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CONSTRUCTIONS OF SERIAL KILLERS AND VICTIMS: ANALYSIS OF TRUE CRIME DOCUSERIES

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CONSTRUCTIONS OF SERIAL KILLERS AND VICTIMS: ANALYSIS OF TRUE CRIME

DOCUSERIES

by

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Abstract

Stories of crime have consistently captured the attention of the public, with stories of heists, kidnappings and murder. The true crime genre receives enormous attention and serves for many as the primary source of crime knowledge, including who commits crime, how they commit crime and how law enforcement responds. Books and podcasts have been interrogated by researchers to understand the nature of the content but missing are the true crime documentaries and docuseries that have dominated streaming platforms in North America. The present study examined three true crime series about serial killers using social constructionism and social problems theory, and examining narratives, dialogue, pictures, and claimsmakers in the docuseries. Four guiding questions were posed (1) how are serial killers constructed as social problem? (2) how are serial killers constructed? (3) how are victims constructed? (4) Who are the main claimsmakers featured? Three recent docuseries were selected, *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes*, *Night Stalker* and *I'll be Gone in the Dark*. Employing qualitative media analysis, the docuseries were examined in their entirety using the program NVivo. Analysis revealed several key findings. The first finding relates to the construction of serial homicide in an episodic fashion, with mythology building around the killer taking place. The perpetrators are given variable amounts of time in each docuseries, with some positioning the killer at the center while others prioritized victim's stories. Construction of the victims also varied widely, from another statistic and evidence to an empathetic person, through the use of dialogue and images. The last component examined was claimsmakers, who overwhelmingly belongs to branches of law enforcement. The implications of these findings are discussed, in addition to the future directions for literature.

Key Words: Media, Documentary Series, Serial Killers, Social Constructionism, Social Construction of Social Problems, Qualitative, True Crime
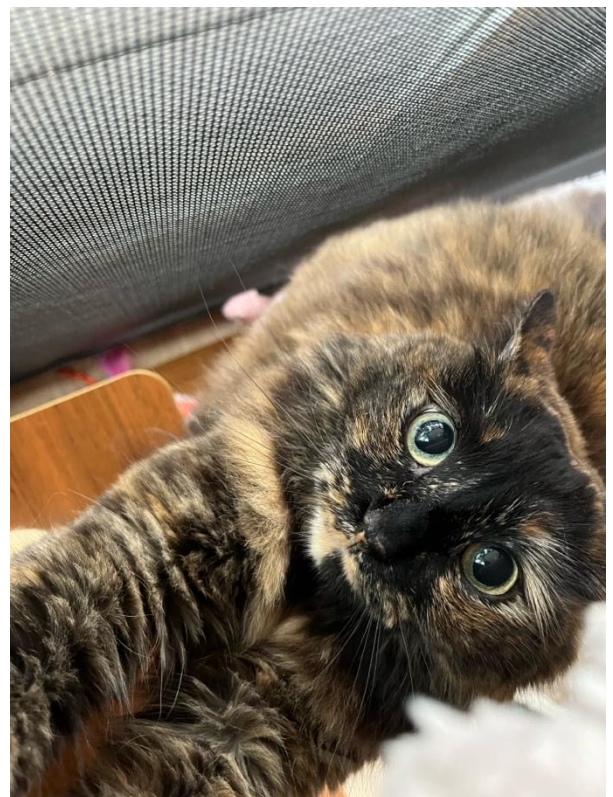
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To all the victims and survivors of violent crimes, I hope to continue to advocate for your stories and ensure you are given the grace you deserve.

Picture 1. Research Assistant Nutmeg

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Chapter 1: Introduction

As stated by Boling (Chan, 2020), "true crime is everywhere" (para. 10). Indeed, across all media formats, "true crime" – media that discusses or portrays real life crimes – has seen a nearly decade-long rise in popularity (Boling, 2019; Walters, 2021). True crime books, such as *The Stranger Beside Me* by Ann Rule (1980) and *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* by Michelle McNamara (2018), have experienced newfound acclaim, with true crime books sales nearly doubling from 2016 to 2018 (Chan, 2020). The growth in demand for true crime is even more evident among podcasts, with *Serial* (2014) becoming the fastest-ever podcast to accumulate 5 million downloads (Dredge, 2014). Despite the decade long period that has passed, the popularity of true crime podcasts has not waned since 2014, with 34% of podcast listeners regularly tuning into true crime shows, and a quarter of the top-ranked podcasts falling into the true crime genre, according to a Pew Research Center study (2023a, b).

Alongside audio-based media, streaming services have also wasted no time capitalizing on true crime enthusiasm, with notable – and sometimes controversial – success (Bruzzi, 2016; Buozis, 2017; Fanning & O'Callaghan, 2023; Morton, 2021; Williams, 2020). Since the overwhelming success of *Making a Murderer* (Demos & Ricciardi) in 2015 on Netflix, evidently a major time for the genre, the platform has released over 50 true crime documentaries, with 18 of the releases spending multiple days on the platform's top 10 list (Pantony et al., 2023; Sayles, 2021; Walters, 2021). Likewise, other streaming services such as HBO, Hulu, and Amazon have produced dozens of true crime pieces, including documentaries and dramatizations (Chan, 2020; Foreman, 2023; Walters, 2021). As of June 2023, over twenty true crime documentaries and series have been released across platforms this year, a testament to true crime's lucrative status (Knappenberger, 2023).

Despite the popularity of true crime media, scholars, members of the public, and people close to the cases have all voiced concerns about the attention given to killers over victims (Chan, 2020; Kundu, 2022; Williams, 2020). Multiple scholars have warned of the celebrity-like status bestowed upon serial killers, courtesy of true crime media that puts the focus on the killers themselves instead of their – often marginalized – victims (Horeck, 2019; Kundu, 2022). In response to the growth of the true crime genre and the aforementioned concern, a growing body of research has accumulated which examines various aspects of the genre and its constructions of crime and focus on the killers over victims (e.g., Boling, 2019; 2022; Boling & Hull, 2018; Bruzzi, 2016; Fanning & O'Callaghan, 2023; Horeck, 2019; Slakoff, 2023; Slakoff et al., 2022).

However, research on recent true crime content is limited. One grouping of true crime media that scholars and the public have expressed concern over, which has received little research attention, are serial killer documentaries (Bushby & Youngs, 2022; Chan, 2020; Fanning & O'Callaghan, 2023; Gemzøe, 2021; Williams, 2020). Not surprisingly, the public has shown a high interest in serial killers, even outside of true crime contexts (Hodgkinson et al., 2017). This public fascination with serial killers is not limited to recent killers or crimes. For example, Netflix released two true crime series focusing on Ted Bundy - *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes* (Berlinger, 2019a) and *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* (Berlinger, 2019b; Reid, 2016) – in the same year. Across media platforms, serial killer cases are incredibly popular. Outside of Netflix are countless dramatizations of and documentaries about Ted Bundy and other prolific serial killers such as Jeffrey Dahmer, John Wayne Gacy, Jack the Ripper and Aileen Wuornos. The vast number of series, movies, podcasts, and books all reiterating stories of serial killers from decades ago defies the typical attention received by criminal cases (Bruzzi, 2018; Walters, 2021).

Thus far, minimal research has focused on true crime documentaries featured on streaming services and what the content and narratives within the media pieces communicate and imply. Previous research has focused on single documentaries or the theoretical implications of the true crime genre, with minimal contemporary focus. Likewise, little exploration has been done into docuseries that focus on serial killers, despite their consistently high viewership across platforms. Furthermore, the importance of true crime centres around the importance of public knowledge and awareness to promote advocacy for victims and justice, especially in cases where victims belong to marginalized groups (Anastasio & Costa, 2004; Ricciardelli et al., 2021; Vedric & Little, 2022). The present study addresses the research shortage, analyzing true crime documentaries' qualitative elements to elucidate the ways in which crime is portrayed to the public and if such portrayals are realistic or enforce biases about perpetrators and victims.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

True Crime Media

The genre of true crime differs from typical media in many ways, including the unique topics encapsulated within it and the long history of crime stories blending informative media and entertainment. The following sections will review the contemporary understanding of true crime as a distinct media genre and the historical changes that have made true crime what it is today. Furthermore, frequently voiced critiques of true crime, as well as new criticism, will be overviewed alongside the potential routes of justice true crime provides.

Defining True Crime

The focus of this study is true crime, which itself encapsulates a vast array of media types and narrative approaches (Murley; 2008; Punnett, 2018). Specifically, true crime includes any form of media that covers real crimes and the details around them, such as the motivations for perpetrators or victim profiles (Punnett, 2018). In addition, true crime can range from reporting about a burglary through a podcast episode to a multipart series on an unsolved homicide (e.g., CBC's *Missing & Murdered: Finding Cleo*); however, a significant percentage of true crime focuses on serial homicide (Larke-Walsh, 2023; Robinson & Daigle, 2022). Furthermore, while technically a global genre, true crime and the associated research have been mostly Western specific, with emphasis on crime in the United States specifically (Hodgkinson et al., 2017).

As described by Punnett (2018), true crime media goes further than regular news media, in that outside of informing audiences on criminal events, true crime also aims to entertain through story telling. The true crime shows produced across streaming services frequently include re-enactments, if not outright dramatizations, giving the audience a seemingly objective

depiction of the crime that is also formatted to entertain (Garcia & Arkerson, 2018). Unfortunately, many people watching documentaries can easily overlook and not consider the story construction behind the scenes, partly due to the assumption that documentaries display a realism unique to the genre (Mackay, 2018). The "infotainment" aspect of true crime is obvious when compared to traditional news, with the use of cinematic shots, composed scores, and suspenseful editing that are akin to the cinematography of horror films (Garcia & Arkerson, 2018).

History of True Crime Media

Today, true crime is a multi-media endeavour that includes books, podcasts, blogs and vlogs, documentaries, and docuseries. Yet public interest in true crime is nothing new (Flanders, 2014; Murley, 2008). Reports and stories of crimes can be found as far back as the 16th century, and even earlier word of mouth passed around grisly details of a murderous "werewolf" or traitor being caught and punished for their crimes (Garcia & Arkerson, 2018). At the start of the 19th century, as cities urbanized and poverty increased, murders, previously rare in frequency, suddenly grew in number (Flanders, 2014). Though the term would not be used for another 150 years, serial killers, those who kill three or more people, were almost certainly present prior to the expansion of cities and recognition of serial killers (Reid, 2016). However, the crimes of serial offenders may have been understood through stories of malevolent mythical forces and possessions, where supernatural forces led someone to commit multiple murders (Vronsky, 2018).

During the 1800s, the crimes of body-snatchers-turned-serial-killers William Burke and William Hare, H.H. Holmes and his infamous "murder castle", and Jane Toppan shocked and fascinated the public (Flanders, 2014; Jenkins, 1994). Burke and Hare lived in Edinburgh,

profiting off the medical school's need for cadavers by first, stealing from fresh graves, then committing murders to provide the bodies. Across the ocean, Jane Toppan committed her crimes in Boston, poisoning her patients at hospitals using various opioids and poisons. H.H. Holmes operated a hotel in Chicago as a guise for luring in women that would go mysteriously missing once he had taken out life insurance policies on them. These cases elicited massive media attention, in the form of pamphlets, news articles, and even recreations of the crimes in dioramas (Flanders, 2014; Walters, 2021). In London, specifically, gory details and subsequent investigations by police were distributed, and often exaggerated, by the press to a fervently awaiting public (Flanders, 2014; Garcia & Arkerson, 2018). However, despite the genre's overall popularity, crime stories were largely considered amoral by the public and unacceptable as a part of the larger entertainment media throughout the first half of the 20th century (Flanders, 2014; Hernandez, 2019).

True crime as it is known and accepted today first appeared within the pages of the American *True Detective Magazine* throughout the 1940s and 1950s (Durham et al., 1995; Murley, 2008; Vronsky, 2018). According to most scholars, however, true crime fully became a genre following the 1959 murders of the Clutter family in Holcomb, Kansas, and the subsequent retelling in the novel, *In Cold Blood* (1966) by Truman Capote (Boling, 2019; Hernandez, 2019; Robinson & Daigle, 2022). Capote brought true crime into the larger public awareness and legitimized true crime as entertainment by departing from pulpy crime magazines. Detailing murders for entertainment was still considered taboo, but true crime was no longer relegated to the shameful fringes of media (Hernandez, 2019). The publishing of *In Cold Blood* (Capote, 1966) also happened to coincide with what popular culture has deemed the "golden age" of serial

killers, which spanned from the late 1960s to the 1990s, at least in North America (Vronsky, 2018).

While serial killers certainly existed in the United States and Canada prior to this period, a combination of factors and social changes meant that serial killers seemingly proliferated across the continent, with many of the killers themselves becoming infamous household names through constant news reports (Boling, 2019). As interest grew, the 1980s and 1990s saw the creation of true crime shows like *Unsolved Mysteries* and *Forensic Files* (Bucklew, 2023). Such shows were popular in their early and mid-years, alongside more reality-show leaning true crime television like *COPS*, but interest dwindled over time with the popularization of the Internet and social media sites (Murley, 2008; Walters, 2021).

As the Internet allowed greater access to a wider range of media, new forms of true crime emerged as blogs and podcasts joined other forms of digital media alongside legacy media. In 2014, American journalists Sarah Koenig and Julie Snyder released their critically acclaimed podcast *Serial*. The original twelve episodes discuss the seemingly solved case of Baltimore teenager Hae Min Lee, the high school girlfriend of Adnan Syed, who was convicted of her murder (Koenig, 2014). The podcast generated record-breaking attention and discussion that was unlike anything the true crime genre had seen (Dredge, 2014). With the release of such a well-received true crime piece that excluded exploitative and gruesome content, the genre was legitimized and pushed out of guilty-pleasure status for audiences (Rife, 2019).

The following year saw the release of two more true crime pieces, both of which, like *Serial*, are considered key contributors to the most recent true crime boom. The first show, produced by HBO, was *The Jinx* (Jarecki et al., 2015), covering the suspicious deaths surrounding Robert Durst, an American real estate heir. Nine months later, the documentary

series *Making a Murderer* (2015) streamed on Netflix, which covers the case of Steven Avery, a man convicted of a 2005 murder in Wisconsin but questions the legitimacy of the investigation and legal proceedings in the case. All three of these examples of new true crime media were immensely popular and helped to kickstart a new wave of true crime enthusiasm (Bruzzi, 2016; Fanning & O'Callaghan, 2023; Hernandez, 2019).

Though contemporary true crime media largely focuses on the same crimes as previous iterations, the ways in which these topics are covered has changed in several ways (Bruzzi, 2016; Buozis, 2016). Among the most notable differences is the departure from narratives present in the 1990s and 2000s iterations of true crime, which frequently fell into "copaganda", praising and glorifying law enforcement while vilifying marginalized communities (Bernabo, 2022; Huddleston, 2016; Walters, 2021). Many of the true crime releases within the last decade, including *The Jinx*, *Making a Murderer*, and *Serial*, highlight the flaws of legal institutions and the people involved, whether such oversights are a product of carelessness or prejudicial actions (Huddleston, 2016). Additionally, as social media has become a hub of discussion for true crime, real life changes to verdicts, reopening of cases and newly garnered attention to cases can be seen (Buozis, 2017; Hernandez, 2019). Greater awareness of which cases are unsolved or had significant flaws in the initial investigation has allowed online communities to work together to generate developments in investigations and court cases. For instance, the previously discussed publication of *Serial* (2014) led to Adnan Syed's conviction being overturned. Online interactions between people outside of law enforcement, and interest in true crime media, has more than ever before led to real life and legal consequences, with multiple cases solved or followed in real time by online audiences.

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic saw an even larger leap in the popularity of true crime, as lockdowns provided ample opportunity to stream shows that offered the "dark" material audiences sought out in the midst of a global pandemic (Sayles, 2021; Demopoulos, 2020). Compared to the same 12-month period of May to April of 2019/20, demand for true crime increased by over 50% and maintained its standing as the most in-demand sub-genre of documentaries in 2020/21 (Parrot Analytics, 2021). As attention grew, so too did the criticism of the true crime content produced across streaming platforms and popularised through social media. For example, when the Netflix series *I Am a Killer* (2018) was released, multiple family members of the victims in this case felt that, even with the notice of the series being made, they were forced to re-experience the trauma of losing a loved one (Chan, 2020). Similarly, with the drama series *Dahmer* (2022), also called *Monster* (Murphy & Brennan, 2022), families of the victims stated that the release of yet another portrayal of Jeffrey Dahmer was cruel, promoting intense discussion around the ethical implications of true crime (Romano, 2022; Williams, 2020).

True Crime in the Contemporary Crime Media Market

Although crime in most Western nations has experienced a general decline over the past three decades, public concern about crime has remained consistently high (Jewkes, 2015). To further invalidate concerns about crimes such as assault or homicide, statistics show that violent crimes are generally vanishingly rare and isolated cases, with the homicide rate of 2021 in Canada being 2.06 per 100,000 compared to general crime which had a rate of 5375.18 per 100,000 the same year (Pfeiffer, 2005; Statistics Canada, 2023). Due to the rarity of violent crime generally and the very low likelihood of a personal encounter with it, much of the construction of crime in our minds utilizes information provided by the media (Davies et al., 2007). As a result, the media influences both how individuals think about the circumstances

surrounding and persons involved in a crime, as well as the justice and legal systems that respond to crime (Kozinski, 2015; Kappeler & Potter, 2005). The prevalence of a type of criminal, for instance, and who they are beyond their crimes can be distorted in the media, such as substance users who are reduced to their addiction in coverage. Additionally, the myth around a completely equal justice system belies the systemic racism and prejudice that media can overlook (Kappeler & Potter, 2005).

Despite the reliance on the media for perceptions of crime, scholars, and journalists themselves, have acknowledged the media's disproportionate fixation on crime (Garcia & Arkerson, 2018; Dredge, 2014). This is exemplified by the "man bites dog" pattern in news where rare events are more likely to be reported and discussed in media (Harcup, 2021). Everyday occurrences are not worth reporting on, but unique or unlikely events can capture the attention of audiences and increase viewership (Russial et al., 2015). The focus on crime in the media is so abundant, there exists a popular saying; "if it bleeds, it leads" (Dowler, 2004; Garcia & Arkerson, 2018; Lee & DeHart, 2007; Pollak & Kubrin, 2007). Violence and fear-based news coverage attract significant attention from viewers – a remnant of our evolutionary need to learn about danger and thus how to avoid it and survive (Baranauskas & Drakulich, 2018; Sangha et al., 2020).

Evidence shows that news programs that include violent stories and capitalize on fear receive more viewership, motivating news and media organizations to focus on the rare cases of violence (Baranauskas & Drakulich, 2018). Specifically, violent homicides attract many viewers and have higher salience due to the unique nature of the violence such cases involve (Chermak, 1998; Robinson & Daigle, 2022). For example, less common crimes and unusually high numbers of victims in homicide cases will generate more attention for a crime story (Chermak, 1998;

Chermak & Chapman, 2007). The resulting popularity of such broadcasts and articles reinforces the spotlighting of crime stories, which are often delivered alongside messages about the prevalence of crime (Howell, 2016). Not only does crime media cause distorted perceptions about the risk of crime to individuals, but it also contributes to inaccurate perceptions of rising crime rates (Baranauskas & Drakulich, 2018; Pfeiffer, 2005). This pattern is especially true regarding violent crimes; from physical assault to mass murder, the public often inflates the rates of such crimes far beyond the statistical realities (Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016). Most crimes are of a non-violent nature, but media tells an entirely different story (Pollak & Kubrin, 2007).

The effects of the media on social understanding of crime, both positive and negative, are well known to researchers. Crime media engagement by the public becomes especially relevant when individuals encounter the legal system (Podlas, 2005). This is apparent by examples such as the coined term "CSI effect" in juries, where members of real-life juries who have watched shows such as *CSI* or *Forensic Files* expect more forensic evidence to be presented in court (Podlas, 2005).

More concerning are the effects that distortions and biases in media, such as victim blaming (where victim's actions and characteristics are used to justify actions against them) and racist narratives in the media, have on the judicial system in real life (Gray & Kubin, 2024). In cases of sexual assault and rape, victims are frequently discouraged from reporting their assault, fuelled by beliefs that the person who attacked them will not be punished and that they themselves may be blamed (Grubb & Turner, 2012). Such belief around reporting assault and receiving justice are learned and reinforced through media that espouses victim blaming, even if subtle (Gray & Kubin, 2024). Media sources and news outlets citing victim behaviours as justification for their assault dissuades victims from pursuing justice, feeling they will be blamed

and criticized by legal representatives (Grubb & Turner, 2012). Beyond the victim themselves, actors in the justice system who accept rape myths and victim blaming will proceed with cases differently than those who do not (Howell, 2016). Police who subscribe to victim blaming ideologies may treat assault cases as inconsequential, and prosecutors and judges may dismiss cases or be more lenient with perpetrators (Grubb & Turner, 2012; Howell, 2016).

