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# “Serial killers are interesting, they’re not heroes”: Moral boundaries, identity management, and emotional work within an online community

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*“Serial killers are interesting, they’re not heroes”*: Moral boundaries, identity management, and  
emotional work within an online community

Michael Spychaj

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## Chapter 1 - Introduction

Everyone is a fan of something, be it of a movie, a musical artist, or a professional sports team; the possibilities are nearly endless. Regardless of what the object of interest is, it serves as the epicenter to a specific fandom, an assortment of individuals who collectively admire this object of interest. Fandom as a behaviour is a widespread cultural phenomenon, often becoming an integral part to an individual's social identity (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington, 2007). While the vast majority of fandoms venerate conventional objects, there are fandoms whose subject of veneration bridge together the worlds of fandom and deviancy.

The concept of deviance is described by Durkheim (1893) as functional; it is not merely a violation of existing social norms and rules, but also the reaction to a real or assumed violation by others. Deviance to Durkheim acted as a central function in any social system as it provides solidarity through unified societal reactions as well as flexibility through social change. As deviance is an integral aspect of any social system, by analyzing it, it elucidates the social order's collective conscious and how they react to uphold social norms, retain social stability, and maintain moral boundaries (Ben-Yehuda, 1985). However, as Goode (1978) illuminates, deviance is a socially defined concept, and therefore always culturally relative. As such, in order to analyze a specific subculture, the *context* of deviance becomes a key factor in understanding any social system.

When it comes to deviancy, there are few crimes that completely encapsulate what is understood as deviant. Murder is one such offence that is perceived as universally deviant throughout every culture of the world (Ben-Yehuda, 1985). By extension, serial murder as a crime is what Hickey (2015) posits is "incomprehensible to society", and those who would commit murder for recreation are considered deserving of the label of "evil" (p. 45). While the

crime of serial murder is not a new phenomena, serial murderers have captured the attention of society at large due to the deep anxieties it elicits within it (Hickey, 2015). The crime of serial murder peaked in the 1980s in the United States, leading North America to experience a “moral panic” (Cohen, 1972) surrounding this perceived “new” type of violent criminal (Leyton, 2005). As serial murder became a budding social problem, it was appropriated by certain parties with their own agendas in it being viewed as a pressing danger to the general public. These claims-makers, specifically official law agencies and special interest groups, were able to co-opt the fear that serial murder instills to socially construct it as a problem worthy of societal attention.

As more attention was afforded to serial murder and its perpetrators due to the claims of law enforcement, political, and media parties, it had a direct impact on western popular culture. The image of the serial murder combines several distinct features: an innate cultural curiosity around death and violence paired with the rarity of this type of violent offender and their unknowable quality, making serial murderers into as Schmid (2005) argues, ‘natural born celebrities’. This interest has been particularly favourable to the media, which has seen a rapid surge in serial murderer-themed media since the 1980s (Hickey, 2015).

Due to the nature of serial murder and increasing media attention, serial murderers have ascended to something approximating celebrity-like status, gaining recognition and a fan following: the serial murderer fandom. While admirers of serial murderers are not new, previously referred to as “prison groupies” (Linedecker, 1993), in an increasingly mediated world, these fans have been able to congregate online in greater numbers than previously before to openly discuss their interests and form their own communities (Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2007). While fandoms serve many psychological needs for those who indulge in it, it also can play a significant role in an individual’s identity and their social development (Gray, Sandvoss &

Harrington, 2007; Guschwan, 2016a). While there have been inquiries into why individuals may feel attracted or sympathetic to serial murderers, particularly while incarcerated, there are no definite answers.

However, unlike conventional fandoms, due to the nature of their objects of interest, the fans of serial murderers voluntarily assume deviance and stigma by association. In conjunction with this acceptance of deviance comes stigma. Goffman (1963) differentiates between physical, individual, and group stigma, he defines stigma as, "...a special kind of relationship between attribute and stereotype." (p. 6). However, what connects these distinct types of stigma is that the sociological reactions remain the same.

To better explore this community, several research questions were developed to guide inquiry: (1) Is the serial murderer fandom a broader reflection of a cultural fascination with death and violence?; (2) How does the serial murderer fandom community maintain its moral boundaries?; and (3) How do members of the serial murderer fandom respond to deviance and stigma in association with serial murderers? These questions served as a foundation in the exploration of this online community.

To function successfully as a community, it becomes necessary to define what behaviours are permissible and which are seen as deviant within it. The serial murderer fandom adheres to this sociological process, establishing moral boundaries that its members should not cross, specifically around the topic of fan behaviour crossing into the realm of celebrating and idolizing serial murderers. By uncovering the moral boundaries of the community, it becomes possible to better understand how they negotiate and manage their group identity as fans, particularly in how they create alternate deviant identities to shield themselves from courtesy stigma, utilize narrative resistance to separate themselves from other groups of fans of serial murderers, as well

as socially distance themselves from serial murderers themselves. However, a unique problem is raised within the fandom, namely that of willingly exposing themselves to details of the crime of serial murderers. Due to this immersion into details of death and violence, community members often expressed the emotional toll it could take on them, particularly in relation to victims. Consequently, fans utilized dark humour as a collective strategy of coping with these emotional responses, lightening the of morbid conversations as well as acting as a form of social bonding among members.

### **Chapter Outline**

This research project seeks to create a better understanding of how the serial murderer fandom as a community functions in relation to deviance and stigma due to an association with serial murderers, how they establish moral boundaries as a social system, and what techniques of identity management they utilize in response. In Chapter Two, an exploration of all relevant literature in relation to serial murder and its social construction and how it has resulted into the rise of serial murderer celebrity, which has directly impacted the creation of the serial murderer fandom. In Chapter Three, the construction of identity is explored through the use of the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism to understand how fan identity is created and managed within this community. In Chapter Four, an outline of the methodology utilized in this research project are provided, clarifying how data was sampled, collected, coded and analyzed using ethnographic content analysis (Altheide & Schneider, 2013) in order to answer the developed research questions. In Chapter Five research findings around defined moral boundaries around interest and idolization are explored, in addition to contradictions and moral blurring within the serial murderer fandom. In Chapter Six, findings around the variety of identity management techniques that appear to be utilized by the community to successfully satiate



their interest in serial murderers and their crimes without spoiling their everyday identities and avoid stigmatization are addressed. As serial murderers hold a significant amount of stigma, fans relied upon alternate deviant identities, ensuring a sense of anonymity and an identity that is freely able to engage in the content of the fandom while minimizing the risk of stigma by association and insulating the risk of stigma contagion onto others. While members of the community acknowledged they held a high degree of interest in serial murderers, they underwent the practice of narrative resistance against being categorized with serial murderer “groupies” they perceived to cross the line of interest into the domain of idolization. In addition, despite the fandom revolving around serial murderers, fans of this community consistently socially distanced themselves from them, overwhelmingly viewing them in a negative manner and emulating conventional societal beliefs in relation to serial murderers as a way to retain some normative aspects of their social identity. In Chapter Seven findings around the emotional work fans undertake due to their exposure to the realities of the crimes of serial murderers are explored, in addition to how this community utilized dark humour as a collective coping strategy in order lighten the atmosphere of morbid discussions, in addition to acting a form of social bonding

To properly situate the serial murderer fandom, it is imperative to explore the various facets in relation to the social construction of serial murderers, how they have been received by society and co-opted mass media and popular culture, and how this has directly resulted in their ascension to a celebrity-like status, leading into the formation of the serial murderer fandom and the resulting barriers they take on for holding a strong interest in serial murderers.

## Chapter 2 - Literature Review

To situate and better understand the serial murderer fandom, it is necessary to review and synthesize foundational knowledge of serial murder. By doing so, it clearly demonstrates how the social construction of the serial murderer has led their celebrity status, which has directly impacted the creation of the serial murderer fandom. As a historical practice, the act of serial murder by definition is not new, however, with the onset of modernity, who and how serial murder is conducted has changed. With these societal changes, the serial murderer has been socially constructed by various vested parties interested in giving them more attention by society as a social problem, which has resulted in a societal response rooted in fear as well as fascination. As a direct result, serial murderers have gained massive amounts of attention from the mass media, leading to their celebrification based on their acts of infamy, a fact which has been reflected in popular culture. As with all celebrities, positive or negative, they have drawn followers in the form of fans, which has led to the creation of a fandom where serial murderers are at the centre. However, unlike normative fandoms, due to the deviant acts carried out by serial murderers and the stigma they hold, the fans of serial murderers adopt a stigma by mere association, leading to a need for their fan identity to be managed through various strategies of identity management.

### *Serial Murder as a Historic Practice and a Modern Construct*

To properly chart the social construction of serial murder, it is important to differentiate between serial murder as a behaviour, and as a modern construct. The act of serial murder is not a new occurrence that has risen in parallel with the modern world, as serial murder as a universal practice can be traced throughout history, and as Schechter (2003) contends is, “at least as old as the human species” (p. 318). By its traditional definition, most commonly accepted by law

enforcement agencies, it is categorized as involving three or more separate homicides, with a cooling off period in between each homicide (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1990). Based on this definition, serial murder has occurred since as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century (144 BCE), when Han dynasty prince Liu Pengli, with the help of his servants, murdered over one-hundred people during the night for his own mere amusement (Sima, 2013). In 1432 CE, the French nobleman Gilles de Rais, who once campaigned with the canonized saint Joan of Arc during the 100 Years War, was executed for the torture and murder of hundreds of children in France (Cyriax, 2009). While the act of serial murder has historically appeared to be reserved for those of higher class with some degree of power, how we currently view serial murder is new.

While the act of serial murder has existed throughout history, the term “serial murder” itself is a modern construct, its first usage being when Brophy (1966) coined its use to describe this specific type of multiple homicide. The creation of this terminology was a result of his dissatisfaction with an earlier reliance on the terms “series-murder”, “multiple murder” and “mass murder”, which had been readily used to describe multiple homicides at the time. Instead, he argued, the term “serial murder” better reflected that its “essential character is repetition at intervals of time” (Brophy, 1966, p. 166). Despite Brophy’s work occurring nearly a decade earlier, it was not until the 1970s and 1980s that the term became a part of the language of law enforcement agencies and society in general to describe this type of violent offender.

Leyton (2005) has argued that the act of multiple murder is an embodiment of the central stressors of their time. With the dawn of the modern era, he continues that there is a culture of violence, particularly within the United States, centered around a moral and sensual attraction to evil. If serial murderers are a byproduct of their time periods due to central stresses, they reveal deeper issues within the western culture.

### *Serial Murder as a Product of Modernity*

The image of the serial murderer has become well known; they are individuals who are seen to represent absolute evil due to their apparent willingness to take life and their lack of remorse in doing so (Hickey, 2015). As a crime, it continues to be a boundless source of both fear and fascination for society due to its adoption by popular culture. The concept of the serial murderer has been adopted by the media as a common narrative of criminality, a modern-day *boogeyman*, characterized as a form of super predator, driven by an innate desire to kill and often harbouring disturbing sexual impulses (Hickey, 2015; Schmid, 2005; Surette, 2015). Serial murderers are presented as unknowable entities through both public and scholarly discourse, as Hickey (2015) states, despite all the research put forth in terms of social, biological, psychological, and behavioural theories, there is no definitive answer to why serial murderers commit their crimes. He elaborates that it is this unknowable quality of serial murderers that serves to pique a collective curiosity about the question of *why* they commit their crimes.

While serial murder has been analyzed by scholars to a great extent, Haggerty and Ellerbrok (2011) maintain that the crime of serial murder has predominantly been examined solely in relation to the personal biography of murderers, when as phenomena, it needs to be viewed in relation to broader social and historical settings. As Haggerty (2009) argues, “serial killing is patterned in modernity’s own self-image.” (p. 170). Modernity as a concept refers to the social changes that occurred within the world, one that provided new experiences due to the interventions of the actors who constructed it (Eyerman, 1992). These social changes stem from the movement of societies, shifting the collective, family-based communities into larger urban communities where social relationships therein also changed. Haggerty (2009) further claims that due to this shift in how societies now function, it has led to a “society of strangers”, where we no

longer know our immediate neighbours due to a lack of a community element in larger city centres. Due to these broad historical changes associated with modernity, it has had a modernizing process on the crime of serial murder as well and how they have come to be viewed by society.

### *The Emergence of the Modern Serial Murderer*

The contemporary image of the serial murderer first emerged following several high-profile cases in the 1970s, such as in 1975 when one of the most prolific American serial murderers Theodore “Ted” Bundy was arrested, a case that would come to represent the prototypical serial murderer (Ramsland, 2013). Shortly thereafter in 1981, Wayne Williams was arrested for a series of murders in Atlanta, Georgia, with a victim count of thirty children and young adults which shocked the general public (Hickey, 2015). During the mid-1980s as these types of crimes peaked, North America experienced a moral panic surrounding serial murderers, as all forms of media detailed this perceived “new type” of criminal (Leyton, 2005). These cases shocked and outraged the public due to their high victim numbers at the hands of seemingly normal individuals, pushing forward the image of the predatory violent criminal. The serial murderer was ascribed as being a purely “American” phenomenon, as Haggerty (2009) described, it was “frequently attributed to the excesses of a pathological American culture.” (p. 168). While this early myth has since been distinguished, as it has been shown all societies around the world have experienced instances of individuals who kill sequentially (Haggerty, 2009), the United States was faced with a perceived looming problem.

### **The Social Construction of Serial Murder**

As the serial murderer has become a by-product of the modern era, those who commit it have been constructed by vested parties to be the definitive criminal. In the contemporary world,

the word “crime” has become synonymous with fear, it projects negative feelings to society associated around a collective sense of safety and security. As a crime, the act of serial murder is considered incomprehensible by society, as it strikes at the root of this collective fear surrounding what is viewed as evil (Hickey, 2015). While invariably against the law, serial murder has become more than just an offence in conflict with official state regulations, it has become representative as an attack on society due to the fear that is promulgated by specific parties (Jenkins, 1994; Soothill, 1993). Comparable to other topics of deviance, serial murder has also been socially constructed as a public problem that requires societal attention.

Jenkins (1994) argues that the issue of serial murder has been appropriated by specific claims-makers, specifically official agencies and special interest groups who seek to exploit the problem of serial murder for their own benefit. As Gusfield (1981) describes, the ownership of public problems is conducted by those who have power, influence, and authority to define the reality specific phenomenon as a public problem. These claims-makers thus have the ability to create and define the social problem itself, influencing how the public views it. The groundwork for the social construction by claims-makers of serial murder was set due to a specific socio-political movement that manifested during the 1980s in the United States.

### *Era of Moral Reform*

From 1981 to 1989, the United States presidency of Ronald Reagan was marked by a strong political movement of re-evaluating existing social problems, viewed in a conservative manner of wrongs and deviancy being attributed to personal sin and evil (Jenkins, 1994). The conservative grassroots campaign mobilized to put an end to what was viewed as liberalism’s corruption of their country, as social constraints around sexuality, drug-use, and abortion had been lifted by movements during the 1970s (Shields, 2014). With high trends in crime, abortion

rates, alcohol use, drug consumption, and the availability of graphic pornography, President Reagan and First Lady Nancy Reagan both expressed a communitarian rhetoric around what was perceived to be the excesses of American society (Hawdon, 2001). These issues became social problems that did not simply hurt the individual, they hurt *everyone* within American society.

