podcasts, etc.) is a current standout of popular culture with 35% of Americans reporting engagement with true crime at least once per week. This thesis presents ethnographic research on depictions and presentations of crime through a lens of gender, race inequality, and sensationalism. My research questions were as follows:

- What language and themes do creators of true crime media use to talk about violence and crimes committed? How are these perceived?
- What attracts people to gender-based violence? Specifically violence committed against white women?
- How do creators and those with personal ties to true crime situate gender and race within the genre, created content, and the fan base?

Data collection involved qualitative interviews with family and friends of true crime victims and true crime content creators, and analyzing true crime titles in popular media. I examine representations of gender, violence, and racial stereotypes in true crime, and how they exist in people's perspectives of the genre. My research draws on qualitative interviews and quantitative analysis to explore how content creators frame gender, the body, and violence in their created and consumed true crime media. Through interviewing creators and people who have personal experience with crime, I explore both the creators' presentations and the

observations made by those who are directly impacted by them. I use feminist theory to review and interpret depictions of gender in created and consumed true crime in both social and mainstream media. Ultimately I examine depictions of gender and violence as a mirror to reflect larger frameworks of fear, violence, race, and conceptions of the body, and how these ideas are disseminated throughout society as true crime continues to grow in popularity.

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To my family, I hope I can make you proud. No one could uplift me more than you did, and continue to do.

Additionally I would like to acknowledge the many people whose stories have contributed to this research, and those who have been unknowingly or unwillingly involved in true crime media. May you find peace, and may your voices someday be your own again.

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Content Warning

This thesis covers several sensitive and disturbing topics that may be upsetting for readers. The following content includes the discussion and analysis of physical and emotional violence, murder, sexual assault, and abuse. Please ensure that you as the reader are in the appropriate mindset to engage with these themes and able to allow them into your headspace before you begin reading.

All victims' and survivors' names have been removed from this work out of respect to those who have suffered, and to protect their privacy and dignity. All criminal names have been removed out of respect for victims and survivors everywhere.

Positionality Statement

I wish to denote my own lived experience as it relates to the context and content of my true crime research. My mother's cousin and dear friend Anthony "Tony" Gustafson was shot and killed in Milwaukee, Wisconsin on September 27th of 1995. He was lured mistakenly by local criminals carrying out a premeditated attack after they confused him with their intended target. He was shot 27 times and passed away at the scene of the crime. While Tony was never the subject of a podcast or TikTok series, my family received a great deal of unwanted public attention following the murder. Due to these experiences, my family has always embodied profound respect for victims of crime and has actively avoided highly sensationalized forms of media surrounding crime, murder, and violence out of respect for Tony. I do not harbor judgment for fans of true crime media, but wish to disclose my perspective as it shapes my research and analytical lens, as well as my position within my findings and investigation. Scholars continue to discuss the importance of positionality and how one's lived experiences can serve as a tool as they navigate their research (England 1994, Corlett and Mavin 2018). The reality of research is that each researcher has their own set of lived experiences that will shape how they carry out their work (England 1994). These experiences do not limit me, but instead generate a unique research perspective and lens (Falu 2021, Weiss 2020).

True crime media examines the lives and deaths of real people and non-fictionalized material about crime, it must be handled with extreme care in all contexts. My goal has always been to navigate this research with the utmost care and respect for the stories of these people as well as their families and loved ones. As I write about pain, suffering, and loss in the following pages, I understand that I approach from the outside. I understand how privileged I am to write on this topic only as an observer.

Introduction and Background

True crime is a non-fiction genre of media that describes in detail crimes, criminals, and adjacent criminal activity. Oftentimes this media follows an individual, typically a criminal or victim, and recounts the events that culminate with a specific crime. Usually the story is told in a narrative style, and is detail-oriented. This media is persistently violent in nature and frequently includes graphic recounts of the events that transpired.

This genre is not limited to current events and crime in a similar manner to news platforms, but instead reaches throughout history and covers crimes, criminals, and victims from several centuries. The genre consists of many types of media, such as podcasts, documentaries, television series, books, social media forums, and more. There is new true crime media constantly being generated with new formats and styles, and new outlets in which to find them.

True crime is a current facet of popular culture, and the genre has broken out from niche communities into mainstream interests. While the emergence of true crime podcasts has marked a true crime resurgence in the last ten years, an initial big boom of public interest in crime began in the 1980s and 90s. Popular television series such as “Unsolved Mysteries”, “Dateline”, and “CSI” were foundational to the genre. The series "CSI" (Crime Scene Investigator) had such a strong effect on its viewers that it caused what is known as "the CSI effect" (Shelton 2008). This entails when jurors began to reference the process of crime shows during actual hearings, calling for DNA evidence and high-level forensic science often only available/featured in fictional media, not real instances of crime. The television series "CSI" sparked a wild interest in criminal activity and criminology, and impacted the public’s perspectives on the judicial system and how crimes can be solved and experienced (Shelton 2008, Podlas 2005).

The show was unlike mainstream news platforms that recount broader details, and instead delved into specific twists and turns of a case and the criminal behind it. Public interest in criminal science, criminology, psychology, sociology, and law skyrocketed (Podlas 2005) and the show ran for 15 seasons with several spin-offs. This public interest was sustained throughout the 1990s and early 2000s with shows like *Law and Order*, *Psych*, *Cops*, and *Criminal Minds*. However, as cable TV has become less popular in the last 15 years, consumers of crime-based media have turned to additional media formats to seek out new content.

The rise of podcasts and social media allows true crime fans to connect on the internet in a “hub” of sorts. Notably, the online true crime community existed before the COVID-19 pandemic, during which many online communities were born and quickly grew (Fonseca et al. 2021). These fan-based communities listen to true crime stories or read about criminal activity in a “corner” of the internet, commonly on social media pages dedicated to their true crime interests.

New formats of true crime are more intimate than a network television show, where fans can grow familiar with the podcast's hosts and find friends or “mutuals” (people who both follow each other on a social media platform) they communicate with, post with, and respond to. The rise in popularity of true crime has grown this social community, and has made way for more personal developments between fans and true crime creators.

Unlike a news anchor who addresses the entire nation, a podcast host can invent a specific name for their listeners or adopt the name that fans have given themselves. This is visible in the case of popular podcast *My Favorite Murder*, where the hosts refer to their millions of listeners as “murderinos” (Hughes 2023). Further, fans sometimes form parasocial relationships with content creators. The nature of these relationships is firmly one-sided and

non-reciprocal, and develops when a fan feels distinctly and personally connected to an online entity (Hoffner and Bond 2022). Along with reinforcing the sense of social belonging and community for fans, these new formats of true crime can evoke a certain sense of intimacy and familiarity between creator and listener.

Additionally this "new wave" of true crime isn't scripted or acted. Podcast hosts and social media creators typically do their own research and focus on the factual details of real crime and criminals, unlike television programs that invent fictional cases, criminals, and victims for each episode. This more independent setting of the new generation of true crime also has its benefits, allowing more taboo perceptions and depictions of crime and criminals to exist unchecked for the most part without the restrictions of cable executives and rating criteria. The growing popularity and acceptance of true crime as a mainstream genre helps to normalize these taboo communities.

The suffering of women, physical bloody suffering, is a hyperfixation of the modern world. It's in the movie theaters, dominating on Spotify (Naseer and St. Aubin 2023), print media, and television series- nearly everyone has access to it because on many platforms, it's free. True crime often has no paywall due to its high availability on YouTube and social media. True crime is everywhere. Content creators romanticize, fetishize, and sensationalize real accounts of human suffering to engage the true crime "community", the previously mentioned online area where they share true stories about real humans. Fans exchange these stories faster than ever before thanks to online applications such as TikTok and Twitter, social media apps based in the United States but accessible across the globe.

The purpose of this research was to investigate the intersection of gender, violence, and consumption by engaging with creators and those with personal ties to true crime media.

Throughout this investigation, my research lens was shaped by additional factors of socioeconomic status, race, and social capital. My research questions were as follows:

- What language and themes do creators of true crime media use to talk about violence and crimes committed? How are these perceived?
- What attracts people to gender-based violence? Specifically violence committed against white women?
- How do creators and those with personal ties to true crime situate gender and race within the genre, created content, and the fan base?

True crime has become seductive, a community filled with individuals sharing a passion and interest for the morbidly curious and shockingly violent. Through this research, I aimed to examine several areas of interest; what do these stories say about the body of a woman? Are women destined to entertain even in death? How do ideas of purity, femininity, innocence, and suffering impact this genre? How does the language used to describe women shape victim narratives and power dynamics? What motivates young women's infatuation with stories of death and danger? My use of "women" here includes all female-identifying and/or presenting people.

Engaging with true crime media causes a confrontation with the reality of these true stories, however, due to the language and imagery used, this confrontation is not always what is expected.

"With their gaudy covers, embellished with photographs of killers and their victims, the back-cover prose that seems almost to drip blood, and their promise of authenticity, true crime books may repel the casual browser. Long, violent narratives of actual murder and rape cases, true crime books are advertised

with lurid adjectives: “The dream ended in a bloody nightmare,” runs the description of one book; others promise “ravenous sexual violation and savage death,” and “a sick, two-year spree of bloodlust and death” (Browder 2006).