Critiques of Contemporary True Crime

Given the popularity of true crime media and other forms of violent media centered around crime, scholars are interested in understanding the appeals of such entertainment (Bergler, 1945; Hodgkinson et al., 2017; Vicary & Fraley, 2010; Williams, 2020). Bergler (1945) was an early critic of true crime enthusiasts, stating his concern over the interest expressed by viewers of crime media. A Freudian scholar by training, Bergler (1945) posited that public interest in crime was a way of expressing personal desires for violent behaviours, suppressed into the unconscious but manifesting through an interest in crime media. Such concerns echo modern critiques of violent media such as video games and contemporary true crime that claim engaging with such content can encourage violent behaviour (Krahé, 2015).

In spite of its growth and popularity, true crime media continues to attract criticism and controversy. As social media helps to proliferate true crime stories in the post-*Serial* boom, so too does it strengthen critiques of true crime among many journalists and scholars (Hernandez, 2019). Several common critiques of true crime have emerged over the last decade. Among the common criticisms, concerns have been raised about the ethics around true crime-based investigative reporting. Critics of this style of reporting have often accused true crime media of exploiting and sensationalizing personal tragedies for entertainment (Hernandez, 2019; Hodgkinson et al., 2017; Williams, 2020). For example, with their commentary on the mythos

that has encapsulated serial killers, Hodgkinson et al. (2017) expressed concern about the "voyeuristic" interest in true crime by university students. Concerns over the focus on violence towards women have also been voiced throughout the literature, including how gender-based and sexual violence are exploited and perpetuated through true crime stories (Patrick & Rajiva, 2022).

Another criticism levelled at the modern true crime genre is the repetition of tired tropes that are based in racist or misogynistic stereotypes, such as the demonization and "othering" of women who defy gender roles (Chan, 2020; Horeck, 2019; Vedric & Little, 2022). Furthermore, inaccuracies about reported crimes, such as narrow discussions about perpetrators, namely white men, and who their victims are demographically, is consistent throughout the true crime genre and raises similar concerns across all crime media (Durham et al., 1995).

While such criticism is warranted, contemporary true crime specifically has been highlighted by some scholars as a potential avenue for overdue justice and changing narratives (Cruz, 2015). Popular media that has come out in recent years, such as *Serial* (Koenig, 2014) and *Making a Murderer* (Demos & Ricciardi, 2015), have shifted true crime into the territory of advocacy journalism by calling attention to potential wrongful convictions, instead of portraying the justice system as flawless (Hernandez, 2019; Walters, 2021). With the recent wave of true crime popularity has come the rehashing of unsolved cases or miscarriages of justice that have gone unchallenged for decades (Pâquet, 2021). Hernandez (2019) calls attention to new written true crime works that do not shy away from the institutional blame in sexual assault cases, from universities that silence victims to the Catholic Church, which has facilitated rampant sexual abuse for over a century. Furthermore, Hernandez (2019) highlights multiple new true crime books that discuss decades old cases where extreme violence was perpetrated against Black and

Indigenous peoples – specifically, the lynching of Emmet Till, a black boy living in Mississippi during the Jim Crow-era, and the Osage County murders that targeted Indigenous landowners, which saw the responsible White parties go unpunished (Hernandez, 2019). The retelling of these cases as discussed by Hernandez (2019) placed emphasis on the racist nature of the violence and how crimes are part of larger patterns of devaluing minorities. As argued by Pâquet (2021), podcasts do similar work of advocating for victims through the route of mass media. The murder of Australian Maria James, stabbed to death in her Victoria home in 1980, has remained unsolved, but the podcast *Trace* brings to light the numerous mishandlings of the case by police and has reignited interest in solving the case (Brown, 2017; Pâquet, 2021). Likewise, the murder of Lynette Dawson in 1982, covered by the *Teacher's Pet* (Thomas, 2018) podcast, is a poignant example of the impacts of new true crime – the Australia-based case was officially solved with the conviction of Chris Dawson, Lynette Dawson's husband, for the murder of his wife in 2022 (Doherty, 2022; Pâquet, 2021). Evidently, new true crime is moving away from the "pulpy" and exaggerated style, which is for the better (Gemzøe, 2021; Walters, 2021).

Review of the Empirical Literature on True Crime

Research on true crime documentaries in the post-*Serial* true crime phase is limited, as much of the material is less than a decade old. However, literature can still provide significant insight into the current state of true crime media and the audiences who engage with it. The following section will review the trends and typical patterns of media discussing crime. Additionally, the motivations of why audiences engage with true crime will be overviewed, followed by the findings of researchers examining the content of true crime.

The centrality of crime to media, both as news and entertainment, does not mean crime is represented accurately. Indeed, crime media distorts the reality of crime in many ways, so much

so the phrase of "if it bleeds, it leads" can be modified with the acknowledgement that it depends on who is bleeding, with white female victims garnering significantly more sympathy than minorities and sex workers (Dowler, 2004). In addition, research shows that media publishers select which crimes or criminal justice issues receive coverage based on several organizational values of the production or institution featuring the information (Gruenwald et al., 2009).

Specifically, researchers examining the "newsworthiness" of crimes have identified several factors, such as level of violence, race, age, and gender, that influence how much attention a crime story will be given (Bouchard et al., 2020; Conlin & Davie, 2015; Gruenwald et al., 2013; Jiwani, 2014; Kappeler & Potter, 2005). Research has also shown that certain victims are more likely to receive sympathetic media coverage if they are deemed more sympathetic, a category generally exclusive to white women, children, and elderly victims (Bouchard et al., 2020; Collins, 2016). Sympathetic victims whose stories appear on the front pages of newspapers are typically white, female and do not have previous criminal offences that could take away from their prescribed innocence (Bouchard et al., 2020). The white-female-victim aspect of stories deemed newsworthy is so consistent that researchers have developed the term "Missing White Woman Syndrome", where stories about missing white women are featured more prominently and given far more attention than similar stories concerning people of colour (Conlin & Davie, 2015; Jiwani, 2014; Slakoff & Fredella, 2019).

Somewhat paradoxically, while the ideal victim in media with whom to sympathize is female, female victims are also more likely to be blamed for their attacks (Dowler, 2004; Dowler et al., 2006). Violence against women, especially women of colour, is treated as common place or as the consequence of the victim's own actions, and such ideas are communicated through newspaper, newscasts, and other media (Dowler et al., 2006; Fast & Kinewesquao, 2019; Jiwani,

2014). Not only are stories about minorities buried within other less-read stories within newspapers, but crime stories involving minorities as victims are less likely to be reported on at all (Jiwani, 2014; Schildkraut & Donley, 2012). In Canada specifically, multiple studies concluded there is a significant under-representation of marginalized victims in the news (Collins, 2016).

Even when minorities and marginalized groups are discussed in the media, they face blatant misrepresentation (Collins, 2016; Nagy et al., 2022). A great deal of research shows that media constructions of minorities and crime often conforms to stereotypes and racial biases (Bouchard et al., 2020; Christie, 1986; Conlin & Davie, 2015; Dowler, 2004; Jiwani, 2014; Nagy et al., 2022). Frequently, victims of colour are assigned responsibility for their victimization and outright blamed for their suffering, such as Indigenous community members in Canada (Nagy et al., 2022). The long history of colonial racism is still visible in the negative misconceptions of Canadian Indigenous populations, who are portrayed as incompetent and undervalued in media (Jiwani, 2014; Nagy et al., 2022). Similarly, members of Black communities are disproportionately portrayed as offenders, and rarely as victims of crimes, despite the fact only a small percentage of racial minorities are involved in crime (Pollak & Kubrin, 2007).

True Crime and Audience Motivations

While there has been a great deal of research conducted on newsworthiness criteria, comparably less attention has been paid to true crime media generally. One area of inquiry has focused on audience motivation, or why people find true crime stories so interesting. One of the first major studies to tackle who makes up the true crime audience and their preferences was conducted by Vicary and Fraley (2010). An analysis of online book reviews through Amazon revealed that contrary to what may be expected, most of the true crime readers were women

motivated by their concern of becoming a victim in a crime. Recent studies have provided further evidence that true crime podcast audiences are also mostly female, despite men making up more than half of general podcast listeners (Boling & Hull, 2018). Women's interest in true crime is so well known that *Saturday Night Live* released a sketch parodying how women use stories of brutal crimes to relax and unwind (Boling & Hull, 2018; King, 2021).

Additionally, researchers have expanded on the motivations behind true crime interest, specifically with regard to how women use true crime to avoid victimization (McDonald et al., 2021; Soto-Sanfiel & Montoya-Bermúdez, 2022). Specifically, the descriptions in true crime about perpetrators and their motivations allow female true crime consumers to gather information they believe will prevent a similar perpetrator from targeting them (Boling & Hull, 2018; McDonald et al., 2021). Female podcast audiences also considered the details of legal proceedings helpful in learning about the legal system, alongside more "voyeuristic" interests of knowing the criminal mind and their behaviours (Boling & Hull, 2018; Hodgkinson et al., 2017; Vitis, 2022).

Several studies have gone further to question how certain groups engage with true crime (Boling, 2022; Soto-Sanfiel & Montoya-Bermúdez, 2022). For example, as many true crime stories include instances of domestic violence, Boling (2022) investigated why women who are survivors of domestic violence (DV) listen to true crime. Echoing findings from other studies, Boling's (2022) interviews revealed that, female survivors of DV listened to true crime podcasts to learn about how to avoid re-victimization and the general criminal justice system (Boling & Hull, 2018; McDonald et al., 2021). Unique to survivors of DV, however, is the desire to have community and feel validated in their experiences with crime and violence (Boling, 2022).

True Crime Content

Another area of research has focused specifically on true crime media content and the extent to which it accurately portrays the stories on which they are based and criminal justice issues more generally (Durham et al. 1995; Gemzøe, 2021; Slakoff, 2022). Similar to crime news media, the content of true crime entertainment does not provide a statistically accurate picture of crime in the real world (Durham et al., 1995; Slakoff, 2022; Slakoff et al., 2022; Yardley et al., 2019). First, most true crime media available today discusses serial homicide, which are incredibly rare compared to other forms of crime. While they only account for 1% of all homicide cases, serial homicide is often central to true crime narratives (Hodgkinson et al., 2017; Criminal Justice Information Services Division, 2020). Representations of perpetrators and victims are also skewed, with findings indicating that most true crime books and podcasts over-represent white male perpetrators and child victims (Durham et al., 1995; Punnett, 2018). Motivations for murder disproportionately center around life insurance payouts, despite most murder being gang related (Durham et al., 1995). One group that is frequently absent from true crime content are victims and perpetrators of colour, a pattern reminiscent of news media discussing crime (Durham et al., 1995; Yardley et al., 2019). The larger and overarching sociological factors that contribute to understanding criminal behaviour or actions of victims, such as systemic and social structures, are also left out of discussions in true crime media (Slakoff et al., 2022; Yardley et al., 2019).

More nuanced aspects of true crime have also been subject to scrutiny by scholars (Slakoff, 2022; Slakoff, 2023; Patrick & Rajiva, 2022; Vedric & Little, 2022). For example, the construction of male perpetrators in podcasts has especially been a point of concern, as literature calls attention to the repeated ways that true crime narratives excuse or dismiss male-perpetrated

violence (Slakoff, 2023; Vedric & Little, 2022). In the process of providing background information about male perpetrators of domestic partner homicide, justifications of their actions, such as struggles with mental illness or previously being victims of abuse were found throughout podcasts (Slakoff, 2023; Vedric & Little, 2022). Mental illnesses such as depression in the context of interpersonal violence are important, but many podcasts have narratives that portray the actions of the perpetrator as beyond his control, and thus not responsible for the crimes he committed (Slakoff, 2023; Vedric & Little, 2022). Especially in cases where men have been accused of violent crimes, there is a tendency within true crime media to treat men as victims and potentially excuse their actions as resulting from difficulties in their lives (Vedric & Little, 2022). Furthermore, in cases of ongoing domestic violence, true crime podcasts will rely on victim blaming narratives, such as the female partner choosing to stay and ignoring the warning signs, without consideration given to well-known situational factors that contribute to women's decisions to stay in abusive situations (Slakoff, 2023). Such findings give credence to critiques that true crime promotes the same tropes and stereotypes as previous crime media, including victim blaming narratives and sidelining stories about marginalized victims (Slakoff, 2023; Williams, 2020).

Despite the concerns and problematic findings that have emerged in the literature, researchers have pointed out the potential of true crime media to promote positive changes. Prominently featured in new true crime media is justice-seeking in the face of a long history of injustices against marginalized groups and neglect of missing and murdered victims (Hernandez, 2019; Pâquet, 2021). Cases that have been dismissed by the public and the legal system as not important are now being given attention, providing opportunities to receive justice for the victims (Hernandez, 2019). In Canada, for instance, cases of missing and murdered Indigenous

women have been re-told – or told for the first time – in recent true crime books that highlight the systemic racism and sexism that perpetuates the violence against Indigenous peoples (Hernandez, 2019). Furthermore, due to the nature of true crime in the age of the internet, family members and independent creators are able to select which cases to discuss. One example is Sarah Turney, who sought justice for her missing sister Alissa, last seen in 2001 in Arizona (Pâquet, 2021). Investigators initially believed that Alissa had run away, but Sarah believed their father, Michael Turney, was involved in her disappearance. Through online advocacy by Sarah and through her podcast, Michael Turney was arrested in 2020 on charges of second-degree murder of his daughter (Fortin, 2020; Horeck & Negra, 2022). Modern true crime presents alternative ways of seeking justice, especially for cases neglected by legal institutions.

Modern true crime media also offers new avenues for "classic" true crime stories that previously romanticized perpetrators and ignored victims. As discussed by McCabe (2022), new additions to the true crime catalogue, such as *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes* (Berlinger, 2019a), given the opportunity to tell a balanced and grounded story that dismantles the mythologized image of serial killers and perpetrators that the media has built. Ted Bundy specifically has been constructed as a charming and calculating man, but this image can easily be contradicted through tapes of him and accurate editing (McCabe, 2022). New information and perspectives challenge long established stories and bring into focus the flaws of the justice system as well as the fallibility of the people who act on behalf of it (Horeck, 2019; Spencer, 2018). In the case of a podcast such as *Serial* (Koenig, 2014), the evidence that helped convict Adnan Syed of Hae Min Lee's murder was revisited through a more critical lens that heightened doubt about the original ruling (Buozis, 2017). Cases originally driven by racism or prejudice against victims of sexual violence can be reassessed through feminist and intersectional lenses.

No longer needing to rely solely on the court's accounts of guilt or innocence, new true crime

can challenge institutional truths that previous had gone unquestioned (Buozis, 2017).

Chapter 3: Theories of True Crime Media

Theoretical Framework

This study will draw on a social constructionist framework to explore and understand how crime and justice issues are produced and given meaning. In the following sections, the theoretical approaches of social constructionism and social problems theory will be reviewed, and their key components explained (Altheide & Schneider, 2012; Best, 2020). Last, the application of these theories to serial killers in the media will be discussed.

Social Constructionism

Social constructionism, or social construction theory, describes how individuals create their subjective perceived reality, unique to them and their experiences (Surette, 2011). A person's perceived reality is not an exact replication of the external reality, rather, social construction posits that people build their knowledge through social interactions with others (Best, 2020; Surette, 2011). As implied by the name, social constructionism heavily emphasizes the role of interactions with others and the development of shared meaning through the language used (Best, 2020; Burr & Dick, 2017). People use socially acquired knowledge in social groups and through different mediums to construct their understanding of the world (Surette, 2011). The shared meanings across interactions and interpretations by an individual act as the building blocks to reality, which further guides an individual's understanding of reality through negotiations and shared meaning (Best, 2020).

Social knowledge sources are not limited to those in one's immediate social sphere but can extend to book authors or newscasters on television (Surette, 2011). Indeed, the social constructivist perspective distinguishes between experienced reality and symbolic reality.

Knowledge gained through personal experience is called experienced reality (Surette, 2011). However, individuals have relatively limited experiences, often never dealing with events like crime or natural disasters. As a result, people turn to alternative sources of knowledge, such as other people they know, governing institutions and, as discussed in this paper, the media, which comprise our symbolic reality (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Surette, 2011). The reality that a person perceives and believes, a foundation impacted by environmental factors such as location and community, will affect the information they accept as true (Best, 2020; Jenkins, 1994). While the cultural environment one is raised in imbues certain values and perceptions, the internet and its worldwide reach has allowed different ideas and perspectives to be exchanged far beyond what was previously possible. As a result, the spaces a person traffics on the internet have also become an important source of perceptions and beliefs.

Media constructions of crime and justice issues is particularly significant to developing perceptions of crime (Pollak & Kurbin, 2007). Most people will have little to no contact with police, courts, or corrections. Similarly, violent crime affects a relatively small proportion of people. As such, the rarity of violent crime requires people to construct their knowledge from the media, as they must rely on symbolic reality from outside sources (Surette, 2011). Therefore, media coverage of crime plays a significant role in consumer's shared meaning about the nature, frequency, and severity of crime (Jenkins, 1994; Pollak & Kubrin, 2007). In the following section, I provide an overview of Social Problems Theory (Best, 2020; Surette, 2011) to provide a better context for later discussing how true crime media has constructed crime as a social problem worthy of public attention and resources.

Social Construction of Social Problems

Social problems are an ever-changing grouping of social conditions that claimsmakers have socially identified as an issue that needs to be addressed (Loseke, 2003). According to social problems theory, people are given socially constructed information about conditions within the culture, such as issues of income, housing, politics and diversity issues (Best, 2020). Through language and constructions, specific conditions are identified as problems and therefore a threat to social well-being (Schneider, 1985). Social conditions are only classified as problems when a social group recognizes the phenomenon as an issue or identifies another group as threatening. What is deemed threatening can differ across groups as social problems are subjective (Spector & Kitsune, 2001). The process of having a group recognize something as a problem begins with claimsmakers, who can be individual activists, political parties, or experts who claim that a specific condition or phenomenon in society is a problem (Best, 2020; Loseke, 2003). Problems can range from racial issues, such as civil rights and oppression of minorities, to behaviour constructed as a problem by power institutions, such as the protests (Best, 2020; Loseke, 2003). A commonly cited social problem is the broad concept of "crime", due to both the harm it does to society and its ubiquity. The concept of crime provides significant opportunities for claimsmakers to connect crime to other perceived social problems they are interested in, such as immigration policies, harsher sentencing and systemic racism (Surette, 2011).

Significant to both social constructionism and social problem theory are frames (Best, 2020; Surette, 2011). Frames are pre-grouped constructions that provide information presented as fact, such as a reiteration of events, but also include interpretative statements about the facts, such as the more extensive meaning for society (Altheide & Schneider, 2012; Surette, 2011). Framing is used in media to highlight other social conditions and problems of the time, such as

the concerns of moral decay that surrounded the Satanic Panic (Wright, 2011). Some claimsmakers may frame serial homicide as a problem stemming from racist or misogynistic law enforcement practices, while others may frame serial killers as an 'invading social evil" (Best, 2020; Jenkins, 1994). The way an issue is framed depends on the source, as different claimsmakers have differing goals (Surette, 2011). The opioid crisis, for example, may be framed as part of the increase in crime by pharmaceutical companies to counter the framing of the crisis as an issue of over-prescription by doctors. Just as with social construction and social problems theory, the framing of issues and circumstances surrounding them contribute to which parts of society individuals believe need to be changed, and which aspects should be maintained.

The uniqueness of serial killers and the attention they attract in the media has led to specific theorization of the way in which serial killers are constructed (Jenkins, 1994). In the case of serial homicide, the process of social construction is entangled in the construction of the crime as a social problem (Jenkins, 1994, pp. 5). Multiple claimsmakers used the phenomena of serial homicide as part of larger claims of social problems. The Federal Bureau of Investigations in the United States used serial homicide and the sudden spike in violent homicide cases to claim that crime was running rampant, and the various law enforcement departments needed more funding and allowances from the government. Additionally, conservative groups brought serial killers into their argument of degrading traditional family values, such as in the instances of serial killers like Dahmer who identified as gay. Feminist claimsmakers view serial homicide as an extension of larger misogynistic beliefs, as many victims are women.

