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Kellyn N. Smith

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EASTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY

Theorizing a Continuum of Serial Killer Fandom and Fascination in our Society

Honors thesis

Submitted

In partial fulfillment

Of the

Requirements of HON 420

Spring 2022

By

Kellyn Smith

Mentored by

Dr. Carl Root

School of Justice Studies

Abstract

Interest in serial killers has become a prominent topic of discussion in the media today. The so-called serial killer fandom has been on the fringes of our society for generations. Violence and the perpetrators of violence have always been fascinating to some individuals. The advent of the internet has allowed the serial killer fandom to spread and for members to connect with each other. Over time, many forms of expression for this interest in killers has manifested.

This thesis proposes a theoretical continuum of serial killer fandom. Constructed from an ethnographic content analysis of existing literature and relevant media, this continuum includes six categories: consumers, collectors, dark tourists, correspondents, groupies, and hybristophiliacs. A description of each category is given alongside discussion of types of associated activities and the prevalence of each within the fandom. The purpose of this project is to bring more context, awareness, and understanding of the fandom to mitigate the concern and fear that surrounds it since there is little research on the topic. Our greater society questions the morality of members of the serial killer fandom, but this concern is mostly unfounded as we will see.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Literature Review.....	3
Methodology.....	8
Consumers.....	11
Collectors.....	16
Dark Tourists.....	21
Correspondents.....	25
Groupies.....	29
Hybristophiliacs.....	32
Identity and Boundaries.....	36
Discussion and Future Research.....	40
Conclusion.....	42
References.....	45

List of Illustrations

Illustration 1: Instagram post from user @spookywolves13

Illustration 2: Jeffrey Dahmer poster posted by Instagram user @thecreepfactory

Illustration 3: “Hybristophilia” drawing on Instagram by user @jessicaperner

List of Tables

Table 1: Consumers online and social media activity data

Table 2: Collectors online and social media activity data

Table 3: Dark Tourists online and social media activity data

Table 4: Correspondents online and social media activity data

Table 5: Hybristophilia online and social media activity data

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Introduction

Fandoms and fan behavior are prolific in our society. Movies such as *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter* as well as musical artists such as Harry Styles and Imagine Dragons all have exceptionally large and very well-known fandoms. These fandoms are widespread and recognized throughout mainstream media. Throughout human history, people have sought to connect with one another to share their experiences and similar interests, including some interests that are condemned or stigmatized (Smith, 2018). The internet has assisted these groups in connecting with each other. Groups who share an interest in stigmatized topics have become known as fringe fandoms (Smith, 2018). They lie on the “fringes” of society as their interests have been deemed disturbing, unusual, or strange by greater society. The serial killer fandom is one of these fringe fandoms.

In recent years, due to an increase in production and consumption of true crime podcasts, documentaries, and social media, our society has become more aware of individuals or groups that hold a particular serial killer, or multiple serial killers, as a point of fascination. This has led to other individuals, groups, and even the media questioning, “why?”. Sometimes this question is accompanied by expressions of shock,

disgust, or some degree of concern for these individuals who direct their attention to convicted killers. Many people in our society fear that such interests could cause issues down the road and question the morality and ethics of those who belong to the serial killer fandom. Some fear that such fascination could result in “copycat killers.”

While there is a lack of research on this topic, there seems to be little potential or evidence for these “fans” of serial killers to pose any more danger to society than anyone else. In fact, the fascination and fandom of serial killers is more widespread than most might think. Dr. Scott Bonn points out in his book, *Why We Love Serial Killers* (2014) that fascination with killers may even date back all the way to the 1880s with the brutal, and unsolved, murders in Whitechapel England by the killer that became known as Jack the Ripper (Bonn & Dimond, 2014). Contemporary fictional killers such as Dexter Morgan from the hit show *Dexter* and Hannibal Lecter from the film *Silence of the Lambs* illustrate popular culture engagement, and fascination, with serial murder. Likewise, non-fictional killers such as Jack the Ripper, Ted Bundy, and Jeffrey Dahmer who have become celebrities of a sort alongside sensationalized news coverage of their crimes. Both the real and imagined murderers kindle and rekindle public interest in serial killers (Bonn & Dimond 2014).

The prevalence of related content online and through various media streaming services indicates that this interest is persistent and growing. The existence of social media, online message boards, and other online space allows individuals to find others with similar interests to themselves, leading to the modern serial killer fandom we see today. The internet allows them to discuss their interest anonymously and form a new identity as an individual or a cohesive identity as a group (Smith, 2018). Common social

media platforms are widely used by participants in the serial killer fandom. At the same time, this utilization of the internet has also brought much attention to the serial killer fandom from outsiders confused and concerned about the fandom.

This fringe fandom ranges from simple interest in serial killers, and true crime, to hyper fixated hybristophiliacs, which are individuals that are sensually attracted to those who have committed crimes or are perceived as dangerous. Hybristophiliacs may have a particular serial killer at the apex of their attraction. Serial killer fascination and fandom is not itself dangerous, but instead is a continuum with different manifestations of interest. Through this theorized continuum, different manifestations of serial killer fascination will be described. Six distinct categories will be identified to explain the behaviors of members of the fandom. These six categories are: consumers, collectors, dark tourists, correspondents, groupies, and hybristophiliacs.

Literature Review

Fandom

Research into the serial killer fandom is limited to date, but more research exists into fandom more generally. Fans have been one of the most widely studied groups of media consumers and have been viewed as the ultimate active audience (Hills, 2002). Fan behavior and culture manifests in many diverse and distinct ways. They have been held by many researchers to be consumers in their primary base function. They must consume media related to their interest to gain the relevant knowledge needed to be a fan to begin with (Hills, 2002). Once this knowledge is acquired, it is then an individual becomes a fan and may begin joining communities or fandoms. Unfortunately for those individuals

considered part of a fandom, they are often stigmatized (Lamerichs, 2018). This stigma is not always directed at the point of fascination but rather at how fans express their interest.

In society, fandom may even be seen as an act of obsession or excess with fans participating in conventions over multiple days, spending hours creating costumes just like their favorite movie or video game character's outfit, or crying over actors or musicians (Lamerichs, 2018). Some fans may even be stigmatized by other members of their respective fandoms and communities for behaviors considered extreme within the group (Lamerichs, 2018). As we will see in this project, the serial killer fandom is no different in this manner than other typical fandoms. Besides the foundation of consumerism, all fandoms are defined by their differences such as the content the fandom is interested in and the unique ways that they express their interest. Now, we must investigate the serial killer fandom directly.

Identity

Identity is an important concept when analyzing fandoms. Within a fandom, there are the identities of the individuals involved but also their identity as a group. Lee et. al. describes how groups build social cohesion to engage individuals in group experiences for the construction of a collective identity and the coordination of the accepted behaviors of the group (2020). Without being able to form a collective identity, groups, communities, or fandoms would struggle to be recognized as such. This is also important for the accepted behaviors within respective groups, specifically within the serial killer fandom as we will see, because they need an identity to uphold and mold with their actions. Today, many fandoms and their activities are seen in the online world. Researchers have contextualized them in a social media setting as it allows for a cultural

flow where members of the fandoms are able to frame their language and texts from mass media to suit their own needs (Lee et. al, 2020). Social media platforms also allow users to interact with communities anonymously and with less pressure on their individual identity compared to the identity of the group they are a part of (Barnes, 2015). Since many fans experience stigma because of their perceived identity as a fan, this anonymity allows them the freedom to join a fandom without fear of judgment.

