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MaryAlyce R.G. Cornett  
*University of Alabama in Huntsville*

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# Capitalizing on crime stories: Unveiling the connection between sensationalism and commercialization in true crime.

by

**MaryAlyce R.G. Cornett**

An Honors Capstone

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Honors Capstone Project Director: Dr. Karen Anne Wallach

Assistant Professor of Marketing

*MaryAlyce Cornett* 4/17/24

Student

Date

*Karen Anne Wallach* 4/18/24

Project Director

Date

 4/18/2024

Department Chair

- Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Honors College Dean

Date



Honors College

Frank Franz Hall

+1 (256) 824-6450 (voice)

+1 (256) 824-7339 (fax)

honors@uah.edu

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MaryAlyce Cornett

Student Name (printed)

MaryAlyce Cornett

Student Signature

4/17/24

Date

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## **Dedication**

I could not have undertaken this journey without the expertise and guidance of my project director, Professor Wallach, who was willing to discuss and listen to me geek about true crime. Without your help this project would not have been possible and to the quality that it is. Thank you to my parents, for providing me the opportunity to pursue upper education comfortably and always pushing me to succeed. To my friends, especially Grace Oswald, for their encouragement and support throughout my university experience. And to my fiance, Matthew Love, for his endless patience, love, and unwavering belief in my abilities.

## **Abstract**

True crime narratives have unfailingly captivated audiences, becoming a highly popularized and prolific industry by sensationalizing crimes for viewership. However, the very description of “true” with true crime provides the appearance and of keeping elements of truthfulness and factual accuracy in such media. Drawing upon evidence from businesses, psychology, and media, this research dissects the motivations behind the corporate production and entertaining design of turning criminals into commodities. The portrayal of true crime has widespread implications, impacting opinions on crimes and legal proceedings, desensitizing violence, and being ethically immoral towards victim’s loved ones. Despite this, producers are motivated to produce and commercialize true crime due to continued consumer demand, low production costs, newsworthiness, and success with advertisers. Finding balance between the ethics of producing and consuming true crime while understanding the popularity of the genre is key, with more discussions needed of the future potential portrayals of true crime and its impact on public perceptions and attitudes.

## Introduction

As media and entertainment have changed throughout the years, the true crime genre has always remained, seeing immense growth across platforms and captivating audiences across the globe. Netflix's original series, *Dahmer - Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* (hereafter referred to as *Dahmer - Monster*), delves into the story of famous US serial killer, Jeffrey Dahmer, who in 13 years took the lives of 17 young men before being caught. *Dahmer - Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* was an instant success and was Netflix's third production and second English language series ever to hit 1 billion views in just 60 days (Netflix, 2022). Even more impressively, viewers across the world tuned in with *Dahmer - Monster* placing in the top 10 in 92 countries and gaining an impressive 83% positive audience rating on Rotten Tomatoes (Montgomery, 2022). While the series saw widespread popularity and success, it did not escape criticism, with it being labeled as sick and twisted by critics (Amin, 2022). Furthermore, families of the victims of Jeffrey Dahmer's killings did not approve of the series' success and popularity, sparking discussions into the ethics of producing and profiting off true crime media (Vlamiš, 2022). With *Dahmer - Monster* Netflix categorized the show as a "drama", showcasing how prevalent sensationalism of true crime narratives is (IMDb, n.d.). Despite the controversy and critique surrounding true crime media, there is an undeniable reality, true crime is a hugely popular genre in the entertainment space.

Before exploring the nature and commercialization of true crime, this research must first define what encompasses the true crime genre. For this research, we will follow the definition created by Dr. Ian Punnett, a widely regarded scholar within the field of true crime. This definition will provide a foundation to understand and examine the distinctive characteristics of true crime.

"By definition, "true crime" is an occasionally controversial multi-platform genre that is most often associated with murder narratives and shares some common ancestral heritage with journalism, but always has been driven by different impulses" (Punnett, 2018).

The foundational characteristic of true crime is its use of real-life criminal cases, investigations, and legal proceedings. By utilizing such facts, true crime provides authenticity and distinguishes true crime narratives from fictionalized accounts or speculative storytelling. Without reality, a story cannot be classified as "true crime," as it lacks the essential elements of truthfulness and factual accuracy. Dr.

Punnet also recognizes the similarities shared between true crime media and journalism, with true crime often using practiced journalistic techniques, like detailed research and interviews, to accurately depict stories. However, it is important to acknowledge the differences between the two, with traditional journalism aiming to inform and educate consumers. While true crime can share the same aim, such media is largely motivated by entertainment value and sensationalism. The popularity of true crime media depends on its ability to captivate audiences with narratives, shocking twists, and suspense, often at the expense of ethics and victim's concerns (Punnett, 2018)(Vlamiš, 2022). The difference highlights the complexity of true crime as a genre, straddling the line between factual reporting and entertainment.