Chapter 4: Current Study & Research Questions

Current Study and Research Questions

Despite the long history of crime media and true crime, in depth and extensive literature on the subject is sparse. This may be due in part to the modernity of the latest true crime boom, which occurred less than a decade ago. Furthermore, the sheer volume of content produced between the release of *Serial* (Koenig, 2014) and present day is overwhelming for researchers to have covered entirely, with new content being produced each month. Given these factors, several gaps are present that the proposed study wishes to address.

Researchers have historically focused on fictional depictions of crime, such as *CSI* (2000) and *Criminal Minds* (2005; Dowler et al. 2006). Much of the research on true crime prior to the *Serial* (2014) boom focused on true crime books and the fictionalized portrayals of crime in procedurals (Dowler et al., 2006; Durham e al., 1995). Current works also focused heavily on the accuracy of crimes in media, unsurprisingly finding that media focuses heavily on homicides and crimes by White men (Durham et al., 1995; Spencer, 2018).

Despite the expansion of the true crime genre through podcasts and documentaries, and the attention paid to these mediums, this growth has not translated to scientific explorations of the true crime media documentaries that are consistently being released. The studies that do examine true crime documentaries and series have thus far been surface level and present several gaps themselves.

First, the docuseries studied by researchers are frequently the same three, namely: *Jinx*, *Making a Murderer*, and *The Staircase*. Podcast research encountered a similar issue, with almost all the research on true crime podcasts revolving around *Serial* (2014). As such, the major purpose of the current study was to expand the sample of docuseries included in the research

analysis, moving beyond the repeatedly studied media to newer content. Furthermore, while podcast research has brought in nuance, such as with content and narrative analyses by Slakoff (2022, 2023), literature on docuseries has mostly been limited to theoretical discussions about the feminist implications of true crime docuseries and examinations of one docuseries at a time. Missing from these analyses is a cross-media examination of patterns in constructions of perpetrators and victims within the true crime series.

To date, Weir (2019) conducted one of the few studies that lays out the narrative details of two documentaries. However, while the documentaries do cover prison and the legal system, neither would be considered true crime. Furthermore, little work has been done using established qualitative media methodology (Altheide & Schneider, 2012). The analysis process captures the themes and meanings communicated across mediums, which is critical for understanding how popular media constructs victims and perpetrators in serial homicide cases. Specifically, the goal of the current study was to address these gaps in the research literature guided by the following questions:

1. How do recent documentaries construct serial killers as a social problem?

2. How do recent true crime docuseries construct the serial killers they focus on?

3. How do recent true crime docuseries construct the victims and potential victims of serial killers?

4. Who are the major claimsmakers in the docuseries and who is absent?

Chapter 5: Methodology

The present study employed a qualitative media content analysis focused on three popular docuseries about serial killers from major streaming platforms (Altheide & Schneider, 2012). Briefly, content analysis, the process of objectively studying the content of messages, is a well-established methodology (Altheide & Schneider, 2012). In recent years, researchers have increasingly turned to popular media texts to better understand how we think about crime, criminality, and justice issues (Welsh et al., 2011). Ethnographic content analysis, or qualitative content analysis, maintains the meaning of the media in context, but also the broader patterns of meaning and communicated ideas (Altheide & Schneider, 2012). In addition, content analysis is also adaptable to the media being examined, so newly emerging themes and patterns can be brought into the analysis (Altheide & Schneider, 2012; McAleese & Kilty, 2019).

Qualitative media analysis is heavily informed by the social constructivist perspective and acknowledges the creation and communication of ideas and stories which are crucial for my study and content (Altheide & Schneider, 2012; Schneider, 2022). From a social constructionist perspective, popular media on crime is one of the only ways the public develops beliefs and understanding of crimes, especially crimes as rare as serial homicide (Holmes & Holmes, 2010; Slakoff, 2022). The popularity of true crime television further lends itself to how significant true crime documentaries are for the public's understanding of serial killers and their crimes (Walters, 2021). The described conditions create a need to study documentaries specifically to best grasp the narratives around serial killers and their victims (Schneider, 2022).

Qualitative Media Analysis

Qualitative media analysis (QMA), also referred to as ethnographic content analysis, is a method specifically used for document analysis and capturing the cultural components of communication (Macnamara, 2005). The adaptability of QMA as a more specified kind of content analysis that prioritizes different formats of media makes it ideal for studying the messaging within media pieces that may be lost through quantitative methods. Additionally, the ability to analyse text and visual content allows video formats such as docuseries to be studied in their entirety (Altheide & Schneider, 2012). Berelson (1952) highlighted several goals that are present in content analysis of communication materials; describe the forms and substance characteristics of the message given; develop inferences about the claimsmakers and audience; and predict the effect of the message. In particular, QMA emphasizes the document being studied in its context and the significance of it as well as how it communicates to the audience (Altheide & Schneider, 2012). As previously stated, QMA aligns with the theoretical perspectives of social constructionism and social problem theory that guide this study (Macnamara, 2005).

Prior to the coding process, researchers identify a problem to be investigated, which in this study is the representation of serial killers and their victims (Altheide & Schneider, 2012). Familiarizing oneself with the context and similar relevant documents is the second step, after which inclusion criteria can be developed based on the known qualities of a potential sample (Altheide & Schneider, 2012). For the present study, the format was inherent within the identified issue, and a period of about 10 years (2014-2022) was selected (Macnamara, 2005; Newbold et al., 2002).

As this study is among few examining serial killer documentaries specifically, common themes are not very well established. Instead, a combination of previous studies and

constructivist grounded theory will be used, specifically the methodology employed by Welsh et al. (2011) and the coding theory explained by Charmaz (2014). Constructivist grounded theory combines the constructivist perspective and grounded theory methodology. The constructivist framework acknowledges research as a process of building the reality of the participants, with the researcher also bringing their interpretation as a non-neutral observer (Charmaz, 2014). On the other hand, grounded methodology is the flexible and iterative practice of developing a theory built from the data without having a fully predetermined ideas of what the data will show (Charmaz, 2014). Constructivist grounded theory allows the data to inform the analytic process and theoretical development while maintaining awareness of the non-neutral observer conducting the research (Charmaz, 2014). This study incorporated element of deductive grounded theory, incorporating past research but ultimately exploring each docuseries looking for additional themes.

Coding is the process by which data, such as an interview or piece of media, is labelled and categorized (Charmaz, 2014). From a constructivist grounded theory approach, the coding process uses what a researcher observes in the data to create codes, which help to categorize the participant's interpretation of their experiences (Charmaz, 2014). Coding in grounded theory is the foundational process of analysis for the research, where the data contributes to the analytic process (Walker & Myrick 2006).

Reflexivity

Qualitative methodology requires the researcher to develop understanding of where they are within the context of their research and how their lived experience acts on their study. In the following section I will identify my positionality as the main researcher on this study. Firstly, my experience as a queer woman of colour has undoubtably shaped my perspectives as a researcher,

including my desire to acknowledge victims of crime and give them voices. Additionally, I have a mindset rooted in social justice and dignity that has also informed how I evaluate material. In terms of the specific content, I have been engaging with true crime content for many years, and I am very familiar with the variety of ways stories can be presented. For example, I have read early true crime material and watched many true crime docuseries much like the sample in this study. As a result, I am very familiar with the content and framing available to audiences of true crime. Furthermore, my familiarity with true crime has led me to form opinions regarding an over-focus on killers and a tendency of media to exploit victims for the benefit of viewership. The perspectives I've developed throughout my experience with true crime and the broader criminology as a whole has guided my work and informed my decisions as a researcher within the context of this study.

Sampling and Data

This study employed constructivist grounded theory to examine the content of three true crime documentary series that center around serial killers. For inclusion in the current study's sampling frame, several criteria were used to identify relevant programs for analysis. First, the docuseries must align with the definition of true crime, that focuses on a real-life crime and/or criminal offender. Second, the primary subject in the docuseries had to be a serial killer matching the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) definition of an individual or pair that kills two or more people in separate events. Third, the present study focused on true-crime docuseries comprised of four to six episodes on a single criminal offender to offer more information (Slakoff, 2022). The series had to be available on Western platforms, but did not have to be in English, as multiple international docuseries are produced for Western platforms. Last, the docuseries must have been released within the last eight years i.e., (2015), in the post-Serial

boom of true crime popularity. Exclusion criteria was also specified. Fictionalized series that portray real life events using actors, such as Netflix's *Dahmer* (2022) were excluded from the study. Based on the inclusion criteria outlined above, an initial search was done across several streaming platforms that are widely used in North America. Using search criteria within streaming services of "true crime" and "documentaries", as well using listicles to find docuseries that meet the above criteria, a sample frame was established. Hulu, Amazon Prime Video, Netflix, Crave, and HBO were searched by using their genre sections, specifically true crime, and on Google, "true crime docuseries" was searched. When conducting the search for docuseries, the criteria were:

(1) Must be a non-fiction true-crime documentary series, or docuseries, that focuses on a real serial killer

(2) Must follow the crimes of a serial killer that matches the FBI definition.

(3) Must be multiple episodes long.

(4) Must be released within the last 10 years, since the boom with the release of Making a Murderer.

Based on this inclusion criteria, a total of 32 true crime documentary series released between the years 2015 and 2023 were eligible for the current study (see Appendix 1). An initial review of the sampling frame revealed that multiple series covered the same serial killer. For example, two series focused on John Wayne Gacy*: John Wayne Gacy: Devil in Disguise* (2021) and *Conversations with a Killer: The John Wayne Gacy Tapes* (2022). One series, *The Jinx* (2015,) was removed from the sample due to its inclusion in several previous studies (Bruzzi, 2016). In addition, this sampling frame included numerous potential series that varied in length greatly, from 120 minutes to 353 minutes. Docuseries that are shorter, such as *Indian Predator:*

Diary of a Serial Killer (2022), will likely include less information and depth than longer series that are able to dedicate more time to aspects of the case.

For the purposes of the current study, three docuseries were included in the final sample for analysis following the same sampling size used by Dosser (2017). Initially, the sample frame was generated in order to compare the viewership data and select the series with the most views within a time frame after release. However, upon generating the sampling frame, I found that view ship data is not available to the public and attempting to quantify the popularity based on metrics from the streaming services was not possible. Instead, I used the number of times each docuseries is mentioned in online listicles. The sampling frame made checking listicles easier as I could compare the docuseries in the lists to the sampling frame without having to look into each docuseries mentioned. In order to still identify popular true crime series within my sampling frame, I conducted a Google search using the term, "true crime docuseries", and identified 28 listicles, online articles formatted as lists, which magazines and popular websites use to provide recommendations on products or media they think their audience will enjoy. Listicles have been shown to be incredibly popular forms of information, as they are easy to read and very shareable (Vijgen, 2014). Listicles can thus provide insight into what is popular and what is growing in popularity, and it can be assumed that across 28 listicles from different websites, the most mentioned series would be the most popular. A table tallying the number of times each docuseries was mentioned can be seen in Table 2, where the twenty-one docuseries are listed.

Given the tabulations of each documentary series, the three most mentioned series were as follows:

1. ***Night Stalker: Hunt for a Serial Killer* (2021)**. Directed by Tiller Russel and James Carroll. This four-episode series details the killings done by Richard Ramirez. He operated in Los Angeles during a period of roughly 14 months beginning in 1985. The docuseries primarily follows the detectives assigned to the case, Frank Salerno and Gil Carrillo, and their investigations into the murders around the city. The crimes themselves were very brutal and caused many in the area to fear being targeted. Total run time: 189 minutes.

2. ***Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes* (2019a)**. Directed by Joe Berlinger. The first in a series of similar four-episode docuseries, recordings from interviews with Ted Bundy are used to overlay a review of his crimes. The interviews were conducted by journalists Stephen Michaud and Hugh Aynesworth, who provide their reflections on the crimes along with people who knew Bundy, the legal professionals and police associated with the case. Total run time: 235 minutes.

3. ***I'll Be Gone in the Dark* (2020)**. Adapted from the book of the same name, the longest of the three docuseries, the six episodes discuss the, at the time, unsolved series of rapes and murders that took place around California in the 1970s to the mid-1980s. These series of crimes were recently linked to Joseph De-Angelo, who was previously referred to as the East Area Rapist: Original Night Stalker, as well as the Golden State Killer. Michelle McNamara's investigation into the crimes is told alongside the accounts of police, survivors of the killer and family members of victims. Total run time: 355 minutes.

Data Collection and Analysis

Similar to the viewership statistics and data, obtaining the episode files for each docuseries was difficult. Netflix and HBO do not allow users to externally download episode files, meaning saving the files had to be done through other methods. All fourteen episodes were

obtained as MP4 files, a standard video file format. An additional challenge emerged when the episodes were initially obtained as MP4, as the Apple version of the NVivo program does not support video files in the program for coding. The issue of not being able to upload the video files is addressed later on.

Developing code and coding media is a multistep process that requires reflexivity and plasticity. Below are the steps outlined by Charmaz (2014) and further steps discussed by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) which guided my process. The first coding step was to generate and construct the codes (Charmaz, 2014; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Literature such as Jenkins (1994), Punnett (2018) and Gemzøe (2021) were reviewed and codes they identified were compiled. This list included the narratives Punnett (2018) identified: "justice," "subversive," "crusader," "geographic," "forensic," "vocative," and "folkloric." The preliminary list also included codes that drew on the mythic elements of serial killer construction from Jenkin's (1994), such as "wolf and lamb" and "evil or devil." An initial viewing was done using the Quick Time Player application. The initial viewing was used to gauge how each of the research questions was answered within the documentaries, and what patterns emerged. Throughout this observation, memoing was done minimally to allow attention to be on the episodes.

Following the initial watch of all the files, two additional watch throughs of all episodes were done using the Quick Time Player application. Memoing was again done throughout, in more detail and with suggestions of codes. Following the second viewing, additional codes were added and codes that could be grouped together under a larger heading were placed in sub-groups. The compiled list of codes was reviewed and consolidated to reflect the themes present within the documentaries. Specifically, codes that addressed the source of information, what was

being discussed, and the visual elements were merged, added, and removed. For example, codes specifying "police" and "lawyer" were developed from a singular code that only specified people working within the legal system. A second round of coding was conducted, and several distinct conceptual groupings emerged. The final codebook is presented in Table 3.

To circumvent the issues with NVivo not allowing me to upload entire episodes into the program, the third viewing included taking screen shots at each point that could be coded. The number of screen shots per episode ranged between 10 and 200, depending on the show and the specific episode. Each shot included the time at which the screen shot was taken in the episode. Dialogue, intertitles and other elements were included in the screen shots to be coded. Dialogue and contextual information were manually added to each screen shot to allow for deeper coding. The screen shots were organized into folders for each episode and uploaded to NVivo. The tentative code list was polished through grouping codes together and defining each code. In NVivo, codes were created in the "nodes" function and included a description of what to code using the node. The collection of codes within NVivo is referred to as a code manual and include a list of specified codes and the corresponding definition or specifications on what data could qualify as that specific code (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

Once the transfer of the codes and screen shots into NVivo was completed, the initial coding process began, the first of two phases, in accordance with Charmaz (2014). Initial coding allows the researcher to understand and become familiar with the data collected in relation to the codes but also helps to identify gaps in the data or codes generated (Charmaz, 2014). Researchers can be flexible by individually coding words, sentences, or incidents as long as the selected method is consistent (Charmaz, 2014). Furthermore, the method chosen will depend on

how much the researcher can break up the data without removing the essential qualitative information for analysis (Charmaz, 2014).

The episodes were coded in order of viewing. Through the process, memos were taken with observations on how codes should be changed, including adding codes, combining codes or removing them. Adjustments were made to the codebook prior to the second round of coding which relied on the same screen shots uploaded into NVivo. During this process, I also engaged in breaking down codes into more specific and focused components, similar to focused coding (Charmaz, 2014). Following the completion of coding, the codes and related content were examined to identify patterns of commonality among claims, claimsmakers and from which docuseries each code was identified.

Chapter 6: Results I

Serial Killers as a Social Problem

The present study explored the representations of serial killers and victims within popular true crime documentaries series. Qualitative media analysis was used to examine three recent docuseries and the construction of killers, victims/survivors and which claimsmakers were present. Specifically, the research process was based on the theoretical approaches of social constructionism and social problems theory. Based on the coding process and analyses, three major patterns of results emerged, each addressing one or two of the stated research questions. As such, my discussions of the findings have been organized into three separate chapters; Serial Killers as a Social Problem; Construction of Victims; and Claimsmakers in True Crime Docuseries. The first chapter addresses how docuseries developed the serial killer within a sociological context and as an individual. Several themes will be discussed within this section including the episodic representation of serial homicide in the docuseries, the othering of serial killers, and the theme of the serial killer as a universal threat.

Themes Relating to Serial Homicide as a Social Problem

Episodic Representation

True crime media can be framed in two different ways: thematic and episodic (Iyengar, 1991). Briefly, thematic framing highlights the contextual and systemic factors that contribute to a social problem. Including such social conditions create connections for the viewer to understand the way that social conditions influence the individual and their crimes, such as a culture accepting of sexist or violent behaviours. Alternatively, episodic framing addresses social problems as discrete events and lacks details on the sociological context in which crime occurs.

There is minimal discussion of that social context, representing the serial killer as wholly unique and distinct from the rest of society and its beliefs.

Analyses of all three docuseries in the sample revealed that episodic framing was the most common approach to the construction of serial killers as a social problem. In *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes* (2019), the first episode establishes the political context of the 1970s, highlighting women's increased rights and freedom. The episode also emphasizes concerns of the time, such as increasing crime and the idea of the 70s as an "angry era", as described by a news anchor. Furthermore, news reports listing the dramatic increase in violent crime played over footage of police and investigators collecting bodies. Other known serial killers of the time, such as John Wayne Gacy and David Berkowitz, are mentioned through news footage, but many of these serial killers were not identified until after Bundy was apprehended. As a result, the introductory episode of this series acts more to build a fear of crime than to explore what social factors could have contributed to the social unrest.

While the footage and news reports effectively establish the fears of the time, such as growing civil unrest and prevalence of drugs, there is a lack of connection to the crimes that will later be detailed. Bundy was conveyed to primarily commit violent crimes against college-age women, but beyond providing context of social changes that the increased freedom women enjoyed coincided with increased violence, the docuseries makes no specific mention of how the sociological context could have contributed to Bundy's crimes. The distinction between the cultural attitudes, social circumstances, and behaviours common at the time from the crimes perpetrated by Ted Bundy is a continuing theme throughout the show, despite having the unique advantage of including the killer's own words, which could elucidate the social impacts on an individual.

For example, as part of the agreement journalists Stephen Michaud and Michael Aynesworth made with Bundy, Bundy could talk about the "mystery person" who committed the crimes from the perspective of a psychological analyst, which ultimately revealed his thoughts and motivations. In one of the many audio clips featuring Bundy, he explicitly states that "Women are merchandise – from the pornographic, through Playboy, right on up to the evening news. So, there is no denying the sexual component. However, sex has significance only in the context of a much broader scheme of things." (Ep. 02, 1:45). While the statement meant to refer to another man's way of thinking, one can assume this is the way that Ted Bundy views women on some level as well. Such thoughts and beliefs about women are treated by the docuseries as though they are unique to Bundy, with little connection to the other crimes against women that could suggest a culture which permits such violence.

As with much of the media coverage of Ted Bundy, *Conversations with a Killer – The Ted Bundy Tapes* devotes a great deal of attention to his appearance; he is referred to as handsome, and his educational attainments are highlighted alongside his perceived normality. The descriptions of Bundy will be discussed in detail later, but these aspects are essential to understanding how the docuseries also fails to make connections between Bundy's status as a white, middle-class man and the victims of the crimes, how the crimes were investigated and how the case progressed.

The episodic framing of serial homicides was also present in *Night Stalker* (2021). Richard Ramirez was active roughly ten years after Bundy and concentrated on the same geographic range. Most of Ramirez's known crimes took place in Los Angeles and San Francisco, and the first episode of the docuseries quickly gives insight into the culture and environment of Los Angeles at the time. Like *Conversations with a Killer* (2019), the *Night*

Stalker emphasizes the violent crime in the city, albeit with the juxtaposition of Hollywood and the associated glamour. Despite the similarities to *Conversations with a Killer*, there is more nuance in the scene setting of *Night Stalker*, with the positive aspects of Los Angeles, such as the decrease in crime from the previous decade, though the cause of the decrease is not mentioned in the docuseries.