By emphasizing the threat these social issues could pose to the community, Reagan successfully redefined ideas around personal responsibility for the committal of crime, emphasizing an individual should know the difference between what is “right” and “wrong”, portraying personal morality as a choice between good and evil (Jenkins, 1994). Those who would willingly target the innocent were required to be met with swift punishment from the state, a rhetoric that would shape later law enforcement policies. By defining these perceived social ills as a societal sickness, it created a distinction between those who indulged in these excesses, and those who resisted them (Elwood, 1994).

### *America’s Response to Serial Murder*

As the serial murderer entered the forefront of America’s collective imagination, law enforcement was presented with a new problem: how to effectively stop them. In 1984, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) sought funding from the United States Senate to develop a pilot program specifically aimed at violent offenders, what would later become National Center for Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC) (Hickey, 2015). Before the Senate hearing, it was reported the FBI made claims that the incidence of serial murder was growing, attributing over 5,000 victims annually to thirty-five serial murderers still at large within the United States (Holmes & Deburger, 1985; Norris & Birnes, 1988). This estimate of victims served to shock and present serial murder as a prevalent social problem, an epidemic that the American public needed to fear (Fox & Levin, 2015). During this period, academics also accepted the claims

made of the high number of serial murder victims, as Egger (1984) stated, “it is reasonable to assume that they comprise no more than between 4,000 and 6,000 victims.” (p. 352). However, it has long been established that this number was greatly inflated, and that the victims of these violent offenders did not even begin to approach a number as high as 5,000, undermining the FBI’s claims of the prevalence of serial murder at the time (Hickey, 2015; Holmes & Holmes, 2010). Others have argued this statistic was likely a result of law enforcement agencies classifying murders labelled as having an unknown motive being equated with a murder with no motive, thus inferring it was a result of serial murder (Fox & Levin, 2015). Regardless of how the FBI arrived at this number, it allowed them to expand their funding and jurisdictional powers in the name of combatting the problem of serial murder (Schmid, 2005).

Due to the moral crusade of the Reagan administration during its campaign of moral reform through policy rhetoric, the FBI acted as moral entrepreneurs and redefined criminals as acting autonomously evil. The reconceptualization of criminality as a willful choice influenced how the media would later frame the crime of serial murder, which directly affected how the public would come to perceive this type of violent crime, granting serial murderers a deep form of notoriety in comparison to other types of criminals (Beckett, 1994; Hawdon, 2001). At the forefront of this epidemic stands another interested party in the phenomenon of serial murder, one with the ability to influence public perceptions.

### *Mass Media and Public Perceptions*

In the current era, the general public largely consumes information on serial murder and its perpetrators through depictions presented by the mass media, who capitalize on these types of crimes to achieve their own goals, often sensationalizing them in the process (Haggerty, 2009). The ways in which the media depicts crime, deviance, and violence through press and television



has been shown to be integral in not only influencing public perceptions, but also in how public perceptions are constructed, although it is unclear whether it is the cause or the effect, they are unequivocally connected (Altheide, 1997; Dowler, 2003; Sparks, 1992).

As Altheide (1997) contends, as everyday life has become more heavily mediated by information technology, we experience events through the “frame” provided to us by the mass media. These frames are the parameters surrounding a specific event, and often events are presented through “problem” frame that become a more pervasive component of the news industry, which has resulted in the propagation of fear surrounding topics such as serial murder for commercial benefit. The relationship between serial murderers and mass media as Leyton (2005) describes, “is an as-of-yet uncharted combination of loathing and fascination.” (p. 37), where the objects of their stories are often disturbing, but still reported on as they are marketable.

The characteristics of the crime of serial murder have been advantageous to the news industry, as Gibson (2006) describes, the crime of serial murder is a media circus, as it combines all the favourable qualities of an ideal news story due to its innate nature. Serial murder by nature is valuable to the mass media for several reasons, as Gekoski, Gray and Adler (2012) specify: (1) serial murder is inherently deviant to society, (2) at the time of reporting, the offender may still be at large, (3) the homicides themselves are often abnormal due to excessive violence or sexual components involving multiple victims, and (4) the victim’s families may be willing to publicly share about their loss. Even when a serial murderer is caught, there is endless potential for news stories revolving around them, such as how they were caught, the process of their trial, and their time spent behind bars. Due to these factors, a serial murderer provides ample material for the mass media to report on foreseeably for years (Gekoski, Gray & Adler, 2012).

From a mass media perspective, serial murder is a problem that deserves an ever-increasing amount of attention, as it is simply good business due to its plethora of news making potential. As Soothill (1993) states poignantly, the problem of serial murder “sells”. However, in the era of 24/7 network news coverage, it has led to a great amount of attention being afforded to serial murderers, giving them both fame and notoriety through the spotlight cast by media attention on their crimes.

According to an FBI (2008) report on serial murder and media issues:

Serial murder cases are inherently newsworthy. Some investigations last for years. Many attract attention because of the type of victims involved, and in others the serial killers themselves are media-attractive. Media attention is exacerbated by the insatiable demands of the twenty-four-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week news reporting industry (p. 39).

In parallel with this increased media attention, it has influenced how society has come to perceive and react to the crime of serial murder, creating vast amounts of fear to exploit, despite a statistically low rate of serial murder. This fact is important, as Gerbner and Gross (1976) assert, fear is a universal emotion, one that is easy to cultivate through symbolic representations of violence, which leads to exaggerated assumptions about the actual extent of the threat or danger, leading to calls for protection.

### **Serial Murder in Popular Culture**

With an ever-increasing amount of attention being granted to serial murderers by the news industry, it was inevitable that what was presented by the mass media would directly affect our culture through entertainment (Leyton, 2005). As popular culture is responsible for a significant amount of information and images pertaining to fear, namely in relation to crime and

violence (Altheide, 1997), serial murder has come to represent both dimensions. Due to the process of turning the crime of serial murder into a significant social problem, the serial murderer has been socially constructed as an unrivaled predator, one that cannot be identified from the rest of society due to their ability to blend in and potentially lurking around any corner, which has had a direct impact on Western popular culture. The standard movie monsters that marked the films of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have been replaced by a new type of monster. Popular culture has consumed the perception of the serial murderer for its own entertainment driven benefits. This is partially due to what Seltzer (1998) describes as a wound culture, where society has become fascinated with violence and its trauma. As such, he states that serial murder has taken its place “in a public culture in which addictive violence has become not merely a collective spectacle but one of the crucial sites where private desire and public fantasy cross.” (Seltzer, 1998, p. 1).

### *Symbolic Encounters with Death*

A fascination with violence and death appears to be a universally inherent human trait, as Stone (2005) states, tourists have long been drawn, intentionally or otherwise, to sites or attractions associated with death, pain, and suffering. This fact is evident with a flourishing thanatourism market, otherwise known as dark tourism, defined as “travel to a location wholly, or partially, motivated by the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death.” (Seaton, 1996, p. 236). Alternatively, penal tourism museums located across Canada has given attraction seekers another avenue of experiencing those who have committed offences and been contained there by proxy (Walby & Piché, 2015). The purpose of visiting sites that symbolically represent death or violence has been suggested to be due to desiring to heighten our sense of morality, while in parallel invoking a shared sense of morality instilled with feelings of relief at our own

personal distance from such experiences (Barton & Brown, 2012). One path of experiencing death and violence while retaining a safe distance continues to be through media mediums.

### *Serial Murder in Media*

If humans are intrinsically drawn to sites of symbolic death or violence, no other entity represents these conditions better than the serial murderer. As serial murder has become a form of the public spectacle of violence, this has become representative in serial murder-themed media. Serial murder themed films alone have increased from a mere twenty-three films in the 1980s to over two-hundred-and-seventy films in 2015 (Hickey, 2015). Films such as *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) epitomized the Western world's newfound fascination with serial murder, revolving around the FBI investigation of serial murderer Buffalo Bill, while receiving the help of another serial murderer, the iconic Dr. Hannibal Lecter. The film spoke to the Western culture to such a degree that it was awarded five Oscars in every major category and remains a cinema classic, allowing individuals to openly express their fascination with serial murderers from a relative safety that these films provide (Schmid, 2005). Leyton (2005) has argued that depictions of serial murderers have become glamorized in media, such as with the character of Hannibal Lecter in numerous book and films. Due to this glamorization in media, he argues this has led to a cultural problem in which he bears no resemblance to the majority of multiple murderers, but instead he is intelligent, cultured, and all around gifted individual. Instead, the audience identifies and sympathizes with Hannibal Lecter instead of his victims, presenting him as a sexualized celebrity.

Fictional accounts of serial murderers have also drastically risen, with life influencing art increasingly blurring the lines between what is reality and what is fiction. This fact is apparent with serial murderers such as Ed Gein, dubbed the "Ghoul of Plainfield", who inspired the

creation of several fictional murderers based on his affinity for removing and preserving human flesh and his dysfunctional relationship with his mother (Jarvis, 2007). Films with these types of narratives serve to provide the public with a safe method of consuming the idea of serial murder without having to acknowledge the reality of it being a real occurrence.

However, films have not solely seen this rise of serial-murderer themed content; books, television, comic books, video games, and specialty items such as collector cards have seen major influences from serial murderers (Jarvis, 2007; Schmid, 2005). Since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, true-crime has developed into a popular genre in all categories of media such as books, movies, and television, containing non-fiction accounts of real homicides, all revolving around a murder narrative (Murley, 2009). The proliferation of fictional serial murderer content has also been sweeping across television networks, with popular shows such as *Dexter*, *Hannibal*, and *Bates Motel* all featuring a serial murderer as the protagonist. The success and popularity of these types of shows is evident. Before its final season, *Dexter* alone was nominated for numerous Emmy awards, while the Showtime website featured an extensive line of items aimed at fans of the show (Donnelly, 2012).

The intake of serial murderer themed media has become a distinct aspect of the modern era, reflective of the human fascination with death and violence. Schmid (2005) offers another explanation as to why modern society finds serial murderers so enthralling, they are what he describes as “idols of destruction”, merging society’s intrinsic interest in death and violence while also being a representation of a rebellion on law itself, a rejection that may serve to collectively be both thrilling and freeing. Hickey (2015) reiterates there is an underlying cultural fascination with this type of violence, arguing that as the majority of society experiences controlled and mundane lives, and as such, serial murderers can stand in as a proxy for acting out

fantasies of hostility and aggression. Others such as Jarvis (2007) alternatively argue that a collective millennial western fascination with narratives and images of serial murder is a result of the commodification of violence due to neo-capitalist processes.

With such a vast amount of attention being granted to serial murderers in a culture based on celebrity, be it from the news media, law enforcement agencies, or various forms of popular media, it has resulted in the serial murderer achieving a celebrity-like status (Schmid, 2005). Serial murderers such as Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmher, and John Wayne Gacy have become the epitome of serial murderer celebrities due to their infamy, as their names, macabre monikers, and the details of their crimes have all but become common knowledge to society. Due to the serial murderer being elevated by their social construction by vested parties, they have achieved heightened levels of notoriety, which has resulted in natural developments of being afforded a celebrity-like status.

### **Celebrity**

The mass media has provided a substantial amount of coverage of serial murderers and their crimes; it has enabled the serial murderer to become more than just a criminal, but a celebrity. As Haggerty (2009) argues, the mass media fosters a culture of celebrity, and the media itself is in the celebrity-making business. Being a celebrity has become a business for mass media, where celebrities are not only celebrated by society at large, but they are created by the industry for economic gain (Mills, 1956). Due to this, it has resulted in a symbiotic relationship between mass media and serial murderers, wherein the media's goal of obtaining the largest audience possible, they have become addicted to portraying the serial murderer as a dangerous predator, touching on the themes of innocent victims, dangerous strangers, and unsolved murders (Haggerty, 2009). Due to media attention, serial murderers have been granted

large degrees of fame due to their portrayals. However, the act of a single murder is not enough to warrant media attention, as Leyton (2005) states, “No one ever became famous by beating his wife to death in an alley, but virtually all our multiple murderers achieve true and lasting fame.” (p. 16). While murder historically was something that could be done by someone to another, in contemporary Western society, a serial murderer is something someone now desires to *become*, as it can grant lifelong celebrity in current society (Haggerty, 2009; Leyton, 2005).

### *Serial Murderers as Celebrities*

The desire to become a serial murderer is directly tied to the celebrity granted to those who commit serial murder. Marshall (1997) defines celebrity as a system for ascribing value to meaning and communication, where the condition of celebrity is a status that can be converted to variety of domains and conditions within contemporary culture. The status of celebrity as such provides distinctions and definitions of success within specific domains. Schmid (2005) points to three distinct aspects of the multi-accentuality of serial murder that has aided in their emergence as celebrities. First, serial murder has aided in their rise to celebrity as they can be used to support ideological agendas from a wide range of claims-makers such as policy makers, social critics, law enforcement, and politicians. Second, as the celebrity of serial murderers grows, their multi-accentual potential grows with it, exposing them to a wider audience, which further increases their celebrity potential. Third, serial murderers represent figures that inspire profoundly negative feelings from the public, which can be complicated by underlying feelings of fascination and even admiration.

### *Fan Attachment to Celebrities*

In a culture of celebrity, those who are afforded celebrity status have gained a fan following. The attachment between fans and celebrities is a parasocial relationship; an imagined

relationship that is experienced as real by the fans (Roberts, 2007). These types of parasocial relationships are an important part of social development, as Adams-Price and Greene (1990) address, these imagined relationships are important during the development periods of childhood and adolescence, as it allows a safe distance in preparation for adult relationships (as cited in Roberts, 2007). Through media exposure, fans are able to cultivate these types of relationships with celebrities, granting them an experience of knowing them, despite the fact they may never even communicate with the individual (Roberts, 2007). This attachment to celebrities leads fans to act upon this imagined relationship, taking actions such as approaching them for autographs or to obtain memorabilia associated with them, and is considered a normative part of the celebrity lifestyle. Through the process of “celebrification”, the process of those who are elevated by the media to public prominence become an economically driven artifice driven by media institutions in their promotion of these celebrities, making their private lives into public spectacles (Hackley & Hackley, 2016). With serial murderers being elevated into the public eye by the mass media, their crimes have become public spectacles for consumption, differing little from other celebrities. As such, they have gained a dedicated audience similar to any other celebrity.

### **The Serial Murderer Fandom**

Through the acquirement of celebrity comes a resultant interest from others. Fandom as an audience have traditionally been defined by their method, being an enjoyable subversion from everyday life. However, fandoms also serve many other purposes, such as being a focal point for creating communities, serving an array of psychological needs for those who participate, and acting as a space for narcissistic self-reflection (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington, 2007). However, celebrity alone is not enough in a mediated world, but only one component to the formation of modern fandom communities. Guschwan (2016a) explains that fandom is a social process, not



limited to an individual experience. There is not merely a bond between the individual and their object of interest, be it traditional objects such as sports teams, movie stars, or music artists, but a collective bond exists between fans as they express their identities through performative communication.

