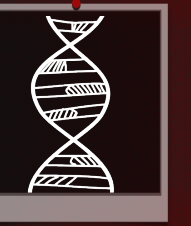




TRUE CRIME CULTURE



THE GENDERED IMPACT

Many would naturally assume cold-blooded violence, gore and death to be male-dominated subjects. After all, action and thriller movies with these elements are stereotypically popular amongst men. Yet for true crime, this could not be further from the truth.

According to a 2018 study by Kelli S. Boling and Kevin Hull, women make up 73% of the true-crime podcast audience. Another University of Illinois study found that women were more likely than men to gravitate toward true crime books as opposed to other violent genres. These consistent demographic patterns raises the question: Why are women so drawn to true crime?

One possible explanation is that women are more likely to resonate with the victims portrayed in true crime media. True crime content frequently depicts victims killed by intimate partners, and according to the U.S. Department of Justice, women compose roughly 70% of murder victims killed by an intimate partner.

In addition to the nature of the crimes, the gender of the victims portrayed also likely plays a role. In a study conducted by Amanda M. Vicary and R. Chris Fraley of Illinois Wesleyan University and University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign respectively, when choosing between true crime books with either male or female victims, male participants were almost evenly split in regards to the gender of the victim. On the other hand, female participants had a clear preference, with 59% of female participants choosing books with female victims and only 41% choosing books with male victims.

Some speculate that this phenomenon could be caused in part by women being more likely to place themselves in the shoes of female victims, and as a result, subconsciously use true crime as a way to learn survival skills in hopes of avoiding similarly gendered violence.

From a young age, junior Sophia Guardado has watched true-crime TV shows like "Autopsy: The Last Hours Of..." and "Unsolved Mysteries."

"[I watch true crime] ... for protection as well as curiosity," Guardado said. "You become more aware of the people you talk to. You shouldn't say every little detail to one person because that person may or may not do something bad."

Sophomore Julianne Miller started watching true crime during quarantine, but recently stopped.

"I started scaring myself with the [amount] I was consuming because I felt paranoid at one point about everything that I saw," Miller said. "Stuff like that ... tipped me over the edge because I was hearing about kidnapping and the horrible things that happened [and] I [couldn't] look at [it] anymore. I know my place in society [as a] vulnerable person."

Despite its psychological thrill and educational value, true crime can also have harmful lasting effects, especially when mixed with the harsh reality of gendered violence.

"My friend and I watch true crime and we would talk about what we knew, and then what would we do in those certain situations and we were like, 'Okay, I'll call you' [and] 'Okay, when we walk down the street, we'll have all of this stuff with us,'" Miller said. "I have a better understanding of the world, yet it also was kind of traumatic just reliving these people's lives."



WHY DO WE LIKE TRUE CRIME? [THE PSYCHOLOGY BEHIND IT]



For some students, true crime media has become a core part of their daily entertainment. Many initially stumbled upon the genre over quarantine, with the media providing comfort during a time of isolation. Senior Anthony Rodriguez-Miranda started listening to "Morbid: A True Crime Podcast" in 2020 and often listens to true crime cases while working or exercising.

"It's just a morbid curiosity that I feel that most people have," Rodriguez-Miranda said. "It's interesting because it sheds light on a ton of different cases [and] ... social issues."

According to data from Nielsen, average viewers from NBC's Dateline increased by 9% from March to April 2020. The March 28 episode of "Lizzie Borden Took An Axe" had 3.42 million viewers, a 30% increase in viewers from the same night the year before.

Humans are often curious about what drives others to commit extreme acts of violence such as murder, extortion or kidnapping, as most of them have never committed such crimes.

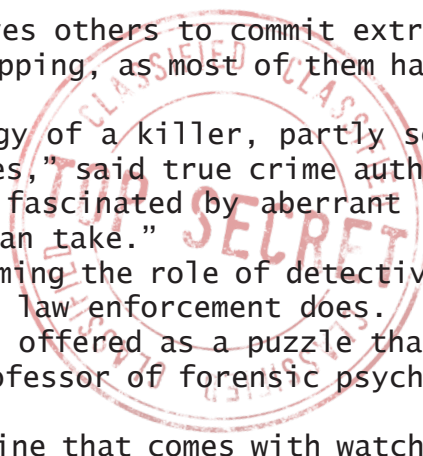
"We want some insight into the psychology of a killer, partly so we can learn how to protect our families and ourselves," said true crime author Caitlin Rother. "But also because we are simply fascinated by aberrant behavior and the many paths that twisted perceptions can take."