Outside of the first episodes of *Night Stalker*, little social context was given, even less so regarding cultural beliefs and attitudes about crimes and victims. Mentions are made of the social inequality between different areas, such as journalist Zoey Tur stating, "But if you went around to the other side, Los Angeles could be a very dark place." (Ep. 01, 1:50). While crime and inequality itself was not brought into the picture, there are some connections invoked between significant events within the United States and the crimes of Richard Ramirez. Specifically, when reviewing the life history of Ramirez, one of his cousins is said to have described to him the murders and assaults committed by said cousin while in the military in Vietnam. This same cousin also murdered his wife in front of a young Ramirez. While not explicitly stated in the docuseries, there can be inferences made about the impacts of being told such traumatic stories about war and later crimes that were described as incredibly violent by investigators. In these connections, a viewer can see the potential impacts of fear-mongering beliefs, observing violence against women and dismissal of mental health concerns among young people.

Comparatively, *I'll be Gone in the Dark* (2020) firmly situates the crimes of Joseph DeAngelo in a culture that accepts violence against women and blames survivors for their victimization, as discussed extensively in the series. At the start of the second episode, multiple police officers discuss the prevalence of sexual crimes against women, both in terms of the number of attacks and individual perpetrators. Multiple rapists were active in the state of

California, and the documentary emphasizes the rampant nature of sex crimes. However, where the previous docuseries halted with discussing the number of crimes, the discussion of *why* is brought up in *I'll be Gone in the Dark*. Multiple victims included in the documentary discuss the way sexual assaults were treated by the legal system as being on the same level as theft despite the profoundly traumatic nature of the crime. One of the experts on the DeAngelo crimes, Melanie Barbeau, in the docuseries: "Rape in the 70s was a crime like a simple assault. It was not considered a big deal. The sentence for raping somebody could be 30 days, could be 90 days, you could get probation. There was no real crime statute for sexual assault…" (Ep.02, 9:58).

Furthermore, news footage and interviews from *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* (2020) show that alongside dismissals of rape victims were accusations against survivors that they provoked the attack through their behaviour, dress or attitude. For example, one taped interview in the docuseries included the following statement from a female presenter: "The woman who allows herself to be seen undressing or partially clothed is the woman who invites trouble." (Ep.02, 49:20). The woman in the tape is shown to be the victim of a 'Peeping Tom', who is hiding in the bushes watching her.

The attitudes towards rape and the survivors of rape are directly tied back to the crimes of Joseph DeAngelo in the docuseries through showing the way his victims were treated by police, how the investigation progressed and the lack of arrests of suspects. Specifically, Fiona Williams, a survivor of DeAngelo, recounts that rape victims who went to police were often treated as criminals and given multiple polygraphs and psychiatric assessments. Gay and Bob Hardwick, also survivors, mention that even their friends asked how they got themselves into the situation. A police report from one of the rapes by DeAngelo is also included, where after interviewing the

survivor and her sister, an investigator states, "One sister is apparently the prettier of the two. Perhaps this accounts for his attacking her instead of her sister." (Ep.02, 49:30).

The impact of the rape culture and attitudes towards women is clearly stated by a woman shown in news footage, who, when asked why she believed no one had been arrested yet, remarked that it was slow going because the victims were women. It should be noted that this statement was made prior to the first murders connected to DeAngelo.

Based on the examples discussed above, while *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* used thematic framing of DeAngelo's crimes, both *Conversations with a Killer* and *Night Stalker* predominantly used episodic framing for Bundy and Ramirez's murders (Iyengar, 1991). Recall that episodic and thematic framing refer to how situations or events are situated in social contexts or how they are treated as separate and unconnected from the space in which they occur. Iyengar (1991) differentiates the two framing types, with episodic framing focusing on a case or event without connection to the political or social issues that contributed and thematic framing explaining what social conditions contributed to the events. Despite the brief inclusions of the social context within the first episodes of *Conversations with a Killer* and *Night Stalker*, the docuseries fall more in line with episodic framing than thematic. *I'll be Gone in the Dark* dedicates significantly more time to the social issues of the period; the direct ties between overarching social issues and the crimes means that the docuseries takes a thematic framing approach.

Previous literature examining media has found that episodic framing is more emotionally engaging and commonly seen in news and entertainment media (Gross, 2008; Iyengar, 1991). Unsurprisingly, violent crime cases are frequently presented through an episodic frame, resulting in the minimization of extensive social issues such as violence against women and minorities

(Aldrete & Fernández-Ardèvol, 2023; Avalos et al., 2023). Furthermore, because of the lack of context, from the audience's perspective, blame for crimes typically falls to the victim in cases of episodic framing from the audience's perspective (Feezell et al., 2019; Iyengar, 1991). Within media specifically addressing serial killers, there continues to be episodic framing of the crimes, such as the news reporting on the Canadian serial killer Peter Woodcock, who target children to sexually assault and murder in the Toronto (Hier, 2020). Serial killers especially are easily framed episodically, as their crimes are already so far from the rest of society in terms of violence and depravity that leaving out the context of the crimes comes easily (Greer, 2007; Wiest, 2016). Furthermore, the entertainment value of episodic framing contributes to the celebrity of serial killers in media, where they become idiosyncratic characters distinct from a social setting (Hier, 2020).

Overall, despite many documentaries beyond this study and within, tackling the underlying causes of serial homicide, there was little time dedicated to understanding the emergence of a serial killer from a specific set of cultural beliefs, attitudes, and circumstances. Outside of *I'll be Gone in the Dark,* addressing social beliefs that could contribute to the crimes and how the investigations proceeded was limited. The lack of explicit contextualization and social detail is especially apparent across the documentaries, given the overlap of time and location. Bundy was active during the same period as DeAngelo, and yet, the dismissive treatment of sexual crimes and the common mentalities of law enforcement were absent from *Conversations with a Killer*. Bundy, DeAngelo and Ramirez all operated within the United States, meaning that there was a cultural environment shared across all their crimes.

The Othering of Serial Killers

Jenkins (1994) extensively explored and examined the tendency of media and the public to purposefully distance themselves from serial killers. Using language that evokes mythology and lore, the descriptions of serial killers remove them from the general population of people to become something other/inhuman. The following sections explore the ways in which the docuseries engaged in the pattern of othering serial killers through language and imagery, as well as discussions about the different types of othering used. Across all docuseries, different terminology was used to refer to the killers, with four distinct categories emerging. The first, the "crazed killer", emerged from the descriptions which were akin to someone who were experiencing severe mental illness, often being referred to as a "mad dog" or "insane." The second grouping, the "demon killer", included verbiage that evoked the devil, or the concept of pure evil being tied to the killer. Thirdly, the "lurking infection" includes multiple descriptions which compare the killer to a disease or pest that plagued society. The last grouping of the "predatory killer" uses language and descriptions that compare the killer to a hunting animal or stalking predator who incites fear. The above categories were developed and gathered from interviews, newspapers, and news reports shown in the docuseries.

Interestingly, all three docuseries included references to each of the four categories, but slight distinctions emerged within each docuseries. In *Conversations with a Killer* (2019) of all four groupings, Bundy was most frequently and prominently referred to in terminology that falls into the "demon killer" and "predatory killer". For example, multiple people interviewed across the show referred to Bundy as "evil," including George Dekle, one of the prosecutors in Florida. While the murders were incredibly violent, the brutality does not appear to factor as much into the description as the deception he perpetrated by blending into the rest of "normal" society.

There were also prominent descriptions of Bundy that referred to the fear he caused across the United States, with him being described thusly by journalist Ward Lucas: "He was this vicious killer who was a complete and total con man, psychopath, and he was running around out there." (Ep. 03, 16:04). These descriptions are not surprising, as much of the conceptualization of Bundy is that he was hiding in plain sight and was an evil that blended into society (Hickey, 2009; Jenkins, 1994). Descriptions of him within the docuseries tend to commit to such characterizations, developing Bundy as purely evil figure who used society as a hunting ground for his malevolent urges (McCabe, 2022).

In *Night Stalker*, Richard Ramirez is depicted and described as a "crazed killer" but most often as a "demon killer". The level of viciousness displayed at the crime scenes, which are featured heavily in the docuseries, appears to impact the characterization of Ramirez. When describing the murder of Mabel Bell, retired detective Frank Salerno states, "That's a pretty sick individual." (Ep. 02, 14:38). In this case, Ramirez had not only committed a brutal murder but made himself comfortable within the victim's home. The lack of logic for investigators and the public likely contributed to this and promoted the idea that someone who commits murder has a mental illness (Hickey, 2009). Additionally, the intense violence of his crimes is communicated through allusions to the devil, with police officers and victims' families making statements such as "There's evil in that man," and "You were in the presence of evil," (Ep. 04, 16:04) when describing Ramirez. Furthermore, multiple episodes include recreations of the places Ramirez stayed during his killings, with creatures reminiscent of diseases functioning as stand-ins, such as rats and flies buzzing around decaying food (Ep. 01, 35:30).

The characterizations of the crimes committed by Joseph DeAngelo in *I'll be Gone in the Dark* (2020) fall into the groupings of "lurking infection" and "predatory killer". Many of the

predatory killer descriptions relate to the fear and terror he inspired around California, which was especially prominent due to how long DeAngelo went unidentified (roughly 40 years). The portrayal of his crimes evokes the image of an unseen predator hunting throughout the state and progressively becoming more violent. Additionally, while the allusions to a predator stalking prey are verbal, the docuseries also employs visual analogies. One prominent analogy is the use of clips from *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954), which are played alongside narration from McNamara's book. The clips depict the titular creature swimming through the seaweed underneath an unsuspecting female swimmer who remains unaware of the danger beneath her. Visually, these clips allude to how DeAngelo lurked in society, undetected and always just out of sight. Characterizing DeAngelo's crimes not as a demonic force, but a those of a bad man humanizes him and brings his construction down to reality., rather than elevating it to evoking "pure evil". He is not given a status that elevates him above humans in the same looming celebrity of Bundy and Ramirez, but instead is ascribed traits like cowardice.

Narratives of serial homicide frequently use descriptors for serial killers that characterize them as outside of reality or beings of pure evil that distinguishes them as a different type of human altogether (Jenkins, 1994). To many people, serial killers do not only commit acts that are evil but embody the concept of something very different and wrong beyond the rest of society (Hickey, 2009). Additionally, the label of "insanity" is frequently placed on serial killers due to how incomprehensible the acts they commit are, despite very few serial killers meeting the legal requirements of the defense of not criminally responsible (Hickey, 2009). As Jenkins (1994) describes images of serial killers that develop a "mythology," such as a stereotype of a savage or supernatural killer, remove the social context and placement of a perpetrator in society. The behavioural and psychological aspects are personalized in a way that differentiates them from

other people, ignoring shared life and social experiences (Hier, 2020). Ultimately, the effect is similar to episodic framing, where the contextualization is missing and disconnected from social issues. Likewise, using imagery that attributes supernatural or animal characteristics to serial killers builds a sensationalized mythology of an outsider (Hodgkinson et al., 2017). The result of the mythology and imagery around serial killers is an unrealistically heightened fear that one could become a target (Hodgkinson et al., 2017). All the docuseries evoke otherworldly imagery in some fashion, demonstrating that serial killers are, on some level, being portrayed as separate from general society.

Serial Killers as a Social Threat

Through the use of selected interviews, news footage and newspaper headlines, all three docuseries convey a public reaction to their depicted crimes. *Conversations with a Killer* (2019), *I'll be Gone in the Dark* (2020), and *Night Stalker* (2021) dedicate time to the waves of fear that rippled from each crime scene into the surrounding community and cities. In *Conversations with a Killer* (2019), much of the focus is placed on the emotional reactions of the public, such as the female students who lived in the Washington University area, with one newspaper displayed with the headline "Fear grips young women." (Ep.01, 33:00). In a similar quote used, a news anchor stated at the time, "The killer slipped back into the night with an ease that baffles police and leaves co-eds terrified." (Ep.03, 20:01). Specifically, the emotional responses highlighted are those that display the shock at the brutality and randomness of the killings. Bundy's crimes were very geographically spread out, so the limited time in any one area may explain the lack of behavioural changes by the public, such as increasing security or learning self-defense that were discussed in the docuseries. A notable effect of the repeated emphasis on the fear felt by the public is the suggestion that serial killers were and continue to be a universal threat. The

construction of the impact of Bundy specifically demonstrates how fear can be utilized in building social problems.

Similarly, in *Night Stalker*, the docuseries constructions the concern of the people of Los Angeles as a main consequence to the events depicted. Multiple interviews with citizens are showcased, conveying that the public was frustrated at the slow police investigation and the fear that they could be next. The mindset that anyone could be a target is echoed by featured clips of journalists as well, who appear thrilled by the emotional response they could latch onto. For example, once the presence of pentagrams at the Pan crime scene came to light, the docuseries suggests that the addition of a Satanist element caused an entirely new media frenzy. Zoey Tur, a journalist reporting at the time, was featured to state, "Once we learned about pentagrams painted on walls, there was a demonic element to this. That really got people scared." (Ep.03, 27:56).

The docuseries' focus on the role of the media in spreading fear and bolstering panic is far more apparent in *Night Stalker*, with multiple statements similar to Tur's included over the episodes, suggesting that the media relished the terror the stories could drum up in the public. The *Night Stalker* also depicts behavioural changes that occurred throughout LA, such as an increase in members of the public taking self-defense lessons, buying guns and putting additional locks on doors. Clips of multiple journalists also emphasized the perception of the universal threat that Ramirez seemingly posed, with Tur stating, "The monster was among us, and hunting us. And anyone could be a victim." (Ep.02, 4:42). The docuseries includes interviews with other residents of L.A. that give the idea that anyone could be targeted, with one interviewed woman stating in a clip "I'm afraid for everybody. Elderly, young, everybody." (Ep.02, 16:06). The

public awareness and fear that serial killers inspire are heavily featured throughout *Night Stalker*, much like in *Conversations with a Killer*.

Public response and fear are conveyed as far less central in *I'll be Gone in the Dark*. Furthermore, the police suppressed information from the public to avoid widespread fear early on. The emotional impact of the crimes on the families is highlighted through interviews, specifically in the rape cases. The docuseries also explicitly connects to the lack of cultural empathy and understanding towards victims and the crimes of DeAngelo.

The docuseries also emphasized the behavioural modifications made by women in areas where DeAngelo struck multiple times, highlighting the work of Sacramento detective Carol Daly, who established self-defense classes for local women while DeAngelo was active in the Sacramento area. Additionally, footage of the town hall meetings is shown, which were held for police to suggested various ways of making safety alarms. Despite this, there is very minimal discussion included of whether the public felt they could be the next target of DeAngelo. Another aspect addressed is the general fear that women held of being attacked and sexually assaulted -- acts which made up the majority of DeAngelo's crimes. However, with regard to the murders, many people, despite their fear, were portrayed as not feeling as though the threat was imminent. For example, when retelling the attack, survivor Fiona Williams stated that she knew of the other attacks but did not worry because the rapes had been in a different part of the city.

Support in Courts

Public interest in serial killers has frequently seen individuals cross the line between fascination and fanaticism (Fathallah, 2022). These individuals may have different motivations, such as believing a murderer is innocent, they were let down by society or that they were acting for the greater good. Regardless of the reason, attending trials and sending fan-mail are the

common behaviours of fans (Fathallah, 2023). Unsurprisingly then, when Bundy and Ramirez were taken into custody and during their respective trials, the docuseries shows multiple people who attended in support of the men. The last episodes of *Conversations with a Killer* and *Night Stalker* spend the majority of their run time on the public trials, with particular attention paid to the admirers and "groupies" in the courtroom. In Bundy's case, many people in support of him are shown to have insisted on his innocence, with one young woman featured who stated, "I'm not afraid of him. He just doesn't look like the type to kill somebody." (Ep.04, 21:46). In the Ramirez trial, clips of the so-called "groupies" state that they did not believe in his innocence, but instead held him as a celebrity who was a victim of society – who also had intense sex appeal, as said in an interview with one of the journalists. Multiple pictures these "groupies" sent to Ramirez in prison are featured, all depicting scantily clad women in suggestive poses.

The treatment of serial killers and violent crime more generally as a universal and ever-looming threat is not unique to the docuseries presented within this study (Jenkins, 1994; Murley, 2008). Much of the reports and media presenting serial killers, while including elements of truth, can also contribute to pervasive mythmaking (Pitre, 2022). In the context of *Conversations with a Killer*, *Night Stalker,* and *I'll be Gone in the Dark*, one myth built on is that everyone is equally likely to be a target for serial killers. The presentation of the public reaction where everyone is afraid because they could be next, and the identities of the victims themselves as relatively "normal" people, contributes to the myth that not only could serial killers be hiding in plain sight but that their victims may be anyone and everyone (Garland, 2002; Hodgkinson et al., 2017).

The framing of the serial killer as a widespread threat aligns with the "problem frame", as described by Altheide (1997). The problem frame positions the issues discussed, regardless of

complexity, as a pervasive and threatening problem in society. A vital component of the problem frame is the merging of news and entertainment into the aforementioned "infotainment" (Altheide, 1997; Garcia & Arkerson, 2018). In utilizing the problem frame, the media also communicates that the issue is widespread and easily identifiable, and the simple narrative structure also suggests a simple solution to the problem. The selected docuseries have elements of the problem frame, notably the distortion of the risk of victimization by serial killers. However, the news reports and other materials included in the series demonstrate how media at the time heavily leaned towards depictions of crimes as arising from single issues and as solvable.

Themes Relating to the Constructing of Serial Killers

According to Jenkins (1994), serial killers can be constructed in various ways, with larger implications for different social issues such as feminism and racial equality. However, common constructions of serial killers relate to the way they fit into the rest of humanity – are they separate forces of evil or disturbed individuals? The following sections review the findings on how the three docuseries built the killers they covered, both as larger-than-life figures and as men who are fundamentally disturbed but human, nonetheless.

Breeds of Killers

All three docuseries addressed the lives of the killers and the crimes they committed, but each with different amounts of time dedicated to them. Based on the constructions of the offenders across all three docuseries, two distinct archetypes of serial killer emerged: "the hidden killer" and "the boogeyman" (Jenkins, 1994). The first archetype, the "hidden killer", refers to serial killers who are portrayed as able to generally blend into general public by looking and acting relatively normal. The hidden killer narrative, which is present in *Conversations with a*

Killer, and *I'll be Gone in the Dark*, can further be broken down based on the insidiousness ascribed to the killer in the docuseries. The second archetype is the "boogeyman", which includes killers whose depictions align with the more typical representations of 'bad guys', such as looking scary and being off-putting to others. *Night Stalker* strategically builds the 'boogeyman' archetype throughout the episodes.

As compared to the other docuseries in the sample, *Conversations with a Killer* devoted the most time and content dedicated to contextualizing its subject and his crimes. As previously discussed, Bundy was simultaneously characterized in the docuseries as predatory but also by his ability to project normalcy that allowed him to hide among others. When focusing on Bundy's ability to 'blend' with normal people, the docuseries included numerous positive descriptors from multiple sources. For example, in discussing Bundy, a former friend said that he was a "handsome young man who had his life in order." The doubt of his guilt at the time and the extent of his rouse of "normalcy" is exemplified in an anecdote from survivor Carol DaRonch. Also contained in the docuseries in the anecdote from DaRonch where she was approached by a neighbour, who questioned whether DaRonch was sure Ted Bundy was the one who attacked her, following the question by stating that he did not seem the "type".

In addition, *Conversations with a Killer – The Ted Bundy Tapes* included footage where other men seemingly complimented Bundy for his projected normalcy. For example, one footage clip from Bundy's trial includes the judge stating that he did not have any animosity towards Bundy – who he had just convicted of several brutal murders. Throughout the series, while the negative aspects of Bundy are included and discussed later, viewers, through numerous clips, are given the impression that Bundy operated in society without suspicion. The idea that a serial

killer could go undetected is one that is frightening to many people, as Michaud discussed when describing Bundy as an enigma among serial killers due to his looks, personality, and education.

Popular culture has adopted the image of a serial killer as covert and hidden amongst the masses in society with little to no indications of their deviance (Hodgkinson et al., 2017; Jenkins, 1994). As put by Bundy himself and emphasized by friends in the docuseries, "There is nothing in my background which would lead one to believe that I was capable of committing murder, absolutely nothing." (Ep.01, 19:54). The docuseries' contradiction between the presented façade and the reality is evidently part of the allure in the narrative of *Conversations with a Killer*, as multiple segments contrast violent descriptions of the crimes with smiling pictures of Bundy or pictures of the crime scenes with positive descriptors laid over. Through multiple interviews with previous friends of Bundy, an image of a well-adjusted and well-educated young man is constructed that is purposefully and sharply contrasted with the brutal crimes he committed, as evidenced by the statement, "He didn't look like anybody's notion of somebody who would tear apart young girls," by Michaud, which is played over footage of Bundy laughing in court. Other examples of the 'hidden killer' narrative in *Conversations with a Killer* even included the episode titles. Episodes 1 and 2, titled "*One of Us*" and "*Handsome Devil*", respectively, illustrated another way in which serial killer true crime mythologizes the serial killer as something of a chameleon, corresponding with fictional representations.