### *Serial Killer Groupies*

The existence of fans of serial murderers is not a new phenomenon; it has been well documented in the cases of prolific serial murderers. Theodore “Ted” Bundy and Richard Ramirez, for instance, each which saw throngs of admirers, mainly female, who openly showed affection for the accused during their prosecution, attending their trials and writing to them while incarcerated (Leyton, 2005). These fans have commonly been referred to as “prison groupies”, with the most infamous serial murderers often having their own paraphilic fan clubs (Linedecker, 1993).

Behaviours such as these have led to psychological interest to explain them, such as the classification of the paraphilia hybristophilia, otherwise known as “Bonnie and Clyde syndrome” (Erlbaum, 1999). Hybristophilia is commonly associated with females, and is defined as the attraction to a partner that is known to have committed an outrage or crime such as rape, murder, or robbery (Money, 1993). While it is suggested this paraphilia can be formed due to past physical or sexual abuse, resulting in low self-esteem and insecurity, making individuals more vulnerable to individuals who espouse deviant sexual preferences and criminal acts (Vitello, 2006). Serial murderers, as such, represent some of the most notorious of criminals due to their crimes, coupled with a high media profile, could make them particularly appealing to hybristophiles. Ramsland (2012) states that some women who become involved with serial murderers believe they can change them, while others see the “little boy” they used to be and

seek to nurture them, or as a form of romantic relationship that cannot be consummated, the perfect relationship for love-avoidant individuals.

However, this explanation appears to be a gendered response to the phenomenon itself as it fails to explain the actions of all female fans of serial murderers, as well as disregarding male fans entirely. While a sexual arousal component may be an underlying function of being a fan of serial murderers, it does not explain their overall behaviour. Densen-Gerber (1993) has asserted that sex is not the sole drive behind hybristophilia, but is an eclectic mix of power, abuse, and self-hate. Regardless of the reasoning for the behaviour of these fans, one fact remains; they feel an attachment to the serial murderer of their choice.

An important aspect of a celebrity fandom is the relationship the individual feels they have developed with the celebrity, which becomes a significant part of their life, consuming much of their time, resulting in the potential for them to attempt to contact or approach the celebrity directly (Giles & Maltby, 2003). This aspect of a celebrity relationship has been particularly advantageous to incarcerated serial murderers, who have been able to profit from it, such as Jeffrey Dahmer, who during his incarceration, received over \$12,000 in gifts from letter writers from around the world (New York Times, 1994).

### *Modernizing Fandoms*

With the emergence of the Internet and its mode of mass communication and networking, fans of all types were able to come together in greater numbers than ever before to discuss their interest of choice on a scale never before seen (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington, 2007). As Guschwan (2016b) elucidates, the Internet has supported the growth of modern fandoms, providing limitless amounts of information to those interested in seeking it out, and allowing fans to create and share content. Furthermore, he illustrates the fact the Internet has facilitated in

the transcendence of geographical barriers, allowing fans to connect from all around the world. With pre-existing barriers becoming null due to the worldwide interconnectedness the Internet provides, the creation of fandoms has become a relatively simple task.

Through the celebrity granted to serial murderers, they have become a source for the creation of communities of admirers to form. While there is a strong likelihood fans of serial murderers existed prior to the existence of the Internet, there would have been fewer means of meeting and communicating, with the Internet becoming the facilitator for the formation of these communities in an online format. The size of the serial murderer fandom is also rather extensive, as Hickey (2015) points out, “almost every known serial killer, incarcerated or not, has a group of followers.” (p. 67). However, to fully understand the fandom as a community, it is imperative to understand the human process of identity construction and how this applies to the collective fan identity.

### **Chapter 3 - The Construction of Identity**

The process of being a fan is not simply being interested in an object, but a process of identity construction and group socialization, all of which impacts what it means to be a member of a fandom. To better understand the collective fan identity of what being a “serial murderer fan” actually encompasses, it requires adopting a theoretical perspective that allows for the analysis of how people create and manage their social identities. The process of identity creation ties back to the human ability of creating and interpreting meaning, leading into how an individual's self-concept and self-image are derived and managed, thus impacting how our social identities and group behaviour come to fruition. By understanding these key aspects of identity creation through the use of symbolic interactionism, it grants insight into the differences and nuances of what being a fan of serial murderers entails, and how these fans differentiate from other forms of group life in the form of fandoms.

#### **Symbolic Interactionism**

Symbolic interactionism from a scholarly context attempts to understand the nature of human social life, particularly in relation to how they socially interact, the purpose of objects in their lives, the individual as an actor, and the interlinkage of action in order to understand how humans come to interpret their realities (Blumer, 1969). Symbolic interactionism allows for this through the study of group life and human conduct based on three basic tenets:

1. Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings they ascribe those things
2. The meaning of such things is derived from, or rises out of the social interaction that one has with others and the society

3. These meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he/she encounters (Blumer, 1969).

Meaning-making is central to how humans experience their worlds through their interaction with objects, which are not merely physical objects, but includes abstract concepts such as identity (e.g. father, mother, brother, sister, etc.). Identities however are not only meanings alone, but also signs that individuals and groups use to evoke meanings in the form of responses from others (Ezzell, 2009). As the process of meaning-making is recognized as an important aspect to the individual as the actor, once an object becomes a symbolic representation of meaning for an individual, it is essential to maintain that meaning to sustain a coherent and cohesive view of the world, particularly in relation to identity (Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 1992).

### **Creating Identity**

While an understanding of the importance how humans create meaning, it is also imperative to identify how this process works in relation to the formation of the various aspects of our identity. As Blumer (1969) identified in his first tenet, humans act towards things based on the meaning they ascribe objects. Identity falls within this scope, where our behaviour is shaped based on what our understanding of what the meaning of an identity is. The concept of personal identity, defined as the person's location in social life, the most essential nature of the self, is constructed through the meaning-making process which differs on an individual level (Hewitt, 1988). However, it is not the sole form of identity, which other forms such as social identity, which differs from personal identity due to its reliance being formed based on the knowledge and value we ascribe to the groups we belong to (Tafjel, 1979). Understanding how various forms of identity are formed, understood, and reacted thus becomes an integral component to understanding an individual or group identity as a whole.

## *Self, I, and Me*

To understand how these various forms of identity are constructed, it is imperative to explore the self and its formation through self-reflection and societal perceptions. Through the process of meaning-making, individuals are able to craft their “Self”, which is a combination of our capacity to abide by existing social norms and engage in social roles based heavily on self-objectification in relation to how we evaluate ourselves based on others’ reactions to us, the ability to “involve the self as object to itself” (Rosenberg, 1988, p. 549). However, the self consists of many aspects, such as self-concept, which is defined as, “The individual’s belief about himself or herself, including the person’s attributes and who and what the self is.” (Baumeister, 1999, p. 13).

Mead (1934) in his theory of social self argues that one’s self-concept is a duality, involving two distinct parts, the first being the “I”, the active aspect of an individual which represents our individual identity and therefore individual impulses, and the “Me”, the socialized aspect of an individual which interacts with the environment and internalizes expected behaviours, attitudes, and societal norms that have been developed over time through social interactions, specifically with significant individuals in our lives. However, the function of “I” is purely reactionary to the “Me”, challenging what the “Me” has come to learn and determining what is best for the individual instead, thus representing our individual responses to situations that differentiate from expected behaviours (Mead, 1934).

The distinction between these two parts of human psychology is prevalent, where the “Me” is learned and shaped by the actor’s interactions with the environment, internalizing how society reacts and we believe others perceive us and is the self as object, while the “I” represents our individual impulses and is the self as subject, in combination making the “Self” the

embodiment of an intersection between the individual and society as it emerges from social interactions (Mead, 1934; Rosenberg, 1988). It is due to these distinct responses between the two aspects of our self-concept, specifically the reactionary nature of the “I”, that it is as Mead (1934) explains, “...we are never fully aware of what we are, that we surprise ourselves by our own action.” (p. 174). However, the “I” and “Me” do not represent two autonomous aspects of reality, and therefore cannot be disassociated from the “Self” (Deschamps, 1982). It is through these interactions and processes that the self is formed and its many aspects, one being self-image, the qualities and attributes that the individual perceives in themselves (Hewitt, 1988).

#### *Looking Glass Self and the Construction of Self-Image*

Building on the idea of the development of self-concept, Fine (1990) denoted that it is a social product, we interpret and understand ourselves based on how we believe society views us. Cooley (1902) referred to this concept as the “looking glass self”, the three distinct ways in which we come to view ourselves. First, we imagine how we are perceived by others, second, we imagine and react to others’ judgements of that appearance, and third, we develop our self through the judgment of others (Yeung & Martin, 2003). As Cooley (1902) states, “The thing that moves us to pride or shame is not the mere mechanical reflection of ourselves, but an imputed sentiment, the imagined effect of this reflection upon another’s mind.” (p. 2). As such, our mental capacity to self-contemplate and envision ourselves from the perspective of another plays a significant role in how our self-image is formed, as one’s self-perceptions are an internalization of how others perceive us (Yeung & Martin, 2003). It is through this social process that an individual’s self-concept is actualized. As our self-concept becomes formed, so too does our social identity, our sense of who we are based on our group memberships (Tafjel, 1979). Though similar to the work of Mead (1934), Cooley (1902) differentiated in his theory

argued that it was not merely significant relationships that shaped our identity, but all relationships we hold over time. While both theories differ on this aspect, they both express how the self emerges through social processes, as Blumer (1969) highlighted in his second tenet, identity comes to be formed through interaction with others and society.

### *Presentation of Self and Identity Management*

Maintaining a cohesive identity in social situations is an important facet of human social interaction, as Goffman (1956) describes this process as presentation of self, or impression management. If an identity suffers from discontinuities, it may undergo an identity crisis, as Erikson (1959) describes, may require the actor to undergo drastic changes and a repatterning of behaviours in order to re-established a cohesive identity. Goffman (1956) in his dramaturgy model of social interaction, relates everyday human interactions to that of theatre performances, where individuals portray a variety of roles, akin to that of actors on a stage. In the “front stage”, individuals are conscious of the audience as a third party, where the actor uses the props of the setting to direct his actions. By doing so, the actor acknowledges the role they are required to play which influences their behaviours, thus presenting an idealized version of themselves to the audience, who may notice any behaviours that deviate from the expected role. In everyday life, an individual tailors their behavior to be consistent with established social norms and mores dependent on who they are interacting with, who are representative of the audience.

However, in the “back stage”, individuals are able to prepare and drop these roles, presenting a side of themselves that a few are permitted to see. The process of impression management, the strategy of attempting to influence the perceptions of others about themselves, is an essential aspect of everyday social interactions on both a conscious and subconscious level, as we control who and what information about ourselves is allowed to be observed (Goffman,



1956). While controlling self-image is a critical part of social interaction, it does not merely delineate an individual, but also affects an individual's social identity and the groups they belong to as a whole in their formation of group identity.

### *Social Identity and Group Behaviours*

While self-image is an integral part of an individual's self-concept, other aspects also play a significant role in how individuals come to understand themselves. The social identity of an individual is understood as part of an individual's self-concept, which is derived from their knowledge of their belonging to a social group(s) in conjunction with the values and emotions attached to their membership in them (Tafjel, 1982).

Zavalloni (1973) defined a group as:

...includes several elements which, at different levels, *identify* an individual; this applies to social categories as general as those of age, sex or nationality, but it may also refer to roles or social positions such as the membership of a profession, a political affiliation, etc. (p. 245).

Individuals are said to classify themselves and others into varying social categories, these categories are defined by prototypical characteristics abstracted from its members (Turner, 1985). Therefore, self-identity is partially based on the salient memberships an individual has in groups, paired with the cognition of oneself (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). When it comes to group identity, Goffman (1956) stated that performers often work in teams, forming bonds of collegiality solidarity based on their mutual performances, such as those who share the same profession or hobby.

Through this matrix of identity development, it becomes possible to define our place in society based on the social categories we belong to, which can range drastically based on an

individual's association with specific social institutions (Tajfel, 1972). As our social identities are tied to intergroup relations, a depersonalization process occurs where the group norms become internalized and members align their behaviours with the group, leading to prototypical group behaviours, a specific type of conformity or "group think" (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Groups as social systems rely on mutual dependence, their realities defined based on their interdependence (Deschamps, 1982). Ellemers and Van Rijswijk (1997) note that group members are motivated to favour their in-group when their social identity is threatened, such as when the group compares negatively with others (e.g. normative fandoms). As such, group identity differs from that of other forms of identity, where it is purely based on group memberships, yet still act in a relatively unified manner in relation to dependence on one another and when the group identity comes under threat.

As Blumer (1969) affirmed with his third tenet of symbolic interactionism, meaning-making is an interpretive process, in which the way meanings are handled by individuals based on what they encounter. In conjunction to Mead (1934), Cooley (1902), and Goffman (1956) all show how the interpretive process of meaning-making is an essential characteristic of identity creation, be it through the relationship of the "I" and "Me" and how they form the overall "Self", or the ability to take on the role of the other as a way to understand how we are perceived by society, or how the gaze of the generalized other can affect our behaviours and actions. Through these identity creation processes, we also come to understand where we situate within the social order based on our group memberships, adding to what it actually means to be "you" and how society perceives and reacts to this identity.

## *Stigma and Courtesy Stigma*

While social identity a pertinent aspect of our overall personal identities, due to the nature of society in its pursuit of creating meaning, those who are deemed to be different from the norm of society may have their identity become spoiled. Goffman (1963) described stigma as signs that revealed something unusual or bad about the morality of an individual to society, “an undesired differentness from what we had anticipated.” (p. 14). As stigma relies upon how the public perceives differences with an individual, it can lead to an adverse reaction if there is a negative evaluation (Susman, 1994). Stigma can be categorized into three distinct types: physical stigma, character stigma, and tribal stigma (Goffman, 1963). Physical stigma was described as what can be seen in plain sight, such as physical abnormalities that can be publicly viewed (e.g. physical deformities). In contrast, character stigma refers to individual traits that are hidden from plain view and consists of the intrapersonal, which are:

blemishes of individual character perceived as weak will, domineering or unnatural passions, treacherous and rigid beliefs, and dishonesty, these being inferred from a known record of, for example, mental disorder, imprisonment, addiction, alcoholism, homosexuality, unemployment, suicidal attempts, and radical political behaviour. (p. 13)

Finally, tribal stigma relates to group stigma, in which a group is stigmatized based on their race, their nationality, and religion. As a stigmatized group, serial murderers occupy two types of stigma, character stigma due to the realities of their crimes, as well as group stigma based on their rare classification as a specific type of violent offender. This stigmatization of individuals and groups serves the primary purpose of drawing clear differences between groups identities, as Davies (1989) states, “...category-maintenance work is aimed partly at letting the deviants know

they've got it wrong... but primarily is aimed at maintaining the category as a meaningful category in the face of the individual deviation that is threatening it." (p. 29)

While those who are stigmatized suffer from a variety of discriminations and are perceived as inferior to the general public, stigma itself holds a contagious effect, potentially spreading to other individuals simply for being associated with those who are stigmatized (Goffman, 1963; Kirby & Corzine, 1981). The response by conventional society to those branded as stigmatized can be as minimal as being labelled and the assignment of social salience to those differences, stereotyped for their differences being viewed as undesirable, to the harsher such as separation from the rest of society (or "othering"), or a loss of status and subsequent forms of discrimination (Green, Davis, Karshmer, Marsh & Straight, 2005).