Overall, this thesis seeks to discuss and explore the popularity of the true crime genre by examining the motivations for consuming and producing true crime content. In doing so, we will analyze the true crime genre and its adaptation and growth with modern media platforms. Recognizing the widespread popularity of the genre, our work offers insights into the reasoning behind such success. More importantly, this paper explores the ethical implications of sensationalizing true crime stories for profit by examining the dilemmas of commercializing real-life stories and the impact on victims' families and overall social viewpoints. By researching these topics, this research seeks to create a deeper understanding of the responsibilities of both producing and consuming such content. Through these investigations, we contribute to the discussions of the true crime genre.

### **The Evolution of True Crime**

True crime has evolved throughout history to fit all media forms, from the Elizabethan-era theater to modern podcasts. One of the earliest examples of true crime as entertainment came from the theater. Largely inspired by ancient Greek theater, English theaters were popular choices for entertainment in the 16th century, often featuring stories of magic, violence, and eroticism (Victorovna, 2020). The first known true crime play, *Arden of Feversham*, was a dramatic retelling of the murder of Thomas Arden (Gioia, 2020). While it was published anonymously, it is believed to be one of William Shakespeare's "earliest theatrical productions now remaining" (Hill, 1993). The culprits of the killing were Thomas' wife and her lover, perfectly categorizing the drama as a "crime of passion", where a human behaves in the extreme



(Engel, 2016). The choice to feature this particular story spoke about the entertainment value of sensationalizing and dramatizing crime for profit.

Centuries later, true crime would eventually appear on American radio, with a program called *Gang Busters* that aired from 1935 - 1957 (Razlogova, 2006). The goal of *Gang Busters* was to share crime stories, ranging from infamous to small-town bandits, while also incorporating national alerts of criminals wanted by the police or the FBI. While sharing true crime stories was not a new concept for listeners, radio technology allowed a new method of interacting with consumers. *Gang Buster's* listeners frequently rang into the show, expressing their thoughts, opinions, and more importantly corrections to the stories (Razlogova, 2006). These interactions introduced the concept that the ordinary viewer's lives could be a part of the thrill of crime and allowed for the first time a way for consumers to interact with the stories. During the time of the radio, the popularity of true crime surged due to public admiration of criminals during the great depression. Characters like Bonnie and Clyde appeared on American radio and newspapers with "fans" eagerly looking on. As "fans listened for sensational sound effects and plot twists rather than for an authoritative narrative defined by its conclusion.", radio was a new form of media that allowed entertainment and sensationalism to be sent directly to consumers' homes (Razlogova, 2006).

In 1966, Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* marked another significant transition in the true crime genre. Recognized as a "pioneering document in the history of American nonfiction and true crime narration", *In Cold Blood* recounted the small-town murders of the Clutter family murders (Voss, 2015). Switching from the killer's and detective's perspectives, Capote's work marked a new serious, documentary style of the true crime novel. Furthermore, the true crime story gave readers a deeper engagement than more fictional crime stories, but *In Cold Blood*, "made reading about gory crime - in this case, the random murder of a farm family in Holcomb, Kansas - respectable" (Browder, 2010). The shift in true crime novels due to *In Cold Blood's* influence laid the groundwork for a more immersive exploration of true crime narratives. This documentary style was hugely popular with readers, with true crime novels appearing regularly on the bestseller list since the publication of *In Cold Blood*. However,

the true rise of true crime content occurred amongst the technological advancements of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

While the podcast format was created in 2005, podcasts struggled with finding a foothold in the consumer market due to competition with platforms like YouTube and the struggles of monetizing. However, this would completely change with the creation of *Serial*, a true-crime podcast that discussed the conviction of Adnan Syed for the 1999 murder of Hae Min Lee. *Serial* was an instant success, becoming the fastest podcast to reach five million downloads and creating a phenomenon known as the “Serial effect”- with a large increase in new podcasts appearing (Sherrill, 2022). Very soon, true crime podcasts became intertwined with the golden age of podcasting, with continued popularity. In 2023, 24% of the top-ranked podcasts focus entirely on true crime, overtaking other genres like politics and government at 10% (Stocking, et. al., 2023). From the 16th century to the modern day, true crime has continued to weave its way into media as a popular form of entertainment, showing the enduring and evolving reach of true crime.

### **The Commercialization of True Crime**

The widespread success of the true crime genre is largely attributed to the technological advancements of television, streaming services, and podcasts (Leigh, 2022). This technology allowed the “true crime boom” to occur with popular shows and podcasts, making true crime into a “popular” genre (Hernandez, 2019). Since then, producing true crime content has been a highly profitable and prominent sector within the entertainment industry, with businesses willing to pay millions for acquisitions of true crime producers. (Williams, 2020). In 2020, the release of Netflix Original *Tiger King*, a true-crime series showcasing the ethically questionable world of big-cat breeding, reached a staggering 34 million unique viewers in the first 10 days, rivaling the third season of *Stranger Things*, another Netflix hit (Chan, 2020). As producers saw growing success in true crime productions, they recognized the genre’s widespread appeal, creating “books, movies, television series, podcasts, blogs, and perhaps most indicative, CrimeCon”, true crime’s version of Comic-Con that draws thousands every year (Cecil, 2020). At the time of writing this, CrimeCon’s 2024 ticket packages range from \$329 to \$1699, with some packages