In contrast, *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* devoted very little time to contextualizing the life and personality of Joseph DeAngelo. This in part may be due to the fact that the series does not reveal DeAngelo's identity for five episodes. Nevertheless, footage and interviews included in the docuseries still used the 'hidden killer' narrative in its construction of DeAngelo. When talking about DeAngelo's life prior to his arrest, survivors and victim's family members are

included discussing their disbelief at the mundane life he lived. Though both Bundy and DeAngelo fit the hidden killer narrative that emerged from the analyses, each docuseries constructs their killer in slightly different ways. On one hand, footage included in *Conversations with a Killer – the Ted Bundy Tapes* construct Bundy as charismatic, conventionally attractive, and a genius. Comparatively, *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* does not mythologize DeAngelo like Bundy. That is, visual imagery constructs DeAngelo as a lurking creature without references that make him seem 'larger-than-life'.

The second type of construction, the boogeyman, is strongly presented in *Night Stalker*. Specifically, using visuals, audio, and descriptions, a boogeyman figure is developed across the episodes. Where *Conversations with a Killer* had voice clips from Bundy's interviews throughout the series, *Night Stalker* sparsely uses the voice clips from Ramirez, with those selected edited to be echo-y and foreboding. For example, between details of the first few murders, Ramirez is featured in a voice-over stating, "I was in alliance with the evil that is inherent in human nature. That was who I was, walking death." Similar quotes and clips of him laughing are used throughout the show, usually over shots of L.A. at night, posing Ramirez as a malicious spectre haunting the city. Furthermore, while his identity is not hidden from the audience, he is not featured visually in his entirety or named until the final episode. The selected descriptions of Ramirez until his court appearance are grotesque, with emphasis given to his intense body odour and greasy appearance throughout the docuseries. His teeth, rotting and blackened, are also given special attention by various witnesses, with close-ups of his teeth featured to illustrate the "creepy" appearance. The creators sequester away a complete image and description of Ramirez until his arrest, only showing flashes of discoloured teeth, visual comparisons to pests and distorted voice clips. Altogether, these elements paint the picture of

someone who cannot blend into society the same way Bundy and DeAngelo are depicted to do but nevertheless relished in the fear they inspired.

Archetypes of serial killers have frequently appeared in media and in scholarly discussions. While the themes developed by Jenkins (1994) have been discussed in building a story and archetype of a killer through comparisons, the ways in which serial killers are constructed compared to how they appear in real life is something Hodgkinson et al. (2017) address. Commonly held beliefs about serial killers in the public consciousness, often created by media, are a narrow view of serial killers and often distorted from what research shows is true in reality. For example, many people imagine a serial killer as a white male committing homicides that have a sexual motivation, despite ample evidence that shows serial killers can be any race, sex and have many different motivations (Miller, 2014a). Even the FBI has previously endorsed the white male image, including the description that they are likely intelligent (Schechter & Everitt, 1997). Comparing this "typical" serial killer to the docuseries, two of the three serial killers in the sample are white men, and all three killers had a sexual element to their crimes, which appears to further reinforce this stereotype.

Furthermore, caricatures emerge in the series, specifically *Night Stalker* and *Conversations with a Killer*, where Bundy and Ramirez are presented in ways that align with the myth that serial killers are calculating geniuses or "crazed killers" (Byers & Collins, 2023). As remarked by Byers and Collins (2023), across fiction and true crime, there is a definite stereotype of a serial killer who looks, acts, and kills like Ted Bundy – a psychopath in plain sight, a "monster-next-door" (Murley, 2008, p. 88). While Ramirez, as a Hispanic man, does not fit the "white genius" stereotype, the traditional image of a violent criminal – someone who is easy to identify due to physical appearance and monster-like qualities – is presented (Murley,

2008). The emphasis on animal and beast-like traits such as his smell, rotting teeth and "lifeless" eyes is decidedly different than the attention paid to how "normal" Bundy appeared. Ramirez, as a result, does not fall into a killer-next-door archetype, who could be anyone, but is instead easily spotted and yet still a lurking monster (Aldridge, 2023). Distinct from both is *I'll Be Gone in the Dark*, as very little is done to describe DeAngelo outside of the necessary information, limiting the development of a caricature.

A Cracked "Mask of Sanity"

As previously discussed, the docuseries mention the surprise that people experienced upon discovering Bundy and DeAngelo were guilty of such brutal crimes. Despite insistences featured throughout the docuseries from family, friends, and even the perpetrators themselves that they had nothing in their lives to indicate they were capable of such violent actions, evidence to the contrary is presented across the episodes.

Conversations with a Killer features many people, including Bundy himself, stating that there was nothing to indicate he was violent or abnormal. Such claims are undermined by descriptions of Bundy as a child. One claim included is from a childhood friend Sandi Holt stated, "He was just…different. He didn't fit in…and he had a temper; he liked to scare people." (Ep.01, 17:46). From an early age, Bundy was depicted as not fitting in with the rest of his peers and struggled to keep up with boys his age. When boasting about his academic prowess, Bundy's voice is interrupted by Holt, who states that Bundy was prone to lying and exaggerating his social standing in school. As later revealed in the documentary, Bundy stumbled across documents as a teenager which showed he was illegitimate and the people who he thought were his parents were his grandparents. This information is revealed by Dr. Carlisle, the psychiatrist

who treated Bundy while he was incarcerated, in the section of the episode addressing why Bundy committed his crimes.

Furthermore, Dr. Carlisle, recounted how Bundy's grandfather was violent and that, as a boy, Bundy may have faced abuse. The docuseries includes that Bundy rarely dated and shows the description by Michaud of Bundy having an "idealized version of himself." While such behaviour early in life is portrayed as not enough to arouse suspicion of future cruelty and violence, later romantic partners talked about his aggression. His girlfriend during the time of the killings, Elizabeth Kendall, is shown describing his emotional volatility and aggression. Another clip is included where Dr. Carlisle describes a time when he purposefully held a girlfriend's head underwater while on a date. The image of Bundy as a fully adjusted and well-behaved individual is shown not to be the whole picture, as multiple people are included testifying to his strange and disturbing behaviour. Even legal representatives of Bundy are shown describing him as erratic and unstable, with a narcissistic personality. While there are aspects of the docuseries which fit into the mythos of Bundy, his childhood and the descriptions from those around him show that there were many indications that Bundy was not as normal as he claimed to be.

Early warnings and the difficult childhood for the serial killer are also shared in *I'll Be Gone in the Dark*. DeAngelo, as previously mentioned, is not extensively discussed in the docuseries, but the theme of bad childhoods and unnerving behavioural signs is still present. Multiple narrators are included describing DeAngelo's early life, where he moved around frequently with his family, including his very abusive father. The specific instance of watching his sister be sexually assaulted while living in Germany is stated as one of many challenges in his childhood. The difficulties faced by DeAngelo are described as uniquely awful, and his nephew disclosed that the family had many secrets, which could have also contributed to his

psychological state. As an adult, similar to Bundy, DeAngelo's ex-fiancée described warning signs and odd behaviour that appeared in their romantic relationships. In the final episode of the series, Bonnie Ueltzen, who was previously engaged to DeAngelo, recounts that he was impulsive and thrill-seeking, with aggressive and violent tendencies. Their relationship ended when she refused to help him cheat on a test. In response, DeAngelo woke her up in the middle of the night with a gun to her face and ordered her to go with him to elope. While to some, DeAngelo and Bundy were ordinary men, the docuseries also feature people and anecdotes that show that despite the normalcy they strived to present, the façade had cracks that were visible to those close to them.

Ramirez likewise struggled through a difficult childhood. As described by the police officers who investigated his crimes, Ramirez faced intense physical abuse from his strict father and was exposed to the horrors of the Vietnam War by his uncle – who then subsequently killed his wife in front of a young Ramirez. Throughout the rest of his youth, Ramirez began using and selling drugs and committing a petty theft amongst other crimes. As stated by a journalist in the docuseries, "All the things that could poison a child were in his life." (Ep.04, 1:05).

Cleckley (1941) introduced the concept of the 'mask of sanity', where individuals with psychopathic personalities can 'mask' their antisocial inclinations to blend into society. While some of the docuseries allude to the "mask of sanity," the warning signs throughout childhood and adult life clearly show that the mask is not fully effective. Across the literature on the early lives and relationships of serial killers, scholars have found that serial and sexual homicide perpetrators experience adverse events in childhood (Chopin et al., 2023; Kerr & Beech, 2016; Marono et al., 2020). While not consistently experiencing one type of abuse or traumatic event, many serial killers are exposed to trauma at a young age, and do not receive the proper care for

the impact such trauma has on them. Furthermore, warning signs are typically present throughout their lives, such as fire-setting behaviour and antisocial tendencies (Miller, 2014a, b). Despite the docuseries including the fact that the serial killers likely faced abuse in childhood, none make an appeal for the audience to feel sympathy for them in a way that would excuse their crimes and brutality.

Visually Building Mythos

As a visual and audio-based medium, all three docuseries told stories visually alongside the narratives presented through interviews and accounts. Part of the visual narratives focused on the killers through photographs or videos, albeit in varying amounts. The visual presentations of the killers acts as an extension of the narratives and themes developed throughout the episodes in *Conversations with a Killer* and *Night Stalker*. In the case of Bundy, the mythos building of the "hidden killer", even if undermined by certain descriptors, continues with the visual representations of him. As with biographical details, overwhelmingly, *Conversations with a Killer* features the most time dedicated to the photographs of the killer. Pictures from Bundy's everyday life, such as when he was a child and in high school, are featured, with many showing a smiling Bundy in an everyday setting.

Additionally, pictures of his family and girlfriend are shown. Pictures from Bundy's time in custody are also featured heavily, but even these tend to depict Bundy smiling or looking contemplative. For example, pictures of Bundy with legal books open around him that were taken while he was in custody in Colorado, are featured, shortly before he escaped through a library window. Without the context that he had murdered dozens of women, such pictures would appear to be positive. Ultimately, repeated positive photos contribute to the notion that Bundy was a hidden threat or wolf in sheep's clothing. The contrast between Bundy as someone who

appeared normal, and his violent behaviour is furthered through the use of smiling pictures of him while the brutal crimes he committed are described. News clips are also included, showing his personality firsthand as he interacts with the press and police. As a result, the viewer not only receives extensive insight into Bundy from the people who knew him, but also through his own description of himself as he was going through the experience of being in custody. Very few pictures display Bundy as a blatant threat, mainly developing fear through detailed explanations of his crimes.

A similar extension of the narrative appears in *Night Stalker.* Ramirez's ghoulish and boogeyman image, which is developed through descriptions and audio clips, is extended into pictures and videos of him. In contrast to Bundy, very few pictures of Ramirez outside of custody are presented in the docuseries, with only those from his early life shown while discussing the abuse he faced as a child. Instead, most pictures are lingering and highly contrasted photographs of Ramirez in custody or being taken into custody. Famously, Ramirez was mobbed by a crowd who identified him from press releases and newspapers. Video clips show Ramirez in a police car, bandaged from injuries inflicted by the crowd. The pictures of Ramirez in the police department are edited to emphasize the shadows and his gaunt appearance. In the courtroom, as discussed previously, Ramirez is shown to have many groupies who treated him as a celebrity. Ramirez is shown wearing sunglasses in court, with sustained shots that show him waving and reacting to his "fans". Over these clips are descriptions of his "animal magnetism" (Ep. 04.)

While the image of a suave man certainly contrasts with the boogeyman narrative, many people still found him terrifying, and the testimony from his victims heightened that fear further. A particularly ghoulish image, of Ramirez baring his teeth and his eyes pitch black, is displayed while a victim's family member states her disbelief that people idolized Ramirez. Another

example is, when describing Ramirez's "dead eyes", Laurel Erickson stated she felt like a mouse looking into the eyes of a cat. The pictures and videos featured throughout both *Conversations with a Killer* and *Night Stalker* function similarly to illustrations in picture books, which emphasize and visually display the story being told and the narrative devices being used.

Present Only When Necessary

Serial killers, especially those caught by law enforcement within the last few decades, are extensively photographed and their image is spread around to audiences. While such documentation can be used in documentaries to make a visual connection between the crimes and the killer, the following discussion touches on the sparing ways that images of DeAngelo are utilized the film maker. DeAngelo is rarely present in *I'll be Gone in the Dark*, both in terms of identity and visualization. The series focuses heavily on the experiences of the victims and survivors and the investigative process by Michelle McNamara; DeAngelo appears only, when necessary, in the final episode. Following the identification of DeAngelo through using DNA and genealogy, the timeline of the rapes and murders is reviewed in light of DeAngelo's guilt. The pictures of DeAngelo appear in the context of showing his family history and when family members are recounting their experiences with him. The docuseries refuses to give him more time than necessary and limits the visual construction of mythos around him, as throughout the episodes, the recounting of the crimes remained grounded. The evanescent nature of DeAngelo is clearly shown in the footage of him in the courtroom, where he is depicted as a bald and weak elderly man.

Chapter 7: Results II

Construction of Victims

Analyses revealed that victim construction in true crime is just as crucial as the constructions of the perpetrator. Not surprisingly, however, victims receive much less coverage than serial killers and not all victims are constructed in similar manners. In addition, the docuseries in the collected sample often focused on the details and image of the victims' deaths rather than their lives and circumstances. The following sections discuss the demographic aspects of the victims, as well as the patterns that emerged through victim construction. The limited time spent on victims, as well as a lack of personalization is contrasted across series. Last, the distinct visual representation and construction of the victims, as compared to the killers, is discussed.

Themes Relating to Constructing the Victims

Fleshing Out Victims

Representation of victims is a central point within true crime, similar to the portrayal of the perpetrators. Across the docuseries sampled, several consistencies emerged in regard to the sociodemographic characteristics of the victims included. Of the victims discussed in *Conversations with a Killer*, *I'll be Gone in Dark,* and *Night Stalker*, around 75% are white and most fall within the age group of 16 to 25 years of age. In addition, the majority of the victims represented in the three docuseries consisted of middle to upper-middle class women and couples. Not surprisingly, given that each docuseries focused on American serial killers, all victims represented were American. Despite three different perpetrators across the three docuseries, the representation was considerably uniform.

However, the demographics of victims presented in the docuseries did not correspond with the existing serial killer literature (Hickey, 2009). Unlike the representation of middle-to-upper-class victims found in the sample, serial killers' victims are more likely to be part of vulnerable, marginalized groups such as sex workers and unhoused individuals (Garcia & Arkerson, 2018; Hickey, 2009). In terms of race, especially in the United States and Canada, Black and Indigenous populations are overrepresented as victims of serial killers compared to the general population (Aamodt et al., 2020). The focus on serial killers who targeted primarily white, middle-class women aligns with the phenomena of "Missing White Woman Syndrome" (Conlin & Davie, 2015). While not restricted to homicide, the phenomena of missing white woman syndrome can be observed in the sample. Specifically, missing white woman syndrome calls attention to the way white, middle- to upper-class female victims are portrayed in the media compared to women of colour and men (Conlin & Davie, 2015). A key aspect of this syndrome is the significantly greater attention that media, and as a result the public, give to cases that involve white women and girls. Despite the majority of serial killers targeting marginalized and vulnerable populations, all three of the most popular docuseries feature killers who almost exclusively targeted white women (Hickey, 2009; Vronsky, 2018).

Consistent with the constructions of serial killers, the constructions of victims represented on screen varied across docuseries. In *Conversations with a Killer*, as compared to the time given to Bundy, very few details were provided about the victims. For example, when introducing the first group of victims from the University of Washington and Seattle area (i.e., Lynda Ann Healy, Donna Gail Manson, and Susan Elaine Rancourt), the only source of information on the victims was news footage sampled in the docuseries. Specifically, a news anchor, when talking about the disappearance of Healy, states that her absence is unusual because she was a

responsible and dependable young woman. Outside of similar details about the reliability of the victims and their gender, *Conversations with a Killer* offers little more information or contextualization on the victims.

However, *Conversations with a Killer* deviated from its general constructions of victims with its focus on Carol DaRonch, who survived an abduction attempt by Bundy in Utah. Specifically, one segment of this docuseries includes an interview with DaRonch where she discussed how the experience disrupted her life at the time and the challenges of getting justice. In particular, *Conversations with a Killer* shows DaRonch expressing frustration at the pace of the investigation, as it took several years to keep Bundy in custody and prosecute him. The interview segments include DaRonch providing details about her life, including what she was excited about and looking forward to in the future. DaRonch also explores her encounter with Bundy, including the fear she felt prior to escaping. Aside from the segments featuring DaRonch, a young white woman at the time, *Conversations with a Killer* offers few insights in the lives of Bundy's victims as the series generally just provides their ages and general comments on their good-naturedness.

In general, *Night Stalker* similarly provides limited contextualization or construction of Richard Ramirez's victims, with the exception of interviews with the family members of three victims and a survivor. Specifically, *Night Stalker* included interviews with the family members of Joyce Nelson, Max Kneiding and Lela Kneiding, the latter two of which were married, which provided details about the victims' lives and personalities are provided by surviving family. For example, Lela Kneiding's granddaughter is shown describing her as a sports fanatic, and Joyce Nelson's son is featured while he recounted the efforts his mother put into her home. The inclusion of descriptions of the victim's lives outside of their murders humanizes and makes real

the tragedy presented. Additionally, the detailed experiences of the families finding the crime scenes, dealing with the media, and going through the trial shows that the death of a victim is not the beginning and end of their story.

However, only these three victims and Ramirez's survivor are contextualized and broadened beyond a statistic in the docuseries. None of the other victims received any descriptors or details outside of their age and name. For instance, victims such as Mabel Bell and Elyas Abowath are described only in terms of their ages and the ways in which they were killed. The vastly different level of time and care given to humanizing certain victims may present them as more deserving of bereavement (Anastasio & Costa, 2004; Plumm & Terrance, 2009). The similarities of the victims' who are discussed is noteworthy as well, with all three being white middle-class elders. While many victims in the docuseries are white and middle-class, only select victims are humanized through construction, specifically the Kneidings and Joyce Nelson. All of the non-white victims in the sample were victims of Richard Ramirez. It is noteworthy that none of them receive the humanization that Nelson and the Kneidings did, with very few details given, if any at all. Several victims are only mentioned in a review of all the victims of Ramirez, such as Chainarong Khovananth and Mei Leung. While the lack of details given about certain victims may simply be due to time constraints of a show and availability of family to talk about the victims, it is still notable that the most discussed victims are white individuals.

As compared to the first two docuseries in the sample, *I'll be Gone in the* Dark dedicates more time to the victims in terms of providing the audience with context of their lives. Survivors of DeAngelo's attacks are heavily featured throughout the episodes, including more documentation of their lives leading up to the attack. For example, Linda O'Dell, who was assaulted alongside her husband, retold about how they had moved into a house and tried to

secure it against a break-in. O'Dell also recounts the strange events leading up to the attack and the assault itself. In these segments, *I'll be Gone in the Dark* highlights the fear O'Dell experienced. Other survivors including the Hardwicks, Fiona Williams and Kris Pedretti, detail the assaults, interactions with the police and how the trauma impacted them going forward in their lives. Biographical information about the victims killed by DeAngelo is also given by McNamara's book that the show is based off. In the case of Lyman Smith and Charlene Smith, the accomplishments they achieved listed, including Lyman's path to judgeship and Charlene's jewelry business. The elements of their everyday life humanize them and broadened the audience's concept of the victims. Passions and interests of the victims make them relatable beyond their socioeconomic status and race, giving an audience a fuller picture of who they are learning about (Plumm & Terrance, 2009). An observation that should be noted is that while featuring more extensive description of the victims and their lives, *I'll be Gone in the Dark* also centres around a serial killer who targeted white, middle-class people.

Despite some differences in the constructions of victims observed in *I'll Be Gone in the Dark*, most representations of serial killer victims correspond with the concept of the "ideal victim" (Christie, 1986; Lewis et al., 2021). Briefly, the ideal victim refers to victims perceived to have characteristics that make them easily empathetic and more deserving of sympathy. According to Long (2021), racist and colonial ideologies have historically influenced common concepts of the 'ideal victim' (Long, 2021).