As serial murderers possess a high degree of stigma due to the nature of their crimes, those who view them as objects of interest to the degree of being a fan also share in this stigma to a lesser extent. This form of stigma is identified as 'courtesy stigma' or associative stigma, a form of stigmatization that individuals can acquire merely for being affiliated with those who are marked as stigmatized (Goffman, 1963; Pryor, Reeder & Monroe, 2011). As Goffman (1963) explains, this form of stigma is particularly unique:

The person with a courtesy stigma can in fact make both the stigmatized and the normal uncomfortable: by always being ready to carry a burden that is not 'really' theirs, they can confront everyone else with too much morality; by treating the stigma as a neutral matter to be looked at in a direct, off-hand way... (p. 43)

Courtesy stigma always falls under the category of character stigma, not belonging to either the 'normals' of society or the stigmatized, but merely sharing a 'web of affiliation' with the stigmatized (Birenbaum, 1970). While those who hold a courtesy stigma are typically able to

maintain an image of normality due to their performance of conventional social roles, their differentness may be revealed in social interactions (Birenbaum, 1992). While not actually stigmatized themselves, they also do not belong to the normals, treading a neutral path where their behaviour may be taken as offensive by conventional society, which may lead to becoming social pariahs as a result.

While courtesy stigma is typically spread to those who have a close connection to or are within close proximity of those stigmatized (Hebl & Mannix, 2003; Pryor, Reeder & Monroe, 2011), as Goffman (1963) iterates, when someone “is related through the social structure to a stigmatized individual, the wider society may then treat both individuals in some respects as one.” (p. 60). As such, as serial murderers reside at the epicentre of the serial murderer fandom, those individuals who are fans thus become linked with serial murderers and their stigma through this social network, making it possible for it to spread to them. As such, identical to those stigmatized, those branded with a courtesy stigma undergo stigma management strategies in an effort to minimize the risk of their identity being spoiled (Goffman, 1963).

### *Otherness*

While stigma remains may be reliant on the perception of society, its realities have consequences. Those who suffer from stigmatization often face various forms of discrimination, which can go as far as a separation from the rest of society, otherwise known as “othering”. The concept of “otherness”, where societies create a sense of belonging through the creation of majority and minority identities, as identity holds little value within a social order without also designating an antagonistic “other” (Okolie, 2003). These dichotomous relationships between groups, such as gender (see de Beauvoir, 1949), hold underlying power differentials where superiority and inferiority are embedded in defined group identities (Okolie, 2003). Due to this

othering in social systems, specific groups are judged against dominant groups and viewed as deviating from social norms, and thus become stigmatized as a result (Hall, 1997).

### *Defensive Othering*

When an individual or collective identity suffers due to being labelled as deviant, and subsequently stigmatized, it may become necessary to recoup to avoid being designated a negative social identity. However, individuals and groups can work on their identities through “identity work”, any actions people take individually or collectively to give themselves or others meaning (Schwalbe & Mason, 1996). One strategy of identity work that can be utilized to recoup social identity is that of “defensive othering”, where members of subordinated groups act in a manner that challenges the dominant expectation of their groups, while at the same time seek approval from them (Ezzell, 2009). This dilemma reinforces the power of stigmatizing labels by arguing that the label is true for some members of a group, but not for all of them.

Identity is not an innate part of our biology, we are not born with it, but it is constructed over time and on the basis of our social interactions. Mead (1934) argued that our social identities are constructed due to our social exchanges with significant people in our lives and our ability to self-reflect and adjust our behaviours accordingly, thus affecting how our “Self” is formed. Similarly, Cooley (1902) claimed that we view ourselves in three unique ways, all of which rely on the human ability to envision ourselves in the shoes of another, which in turn allows us to actualize our self-concept. Goffman (1953) highlighted how our behaviours can change based on the watchful eye of the audience in the front stage, representative of society and its ascribed social norms and mores, while back stage we are able to drop these roles for the rare few and be ourselves. Therefore, our self-concept, and its many complex aspects such as

personal identity, self-image, and social identity are all social products that are developed on an individual basis dependent on the social interactions incurred.

As identity is a social product, it can be changed or become spoiled based on perceptions from others, specifically in relation to stigma and othering and how society comes to see an individual or a group. Due to the deviance ascribed to serial murderers, those who belong to a community that revolves around them as a topic of interest, their identities may become spoiled and thus need various methods of identity work in order to manage a fan identity on an individual level. Furthermore, as a group, they also collectively share an identity, thus may undergo strategies of identity work such as defensive othering, where they separate themselves from “other” fans to still sate their interest in serial murderers, while simultaneously attempting to conform to dominant social norms

## Chapter 4 - Methodology

With the advent of the Internet, fandoms have evolved by progressively moving into digital domains (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington, 2007). As such, to properly study the serial murderer fandom, it must be explored through both its community elements, which will provide a better insight into this online subculture as a whole. To answer the chosen research questions, the appropriate methodology had to be undertaken to tap into the underlying subculture of the fandom. Utilizing ethnographic content analysis, websites were sampled to provide preliminary insights into the subculture, before commencing data collection, protocol development, coding, and finally data analysis to develop a better understanding of the serial murderer fandom.

### *Purpose of Study*

The overall purpose of this study is to provide a better understanding of the serial murderer fandom as a longstanding deviant subculture, how they function as a community in an online setting, and how they negotiate and manage their shared fan identity.

### *Research Questions*

To achieve the purpose of this study, two research questions were developed: (1) How does the serial murderer fandom community maintain its moral boundaries?; and (2) How do members of the serial murderer fandom respond to deviance and stigma in association with serial murderers? While these research questions served as a starting point for the exploration of this specific community, analysis was not limited to these three questions, as other themes emerged from the data, they were also pursued with the purpose of better understanding the serial murderer fandom.

### *Research Design*

To answer the research questions, this study utilized *ethnographic content analysis*, which is defined by Altheide (1987) as a methodology which, “situates textual analysis within



the communication of meaning.” (p. 68). The emphasis of this research method is on discovery and description, searching for contexts, underlying meanings, patterns, and processes rather than on simply quantifiable relationships between variables (Altheide, 1996). Altheide and Schneider (2013) highlight that ethnographic content analysis seeks to bridge the gap between objective content analysis and participant observation, blending them and allowing the researcher to interact with documents to allow statements to be placed in the proper context for them to undergo proper analysis. Documents in this respect refer to any items of research interest that enables the recording and retrieval of information (Altheide & Schneider, 2013).

With the emergence of new technologies, documents of research interest have expanded, ranging from websites, e-mails, text messages, and even online videos. As per Glaser and Strauss (1967), ethnographic content analysis involves emergent and theoretical sampling of chosen documents. This research approach enables the researcher to develop the appropriate protocol that can then be used for systematic analysis, followed by continual comparisons of the chosen documents to clarify underlying themes, frames, and discourses that may be present.

Ethnographic content analysis is an inductive process, as the researcher is tasked with first examining only a few documents to derive questions on the protocol that will help provide the researcher with information, and then test the protocol on additional documents to revise it appropriately. The dynamic nature of ethnographic content analysis allows for the tracking of discourse, following specific words, themes, and frames over a period of time, across different types of issues, and across various types of media sources (Altheide, n.d.). This methodological approach is more favourable than straightforward qualitative media analysis, as the researcher remains instrumental throughout the content analysis instead of a heavy reliance on a pre-constructed protocol. As the researcher remains central during analysis, it enables both

reflexivity and an elevated level of interactivity with the chosen content (Altheide & Schneider, 2013).

### *Sampling of Websites*

To properly study the subculture of serial murderer fandom, a largely populated community sub-forum was examined, in addition to one murderabilia auction and sale website. For sampling purposes, a community sub-forum was understood as online discussion forum that contained active members, who could post discussion messages, images, and videos in relation to serial murderers. A murderabilia website was also understood as a website that actively underwent the process of auctioning and selling items of murderabilia, art and artefacts associated with serial murderers to other users. Studying this aspect of the fandom's culture is difficult, as Altheide and Schneider (2013) state, "its most significant features are subtle, taken for granted, and enacted in everyday life routines." (p. 6). To analyze the community dynamic of this specific fandom, one website that contained a community presence of serial murderer fans was selected as a site for data collection, Serial Killers (<https://m.reddit.com/r/SerialKillers>), a public sub-forum present on the popular news website Reddit which allows users to post and comment on a wide variety of serial murderer related content.

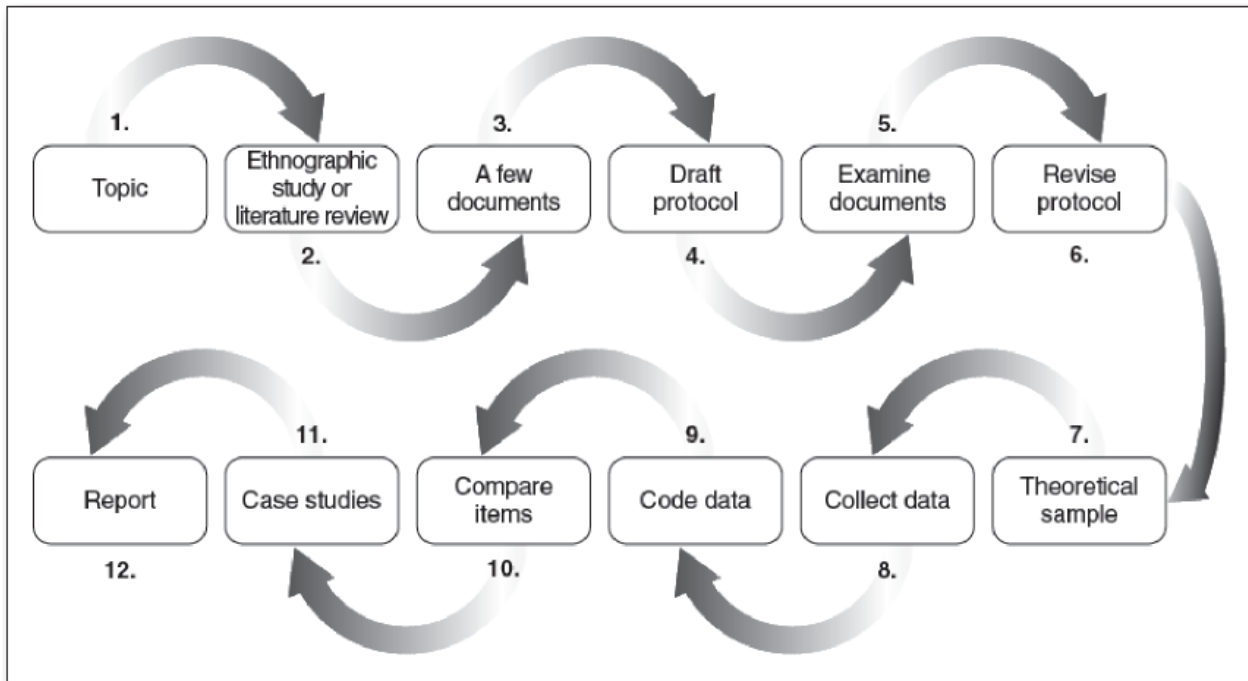
This website was chosen for three reasons: (1) the discussion board was dedicated solely around serial murderers (2) they are accessible to the public without the need for membership sign-up, (3) contain active users, (4) and have publicly visible comments or posts by users. While there are numerous websites dedicated to serial murderers, it was imperative to select one in which a community element was present through their interactions with one another in order to assess the importance of communication among them. In addition, while all of four of these criteria may be met, it was necessary to choose a website that contained a significant number of

members and/or visitors (represented by subscribers) for the sample to be better representative of the serial murderer fandom. At the time of data collection, there were 47,505 subscribed users on the sub-forum.

### *Data Collection*

First, sampling was conducted on two sample websites, one representing the community element of the serial murderer fandom, and one representing the murderabilia dimension of the fandom dynamic. As outlined by Altheide and Schneider (2013), these websites acted as information bases, which provided the necessary data in order to draft an appropriate protocol that was used for content analysis. These preliminary steps enable the protocol to be tested and revised accordingly based on the information that emerges, allowing for the protocol to better capture intended data during the data collection phase of research.

The process of ethnographic content analysis is as follows:



*Figure 1.* The process of Qualitative Document Analysis (Altheide & Schneider, 2013, p. 19)

Following the sampling process, data collection commenced on the sub-forum. Adobe Acrobat Pro was utilized to capture pages entirely in portable document format (PDF). Following the deletion of unnecessary pages (e.g. blank pages), there were approximately 2,937 pages of data related to the sub-forum that were created between May, 2016 to November, 2016 (6 month time period). In addition, approximately 374 pages related to murderabilia sale and auction sites. Due to the large amount of data collected from the sub-forum, it was decided that while murderabilia auction sites are representative of what Jarvis (2007) describes as the most “hardcore” of serial murderer fans, due to time constraints and a lack of communication between users, it was necessary to exclude them from the research project in favour of studying the more data rich sub-forum.

#### *Protocol Development*

Due to the large amount of data collected from the discussion board, it became necessary to produce a protocol that would allow for coding to occur in a manner to minimize issues related to time constraints while still capturing the underlying themes and discourses present in the serial murderer fandom. As such, every third PDF document was coded to allow for sufficient analysis of the sub-forum while still capturing recurring themes and discourses. While ethnographic content analysis is closely related to qualitative content analysis in its goals and purpose, which seeks to analyze as many documents as possible to form generalizations based on hypothesized relationships, ethnographic content analysis seeks to create a deeper and more detailed understanding of a subculture, therefore allowing for the sampling of documents (Altheide, 1987).

#### *Coding*

One of the most significant steps during qualitative research is the practice of coding, which allows the researcher to organize and make sense of textual data, which in its raw form, is chaotic in nature (Basit, 2010). To mitigate coding issues and aid in the data analysis process, the software program NVivo was used, which was specifically created to aid in qualitative research, particularly in the steps of coding, categorization, and analysis of qualitative data. Tools such as NVivo allow the researcher to examine their data with improved rigour during the data analysis process by validating the researcher's impressions of the data (Welsh, 2002). Utilizing this software program, each PDF file was uploaded and coded manually, allowing for the creation of categories and sub-codes.

Following the completion of data collection and coding, codes were compared to identify recurring themes, words, and symbols, in addition to specific key differences (Altheide & Schneider, 2013). After the completion of initial coding, there were 46 unique codes related to the serial murderer fandom present. Descriptions and summaries were crafted for each code allowing for the creation of an extensive coding framework, which further aided in the refinement of the protocol (Altheide & Schneider, 2013). As items were further compared and contrasted for key differences and similarities, it was made clear that several codes overlapped, were redundant in nature, or simply did not have enough references throughout the data to provide any meaningful purpose to explore further.