The serial killer fandom operates somewhat differently online in terms of identity and social media use compared to other fandoms. Barnes states, “The TCC (true crime community) differs from a typical online forum in that it is an affiliation of pages united around the topic of true crime.” (2015, pp. 27-28). Barnes recognizes that there are many distinct aspects of the online true crime and serial killer fandom that range in their expression or even topics but are all united in the serial killer fascination. One of the largest factors concerning the identity of the community and fandom is that while it has existed for a long time, the internet now allows for members to find a “place of their own” and connect with other members around the globe (Barnes, 2015). This ability to connect with a more formidable group of people with similar interests is a large contributing factor to members of the serial killer fandom and true crime community forming their identity and expressing their interest in killers.

Besides being able to develop their identity within their fandom, spoken and unspoken rules are in place to assist “managing” that identity as well (Spychaj, 2017). This is the idea that serial killers are “interesting” they are not “heroes” and applies to the fandom and community in general. Not only is the idea that serial killers are just points of interest and fascination and not something to be worshipped as a hero or immortalized

important to the discussion of the community, but the examination of moral boundaries and identity management explains how members within the fandom and community further express their fascination in a more socially acceptable way (Spychaj, 2017).

A Fringe Fandom

As discussed, the identity of the serial killer fandom has been aided by the internet and social media. Increased participation in the fandom has increased both curiosity and concern about the phenomenon. Scholars have referred to the serial killer fandom as a fringe fandom because of its presence on the fringes of society (Smith, 2018). While the general population might have been unaware of a fandom around killers, it has existed in the shadows for generations. In fact, the serial killer fandom seems to have existed at least as long as the recorded history of serial killers (Bonn & Dimond, 2014). Possibly even longer, however, as members of the fandom might have hidden themselves because of the stigma of their interest. The rise of social media has allowed them to connect with one another and has brought more attention to the group as it has increased in numbers (Lee et. al., 2020). This new awareness also includes interest in their activities as a group.

Activities of the Serial Killer Fandom

The different manifestations of serial killer fascination and interest are also all expressed in diverse ways. These different expressions and activities associated with the fascination and fandom of serial killers have been researched individually. For example, Barnes (2015) explains what she calls crime-tripping. Crime-tripping is the act of learning the stories of locations and places, related to crimes, and visiting those locations

because of the events that transpired there (Barnes, 2015). Thousands of teenagers and young adults alike seek out these experiences for the thrill of the unexpected and unexplained phenomena surrounding the locations they visit (Barnes, 2015). Hohenhaus (2022) likewise focused on this phenomenon of crime-tripping under the label of “dark tourism” and has compiled a guide to many popular and unknown destinations.

Hohenhaus’ online blog is composed of descriptions and photos from his own visits to the locations featured. Some included locations are crime museums, cemeteries, and specific crime ridden cities (Hohenhaus, 2022). More specific locations are discussed in the dark tourism section below.

Similarly, there is scholarly research about the collection and sale of murderabilia. Murderabilia is a type of memorabilia that is connected to a killer or even their victims. There are many individuals who collect items that were either made by a serial killer or someone connected to them, an item from their home or trial, something that was owned by a victim, or items that are otherwise connected to serial killers such as from the locations of their crimes. Denham (2020) finds that items of murderabilia have an “aura” from their history that makes them valuable to collectors of murderabilia. He also found that many collectors seek out original items owned or created directly by a serial killer. Denham explains, “They are the items to which collectors aspire, with the highest associated value, but that represent the most expensive and unattainable as well.” (2020, p. 337). Meaning that the items that are most intimately connected to the serial killer of interest are the items that have the most value to these collectors. The sale and collection of murderabilia has also been linked to the theory of “wound culture” in other literature (Schmid, 2004). Wound culture refers to what its name suggests, a fascination with torn

and open bodies or persons because of the shock and trauma of the “wound” (Schmid, 2004). Indeed, murderabilia itself and the collection of it is shocking to most people.

As we can see, there is some scholarly literature pertaining to the individual categories included in this project. However, very little connection has been made between them as proposed here in a theorized continuum. Additionally, there are holes in relevant literature as to membership in the serial killer fandom and some of the other ways that these fans exhibit their interest. This research hopes to begin making some of these connections.

Methodology

As there is a lack of data from research about the functioning of the serial killer fandom, data must be gathered from the source. The research within this project is qualitative in nature with some statistical support. The fandom and its members are highly active on social media platforms across the world wide web, and it is the internet that has been so instrumental to the formation of the fandom. Because of this, it is important to analyze their interactions on social media. The sites that they actively use include Reddit, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and Tumblr as well as specialized and obscure websites that cater only to members of the serial killer fandom or those interested in it. These social media platforms will be searched for posts created by members of the serial killer and true crime community.

Sample

For this project, numerous online domains and social media platforms were identified as having active users in the serial killer fandom. Keywords such as “serial

killer”, “serial killer fans”, and “true crime” were used to source the initial findings. Purposive sampling initially identified countless websites, articles, videos, forums, and social posts relating to the topic. As social media use is common in today’s world, individual searches were completed on each platform to narrow the results to manageable numbers. Because of this, Reddit, Instagram, and TikTok were selected as the primary sources of fan interactions and postings as the communities within these social platforms have easily seen data on membership and are public. Additional sites, accounts, forums, and posts were found through the initial sampling. The database for this project ultimately consists of the three previously mentioned social media platforms with countless user posts, comments, forums, blogs, and otherwise unique contributions that are so widespread across the internet and diverse that it is impossible to condense them all to statistical findings.

Analysis

Specifically, for this project, interactions on Reddit, Instagram, and TikTok were analyzed to show the prevalence of the fandom, the interactions they have with each other, and their individual behaviors, activities, and ideas. These forums, comment sections, videos, and user interactions show individual expression of members within the serial killer fandom and true crime community. Canet (2019) provides clear research and analysis on using digital technology, such as videos and films, to complement research and also establishes that research videos and online video journals are emerging as a new scholarly form. While the videos themselves may not be seen in this project, their content may still be analyzed throughout. Gathering real examples of the postings and interactions of members of these communities further describes how fascination with

serial killers can be manifested. This data is analyzed alongside secondary scholarly and journalistic work pertaining to the various types of fascination shown by the members of the fandom.

To analyze and organize data from such documents and literature, an ethnographic content analysis method will be used. Ethnographic content analysis has been defined by Altheide and Schneider (2013) as a reflexive analysis of documents and has been recognized and utilized as a distinct method for research in the social sciences. This method is not only important to the analysis of scholarly literature, but also to analyzing the social media activity for this project. Being immersed in the interactions, behaviors, contexts, and the world of the subject matter so to speak is crucial to ethnographic research (Altheide & Schneider, 2013).

The focus of this analysis, as described by Altheide's ethnographic content analysis, is discovery and description of contexts, identifying underlying meanings, discovering patterns, and analyzing processes rather than emphasizing quantity or numerical relationships between variables (SAGE, 2012). To implement an ethnographic content analysis, Altheide has identified the steps required for a successful study. These steps include: pursuing a specific problem and becoming familiar with the process and context of information sources, exploring possible sources for information on the problem, becoming acquainted with several examples of relevant sources noting their format, selecting a unit of analysis for each source, listing multiple items or categories to guide data collection and draft a protocol, collecting from several sources to test the protocol, and selecting additional cases to revise and refine the protocol (SAGE, 2012).

Application of these steps to the data collected and analyzed for this study informed the continuum of serial killer fascination and fandom described in-depth below.

The Continuum

Consumers

Consumers within the serial killer fandom seek out information about serial killers or their crimes. Many have become interested in the topic of serial killers because of sensationalized and stereotypical depictions and coverage of killers by news and entertainment media (Bonn, 2014). They have not created this fascination themselves but have been conditioned by the media and continue to look further into the idea of serial killers. These fans may also be considered the “normal” expression of interest in serial killers and true crime as consumers of true crime media. This is likely because they are the most prevalent group of serial killer “fans” in society and are also consequently the most prevalent voices.