already sold out (CrimeCon, 2024). Clearly, true crime is a prolific industry, with producers and businesses quick to provide content and services to eager consumers. Soon, channels like *Investigation Discovery* appeared, featuring only true crime content (Steel, 2015). Choosing to utilize true crime's proven success, media producers continue to consistently release new true crime shows, podcasts, and movies into the market. This perpetual cycle of production is eagerly met by viewers and listeners alike, excited for the next true crime hit. Furthermore, the popularity of true crime in podcasts, television, and movies has formed a true crime "pipeline", where one hit serves as the source of inspiration for another media form (Nguyen, 2022). This is especially seen with podcasts and television programs, where the success of one inspires the creation of another. This relationship between different media forms ultimately allows for a continual exchange of ideas, with the popularity of one mutually benefiting the entire true crime genre. There is no question that true crime is highly popular, but the adaptability of true crime stories across different media formats highlights its ability to entertain a multitude of audiences across platforms.

Another crucial factor in the widespread commercialization of true crime is the costs associated with producing such content. Because true crime comes with a plot that is largely written out, true crime is more cost-effective than scripted fictionalized television shows and movies, ultimately requiring fewer writers (Steel, 2015). With true crime content, techniques and formats used are more similar to a documentary, with interviews and narration. These formats require fewer resources in terms of script development and fictional storytelling aspects. The cost-effectiveness of true crime makes the genre more attractive for media companies like *Investigation Discovery*, allowing them to produce popular content at a lower cost.

"The strategy also was economical: with plotlines ripped from the headlines, re-enactment actors, and few stars, the average cost per hour-long episode totaled about \$300,000 — roughly a tenth of the cost of an average scripted network drama. Investigation Discovery produces more than 700 hours of original programming a year and owns the rights to those shows. That allows the network to capitalize on them, digitally and internationally" (Steel, 2015).

The nature of true crime narratives allows for a style that relies on actual events, testimonials, and investigative reporting, reducing media producers' reliance on elaborate scripts and fictionalized

storytelling that increases the budget for more scripted productions. Additionally, casting actors for true crime is typically focused on accuracy, looking for someone who fits the description of a victim or criminal. While big-name actors can be used, especially for larger-scale productions, most productions utilize casting calls to find their perfect fit, decreasing their costs (Dean, 2015)(Steel, 2015) . The lower cost of producing true crime content, along with its growing popularity among consumers, contributes to its widespread appeal among media companies seeking to balance both budgetary constraints and audience engagement.

With the popularity of true crime content saturating the market, what keeps the genre so interesting to viewers? If anything, the “trope” of the true crime story is repetitive, a bad guy and victim and a detective, suggesting the market eventually would become saturated in its own “campiness”. Even *Investigation Discovery* has made the creation of episodes “formulaic” with an “essential, inviolable pattern of recreations” (Peterson, 2015). Consumers’ interest in true crime content, despite its repetitive tropes and ideas, can be largely attributed to several factors that align with the concept of “newsworthiness”, a term used by journalists to gauge the appeal of a news story (Purdue University, n.d). While there have been several discussions on newsworthiness and crime, they largely focus on crime in the news, not as entertainment (Gruenewald et. al., 2011; Wong & Lee, 2021). While connections have been made between true crime podcasts and newsworthiness, this concept can be extended to all crime entertainment as finding the most newsworthy story to sell results in more views, clicks, and attention, similar to the news, highlighting the relationship between true crime media and traditional journalism (Hibbett, 2018). While journalists and theorists have debated what exactly qualifies a story as newsworthy, the basic elements, argued by Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge are (Purdue University, n.d):

- 1) Relevance: How relevant is the story to the audience?
- 2) Timeliness: How recently did the event occur?
- 3) Simplification: Can the story be easily simplified or summarized?
- 4) Predictability: Was the story or event on a predictable schedule?
- 5) Unexpectedness: Was the story completely unpredictable?
- 6) Continuity: Can the story allow for continual coverage?
- 7) Composition: Does the story fit in the media outlet?
- 8) Elite People: Is the person that the story follows of a higher status?
- 9) Elite Countries: Did it occur in a wealthier, developed country?

10) Negativity: Bad news is always good news.

With these ideas, the more elements a particular story has equates to a more newsworthy story.

Examining different aspects of true crime with “newsworthiness” provides insights into why true crime content remains so popular, with relevance, unexpectedness, and negativity playing pivotal roles.

With the true crime story, the very nature of such a topic lines up perfectly with particular aspects of newsworthiness. Unexpectedness and negativity are integral parts of the true crime story, with the subject matter of true crime full of sudden violence and depravity. Media producers can use these concepts to their advantage, keeping viewers on the edge of their seats (Schleser, 2010). The twists and turns that the true crime genre can use further add to the sensationalism of stories. The choice of which true crime stories to feature, which typically have an average person who was simply at the wrong time or place, adds to the normality of the victims of true crime (Bates, 1999). This overall adds relevance, with viewers being able to identify with the victim. This relatability adds an emotional connection with the storyline, making consumers hooked on continuing the story. With the popularity of true crime at an all-time high, media producers can continually push the next true crime story. Interestingly, the production cycle of entertainment media does not always follow the idea of timeliness, with certain more popular crimes enduring the test of time. Well-received and engaging stories often are subjected to a multiple of remakes, each one “varying in story structure and format” (Ho, 2022). Media companies recognize the appeal of certain cases and continually choose them time and time again to capture the audience's attention. Writers and producers of true crime content are also able to enhance certain elements of a story to better align with the criteria of newsworthiness. By emphasizing aspects like unexpected twists, heightening negativity, and increasing relevance, writers can ensure true crime narratives are more newsworthy (Kristensen & Bro, 2023). This differs from journalism, which focuses on facts and informing the audience. The true crime story, inherently corresponding with the concept of newsworthiness, showcases the popularity and audience interest within entertainment media.