An example of this was the original code "exploitation of a serial murderer", which had a mere three references from one discussion topic related to the female serial murderer Aileen Wuornos during her imprisonment and subsequent execution. This method of analysis allowed for a deeper analysis of the subculture of the serial murderer fandom by revealing underlying

themes, frames, and discourses. Following the removal, combining, and revision of codes, 37 unique codes and sub-codes were left for further analysis.

### *Data Analysis*

Following the development and refinement of 37 codes and sub-codes, these items were compared to discover their relevancy towards one another and any emergent themes.

Categorically, 12 distinct areas emerged from the sub-forum data (see Appendix A), all of which revolved around how community members shared information around serial murderers and their crimes, their reactions to them, how they viewed serial murderers, and how they interpreted their identity as a fandom. Each of these categories, while relating to a minimum of one other category, all encompass a distinct aspect of the serial murderer fandom. Further analysis revealed that the majority of these codes related to how these casual fans of serial murderers set moral boundaries within their community, managed their collective social identity, and their reactions to serial murder.

## Chapter 5 - Moral Boundaries within the Fandom

Through extensive data analysis, several distinct emergent themes became clear from the serial murderer sub-forum in relation to how this specific subculture functioned. While all themes were interconnected, they each encapsulated a specific purpose connected to being a casual fan of serial murderers within this mediated community. From the data, three major themes emerged: moral boundaries, managing fan identity, and emotional work. The theme of moral boundaries deals with how the fandom drew its symbolic boundaries around permissible and impermissible behaviour from its community members. Managing fan identity addresses how members managed deviance and stigma in relation to being a fan on serial murderers. Finally, emotional work addresses the emotional toll that community members undergo, and their coping strategy to minimize it.

Like all social systems, the serial murderer fandom defined clear symbolic boundaries around behaviours that were viewed as permissible and impermissible, specifically around the topic of the celebration or idolization of serial murderers. However, while these boundaries at first appeared fairly definitive, habitually they relied upon the context of the fan behaviour, leading to a blurring of how consistent many of these moral boundaries truly were, leading to contradictions within the fandom and behaviours that appeared to stray into impermissible behaviour, but had no ramifications from the community.

### *Symbolic Boundaries*

Symbolic boundaries are an intrinsic feature of any society. As Durkheim (1915) argues, these symbolic boundaries are the method of how individuals separate into groups and create feelings of similarity and form a group identity. Furthermore, he states that the most significant symbolic boundary was that between the sacred (interests of the group) and profane (lesser

individual concerns), as he described "...the sacred and profane are always and everywhere conceived by the human intellect as separate genera, as two worlds with nothing in common." (p. 36). Durkheim (1915) in his perspective on the social construction of the sacred and profane dichotomy, stated that it was from this symbolic boundary that lesser boundaries were derived, specifically that of moral boundaries. According to Erikson (1966), communities maintain moral boundaries against any activities that drift outside the radius of acceptable conduct and may be seen as inappropriate or immoral. By doing so, the community creates a symbolic set of boundary lines, which limits specific activities, enabling the maintenance of their cultural integrity.

At the onset of data analysis, one of the most prominent themes when exploring this sub-forum consisted of how the community draws its moral boundaries around what was perceived as permissible content and behaviours by its community members. Lauderdale (1976) reiterated the importance of moral boundaries within communities, noting that within a social system and the social space they inhabited, moral boundaries are defined to give the system its identity, in terms of who inhabits it, what actions they engage in, and what actions are permissible or morally acceptable. Furthermore, those within this social space engage in the evaluation of what actions are moral and permissible to maintain moral boundaries and create a sense of solidarity with one another. Due to the nature of the sub-forum, a healthy interest in serial murderers and their crimes was seen as acceptable; however, some areas of discussion appeared to transgress established moral lines, showing an overall permeability of moral boundaries within this social group.



### *Interest vs. Idolization*

As a community, one of the most significant moral boundaries revolved around that of the degree of interest in serial murderers. Often throughout discussions, it was demonstrated how the fandom perceived the actions and behaviours of its members and that of others. Consistently, the community defined and reinforced what was seen as permissible behaviours, while seemingly condemning other behaviours and actions that could be viewed as straying into the domain of celebrating or idolizing serial murderers.

### *Permissible Interest of Serial Murderers*

Within this community, one moral boundary that was consistently defined and reinforced emerged through analysis of the code theme of “fascination”, referring to comments or discussion that appeared to show underlying feelings or various degrees of interest in a serial murderer or their crimes. From within this theme it became apparent there was a moral boundary of permissible interest within the fandom. Permissible interest within this community took place on a continuum, typically in relation to members simply wishing to learn or know more about specific serial murderers or their crimes, which is an essential characteristic of a fan taking part of this community and was perceived acceptable. Community members often gave accounts to make sense of their varying degrees of interest in serial murderers.

The dimension of what a healthy interest in serial murderers actually encompassed within the community appeared to be a generally gray area, as some fans expressed who their “favourite” serial murderers were and how fascinated they were by them. In a discussion around which serial murderer fascinated community members the most, one user elaborated on their interest in Ted Bundy:

Mine is Bundy. I'm fascinated by his psychology but the thing that got me was the final interview. While blaming everything he did and his behavior on pornographic materials there's a point for a split second that the mask slips (p. 1).

An interest in how the mind of a serial murderer operated, their nature, and the underlying *why* they committed their crimes was a common occurrence, and one that reflected the general population's interest in serial murder in general (Hickey, 2015). Another user reiterated this curiosity by elaborating on how their interest was tied to how any individual could become a serial murderer, questioning what prevents the average person from potentially succumbing to dark desires:

I would love to talk to every serial killer. They amaze me. Their minds are so twisted, what makes them actually act in the thoughts they have. Do they ever look in the mirror and say "it is amazing how fucked up I am." if they don't realize they are crazy, makes me wonder about sanity at all. Do we all have the ability to be a Dahmer or Bundy? What keeps us from acting? (p. 18).

Similarly, one community member explained their interest in serial murderers, comparing it to that of an obsession, "If you're anything like me, you're obsessed with the extremity of serial killer psychology and behavior--and in many ways, you view them as manifestations of humanity's ugly id." (p. 522).

An alternate avenue of interest into the mind of a serial murderer was often tied back to their childhood upbringing, if there were any warning signs present that could illuminate what could have gone wrong. As one user explained, "I love learning about people's upbringing and any physical/mental illness that may have contributed to them becoming a serial killer." (p. 54). However, as Fox and Levin (1999) note, not all serial murderers suffer from psychological

disturbances or are byproducts of an abusive upbringing, which only serves to reinforce their mystique and generating more interest and questions into *why* they commit their crimes.

Such was the case with one user, who hypothesized as to why some serial murderers commit their crimes:

Here's how I see it. I think all serial killers have some pretty intense misery somewhere inside them. I don't think happy people ever decide that the best way they can achieve intimacy is through murder. I think a lot of the classic cold blooded type serials, like a Bundy or a Gacy, are able to appear so normal because they're able to compartmentalize everything. They just learned how to repress shit so they know how to hide it from people. A lot of them think of themselves as a different person when they're killing, which is part of how they can justify it to themselves (pp. 40-41).

Another user re-affirmed the stance that not all serial murderers are psychologically disturbed, “Some of them are completely sane, they just have very sick fetishes and that is not an illness.” (p. 351). The distinction made by the above quotes stating that some serial murderers are sane and attempting to fill a need for intimacy, or satiating a specific sexual fetish represent attempts to explain and understand the mindset of a serial murderers, specifically ones who do not appear to suffer from mental illness.

Attempting to understand or explain the mind of a serial murderer in general was a common occurrence, as one fan attempted to explain:

Maybe we admire them. The freedom they must feel, to do exactly what they want when they want to whomever they want. Maybe we want to study them, or understand them. Or maybe human brains are insanely complex. We can't understand how these people think, so how can we understand how we think to understand them? (p. 524).

A base interest in the psychology of a serial murderer or their state of mind at the time of their crimes was a common theme throughout discussions, a topic that was never challenged as crossing boundaries. An explanation for this desire to understand serial murderers and a general interest into them is as Haggerty (2009) argues a resultant effect of a culture of celebrity, whereas it is now the norm to not become famous for virtuous acts, but individuals now become known through mass media exposure and are celebrated consequently.

A community member reinforced a general cultural interest in serial murderers:

I think there's a correlation in regards to the heavily capitalist culture and the media- for instance the US has got to be one of the few countries that actively gives Serial killers catchy monikers. It's a strange phenomenon I think and it almost says you can be famous if you become a serial killer. (p. 1374)

However, Schmid (2005) sees this interest from a different perspective, he contends that serial murderers act as “idols of destruction”, they merge a societal interest in death and violence, while also being representative of rebellion against the law, allowing individuals to live vicariously through serial murderers to feel a sense of exhilaration and freedom from the mundane nature of everyday life. One user reaffirmed this point by stating, “I am fascinated because I live vicariously through them. The thought of murder can at times be tantalizing.” (p. 524). This general form of interest in serial murderers was viewed as permissible within the community, however, there appeared to be a continuum involving an interest in serial murderers, as those who drifted into idolization were met with different responses from the community.

#### *Idolization of Serial Murderers*

Along the continuum of interest, it appeared some members took their interest to an excessive level, crossing into the realm of idolization, where it appeared to be more adoration of

serial murderers than a curiosity about them, often at times appearing to celebrate their actions. Often this theme ran parallel to what Jarvis (2007) referred to as the “hardcore fans” of serial murderers, which often fell into this realm of idolization. These fans are ones who commit more extreme acts of dedication towards serial murderers as objects of interests, such as memorializing serial murderers through an act of permanency, an act that resulted in a permanent effect (e.g. tattoo). Throughout several discussions it was relatively clear which acts crossed the moral boundary of permissible interest as they were condemned by those who seemed to take their interest in serial murderers to a celebratory level, while in others appeared to be more open to interpretation by the community, showing a permeability to this specific moral boundary.

The divide within the community was at times apparent, as one member commented on the nature of some of the discussions within the community in a discussion surrounding songs inspired by serial murderers, “Posts like this make me really uncomfortable. What's the point? No hate I'm just genuinely turn off by discussion like this, I know it's not ment too, but this feels like idolization.” (p. 1562). However, others defended the nature of their interest, as one fan noted:

I hate using the phrase 'favourite' but it does kind of fit; better than any other word I can think of to use, especially when someone is asking who is in no way interested in the morbid bits of serial killing. Maybe, a preference for certain cases..? I don't think anyone here intends 'favourite' as in they're fangirling over the killer, but the case itself. (p. 521-522).

However, when a behaviour clearly crossed into the realm of idolization, the community often rallied and condemned those involved. In a thread revolving around an image of a young person showing off their tattoo of an imitation of a bite mark present on one of Ted Bundy’s

victims, the general response was negative, even bordering on extreme with personal insults being levied against the person who was tattooed. One community member noted, “While this is a really good replication of the impression, it's incredibly distasteful and an insult to the victim.” (p. 90).

Another user seconded this point by stating:

Because his case is incredibly famous & since it is a tattoo that looks like it was drawn from the crime scene photo, it's more than reasonable to think the inspiration comes from his bite mark. Unfortunately it's not unheard of for idiots to idolize these disgusting excuses for human beings. (p. 97).

A common trend in discussions such as these was citing how the idolization of serial murderers affects victims and their families, expressing their sympathy with how individuals who undertake actions such as these are generally viewed as unacceptable. This stance on idolization was repeated in another discussion around images of individuals who had tattooed the portraits of serial murderers on themselves, with one user reinforcing the moral stance:

They're some of the best portrait tattoos I've seen. Most of them look terrifying. However this level of worship makes me super uneasy. It's one thing to put up a poster of these sick fucks but it's a whole other story when you're getting them indelibly applied to your skin. (p. 2487).

The moral boundary around the idolization and glorification was continuously reinforced within the sub-forum, as another user noted, “How can someone get a tattoo of a person who raped, ate and killed other men women and children? Serial Killers are interesting but not to be fucking praised. Did i really have to explain that.” (p. 2488).

While for some fans it appeared to fall under common sense that behaviours such as these

were unacceptable conduct, others appeared to understand why some individuals would tattoo themselves with the portrait of a serial murderer, but took offence with the subjects chosen, “Okay I vaguely get why someone would feel like they wanted a serial killer tattoo, like it's taboo or something, but Gacy? A fucking pedophile? Just why.” (p. 2488).

The idea of idolizing and glorifying serial murderers appeared to be the tipping point against those who participated in this form of memorialization. However, despite the condemnation of the tattoo, they still offered the idea of undertaking this type of behaviour for the “taboo” factor may be acceptable, suggesting that behaviours such as these may be a form of rebelling against societal norms and providing individuals with a sense of freedom by proxy (Hickey, 2015).

The preceding quotes highlight how while an interest in serial murderers is a permissible behaviour, and essential quality of being a fan within the community, it was often tied to an interest in the human psyche and what prevents the average person to succumbing to these types of dark desires. However, when the content of discussion drifted into the realm of victims, or those who appeared to idolize serial murderers or were viewed as being insensitive to victims through their actions, a negative response from the community was generally shared, therefore maintaining moral boundaries within the community. As one member put it succinctly, “Serial killers are *interesting*, they're not *heroes*.” (p. 2485, *emphasis added*), reinforcing how the serial murderer fandom community *should* perceive serial murderers; however, these boundary lines appeared to be more malleable than set in stone.

#### *Contradictions and Blurred Boundaries*

While specific areas of discussion appeared to have clearly defined moral boundaries that should not be crossed within the community, oftentimes they were more blurred than clear, such

as when it came to the consumption of the serial murderer by popular culture, communicating with incarcerated serial murderers, purchasing items of murderabilia, and the imitation of serial murderers by fans.

The adoption of the image of the serial murderer by popular culture for its own usage has become a common occurrence, as Hickey (2015) notes, there has been an exponential growth in films featuring serial murderer themes from the 1980s to 2015 alone. However, other forms of media have also appropriated the serial murderer as a form of inspiration for their content. In a discussion revolving around which serial murderer had the best song dedicated to them by a musical artist, sharing an array of songs named after or dedicated to serial murderers (e.g. Ted, Just Admit It... by Jane's Addiction), there was a clear division within the fandom by those who did not agree with this form of sensationalization of serial murderers. One user argued their point of view on this issue, "Posts like this make me really uncomfortable. What's the point? No hate I'm just genuinely turn off by discussion like this, I know it's not ment too, but this feels like idolization." (p. 1562).