Consumers are individuals who enjoy watching true crime documentaries on television, listening to podcasts, or reading books about crimes and killers. Although they are still considered deviant as a subculture of the greater society, they have come together within a fandom to share their fascination with each other (Broll, 2020). These members of the fandom widely use social media as a main conduit of interaction, to share and discuss such topics and related media. It is this access to social media that has become a necessary part of forming identity, community, and cohesiveness for the serial killer fandom and consumers (Lee et al, 2020). This group of individuals has also only become more active on social media outlets over time. This activity has led to substantial amounts

of posts and interactions among the serial killer fandom to be seen on many social media platforms.

The subReddit, as the online forums are called, r/serialkillers on the social forum platform Reddit has over 548,000 members as of April 2022. The forum was created on January 13, 2011. The forum states that it was created for discussions, news, and updates concerning serial killers and every post must be related to a serial killer (r/serialkillers, 2011). There are not many other restraints to the content that can be posted but the subReddit does ban any glorification of serial murder or serial killers and does not allow promotion of merchandise related to serial murder or serial killers (r/serialkillers, 2011). Meaning, this subreddit is meant for more neutral fascination of serial killers and subsequent discussions related to killers and their crimes. Reddit is also home to other forums dedicated to true crime and individual serial killers.

The subReddit r/zodiackiller, dedicated to the serial killer known by the same name, has 60,900 members as of April 2022 and was created on August 13, 2009. The r/truecrimediscussion subreddit has 333,500 members as of April 2022 and was created on June 29, 2015. The forum welcomes any topic related to true crime, serial killers, and unsolved cases (r/truecrimediscussion, 2015). Similarly, r/truecrime has over 732,300 members as of April 2022 and was created on October 18, 2010. Beyond these subreddits, Reddit is home to countless other forums dedicated to serial killers, specific serial killers, and true crime in general. There are even subReddits dedicated to other fan outlets for the topics such as forums dedicated to serial killer podcasts, books, user created art or memes, and television shows.

Besides Reddit, the social short video sharing platform TikTok has quickly taken off as one of the most popular platforms for internet users. Consequently, the serial killer fandom has also begun utilizing the platform. The hashtag #serialkillers on TikTok has 531 million views across the videos posted with the tag as of April 2022. The top video under the hashtag, as of this writing, was posted by user @caughtpodcast on July 13, 2021, and focuses on Corrina Smith who was convicted of murder in England (Ransom, 2021). The video has 21.2 million views, 4.2 million likes, and 98,400 shares as of April 2022 (Ransom, 2021). The user has the comments turned off on the video for an unknown reason. Another hashtag, #serialkiller, has 2.6 billion views in total as of April 2022. The top video under the tag was posted by @districtsun on July 28, 2021. The video has 23.4 million views, 4.1 million likes, 41,000 thousand comments, and 75,600 thousand shares as of April 2022. The video is a compilation of quotes from killers Ted Bundy, Richard Ramirez, and Charles Manson that brings a little dark humor to the topic of serial killers by adding emoji subtitles to a video of Manson dancing in court.

While TikTok has quick and short videos, longer videos can be found on the video sharing site YouTube. YouTube.com is a treasure trove of user created and sponsored content. Anyone can create their own channel and begin posting videos. There are many videos and channels within the serial killer fandom on the platform posted by individuals and companies. These videos and channels can be found with any relevant search on the website. One such channel, the channel Bailey Sarian, titled after herself, has 6.26 million subscribers. She is known for her videos where she applies makeup while telling true crime, murder, mystery, and serial killer stories. On her channel, Sarian has a playlist entitled “Murder, Mystery, and Makeup” that has 113 videos with 447 total

videos on her channel as of April 2022. Her most popular video on the channel, “Jeffrey Dahmer. Inside His Messed Up Mind & How He Almost Got Away. Mystery & Makeup | Bailey Sarian” was posted on February 17, 2020, and has 21 million views, 311,000 likes, and 17,500 comments as of April 2022. This is just one example of a large and heavily viewed channel on the platform with videos pertaining to serial killers and their stories.

Instagram is another social media platform where users can share photos and short videos of their lives and interests. Within the serial killer fandom and true crime community, the hashtag #serialkillers has 357,000 posts as of April 2022. A recent post from user @spookywolves13 shows a sign that says, “my Netflix history makes it look like I’m studying to become a murderer” (Illustration 1) and is captioned by the user, “Yes... studying” (2022). The post is an example of the dark humor that some members of the fandom share. Other threads on Instagram include the hashtag #truecrime that has over 1 million posts and another hashtag, #truecrimecommunity, that has 309,000 posts as of April 2022. Serial killer fandom members use the platform, these hashtags, and other hashtags like them to post art that they have created, places they have visited, and discussions of other material related to serial killers.

As we can see, consumers of serial killers use these social platforms to connect with each other. The content they post can be informational and educational while posts from others are memes or funny posts meant to lighten the mood. The fandom members also rely on these platforms to hold discussions with each other to share thoughts on killers, their crimes, or other serial killer related media such as podcasts. The member, view count, and post counts for consumers can all be seen in Table 1 below.

Illustration 1. Instagram post from user @spookywolves13

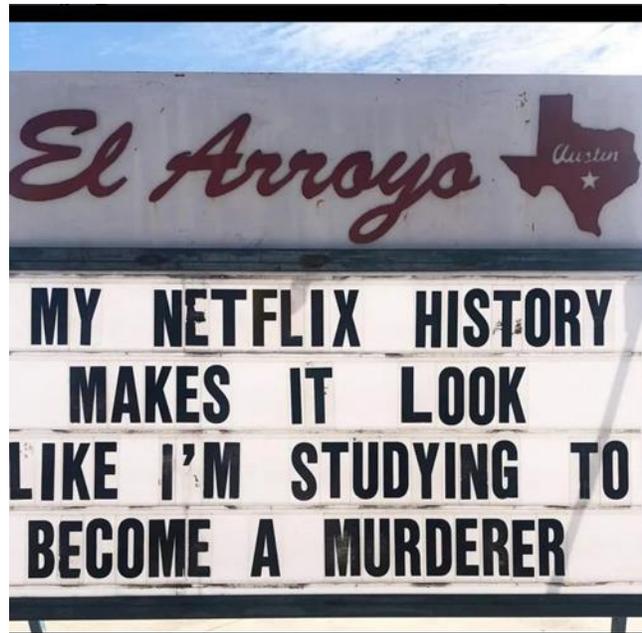


Table 1. Consumers online and social media activity data.

Platform	Community	Users
Reddit	r/serialkillers	Approx. 548.0 thousand members
Reddit	r/truecrimediscussion	Approx. 333.5 thousand members
Reddit	r/truecrime	Approx. 732.3 thousand members
Instagram	#Serialkillers	Approx. 357.0 thousand posts
Instagram	#Truecrime	Approx. 1.0 million posts
Instagram	#Truecrimecommunity	Approx. 309.0 thousand posts
YouTube	Bailey Sarian: Murder, Mystery, and Makeup	Approx. 6.26 million subscribers
TikTok	#Serialkillers	Approx. 531.0 million views
TikTok	#Serialkiller	Approx. 2.6 billion views

Collectors

Collectors within the serial killer fandom are individuals who search for memorabilia, known as murderabilia within the fandom and market, which is connected to serial killers. These are items that are not ordinary or common and have their value because of their relation or connection to notorious crimes or criminals (Binik, 2020). There are many fandom members that look for pieces of murderabilia to buy, sell, and trade with others that have the same interest. Denham (2020) describes this interest as an individuals want to get close to items with a specific aura to have an authentic experience in connection with the item or the person it relates to. For some, collecting murderabilia may point to fascination with crime and criminals and a search for meaning and intense emotions through an object (Binik, 2020). Certainly, this means that many collectors seek original objects of murderabilia, but besides these genuine items, there is also a large market within murderabilia for reproductions of items as the originals are difficult to find or are more expensive. In fact, the term of murderabilia covers any item created or owned directly by a serial killer, items related to notorious crimes (Hurley, 2009), and items that otherwise reference serial killers such as graphic T-shirts and board games (Binik, 2020). Many serial killer fandom members are not shy to ask others about their personal murderabilia collections or their opinions on someone else's collection on social media platforms.