An essential driving force behind media production for all companies is advertisers. While certain platforms allow creators to make money from producing content, the wide majority of income is produced

by the relationship between media and advertisers (Rinallo & Basuroy, 2009; Mantrala et.al., 2007). With the nature of true crime following dark, gory, and violent stories, companies might be hesitant with their product or service being advertised by such content. However, specific advertising clients have utilized such concepts to their advantage, finding a niche in the realm of true crime and capitalizing on the genre's popularity. For instance, *Up and Vanished*, a prominent true crime podcast that shares missing person cases is frequently sponsored by home security systems (Oxygen, 2024). This suggests that manufacturers associate true crime with a desire for safety. By choosing to market such a product to listeners of a true crime podcast, manufacturers can utilize the consumer's heightened awareness of security due to the unsettling nature of the true crime. Of course, not every advertisement on true crime media syncs with safety. Another popular advertiser of true crime content is a role-playing subscription called "Hunt a Killer", which allows users to take on an investigative role by mailing evidence directly to users doors (Hunt A Killer, n.d; Hibbett, 2018). Through highly realistic evidence, like police reports, witness testimony, and forensics, consumers can immerse themselves in investigations with an interactive experience. By podcasts advertising these murder mystery subscription boxes, a feedback loop is created, where the consumers not only continue to engage with true crime media but also actively engage with investigating murders themselves (Hibbett, 2018). This feeds into the popularity and consumption of true crime content by fulfilling listeners' curiosity of immersing themselves in a detective role and overall improving their engagement with true crime (Irshad, 2021). In this context, advertisers play an important role in shaping consumer's experiences, showcasing an ability to strategically align products with the unique characteristics of the true crime genre.

### **Ethical Concerns with Commercialising True Crime**

As consumer's interest and demand in real-life criminal cases and narratives continue to soar, commercialization of true crime will continue as long as profit can be made. However, unlike fictional crime narratives, which are results and productions of a writer's imagination, true crime stories are true events, involving real people and real consequences. This distinction of true crime is what creates ethical dilemmas in producing true crime content, specifically regarding the exploitation of a heartbreaking

tragedy for money or content. It becomes even trickier when the victim's loved ones speak out against the creation of such content (Vlamiš, 2022). While there is no doubt that true crime sells, producers of such content must consider the implications of such production.

The creation of "Son of Sam" laws in 40 states across the United States reflects society's stance against criminals profiting from their crimes (Burnworth, 2022). Named after the serial killer David Berkowitz- otherwise known as the Son of Sam, these laws aim to prevent monetary gains from criminals, earned through selling their stories. Money earned from entertainment deals with convicted criminals would instead be used to compensate their victims (Alexander Jr, 1992). However, the constitutional validity of these laws has been challenged over the years, primarily on their hindrance on the fundamental right to free speech guaranteed by the First Amendment, leading to their overall limited application and enforcement (Howe, 2004). This is complex, as Constitutional rights in America are given to every citizen, even one whose stories are the "most capable of generating media contracts, and thus triggering Son of Sam laws, [which may] involve recollections of the most gruesome and sensational crimes" (Soderberg, 199). Producers of true crime are able to easily capitalize on true crime stories, as criminals lose the right to their image, requiring no permission to produce their stories (Williams, 2020). While the unconstitutionality of the Son of Sam laws will not be examined in this paper, the very creation of these laws is important. As a society, allowing criminals to gain money from committing illegal acts feels wrong, enough for the creation of these laws. This speaks of the foresight of true crime media's popularity, even in 1977 when the laws were enacted. However, despite this understanding, we continue to support such stories by consuming true crime media.

Where there are some regulations and societal understanding against criminals profiting from their crimes, there is a lack of agreement regarding victim's rights of their suffering being shared for entertainment (Miles, 1991). True crime media often utilized sensationalism and even more fictional-style formatting to engage audiences and create a more compelling story for consumers (Graham & Stevenson, 2022). However, this growing emphasis on the entertainment aspect of true crime media, particularly as its popularity increases, has raised conversations about exploitation of victims and their families with the