The division within the fandom as to what was too far was often at times unclear around idolization and celebration of serial murderers, as per one discussion around an imprisoned serial murderer selling their articles of clothing for profit. One community member seemed to accept the purchasing of murderabilia by serious collectors, but challenged those who would buy objects such as clothing, noting, "Any serious murderabilia collector isn't collecting panties. That's gross, even for someone fascinated with serial murder enough to spend their money on souvenirs. Whoever paid \$250 for those panties is one sad motherfucker, not a rich/successful businessman." (p. 188). According to this member, there is a clear distinction between what a "serious" murderabilia collector collects, implying those who collect murderabilia are still



perceived as legitimate fans, however, those who buy objects such as used clothing are merely “sad” and do not appear to be seen as belonging to the legitimate fanbase due to crossing over the moral boundary of being disrespectful to victims.

However, even within the same discussion, this argument was challenged by another user on the basis the individual who purchased the article of clothing could be anyone:

Well quite honestly neither one of us knows who actually bought the panties haha could it be a successful businessman with a wife and 3 kids? Sure it could be. Could it be a cracked out 40 year old virgin? Of course it could be! People collect different shit.

"Normal" looking and successful people with wives/husbands and kids, sometimes have the most bizarre fetishes or collectons, that would shock you if you found out. (p. 188).

It appeared that in general, the collecting of murderabilia was acceptable to a degree to the fanbase as long as they were not sexual in nature which appeared to be viewed as crossing a line, despite the fact that the majority of items of murderabilia hold little to no real market value. As Smith (1989) iterates, when material goods that have no intrinsic value are auctioned, individuals are not bidding for the item itself, they are bidding for a social status that is bestowed by the community. As such, serious murderabilia collectors may hold a higher social status within the serial murderer fandom due to their higher levels of commitment to their objects of interest despite that the items they collect could be viewed as disrespectful to victims and a form of idolizing and celebrating serial murderers. This stance would run counter to that of the general public, as Jarvis (2007) discusses, “Although it might be tempting to dismiss this phenomenon as the sick hobby of a deviant minority, murderabilia is merely the hardcore version of a mainstream obsession with the serial killer.” (p. 327).

Despite the collection of murderabilia being generally viewed as a somewhat permissible

behavior by fans, one activity that appeared tied to it was wishing to, or actually contacting incarcerated serial murderers, a behaviour that had no ramifications from the community.

In a discussion around what items of murderabilia were seen as best, one fan commented on their own experiences of writing and collecting letters, “I still have a handful of letters of killers I've contacted (Ian Brady, Dennis Nilsen, Manson). I have a couple of paintings too, but I'm trying to get rid of it all. Over the years I've seen some very bizarre items.” (p. 2075). A general interest in contacting serial murderers was not uncommon by fans, as was made evident another discussion around if anyone had ever met Edmund Kemper, another fan shared which incarcerated serial murderers they had already contacted:

I adore him and relate fully, so hopefully my letter will be good enough to get a reply. I also have written Rader, Berkowitz, Ridgway as well as 2 other prison friends of mine, one of which was given to me by Uncle Charlie (yes, Manson haha). (p. 2713)

In another example, in a thread asking which serial murderers fans had contacted, another individual noted, “I've been writing letters back and forth with many serial Killers and people on death row and I must say it's very interesting. (p. 2111). Within all of these instances of individual fans sharing their experiences and generally positive attitudes around writing and contacting incarcerated serial murderers, there were no negative comments directed towards them. By inferring the positive responses and lack of negative responses by the community, it would appear contacting incarcerated serial murderers is viewed as a permissible behaviour, despite the reality of their crimes, which may be due to the fact that writing to incarcerated serial murderers is a longstanding behaviour, particularly with the most prolific cases (Leyton, 2005). This fan behaviour was not the only one which from the surface appeared to cross moral boundaries.

Another code that emerged from the dataset that heavily contradicted the moral boundary of idolization was that of “imitation”, where members emulate serial murderers or their victims through behaviours, how they dressed, or actions. While a general sense of sympathy for victims was shown throughout most discussions, when it came to the imitation of serial murderers, context appeared to be a significant aspect in determining whether moral boundaries had been transgressed.

In one discussion based around the image of a user dressed as Jeffrey Dahmer for Halloween, complete with a freezer full of severed mannequin heads, the general response by the community was light and full of praise. One user commented and corrected, “This is awesome! Wouldve been better if the head was a man, though. Dahmer never killed a woman.” (p. 26). As Goode (1978) explained, since deviance is a social construction, it is reliant on cultural context. Halloween appeared to be important in the context of this discussion, where imitating the behaviour of a serial murderer through dress could be viewed as a form of celebrating serial murderers. The behaviour is re-framed due to occurring on a day in which pretending to be someone else is viewed as acceptable by society in general, and therefore not deviant.

However, other forms of imitation were seen in a more negative light by community members. In another in another discussion, one user admitted to apparent intrusive thoughts by stating, “Guys I know I would never hurt anyone at all. But sometimes i imagine myself a serial killer and like the color of blood. What should i do about it?” (p. 1469). This comment was readily met with comments disparaging their behaviour, as one user ridiculed, “Just keep enjoying the 7th grade.” (p. 1469). However, other members appeared less stigmatizing, offering options for the individual to seek help, while also normalizing their behaviour by stating these types of intrusive thoughts were not uncommon. Occurrences such as these show the

permeability of the moral boundaries within this community, whereby some users view behaviour such as imagining oneself as a serial murderer as unacceptable, going as far as to attempt to correct the behaviour through condemnation, while others were accepting of the transgression, even to the point of normalizing or even praising an individual's behaviour simply because the behaviour was re-framed by the community as acceptable due to the holiday it occurred on.

In addition to instances such as these, the community undertook what can be described as “fantasy battles to the death” between serial murderers. In a particular discussion, the strengths and weaknesses of specific serial murderers were debated in a scenario of who would win in a fight to the death. Extensive comparisons between serial murderers were made, ranging from physical characteristics, mental health states, and innate talents which may provide them with an advantage or disadvantage in a fight.

This type of competitive and comparative behaviour between fans can best be compared to that of other fandoms such as fantasy football leagues, which were shown to be tied to processes of identification and loyalty to teams and specific athletes (Drayer, Shapiro, Dwyer, Morse, & White, 2010). These activities were met with no resistance by community members, indicating these acts of fantasizing about serial murderers was acceptable despite the implication it may fall constitute celebrating serial murderers, thus crossing the boundary line of permissible interest into the realm of idolization. While these battles were imaginative in nature, it also appeared to be a competition among fans, those who held the most knowledge of the chosen serial murderer were able to better dictate the strengths and weaknesses of each murderer. Furthermore, fans were able to correct others on information they deemed to be inaccurate and therefore not applicable to the battle. Davis and Duncan (2006) found that these types of fantasy

competitions emphasize bonding among fans, while also appearing to be a method of knowledge transfer among peers. This form of interest seemed to fall within the boundaries of knowledge, not crossing over into the realm of celebration of a serial murderer as drawn by the moral boundary around permissible interest.

However, one significant contradiction within the moral boundaries of the fandom came in the form of fans discussing their “favourite” serial murderers. This behaviour was heavily tied to the code of fascination, with individuals typically choosing their favourite serial murderer based on their high degree of interest in them. In a discussion revolving around one user stating how they were obsessed with serial murderers, in the replies that followed many community members shared who their “favourite” serial murderer was with detailed reasons. One fan noted the reasons for their favourite serial murderer:

Personally my favorite is Kemper. His ability to manipulate was astonishing, and his behavior during his active years as well as his since his incarceration is fascinating. He seems to be a Serial Killer who was in complete control of himself, and rarely was irrational or impulsive. (p. 519).

The connotation behind the usage of favourite by fans in terms of serial murderers is that of preference and a general sense of attachment to that specific serial murderer. The act of selecting a favourite serial murderer by fans appears to contradict the moral stance of retaining respect for victims and their families, drifting into the realm of idolization in a similar fashion to that of other fans in how they form a parasocial attachment to certain celebrities (Roberts, 2007). Yet within the context of the community, having a favourite serial murderer was generally acceptable and understood as falling under the umbrella of interest. However, some fans took offence to this wording, as one user stated:

Anyone that considers themselves as having a favourite serial killer, I do not identify with in any way. I am interested because their thinking is so alien to me. Sort of like a Nazi in the camps, I cannot comprehend why they did the things they did. I despise them though & hold zero admiration or respect for them. Saying there is a favourite conveys positive emotions & these men are true monsters that have no redeeming qualities at all. Must say it shocks me that people would say they have a favourite. (p. 521)

Within the serial murderer fandom, few moral boundaries appeared to be clearly defined within the community, such as remaining respectful to victims and victims' families when it came to discussion and behaviours, however, others were not as black and white, but gray at best. While an interest in serial murderers bordering into the domain of idolization is not surprising, as Haggerty (2009) argues, due to the attendant rise of a celebrity culture and the mass media capitalizing on the image of the serial murderer, they have become celebrities worthy of attention. Despite this apparent moral dilemma between the theme of interest and idolization, the community continuously appeared to condemn types of behaviours and actions that appeared to take an interest in serial murderers too far, yet were praised for others.

While there appeared to be firmly established moral boundaries within this community, upon deeper exploration, they were superficial at best and highly permeable. In some instances, behaviours were viewed as permissible, while in others they were condemned by the community, despite that that both instances may transgress established moral boundaries. As Goode (1978) discussed, as deviance is a social construct, it is always culturally relative, and therefore dependent on context. When a member transgressed moral boundaries of the community, often it appeared these transgressions initiated a process of re-framing dependent upon the context of discussion (Caravita & Halldén, 1994). While imagining oneself as a serial murderer was met

with overwhelming negativity in what appeared an attempt to correct the behavior of a member, dressing up as a serial murderer for Halloween was met with no resistance due to the context of it being a holiday. By re-framing the context of these behaviours, what is seen as drifting into the realm of celebration or idolization of serial murderers, or insulting to victims, becomes forgivable or acceptable instead.

The social milieu of this community appears to be one that has a weakened collective consciousness, where there appear to be very few internalized social norms, specifically around what a permissible level of interest was viewed as. As such, moral boundaries within the community appeared largely open to interpretation by members depending on the context of the discussion, leading to a lack of uniformity in responses by the community (Hamilton, 1990). As Durkheim (1893) claimed, one of the functional aspects of deviance is the solidarity it provides through a social system's unified reactions. However, throughout analysis it appeared this community's reactions were not uniform due to ill-defined and unmaintained moral boundaries. As Lauderdale (1976) noted, "Deviance can be thought of as a product of the movement of moral boundaries rather than as a product of the movement of actors across those boundaries." (p. 661). Therefore, due to the permeability of moral boundaries within this community, many behaviours that would appear to be deviant due to members' reactions in one instance are instead transgressed in others, even being seen as acceptable through a process of re-framing. As a result, the serial murderer fandom as a community is eclectic at best, appearing to be full of inconsistencies, contradictions and conflict, which contribute to a social system with a dysfunctional community identity (Lauderdale, 1976). The malleability of established moral boundaries speaks to the collective fan identity overall, and elucidates the processes they undertake to negotiate and manage it.

## **Chapter 6: Fan Identity: Managing Deviance and Stigma**

The participation in a fandom can have a significant impact on an individual, often becoming an integral part of their social identity (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington, 2007). However, while most fandoms are focused on conventional objects of interest (e.g. sports teams, musicians, movie stars, etc.), serial murderers as celebrities do not fall within this normative category of positive celebrities. Fans within this community willingly expose themselves to graphic images and information related to the crime of serial murder, behaviours that can be perceived as deviant or even condemned by others due to having an “unhealthy” interest in serial murderers or insulting to victims and their families, thus increasing their risk of courtesy stigma (Goffman, 1963; Schmid, 2005). As such, in order for individuals to participate in this community, it was revealed that members of this community use several distinct strategies of identity management, a basic function in social life where an individual exerts strategic control over the image of themselves for others to see (Goffman, 1963).

As the serial murderer fandom acts as a smaller social system interacting in an online format, it can be viewed as a microcosm, a community that retains the same characteristics of general society in relation to the creation of identity. The way in which social systems create and negotiate identity is important, as Goffman (1963) explains stigma and its management in relation to deviance, “It should be seen, then, that stigma management is a general feature of society, a process occurring wherever there are identity norms.” (p. 155). When stigma is not properly managed, it can result in a ‘spoiled identity’, where others discredit an individual based on the perception they belong to a category that is lesser than normal (Goffman, 1963). By analyzing the serial murderer fandom as a social system, specifically how their identity as fans of serial murderers is negotiated and managed, it becomes readily apparent they act in a



counterintuitive manner compared to other fandoms. As a community, they undertake several distinct strategies of separating themselves from their everyday normal identities, other groups of fans, and serial murderers themselves.

Throughout the data analysis process, several strategies emerged around how this community managed the various aspects of their fan identity. The community utilizes the strategy of separation from their everyday lives with the creation and use of online deviant identities, allowing them to socially distance themselves from their objects of interest, despite serial murderers being the epicenter of their fandom. Fans also undergo a process of narrative resistance against being placed in the fan category of “groupies”, claiming they are merely interested in serial murderers, but do not idolize them. By employing these identity management strategies, fans appear to be able to cope with their willing exposure to details of death and violence, while also offsetting any potential deviance and stigma they may garner due to an affiliation with serial murderers, thus allowing for active participation within the serial murderer fandom.

### **Anonymous Deviant Identities**

As a fan identity, being a fan of serial murderers has more difficulties in relation to stigma than that of a normative fandom. Through data analysis, one strategy of managing stigma that presented itself was the creation of an alternative identity, a secondary identity completely separated from that of an individual's primary, well-known identity. As Trautner and Collett (2010) suggest, one method of respite from stigma comes from positive alternate identities wherein it becomes possible to choose one's own self-definitions, creating a positive secondary identity in contrast to that of their primary identity which may hold deviant traits and its potential negative effects. However, while the creation of alternate identities was conceptualized as

holding positive traits to buffer against deviance and stigma (e.g. stripteaster identity vs. student identity), within the serial murderer fandom, the creation of a deviant online identity works in a reversed process, similar to that described by Maratea and Kavanaugh (2012) who explored how deviant identities emerge, are cultivated, and affirmed in cyber settings, allowing for the creation of deviant online communities. By creating anonymous deviant identities, community members are enabled to freely engage within the fandom around discussions that could be perceived as deviant by those who fall outside of its domain.

Due to the community's main method of communication occurring online, members are able to embrace anonymity due to the nature of the sub-forum, where no personal information is required to register, simply the creation of a unique username. The behaviour of using an online identity for anonymity resembles what Goffman (1963) explains in relation to anonymity as a method of managing stigma:

The stigma and the effort to conceal it or remedy it become 'fixed' as part of personal identity. Hence our increased willingness to chance improper behaviour when wearing a mask, or when away from home; hence the willingness of some to publish revelatory material anonymously, or to make a public appearance before a small private audience, the assumption being that the disclosure will not be connected to them personally by the public at large (p. 84).

