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Society's View of Mental Illness as a Result of Fictionalized Portrayals of Serial Killer Narratives

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SOCIETY'S VIEWS OF MENTAL ILLNESS AS A RESULT OF FICTIONALIZED
PORTRAYALS OF SERIAL KILLER NARRATIVES

A Thesis Presented to
the Faculty of the University Honors Program
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of the NEIU Honors Program
for Graduation with Honors

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ABSTRACT

Fictionalized serial killer narratives have been essential to media for decades, beginning with the early noir films, detective novels of the 1940s and 50s (Murley, 2), and western narratives which heavily depicted good versus evil (Hall, 5). As media has evolved, fascination with true crime has continued to grow and in turn, began to increasingly provide inspiration for fictional films and TV shows, especially through streaming service television shows like *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes* (2019), *Mindhunter* (2017), and *Making a Murderer* (2015). Through research on the psychological interest in violence, the blurred line between fact and fictional serial killer narratives and their marketability this thesis focuses on the exploitation of mental illness in fictionalized serial killer narratives centering around the depiction of serial killers as monstrous celebrities. It uses Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory to explain how incorrect and negative messages about mental health are encoded into filmed media which affects how society views mental illness. These narratives demonize mental illness and this thesis argues that the media has turned the serial killer into a consumable character by exploiting their mental illness. Its goal is to enlighten audiences about how their consumption of fictionalized serial killer narratives, affects the way in which they perceive those living with mental illness.

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INTRODUCTION

People have always been interested in True Crime and multimedia has always set the perfect stage for it. However, with True Crime came the serial killer narrative, which also found a spotlight within the media with the help of sensationalism. According to Joy Wiltenburg, in her journal article, “True Crime: The Origins of Modern Sensationalism,” sensationalization of True Crime in the media finds its origins as far back as the 1500s within early German printing centers (Wiltenburg, 1379). During these times True Crime narratives were often set to songs or rhymes, or even had violent scenes carved into wood to increase both their visual and oral effects. Incorporating these procedures broadened their audience (Wiltenburg, 1382). The word “sensationalism” was invented in the nineteenth century as a pejorative term to denounce works of literature or journalism that aimed to arouse strong emotional reactions in the public” (Wiltenburg, 1378). Another early representation of sensationalism in the media was the practice of yellow journalism, which rose to popularity in the late 1800s. Yellow journalism included the use of enticing, eye-catching headlines, faked photos and non-fact checked stories (Harrower, 11). Today, these same sensationalized narratives are seen in film, on television, or even more popular, YouTube and streaming services like Netflix and Hulu. With streaming services such as these, audiences have seen a plethora of serial killer documentaries and biopics. The ever-growing number of these documentaries is in response to society's demand for that specific, sensationalized, binge-worthy serial killer narrative. The issue with simulated violence, or filmed violence, defined by Jeffery Goldstein in his book, *Why We Watch: The Attractions of Violent Entertainment*, as it relates to serial killer

narratives is the effect that it has on society's perception of mental illness as a whole including society's misunderstanding of terms used to label these individuals (Goldstein, 3). While society may perceive serial killers as psychotic monsters, forensic psychiatrist Dr. Park Elliot Dietz says, "every serial killer is mentally disordered, nearly all are sexual sadists, yet few are actually psychotic" (Dietz, 483). Being psychotic and suffering from psychosis are two different things. According to Dr. Robert D. Hare, a true psychopath does not have a sense of reality and lacks the ability to feel empathy for others (Hare, 34). Being psychotic is referred to as part of the individual's personality (Hare, IX). An individual who is suffering from psychosis usually suffers from a chronic mental disorder that results in "abnormal or violent social behavior," as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary. It is considered to be a symptom of chronic mental illness. Thus, all serial killers are suffering from chronic and often untreated mental illnesses and suffer from psychotic symptoms, but most are not actually psychotic. This is important to understand because the way in which the media depicts serial killers and their stories in highly sensationalized and dramatized ways affects how society as a whole views mental illness; especially during this time of heightened awareness of mental health and society's ability to talk more openly about it.