Many Reddit users have begun discussions about murderabilia across different forums. One user, u/TheyROutThere_75, posted in the subReddit r/SerialKillers on October 27, 2021, asking other users what they thought about murderabilia. There are 41 comments in the thread and the post has 25 upvotes, or likes, as of April 2022

(u/TheyROutThere_75, 2021). Most of the comments were from users who did not mind the idea such as user u/jplay17 on the thread who explained that they did not care if people collected murderabilia, as long as they did not glorify the killer, and even mentioned they would like to see an item that a serial killer owned for themselves (u/TheyROutThere_75, 2021). However, some other users were less sympathetic to the idea. One user, u/DoUliekChickenz, simply said, “It’s creepy and glorifies these monsters as if they were idols to be fawned over.” (u/TheyROutThere_75, 2021). This shows that even within those in the fandom, there are still debates on what is acceptable or not.

Another Reddit user, u/FreshAd3637, posted in r/TrueCrime November 29, 2021, asking other users their opinion of murderabilia. The post as 67 upvotes and 61 comments of April 2022 (u/FreshAd3637, 2021). This post also spurred a debate among the members in the comments. User u/MissSarahLee approached the topic by encouraging individuals to consider how the victims or their families would feel about people buying an item from the crime scene or from the killer (u/FreshAd3637, 2021). User u/er_flair was much more neutral on the topic by saying that they thought murderabilia was interesting and belonged in a museum however, collecting it and keeping it at home seemed odd to them (u/FreshAd3637). These are only a few examples of the discussions that can be found across many different serial killer and true crime Reddit forums.

Other members of the fandom have reached out on other social media platforms to learn and see more about murderabilia. The hashtag #Murderabilia on Instagram has 11,200 posts as of April 2022. One of the top posts under the hashtag was posted by @thecreepfactory on July 12, 2020. The post is a photo of a poster featuring Jeffrey

Dahmer (Illustration 2) and has 113 likes and 2 comments as of April 2022 (thecreepfactory, 2020). On TikTok, the hashtag #Murderabilia has a total of 594,600 views as of April 2022. Josh Schultz's account @thawikidone, which has 59,500 followers and 440,500 likes as of April 2022, has several videos under the hashtag showing off pieces of their true crime collection (Schultz, 2021). Schultz video highlights a piece of killer Bob Berdella's "torture bed" that he keeps behind glass. Other hashtags that are a play off murderabilia also have high view counts. The hashtag #murderabilla, with an extra L to avoid criticisms associated with #murderabilia, has 1.2 million views as of April 2022.

Besides sharing their collections on social media, collectors in the fandom have also looked to many online sources for acquiring murderabilia for years. It is not common to have such items available in physical stores near collectors, so they look to online shops. Murderabilia originals and reproductions were banned from the online shopping marketplace Ebay in 2001 and consequently sellers had to find new domains to list and buy their murderabilia (Binik, 2020). This has led to the creation of many online store and auction houses specifically for the purpose of buying and selling murderabilia. A quick internet search for murderabilia is answered by pages of results with many retailers and shops. Some of the biggest websites for the murderabilia market include *Serialkillersink*, *Murderauction*, and *Supernaught* (Binik, 2020). There are many more than this, but we will look deeper into *murderauction.com* as a relevant case study.

MurderAuction.com is a site dedicated to the selling of items claimed to be connected to serial killers and other criminals. The site acknowledges that the items marketed on the site are not welcome in all places, "We aim to serve those with an

interest in objects not usual or sometimes ‘safe’ to the world of common collecting.” (Murder Auction, n.d.). The site was created in January 2005 and claims to be the first of its kind as well as the leading true crime memorabilia auction house (Murder Auction, n.d.). The auctions and listings are separated by categories on the website. There are 38 total categories such as “letters” with 4,600 listings, “artwork” with 3,400 listings, “autographs” with 4,500 listings, and “crafts” with 421 listings as of this writing. The listed auctions are constantly changing as auctions end and new ones start in their places. Many of the listed auctions claim to be original murderabilia items while others are copies of the originals. A count of views, posts, and auctions related to the activities of collectors can be found in Table 2 below.

To further explain how prolific the collection of murderabilia has been in our society, it is also important to discuss a set of laws known as the Son of Sam laws. In response to the rise of selling and buying of murderabilia, as well as books and movies made about criminals, laws were created to keep these criminals from profiting from their crimes. The first such law was enacted in 1977 after serial killer David Berkowitz, known as Son of Sam, sold the rights to his story to media outlets (Thomas, 2009). Thus, allowing the story of his crimes to be produced and sold on mainstream markets. The purpose of these laws, created in response to Berkowitz, was to prevent killers and criminals from profiting from their crimes through commercial productions such as books, movies, and television shows (Thomas, 2009).

The initial law enacted in 1977, by New York legislature, also established that the monetary earnings from such ventures would be given to the victims of the crimes and their families (Thomas, 2009). Even though the law was named after Berkowitz, it was

never used against him as the law stated that it applied to convicted individuals, but Berkowitz was found incompetent to stand trial and consequently was never convicted (Hurley, 2009). That first Son of Sam law, and many that followed it, were also deemed unconstitutional on the grounds of the first amendment (Hurley, 2009). Because of this, different versions of the law have been created through the years in attempts to create unmovable legislature. In 2012, 40 states had Son of Sam related laws in place although they were continually ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court (Hudson, 2012). To avoid violation of previous legislature and court decisions, new laws prohibiting criminals from profiting from their crimes must be extremely specific and cannot solely target proceeds from expressive activity related to crimes while ignoring other assets the offender might benefit from (Hudson, 2012; US Department of Justice, 2020). This is to ensure that no arbitrariness is created by the laws and their enforcement.

Illustration 2. Jeffrey Dahmer poster posted on Instagram by user @thecreepfactory



Table 2. Collectors online and social media data.

Platform	Community	Users
MurderAuction.com	Auction listings	Thousands of active auctions
Instagram	#Murderabilia	Approx. 11.2 thousand posts
TikTok	#Murderabilia	Approx. 594.6 thousand views
TikTok	#Murderabilia	Approx. 1.2 million views

Dark Tourists

Dark tourism has become a niche form of tourism in our society based on the stories of events at the locations visited. Those who visit these locations have become known as dark tourists. Locations of dark tourism are those with a veil of mystery covering the place itself or where strange phenomena and unusual events took place (Puhle & Parker, 2021). Many of these places are surrounded by folklore, legends, or stories of the paranormal. Another definition of dark tourism is, “tourism involving locations associated with death and great suffering” (Gibson, 2006). While this sounds grim and “dark,” some locations also have deeper meanings to certain groups who visit them that may not be all bad. Dark tourism trips are also considered to be educational and part of what is called heritage tourism of the dark side of human history (Hohenhaus, 2022). Indeed, locations of dark tourism often have long, and eccentric histories associated with them.

Throughout history, many sites of dark tourism have had a basis in religion and holy sites that warranted pilgrimages by those who believed in them (Puhle & Parker, 2021). These religious sites may even hold hope for those who make the pilgrimage to

them. Recently, dark tourism has come to be strongly associated with serial killers and true crime enthusiasts as well as paranormal investigators. Many towns and communities have suffered losses to their tourism and business industries due to serial killings committed in or near them, however, in some cases, this loss has been offset by tourism associated with the serial killings (Gibson, 2006). Meaning that while the more traditional modes of tourism declined, dark tourism quickly took its place. Some of these dark tourism outlets are advertised widely, much like mainstream tourist attractions. One example is the Cream City Cannibal Tour in Milwaukee, Wisconsin that discusses the crimes of Jeffrey Dahmer while touring the city where he committed some of his crimes (Hintz, 2021). Other locations can only be found through specific sources such as blogs created and run by other dark tourists, online videos, and online social media and forum posts some of which are discussed below.