“Dream,” “ravenous,” “savage”- all words used here to describe violent crimes, but are also commonly used in romantic and sexual contexts. My research investigates this language use and its prevalence online as it has been disseminated through the true crime community. Especially on social media platforms such as TikTok and YouTube where increased interaction and views are monetized and unrestricted by age, the presentation of these crimes and the reactions they provoke are of note.

The dramatization and sensationalization of crime and violence are not new phenomena. There have been documentaries, TV shows, and literature within the genre for decades, not to mention radio broadcasts, newspapers, and public announcements that have been reporting crime as one of their inherent purposes for centuries. Throughout history, people have used media as a tool. This tool helped educate them on where to live, which communities to be a part of, and how to live. Still today, media has entrenched itself in decision making, including “how to raise children, where to invest social wealth, what punitive governmental actions to support, how to view groups perceived as likely criminals—a broad range of choices and attitudes that affect the quality of a society and its political life” (Seplov 1994). Both the Supreme Court and the American Bar Association have come forward to declare that the media we consume has distinct effects on how we perceive legal systems (Podlas 2005).

Portrayal and depiction of crime may have the power to influence how one understands their own life as well as the reality of their community (Callanan 2012). Depending on the representation, this influence can create an understanding of crime in the viewer distinctly out of proportion to the actual frequency and severity of crime in their area (Wiltenburg 2004). How

does the influence true crime has over its viewers change if the viewer is not engaging with the material on grounds of intending to learn about their community or identify threats- but instead for fun or as a hobby?

And while production and consumption of true crime media is a stand-out facet of current pop culture, it is notably so amongst young women as described by Boling (2018): “the true crime podcast audience is predominantly female (73%)”. As this non-fiction subgenre has become increasingly targeted towards and popular among young women (Biressi 2000), there have been notable shifts in the direction of true crime content creation.

Sensationalization relies upon and feeds off of an emotional response from the person engaging with the content (Wiltenburg 2004). Many factors have been identified as having an impact on how likely one is to have a heightened fear of crime such as age, gender, and race (Ortega et Al. 1987). Boling’s statistic that 73% of true crime podcast listeners are female precedes the question: How could a demographic predicted to be some of the most frightened of crime comprise over half of its fan base in one of the largest true crime media categories? Women, on average, are more likely to engage with media relating to true crime than men (Vicary, Fraley 2010). However, women have additional motivators beyond those of mere entertainment when they choose to engage with this media.

“...by understanding why an individual decides to kill, a woman can learn the warning signs to watch for in a jealous lover or stranger. By learning escape tips, women learn survival strategies they can use if actually kidnapped or held captive.” (Vicary, Fraley 2010).

But how often do true crime media focus on this educational aspect? Does the sensationalization of crime overshadow the potential benefits of engaging with true crime media? How does turning someone’s death into a lesson affect their legacy, morality, and dignity?

I gathered data by interviewing content creators and those with personal ties to true crime to gain insight on their perspectives on the genre and its description and depiction of crime. One of the main goals of these methods was to learn about the interviewees' reactions to the themes in true crime media, how creators choose what cases to cover, and how they describe them. Following my data collection, I used qualitative coding to analyze my interview data. I also collected data from Netflix, the world's most popular streaming service for television and film (Netflix n.d.). I examined emerging themes within Netflix's catalog of true crime titles with quantitative analysis.

This thesis and the questions I pose are significant as an infinite number of crimes have been committed, yet only a select few make it “big” in the world of true crime media. It is important to disclose these selections for what they are, and what they say about who is and is not valued in true crime spaces, as well as how these values connect to bigger ideas of value in society. Additionally, it is important to ask questions about what is created and presented to the masses, and under what circumstances the media are consumed.

Theory

This work's theoretical foundation is largely based in feminist and queer anthropology, with specific foci on positionality, gender study, social learning theory, and digital gaze. My goal for this thesis was to use the potential theories I have identified to deeply analyze and assess my data/research questions. My results contribute to conceptions of gender in American society, and the intersectionality between gender, race, and violence. This research also explores how media consumption is reflected in the creation of true crime media, as well as the role that media plays in modern society.

This thesis is rooted in feminist and gender-oriented theory as well as elements of storytelling. These themes operate as somewhat of a skeleton that resides within my research like a support system. Today's true crime media is inextricably linked to the experience and perceptions of gender, and the following scholars' work elaborates on how these experiences and perceptions exist within society on a broader scale. I apply their work into the specific context of my research again to serve as the bones of my investigation and findings. True crime, at its own skeleton of sorts, is storytelling. The word "story" here is capable of embodying a spectrum of meanings. It could mean something akin to a news story focused on facts and timelines, or something closer to a narrative that follows the lives and memories of individuals. In any case, the language used to build a story is inherently influential.

The genre of true crime revolves around narrative-making, thus the words used to describe women, bodies, death, and violence are incredibly significant in how these stories are told and perceived. The presentation of true crime and the enhancement of its shock value via sensationalization, romanticization, and fetishization are both rooted in the specific and intentional presentation of these stories. The specific words chosen in the production and

labeling of true crime are vital to this research to uncover messages sent to those who interact beyond the content and story itself. Emily Martin (1991) carefully and thoroughly examines language and how people create gendered narratives, as well as how power is shaped by, and shapes language (Martin 1991). As true crime media are created, language matters. Words are powerful, and far from arbitrary.

The impacts of intersectionality are crucial to finding the true motivators and emotions consumers develop surrounding their interests in true crime. Margo Weiss (2020) clearly describes the importance of intersectionality, positionality, and power relationships as they pertain to the understanding of socio-cultural phenomena (Weiss 2020). This project has a close focus on gender, but other traits such as age, race, and privilege are integral to understanding and conceptualizing the topics investigated. It is vital to pay attention to the overlap of these characteristics, as well as how they hold influence over each other and the overall behavior one exhibits. Additionally the incorporation of positionality was important to me throughout this research. My position and my identity shape how I intercept and understand this research, which was important to keep in mind at all points of this thesis. Weiss describes positionality as a tool that allows the researcher to potentially make unique connections and observations, and is not a weakness to the researcher but instead a reality for all researchers (Weiss 2020).

Nessette Falu (2021) demonstrates how research is seen through personal experiences that create a lens unique to each researcher (Falu 2021). Similar to Weiss, Falu stresses the point that the lens every researcher has due to their personal experiences can render visible new findings and perspectives. Falu also frequently shares her own perspectives on issues and themes within her research (Falu 2021). Again, viewing one's position as a tool instead of a detriment to the legitimacy of their work.

Mascia-Lees and Black (2000), in their book titled *Gender and Anthropology*, discuss many theoretical foundations that will be essential in this project. One specific example in their book comes from social learning theorists. Social learning theory argues that the variation of aggressive and submissive tendencies across gender(s) cannot be accounted for via biological evolution (Mascia-Lees, Black 2000). This theory will be vital, as emotional content such as violence, anger, pain, fear, empathy, and vulnerability will be investigated in this project as they pertain to consumer's emotional response to engaging with true crime media. These scholars provide excellent background into both historical and new theoretical foundations that will be further examined as the scope of this project narrows and moves more closely in a specific direction.

In conjunction with the above gender theory, I have applied Claude Lévi-Strauss' (1955) theory of binary opposition. In *The Structural Study of Myth* (1955), Lévi-Strauss claimed that binary oppositions are the building blocks of how humanity conceptualizes narratives. This theory promotes how stories can be best understood when they fit into how a society can be influenced to view their reality: with stark contrast and emphasized dichotomy. Notably within true crime, sensationalism often juxtaposes killer and victim through emphasized means of exaggerating the binary between good and evil moralities. This continuously creates strong, wicked men and weak, unaware women within the genre. More so, true crime frequently places a victim's reality in opposition to the life they "should" have lived, one free of crime and suffering. I apply binary opposition here as a means to better understand the roots of sensationalism within true crime content. I also recognize the colonial foundations of binary thinking, and recognize that this theoretical infrastructure is not embodied by all peoples and cultures. As I investigate

true crime content and its trends of sensationalism I recognize how its use of binary opposition contributes to its colonial footprint.

Methodology

The Research Roadmap

This thesis has always been framed as an exploration of true crime media through its many different phases and foci. Due to my previously mentioned personal experiences with crime and media coverage, I am consistently interested in all aspects of the current cultural fixation on crime, violence, and criminals. Initially, I had set out to investigate fans of true crime content and the motivations behind their engagement, specifically how these motivations connected to the romanticization, sensationalization, and fetishization of crime. However, during the initial stages of this research, I discovered the levels of romanticization and fetishization went deeper than I had anticipated. I found entire accounts and online communities on Twitter (also known as X) and TikTok that were dedicated to the obsession and figurative worship of serial killers and criminals. One specific example of this was what I found by searching “true crime community” on Twitter. The accounts I found in my search focused on the appearance and implied charisma of mass/serial killers. Two killers who carried out a school shooting and attempted bombing at Columbine High School in 1999 were among those frequently highlighted (Rico 2015). The Twitter accounts posted home videos of the two as young children, many photos, fan-created art (fanart), and several tweets proclaiming love and affection. The accounts often referred to them as their “boyfriends”, and used words like “hot”, “quirky”, and “misunderstood” to describe them. Most disturbing to me was that many of these accounts were owned and operated by individuals who identified themselves as underage minors in their account biographies.