In no way does this thesis intend to engender sympathy for serial killers, nor does it intend to offend the victims of these individuals' crimes and their families; rather it seeks to encourage examination and critique of the messages the media is offering them about mental illness through these depictions. By packaging serial killers as marketable celebrities, causing a blurring of the line between fact and fictionalized narratives, contemporary media is adding to the mental health stigma that is still very present within

our society. This thesis seeks to explain how this cyclical cycle of interest and misrepresentation leads to the fueling of stigma.

Filmed media encodes messages into sensationalized, counter-hegemonic, serial killer narratives, that are often highly fictionalized and inaccurate, these messages are decoded by audiences and as a result have a negative effect on how society perceives mental illness as a whole. Hegemonic media is media that is influenced by dominant forces within society. These dominant forces, like the government, large corporations, and production companies hold ideologies that are highly normalized, and often incorporated within the media we consume. Individuals who struggle with mental illness, including serial killers, are oftentimes inaccurately depicted within mass media because their narratives are counter-hegemonic, or not normal. However, this often increases society's interest in these individuals as they try to understand them.

SERIAL KILLERS AS MARKETABLE CELEBRITIES

The serial killer's ability to resonate with audiences on a psychological level has caused him to become a celebrity within the media. Examples of this can be cited with the Zodiac Killer whose massive media coverage is one of their most recognizable traits. The Zodiac Killer sent coded messages to newspapers, which taunted the police, making them a cultural icon at the time of their killings. The Zodiac Killer has not been caught to this day; therefore, I have used the pronoun them and their to refer to them. It is easy for the media to create narratives around the serial killer because they present a relatable main character that acts in highly formulaic patterns. Their narratives are also extremely consumable because of the way in which they are marketed.

The serial killer presents audiences with a relatable “othered” character and therefore their stories do well in the media. Serial killers are perceived to be just like everyone else in society, however there is something looming underneath that society cannot explain, which makes them so fascinating. As explained by Nicola Nixon, in their slight “otherness,” they can be compared to the gothic monsters such as Frankenstein, Dracula and the Wolfman (Nixon, 220). As said by David Schmid in his book, *Natural Born Celebrities*, “The famous serial killer combines the roles of monster and celebrity in a particularly economical and charged way, and this is why famous serial killers are such a visible part of the contemporary American cultural landscape” (Schmid, 8). Serial killers are also similar to celebrities in the sense that they are just like regular members of society however they are still at such a distance that society cannot understand their way of life (Schmid, 8). However, what is important to keep in mind, as stated by Leo Braudy in his book, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and its History*, is that “the serial killer is the exemplary modern celebrity widely known and famous for being himself” (Braudy, 554). Like a celebrity, serial killers are commodified off of their personalities, which mental illness plays a large part in forming. This commodification of the serial killer’s personality can be attributed to the ways in which serial killers’ function in society as well as in how they commit their crimes.

The ways in which serial killers’ function is highly patterned and methodological causing their stories to be highly marketable. As explained in an article entitled, “The Guys Who Shoot to Thrill: Serial Killers and the American Popular Unconscious” authored by Robert Conrath, their serialized behavior patterns can be compared to that of an anthological television series. While the characters and setting may change each

season, the viewer still knows the general way in which the story is going to play out (Conrath, 151). Therefore, they are able to provide media producers with an easily reproduced template.