Multiple victims across the sampled docuseries meet the standards set out by Christie (1986), but in *Night Stalker*, the victims who receive further humanization are those who meet the criteria. First, Joyce Nelson and the Kneidings were all at the cusp of being elderly or were elderly and were likewise perceived as "vulnerable". All are described as being passionate about

one thing or another and being grandparents. Additionally, the attacks took place in their homes, where they have every right to be and were not "placing themselves in danger". The offender, Ramirez, is constructed throughout the series as a boogey-man like figure and fits very well into the "big bad" described by Christie (1986). Last, Ramirez did not know any of his victims but targeted them randomly, meaning none of the victims could be blamed for associating with dangerous people. Crucially, the victims were all white. While not mentioned in his initial theorization of the ideal victim, researchers have found strong links across ideal victim standards and racial bias (Forringer-Beal, 2022). The humanization afforded to "ideal victims" furthers the empathy they receive, as they are made to be relatable and understood as fellow humans (Plumm & Terrance, 2009), while severely limiting the connection to other victims who are not provided the same attention. In cases of violent crime especially, the more detail given about the victim, the more the audience feels empathy towards them (Anastasio & Costa, 2004).

Visual Representation

A visual representation provides further opportunities for humanization of the victims, expanding conceptions of the life they had prior to their murders. Photographs are the primary visual representation utilized and can be divided into non-crime scene pictures and crime scene pictures. The current section will address how non-crime scene pictures are utilized or are absent in the visual presentation of the victim.

Conversations with a Killer rarely presented more than a single picture for each victim, limiting the lens into the victim's life prior to their death. Many of the pictures featured are those that have been published in relation to the Bundy murders for decades. For example, Melissa Smith, Nancy Wilcox, and Laura Aime have the same pictures displayed repeatedly and only have their names included with these pictures once. Deborah Kent, who was confirmed to be a

victim of Bundy in 2015, is also only shown in one photograph, which appears to be a school photo (Molteni, 2019). As with the descriptions of victims, Carol DaRonch is an exception to the sparsity. As she recounts her experience, pictures of DaRonch as a toddler, child, and young adult are shown. Later, court-room pictures of DaRonch testifying against Bundy are also included alongside news footage from the trial. Beyond DaRonch, the docuseries provides few opportunities for the audience to build their concept of the victims, semantically or visually.

The victims of Ramirez featured in *Night Stalker* are treated similarly, with minimal pictures or footage of them outside of the crime scene. In the case of some victims, as with Chainarong Khovananth and Mary Louise Cannon, there are *no* images of them included outside of crime scene pictures. Other victims, such as Dayle Okazaki and Tsai Lin Yu, are only shown in one picture excluding crime scene pictures. The minimal visual representations of some victims is highly contrasted with several others. Joyce Nelson and the Kneidings, in addition to more time dedicated to their lives, are also more extensively represented through photographs. As relatives of the victims are featured talking about their loved ones, multiple pictures of the victims are shown. For example, while Joyce Nelson's son described how she put many hours into the house where she lived, pictures of her in the kitchen are shown, working on the cabinets. Along with details given by family members, the photographs featured illustrate the mortality of the victims beyond statistics.

Across the three docuseries, *I'll be Gone in the Dark* provides the most visual representations of the victims and survivors. The ways in which the pictures are displayed, and the quantity of different pictures, differs from the other two docuseries.

Notably, many pictures are featured within the episodes almost diegetically, where photographs are shown in frames on nightstands, dressers, or in the hands of the survivor, as

opposed to being presented in intertitles. For example, during an interview with survivor Kris

Pedretti, the camera focuses on her hand holding a photograph of Pedretti as a young girl, and in

another example, the daughter of victim Cheri Domingo is shown sifting through pictures of her

mother as a young woman. These instances poignantly connect the crimes to the present and

solidify the genuine experiences of the victims, survivors, and their families. The docuseries

further accomplishes situating the crimes and impacts through extensive visual representations of

the survivors and victims. Each survivor featured—Fiona Williams, Kris Pedretti, the

Hardwicks, and Linda O'Dell—are shown in numerous pictures, including pictures from after

their attacks that show how they have moved on. The Hardwicks are shown with their growing

family and Williams is shown with her children. The pictures of murder victims are also not

limited, such as Brian and Katie Maggiore who are shown in the snow, at their married and

embracing each other. Janelle Cruz, who DeAngelo killed in 1986, is featured on video tapes,

smiling and spending time with friends. Of the pictures shown, the majority are candid pictures

from the daily lives of the victims.

No Dignity in Death

In a true crime docuseries, the viewer can expect a certain number of crime scene

pictures, with varying levels of gruesomeness. The extent to which the docuseries features crime

scene footage that includes blood, or the bodies of the victims varies, but similarities emerged

between docuseries. The current section specifically addresses the crime scene pictures that

feature victims and the extent to which gore is displayed. *Conversations with a Killer* and *I'll be*

Gone in the Dark take a similar approach in regard to the crime scene pictures used. The many

crime scenes of Bundy and DeAngelo are visually featured across all episodes, but many do not

include the bodies of the victims. Blood and the mayhem of a murder are shown, such as the

blood-stained beds in the Chi Omega house and the mattress at the Domingo and Sanchez murders. However, photos of the victim's remains are withheld from the audience in most cases, preserving victim's dignity in death, with a handful of exceptions. The first episode of *Conversations with a Killer* shows the decomposed remains of multiple victims that were found along an Issaquah service road in Washington. The pictures appear in rapid succession, showing the skeletal remains of a spine and ribs, skulls with missing mandibles, and several skulls in a forensic lab. These pictures are not shown again, serving as shock value at the beginning of the series. *I'll be Gone in the Dark* also features pictures of the victims at crime scene, many of which are the bound hands of victims, both deceased and alive, which establishes similarities across crimes. Additionally, the third episode includes a picture of the bedroom at the Domingo Sanchez crime scene, where two bare legs are visible in the right side, with the victim unspecified. Both Bundy and DeAngelo were incredibly violent killers, and many of their victims were bludgeoned or beaten. The audience are spared from the full extent of the crimes in favour of showing the aftermath of a murder through the wreckage of the rooms and bloodstains, and the victims are spared from being put completely on display and are given dignity in death.

Furthermore, neither *I'll be Gone in the Dark* or *Night Stalker,* uses recreations of the crime scenes in the traditional sense, where an actor is portraying the victim being attacked or after the attack. Instead, *I'll be Gone in the Dark* emphasizes the home invasion aspect of DeAngelo's crimes by recreating the homes where the attack took place. For example, during the interview with Fiona Williams about her attack, a recreation of her home's hallway is shown in a lingering shot that slowly approaches her son's bedroom. A similar recreation is used when the daughter of Lyman Smith describes her brother finding Smith and his wife, Charlene, in their bed. The crime scene recreation was viewed through slow shots approaching the bedroom door

and brief close ups of the blood on the pillows. However, the bodies of the victims are never shown or featured in the recreations.

A very different approach is taken in *Night Stalker*; this is apparent in the first episode of the docuseries with quick successions of close-ups on multiple victim's deceased faces, their eyes, mouths, and entry wounds covered with crude black rectangles. In most of the pictures, the identity of the victim is unclear, and location of body wounds are decontextualized. Pictures of the victims' bodies in the crime scenes and during autopsy are heavily used in each episode, often with many clustered together and presented in rapid cuts. Several crime scene pictures show the bodies of the victims with their faces blacked out, such as Elyas Abowath and Joyce Nelson, but where their bodies are nonetheless clearly shown. Chainarong Khovananth is another victim whose body is present in multiple crime scene pictures, which is the only visual representation given for him throughout the docuseries. *Night Stalker* also uses recreations of the crime scenes but differs greatly in terms of gore from *I'll be Gone in the Dark*. Computer-generated crime scene recreations are shown throughout the show, depicting the crime scene as it was when police arrived. The first recreated crime is Dayle Okazaki's murder. The kitchen is ransacked and there are blood spatters on the counter, which are focused on as the camera pans up overhead to show a bird's eye view of Dayle Okazaki's body. A similar recreation is used for the Nelson and Kneiding crime scenes, showing the murders from above. Very little is withheld in the recreations, with the camera moving close to the bodies and through the carnage of the crime scenes. The numerous photos of the deceased victims and focus on the injuries and blood rather than holistic portrayals of the victims as people when they were alive is even more stark when you consider the fact that some victims are only shown deceased. The victim, when only shown through crime scene pictures, is abstracted away from the person they were. The victim

becomes a piece of forensic evidence, especially when the crime scene photos are not labeled to specify which victim is featured and are instead just pictures of bodies. The importance of the visual representation in death is similar to that of the representation of victims as alive. While gruesome evidence can evoke strong emotional responses from audience, excessive imagery of violence can lessen the impact such images have (Bright & Goodman-Delahunty, 2006; Guo et al., 2016).

Giving a Voice to Victims

In the case of true crime that focuses on murders, victims are unable to speak for themselves, even if survivors of similar attacks are able to speak to their experience. Thus, true crime must rely on the testimony of others to talk about the victim, whether they are family or people close to the case. Across the docuseries, three main claimsmakers emerged as sources of information for victims. The first claimsmakers were the survivors of the attacks. While each of the series covered the crimes of serial killers, all had at least one survivor of the killer. Carol DaRonch, previously mentioned, escaped capture by Ted Bundy, and was able to tell her story in *Conversations with a Killer*. Richard Ramirez had multiple survivors, but only one, Anastasia Hronas, is included in *Night Stalker*. Hronas was abducted and raped by Ramirez when she was a young girl but was returned later that same night alive. She recounts her kidnapping and the experience of helping to identify Ramirez when he was finally apprehended by police. Similarly, several victims survived Joseph DeAngelo's attacks - *I'll be Gone in the Dark* includes footage of some of these victims recounting their experiences. Many of the survivors recount experiences that were not verifiable by forensic evidence, and thus only able to be recounted by the survivor themselves, such as strange occurrences prior to the attack and whether the killer spoke during the assault. The inclusion of the survivors' testimonies allows them to speak on their own behalf,

which is critical in a media genre where victims are frequently overlooked in favour of perpetrators, especially given the deep impact that victim narratives have on audiences (Tolputt, 2016).

The families of murdered victims also provide information about the victims in *Night Stalker* and *I'll be Gone in the Dark*. The Nelson and Kneiding families both expound on their loved ones who were killed by Ramirez, emphasizing the humanity of the victims while also conveying their grief. Likewise, family members of Lyman Smith, Cheri Domingo, and Manuela Witthuhn recount finding their loved ones deceased, their bereavement, and the impacts of the police investigation. Domingo's daughter describes what an amazing woman her mother was, while also recounting their last argument. Allowing the families to speak to the character of the victims provides an opportunity for people who hold the memories of the victims to become claimsmakers in their stories.

The last notable claimsmakers around victims are journalists featured through news footage and/or authors who wrote about the cases. Notably, narration from Michelle McNamara's book is featured throughout *I'll be Gone in the Dark* to provide context, as well as act as an additional claimsmaker for the victims. Many of the biographic details of the victims are provided by the hidden narrator, such as the recent marriage of Keith and Patty Harrington and their success in their respective career fields. Additionally, in *Conversations with a Killer*, news anchors are featured characterizing one of Bundy's Washington victims, Linda Healy, as responsible and close to her roommates.

When talking about victims, there is very limited information, and like many of the points of analysis, the results vary. Consistently however, police provide little information about victims, and many of the details are from the survivors themselves or from their families. If the

survivors are not able to talk about their experience or the family is not included, there is no one to advocate or speak on behalf of the victims, regardless of the use of other claimsmakers such as police and legal representatives. Victims are not given a voice themselves and are dehumanized through crime scene pictures and an absence of details of their life (Anastasio & Costa, 2004). Literature on the presentation of victims, visually and through biographical information, is limited, however research by Gehrke (2024) demonstrates the mistreatment of victims' stories that appears across true crime. Concerns about the impacts on victims have been voiced by other academics, including Williams (2020). In their article on victims' rights within the realm of media, Williams (2020) pointed out that while the Son of Sam Law prohibited convicted offenders from profiting off their crimes through book or other media agreements, there were no additional safeguards for victims and their families who did not want to be spotlighted again.

Chapter 8: Results III

Claimsmakers in True Crime Docuseries

A component of all stories is the storyteller who is entrusted with the narratives and imbue the tales with their own ideologies and constructions. While not all storytellers are visible, as identified by Dosser (2017), they emerge in different ways through a narrative. In constructionist theory, groups of storytellers can be compared to claimsmakers. In the following section, I will examine themes that emerged from analyses concerning what claimsmakers were given the opportunity to tell their stories, which claimsmakers were absent from the docuseries, and the content of the claims presented.

Claimsmakers in Social Problems Theory

Within social problems theory, one of the critical components are "claimsmakers" (Best, 2020). Claimsmakers are those making the argument that there is an issue that needs to be addressed while offering proposed solutions (Spector & Kitsune, 2001). Not all claimsmakers are alike, with different proximities to the problem and varying perceived authority on a topic. None of the docuseries featured an overarching or consistently present narrator, but instead relied on claimsmakers to tell the stories of the three serial killers. While not all of the people included in the docuseries spoke to specific social problems, the series assembled their statements in such a way as to promote a larger narrative around serial homicide as a looming threat. Understanding the emergence of serial killers from psychological or sociological conditions was ignored in favour of encouraging and adding to fear/thrill experienced by audiences.

Themes Relating to Claimsmakers

Police as an Authority

Across all the series included in the sample, the most common claimsmakers were police and detectives who worked on the case in question. Due to the age of the cases covered in the docuseries, the law enforcement officers, primarily consisted of retired, male investigators who had decades of experience with these cases. Using police as claimsmakers is not surprising in the true crime genre, as law enforcement is directly involved with the crimes and have insight into the investigative process. The participation in crime investigation grants police a level of authority when speaking on specific crimes, such as a serial killer case (Spector & Kitsune, 2001). In serial homicide cases, the killer may have a small geographical area where they are active, or can cross continents to find their next victim, meaning the number of police involved in a case can vary greatly.

The crimes of Ted Bundy spanned the entire United States, from the northwest coast to the southeast coast. As such, each episode in *Conversations with a Killer – The Ted Bundy Tapes* includes interviews with the detectives assigned to work the specific murder being discussed. Notably, Ken Katsaris, the Sheriff of Leon County, Florida, describes his interactions with Bundy and the strange behaviour he exhibited, such as rapidly switching his emotions. Additionally, Katsaris details the crime scenes at the Chi Omega House and the subsequent attack on Cheryl Thomas several blocks away. The police featured act as contextualizing forces for the crime scene pictures and connect the victims through explanations about the killer's activity.

Similarly, *Night Stalker* relies heavily on detectives with the majority of the case told from their perspective, including discussions of the forensic evidence and investigative process.

Detectives are heavily relied on in *Night Stalker;* the majority of the case is told from their perspective, including discussions of the forensic evidence and investigative process. Because Ramirez operated primarily in the Los Angeles area, the same detectives, Frank Salerno and Gil Carrillo, are able to speak on the entirety of the case. Each episode follows the detectives in their investigation, focusing heavily on the forensic evidence across cases and the challenges of hunting a serial killer. Outside of the victims' families, the law enforcement personnel act as the source of information on the victims as well, despite the minimal information they provide. Law enforcement primarily speaks to the connections between the murders and explaining the reasoning behind decisions in the case, such as the theorization by Det. Carrillo that a serial killer was operating in L.A.

Similar to the detectives in *Night Stalker*, the officers and detectives in *I'll be Gone in the Dark* provide the investigative story, but like in *Conversations with a Killer*, the widespread nature of DeAngelo's crimes required multiple jurisdictions. Most of the detectives who worked directly on the case are featured early in the episodes, with Paul Holes discussing his efforts on the cold case later on. The number of detectives and officers featured in *I'll be Gone in the Dark* is significantly less than the other docuseries, but the recent work on the case, such as DNA testing, are all told by Paul Holes.

As described by Best (2017), police are part of a governing agency who are considered experts in speaking to the details of crime. However, while law enforcement may be the direct link to criminal investigations and understanding, they are still individuals who are affected by cultural norms and preconceived notions about other people (Wattis, 2017). The perceptions of victims by police can be heavily influenced by the characteristics of victims, such as whether they make "good" choices and are thus deserving of empathy (Ricciardelli et al., 2021; Sleath &

Bull, 2017). These preconceptions by police can also affect case outcome, and in multi-homicide

cases, the dismissal of a murder can result in more people being killed (Wattis, 2017).

Additionally, as described in *I'll be Gone in the Dark*, the treatment of victims by police

was less than favourable, with a lack of proper care being given to help them and a lack of effort

made to take the blame off of them. Racial bias has also been found across multiple police

officers, especially in light of the police brutality faced by Black men (Lim, 2017). Thus, police,

while close to the crime itself, undoubtedly are liable to hold prejudices that would in turn affect

the claims they make about victims, serial killers, and the associated investigation. Furthermore,

as a case remains unsolved, law enforcement experience increased pressure from victim's

families and the public to close the case (Wellman et al., 2020). The pressure can result in arrests

and coerced confession that help police to "save-face" in the absence of further leads, something

which has been extensively documented (Gudjonsson, 2018).

Police and legal personnel who are claimsmakers in the docuseries must also be

considered in terms of what they are claiming to be the issue(s) within the context of serial

killing. As set by Spector and Kitsune (2001), claims are stated by the claimsmaker to draw

attention to a specific condition of society. Law enforcement are the voices given the most time

and attention in the three docuseries, and thus dominate the construction of the serial killers,

victims, and the crimes committed. In construction of crime more generally, police have been

found to emphasize the possibility of others being targeted and the need to take steps to protect

oneself, and it is evident that experts in a knowledge area may not have all — or accurate —

information for identifying and describing social problems (Best, 2020; Buffone, 2019). While

such claims are less directly harmful than bias against victims or perceived victimhood, the

perceptions of crimes by police are not always aligned with the scientific evidence produced by

researchers. Additionally, the importance of police in dictating narratives around crime must consider the possibility of "copaganda", or the promotion and glorification of police as protectors (Bernabo, 2022). Serial killer stories provide ample opportunities for portrayals of police as hero figures, hunting down a personification of evil that threatens the public. However, many serial killer cases expose the flaws of the justice system, by demonstrating the lack of concern for minorities and blasé treatment towards concerned families (Aldrete & Fernandez-Ardevol, 2023; Fast & Kinewesquao, 2019). Additionally, as discussed by the survivors in *I'll Be Gone in the Dark*, police historically have dismissed assault cases. Additionally, literature demonstrates that police can hold biases against victims, such as specific notions of what a victim "should" look like (Ricciardelli et al., 2021). The next section will discuss the claimsmakers who are also experts or directly impacted by crime but were not featured in the docuseries as heavily as law enforcement.

Missing Grief

While the perspectives and experiences of police and officials within the legal system are valuable to an audience, other claimsmakers are notably limited in their appearances across the three docuseries, if they are even featured at all. First and foremost, victims' families have little representation in the three docuseries. As previously discussed, the families of victims provide critical context for the lives of those killed and humanize them beyond a single picture (Gehrke, 2024; Slakoff, 2022); the inclusion of family is thus important to ensure the audience understands the human cost of the serial killer. All of the docuseries include clips or statements from the families of the victims, and the families and loved ones are frequently the primary sources about victims. Comparatively, very few details about the victims are given by police and other claimsmakers. This is despite the fact that police are featured as key claimsmakers.

Evidently, the families and loved ones of victims play a key role in giving victims a voice in their own story.

Conversations with a Killer does not directly include any of the family members of the victims but does have clips of the families expressing their grief. Night Stalker uses the family members as claimsmakers more frequently, with most of their input directly relating to the victims themselves. Similarly, surviving family members of victims and multiple survivors are able to relay their experiences in I'll be Gone in the Dark.

From an informational standpoint, the inclusion of family testimony is key to humanizing victims and survivors, as well as constructing a more complex idea of serial homicide. However, criticism relating to the re-victimization and traumatization of families has been levelled at true crime media (Slakoff et al., 2022; Yardley et al., 2019). Thus, the inclusion of families and survivors should be done in ways that prevent the families from being exploited further for entertainment.

Serial Killers Themselves

Much research has been done that centre on the serial killer in question as a claimsmaker (e.g., Burgess et al., 1986, Ressler et al., 1986). Especially in infamous cases, researchers, law enforcement and journalists all look to speak directly with a killer, to understand motives and get the inside story (e.g., Conversations with a Killer). Once the killer has been executed or passed away, such as with Bundy and Ramirez respectively, the interviews become all the more significant. When producing a true crime story, the decision of whether and how to include the interviews available can considerably change the way a killer is constructed.