Additionally, I found many individual tweets and TikToks ranking the attractiveness and sex appeal of famous serial killers. The comments on these Tweets and TikToks often expressed

sentiments about how, due to their perceived attractiveness, these social media users would have allowed themselves to be placed in danger by these criminals or form relationships with them. The comments often say/write things such as “[Serial killer] is so hot! I would have let him take me!”. This was further evidence of problematic parasocial relationships, and a clear sign of potential danger associated with the intense online fanaticism for true crime, content creators, and the criminals they cover.

Finding this side of the true crime community was a shock, and it shifted the story I wanted to tell with this thesis. I realized that the motivations of those who engage with true crime media vary beyond my initial estimations and that I wasn’t personally comfortable investigating some aspects of these motivations. While the specific focus has shifted, the research itself has continuously moved forward as an exploration. In this thesis, I explore true crime media as an experience. I use the word “experience” to indicate that I examined true crime media through recognizing and investigating the various experiences it provides to different individuals, and the significance of the genre as a whole. I shifted my focus to instead explore perceptions of true crime from the perspective of both those who make the media and those who have personal ties to the crimes themselves, two populations that have yet to be investigated to the same extent as true crime fans.

Social Media Immersion

Before beginning interview recruitment, I took two weeks in June of 2022 to immerse myself online in my research area. Specifically, I used this time to make a separate Twitter and TikTok account from my personal accounts and began closely examining the online true crime communities. Both Twitter and TikTok are algorithm-based social media platforms, meaning that each feed is curated by the application through analyzing what the user interacts with and then

promoting similar content. By starting fresh accounts with no user data, I was able to curate new feeds on these platforms that allowed me to see and interact with true crime content I wouldn't otherwise find given my personal account's algorithms and user data. I took field notes during this process and noted common themes I noticed during each observation. I also used this time period to further specify my research.

The true crime community is ever-changing, with newly generated media and content surfacing every day. Modern social media allows for new content creators and consumers to join in at any time from anywhere in the world. Unlike other forms of media, there is no paywall to post true crime content to TikTok, Twitter, YouTube, or other social media websites. There is no book editor to hire or director to audition for, "regular people" can join the true crime community online and rise to fame or notoriety as a creator in ways that more structured media (film, television, print) does not allow. The "Wild West" lawless nature of the internet makes room for seemingly infinite true crime content, creators, and consumers.

Qualitative Research

Recruitment

The recruitment process for this research was intensely careful and tentative. There are no permissions in place to protect victims and survivors from being covered and investigated by the true crime community against their will. Once police documents, court orders, trial transcripts, and other crime details are released to the public- legally they become public domain regardless of the feelings and resulting traumas of any involved parties. My goal with recruitment was to make sure that all of my participants were completely comfortable, informed, and willing to participate every step of the way. I believed one way to ensure this was to conduct my interviews without any reward for participating. I wanted to ensure that any and all contributions to my

research were provided by people who did so only because they wanted to, not for any other reason or motivation. Again, there are no permissions in place to protect the individuals covered in true crime media nor any stipulations about sharing any garnered revenue. I wanted no place in any financial exchanges that could potentially exploit victims and survivors. Additionally, I wanted all participants to be comfortable removing themselves from the research at any given point without the pressure of worrying about any monetary losses.

I chose to speak to content creators and those with personal ties to true crime because I believe them to be closer to the heart of the trauma that the industry operates on. Those with personal ties sit at the center, genuinely experiencing real-life loss, violence, and trauma. Content creators sit in the middle, producing, processing, and packaging real life events. Consumers and enthusiasts exist even farther outside content creators, with the most distance from the real life pain and suffering. These perceptions have already begun to surface in academia.

There is already data and literature available that explores fans' experiences and perceptions of true crime, an area of study that is also growing rapidly along with the genre (Fathallah 2023, Schulenberg 2021, Rico 2015). Additionally, within these articles there often exists a content analysis of true crime media, but it typically lacks evidentiary support from content creators themselves. Although individuals with personal ties to the event may be featured in true crime, their representation is highly curated and lacks an authentic voice. I saw these two populations as an interesting hole in the literature, both with a certain pre-existing coverage and voice, but one lacking in autonomy and genuine academic engagement.

I found my participants through the online social media accounts I had created on Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. I chose to do this because of the inherent voluntary nature of posting on social media, all of my participants willingly and publicly identified their personal ties to true

crime independently. While finding participants that have personal ties to true crime, I used key search phrases such as “true crime victim”, “true crime ethics”, “true crime survivor”, and “true crime families” to find accounts that identified themselves and their connection to true crime. Often this was either in their account biography or within an individual post they had made from the account. I then reached out to them through the messaging system within the social media platform, known as a “direct message” or “DM”, or commented on their post. For those having personal experiences with true crime, I began my message with a detailed description of who I am, what I was researching, and some details about my family’s connection to murder and media coverage. I explicitly stated that I was not looking for any case details and wouldn’t ask any direct questions about their case(s) and that I was only researching depictions and perceptions of the true crime genre as a whole. If the individual didn’t respond, I didn’t follow up or message again out of respect.

When finding participants that created true crime media, I used key search phrases such as “true crime”, “true crime podcast”, “true crime storytelling”, and “true crime coverage”. Again, I reached out to them through a direct message or commented on a post of theirs. I began my message with a detailed description of who I am, and what I was researching. From there I waited for a response and typically exchanged emails, where I then gave a more detailed explanation of my credentials, research goals, and brought up the interview process.

In additional efforts of recruitment, after each interview, I asked participants if there was anyone they’d be willing to speak to in their lives who might be interested in participating in this study. This helped me in my endeavors to find participants via snowball sampling (Russell 2011).

Interviews

I obtained formal informed consent from all of my participants and ensured that they were legal adults. The 14 people I spoke to and included in the data can be primarily classified as but not limited to content creators of true crime/crime media (TikTokers, Twitter posters, podcast hosts, print media), and friends and families of those who have been affected by violence or crime and are connected to true crime media. I completed all interviews via Zoom, allowing all participants to leave their cameras disabled if they wished. The interviews lasted between 10-120 minutes and were audio recorded via Zoom and transcribed without transcription software. Participants were provided with a consent form before the interview, though most opted for providing verbal consent to be both interviewed and recorded. I provided a formal consent form to those who wanted it, giving them their own copy with both of our signatures for their records.

The interviews themselves were semi-structured and participant-led. Prior to asking any questions I informed all my participants that, at any given time, they could remove themselves and their data from the study. I developed an interview guide that consisted of five rough domains. Some domains were specific to either content creation or personal experiences with true crime and were only used if pertinent to the participant. I labeled the domains as follows; introduction, creating true crime, personal crime experiences, true crime significance, and conclusions. Both the introductory and concluding sections were almost entirely open-ended and focused on the participant's comfort with the material and topic. I began all interviews by asking my participants to tell me a little about themselves, and oftentimes this led them to start discussing their experiences with true crime naturally. For content creators, I often asked them to describe how they made a podcast episode from start to finish- no detail too big or small. This allowed them to begin the more specific domain of the interview with something familiar, and

gave me the opportunity to ask follow-up questions along the way, asking “Why do you ____?” or “How does ____ work?”. I also asked them about true crime media types, expenses, and content, though many of my participants naturally covered these topics on their own or through follow-up questions. For participants with personal ties to true crime, I began the more specific domain of the interview by asking “Could you tell me about how you feel connected to true crime?” and let them speak freely.

In all of my interviews, this first question led participants to cover a variety of topics naturally and gave them the space to explain their unique perspectives. I also found that it was at this point that participants would opt out of the interview process, and request their data and contributions be destroyed. I believe that asking participants about their connection to true crime resulted in a direct confrontation with a myriad of potentially traumatic events. For many of my participants, my interview facilitated a return to painful memories. I estimate that this process was too much for some participants, resulting in their exit from the study. Upon request, I immediately removed these participants from the research and destroyed any of their data I gathered up to that point.

For the participants that continued on, I began asking questions about greater true crime significance. These questions were targeted at exploring bigger issues within the true crime community such as money, ethics/morals, fans, race, gender, sexuality, and more. These questions were phrased openly. “What do you think about the profits of the true crime industry?” and “How do you feel like gender is presented in true crime media?” were both good starting points. Many of these broader topics are connected, and my participants again often talked themselves through many points on their own with small prompts of “Could you tell me more about that?” or “What else do you associate with ____?”.

Finally, my conclusion domain consisted of a moment of quiet for my participant to think and rest. I said something along the lines of “I really appreciate how much time you’ve given me, those are all of my questions, and I’d like for you to take a moment to think about anything else you’d like me to know about these topics. If you’d rather complete the interview at this point, you’re more than welcome”. I was patient and gave participants as much time as they needed, and often at this point, participants with personal ties to true crime became emotional, along with a few of the creators. I allowed them to speak for as long as they desired and concluded the interview once they had finished.