genre (Williams, 2020). More specifically, true crime narratives are not required to receive the blessing of victims and their families. This has led to several cases where families have spoken out against documentaries and dramas that they feel exploit their loved ones' tragedies for entertainment and profit (Vlamiš, 2022). However, victims and their families have no grounds to prevent the production of their stories, with courts often ruling against victims or their families in cases with entertainment companies (McNulty, 2023). Again the First Amendment protects companies from producing these stories, as long as the story is found in public records and they portray it accurately, factually, and respectfully (Dahl, 2022). Victim's are also not able largely file under the right of publicity, a tort, "designed to prevent unauthorized uses of a person's identity that typically involve appropriations of a person's name, likeness, or voice" (Post and Rothman, 2020). This is directly correlated to producers focusing on utilizing real people's name and image for realistic likeness to categorize their stories as "true" (Williams, 2020). Of course, the right of publicity conflicts with the First Amendment, and its rulings have widely differed in the few states where it is law. Because of these different interpretations and rulings, researchers have argued for a framework that will allow a more nuanced interpretation, like the right to privacy (Post and Rothman, 2020). Of course, the balance between sensitivity and respect towards the individuals whose lives have been affected by these crimes, and the pursuit of commercializing their stories by producers, is a challenging dynamic, especially considering the First Amendment. As the person whose likelihood is capitalized on is typically dead, the conversation protecting their rights is complicated. However, the commercialization of true crime can sometimes reduce their narratives to purely entertainment value, forgetting that these stories harmed, often in very violent methods, a real-life person and impacted their loved ones.

Bias can often appear in the creation of true crime media, as producers may have a specific narrative or agenda in mind. The huge success of the podcast *Serial*'s first season, which focused on the false conviction of Adnan Syed for murder, made narratives that shared the conventions of innocent people more popular. The hit Netflix documentary, *Making a Murderer*, told the story of Steven Avery, who was wrongly convicted of sexual assault for 18 years and later imprisoned for the murder of Teresa



Halbach. While the series saw critical success, it also faced criticism for disguised bias in favor of Avery's innocence, "the title alone reveals the television show's focus on the perpetrator but does not advertise that 'the documentary omits evidence that would raise doubts about the innocence of Avery' (Smail, 2022). As the audience perceives true crime as "true", they also believe that a documentary format follows the law and what actually occurred as a central theme (Rickard, 2023). However, many filmmakers understand that the entertainment value and the argument of the film take priority, even before the truth. This is problematic, as the very nature of true crime has claims of authenticity. Filmmakers are unable to claim that audiences can determine the validity of their films like experts. Instead, audiences tend to take true crime documentaries as the truth (Morton, 2021). Therefore, hidden agendas of filmmakers and producers in such media are highly unethical, shaping viewers' perceptions of justice and the legal system, impacting real cases. Following the documentary *Making a Murderer*, an online petition amassed over 523,970 signatures, urging President Obama to pardon Avery, which never occurred (Trisler, 2017). Ken Kratz, the special prosecutor on the case, received death threats, a glitter bomb sent to his office, and even considered suicide (Costello, n.d.). With real-world implications, biased true crime narratives can influence the public's understanding, highlighting the need for balanced and true storytelling in this genre.

As true crime has become more popular, criminal celebrities have appeared, with figures such as Bonnie and Clyde, Ted Bundy, Jack the Ripper, Ted Kaczynski, and Jeffrey Dahmer becoming household names with their stories forever holding a place in popular culture. This phenomenon reflects a shift in the concept of fame and celebrities, which traditionally was earned through achievement and talent now is earned through visibility in culture (Schmid, 2008). This shift in fame also represents a broader trend where being visible is no longer necessarily linked to merit but is instead driven by whatever captures the public's attention (Brown, 2008). As a result of the public's fascination with crime, criminals have found themselves in the spotlight, gathering attention and recognition. However, categorizing criminals as celebrities raises ethical questions about the glorification of criminal behavior and the romanticization of crime. A recent example that highlights this dilemma is Gypsy Rose Blanchard, who pleaded guilty to the

second-degree murder of her mother. Gypsy's case gained widespread attention due to the extreme nature of her mother's control and abuse, due to a mental illness (Kettler, 2023). Despite serving an 8-year prison sentence, 3 weeks after her release Gypsy gained 8.3 million Instagram followers and 9.8 million TikTok followers, with experts claiming the possibility of earning "up to \$100,000 per social media post through endorsement deals, brand partnerships and speaking engagements" (Hill, 2024)(Settembre, 2024). The rise of individuals like Gypsy Rose Blanchard to celebrity status highlights the complexity of the criminal celebrity and public interest in the topic. While some may argue that giving criminals a platform is a form of empowerment or redemption for their crimes, others find that it minimizes the severity of their actions and exploits their crimes for personal gain online.

Within the true crime genre, featuring serial killers have become more popular. This popularity is followed by merchandise associated with serial killers called "murderabilia" (Jarvis, 2007). Enthusiasts of the true crime genre have access, largely through the internet, to a wide array of products, ranging from figurines to apparel and artwork, all featuring famous serial killers. Following the success of the Netflix drama *Dahmer - Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story*, the online market experienced a surge in Dahmer-related merchandise. These products frequently featured images of killer Jeffrey Dahmer alongside perverse slogans such as "Team Dahmer," "Jeff Boyardee," "Om Nom Nom," and "Let's Do Lunch."(*Jeffrey Dahmer Merch for Sale | TeePublic*, n.d.) Even the personal belongings of criminals are available for purchase online, with fans able to buy items like Jeffrey Dahmer's Prison Bible and Letter for the price of \$10,000. (*Murderabilia*, n.d.). The surge in Jeffrey Dahmer merchandise was so widely popular that eBay banned the sale of Dahmer Halloween costumes on their platform, citing that these sales violated their "'violence and violent criminals policy'" (Cerullo, 2022). This policy prohibits "listings that promote or glorify violence or violent acts, or are associated with individuals who are notorious for committing violent acts". The selling and purchasing of murderabilia is problematic as it both increases the criminal's visibility and also raises ethical concerns about the nature of the industry. The sale of merchandise featuring criminals impacts society's viewpoints on crime and can be seen as glorifying or romanticizing their actions (Schmid, 2008). Making quips on tee shirts on the serious nature

of crimes trivializes criminals' actions and has increasingly become the norm in today's society.