One might even argue that society's monstrous consumer culture is what causes audiences to crave and devour increasingly violent narratives. Author Brian Jarvis explains in his article, "Monsters Inc.: Serial Killers and Consumer Culture," that "the commodification of violence in popular culture is structurally integrated with the violence of commodification itself" (Jarvis, 1). The violence of consumer culture in which Jarvis is referring to can be seen in the violence surrounding Black Friday deals and most recently the panicked consumer culture surrounding hoarding food and supplies during the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Consumer culture is so violent in itself that the violence of serial killer narratives fits perfectly into it. Consumer culture has accepted the very real violence of serial killer narratives with open arms, allowing it to not only influence fictional depictions of serial murders in television shows like *Criminal Minds* (2005) and *Law & Order* (1990), but be the main subject in Netflix documentaries like *Conversations with a Killer* (2019), *Making a Murder* (2015), and *Mindhunter* (2019).

THE BLURRING OF THE LINE BETWEEN FACT AND FICTION

True Crime has been referred to by Mark Seltzer, in his book *True Crime: Observations on Violence and Modernity*, as "crime fact that looks like crime fiction" (Seltzer, 2). Some even cite the fictionalization of true crime as one of America's favorite past times (Haut, 3). As stated in an article by Stephen King on the intrigues of horror

films, “One critic has suggested that if pro football has become the voyeur’s version of combat, then the modern horror film has become the modern version of public lynching” (King, 151-152). The issue with fictionalized serial killer narratives arises when the line between fact and fiction begins to blur and sensationalism begins to occur. Fictionalized serial killer narratives often take inspiration from real life crimes. One of the first examples of this being the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), whose main character took inspiration from the real life serial killer Ed Gein. Multiple episodes of *Criminal Minds* were also inspired by real serial killers like the Zodiac Killer and the Manson Family. Today, the fictionalized serial killer narrative can be seen in more true to life depictions of serial killer narratives. Netflix’s *Mindhunter* series can be seen as a major example. Serial killer Edmund Kemper is portrayed with eerie accuracy on the show, along with many other serial killers including: The BTK killer, Son of Sam, and Charles Manson. However, it is Cameron Britton’s spot-on portrayal of Kemper that draws in fans as they become infatuated with his relationship with Holden Ford. Ford is also based off of a real FBI agent John E. Douglas, whose personal story is often dramatically fictionalized for the show.

Therefore, as stated by author Sonia Baelo Allué in her article, “THE AESTHETICS OF SERIAL KILLING: WORKING AGAINST ETHICS IN ‘THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS’ (1988) AND ‘AMERICAN PSYCHO’(1991),” the serial killer, “belongs to the realms of both reality and fiction and as a consequence of this cultural crisscrossing, on some occasions, reality and fiction become mixed and influence each other” (Allue,7). Thus, there is a clear blurring between the line of fact and fiction that can be cited when discussing society’s perception of mentally ill individuals.

The stereotypes and negative connotations around those living with mental illness take root in the language used when speaking about or portraying serial killer narratives. As stated by Christina Gregoriou in her book, *Language, Ideology and Identity in Serial Killer Narratives*, “The language that surrounds real-life killers ultimately fictionalizes them, while it enables fictional killers to be glamorized, even admired” (Gregoriou, 164). This way of speaking contributes to how society perceives these individuals and their crimes (Gregoriou, 164). Examples of this language can be seen in the trailers for films like *My Friend Dahmer* (2017) and *Incredibly Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* (2019). Equating popular actors like Zac Efron to serial killers allows for their glamorization. *Time Out New York* refers to *My Friend Dahmer* as, “A window into the making of a monster.” *Nerdist* refers to the film as “fun.” This language fictionalizes these individuals, their mental illnesses, and their crimes. It removes the severity of the situation and replaces it with the lighthearted feeling of a superhero origin film or a coming of age story, this especially seen in the film, *My Friend Dahmer*. If one perceives these mentally ill individuals as fictionalized characters, this has a direct effect on how society is going to view mental illness in its entirety leading to a never-ending cycle of misrepresentation and stigma.