Data Analysis Procedures

I used Atlas.ti to code my interview transcripts qualitatively. I first read through my data to search for emerging themes, and then I used a deductive coding method and allowed the naturally emerging themes within my data to form my codes and subsequent analysis (Russell 2011). Originally I separated those with personal and creative ties to true crime into two groups, but I found very few disparities in their codes and coded them together with the same codebook, instead opting to include “p.t.” and “c.t.” after participant names to indicate “personal ties” or “creative ties”. I ended my qualitative analysis with 27 codes, but chose to intimately explore 7 which I broke up into the following groups: Sensationalization, Race, Gender, and Sexuality, and Ethics: Money and Permission.

The coding process was exceptionally emotionally exhaustive, and revisiting the traumas shared with me was a powerful experience. It is important to recognize the self when investigating realms of devastation, not as an entity of research, but as a person who will go on even after the research has stopped (England 1994, Drozdowski and Dominey-Howes 2015). I

took many breaks during the coding process, and am still working to understand the effects of becoming so familiar with violence and suffering.

Quantitative Research

My goal for my quantitative research and subsequent dataset was to assist in rounding out my interview experiences with results that further contextualize my qualitative findings (Snelson 2016). As previously stated, true crime has worked its way into mainstream media channels, moving from hole-in-the-wall internet blogs to billion-dollar streaming services that now fight over the rights to put the “biggest and baddest” criminals on the big screen (Burnworth 2022). I chose to examine Netflix, “a subscription-based streaming service that allows our members to watch TV shows and movies” (Netflix n.d.) due to its global popularity and recent notable increase in true crime media production (Walters 2021).

Description of Data Set

I collected these data in October of 2022 to support my thesis on the creation and consumption of true crime media. The dataset consisted of primary data I collected from the streaming platform Netflix, drawing from the platform’s category “True Crime”. The goals of this data collection were to record the titles that Netflix tagged as “True Crime” along with corresponding identifying details about the titles to analyze how Netflix defines and creates true crime media. Other crime categories exist on Netflix such as “Serial Killers”, “Forensics”, “Dysfunctional Families”, “Based on Real Life”, “True Crime Documentaries”, “Stories of Greed and Corruption”, and more, though this study exclusively includes titles tagged broadly as “True Crime” for the sake of cohesion and focus. This data collection represents Netflix’s most basic definition and depictions of the genre, and their most centralized depictions of true crime.

Population, Sample Size, and Participants/Samples

The sampling strategy I used for this data collection was purposive sampling. I began by searching “True Crime” on the Netflix homepage and selecting “True Crime” from the available grouped titles/tags in the “Explore titles related to” menu. I used the preview page for each title and recorded the title's information.

These data ($n = 32$) included the title name, year, media format (e.g., documentary series, film, etc.), rating, and Netflix’s primarily assigned descriptive adjective, central crime(s). Then I recorded the content’s criminal’s name(s), criminal’s perceived race(s), criminal’s gender(s), victim’s name(s), victim’s perceived race(s), and victim’s perceived gender(s).

Measured Variables, Materials, and Procedures

The variables I used in my data analysis are central crime(s), criminal’s perceived race(s), criminal’s gender(s), victim’s perceived race(s), and victim’s perceived gender(s). All variables were categorical. I examined the frequencies of these variables specifically to better understand how Netflix depicts crimes, and more specifically, who commits them and who experiences them. By better conceptualizing what crime “looks like” to consumers, we can be better informed on how true crime consumers understand gender, race, ideas of the body, and crime. As 35% of Americans engage with true crime weekly (Naseer, St. Aubin 2023), the true crime community’s conceptualization of these topics plays a large role in how the greater population understands and depicts them.

Data Analysis Procedures

I generated descriptive statistics to identify the frequencies of these variables. IBM SPSS Statistics Version 28 was used to complete all quantitative analyses. Descriptive statistics

(frequencies) were used to identify the occurrence of central crimes, gender, and race within the dataset.

Confidentiality and Data Storage

All transcripts, audio files, consent forms, and identifying data/forms were kept in an encrypted Google Drive folder connected to my university account. The university's institutional review board (IRB) confidentiality measures were followed in all capacities throughout this research. Additionally, all access to the designated research-specific social media accounts and email account were kept exclusive to the researcher.

Quantitative Findings

Introduction

Public interest in true crime media (TV series, documentaries, podcasts, etc.) is a current standout of popular culture with 35% of Americans reporting engagement with true crime at least once per week (Naseer and St. Aubin 2023). As the true crime genre continues to rapidly expand, it is important to critically examine content to understand how crime and violence are presented to consumers, especially in terms of race and gender. This research analyzes a primary dataset collected from the streaming platform Netflix to explore possible frequencies of race, gender, and crime variables within their “True Crime” category. The results show that of the 32 titles included here, 50% focused on murder as the central crime, 59.4% focused on central white criminals, and 62.5% focused on central male criminals. Of all featured victims/survivors 59.4% were white and 87.5% of all victims/victim groups were female/featured females. I examine these results and representations of gender, violence, and race in Netflix’s “true crime” category to better understand the platform’s depictions of crime and how these representations could be reflected in consumers’ understanding of crime, criminals, and victims/survivors.

Background

True crime is an incredibly wide-reaching genre with content created and consumed across a variety of media formats such as books, documentary series, podcasts, and social media. The popularity and accessibility of true crime are notable facets of current and past popular culture and media globally, especially in the United States. While research efforts have been made to investigate how the consumption of true crime informs consumers’ perceptions of crime, very little has been done to investigate the true crime media itself and how it depicts gender and race.

Current data provided by the federal bureau of investigation's crime data explorer (FBI n.d.) shows that in 2022, there were 19, 200 counts of murder committed in the United States. Of these murders, 79.6% of the offenders were men, and 77.3% of murder victims were men. Additionally, 52% of the offenders were black or African American, and 56% of victims were black. These are the majority statistics in which my quantitative research is rooted in.

Review of Previous Literature and Theory

"True crime media " consists of content that discusses real crimes, criminal activity, and criminal history. Within the genre itself, there are a myriad of means to consume true crime content including; podcasts, novels, TikToks (short videos via the social media app TikTok), tweets, television series, documentary films, biography films, YouTube videos, and more. There have been notable shifts in the direction of true crime content creation; for example, the non-fiction subgenre has become increasingly targeted towards and popular among young women as they have become the primary consumers of true crime content (Biressi 2000).

The production and consumption of true crime media is especially a stand-out facet of popular culture amongst young women specifically as described by Boling (2018): "the true crime podcast audience is predominantly female (73%)" (Boling et al. 2018, p. 220). This is an important statistic to consider while examining the depictions of gender present in true crime media. My quantitative research considers how one's own gender could inform their understanding of the media they consume. Additionally, this thesis explores how Netflix's true crime depictions could potentially inform and influence consumers' understanding of their own gender/gender frameworks through who and what they frequently see represented in Netflix's content.

Continuing with the impacts of true crime consumption, engaging with true crime media and the internalization of content can shape how consumers view the world and their place in it. Specifically, the portrayal and depiction of crime may have the power to influence how one understands their own life as well as the reality of their community (Callanan 2012). Depending on the representations of gender and race, this influence can create an understanding of crime in the viewer distinctly out of proportion to the actual crime that occurs outside of true crime media (Wiltenburg 2004). True crime could create ideations of crime within its consumers that exist outside of crime “realities” due to the misrepresentation of crime, criminals, and victims. This can enact a divide between how a true crime fan understands crime, violence, and the value of a victim from someone who does not engage with true crime media.

Many factors have been identified as having an impact on how likely one is to have a heightened fear of crime such as age, gender, and race (Ortega et Al., 1987). As previously mentioned above, 73% of true crime podcast listeners are female. Interestingly, the demographic predicted to be some of the most frightened of crime instead makes up over half of its fan base (Ortega et Al., 1987). This research pursues potential implications connected to heightened female viewership and the resulting shifts in perspective for these consumers due to the depictions of crime in the content.

On top of heightened female fan bases (Vicary et Al., 2010), women have additional motivators beyond those of mere entertainment when they choose to engage with this media. Cautionary tales and learning lessons are frequently featured in true crime media which provide a somewhat educational aspect to its consumption, giving consumers the impression that they’re learning about criminal behavior and what it takes to stay safe (Vitis 2022).

As previously stated, true crime content shapes consumers' conception of crime. Namely whom they should fear and what they should fear might happen to them, creating a sense of distress they likely would not otherwise experience. Additionally true crime manipulates ideas of who is valued in the public's eye following a crime-related event, and what experiencing crime does to the worth of a person are all impacted.

The last point listed above is equally aimed towards both monetary and societal value. Streaming services are not filled with detailed documentaries following young women of color as they navigate safe, predictable lives. The story of a girl who makes her way through the world unharmed does not bring in millions of views, dollars, nor mourners. It is the juxtaposition of a white girl's suffering in the face of her previously "average" life; much like Lévi Strauss (1955) discusses. It is the coexistence of opposites within her story that attracts an audience. This distinct binary separation between the normalcy that the audience expects for her, and her violent reality ignites a fascination and shock value worthy of a billion dollar industry.