Barnes (2015) connects this tourism with legend tripping, or in this case what is explained as crime-tripping, which involves the telling of legends and stories of what happened at specific locations on the journey to them. Dark tourists within the serial killer fandom can then be called crime trippers. Often these crime trippers will learn about the story of serial killer locations before they venture to them to fully experience what it means to be in those places. Barnes (2015) took a personal trip to a site in Utah that the serial killer Ted Bundy frequented. That same location is now said to possibly still be the site where bodies of a few of Bundy's victims are still buried. Barnes also explains that crime-tripping can be done alone or in groups and besides visiting the physical locations, it is also now possible to crime-trip on the internet through virtual

renditions of the real places. Many crime-trippers or dark tourists also share their experiences on the internet.

While discussing the analysis of social media platforms and examples of dark tourists, it is important to note again that dark tourism is not reserved for the serial killer fandom alone, but it covers multiple different topics.

The dark tourism discussion on Reddit is widespread. Users can be found referencing dark tourism among any number of subReddits. There is one subReddit forum that is devoted to dark tourism. Created April 29, 2014, the r/darktourism subReddit is home to 1,400 members. Dark tourists are also active on TikTok. The hashtag #darktourism on TikTok has 38.5 million views as of April 2022. Users share short videos from their visits to crime scenes or known “dark” locations that have connections to crime, criminals, and fictional crimes through hashtags such as this one. The hashtag #darktourist has approximately 26.3 million views as of April 2022. One of the top videos under the hashtag shares the grave of Mary Meinert, in Marietta, Georgia, who has turned into a local legend. The video was posted November 23, 2021, by user @blairbathroy and has 238,200 likes, 1028 comments, 946 shares, and 982,400 thousand views as of April 2022 (Bathory, 2021). Another video by the same user is a compilation of true crime sites that they have visited including Jeffrey Dahmer’s childhood home and H.H. Holmes’ “Murder Castle”. The video was posted March 19, 2022 and has 13,700 likes and 186 comments as of April 2022 (Bathory, 2022).

Instagram is another social media platform that dark tourists frequent. The hashtag #darktourism on Instagram has 56,700 posts as of April 2022. Users share images from places such as Chernobyl, abandoned prisons, and dark museums. One post,

by user @connecticut_murder_lady, shows the grave of Elizabeth Short who became known as the Black Dahlia and is still a discussed unsolved murder (2022). The photo was posted April 23, 2022 and has 31 likes as of April 2022. The hashtag #darktourist has 11,500 posts as of April 2022.

Alongside social media activity, there are independent sites that dark tourists use such as the blogs to learn about more dark tourism locations. One such website is dark-tourism.com. This website includes dark tourism locations separated and organized by country including the Museum of Death in Los Angeles that contains many items pertaining to serial killers and the infamous Alcatraz prison. The creator of the site, Peter Hohenhaus, writes all the descriptions for the locations himself. Any of the photos found on the website were also taken by him during his personal visits to the locations. The locations featured on Hohenhaus' site range from the location of 9/11 in New York to the West Virginia Penitentiary and countless other locations in the US and other countries (Hohenhaus, 2022). Hohenhaus' site is a fitting example of the blogs mentioned previously that assist other dark tourists in their travels. Other examples of easy to find dark tourism aids are internet articles such as, "10 Great Places to Visit for Dark Tourism" by the media company The Richest. Table 3 summarizes some of the online activities of dark tourists.

Table 3. Dark tourists online and social media activity

Platform	Community	Users
Reddit	r/darktourism	Approx. 1.4 thousand members
Instagram	#Darktourism	Approx. 56.7 thousand posts
Instagram	#Darktourist	Approx. 11.5 thousand posts

TikTok	#Darktourism	Approx. 38.5 million views
TikTok	#Darktourist	Approx. 26.3 million views

Correspondents

In the serial killer fandom, some individuals seek to connect with killers and criminals in a personal way. Correspondents converse with serial killers while they are serving their sentence in prison. Truly little scholarly research exists on these individuals. Nevertheless, they are very present and active in our society. Writer Sheila Isenberg in the documentary *In Love with a Killer* explains why individuals might write to imprisoned pen pals. She compares the phenomenon to the Knights of the Round Table in that these prisoners put their correspondents or pen pals, usually women, on pedestals and give them unending attention since they have little else to devote their time to while in prison (Fournet & Schmitt, 2012). This makes the correspondents feel enthusiastic about conversing for and with their convicted pen pal.

Similarly, *Psychology Today* discusses prison pen pals and how potentially violent inmates tell their pen pals how lonely they are and that their pen pal gives them a friend (Ramsland, 2018). Besides handwriting letters to pen pals, some correspondents also get phone time for telephone calls, send emails, and in some cases, correspondents may also visit the prisons their pen pal is housed in to meet them in person. Christopher Duett writes in an article for *Vice* that he would send money to pen pals in prison for postage and phone time (2014). Misty, a fan described in the documentary *In Love with a Killer*, discusses what it was like to meet convicted serial killer Richard Ramirez in person after he asked her to visit him once they had sent many letters to each other

(Fournet & Schmitt, 2012). An app, called JPay, was also created in 2006 that partners with institutions in 35 states that allows prisoners to make money transfers, use email, and have video visitations (Isenberg, 2021). The correspondence can range from offering support to the offender while they are imprisoned, contacting them for research purposes or morbid curiosity, to love letters or fan mail from the correspondent to the offender. There have been cases where this interest is reciprocal. Doreen Lioy is another famous, or infamous, pen pal who wrote love letters to Richard Ramirez, the serial killer known as “the Night Stalker.” Lioy and Ramirez were eventually married (Margaritoff, 2021). Innovations in technology have created new ways for correspondents to connect with incarcerated individuals of interest, including but not limited to, serial killers.

Many independent websites have been created to aid potential correspondents in finding an offender they want to connect with. Some of these sites are writeaprisoner.com, prisonpenpals.com, inmate-connection.com, and many others that can be found with a quick Google search. It is quite easy for individuals to find these websites. Many are set up like popular dating apps. Profiles are created for offenders that include their photo, their demographics, and may include some of their interests and other information about them. Potential correspondents can browse these profiles and connect with multiple offenders if they choose to. The online domain WriteAPrisoner (2022) was created in 2000 and posts profiles of inmates looking for a pen pal. The Website states that, “Inmates have been turning to WriteAPrisoner.com since its inception in 2000 to find mentors, legal aid, educational opportunities, employment upon release, counseling, housing options, and so much more.” (WriteAPrisoner, 2022). The site also claims to have worked with millions of people since their start by creating and listing inmate

profiles (WriteAPrisoner, 2022). The website is limited to those 18 years old or older but does not say how it ensures users are of age. Besides connecting correspondents with inmates, the website also hosts forums that have thousands of topics and comments from pen pals that use the site.

Correspondents also connect with each other on social media platforms for advice, tips, and sharing their own stories with writing to prison pen pals and visiting them. Reddit is home to the forum subReddit of r/prisonpenpals. The community was created April 19, 2015 and has 884 members as of April 2022. The “about” box on the subReddit’s page describes it as a place to find a prison pen pal, share experiences, and share tips on how to be a better pen pal (r/prisonpenpals, 2015). The forum also explains that they do not condone the actions of their pen pals but rather, “acknowledge that they are paying their debt to society and need someone on the outside who will treat them with respect.” (r/prisonpenpals, 2015). Members of the community share websites where they can connect with prisoners through a pen pal system and assist each other in finding pen pals.