As Jones et al. (1984) reiterated, concealability is a critical factor in relation to managing stigma, specifically in its visibility of the attribute or condition, which determines how easily it can be detected. By concealing their identities, community members may be able to differentiate their fan identity from that of their everyday non-deviant identity, dispersing any potential courtesy stigma (Goffman, 1963) that may be acquired through their association with serial

murderers to that of an alternate online deviant identity, creating a strawman to which the social audience can fixate and react to (Becker, 1963). Alternatively, due to the nature of stigma, which can not only impact an individual, but those with close connections to them such as family, friends, and colleagues, an alternate deviant identity insulates any risk of contagion to others (Kirby & Corzine, 1981).

While not a readily discussed aspect among the community despite every individual conducting this behaviour, one user shared how they kept their interest in serial murderers separate from their everyday lives for the benefit of others, “I havent told many people about this as I don't want people worried about me.” (p. 2102). The implication that by not sharing their interest with others as it may make them “worry” demonstrates how an interest in serial murderers could be construed as deviant by others, therefore leading to potential stigmatization.

While alternate identities enabled users to avoid being labelled deviant and facing stigmatization, the anonymity they provided also showed its value member interactions. In one discussion thread, as two users argued about defamation around one user being called a serial murderer, “Wait, how can you defame an anonymous username?” (p. 2131). At other times, anonymity was reinforced by the moderators of the sub-forum, as per one discussion where a community member shared personal information, a behaviour that was an infraction of official community rules, which resulted in all relevant posts being deleted and a warning, “No personal information.” (p. 2130). By remaining anonymous, community members are enabled to indulge in their interest in serial murderers, in addition to having their primary identities remain concealed not only from the public, but from others in the community.

The creation of an anonymous deviant identity allows fans to freely embrace in their interest in serial murderers without repercussion, while at the same time acting as a protective

insulator against those who view this heightened form of interest in serial murder as deviant, offsetting any risk of their primary identities being redefined as deviant or stigmatized, while also preventing the risk of stigma from contaminating others they are close to.

### **Fan Identity and Narrative Resistance**

Within the community, another strategy of managing fan identity that emerged was that of narrative resistance, a strategy of identity management in which those who are stigmatized by a dominant narrative about their identities, which may hold negative labels, is counteracted through the construction of a counter-narrative in order to manage their identities (Ronai & Cross, 1998). As Ronai (1997) explained, “Others have the ability to threaten our opinion of ourselves by suggesting negative categories to define ourselves by...” (p. 125). This threat from outside parties is known as “discursive constraint” (Ronai, 1994, 1997), which can cause an individual to internalize the suggested negative self-definitions, which can simultaneously control their behaviour. Narrative resistance occurs as a response to the threat of discursive constraint, emerging as an alternative stock of knowledge, in which an individual or stigmatized group actively resists these suggested negative definitions, which serves to decenter the authority of those attempting to dictate identity (Ronai & Cross, 1997).

Members of this community specifically undertook a stigma management behaviour similar to what Ronai and Cross (1998) describe as ‘deviance exemplars’, when individuals or groups create straw men (or women) by which to compare themselves with. Deviance exemplars are constructions to serve as narrative models which allows individuals and groups to separate their identity from these deviant examples that embody all negative labels and traits associated with that identity, to which can be categorically rejected as not being representative of them (Ronai, 1994). However, while Ronai and Cross (1998) discuss how straw men (or women) are

typically constructs created by groups for comparison, as serial murderer groupies do exist, this community actively compared themselves to other groups of fans, ones who are seen as idolizing serial murderers. By doing so, they engage in narrative resistance by stating these “other” fans are too immersed within their interest of serial murderers, and thus any negative stereotypes or labels associated with this interest are not applicable to them, despite belonging to the same deviant setting.

As a community, members often remarked on how they self-identified as fans of a specific serial murderer, or more generally of serial murderers, as one member stated in a topic around the investigation of the Zodiac Killer, “I've always been a fan of Edward Wayne Edwards.” (p. 1552). While in another discussion surrounding why individuals were obsessed with Jeffrey Dahmer another user shared, “First of all I think a lot of people feel they relate to him in some way, which I don't really understand. I am a fan (as much as a serial killer can have a *fan*).” (p. 662, emphasis in original). Despite members of this community often identifying as fans of serial murderers, it was often a consensus that their interest levels remained within constrained parameters and they were respectful to victims in how they conducted themselves, as one member observed, “From my experience, the vast majority of the this sub's participants are sensitive and respectful to how the subject matter impacts the victims, their families, loved ones, and friends.” (p. 2114).

However, while some members acknowledged a sub-forum dedicated to serial murderers could border into what could be perceived as deviant territory, with one member commenting on the nature of the forum, “Due to the fact this is all about SKs, often glorifying, fetishising and obsessing over them...” (p. 2430), others were more accepting that their interest in serial murderers was normal, as another fan remarked, “Obviously I'm interested in serial killers as I

am part of this sub, and I don't begrudge anyone that has a different level of interest the me.” (p. 1563). While the above quotes highlight the disjuncture within the community around the topic of interest and idolization as mentioned in the previous chapter, the majority of community members continuously reiterated their interest levels were within normal boundaries, which appeared to play a significant role in how they constructed their group identity.

However, a clear separation was shown when comparing to other communities dedicated to an interest in serial murderers. Within the serial murderer fandom, narrative resistance was displayed in relation to being associated with other fans they perceived as acting more deviant through the amount of attention they provided serial murderers. One member highlighted this separation between fans:

I had a spate of 'discussions' with serial killer groupies on youtube, until I gave up, they live in a fantasy world and have a pretty blinkered view of the sk's crimes and a very basic grasp of the sk's psychopathy. (p. 2700)

The usage of the term groupies by this fan is similar to what Linedecker (1993) describes as “prison groupies”, a phenomenon of individuals becoming admirers of serial murderers, primarily female, who have historically have attended high profile trials and actively communicated with them during incarceration through mail correspondence. While in another discussion, one user reiterated the mental health of some fans is diminished, “Wow these girls are the same level of crazy as those girls who fell for the Boston Bomber a few years back.” (p. 91). The differentiation posited between these two types of fans shows the community’s resistance against being associated with fans who openly show high degrees of admiration towards serial murderers, falling outside the parameters of what they viewed as a healthy interest level.

The idea that certain fans were unable to understand the basic nature of serial murderers was re-affirmed by another poster, commenting on the mental processes they undertake to associate with serial murderers to the level in which they do:

There are always people that become infatuated with psychopaths like Dahmer, "Fans" if you will. They try to spin things and do mental gymnastics in an attempt to try to humanize these sick fucks. It's really fascinating in it's own right. (p. 668)

However, unlike most members of the community, this user specifically separated themselves from being categorized into the group of “fans” all together, despite their participation in a sub-forum dedicated to the discussion of serial murderers, which in itself could be perceived as fan activity.

By comparing themselves to other groups of serial murderer fans, members within this community are able to demarcate between other groups of fans (particularly groupies), allowing their identity to emerge narratively by rejecting what these deviance exemplars are seen to represent, an unhealthy interest level in serial murderers, disrespectful to victims, and holding a poor grasp of understanding their psychology (Cordell & Ronai, 2013). By understanding how the serial murderer fandom engages in narrative resistance, it becomes a useful frame for understanding their discourse, which provides a deeper insight into how they construct their fan identity.

As a community, they come to form their unique group identity as fans who while having an above average interest level in serial murderers and their crimes, it is within healthy parameters, to which is guided by remaining respectful and sympathetic to victims and their families, while also holding a basic understanding of the psychology of serial murderers. These distinct qualities of their identity represent what they believe separates them from other fans or

the deviant examples of “groupies”, thus enabling them to engage as fans without drifting into the domain of idolization of serial murderers. However, narrative resistance was only one strategy undertaken by this community in how it manages its identity and not the only groups they actively distanced themselves from.

### **Social Distancing and Emulating Conventional Beliefs**

Within the serial murderer fandom, the most intriguing fan identity management strategy came with how they appeared to perceive serial murderers and disassociate themselves from them through the use of social distancing. Social distancing according to Hodgetts et al. (2011) is, “...the ways in which individual preferences, based in a person’s membership of specific social in-groups, influence social relations with people from other out-groups.” (p. 2). Despite serial murderers being the objects of interest for this community, making them a central component of their fandom, the overwhelming majority of fans expressed overwhelming negative feelings towards serial murderers. While discussions surrounding serial murderers were at times contradictory to seemingly defined moral boundaries, viewing serial murderers in a negative light was consistent throughout the sampled documents.

The act of socially distancing occurs when one group differentiates themselves from another individual or a group, primarily based on differing attitudes and beliefs (Swim, Ferguson & Hyers, 1999). As Bogardus (1947) first described the behaviour of social distancing in group relations, “the center of attention is on the feeling reactions of persons toward other persons and toward groups of people. In this approach to interpersonal and personal-group relations the main emphasis throughout is on human reactions as guided by the feeling aspects of personality.” (p. 306). One explanation provided for the usage of socially distancing as a method of identity



management is the avoidance of courtesy stigma (Goffman, 1963), a potential consequence of being associated with a stigmatized group.

As a form of stigma management, socially distancing has been shown to manifest in groups who fear a resulting discrimination from a personal and societal level (see Mahajan, Sayles, Patel, Remien, Ortiz, Szekeres & Coates, 2008), as those who take on a courtesy stigma become viewed as normal, yet also different due to their affiliation with a stigmatized group (Birenbaum, 1970). The intersected nature of courtesy stigma results in an individual or group that does not quite belong to either group (e.g. normals and the stigmatized), yet still faces discrimination and a spoiled identity as a consequence (Goffman, 1963). Through social distancing, groups are able to differentiate between “us” and “them” through group norms, despite that the group itself may not have an overall positive affective orientation towards all of its members (Karakayali, 2009).

While the serial murderer fandom at times did not appear to agree on what subjects were permissible and which crossed moral boundaries, one of its most consistent qualities was how it collectively viewed serial murderers in a negative light, often by expressing it in a variety of ways, and thus separating themselves from serial murderers and creating social distance. Throughout the sub-forum, the community utilized several strategies of social distancing from serial murderers, specifically through moral condemnation, expressions of contempt, and projections of violence.

### *Moral Condemnation*

When it came to moral condemnation as a form of social distancing, community members would often share how serial murderers did not abide by standard human conduct. Within the sampled documents, fans used the term “evil” alone approximately 33 times in

describing serial murderers or the crimes they committed, a notion heavily rooted in religious beliefs, but encapsulating the idea of individuals who are without guilt, remorse, or compassion for their victims (Hickey, 2015). These comments were often straightforward and used to describe a serial murderer, as was evident as one user said, "...there's also a bit where you can really see the evil in him - he's working that man the entire time..." (p. 412), or was reactionary in response to details of their crimes, such as, "This man is pure evil down to his very core." (p. 29) in reference to Ted Bundy.

However, evil was not only a descriptor of who serial murderers were, but of what their influence can do to others, such as in another discussion revolving around if community members would visit a serial murderer in prison, one individual replied, "Hell no. Not a chance, family or not. Serial killers are predators and they would just lie, manipulate and bring evil into your life." (p. 450). The commonality of comments such as these made it appear as if the majority of fans perceived serial murderers as morally reprehensible, despite the purpose of the sub-forum revolving around the discussion of them. While these quotes highlight a specific form of moral condemnation of serial murderers made by the community, it was not the only strategy of social distancing undertaken by the community.

### *Expressions of Contempt*

Despite the essential quality of serial murderers as the central focus of their fandom, when it came to fans expressing how they viewed serial murderers, it was overwhelmingly negative, where serial murderers were viewed with a general disdain or as less than human. These expressions of contempt were a common occurrence within the community, such as in a discussion around quotes made by serial killers, one individual stated, "This is why Bundy is so scary. It's so easy to get wrapped up in the charm and smarts; but he's really a cold hearted, crazy

fuck.” (p. 2093). Comments such as these were often short and to the point, simply meant to dismiss serial murderers entirely for their actions.

Besides the general insults made by the community about serial murderers, some chose to describe serial murderers as something less than human, or not human at all. This was the case in a thread discussing a news article around a serial murderer, one user shared their view on the subject, “I try to be careful with what I say online, so ‘asshole’ is usually the worst insult I toss out. But he's far worse than that, he's a disgusting immoral subhuman.” (p. 724). However, in another discussion topic, a community member described how they felt about viewing images of serial murderers, “There's always something in their eyes for me if you look right into them even the unlikeliest looking monster has cruelty in their eyes.” (p. 1545).

While insults were levied rather freely within the community, remarks surrounding the mental health of serial murderers were also frequent, however, often they veered into that of apparent loathing, as was apparent in another thread where one community member expressed their feelings for Dennis Rader, “I don't know why really but I have nothing but contempt for rader...far more so than others of the type... he just seems so....dumb.” (p. 1039). While in another, a similar response was shared, “BTK is very interesting. Dennis Rader is a study in narcissism and bloated sense of self-worth.” (p. 60).

Quotes such as above demonstrate the willingness of this community to construct serial murderers as less than human, utilizing general insults to diminish who they are as people, while also at times pointing out how they are sub-human or even not human at all due to their crimes, as evidenced by their usage of the term monster and its negative connotations. By doing so, it appears as if the community is further distance themselves from serial murderers, creating an “us” and “them” mentality despite their apparent interest in them.

## *Projections of Violence*

While the majority of negative comments directed towards individual serial murderers appeared related to the negative emotions they elicited within individual fans, others went further and projected violent feelings onto serial murderers, typically in the form of wishing they would fall victim to the death penalty or through individual violent fantasies.

One common projection of violence that emerged in relation to serial murderers was that of wishing death upon them through the usage of the death penalty. In a discussion surrounding the details of David Parker Ray's crimes, an individual stated, "I'm anti-death penalty, but I have a lot of trouble justifying not killing this guy by slow, severe pain." (p. 2501), while others supported this notion, such as "I don't agree with the death penalty but I'd gladly turn on the electric chair myself on this sick fuck." (p. 1232). This sentiment around use of the death penalty for serial murderers was stated numerous times, such as in one thread where a user commented it should be utilized in addition to historical torture practices:

I pity the people who had to take on board what they perpetrated on those girls man.... I mean, and I do ... Death penalties are backward. Mediaeval. Hypocrisy in the highest. But for THESE fuckers... just for the look of them, a short rope, draw ... and quarter them. Hell, even burn their innards while they still can see it happening! (p. 1231).

However, the most interesting aspect of these comments show that each community member notes they are morally against the use of the death penalty, but are willing to make an *exception* for these specific serial murderers, showing a moral graying in order to achieve what they view as justice.

While comments around wishing use of the death penalty on serial murderers were not an uncommon response, other fans drifted into the realm of violent fantasy. In some instances, these

projections of violence were subtle, as one member shared how they perceived the value of a serial murderer's life:

I'm not saying vigilante justice is the way to go, but I wouldn't lose any sleep over it. I imagine your code of ethics is a pretty black and white one, yet we live in a sea of gray. If you believe every life has value, good on you. I beg to differ, especially for a man who was already given a second chance. (p. 730)

Other community members were more upfront about how they projected violent feelings upon serial murderers, often in the form of wishing they could kill a specific serial murderer themselves, as was the case as one user shared, "We know he did it. We know how he did it, and we know how terrible it was. I'm with you, I could kill the man myself with my own hands and sleep that night with a guiltless conscience." (p. 1232). These projections of violence often drifted into the more detailed, as one person commented on the case of a serial murderer who was able to re-offend, "I honestly would delight in torturing this man to a slow, painful death, like the one in *Law Abiding Citizen*. And I'm generally a pacifist. Fuck everything about this guy." (p. 730).