Research Objectives, Hypotheses, Significance, and Purpose of Current Study

Accordingly, the present quantitative study investigates how Netflix depicts crime and which crimes are relevant to showcase in their media. This project's theoretical foundation is based in feminist and queer anthropology, with specific foci on positionality, gender study, and digital gaze.

This research's outcome sheds light on the true crime phenomenon and its functions as an element of popular culture by providing insight into how Netflix depicts crime on its platform, and how these depictions could shape consumers' ideas of crime and crime-related concepts such as race and gender. A greater understanding of how Netflix specifically depicts true crime could inform how 35% of Americans conceptualize race, gender, and crime in their own lives and

communities. The main objective of this report is to examine the frequencies of the demographics that Netflix covers in true crime media including gender, race, and type of crime. Specifically I examine representations of race and gender, and the value systems these representations reinforce and reject.

I entered this research with expectations of exclusion. I hypothesized that women of color, queer people, and those that exist outside of the mythologized white woman archetype would be less present within my data. I hoped to observe quantifiable evidence of this, not to reinforce colonial and racist ideologies and social factors, but to provide substantial proof of these oppressive systems at work in popular media. Additionally, this is an emerging area of research interest, and I anticipate that these data will contribute to knowledge of true crime media and its societal implications.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Results demonstrated (see table 1) that the most featured crime was murder. Of the 32 titles, 50% focused on murder as the central crime and 28.1% focused on serial murder. Abduction and sexual assault both comprised 6.3% each, and serial sexual assault and war crimes made up 3.1% each. Of the 32 titles, 65.4% focused on central white criminals, and 62.5% focused on central male criminals (Figure 1). Additionally, 68.8% of titles featured one criminal working alone, while 18.8% involved several criminals and 12.5% featured unknown criminals/unsolved cases.

The mode victim race was white (Table 1.2) and findings showed that 59.4% of all featured victims/survivors were white. The mode victim gender was both genders (Table 1.3). Of the 32 titles, 12.5% of the victims were male, 37.5% were female, and 50% featured both

genders of victims (Figure 2). Additionally, 50% of the titles examined involved crimes with multiple victims, and 50% involved crimes with one solitary victim.

Initial Explanation

In summary, these results show that collectively 78.1% of the analyzed titles focused on murder of some variety. Murder was the highest occurring crime, closely followed by serial murder. Of the criminals featured, the most common race and gender combination were white males who worked alone. Of the victim/survivor data, men were featured less than women. 87.5% of victims/victim groups were women/featured women.

Discussion

Summary of Main Findings

The primary objective of this quantitative study was to examine the frequencies of the demographics that Netflix covers in true crime media. The main findings of this analysis show the most commonly featured criminal on Netflix's "True Crime" category is male, white, and committed murder alone. No Asian, American Indigenous, Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander-identifying criminals were detected within the dataset.

Most victims featured were white regardless of gender with no reported instances of victims identified as American Indigenous, Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander. Half of all titles featured more than one victim per criminal/criminal group, and 87.5% of all victims/victim groups were female/featured females. The most commonly featured victim/survivor on Netflix's "True Crime" category is female, white, and was murdered/killed in a string of murders.

Explanation and Interpretation of Results

These data can be interpreted to indicate that Netflix highlights white people in their “True Crime” category above all other races, despite how this contradicts the factual crime statistics. Netflix’s criminals are highly likely to be men, specifically murderers, and victims are likely to be murdered females. This indicates that most of Netflix’s “True Crime” category follows a very similar crime story in terms of demographic details. This also indicates that the Netflix production system (in terms of the “True Crime” category) excludes certain stories from being told/made. Additionally, while the category is broadly listed as “True Crime”, all crimes featured possess a violent/interpersonal element (murder, serial murder, sexual assault, serial sexual assault, abduction, armed robbery, and war crimes). This also ties into the previously mentioned “boilerplate” crime story that Netflix statistically favors- a white man committing a violent, fatal crime against a white woman/series of white individuals.

Generalizability and Broader Implications

Broader implications of these findings are connected to the concept of media consumption and its effects. The true crime that consumers engage with each day affects how they view the world around them and the people in it (Seplow, 1994). In further terms of how the internalization of media teaches the consumer “how to view”, it is imperative that we consider how value is ascribed through coverage. Through the hyper-fixation placed on violence committed against white female bodies, true crime informs consumers that these are the people we value in society and whose suffering should be documented and broadcasted. This could have profound effects on crime consumers who could learn to understand their own gender through this framework of violence, fear, and crime after consistently internalizing the commodification of white women experiencing abuse and violence.

Findings show these titles fixate on murders and serial murders committed by white men against white women/people. Regardless of the specific crime rates that occur around the world at different locations, Netflix's "True Crime" category is built off of one specific crime template that features and values white bodies and white suffering almost exclusively. Netflix's depiction of crime paints a very specific picture of what designates a crime, who commits murder, who is murdered, and who's murder (in terms of race and gender) is produced into Netflix's television programs. The only FBI statistic that Netflix represented factually was the high likelihood of murder offenders being male (FBI n.d.). Criminal race, victim race, and victim gender were represented inaccurately within Netflix's content. This discrepancy is worrisome as this pattern creates an understanding of crime in the viewer distinctly out of proportion to the actual frequency and severity of crimes (Wiltenburg 2004).

This ascribed value, for storytelling purposes or otherwise, can also reinforce a highly problematic viewpoint that white stories are the only stories worth telling or listening to. This viewpoint could be internalized by consumers and spread further within the true crime community, potentially reinforcing racist ideologies such as only white murders being worth solving or only white victims being worth remembering.

Quantitative Study Limitations and Future Directions

One potential source of bias within the data is the element of perception during data collection for race and gender variables. Race and gender were identified through observation of the corresponding title. However, in most cases race and gender of individuals were not explicitly stated aloud nor in writing in which case the researcher used their best judgment to infer these demographics. This is accounted for by variable names, such as the labels "criminal's perceived race" or "victim's perceived gender". Additionally, this study operated using a gender

binary system with “unknown”, “male” or “female” as mutually exclusive options. This is an exclusionary system that could misrepresent gender identity within the sample. A similar system was used for perceived race, which may have excluded or limited individuals who have a racial identity that was unknown to the researcher during observation. These limitations could bias statistical findings resulting from the exclusionary perception practices.

An apparent limitation of this study was the exclusion of Netflix’s broader true crime categories previously mentioned such as “Serial Killers”, “Forensics”, “Dysfunctional Families”, “Based on Real Life”, “True Crime Documentaries”, “Stories of Greed and Corruption”, and more. Additional investigation and research can be done involving these categories and any frequencies and relationships that exist within them. Some of Netflix’s titles are tagged within multiple categories, so additional time would need to be dedicated to the significance and protocol for the duplicate titles. Further, additional study could be dedicated to other streaming services such as Hulu, HBOmax, AppleTV, Paramount+, Amazon Prime, and standard network television companies that create true crime content.

This research has the potential for further expansion using inferential statistics such as chi-squared tests using variables from the dataset to explore relationships that could exist within the data. One specific relationship worth revisiting is that between date of production and details of the program (crime type, victim and criminal demographics) to observe potential trends in the content and further explore the intersectionality of race and gender. Additionally, tracking the demographics of viewers of true crime content on Netflix would be a substantial contribution to this investigation. Following this study’s initial results, continued research into additional relationships could prove valuable for the continued understanding of true crime’s effect on its

consumers' conceptualizations of crime, violence, gender, race, and their implications on worldview through quantifying the significance of the relationships between these variables.

Qualitative Findings

Sensationalization

“I’m scared that we’re in a place where people will just want more and more and more...” - Shaindel (personal ties).

Sensationalization is the presentation of information with the intent of making it as exciting and shocking as possible (Faria 2013). Of my codes, “Sensationalization” was the most prevalent. I used this code to flag portions of my interview transcripts that explored the use of enhancing, exaggerating, and highlighting specific crime details over others to attract attention and enhance the shock value of content. In the context of true crime, this often presents as sexualization, fetishization, and romanticization of criminals and violence. Additionally, it can present as an emphasis placed on innocence, and a victim or survivor’s perceived unlikelihood of experiencing crime.

Sensationalization plays a role in the next several discussions, beginning first with addressing the phenomena as a whole. My results showed that all participants identified a frustration and disgust with sensationalism in true crime, regardless of their personal or creative ties to true crime. Sensationalization is viewed as commonplace practice in true crime, “it’s actually stressful because it feels like if you don’t sensationalize something it may not be as interesting to people, which feels wrong.” - Mary (creative ties). Creators actually feel pressured to sensationalize their own media both directly and indirectly through viewer engagement data and the social fear that they will be less successful if they do not provide a story that grabs attention.

One way this drive to create “interesting” media manifests for creators is through featuring certain criminals in their content, especially those with a large fanbase and/or

following. This is proven to garner attention, “The big name serial killers will always get you a download boost, it’s kind of low-hanging fruit because there is still so much interest.” - TZ (c.t.). Many spoke to the current hyperfixation on criminals, specifically referring to the emphasis placed on killers. But more than just name-dropping these popular killers, there is the element of fetishization and the emphasis of appearance and appeal. As creator Lindsay explained, “It seems to me that the narrative right now is to sexualize these killers, like people say ‘[serial killer] is so hot!’ which I’ll never endorse or support...” - Lindsay (c.t.). Needless to say there is a certain danger present in the fame awarded to criminals, “It almost seems like they’re getting what they want, a lot of serial killers want their names to be known and so [content creators] are literally giving them what they want.” - Mary (c.t.).