TikTok has also become a hub for prison pen pal and correspondent discussion and sharing. The hashtag #writeaprisoner has a total of 457.5 million views amongst all the videos posted under the hashtag as of April 2022. Similarly, the hashtag #writetoaprisoner has another 11.2 million views in total between the videos posted under it as of April 2022. Both hashtags have seemingly adopted Britney Spears’ song “Criminal” as their anthem as a multitude of the videos posted using one or both hashtags use the song. The TikTok sound has 590,800 videos that use the song as of April 2022.

Instagram is another social media platform used by correspondents. The hashtag on Instagram #prisonpenpals^tm has 174 posts as of April 2022. The hashtag #prisonpenpalswanted has 549 posts as of April 2022 and highlights many posts of inmates that are looking for a pen pal. The hashtag #prisonpenpals has approximately 8,800 posts as of April 2022. Many users use the hashtag to share their stories of writing to a pen pal in prison. There are also numerous accounts on Instagram that pertain to prison pen pals. One account, @prisonpenpals wanted, has 58 posts and 328 followers as of April 2022. The account posts pictures and descriptions of inmates looking for a pen pal and invites other users to connect with them.

YouTube is a method that pen pals use to create longer videos for others to view. These videos may offer advice on finding and talking to a pen pal or may also be testimonials that current or former correspondents use to share their experiences writing to prisoners. A channel on YouTube called Lipstick Lullabies posted a video on March 6, 2020, titled “Writing to Prisoners: How to Do it Safely” after other videos they posted of their experience writing to inmates gained attention. The video has 38,000 views, 716 likes, and 286 comments as of April 2022 (Sterling, 2020). In the video, the user gives viewers tips on how to connect with a prison pen pal and advice on how to interact with them safely. The channel Lipstick Lullabies has just over 2,000 subscribers as of April 2022 (Sterling, 2017).

Using the search function on YouTube brings up countless other videos of firsthand experiences with prison pen pals, tips or advice, and other videos on how to find and communicate with a pen pal that is in prison. In a BuzzFeed video on YouTube, a woman shares her story of falling in love with a pen pal that was in prison (Buzzfeed,

2020). The video was posted on May 10, 2020, and has 118,700 views, 3.1 thousand likes, and 236 comments as of April 2022. See Table 4 for a summary of pen pal activities.

Table 4. Correspondents online and social media data.

Platform	Community	Users
Reddit	r/prisonpenpals	Approx. 884 members
TikTok	#Writeaprisoner	Approx. 457.5 million views
TikTok	#Writetoaprisoner	Approx. 11.2 million views
Instagram	#Prisonpenpals	Approx. 8.8 thousand posts
Facebook	Public group PRISON PEN PALS	Approx. 8.4 thousand members
Write a Prisoner.com	Inmate profiles	Claims to have served millions of individuals

Groupies

The Merriam-Webster dictionary gives two different definitions of the word groupie. It is a noun that describes one, “a fan of a rock group who usually follows the group around on concert tours”, two, “an admirer of a celebrity who attends as many of his or her public appearances as possible” and is also synonymous with enthusiast and aficionado (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Groupies in the serial killer fandom are individuals that are heavily fascinated either by a serial killer themselves or the crimes they committed. They look to get into close, physical proximity with serial killers such as being in the court room during the killer’s trial and visiting the prisons the killers serve their sentences at once convicted.

Many of these groupies are women who find the serial killers attractive such as in the cases of Ted Bundy and Richard Ramirez who each had flocks of women present at

their trials just to get a glimpse of the killers in person. Ted Bundy is one of the most famous serial killers in our society and was known for his charm and wits in court while the court was filled with “Ted Groupies,” women who wanted to see this killer for themselves (Bentham, 2015). While these groups have been seen on the news, there is little existing research on these serial killer groupies. Sheila Isenberg writes that the police, attorneys, and prison officials are very familiar with groupies yet very few have investigated this phenomenon or the motives of groupies (Isenberg, 2021). Despite this, serial killer and prison groupies and their activities can clearly be seen in the media and online.

As mentioned previously, groupies have been the center of many news stories and reports over the years. YouTube has become a place to find many of these recordings as it is a large video sharing website. A clip from CBS news in the 1970s was uploaded by ArchiveNewsFootage that shows interviews with Ted Bundy groupies. Many of the spectators in the court were women around the same age of the Florida sorority girls that Bundy was on trial for killing (ArchiveNewsFootage, 2015). In the interviews with several of the women, many mentioned being afraid of Bundy, yet they were still fascinated with him for reasons unknown even to themselves (ArchiveNewsFootage, 2015). One of the interviewees did say that she did not think he looked like a killer, and she was not afraid of him (ArchiveNewsFootage, 2015). These women, and many others continued to follow Bundy’s trial very closely.

Another video posted by KRON 4 news YouTube channel shows the 1990 trial of “the Night Stalker,” Richard Ramirez. Several women are interviewed and say that they wanted to be in the courtroom to see Ramirez in person, several saying they thought he

was cute (KRON 4, 2013). The news reporter even says that these women stalk Ramirez, a play on his nickname, any time they can get near him (KRON 4, 2013). A more recent example of this phenomenon was posted by *Inside Edition*. In the news story, the daughter, Kerri Rawson, of serial killer BTK (Bind Torture Kill), Dennis Rader, describes how her father's groupies have begun contacting her on his behalf (Inside Edition, 2022). Kerri cut off all contact with her father once he was convicted of killing ten people in 2005 and consequently, his groupies have begun contacting her explaining that he would like to speak with her (Inside Edition, 2022). This also shows the commitment that some groupies have for the central figure of their interest.

The documentary discussed in the section on correspondents, *In Love with a Killer*, also shows examples of groupies. The documentary delves into the stories of three individual women and one man who all became fascinated with a killer. Going beyond their days as groupies, these individuals eventually began relationships with the killers they are interested in (Fournet & Schmitt, 2012). James Whitehouse even married Susan Atkins, a member of Charles Manson's group the Manson family, and would go on to get his law degree to attempt to assist Atkins in her appeals and get her approved for parole (Fournet & Schmitt, 2012). His efforts were unsuccessful, however, and Atkins died in prison in 2013.

Whitehouse is only one groupie who has married a killer. Carole Ann Boone famously attended Ted Bundy's trial and was very outspoken about her feelings for him (Kuroski, 2021). Boone ended up marrying Bundy while he was still on trial and after he was convicted and placed on death row, they conceived a child together (Kuroski, 2021). Another instance of a groupie who married a serial killer is Doreen Liroy, also mentioned

above in the section on correspondents. Besides writing letters to Richard Ramirez, she also visited him in prison where they eventually got married (Margaritoff, 2021). These are only a few of the more prominent instances of groupies and their subsequent marriages to convicted killers.

Besides these news clips, other videos, and specific stories of groupies, groupies are much more difficult to find through social media. There are no large groups of these individuals that can be found online, at least for those who are on the outside and are not current serial killer groupies. Because of this, significant data on their social media activities was not able to be collected. However, this may also show more about their behavior and the way that their interest is expressed. Groupies may be less inclined to look for others with the same interests as they are more so focused on following and staying up to date with the serial killer with which they are fascinated. Certainly, there is potential for further research on serial killer and prison groupies, how they interact with killers, and how they interact with each other. Most of what exists, to date, is journalistic in nature, often sensationalist and seldom, if ever, approached scientifically or with an attempt towards objectivity.