THE CREATION OF STIGMA USING STUART HALL’S ENCODING/DECODING THEORY OF COMMUNICATION

The way in which society assigns meaning to messages around the world that are encoded into media portrayals is a cyclical cycle. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall’s encoding decoding theory can be used to explain this phenomenon. Hall’s theory states that media

producers encode messages into media which are then decoded by society. This theory easily allows for the perpetuation of stereotypes. Hall says, “It is this set of decoded meanings which ‘have an effect,’ influence, entertain, instruct, or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioral consequences” (Hall, 3). The serial killer does not fit into the hegemonic norms of society and does not have a place in normalized media and therefore he acts out in counter-hegemonic ways. The serial killer is a deviant individual who is not considered a real person in mainstream media’s eyes. As a result of this, the media often struggles to accurately portray their counter-hegemonic ways of living and thus society’s perception of the mentally ill individual suffers, and negative stereotypes are continually perpetuated. This is because the encoding/decoding theory of communication is cyclical. Media producers were at some point audiences and some audiences become media producers, they are one and the same being continuously fed the same incorrect messages.

Julia Crant used Hall’s theory when conducting a study on how filmed media affects the way in which society perceives those living with mental illness. In her study, Crant split subjects into two groups. She showed one group a control video on animals and showed the other group a video of a fictitious individual living with schizophrenia successfully teaching a class. She then administered a survey with questions relating to schizophrenia and people’s attitudes towards individuals living with the disease. Those who watched the latter video had a positive opinion of those living with schizophrenia, viewing them as less dangerous than those who had watched the control video. While Crant’s study was able to show a positive impact on a group of individual’s perceptions of mental illness, this is not often the case with fictionalized serial killer narratives

(Crant, 194-195). As explained by Jean Murley in her book, *The Rise of True Crime: 20th Century Murder and American Popular Culture*, True Crime is often “read as a countercurrent to the social progress and cultural changes-feminism, multiculturalism, political correctness-that have transformed American life in the past four decades” (Murley, 3). Meaning that fictionalized serial killer narratives cause society to regress in political correctness and cultural understanding. Society has made major strides to become more knowledgeable and informed on mental health in the past few years. However, by feeding an easily imprintable society incorrect and sensationalized messages about mental illness through filmed, fictionalized serial killer narratives, society regresses.

Authors living with mental illness, like Naomi Kando, highlight these counter current stereotypes that are often perpetuated within these narratives. Kando explains that one of the largest issues with mental illness depictions in media is that they are oftentimes inaccurate and for individuals who have never encountered mental illness outside of media it can have a negative and inaccurate effect on how society views mental illness (Kondo, 250). She specifically cites the perception that many people in society hold that all individuals suffering from mental illness are violent, despite the percentage of dangerous mentally ill individuals being statistically quite small in reality (Kondo, 250). Thus, fictionalized narratives encourage society to view those suffering with mental illness negatively and inaccurately.

BREAKING THE STIGMA

Therefore, recent filmed media like *Mindhunter*, *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* and *My Friend Dahmer* glamorize the lives of serial killers and their crimes. It is essential for society to understand the effect that fictionalized serial killer narratives have on their perception of those living with mental illness. Media influences the way in which we perceive the world around us. Due to the fact that those who live with mental illness struggle to find a place in hegemonic society, their stories are often misrepresented by the highly hegemonic media whose narratives ultimately taint the way in which society comprehends the complexities of mental illness. Such narratives perpetuate stereotypes and stigmas that demonize mental illness as well as those living and functioning with it on a daily basis. These stereotypes are inaccurate, yet deeply ingrained into society's subconscious as we continue to see an overflow of this highly sensationalized content. While these fictionalized serial killer narratives do not seem to be going anywhere, avid consumers of this media should strive to inform themselves about mental illness to understand that not everything they are seeing in this media is accurate. If fans of True Crime and fictionalized serial killer narratives strive to educate themselves in this way, they can help to break the cycle of sensationalized and damaging depictions of mental illness, the first step toward altering how our society views individuals living with mental illness.

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