Notably, all participants with both personal and creative ties to true crime frequently explained how important it is to counteract sensationalist representations of criminals, specifically through valuing victims. “I am an ethical podcaster, and that entails making sure that I focus on the victims and not the suspects, I’m using all my energy to bring justice and get their names out, not the criminals’.” - Jasmine (c.t.). Participants reported that the best way to attempt to draw attention away from killers and criminals was to highlight victims, and the real people beyond the violence, trauma, and pain. Additionally, there is no formal definition of what makes a true crime podcast ethical or not. Though from Jasmine’s personal definition above, it can be inferred that true crime ethics are thought to be infused with justice, and valuing victims and survivors.

However, the drive and call for exciting and shocking media creates criteria for rejection of cases, victims, and even criminals. One participant seeking coverage for her daughter’s murder stated that “It is so bizarre, but there have been a number of national shows that said [my

daughter's murder] didn't have enough of a "hook". Who knows what they mean, but probably that means it doesn't have enough twists and turns to attract interest. It was just a 'normal' suffocation." - Maggie (p.t.). Sensationalism persists that all suffering was not created equally, and creates a horrifying ranking system that prevents certain stories from being told.

Families and loved ones of victim's will sometimes seek out true crime media platforms in hope to get coverage for their case(s), though the pressure placed on true crime to be as "engaging" as possible creates barriers for these families. As true crime has become more commodified, the supply and demand for stories of a certain caliber in terms of the "twists and turns" mentioned above sets a dangerous precedent for who is and is not worthy of coverage in a sensationalist-adjacent genre.

The inclusion of violent, graphic details in true crime also passes through sensationalism territory. "If a court report says something like 'He was shot in the head and suffered massive brain injury', now do I need to report that his brains went out the back of his skull? What's the value of saying this happened to this man? What, or I guess who, does that value really?" - Phil (c.t.). What is the point of including highly graphic violent details in true crime?

Sensationalization would justify these inclusions as a means to grab attention, and to enhance the shock value of the content. Shock breeds interest, and interest breeds consumption via views/clicks.

There is however the possibility that creators believe "gory details" will help to provide a more accurate story. Though Mary, a true crime podcaster contests this, saying,

"I listened to one episode, and it was just so incredibly detailed- like it was just not necessary at that point, just so detailed and so graphic. I don't know if they were just trying to tell the story as it happened but I wouldn't want someone to know that about me, about what happened to me I mean... I do feel like some people are more into the darkness of it and they really like talking about the really, really awful, horrible stuff for their own reasons." - Mary (c.t.).

There is no possibility of investigating the motivation behind each and every inclusion of graphic violence in true crime, and I do not move to suggest that all true crime creators employ sensationalization over accuracy. However, it is important to recognize the possibility as discussed by my participants, and the precedent it sets for how we as a society perceive and depict violence, crime, and criminals.

The value placed onto fascination and intrigue is powerful. The persistence of sensationalization in lieu of truthful storytelling is almost dystopian, especially when the genre is rooted in the lives, and primarily deaths, of real people. Martin's (1991) emphasis on the power of language rings true, and the manipulation of language and truth takes advantage of this power. Enhancing graphic details, highlighting appearances, while also strategically excluding other victims, and the exploitation of truth work to shape a specific narrative with the power to influence consumers' perception of the world around them. As my participants expressed, the pressures of sensationalism within the genre are very real. The drive to create fascinating content poses a threat to the integrity of true crime.

Race, Gender, and Sexuality

“There is absolutely a degree to which [true crime content creators] can make a spectacle out of a pretty white woman's death specifically.” - Allie (p.t.).

In similar terms to how sensationalization functions, true crime is capable of ascribing worth and value to specific victims. As can be seen in the previous chapter, clear and quantifiable attention is given to white women in the true crime genre. Often when an area of media focuses on women's stories, voices, and bodies the content is seen as empowering and representative, such as art or creative endeavors (Setyaningsih et al. 2012). What does “empowerment” mean in the context of true crime? What is representation really when the

woman's voice and body are dead? These concepts can and do in fact operate as wolves in sheep's clothing. Representation melts and reforms into fetishization and obsession. Obsession is neither careful nor empathetic in nature.

Participants criticized the way women are framed in the existing media. "Women are often described as a 'damsel in distress' or worse, as someone who lived a high-risk lifestyle and 'deserved' what happened to them." - DR (p.t.). The stories of women's suffering are often described as lessons to be learned by the audience, shifting blame from the acting criminal to the decisions and actions of the victim. Additionally as I have explained, the general focus on whiteness in true crime targets these lessons and warnings to a specific audience. This raises concerns about who specifically true crime protects and who it leaves vulnerable.

Instead of uplifting the victims and survivors, their final moments are flipped into mirrored instructions for other women to internalize. Trauma is turned into a warning, even twisted into comedic scoldings at times, telling predominately female audiences what not to do if they want to stay alive, stay whole. These women are used as examples, and this pattern in true crime sheds light onto the moral and virtuous pressures placed onto women to always know and do better. The popularity of victim blaming in true crime is worth investigating and critically examining as it reinforces ideas of feminine weakness, unpreparedness, and incapability. Victim blaming goes after the innocent, actively ignoring the criminal's autonomy to never have committed their respective atrocity in the first place.

In terms of true crime's coverage of women, several of my participants were vocal in their outrage, clearly stating their frustration with the exclusionary nature of who is featured and who is not. "Everyone should have that type of attention no matter what they look like, where they come from, who they are, or what their orientation is." - Jasmine (c.t.). To be clear, no

participants made any statements alluding to the fact that white women should not be covered in true crime. Instead they expressed a clear dissatisfaction with the singular lens of representation within the genre, and the lack of value assigned to every victim and survivor who exists outside of the almost mythologized white woman.

Race, gender, and sexuality in true crime are especially powerful due to the frequent intersections present within the content. As consumers internalize the media, they internalize the morals of the story. When specific details are emphasized, the story becomes inherently persuasive and powerful. The intersectionality present weaves together gender, violence, power, race, sexuality, and morality in a significant way.

As Mascia-Lees and Black (2000) describe, gendered characteristics are not inherent truth and should not be attributed as such. And yet despite this, true crime persistently tells stories sensationalizing the wickedness of men, and the weakness of women. The absence of people of color, the LGBTQIA+ community, and non-female victims in true crime is telling. The singular crown of value placed onto white women not only silences victims and survivors, but devalues everyone in society who doesn't fit the mold true crime has created.

Again, there is no way to investigate the motivations behind each piece of true crime media made that covers a white woman. I do not move to brand the entire genre as racist or sexist, but instead I hope to highlight patterns, inspire a closer look at who is and is not valued by creators and consumers, and what this means in the context of the ever-growing popularity of true crime media. These themes highlight epistemologies of American society and the judicial system that must be closely observed and held accountable.

Ethics; Money and Permission

“There is no permission for true crime creators which therein lies the problem. True crime creators often get to do and say whatever they want with no pushback or repercussions. Someone can tell the story of a loved one being murdered while doing their makeup and that be a main source of their income. Obviously the victims of murder cannot be asked permission, the families are hardly reached out to. It isn’t until they google their loved one’s name that they find this grotesque article that was written.” - DR (p.t.).

There are no formal rules about permissions for the creation of true crime media. The informal nature of true crime and its widespread accessibility allows for creators to cover anything and anyone they like, and then disseminate their media on virtually any platform. There are no laws to protect victims or survivors, nor their families and friends. Private legal action can be taken, though oftentimes the true crime in question covers the deceased alone, leaving family and friends unable to take action in their defense.

Crime content creators primarily source their content from the internet. Participants cited websites such as social media, murderpedia, open access legal databases, and police reports as common means of finding material and cases to cover. All of these websites are free, and have no restrictions for public use. Simultaneously, families and loved ones have no control over who can access this information, nor can they control how one might use it. This was internalized by participants with personal ties as a theft of autonomy, “If we wanted the world to know how and why we think my brother went missing- it should be us to tell the story, not some person who never even knew him.” DR (p.t.).

In conjunction with permission, the monetization of true crime also operates in an ethical and legal gray area. There is no exact amount publicly released and legitimized, but given the amount of true crime media created and consumed, it is sure to be a very large number. While TikToks, Tweets, and other social media formats might not garner lump sums, bigger films,

documentaries, ad-monetized podcasts and YouTube videos, books, and television series are more likely to have an economic impact.

“You know, some of these podcasts, and I don’t want to name them, but these bigger podcasts are getting millions of dollars in ad sales. And they’re selling mattresses, or hair dye, or whatever it is- but that doesn’t sit right with me. These true crime creators are making millions and millions off the backs of these victims and survivors.” - Celene Beth (c.t.).

Ethically speaking, the genre again encounters a controversial area. While there are laws in place that prevent criminals from profiting off of their crimes through any writings or productions (Nosrati 1998), there is no “mirrored” law in place about compensating people covered in true crime, nor their surviving families and loved ones.