Hybristophiliacs

Amongst those fascinated by serial killers, there are those who are also attracted to them. The American Psychological Association defines hybristophilia as, “[a] sexual interest in and attraction to those who commit crimes. In some cases, this may be directed toward people in prison for various types of criminal activities.” (American Psychological Association, n.d.). It is a recent vocabulary word that has yet to be included in many dictionaries (Dimond, 2019). For many, hybristophilia may seem quite

outrageous, but it has also become known as Bonnie and Clyde syndrome in the media because it is a psychological occurrence and paraphilia (Dimond, 2019). People who are hybristophiliacs do not simply choose to be attracted to dangerous individuals, there are psychological reasons for why this attraction arises. This attraction also leads to many relationships between convicted criminals and a partner on the outside of the prison. These relationships are much more common than the public may be aware of and there are many in the criminal justice system who acknowledge that they exist (Isenberg, 2021).

It is also easy to see overlap within this project, particularly the sections on correspondents and groupies, that numerous individuals, male and female, have relationships with a partner that is currently incarcerated. The examples of Carol Ann Boone, Doreen Lioy, and James Whitehouse are, again, famous examples of prison relationships that lead to marriage amongst these individuals. That is not to say that any of these three examples are confirmed hybristophiliacs. Carol Ann Boone and Doreen Lioy both famously insisted that their partners, Ted Bundy and Richard Ramirez respectively, were innocent of the crimes they were convicted of or at least did not deserve to be convicted of them (Kurosaki, 2021; Margaritoff, 2021). Whether the motives for their claims were purely out of love or perhaps a symptom of a hybristophilic tendency, further research, out of the scope of this project, would need to be conducted as little research exists on the topic of hybristophilia in general. Moreover, many more of these relationships and hybristophilic individuals can be found in online communities.

These hybristophiliacs are regularly active on social media, specifically Reddit. This could be because they are unlikely to find individuals near them that share their

affinity for serial killers or fear of being viewed as an outcast in their community for their attraction as many users confide anonymously online. The subReddit forum on Reddit r/hybristophilia boasts a membership of 1,900 users as of April 2022. The forum was created on June 17, 2013 and is now a place of discussion and security for its members (r/hybristophilia, 2013). The subReddit administrators describe it as a “judgment free zone” for those who want to share their experiences with Hybristophilia or those who want to learn more (r/hybristophilia, 2013).

The Hybristophilia Wikipedia page and other articles are also linked on the group’s page for ease of access for users who visit the subReddit. Members of the forum use it to share their own experiences with hybristophilia, discuss their favorite serial killer, and even to voice concern over their own attraction to killers. Some of these users have one particular killer at the epicenter of their interest while others are more generally attracted to the danger of serial killers and even rank or list their serial killer “crushes” throughout posts and discussion in r/hybristophilia. In a post by u/roommate213, the user lists out their favorite killers, so to speak, by their hands. The user mentioned Ted Bundy, Richard Ramirez, and Jeffrey Dahmer because they liked the way each of their hands looked (u/roommate213, 2022). In another thread by u/IndependentEmpty8588, the user asks others in r/hybristophilia who their first hybristophilia crush was. Some users responded with only one answer, such as u/sherival123 who said, “Jeffrey Dahmer! I still think he’s cute asf.”, but others had more than one such as u/eerie_ava who liked Ted Bundy followed by Eric Harris, Dylan Klebold, and Paris Lee Bennett (u/IndependentEmpty8588, 2022). That user also explained that they would not define

any of them as “crushes” but rather that they have or had an interest or allure towards them (u/IndependentEmpty8588, 2022).

Hybristophiliacs are also present on other mainstream social medias. On Instagram, the hashtag #hybristophilia on Instagram.com boasts 5,200 posts as of April 2022. The topic contains many diverse types of posts including user created art, videos of serial killers, “memes” related to the topic, criticisms of Hybristophilia, and more. One user, @jessicaperner, posted their own drawing titled “Hybristophilia” that captures of the essence of the term. The image (illustration 3) was posted June 27, 2019 and has 147 likes and 7 comments as of April 2022 (Perner, 2019). One account on Instagram called @hybristophiliacs has posted 82 posts between July 15, 2021, and April 2022. The account also has 665 followers as of April 2022 (Gabi, n.d.). Their posts are related to serial killers, hybristophilia, and true crime.

The next social media, TikTok, seems to have banned the use of the hashtag #hybristophilia on their platform as of this writing. Videos using the hashtag are not linked, the tag is instead plain text. No statement on this ban could be found but the community guidelines state that they will remove content that is overly sexualized, violent or graphic, violates minor safety, and more (TikTok 2022). Users have seemed to bypass this by using #hybristophillia, using two L’s instead of one in the spelling. This hashtag has approximately 347,800 views as of April 2022 (#hybristophillia, n.d.). This social media data can be viewed in table 5.

Illustration 3. “Hybristophilia” drawing on Instagram by user @jessicaperner



Table 5. Hybristophilia online and social media activity data

Platform	Community	Users
Reddit	r/hybristophilia	Approx. 1.9 thousand members
TikTok	#hybristophilia	Approx. 347.8 thousand views
Instagram	#hybristophilia	Approx. 5.2 thousand posts

Identity and Boundaries

Now that we have examined this continuum of serial killer fascination, we must look more into their identity as a group to address the concerns and fear that much of society has for this fandom. Some members of the so-called fandom have responded to

these concerns to argue that they are not really “fans” at all, in the accepted definition of the term. Many members of the serial killer fandom, in fact, revoke or deny the title of “fan” altogether. Their goal is not to glorify or worship serial killers but to learn about them and bring awareness to their victims. A moderator on the r/serialkillers subReddit, user u/dr.rainbow, wrote,

“We are not a fanclub. We are not sympathizers. We are here for true crime discussion. If you came here with that [worshipping] mindset then make a different community and go elsewhere. That's not what this subreddit is for.”

(u/dr_rainbow, 2018).

This is a sentiment that can be seen across serial killer online communities. Many users in the r/hybristophilia subReddit also express concern for their own mental and emotional state because of their attraction to killers. This is an example of the self-policing of members of these communities.

The serial killer fandom as a social system defines its moral and symbolic boundaries that help to form their identity, decide who is a part of the fandom, the actions they take, and which behaviors are permissible and morally acceptable (Spychaj, 2017). Those who continue behavior outside of these boundaries, such as idolizing and celebrating killers, are not members of the serial killer fandom discussed. In finding what they consider as morally acceptable, the members of the serial killer fandom also view themselves as a group of like-minded individuals who happen to be interested in serial killers (Smith, 2018). What many on the outside of the fandom see as a dark and strange obsession, those in the fandom describe as something much more innocent. The basis of the serial killer fandom has been described by members of the fandom as an attempt to

understand how someone could commit the crime these killers committed, uncover and understand the mind of serial killers, and why they did commit their crimes (Spychaj, 2017).

For members of the fandom who may be the most stigmatized, they even voice concern for themselves. The Reddit user u/cherrytrenchcoat created a poll in the r/hybristophilia subReddit asking users that if they could, would they get rid of their hybristophilia? (2022). Among the 219 votes on the poll, 37 said yes, 33 said no, 11 said unsure, and 76 said they were not a hybristophiliac at all, and the other 62 votes were to show the results of the poll (u/cherrytrenchcoat, 2022). In the comments of that post, some users voiced how their hybristophilia made it difficult to create and maintain regular relationships (u/cherrytrenchcoat, 2022). Others who responded “no” to the poll explained that they would not get rid of it altogether, but they wished it were less intense as it made them feel guilty (u/cherrytrenchcoat, 2022). It is important to remember for these hybristophiliacs that hybristophilia is a paraphilia that can be caused by any number of influences out of the hybristophiliac’s control.