Each docuseries differs in the ways the killer is featured as a claimsmaker. Conversations with a Killer undoubtably includes the central killer, Bundy, the most of any of the docuseries, as

Bundy is one of the main claimsmakers within the series. His voice is consistently used in the docuseries to provide context for events and his emotions as his case progressed. Statements by Bundy are frequently contrasted with testimony from people who knew him in order to demonstrate his distortion of the past. For example, when relaying his childhood, the audio clip of Bundy includes how he was a popular child and did well in school. Despite his statements, an interview with a childhood friend is played where she contradicts his account multiple times, explaining that he was always a little odd (Ep. 1). Multiple occurrences set up Bundy as a claimsmaker, then bring in other interviews to negate what he said, turning Bundy into a purposefully unreliable claimsmaker, or at least one who may twist the facts. Furthermore, many of the people who are interviewed and featured directly spoke to Bundy and also make statements echoing things he has said, giving him further status as a claimsmaker within the docuseries.

Night Stalker made less use of the audio clips of Ramirez, as discussed previously, only including ominous quotes from Ramirez during specific clips of Los Angeles. As a result, Ramirez is less of a claimsmaker in the docuseries. *I'll be Gone in the Dark* did not feature any clips of DeAngelo talking, removing him as a claimsmaker in the docuseries altogether. While the opportunity to use the killer as a claimsmaker can potentially attract viewership, it can also muddle details of a case (Kenner & Oldham, 2019). The unreliable narration from Bundy is only one example of the way serial killers can twist case information and is a reason researchers who interview serial killers are wary of the information they are told (Reid, 2017). The variety of ways a serial killer can become a claimsmaker or be excluded entirely should be noted, as minimal work has focused on the serial killer themselves as a main speaker on the topic of multiple murder in media (McCabe, 2022).

Scientists and Researchers

Researchers are experts in their associated field, with up-to-date knowledge and awareness of discourse (Best, 2017). However, despite the value of their input, none of the docuseries included academic researchers as claimsmakers. The one exception is Dr. Al Carlisle, the psychologist who worked with Ted Bundy while he was in custody in Utah. Dr. Carlisle speaks to the psychological state of Bundy while in prison, and sheds light on the ways his childhood molded his behaviour. Outside of Dr. Carlisle and those directly involved with a case, the docuseries do not include claimsmakers who are able to place the current case in science. Researchers can speak to patterns within an area and describe a phenomenon as it is understood at that time, explaining how one serial killer compares to others and the reality of the case in a larger context. Specifically in the three docuseries, as mentioned, the victimization of white, middle- to upper-class victims is not the norm for many serial killers. Furthermore, researchers can speak to the sociological, forensic, and psychological context of a case and how the cultural norms permeated down into institutions such as the legal system and interpersonal interactions. The importance of experts and researchers in true crime can be brought back to the label of infotainment – the educational and informative aspects of the media can be provided by academics in the field to disseminate accurate knowledge in crime research (Garcia & Arkerson, 2018; Savolainen, 2022).

Chapter 9: Discussion

The present study examined the constructions of serial killers and their victims in three sampled true crime docuseries. In true crime media, serial killers have a unique draw as evidenced by the persistent mythos around killers like Ted Bundy and Jack the Ripper. With the most recent surge in true crime media wave beginning in the mid-2010s, the docuseries has emerged as the dominant medium particularly for serial killer-centric pieces (Moore, 2021). To date, most research on true crime has been limited to podcasts or examinations of one specific piece of media. Three docuseries available on Netflix were analyzed: *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes* (2019), *I'll be Gone in the Dark* (2020) and *Night Stalker* (2021). Four research questions guided analyses of these series: (1) How do recent documentaries construct serial killers as a social problem?; (2) How do recent true crime docuseries construct the serial killers they focus on?;(3) How do recent true crime docuseries construct the victims and potential victims of serial killers? and; (4) Who are the major claimsmakers in the docuseries?

Several major themes emerged from analyses performed. The first grouping of themes focused on the sociological context and how serial killers were discussed as social problems. These included episodic representation of serial killers, the othering of serial killers, the universal threat serial killers present and their supporters. Examination of the construction of serial killers revealed themes such as the differentiation of "types" of serial killers, misleading descriptions of how serial killers blend in, and the exaggerated or sparing visual representations. Similar themes emerged through exploration of victim construction, specifically relating to the details with which victims were described, their visual representation, in life and death, and the lack of input from those who are affected by the murders. The last grouping of themes relates to

claimsmakers, as the police emerged as a strong authority, but victims and their families were largely absent.

There was a strong tendency for the series to present serial killers as a ubiquitous threat to society. More so, serial killers are presented as a threat to the well-off middle class, who own their residences and live in hypothetically safe neighbourhoods. Despite the looming threat of serial killers over society that is presented, very little is done to connect the serial killer to the social context in which they occur. The transactional nature of environmental and cultural influence is ignored for the construction of a serial killer as an invader, disconnected and uninfluenced by the social context they emerged from. The use of fear as a tool to draw in audiences to a piece of media is not unique to the series analyzed here, as multiple researchers have found that media outlets purposely use fear to attract attention (Dowler, 2004; Lee & DeHart, 2007). The disconnect from social context furthers the idea that serial killers present a threat that could not be anticipated despite cultural and psychological influences. Crime has frequently been constructed as a threat that does not discriminate, with each part of society equally likely to experience victimization, despite reporting trending towards crimes in affluent areas, where in reality, crime impacts marginalized and racialized communities most heavily (Collins, 2016; Petersen, 2016).

More specifically to media focusing on homicides, research supports the findings of this study, as other examinations of true crime have also reported the construction of crime as an invasion into middle class domesticity (Marceaux et al., 2023; Walter, 2023; Welsh et al., 2011). The focus on middle class suburban areas in the docuseries, especially *Night Stalker* and *I'll be Gone in the Dark*, supports previous findings that serial homicide and crime in general fascinate audiences due to the invasive danger they present to otherwise safe and protected populations

(Walter, 2023). Serial killers are thus portrayed as a social problem through the substantial threat they pose to middle- and upper-class individuals, who are often depicted as ideal victims who are not complicit in their victimization (Welsh et al., 2011). Few studies have dug into the patterns across media that cover serial killers, but a study by Marceaux et al. (2023) found similar themes of eliciting fear and threats to establish serial killers as a social problem. For example, the emphasis on the safety of the areas where Richard Ramirez, Ted Bundy and Joseph DeAngelo hunted is meant to increase the fear of audiences, as even somewhere so secure is not safe from these "invaders" (Marceaux et al., 2023; Welsh et al., 2011). Furthermore, the brutality with which the selected television broadcasts describe the crimes against the victims builds on the fear that is imbued throughout the docuseries, most notably in *Night Stalker*. The excessive violence used to describe the murders is part of the process of increasing fear through reiterating the horrid details that capture attention (Collins, 2016; Marceaux et al., 2023).

The findings also demonstrated that even more so than the presentation of serial killers as a social problem, the presentation of serial killers themselves varies greatly across docuseries. However, the results do align with previous literature, as Bundy, Ramirez and DeAngelo are all presented as different brands of "monstrous" (Wiest, 2016). The use of monstrous and animalistic imagery as part of the construction of serial killers is well established, as Jenkins (1994) identified the use of mythology and folk tales when describing serial killers and similar findings were reiterated by Wiest (2016). Both Jenkins (1994) and Wiest (2016) recognize the construction of the serial killer as a metaphor or extension of a social concern, such as the way Godzilla acts as a personification (or monsterfication) of nuclear fallout and war. The tendency of the docuseries makers to use descriptions of the killers as "evil" or "demonic" is also not a novel pattern within serial killer media (Collins, 2016). News reporting frequently acts to

separate offenders from the rest of society, using language such as "savage", "insane" or "devil" in ways that dehumanizes the killer away from lay people (Collins, 2016; Marceaux et al., 2016). Similar to the removal from social context, such language removes the context of how broader social norms and beliefs contribute to how the crimes were committed and the response from the public. Other than the attention given to issues around women's autonomy and pervasive rape culture, the docuseries do not appear to provide further diagnostic framing to the serial killers that connects them to other social issues, as has frequently been done by media outlets (Jenkins, 1994). As previously mentioned, there were little connections to social context, and likewise, social problems that the serial killer exemplifies. In terms of framing, the docuseries identify the problem of serial killers and some influential social conditions, but do not move past a preliminary diagnostic frame that states the issue (Loseke, 2003). Ultimately, the docuseries miss the opportunity to further explore how a serial killer emerges within cultural norms and call attention to social issues that may still affect marginalized and vulnerable populations to this day.

In constructing the serial killers through the details of their lives and personality, the results show that the level of detail given about the serial killer varies greatly, with *Conversation with a Killer* providing by far the most detail on Bundy, especially when compared to the sparse information given about Ramirez and DeAngelo in their respective docuseries. Previous work on the narratives presented by serial killers when telling their stories support the findings here, with posturing by the killer as an expert and more intelligent than the investigators (Bartels & Parsons, 2009). However, the limited time spent on the lives of the serial killers in *Night Stalker,* and *I'll be Gone in the Dark* presents challenges in comparing the findings here with other studies, of which there are few that address the construction of serial killers as individuals (Boyle & Reburn, 2015).

The present study also identified trends of victim constructions within *Night Stalker* and *Conversations with a Killer*, where victims are depicted as relatable to middle class audiences to assist in stoking fear, but not humanized enough to provide sympathy and humanizations (Horeck, 2019). Similar results have been reported in other media investigations, with media presenting victims as innocent and relatable for the audience, while also reinforcing narratives of good versus evil (Marceaux et al., 2023; McShane & Williams, 1992). While the docuseries examined in my study did not feature victims who are part of marginalized groups, such as sex workers or the queer community, evidence demonstrated the disparity in wording between victims who meet the "ideal victim" criteria, compared to those who do not (Christie, 1986; Collins, 2016). White victims who were well off were described with positive characteristics, mentions of their responsibility, potential and innocence (Marceaux et al., 2023). True crime as a genre has been overwhelmingly white in its focus, with only a recent recognition of both perpetrators and victims of colour (Horeck, 2019; Punnett, 2018).Two of the three series, *Conversations with a Killer* and *Night Stalker*, feature minimal information on victims that would allow a more in-depth analysis of the construction, but the absence of information is also notable in itself (Collins, 2016; Gehrke, 2024).

The trend of media to focus on white, mostly female, middle to upper class victims is well documented, and the results here demonstrate a continuing pattern of limited representation for marginalized communities (Christie, 1986; Collins, 2016). While some findings continue the criticized habit of true crime media centering around "ideal victims" with little humanization, the results from *I'll be Gone in the Dark* are more akin to the justice seeking and victim centric narratives that have begun to emerge (Buozis, 2017). Additionally, none of the docuseries

engaged in victim-blaming, a trend that has luckily lessened with movements such as #MeToo

and recognition of prevalent rape myths (Avalos et al., 2023; Horeck, 2019).

The visual construction of victims is also significant, as the findings show continued

patterns that emerged in the semantic construction of victims (Punnett, 2018). Visual depictions

of victims of serial killers have existed for as long as true crime, with sketches done of the crime

scene prior to photography (Murley, 2008). Notably, *I'll be Gone in the Dark* includes numerous

photos of victims that humanize them, such as the victims on vacation or with their partners. The

inclusion of pictures of the victims in their normal everyday develops the relatability for the

audience but goes further than *Night Stalker* and *Conversations with a Killer* to foster a

connection of the audience to the victim as another person who had dreams, passions and a life to

live. Conversely, the limited pictures in *Conversations with a Killer* do enough to see the victim

as human, but only in so far as eliciting negative responses to their murders (Murley, 2008;

Punnett, 2018). *Night Stalker* is even more graphic, engaging in what Punnett (2018) refers to as

"crime porn", with excessive gore, blood and gratuitously violent close-ups that overwhelm/thrill

a viewer rather than develop sympathy for the victims. Many of the victim's lives, notably

victims of Richard Ramirez and Ted Bundy, are not described in detail, and likewise their lives

are not shown through home videos, casual pictures or school photos. However, their deaths are

detailed extensively, including copious details about the violations and violence inflicted on them

by their killer. The graphic nature of the descriptions, especially as the only associated details

about the victims, can act to dehumanize the victim to only their bodies and the violence inflicted

on them (Lang & Alejandro, 2024). Reduction to a physical object on which brutality is

performed the human element and can likewise remove the empathy an audience feels

(Loughnan, Pina, Vasquez, & Puvia, 2013; Papadaki, 2021).

The final grouping of results stemming from the initial research questions are that police act as the primary claimsmakers in true crime docuseries. When considering claimsmakers in true crime media, audiences are limited to the views that are presented to them by the docuseries or documentary. In the sampled docuseries, overwhelmingly, male detectives and investigators provided the most information on the crimes and perpetrators. Notably, despite the abundance of time police received, very little of the information they disclosed related to victims, beyond the aforementioned grim details. Victims thus become forensic evidence, discussed in their cases alongside evidence such as footprints and DNA. If the police do not construct the victim as more than a piece of the crime scene, then the audience will not know the victim as anything more than that. The goal of law enforcement officers is to solve the case, and when including them as claimsmakers in true crime, the details outside of what is immediately required to close a case, including victims, may be pushed aside.

A second group of claimsmakers are the families of victims and survivors, also referred to as "co-victims", however, this group is much less present as a whole within the documentaries. Once again, the exception is *I'll be Gone in the Dark*, where several co-victims and survivors are interviewed to discuss their experiences. The inclusion of co-victims can be a challenge due to external factors that are not presented in the docuseries and critics have raised the concern that the grief of loved ones may be exploited for profits (Slakoff et al., 2022; Yardley et al., 2017; Yardley et al., 2019). While the discussion of losing a loved one can be very painful, families can actually benefit from discussions with the media and control the narratives around their loved ones (Pâquet, 2021; Tolputt, 2016). The family members who talk with journalists experience what Tolputt (2016) referred to as "quasitherapy", being able to discuss their

experiences at length. Furthermore, family members are able to dictate narratives around their loved ones.

One group of claimsmakers noticeably absent in all three docuseries were scientific experts, specifically researchers who can contextualize the cases and details. Docuseries such as *Crime Scene: Times Square Killer* feature several academics, including Dr. Peter Vronsky and Dr. Melinda Chateauvert, who are able to explain the sociological context that surrounded the crimes of Richard Cottingham. Experts of a subject are highly influential as claimmakers, with a unique knowledge that affords them a special authority for discussing social problems (Best, 2020). Researchers and academics who rely on knowledge acquired through testing and studies may not always be included in shows made for entertainment, but their presence can serve to inform the public on social issues from an academic standpoint (Savolainen, 2022).

In addition to the finding resulting from the research questions posed in this study, further patterns were identified across all three docuseries. On a more quantitative than qualitative level, the general representation and time dedicated to talking about the perpetrators far surpassed the victims (See Fig. 1**).** Not all true crime series approach the case with the same goal – the choices by producers and creators make clear that *Night Stalker* is an exploration of the forensic and investigative work by detectives. Likewise, *I'll be Gone in the Dark* is told through the experience of the late Michelle McNamara and the search for justice. Finally, *Conversations with a Killer* intends to dismantle the mythos of Ted Bundy by giving accounts that contradict Bundy's proposed narrative. However, regardless of the execution and how the message is given, *Night Stalker* and *Conversations with a Killer* still reduced the victims to statistics within the narrative. Disproving the mythos around Ted Bundy is not necessarily worth it if the dignity and lives of victims are the cost yet again. While McCabe (2022) argues that Berlinger (2019a)

deconstructs the mythology around Bundy, this is done at the expense of the victims, and the same can be said for *Night Stalker*, where the exploration of the case ultimately does not have time to humanize the very people who are central to the case.

Part of the time dedicated to the serial killers is speculation about their mental state and motivations, such as questioning the sanity of Richard Ramirez or Ted Bundy. While the docuseries in the sample offer questions of speculations regarding the psychology of serial killers, literature and research is not discussed or included. Research relating to the etiology of serial killers shows multiple interacting elements all contribute to the emergence of a serial killer, such as genetics, environment and psychology (Reid, 2017). Psychopathy, for example, is commonly associated with serial killers, but research demonstrates that the diagnosis is not nearly as prevalent in serial killers as one may anticipate (Reid, 2017). Findings that could answer the questions posed about how a person can commit such heinous acts are largely left out of the docuseries, along with the experts and researchers who could further contextualize the behaviour of a serial killer.

The findings presented here have larger implications for true crime, as the creators and producers of true crime are accountable to the victims, killers and families whose stories they are telling, and the narratives they communicate (Spencer, 2018). The blatant display of violence included in various true crime series, especially those covering more violent crime such as serial killers, can desensitize viewers, lowering the emotional impact that they previously would have experienced in response to violence (Di Tella et al., 2017). Compared to other studies on the general true crime genre, the present examination bolsters previous findings in relation to the stylistic choices and concepts presented (Bruzzi, 2016; Morton, 2021; Walters, 2021). Bruzzi's (2016) work on the emerging genre of true crime notably identified specific components that

multiple genre-defining series shared, namely *The Staircase*, *Making a Murderer* and *The Jinx*. While the documentaries and docuseries explored by Bruzzi (2016) follow a case that at the time was unsolved or ambiguous, the narratives presented are different, with themes of "subversion" and "crusader" emerging through the piece (Punnett, 2018). Compared to one-off cases that can be questioned and prompt the audience to make their judgements on the guilt or innocence of the subject, also referred to as "jurifying" the audience, the docuseries on serial killers do not leave room for interpretation about the case (Bruzzi, 2016; Walters, 2021). The use of family friends, people who knew the killer and insiders on the case are all elements shared by both *Serial* and *Making a Murderer* in Bruzzi's study and the docuseries examined here, with the inclusion of childhood friends of Bundy and family members of DeAngelo. *Night Stalker* is the exception, with very few people included who knew Ramirez other than Salerno and Carrillo, the two investigators. Stylistic similarities, such as the opening title sequence, are also present. The described title sequence of *Making a Murderer*, with ominous string music and lingering shots of otherwise innocuous scenery are also present in the opening of *I'll be Gone in the Dark*, which features nighttime shots looking into suburban houses and slow tracking shots of empty hallways. *Conversations with a Killer,* due to the heavy reliance on the titular tapes, is more stylized, but nonetheless includes innocent looking pictures with a dramatic score overtop.

Likewise, the description of the arcing narrative of true crime media, including the three-act structure that covers the crimes, investigation and trial (Bruzzi, 2016; Morton, 2021). Each of these acts are heavily supplemented with "evidence verité", or real-life documentation of the crimes (Silbey, 2009). Newspapers, news footage, court footage and forensic footage are all different examples of evidence verité, with varying use depending on when crimes took place. The high-profile nature of serial killers however means there will usually be extensive footage

from news reports, newspapers and the subsequent trial. All three docuseries sampled in this study heavily incorporated different pieces of documentation: with *I'll be Gone in the Dark* even including the police report files from survivors of Joseph DeAngelo. Evidence verité lends an even greater credibility to the documentary or docuseries, and thus inclusion of it must be done with consideration of the claims made alongside the evidence (Morton, 2021). Additionally, in pieces of evidence verité such as newscasts from the time of the crimes, the sociological views are imbued into the way things are discussed in the media — with the media being a critical claimsmaker of social problems (Best, 2020).

Further components of the docuseries also align with the current research on the genre of true crime, including the emotional reaction elicited from audiences (Larke-Walsh, 2023). The use of crime scene pictures and descriptions of the brutality of the crimes in *Night Stalker* and *Conversation with a Killer*, and even to some extent *I'll be Gone in the Dark*, all invoke disgust and horror, or in some viewers, a thrill seeing such violence. As discussed previously, the excessive use of crime scene pictures can desensitize audiences and falls into what Morton (2021) refers to as irresponsible manipulation. Furthermore, documentaries and docuseries utilize music for displaying tension, fear and sadness. Much like horror films, which often capitalize on the use of sound design and soundtracks to generate atmosphere, true crime, especially the highly stylized true crime of today, use sound to build on the emotion of each episode (Lopes et al., 2019; Morton, 2021). The treatment of true crime, especially within docuseries and documentaries, as extensions of fictional stories can be useful to capture audience attention. However, as previously discussed, the dramatization of true crime can become intertwined with changing details or adding interactions that are impossible to verify – ultimately developing a

new fictionalized version of the events that deviate from the truth and change the story of the victims and perpetrator (Bruzzi, 2016).

The present study has significant implications for the study of true crime and the information passed to audiences from popular media. While true crime has potential to act as an opportunity to bring recognition to old or ignored injustices, the findings of this study show that true crime media is still fixated on routine cases, such as Ted Bundy and Richard Ramirez, which was true of many of the docuseries in the sampling frame, especially the most popular ones. As one of the most popular mediums for true crime, docuseries have potential to shine light on serial killer cases that have not been given the same care. However, audiences are still being shown the same cases that reinforce stereotypes and misconceptions about serial killers and their victims (Hodgkinson et al., 2017). The focus on the "usual cases" reinforces the idea that serial killers and the social problems that influence their crimes are things of the past, no longer present in 2024. Additionally, true crime docuseries do not commit to exploring the sociological or psychological influences on serial homicide, but instead use episodic framing and build on the mythology of serial killers. Similar to the portrayal of serial killers using stereotypes, treating their crimes as entirely individual is an ongoing issue in true crime, and fails to communicate to audiences the importance of sociological context. Another finding that persists across true crime is that victims are generally not granted the same attention and development as their killers, though two of the three docuseries did make efforts to expand upon the victims' lives. The last major finding of this study relates to the claimsmakers disseminating deeper victim-related information to audiences.