“[True crime content creators] are just kind of lining their own pockets with other people’s pain, like they’re exploiting people that can’t say anything back. Fans... I would say the same because there is no ethical consumption of [true crime], they’re still funding this machine that exploits people and doesn’t give back anything close to what it takes.” - Allie (p.t.).

Some content creators can and do donate their true crime revenue on occasion, mentioning donation websites such as Go Fund Me and even funerary websites. “I donated all my February revenue towards their Go Fund Me, the family’s Go Fund Me, after I covered their case. I wish more podcasts would do this, there’s no way of knowing.” - CJ (c.t.). There truly is no way of knowing how true crime profits are spread out, and while some crowdfunding websites allow those who donate to leave a public message, this does not serve as a ledger to track who has and has not contributed.

This also brings into question the idea of transactional relationships between creators and families, and profit in general. Profit as a result of true crime is an endlessly complicated intersection. Some participants reported extreme discomfort with the idea, “I battle this with my

podcast, I feel deeply uncomfortable receiving funds off the backs of lost loved ones. Endlessly uncomfortable.” - Jasmine (c.t.). As the true crime wave continues to crest, I suspect laws will be put into place to attempt to regulate some of these ethically strenuous relationships.

True crime commodifies trauma, violence, and death. Regardless of the intentions of creators, the industry’s recent relentless push forward into mainstream channels of interest continue to generate capital. Marx’s *Capital* (1906) covers commodity fetishism, the act of stripping the labor, effort, and processing away from a valued product, leaving the end result as seemingly inherently valuable. This philosophy can be somewhat applied to the production of violence-centric true crime, though with some adjustments. The body often plays a large role in true crime. Most typically the wounded or dead body of a woman. Her body garners interest in life, typically through the sensationalization of her beauty and innocence. Though more than this, her body garners interest in death, which in turn drives monetization of the media. Her trauma is not ignored, but instead contributes to the fascination and obsession.

This mechanism builds on commodity fetishism, as the process of her body becoming a corpse is a big part of her story. True crime content rarely passes on the opportunity to describe final moments, with detailed recollections filled with violent details. True commodity fetishism would name death as the valuable, whereas true crime prizes the “becoming” of a dead body, the fascination it sparks, and the money it generates. To truly grasp the cultural significance of the popularity of true crime, this pattern cannot be ignored.

Qualitative Study Limitations and Future Directions

The above findings and discussion do not seek to answer questions so much as to explore them. These data are only the beginning, a small glimpse into perspectives on issues of race,

gender, and the value we place onto our fellow humans. Additional research could extend these questions and investigation to a larger sample of the true crime community. I was open and honest during my recruitment process, explaining my interest in ethics and morals of true crime. This could have, in theory, caused my participant sample to have a high representation of “ethical” creators. “Unethical” creators may have been hesitant to participate given the context of my research, potentially skewing my data in favor of participants already concerned with true crime ethics and morals. However, my research pointing to evidence of those concerned with ethical true crime in the first place is a hopeful sign for the genre, and should be seen as such. Further exploration of true crime creators could be incredibly helpful to further identify crime depictions, trends, and representation within the genre.

An additional potential limitation is my uneven number of participants with personal vs. creative ties to true crime. Recruitment for this research was incredibly difficult, with only 18 participants responding in the first place out of the roughly 120 contacted, and only 14 participants remaining involved with the research until its conclusion. As discussed above, there are no permissions in place to protect victims, survivors, and their loved ones- I harbor no resentment towards anyone unwilling to risk the exploitation of their trauma. Though further research into those with personal ties could prove helpful in efforts to explore the potential harm of true crime, it is not beneficial for the participants themselves and should be navigated with extreme caution and care.

Conclusion

Through the completion of my research, I discovered complexities and epistemologies of true crime situated in gender, race, and consumption. Sensationalism is a present reality within true crime media, and the genre exploits stories of violence and trauma to appeal to its consumers. Language is a powerful tool and through the intentional coverage and exclusion of narratives and stories- oppression and erasure can run rampant. The exploitation of white women's bodies, stories, and deaths is used to fuel racist and colonial ideologies and is rooted in value systems that situate white women both as invariably innocent, and as an example of moral failure. Women specifically are used as lessons, and blamed for the violence they encounter.

True crime is an endlessly complicated and nuanced genre. This work is a small glimpse into its complexities, and there are additional questions to ask of the genre. My findings, both qualitative and quantitative, show that there are serious concerns within the genre worth considering. Specifically, the unequal coverage provided to victims who are white women, and criminals who are white men. Additionally, the lack of permissions and protections in place to prevent the exploitation of victims, survivors, and their loved ones. True crime must be held accountable for these representations and vulnerabilities.

I encourage readers to question themselves, and more importantly to question the content they consume. In terms of accountability, it is important for consumers to confront how their participation with true crime contributes to the erasure of the suffering of people of color, queer communities, and men. Through the consistent support given to problematic ideologies in true crime, fans help to reinforce and uphold racist and exclusionary trends within the genre.

In conjunction with accountability, expectations and glorifications of juxtaposition must be dismantled. It is paramount that we as a society look deeply into what drives our fascination

with true crime. Without understanding the deep colonial and racist roots within these pathways of intrigue, we cannot move forward and away from these institutions.

Additionally, along these lines, we must also consider the criminals and killers that captivate true crime audiences. Why have white, cisgendered, male serial killers created literal cult followings? I suspect through similar assumptions as listed above- our society does not predict a handsome, well-dressed, and “well-mannered” white man to be capable of committing acts of indescribable violence. Why is that? Again, I suspect society imagines a different man when faced with such atrocities- most likely a man of color, low economic status, who happens to be less conventionally attractive. False representations of crime, such as Netflix’s misrepresentation of criminal race, victim race, and victim gender must be identified and examined for how they contribute to the sensationalization of crime and criminals. The breakdown of juxtaposition fascination and misinformation must be an intentional choice made by consumers that is led by education and awareness. Through holding true crime accountable for its sensationalization, harmful stereotypes and their not-so-subtle enhancement used to garner attention can be dismantled.

Primarily, I recommend accountability as a measure of decolonization (Smith 2019). True crime content is currently on a rise with more content being created every day. This rapid influx of new material into the genre leaves little room for accountability as new stories are ushered in and out like a revolving door. Consumers must think critically about the material they’re internalizing and hold creators accountable for the inclusion of diverse stories as well as any narrative that exists outside of the accepted current template. Stories highlighting indigenous women, women of color, the queer community, and all those who exist outside the mold of the mythologized white woman must be accommodated. However, these communities have been

historically vulnerable to research (Smith 2005) and must be treated with respect and autonomy as their stories are their own, and not to be exploited. Fans of true crime must reject the erasure of the suffering of people of color, and carefully consider how they deem stories valuable or uninteresting.

As people of color come forward, they must be received respectfully as the genre learns to navigate these large changes and decolonization efforts. Decolonization benefits everyone. Through the decolonization of holding creators and consumers of true crime accountable, the recognition of language's power in all cases, and the racist and colonial implications of the sensationalization of crime details- all those who are commodified and oppressed by current true crime media practices will be uplifted alongside the marginalized communities. True crime's intersectional depictions of gender, the body, race, and violence must be considered to fully recognize the influence the genre holds in the creation of perspective.

Through all of this, there must be the use of inclusive and mindful language. Sensationalization, fetishization, and romanticization are all commonplace practices in the true crime community, regardless of creators' and consumers' intentions. Words have power, and there is a distinct influence in the creation of popular narratives. If all people are to be uplifted in true crime media, this co-created power between creator and consumer must be considerably and carefully wielded to encourage awareness and justice- not to fetishize and further commodify suffering and violence.

Finally, the true crime community of content creators and consumers must be responsive, receptive, and attentive to the criticisms and suggestions of those involved, whether they be family members of victims or survivors themselves. True crime is a budding area of both popular

culture and scholarly interest, it must learn and adjust as it grows to accommodate the wants and needs of those it profits from.

Future Research

This area of study would benefit from extensive further research into the aforementioned areas of interest, as well as expanding further into topics I left unexplored. While there is pre-existing literature surrounding fans of true crime media, I recommend continued exploration of what drives true crime obsession. More so, I hope to see research completed on the effects of the regular consumption of violent media. Much like the time and dedication given to young men playing violent video games, I anticipate future research into how violence-adjacent hobbies can shape the outlook perspective of young women. Specifically, I recommend examining young women's understanding of their bodies, violence, safety, risk, their gender, and men's role in all of these themes as a result of their consumption of true crime.

Additional research must be completed on the inclusionary and exclusionary culture of true crime content creation. Quantitatively speaking, additional research on streaming services can help us to better understand what true crime already exists on mainstream accessible platforms, and help us to predict what will come next. Also, having a record of true crime coverage patterns will help track potential trends in the future as the genre expands. This approach can be applied to social media, and other formats of true crime such as books, podcasts, and more. Additional effort can be put towards asking true crime content creators about their perspectives of the genre and comparing those perspectives to the content trends as mentioned above.