Furthermore, the choice to make a profit by creating such perverse merchandise causes further harm to victims and their families (Staff, 2021). The act of commodifying criminals into marketable figures through producing murderabilia ultimately sensationalizes violence and criminal behavior, further turning criminals into objects of fascination.

### **The Psychology of True Crime**

Within the genre, consumers often find themselves in a complicated relationship with the nature of the true-crime material. Some consumers go as far as describing their fascination with true crime as an “addiction”.

“My true crime fixation used to make me uncomfortable: Now I've accepted the addiction as part of my life. And that's what it is--an addiction. It's how the genre often describes itself”  
(Moskowitz, 2020).

This description implies a sense of guilt or unease with consuming true crime narratives, especially with violent crimes and with gory depictions of death. Despite recognizing the potentially harmful effects of engaging with true crime, enthusiasts and lovers of the genre continue to consume the material, hence the choice of the word addiction. This choice highlights the challenges that consumers face. While they recognize their conflicting emotions and the potential effects of consumption, true crime is still able to captivate audiences

Why do consumers have such a fascination with the true crime genre? While there is the concept of newsworthiness, consumers' fascination with the true crime genre is largely attributed to the concept of the human fascination with violence (Elbert et. al., 2010). Given true crime's intensive dive into death, this fascination can be extended to the concept in psychology known as morbid curiosity, which can be defined as an interest in or curiosity about unpleasant or disturbing subjects, particularly those involving death (Scrivner, 2021). The reason why humans have morbid curiosity is because our brains are interested to see the results and to file the information for later. Additionally, consuming unpleasant or disturbing subjects also causes a fight-or-flight response, causing adrenaline, endorphins, and dopamine, making it harder to look away from the source (Rakshit, 2020). Corresponding with the concept of morbid curiosity,

research conducted by Susanne Oosterwijk found that individuals exhibit a noticeable preference for negative stimuli over neutral stimuli and positive stimuli. Individuals demonstrated a significantly greater likelihood of selecting such content over neutral imagery when negative stimuli included themes of violence, harm, war, accidents, conflicts, or attacks. Even when the stimuli featured severe bodily harm, such as mutilated hands, bodies, or faces, as well as close-up images of death, individuals were still equally likely to choose to view such content over neutral imagery (Oosterwijk, 2017). This suggests that the intensity of an image or story does not necessarily deter individuals from consuming it, suggesting that the gruesome nature of true crime stories may increase the appeal to certain audiences.

The appeal of morbid curiosity in true crime is further shown by the emergence of “web sleuths,” who become invested in criminal cases they find online and conduct research and investigations (Mathiesen, 2022). These self-proclaimed detectives often share their findings and various theories online, overall contributing to a large community of true crime enthusiasts engaging with the genre. The act of playing detective allows audiences to experience the thrill of crime and criminal investigations from the comfort of their own home (Barnes, 2015). The most popular topics for web sleuths to investigate are cold cases, which are crimes that have already happened but with no conclusion (Halber, 2014). Companies recognize consumer’s curiosity in the unknown and uncovering the truth, with companies like Uncovered “crowdsourcing” real cold cases to interested amateur detectives.

“Uncovered is where the most passionate true crime enthusiasts can learn from and teach others. Dig deeper into the stories you’ve heard before, and encounter many others you haven’t, in ways that help. At some point, compassion causes entertainment to grow into a need for activism, contribution, and community to solve the stories of real people (Uncovered, 2023).”

By allowing true crime enthusiasts to delve into real-world cases, Uncovered encourages users to become more actively involved in seeking justice and closure for victims and their families. This shifts true crime away from just entertainment and into a more active participation role. While web sleuthing has solved cold cases before, it is important to acknowledge that not all participation in true crime is inherently useful (Halber, 2014). One large issue of web sleuthing is the spread of misinformation, which is already prevalent on digital platforms. Web sleuths often can jump to conclusions from misinterpreted evidence,

leading to false accusations of innocent individuals, which can lead to real-world implications for those falsely accused (Pumphrey, 2021). It is important to note that these web sleuths are amateurs and lack the training and experience of experts. While it does allow enthusiasts to engage meaningfully with true crime stories, there are consequences of their actions and accusations.