Limitations

The findings from the three docuseries selected—*Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes*, *Night Stalker* and *I'll be Gone in the Dark*—have shed light onto the current state of true crime media. Despite the significance of the findings in the present study, there are several limitations that require discussion. First, the sample for this study was limited in the number of docuseries selected. Altheide and Schneider (2012) do not specify an exact number of documents to analyze when conducting a qualitative media analysis, but larger sample sizes provide more data. As evidenced by the size of the sampling frame, many true crime docuseries exist, with more being released monthly. However, the time constraints and the nature of a Master's thesis required that the sample be manageable. Only three of twenty-one potential docuseries were selected, as three distinct series would be both feasible and ensure results were not divided into halves, allowing for distinct or shared patterns to emerged. While the sample is small, the themes and results identified can work to guide future research on true crime media, especially the contemporary media that has yet to be analyzed. For example, the creator of *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes*, Joe Berlinger (2019a), continued the series with two additional docuseries using the shared concept of featuring the tapes of the serial killers. *Conversations with a Killer: The John Wayne Gacy Tapes* (2022) was released three years after the series on Ted Bundy, with *Conversations with a Killer: The Jeffery Dahmer Tapes* (2022) released the same year. Analysis of two additional docuseries by the same creator could expand the results provided in this study through greater sample sizes across more platforms. However, the focus on repeatedly covered cases, such as Ted Bundy, Richard Ramirez and Jeffery Dahmer, limited the ability of the present study to account for other docuseries that do not have established narratives around the killer. True crime media which addresses killers who

targeted marginalized victims may have different approaches to the construction of the perpetrator and victims.

The second limitation with this study is the length disparity between the docuseries. Both *Night Stalker* and *Conversations with a Killer* consisted of four episodes, while *I'll be Gone in the Dark* spanned across six episodes. As all the episodes were roughly one hour each, *I'll be Gone in the Dark* was significantly longer, with two additional hours of content. While the extra data was helpful in the analysis, the difference in lengths means a completely fair comparison is challenging, with more opportunities to address victims, explore the killer, and include case information in a longer series. The issue of varying time lengths was partially circumvented through the sample frame only including docuseries, but episode number and length variations still emerged between series. While this certainly presents a limitation in terms of comparisons across series, the shorter docuseries show what information and material was prioritized by the creators. The inclusion of certain information in *Night Stalker* and *Conversations with a Killer* shows what the docuseries makers consider the most crucial for their shows, without the benefit of two additional episodes. Using a larger sample size could help to eliminate this issue, as the inclusion of multiple docuseries of varying lengths would provide a better comparison.

A third limitation in this study is the amount of data that each serial killer gives, such as entire recorded interviews by Bundy that delve into the psychology of his crimes or shorter interviews by Ramirez attempting to justify his actions. As discussed by Tang (2022), not all serial killers are interviewed extensively or have the interviews recorded to use later. The existence of the recordings is a luxury to the creators, which is not available in every case. The amount of information on each serial killer also differed in terms of what was known at the time. Specifically, the day production began for *I'll be Gone in the Dark*, Joseph DeAngelo was

arrested. Interviews as extensive as those with Bundy were simply not available to the

production team, and as a result the contents of the docuseries differ significantly. The limitation

of data availability to the production team cannot be addressed by researchers; however,

acknowledging the limitations, as has been done here, can help to place the results in a larger

context.

Similarly, external factors also affect the docuseries in ways which are difficult to

account for during analysis. Production challenges, inclusion of different people, and availability

of information all influence and impact the contents of the docuseries. One significant way this

manifested was in the identification of the serial killer. As mentioned previously, DeAngelo had

only just been identified and arrested for the Golden State killings at the start of the production

of *I'll be Gone in the Dark*. Charges had still not been laid, and biographical information was

just being put together to understand the life he had during and after the murders. An interview

with DeAngelo would not have been possible for the creators, all of which affected the series'

contents. At the time of production for *Conversations with a Killer* and *Night Stalker*, Ted Bundy

and Richard Ramirez were household names for true crime fans, and their lives had been

thoroughly analyzed by investigators, media, and crime enthusiasts, meaning plenty of

information was able to be included in the docuseries. The limitation of one docuseries lacking

the detailed analysis of the killer could also be circumvented through larger sample size, which

would account for both long-since identified serial killers and those who have been named only

recently, such as Rex Heuermann and Bruce McArthur, two serial killers operating in New

Jersey and Toronto respectively. Additionally, many docuseries focus on serial killers who have

not been identified officially. Jack the Ripper, the Zodiac Killer, and the murders in the Texas

Killing Fields have all been the focus of documentaries and docuseries, with Joe Berlinger also

involved in the production of *Crime Scene: The Texas Killing Fields* (2022). Multiple examples of each in the sample can help to identify if certain patterns within docuseries are due to the amount of information, how recent the case, or decisions by the creators of the series.

Additionally, external factors relating to the victims also potentially contributed to what was included in the series. All the crimes covered in the three series took place at least thirty years ago, meaning many of the survivors or victims' family members would be significantly older, if not deceased. Furthermore, the notoriety of serial homicide cases has likely meant significant, if unwanted, attention to their loved one's murder, which may have prompted them not to appear in the docuseries. As discussed previously, true crime has faced legitimate criticism for the exploitation of victims that can occur, especially when family members make their disapproval known (Romano, 2022). Family members may feel exploited by the production or be tired of being asked about the same horrible events decades after. Survivors of the attacks may find justice in being able to discuss their experience but may not want to be re-traumatized by involving themselves in a docuseries about their attacker. For example, not all of the survivors of DeAngelo were included in the docuseries, with many only being shown during the court meeting to set a trial date. The absence of family members and survivors can influence the detail and humanization that a victim is given, ultimately changing the findings during analysis. However, while the lack of knowledge around behind-the-scenes decisions is certainly limiting, production teams of true crime can also make efforts to counter the absence of survivors and family by having other sources speak to the experiences of victims, such as police or journalists who are interviewed. The investigators, prosecutors, and defense teams may also hold a similar sentiment as victims' families, and thus decide not to appear in the docuseries. These external factors, unless publicized, are hidden and cannot be known when analyzing the content of the

series. The layers of choices in producing a show can muddle the end results, with omissions that may have been out of control of the production team appearing as intentional. Despite this, the end result is what the audience is shown, and thus must be studied as the way the docuseries ultimately constructs the killer and their victims.

Conclusion

The significance of the findings presented show that true crime still has a ways to go in telling compassionate and accurate narratives around serial killers and their victims, but that efforts are being made to shift the genre in a different direction. Audience members who are engaging with new true crime not only have access to new narratives for old cases but recent cases that shed light on biases that exist within the justice system. The docuseries examined in this study all differed significantly in their approach, despite all covering serial killers who were similar in many ways – meaning audiences are not limited to only one construction of serial killers and victims. The docuseries also give audiences insights into the unique challenges of tracking a serial killer and impact on the families of victims. Further explorations of a broader sample need to take place to better understand the true scope of social constructions in true crime media. Other docuseries listed in the initial sample frame could all be subject to study and would provide further insight into the research questions of this study. Additionally, the actual impact of the docuseries on the viewer's construction of serial killers and their victims also requires analysis, as the theory and assessment presented here assumes certain presentations result in specific constructions. For example, the folkloric imagery and descriptions of Richard Ramirez in *Night Stalker* may not be as impactful on viewer's construction of serial killers as previously thought. The future research on true crime docuseries and documentaries generally can give insight into the larger patterns of social construction and the impact on audiences. The present

study is among the first foray into serial killer media, and the findings have implications for the way true crime has evolved. While these results are exciting, future studies can shed light onto the ways audiences take in information and develop improvements in the genre regarding accurate representations and expanding empathy.

Appendix A

Table 1
Sampling Frame

Series Name	Year	Run Time	Service
The Killing Season	2016	344 minutes	Hulu
The Hunt for the Zodiac Killer	2017	170 minutes	Amazon
Unabomber: In His Own Words	2018	175 minutes	Netflix
The Confession Killer	2019	240 minutes	Netflix
Killer Ratings	2019	351 minutes	Netflix
Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes	2019	236 minutes	Netflix
The Alcasser Murders	2019	303 minutes	Netflix
Murder in the Bayou	2019	272 minutes	Showtime
Ted Bundy: Falling for a Killer	2020	231 minutes	Prime
The Ripper	2020	195 minutes	Netflix
The Night Caller/After the Night	2020	197 minutes	Prime
Atlanta's Missing and Murdered: The Lost Children	2020	267 minutes	HBO
I'll Be Gone in the Dark	2020	353 minutes	HBO
Night Stalker: The Hunt for a Serial Killer	2021	189 minutes	Netflix
The Sons of Sam: A Descent into Darkness	2021	239 minutes	Netflix
Confronting a Serial Killer	2021	278 minutes	Crave
Crime Scene: The Time Square Killer	2021	147 minutes	Netflix
Dig Deeper: The Disappearance of Birgit Meier	2021	236 minutes	Netflix
The Raincoat Killer	2021	143 minutes	Netflix
John Wayne Gacy: Devil in Disguise	2021	308 minutes	Peacock
The Girl in the Picture	2022	101 minutes	Netflix
Captive Audience	2022	138 minutes	Hulu
BTK: Confessions of a Serial Killer	2022	172 minutes	A&E
Conversations with a Killer: The John Wayne Gacy Tapes	2022	183 minutes	Netflix
Conversations with a Killer: The Jeffery Dahmer Tapes	2022	180 minutes	Netflix
Indian Predator: Diary of a Serial Killer	2022	120 minutes	Netflix
Indian Predator: The Butcher of Delhi	2022	125 minutes	Netflix
Indian Predator: Beast of Bangalore	2022	143 minutes	Netflix
Monique Olivier: Accessory to Evil	2023	206 minutes	Netflix
The Myth of the Zodiac Killer	2023	130 minutes	Peacock

Last Call: When a Killer Stalked Queer New York	2023	214 minutes	HBO
The Playing Card Killer	2023	151 minutes	Netflix
The Murders at Starved Rock	2021	174 minutes	HBO

Table 2

Tabulation of Possible Docuseries and Number of times Mentioned in Listicles

Docuseries	**Mentions**	**Platform**
[Last Call: When a Serial Killer Stalked Queer New York](#)	7	HBO
[Night Stalker: The Hunt for a Serial Killer](#)	16	Netflix
I'll Be Gone in the Dark	9	HBO
The Playing Card Killer	3	Netflix
The Confession killer	4	Netflix
Conversations With a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes	11	Netflix
Conversations with a Killer: The John Wayne Gacy Tapes	1	Netflix
Crime Scene: The Times Square Killer	2	Netflix
Monique Olivier: Accessory to Evil	3	Netflix
Ted Bundy: Falling For a Killer	5	Amazon
Captive Audience	3	Hulu
Atlanta's Missing and Murdered: The Lost Children	3	
The Girl in the Picture	6	Netflix
John Wayne Gacy: Devil in Disguise	4	Peacock
Indian Predator: Butcher of Delhi	1	Netflix
The Night Caller/After the Night	1	Prime
The Ripper	6	Netflix
The Sons of Sam: A Descent into Darkness	4	Netflix
The Raincoat Killer	3	Netflix
The Murders at Starved Rock	1	HBO
The Killing Season	1	Hulu

Table 3
Codebook

Code	Subcodes	Definition
Case/Timeline Information		*Information such as the date of the crime, breaks in murders, locations, details about case*
Claimsmakers	Authors	*Writers on case, books for case*
	Experts	*Doctors, academics, etc.*
	Family/friends of perpetrator	*People associated with killer*
	Family/friends of victims	*People associated with victims*
	Journalists	*Anchors, citizen detectives etc.*
	Lawyers/Judges	*Prosecutors, attorneys, judges*
	Other	*People outside these categories*
	Perpetrators	*Killers that are focus of doc*
	Police	*Detectives, criminalists, etc.*
	Survivors	*Previous victims of killers*
Contextualizing Perpetrator	Life history/personality	*Descriptions of life and the type of person they are/were*
	Motivations/psychology	*Speculations about reasons, thought process etc.*
	Negative descriptors	*Blatantly negative statements*
	Positive descriptors	*Complimentary statements*
Contextualizing Victims	Life history/personality	*Details about life prior to crime, including hearing about similar crimes*
	Experiences of crime for victims and family	*Psychological impacts on victims and family, experiences with police, media*
	Blame/sympathy	
Crime Construction	Predatory other (wolves & lambs)	*"Hunting", "stalking", "terrorizing"*
	Criminal lurking/infecting (Savage)	*Describes killer as akin to illness or disease*
	Crazed killer	*"Lunatic", "crazy", "insane"*
	Demon killer (Supernatural)	*"Evil", "devil", "darkness"*
Description of crime		*Details of crime like the method, sequence of events, etc.*
Evidence verité	Court room pictures/footage	*Images of inside/near court*
	Crime scene pictures/footage	*Images of scene, outside/inside*
	Forensic evidence/documents	*Documents related to the case, such as body parts found, show prints, DNA, lack of evidence*
	Investigation process	*Interviewing, collaborations, etc.*
	Newspapers/news footage	*News from time, newspaper clippings*
Impact of Crime on Investigators	Journalists, authors of case	*Psychological impacts on the people writing about the case*

	Police/Law enforcement	*Effects on the police in the case*
Investigation Context	Knowledge aspects	*Discussion of how SKs were new to police, how each SK was "unlike what they had seen before"*
	Policing context	*Issues related to officers not communicating, sharing information, including with media, politics of police*
	Technology context	*Issues or advancements of technology related to the case*
Narratives	Crusader	*Social reformation, the aim becomes overturning of a specific wrong and a new awareness.*
	Folkloric	*Stories that explain a truth to a public but may not be 100 percent factual, a common pedagogy in true crime texts*
	Forensic	*Visual portrayal of crime narratives, detailed descriptions of crime scenes, autopsies, and scientific methods of crime detection*
	Geographic	*Elevates a detailed description of the scene setting as a frame for events above traditional journalism's basic fulfillment of the "where" of a story.*
	Justice	*"Victim-centric", reflect a need to secure justice for the victim(s)*
	Subversive	*Author makes to reconsider evidence, testimony, demand new testing, or expose malfeasance*
	Vocative	*Denotes the shift of the authorial style from an objective, journalistic ordering of facts to an advocacy position*
Other		
Public reaction/response		*Reaction of the public, both horror and precautions taken.*
Setting/Sociological Context	Gendered violence	*Women's issues, like rape culture and victim blaming.*
	Location context	*Description of neighbourhood, area where the crime took place, pics of area*
	Police disconnect/brutality	*Issues with victims, brutality,*
	Political context	*What political changes happened?*
	Rampant crime	*Was crime increasing or decreasing?*
	Social inequality	*Gender, financial, racial inequality and changes that have happened*

Visual depiction of Perpetrator	News, court, prison footage/pictures	*Images of the perpetrator in the news and in police custody (court, jail, etc.)*
	Non-crime related pictures	*Images from daily life, outside crimes*
Visual depiction of Victims	Crime scene pictures Body shown Face shown	*Images from the crime scene that include body, or face of victim in them. Only when it's clear that it is victim*
	Non-crime scene pictures	*Life pictures, before and after crime*
	Recreation of crime scene With body Without body	*Digital or re-enactment of crime, including the body or only showing scene, no body included.*

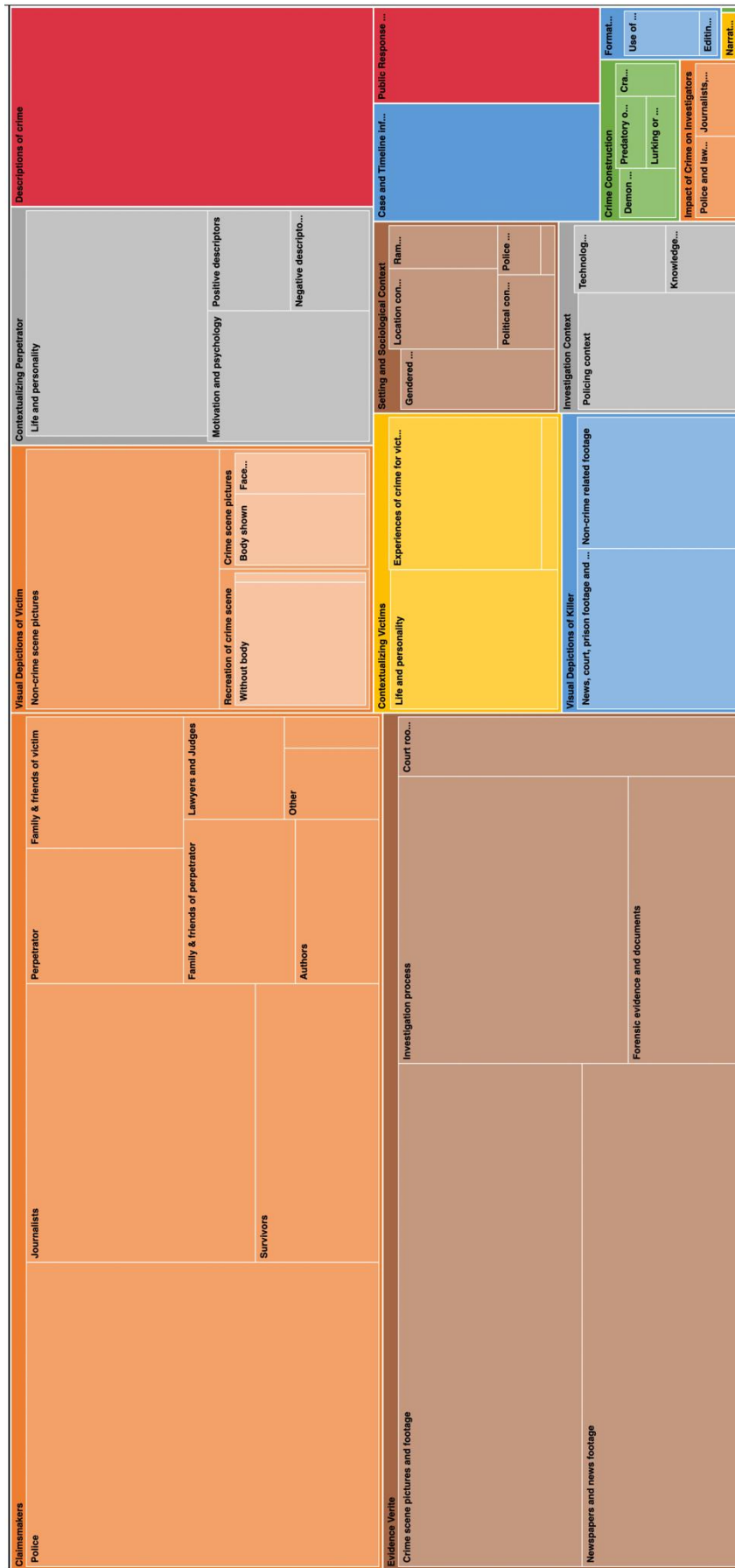*Figure 1. The final code hierarchy from NVivo*

Appendix B

For all the victims mentioned in the docuseries and those who were not.

Jennie Vincow

Dale Okazasi

Tsai-Lian "Veronica" Yu

Vincent Zazzara

Maxine Zazzara

William Doi

Mable "Ma" Bell

Mary Louise Cannon

Joyce Lucille Nelson

Max Kneiding

Lela Kneiding

Chainarong Khovananth

Elyas Abowath

Karen Sparks

Lynda Healy

Donna Manson

Susan Rancourt

Roberta Parks

Brenda Ball

Georgann Hawkins

Janice Ott

Denise Naslund

Nancy Wilcox

Melissa Smith

Laura Ann Aime

Debi Kent

Caryn Campbell

Julie Cunningham

Denise Oliverson

Lynette Culver

Susan Curtis

Margaret Elizabeth Bowman

Lisa Levy

Kimberly Leach

Claude Snelling

Brian Maggiore

Katie Maggiore

Debra Manning

Robert Offerman

Lyman Smith

Charlene Smith

Keith Harrington

Patrice Harrington

Manuela Witthuhn

Cheri Domingo

Greg Sanchez

Janelle Cruz

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