Another underlying theme within the serial killer fandom is sympathy for the victims of serial killers. Many assume that those who are interested in serial killers are disrespectful to their victims or forget about them entirely. However, this is not the case. Christopher Duett also writes in his article that his correspondence with almost 50 different killers did not make him feel more empathetic for the killers but more sensitive to their victims instead (Duett, 2014). Similarly, Misty from the documentary *In Love with a Killer* explained that after she met Richard Ramirez in person, she realized immediately how evil he truly was, and she sympathized with his victims (Fournet &

Schimitt, 2012). With this being said, the lines of the serial killer fandom and the behavior accepted within the fandom remains blurred, due in part to the topic of interest but also to the stigma surrounding the fandom that can result in ‘spoiled identity’ of the fandom and fandom members (Spychaj, 2017). To bring further clarity to the serial killer fandom, and avoid a spoiled identity of the group, the title of Sychaj’s thesis serves as a reminder of what the fandom is about, “Serial killers are interesting, they’re not heroes” (2017).

Finally, addressing the concern of “copycat” serial killers, or killers who commit their acts because previous killers inspire them, there is little basis to assume that the serial killer fandom will breed new serial killers. Little research exists on the idea of copycat killers, but some researchers have examined the effects of violent media on individuals. A large population of people consume violent content in the form of video games, media stories, and real-life stories every day and do not mimic or imitate the behavior that they see (Helfgott, 2015). This shows that the typical person is not looking to cause more violence. Instead, the risk group in terms of the serial killer fandom are those individuals that cross the line of acceptable behavior in the eyes of the fandom and are consequently not members of the fandom.

The phenomenon of copycat, or contagion, killing has been most closely acquainted with mass murderers and school shooters (Langman, 2017b). Mass murder, while not the same as serial killings, has often been included in the discussion of serial killers as both do result in the deaths of multiple victims. It is also the act of mass murder that has been most imitated, though these occurrences are also rare. Individuals who take inspiration from past mass murders usually view one or more killers as idols or as God-

like (Langman, 2017a). This idolization is, again, behavior that is not accepted in the serial killer fandom as discussed. These copycats are also drawn to imitating past killings for their own various personal reasons (Langman, 2017a). These personal reasons may overlap with severe mental illness that led to them completing their crimes. Indeed, psychological and physical abuse, especially in childhood, is a common characteristic of killers (Allely et al, 2014). Like the idea that not everyone who plays violent video games or who are exposed to violent stories will lash out with their own crimes, not everyone who has suffered abuse in the past will become a killer or violent person. Research suggests that pre-existing neurodevelopmental problems, environmental insults such as head injuries and childhood maltreatment, and other psychosocial factors interact in individuals associated with serial or mass murder (Allely et al, 2014). There are many factors that contribute to individuals who become killers or copycats, simply being in the serial killer fandom alone will not produce more killers as many may fear.

Discussion and Future Research

The six categories proposed in this continuum of serial killer fandom and fascination are measured at a nominal level. Further research needs to be conducted to determine if these categories could be ranked ordinally or otherwise. There is also potential for further categorization within the six categories mentioned as the fandom has grown and continues to grow and include more individuals with more expressions of interest. Certainly, interest in serial killers continues to grow as more people find these online communities, join, participate, and interact in them. In the research for this project, the membership, postings, and views across all online communities mentioned continued to grow each time they were consulted.

Because the nature of this project is to theorize a continuum of fandom behavior in serial killer fans, it is important to note that it is beyond the scope of this project to fully understand and explain why these individuals have the interest that they do and why they express it in the ways that they do. Certainly, increased media on the topic plays a role in the rising interest in serial killers, but there are also many other possible psychological and sociological theories and explanations for why this interest exists and persists. Further, as mentioned previously, there is little research and scholarly literature that exists on these individuals and groups. Each one of the six categories in this continuum warrant further research. There is great misunderstanding of the serial killer fandom because of this lack of investigation, analysis, and knowledge. Further research and understanding of the topic could help to alleviate the stigma, concern, and fear that surrounds the fandom and those individuals who are a part of it. Considering how the fandom is growing, this knowledge could prove useful in avoiding pathologizing or ostracizing members of the fandom.

This continuum is also fluid, meaning that some individuals in one group or category may join others as their interest increases or decreases. This also means that some may be a part of one category and join another to further the first group they were a part of. For example, a collector may become a dark tourist, or crime tripper, to find more items and artifacts for their murderabilia collection, souvenirs from the traveling that they embark on. A hybristophilic may also become a correspondent, or a groupie, to have personal contact, connections, and/or conversations with the killers that they are fascinated with or to whom they are otherwise attracted. On the other hand, a correspondent who initially contacted someone out of morbid curiosity may develop

feelings after prolonged correspondence. Regardless, rising interest in serial killers and their crimes still leaves many concerned about these “fans.”

As discussed in the section of identity and boundaries, it is much easier to see how this concern is unfounded. As this fandom continues to grow, their identity and boundaries will continue to shape the acceptable behavior of its members. Society must learn to separate the individuals of the serial killer fandom discussed in this project with the individuals beyond the fandom’s bounds who may pose a risk to the greater society. Further research into individuals who have idolized previous killers or are confirmed to have committed atrocious acts in inspiration of past events will certainly help to clarify this point further. Moreover, further systemic research of the social media trends and patterns of serial killer fandom members could shed further light into their motivations for being active members of the fandom. This would assist in separating the serial killer fandom and its members from individuals beyond the fandom’s boundaries. Those individuals that celebrate killers are a different breed of person altogether.

Conclusion

The fringe fandom of serial killers has been gaining recognition in the media as the fandom itself gains new members. It has also been shown that this interest is not new to our society but has been present at the outskirts of society since the phenomenon of serial killing first began, hence the idea of a fringe fandom. The serial killer fandom discussed is also less of a fandom, as many of its members deny being fans in the same way that fans love Taylor Swift or the Marvel movies. Instead, they are more interested in learning about the killers themselves, their victims, and their crimes. They may express this interest in the categories explained in this continuum. Some are consumers of media

pertaining to killers, such as documentaries and books, while others may collect murderabilia related to the killers or their crimes. Still others may become correspondents that choose to make personal contact with convicted killers and criminals while they serve their sentence in prison. Groupies are also not a recent concept even in the discussion of serial killers. The newest term to the serial killer fandom is hybristophilia in which individuals form an attraction to these violent criminals. These categories are not concrete or stable as many fans may be members of multiple categories within the continuum.

Members of the fandom also rely heavily on the internet and social media to connect with one another. Numerous online communities of these fans exist on various social media platforms such as Reddit, Instagram, and TikTok. The connections that they can make on these platforms are what allows them to create their own identities as fans and as a group. As discussed, the membership of these online communities is ever increasing despite some attempts by social media and online companies to ban content relating to the fandom and serial killers. These attempted bans come in response to concern and fear of the serial killer fandom that stems from misunderstanding of the fandom.

As we can see, this fear is unfounded towards the serial killer fandom. The fandom members moderate each other. Over the establishment of the fandom, the group has worked together to ascertain what is and what is not acceptable behavior in terms of their interest in serial killers and the expression of that interest. They remind anyone in their online communities that might stray into inexcusable territory that serial killers are interesting, they are not something to be praised or celebrated in any way. Many also

explain how their interest in serial killers, and subsequent research, makes them more sympathetic to the victims, not the killers. There are also many factors that contribute to the creation of killers including psychological and sociological reasons that cannot be linked to membership in the serial killer fandom alone. Again, individuals who do exhibit behavior that may idolize killers, or otherwise worship them, are outside the boundaries of the fandom.

There is still extraordinarily little research on the topic of serial killer fans. There is much potential to research the occurrence and activities of these fans and why they have the interest that they do. Each category in this continuum has room for research as there is little knowledge available about them that still leaves many misunderstandings and fear of the fandom. Many who do identify with hybristophilia are even asking why they have the attraction that they do and recognize the little data that there is on the paraphilia. As more individuals are showing interest in and joining the fringe fandom of serial killers, this research could become instrumental in separating this interest with the darker idolization of serial killers involved with potential copycat killers.

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