Sensationalization is not unique to true crime, and much like basic exaggeration and hyperbole, can work its way into everyday conversation. However, it is uniquely significant in

true crime settings due to the previously mentioned impacts that sensationalization could have in terms of how we value fellow humans. Within my qualitative dataset, I had more data than I ever could have hoped to analyze within this work's timeframe. Further attention should be given to the risks of sensationalization of evil, and how it can impact those who engage with it in any capacity.

Finally, further research into true crime online communities would be beneficial to better understand the effects of true crime media on society as a whole. As previously mentioned, true crime is expanding in all directions every day. While social media and the internet continue to connect the globe, these online communities are more available every day. Research should grow with the genre and the community, following its expansion and investigating its reach into the world around us.

True crime's intersectional depictions of gender, the body, race, and violence must be considered to fully recognize the influence the genre holds in the creation of gender, race, and perceptions of violence. These data are only the beginning, a small glimpse into perspectives on issues of race, gender, and the value we place onto our fellow humans.

Tables and Figures

Table 1.

Differential statistics results of Netflix's "True Crime" category displaying crime type, race, and gender.

	Crime Type	Criminal Race	Criminal Gender	Victim Race	Victim Gender
<i>n</i>	32	32	32	32	32
Mode	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	3.00
<i>SD</i>	1.49	2.13	0.93	2.73	0.71

Table 1.1.

Key for decoding "Crime Type" results in Table 1.

Crime Type	Code
Unknown	0.00
Murder	1.00
Serial Murder	2.00
Sexual Assault	3.00
Serial Sexual Assault	4.00
Abduction	5.00
Robbery	6.00
War Crimes	7.00

Table 1.2.

Key for decoding “Criminal Race” and “Victim Race” in Table 1.

Race	Code
Unknown	0.00
White	1.00
Black	2.00
Hispanic	3.00
Asian	4.00
American Indigenous/ Alaskan Native	5.00
Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	6.00
Multiple	7.00

Table 1.3.

Key for decoding “Criminal Gender” and “Victim Gender” in Table 1.

Gender	Code
Unknown	0.00
Male	1.00
Female	2.00
Both	3.00

Figure 1.

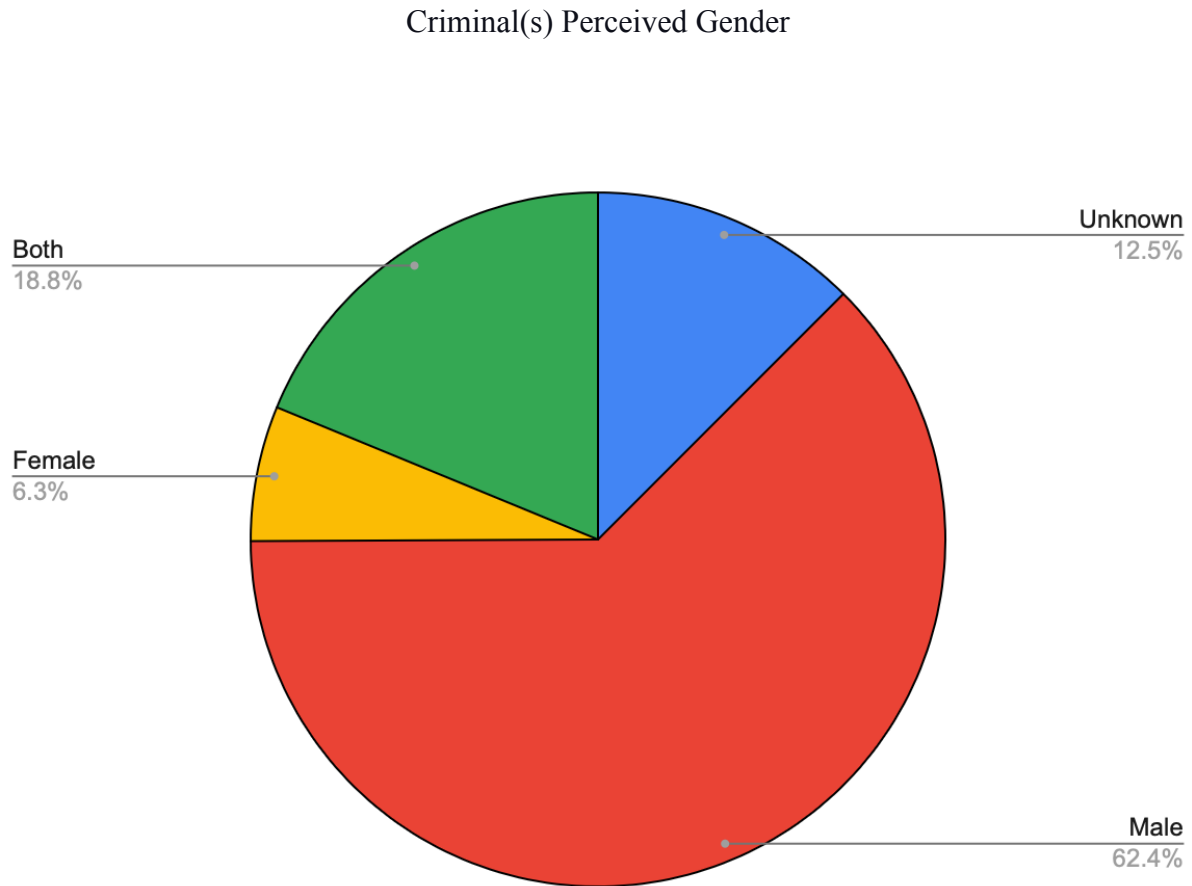


Figure 1. Comparison of criminal(s) perceived gender found in Netflix's "True Crime" category titles. Percentages reflect the individual category out of 32 analyzed titles total.

Figure 2.

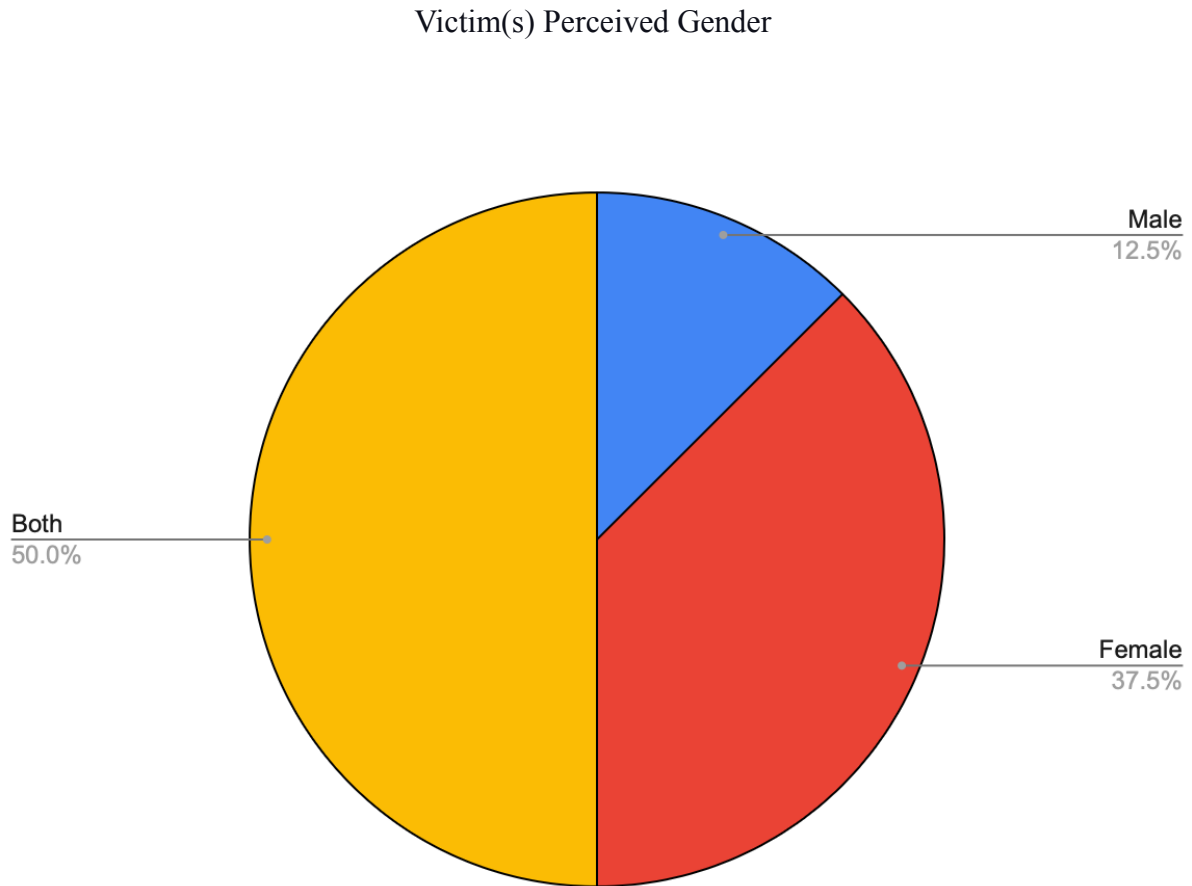


Figure 2. Comparison of victim(s) perceived gender found in Netflix's "True Crime" category titles. Percentages reflect the individual category out of 32 analyzed titles total.

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