Avid watchers love solving puzzles, assuming the role of detective to see if they can figure out the perpetrator before law enforcement does.

"Most true crimes on TV and in books are offered as a puzzle that people want to solve," said Katherine Ramsland, a professor of forensic psychology at DeSales University.

People also gravitate toward the adrenaline that comes with watching true crime as it allows them to experience fear in a controlled environment, according to Drew University criminology professor Scott Bonn.

However, consumption of this type of content can have lasting negative effects. According to a 2015 study published in the American Psychological Association's "Journal of Personality and Social Psychology," more exposure to media violence leads to desensitization to violent stimuli and lowers levels of sympathy for victims. Additionally, according to Purdue University Professor Glenn Sparks, a professor at Purdue University, this normalization of violence can make people more tolerant of violence in real life. On the other hand, some argue this type of content can raise awareness about safety, and the widespread coverage of a case on news outlets and social media can also bring about useful developments.



ONGOING CASES

For many people, becoming a victim of crime is their worst nightmare. For an unlucky few, this nightmare becomes reality. And in the age of social media, these nightmares have the potential to become someone's nightly entertainment.

The true crime genre encompasses cases that have been unsolved for decades, as well as cases that have recently come to trial. With the rise of the Internet, easily accessible public information online has allowed people to become fully immersed in the details of criminal cases. A growing number of crimes have been covered by social media while investigations actively unfold, giving huge audiences unprecedented insight into the proceedings of criminal cases. Unsurprisingly, the numbers of people who allege to possess intimate details on criminal cases has also grown with the rise of the true crime genre. This phenomenon has influenced multiple missing persons cases, some even garnering worldwide press.

One such case that has recently received national attention is Gabrielle Petito. Petito was reported missing from Teton County, Wyo. on Sep. 11, 10 days after her fiancé, Brian Laundrie, returned from their shared cross-country van trip. After details of her case were publicized across various social media platforms, a large following formed, with updates on her case amassing thousands of likes and shares and reaching national headlines. As a result, two travelers who had recently passed by the same area found a shot of Petito's white van in their footage. The area was searched, and Petito's remains were found on Sept. 19, eight days after she was first reported missing.

While media attention furthered the progress of Petito's case, the massive amounts of coverage and reporting led people to inquire about her personal life prior to her disappearance. The Internet's deep involvement in her online presence and investment in bringing Petito justice has undoubtedly assisted authorities, yet many worry that the media circus surrounding her case has created a spectacle out of a very real and traumatic time in the lives of Petito's family.

THE ROLE OF RACE

Racial bias often rears its head in daily life and media, and true crime is no exception. In many forms of media inspired by true crime or direct interpretations of real events, especially on television, characters of color are often depicted as perpetrators.

A 2018 study by Color of Change, a nonprofit civil rights organization, discovered that across 26 different shows from various providers, wrongful actions generally associated with racial bias were depicted in a completely race neutral way, rather than displaying realistic race relations.

These shows often avoid implicating the criminal justice system for its bias and systemic racism. Instead, they tend to shift the focus towards excess bureaucracy or inadequately harsh punishments. While all of these shows include characters of color, their portrayals often lack depth and rely on stereotypes. Additionally, there is a major lack of diversity in the writers and showrunners producing these shows.

According to the same Color of Change study, there were a total of six discussions of reform toward the justice system across 353 episodes aired, wildly underrepresenting the actual amount of discourse surrounding the criminal justice system. The media observed in the study consisted of primarily white victims, and the shows frequently shirked from acknowledging the injustice that people of color face at the hands of law enforcement, as well as the lack of attention and concern non-white victims receive in the criminal justice system. For example, more than 700 indigenous women went missing in Wyoming alone over the last ten years, yet coverage of these women was minimal until very recently.

TRUE CRIME BY THE NUMBERS

IN 2020, TRUE CRIME...

was the **#3** most popular podcast genre

was the **#2** most watched show on Netflix ("Tiger King")

saw a roughly **9%** jump in viewers between March 23 and April 5 ("Dateline NBC")

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