Recently within the genre, there has been an increase in the psychological aspect of true crime, with narratives often delving deeply into the minds of the criminals, known as criminal profiling (Petherick, 2012; Godwin, 2002). Typically, the main character is a profiler and engages in a psychological battle with the criminal throughout the plot. While the profiling portrayed in this media is highly dramatized for entertainment purposes, audiences are interested in this format of true crime due to the insights they provide into the complexities of the human mind and criminal behavior (Eid, 2023). By discussing and providing insights into the factors that drive such individuals to commit these violent acts, these narratives provide viewers with a unique perspective. However, the portrayal of criminal profiling often differs from the reality of criminal investigations, where profiling is not commonly used (Whitman, n.d.). A meta-analysis of investigations found that "profilers do not decisively outperform other groups when predicting the characteristics of an unknown criminal" ("*Criminal Profiling Has Been Fooling Us All,*" 2022). This showcases a disconnect between true crime narratives and reality, with the portrayal of criminal profiling in entertainment dramatized and exaggerated for the sake of creating an interesting story. This disconnect can lead to misperceptions with consumers of true crime, who believe that criminal profiling is a prominent and effective practice in real-life criminal investigations (Greiwe & Khoshnood, 2022). This false portrayal from media companies further construed consumer's perceptions and understanding of investigations. Despite this, criminal profiling remains a popular theme in true crime media.

The true crime genre has garnered a significant female following, with women being a majority of its consumer base (Monroe, 2020). The genre's popularity among women is surprising, especially considering true crime's frequent depictions of violence against women, which are often described as voyeuristic, misogynistic, and even sexualized (Vitis, 2023)(Soto-Sanfiel & Montoya-Bermúdez,

2022)(Browder, 2006). Despite these troubling aspects, women are drawn to the true crime genre for a variety of reasons. Some women wish to educate themselves about the potential horrors of the world, viewing it as either a form of preparation or feminism (Rodgers, 2023). Others identify themselves within the true crime stories they consume, relating to the experiences of victims or seeing parallels within their own lives (Browder, 2006). Some consumers simply enjoy the thrill of exploring darker aspects of the human psyche. More specifically, consuming negative content causes different sensations and emotional reactions to occur, like arousal, sadness, or disgust (Niehoff & Oosterwijk, 2020). Due to different perceptions and the five-dimensional curiosity scale, some consumers, like thrill-seekers and adventurers, are more motivated to continue to seek out negative content, valuing the emotional experiences and sensations (Noordewier & van Dijk, 2020). Other research suggests that boredom motivates consumers to explore negative information due to it causing arousal (Loewenstein, 1994). As audiences continue to consume crime stories, the fear of crime is a universal concern, with people willing to change their daily routines and behaviors in an attempt to stay safer and decrease victimization (Madriz, 2023). However, women are often more fearful about becoming victims of crime. This heightened fear among women can be attributed to various factors such as sexual assaults and domestic violence, where women are traditionally known to be the victims (Roth Cortes, 2017). The media also tends to sensationalize and feature violent crimes against women, which also may contribute to heightened fear of becoming a victim (Parrott & Parrott, 2015). Contrary to these fears, research indicates that men are more likely to be victims of certain crimes, particularly violent ones in the United States (Madriz, 2023). Surprisingly, the lowest rate of victimization occurred against white women, despite the media phenomenon known as “Missing White Woman Syndrome,” where white women, particularly young ones, are more likely to receive media attention compared to minority men and women (Washak, 2018). The difference in media coverage contributes to a distorted perception of crime risk, as media sources often shape people’s beliefs about the frequency and nature of crimes, leading to an overestimation of the likelihood of victimization of consumers (Sacco, 1982). This is seen with both crime reports and true crime media, as people perceive true crime media as an accurate depiction of crime due to the idea of it being “true”. This disconnect

between perception and reality highlights the complexity of the true crime genre for both producers and consumers.

### **Sensationalizing and Desensitizing True Crime**

Sensationalism within the media is not a new concept and is often seen as “unavoidable”, largely because humans are wired to be interested in media involving violence (Uzuegbunam & Udeze, 2013). The goal of sensationalism within the modern media is to cause an emotional response to content, and then utilize that interest to increase viewership (Costello, n.d.). There is readily available material to sensationalize within true crime, with stories typically full of drama, suspense, and violence, and sensationalism dependent on emotional responses (Wiltenburg, 2004). Because sensationalizing typically makes the material more engaging for the average consumer, authors and producers of true crime choose to do so, as “any news story is a story, and any true crime story can become a sensational one” (Borrione, 2021). In particular, true crime is an easier genre to sensationalize compared to fictional crime, as the idea that these stories are real provides more emotional responsiveness. These stories are not recreational or fun, but a horror that someone went through (Costello, n.d.). Other than its usefulness in consumer engagement and interest, sensationalism is typically used to address or push social change. While this is tricky with other genres, true crime media typically pushes past the political landscape, allowing producers to push their own hidden agendas, like undisclosed bias, without branding them as propaganda (Costello, n.d.). Historically, sensationalized true crime was used to teach and discuss important lessons in society, such as “religious understandings of sin and punishment, political goals of strengthening public order and authority, and cultural tensions over the changing political dynamics of family life” (Wiltenburg, 2004). However, the role of sensationalism has changed, with researchers discussing a variety of reasons, from increased competition within the market to the societal shift away from religious teachings (Cohen, 2006; Halttunen, 1998). True crime was seen as a “low-brow” form of content, only to feed consumer’s interest in violence. However, the popularity of documentary-style true crime has changed this perception and now true crime is considered a more respectable genre (Hernandez, 2019).

With sensationalized true crime, with vivid and gory details depicting the worst of mankind, how are consumers impacted with this material readily available to them? As sensationalizing true crime aims to cause strong emotional reactions from consumers, constant exposure to such violence causes a decrease in emotional response (Thomas et. al., 1977). With true crime in television and movies, the use of actors causes a disconnect, making these reenactments feel like not real events, even when they are (Lowe, 2016). Furthermore, due to the media's usage of bias, sensationalism, and overall cinematic focus to retain viewers, consumers can often struggle with determining what's fiction vs reality (Friedman, 2013). Combined with consumers' consumption of true crime media, typically for entertainment and relaxation purposes, and how we view or listen to true crime second-hand reduces the impact of the material, overall adding to our desensitization (Marris & Thornham (Eds.), 2000). With the success of such media at the forefront of producers' minds, new content is continually pushed out, looking for the next big hit within the genre. With true crime becoming increasingly popular in television, movies, and podcasts, sensationalized content is regularly exposed to consumers with no regulations, making it more difficult for consumers to see the shock value and overall causing desensitization (Lowe, 2016).

Regular sensationalized true crime exposure to the everyday consumer is not only shown on television, books, podcasts, and movies. Social media and other internet platforms are common ways for consumers to learn about true crime, with the ability to share their own opinions and input on the cases. Through these platforms, a true crime community has readily appeared, with consumers able to talk about theories, and psychology, and attempt to understand motives (Broll, 2020). However, more worryingly, “fans” of criminals have appeared, admiring criminals actions and “accomplishments” (Fathallah, 2022). How can consumers willingly agree and even respect the actions of criminals, especially when told of the violence and atrocities they committed? While these “fans” have existed since the Victorian Era, the creation of the internet and various platforms allowed consumers to connect with like-minded individuals with ease, further growing the online true crime community (Fathallah, 2023; Walters, 2021). While not all members of the true crime community identify themselves as “fans” of criminals, they do express interest in their crimes, creating user-generated content (UGC) ranging from “art, fanfiction, jokes, and memes”



(Fathallah, 2023). Utilizing the serious topics of true crime, especially due to the trueness of the content, to make distasteful jokes is perverse and cruel to the victims and their loved ones (Foster, 2021). Sadly, such UGC is seen as normal on the internet, but the acceptance of such content showcases the desensitization of consumers.

### **Conclusion**

There is no question that true crime is a highly prolific and popular industry, both for producers of the genre and consumers. While true crime has evolved to better fit modern media, consumers are still driven by the curiosity of what drives criminals to act, the pursuit of knowledge, and the thrill. Producers utilize true crime's popularity and continually focus on pushing out sensationalized dramatic content for viewers. This sensationalized content, while designed to be entertaining, harms viewers' perceptions of both crime occurrences and legal proceedings and harms the victims and families, who often do not consent for their stories to be told. The regular consumption of sensationalized true crime content found both in media entertainment and the internet, also desensitizes the audience's emotional reactions to violence, crime, and death. Despite this, producers still focus on creating true crime media, as several aspects prompt the production such as lower costs, the correlation with newsworthiness, and finding advertisers. However, by exploring both the ethical and social dilemmas of commercializing and sensationalizing true crime, this research has showcased the need for both consumers and producers of true crime to understand the responsibilities of such content.

Of course, the consumption and production of true crime content will perhaps never truly stop, if its rich history has any implication. Humans will always have curiosity about things they do not truly understand or fear, and producers will always follow consumer demand. Furthermore, producers will continue to sensationalize true crime content to make it engaging for consumers. With this in mind, producers and consumers can and should make more ethical considerations within the true crime genre. Standards of the true crime genre could be created, with more mindfulness of the impact on victims and their loved ones while still creating engaging content. Acknowledging the nature of the story being produced, more considerations should be made knowing it is based on truth. Producers can still create

engaging and interesting content without glorifying and sensationalizing criminal's actions themselves. This could potentially improve international interest within the true crime genre, a valuable potential market. While not discussed in this research, there is resistance against consuming such media, in markets with cultural disconnect, commonly caused by emotional disconnect. The two markets studied, Colombia and Singapore, either needed to “escape everyday violence” or felt a “cultural disconnect due to their low murder rate” (Soto-Sanfiel & Montoya-Bermúdez, 2023).

By focusing on a more inclusive representation and providing a less sensationalized true crime narrative, these potential markets could be met. For consumers, this research highlights the importance of conscious and mindful consumption. While true crime can be informative and educational, consumers should be aware of potential desensitizing effects and ethical considerations. These stories, while treated as entertainment for many, are true and need to be treated with respect and horror not awe. As a whole, this research highlights the need for more conversation about the portrayal of true crime and its impact on public perceptions and attitudes. By exploring both the commercialization, consumption, and use of sensationalization within true crime, this thesis aims to strengthen further discussions and reflections on the role and impact of true crime media.

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