As strategies of social distancing, fans within this community appeared to separate themselves entirely from serial murderers either by morally condemning them for their crimes, often in line that they were "evil" beings or by expressing contempt for them through general insults or sharing how they viewed them as less than human. However, projections of violence were a more common occurrence among this community, where its members shared how they wished serial murderers would fall victim to the death penalty, a representation of institutionalized justice, or to the more extreme, in how they wish they could carry out acts of violence or even kill a serial murderer if given the opportunity. By constructing serial murderers

as lesser beings, members of this community appear to disassociate themselves from serial murderers, to the point where moral degradation occurs within the community, where even individuals who identify as anti-death penalty or anti-violence can justify wishing death, or projecting violent fantasies onto serial murderers. By doing so, their community remains socially separated from that of serial murderers.

While it is not an uncommon practice for fans to justify the deviant actions of celebrities, within the serial murderer fandom, these strategies of socially distancing as a form of fan identity management are particularly unique (Qiu, 2012). According to most scholarly research surrounding fan studies, fans often wish to feel *closer* to their objects of interest in strengthening their parasocial relationship with them, not actively socially distance themselves from them (Roberts, 2007; Rojek, 2006; Stever, 2010).

One explanation for this unique fandom behaviour may lie in the nature of serial murder itself, as the act of murder is understood as being a universally deviant act present across all cultures, and with their apparent willingness to take lives, it becomes nearly impossible for fans to justify their crimes (Ben-Yehuda, 1985). While at times fans appeared to show some sympathy for serial murderers, such as one fan in reference to the personal biography of Aileen Wuornos, stating:

I've seen a few documentaries on her and this one makes your heart break for her just a bit. Yeah she killed those men but people used this poor woman her whole life. It's wrong what she did but it's also wrong for people to be taking advantage of her for so often and for so long. (p. 1579)

Statements such as these were uncommon within the community, as the overwhelming majority of fans appeared to express their feelings towards serial murderers in a negative way rather than

attempt to rationalize why they committed them, showing several clear strategies of socially distancing.

While fans of serial murderers within this community appeared to socially distance themselves from serial murderers, related to this strategy was that of the emulation of conventional behaviours in how they negatively viewed their fan interests. Goffman (1963) described these types of behaviour as “covering” and “passing” in relation to those who suffered stigma (e.g. handicapped), by acting in a manner not to draw attention to their stigma. By undergoing covering, individuals “learn about the structure of interaction in order to learn about the lines along which they must reconstitute their conduct if they are to minimize the obtrusiveness of their stigma.” (Goffmann, 1963, p. 104). Alternatively, while tied to the idea of covering, the concept of passing revolves around the notion of an individual who holds a covered or hidden stigma to pass in the public as normal, therefore diffusing any potential prejudice from conventional individuals. While these concepts were initially constructed around those with physical stigmas with differing visibility and the social information they convey, the concealment of stigmas on a more intrapersonal level have been conceptualized (see Smart & Wegner, 1999) around how individuals roleplay expected and conventional behaviours in order to conceal their stigmas from others.

As Hickey (2015) states, serial murderers are incomprehensible to society, and are generally viewed with immense contempt due to their apparent joy in controlling and taking human lives. Further, Birenbaum (1970) notes that courtesy stigma relies upon situational variability, therefore, as those within the fandom emphasize dislike of serial murderers, which at times appeared to border on hatred, they emulate an expected societal reaction to the deviant and stigmatized identities serial murderers hold. By doing so, fans may be able to retain some of their

social identities and continue their membership in the social order, despite still facing derogation and an expectation to conform (Birenbaum, 1992).

While it can be argued members of this community could not be “fans” of serial murderers due to their active resistance against being associated with them through various identity management strategies, their actions and behaviours fall within the parameters of what a fan encompasses. Fandom as a term is ascribed with notions of excess, particularly in relation to obsession with their objects of interest, emotional displays, and the creation of illusory relationships in order to fill a psychological need within their lives (Jenson, 1992). In comparison, aficionados are viewed as rational individuals who are able to rationally evaluate their objects of interest, displaying their interest in more measured ways. However, as (Jenson, 1992) argues, these two labels describe the same activity, but are merely rooted in differences of social status and class. In essence, being a fan and being an aficionado entail the same activities, the difference being the pejorative connotations attached to being labelled a fan.

Within this community, members display several key behaviours and activities that indicate they can be classified as fans: (a) a strong interest in their objects of interest (actively discussing serial murderers, wishing to learn more and understand serial murderers), (b) signs of admiration (imitating serial murderers), (c) participating in activities surrounding their objects of interest (fan labour in the form of art creation and fantasy death battles), and (d) promoting their objects of interest (providing addresses to mail incarcerated serial murderers). Based on these aspects, despite several community members expressing how they are not fans of serial murderers, their behaviours and activities appear to go against this narrative.

While fan identity can hold great value to the social identity of an individual, when it came to being a casual fan of serial murderers within this community, it appeared that several



identity management techniques were utilized by them to resolve issues with being a fan of serial murderers. The creation of deviant online identities allowed fans to consume as much information regarding serial murderers as they desired, protected by the anonymity of the Internet, while also providing a separation from their everyday identities to eliminate any potential courtesy stigma they could receive. Fans also differentiated themselves from “other” fans, undergoing narrative resistance that their level of interest was to an acceptable degree, while other groups, such as groupies, were deviant for their perceived unhealthy interest levels that crept into the realm of idolization of serial murderers. Despite serial murderers being the epicenter of their fandom, they undertook strategies of socially distancing themselves from serial murderers, instead choosing to condemn and dismiss them, while also emulating conventional societal responses in relation to them to retain some normality to their social identities.

## Chapter 7 – Emotional Management

While members of the fandom undertook several strategies of managing their fan identity, it was not the only issues they faced. As a community, they frequently undertook a process of emotional management to address unwanted emotions through coping strategies. Through emotion work, fans were able to manage the emotional toll of the realities of being interested in serial murderers, often utilizing dark humour as a way to lighten the atmosphere of morbid discussions, and thus ensuring a continued interest could persevere.

### *Emotion Work*

When it comes to an interest in serial murderers, an inevitable aspect arises in an exposure to accounts of their crimes. These accounts of their crimes are often detailed in nature, such as how victims perished or suffered, or border into the visual, as images and videos of their crimes or their aftermath were shared. As a result, many emotions appeared to arise in community members, often negative, which in turn required fans to undergo a process of emotional-management in order to cope with the realities of serial murderers and their actions. Emotion work according to Hochschild (1979) is, "...the act of trying to change in degree or quality an emotion or feeling." (p. 561). Emotion work in this sense is the act of trying to manage emotions by evoking or shaping them, even if the process is not successful, which differs from other emotional techniques such as control and suppression, which are attempts to minimize or prevent emotions entirely (Hochschild, 1979).

When it came to discussions around victims, particularly children and those who were perceived as vulnerable, often provoked strong negative emotional responses from community members. These responses were often prompted by reading details of what had occurred, but were also shared upon the viewing of images and videos. Due to this emotional toll of being a

fan and their exposure to death and violence, this community appeared to utilize dark humour as a strategy of coping, allowing them to lighten the mood of conversations and socially bond with one another, ensuring the community continued to function appropriately.

### **The Emotional Toll of Being a Fan**

Being a fan of serial murderers unlike other fandoms has its own unique issues, specifically due to their willingness to expose themselves to details of crimes and the fate of victims to sate their interest. Throughout numerous discussions, it was often shared that this practice took an emotional toll on them, often appearing to be related to that of action of empathy, defined as, “the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts and experience of another...” (Polaschek, 2003 p. 173). Repeatedly when these emotional responses were elicited, it was around the subject matter of what was perceived as vulnerable victims, which in this context often referred to those who were perceived as defenseless or weak against predatory individuals, such as children and animals. Regularly, users shared how reading about these types of victims made them feel, usually in a negative manner, as one user made a comparison, “Serial killer or not, this always bothers me the most when predators go after the weak. I guess it’s not unlike most of the rest of the animal kingdom.” (p. 2224), highlighting how the community perceived these individuals who preyed upon certain victims who were perceived to be vulnerable based upon their attributes.

Victims seen as particularly vulnerable were that of children, which were often mentioned throughout discussion posts, particularly when the details of their crimes were macabre or vicious in nature. At times responses were merely that of disbelief, as one member questioned how someone could prey upon children, “I was done-for at plyers. How could he do

what he did to children?” (p. 1231). In other instances, fans shared how it directly affected them emotionally, as one user noted in a discussion revolving around a news article on serial murderer Lawrence Bittaker, “Yes. Reading about savagery perpetrated against children are the hardest on the emotions and the mind, in my opinion.” (p. 1233).

The stance on children evoking a powerful emotional response was reiterated numerous times by community members, such as in another post discussing the blog of a convicted serial murderer, one user explained how the blog’s descriptions of what had occurred to child victims affected them, “I have a pretty strong stomach, but kids are my Achilles Heel.” (p. 1102).

However, these responses were not always relegated to reading about the fates of child victims, such was the case of a user’s response in relation to a photo of Albert Fish, “Ugh. After learning what he did to that little boy, I can barely bring myself to look at him. Normally I’d download this – it’s a cool photo – but I don’t even want his digital ghost in my phone.” (p. 1350). While in general reading about the details of what occurred to child victims appeared to cause an emotional response within users, even images of serial murderers appeared to prompt negative feelings based on knowledge of their crimes.

Children as victims appears to play a significant role in eliciting a personal response from fans, as Best (1990) argued, “Menaced by deviants, child-victims are vulnerable to harms intentionally inflicted by others. Like deprived and sick children, child-victims are not held responsible for their plight.” (p. 5). Community members appeared to conform to this sentiment, seeing children as unable to defend themselves due to not being fully matured, thus particularly vulnerable to serial murderers, and therefore not responsible for what occurred to them. However, while children were often mentioned at the most frequency around causing emotional responses, they were not the only types of victims that produced an emotional response from

community members.

Fans sharing their experiences of negative personal reactions in relation to descriptions of what happened to victims was occurred numerous times throughout discussions. At times these responses were basic, such as one user commenting, “I got physically sick. I stopped reading it.” (p. 1101), while in others they clarified exactly caused their response, “It's beyond disturbing, in my opinion. It's about the molestation, torture, and murder of children.” (p. 1102). While in another thread discussing videos of actual murders, one individual spoke of the released Luka Magnotta video and how it made them feel about the victim:

I did watch the Magnotta video, only after I found out that the victim was already deceased. Actually, I think I inadvertently saw the first few seconds of the stabbing with the ice pick before I knew that he was already deceased, and it really, really got to me. I would rather watch the most extreme, realistic and gory movie scene, than any scene where a person dies or is tortured by the hands of another, no matter how tame the event is. (p. 692)

The reality of watching real crimes being perpetrated on actual victims appeared to cause a powerful emotional response within this community member, even noting that they would rather watch any movie scene instead, as the knowledge that it not fictional but in fact was *real* made viewing the videos much worse.

However, more interestingly, at times fans appeared to not only have an emotional response from details of what occurred to victims, but expressed empathy for others who had to be exposed to them as well, such as one community member discussing a transcript of a serial murderer’s torture video, “...there's a transcript of one of their torture tapes available online. Having just read that still gives me nightmares. Can you imagine all the law enforcement, legal

officials, and jurors who had to listen to that multiple times?” (p. 1232). This sentiment was shared numerous times, such as in a discussion around members favourite serial murderers, “I never forget about the horrible manner those victims had their lives taken from them and how the families had to hear all those details during trial.” (p. 58). While in another thread revolving around Dennis Rader, one member commented:

After watching the documentary about the effect of BTK's crimes on the surviving Otero and others it's sad to hear that he still has the ability to talk to the outside world.

Mohterfucker should be in the darkest dungeon with as little comfort as possible only to be let out to be studied by the real heroes in these horrible real stories. (p. 251)

The ability of fans to not only empathize with victims, but their families and others who were exposed to the details of crimes, to the point of a negative emotional response, appeared to be a prevalent function of their community.

However, at times these emotional responses by fans appeared to drift into stronger feelings due to the details of crimes, as was the case when comments were made regarding the depravity of Lawrence Bittaker’s crimes, as one person stated, “After reading the article, I was ready to throw all the needles at him like darts, turn on the electric chair; all while Bittaker sat in the gas chamber.” (p. 1233). As mentioned in the previous chapter, projections of violence were not an uncommon occurrence within the community, where the details of what serial murderers did to victims appeared to generate a stronger emotional response, moving into areas of anger or apparent loathing, to the point they expressed how they wished to enact violence upon the individual serial killer. Examples such as these show that community members often had strong empathy for the victims of serial murderers, despite their objects of interest being the serial murderers themselves. The irony of serial murderers being part of their interest, while

empathizing with their victims was noted by one user:

Haha yes, that is certainly the irony. It's fascinating in a way I can't explain. I'm always game for a good serial killer or homicide detective show, yet I have nothing but empathy for victims and their families & wouldn't wish it on anyone. To think what people suffer at the hands of sadists is deeply upsetting. (p. 1673)

While human victims appeared to be the most frequent cause of emotional toll on community members, they were not the only types of victims as discussions also veered into that of animals, as one user shared how they felt about viewing a video of a kitten being killed:

I remember 4 or 5 years ago a video of a Japanese woman standing and walking on a tiny kitten in high stilettos. As far as I remember it was taken down and it was rumored that she was punished with a fine or something like that. I've seen some crazy videos, but stuff like that is next level evil and the people behind the videos. (p. 912)

The community chastisement of the actions of serial murderers in relation to vulnerable victims was a widespread practice throughout the sub-forum from discussion to discussion, acting as public communication around the significance of this social system's morals (Lauderdale, 1976). The quotes above highlight how the community consistently reinforces how these types of victims are worthy of empathy. Those who were perceived as vulnerable victims, particularly children, often elicited a negative emotional response from the community at large, indicating that those who were viewed as particularly defenseless or weak in relation to predatory individuals were particularly privy to empathy from community members. However, while it is apparent that indulging in the details of the crimes of serial murderers could take a significant emotional toll on fans as they continuously expressed, they utilized a specific strategy in order to cope with the emotional realities of the fandom.

## **Dark Humour**

As one of the most prominent features of the serial murderer fandom is their willing participation in exposing themselves to graphic details, images, and videos related to serial murderers and their crimes. Frequently, these sources came in the form of detailed accounts of what had occurred to victims, or were graphic and macabre in nature, to which some community members expressed caused an emotional toll. Within particular discussions which revolved around graphic details, one emergent theme that became apparent within this fandom was that of dark humour, a form of emotion work that allowed them to cope with the realities of the fandom.

Dark humour, otherwise known as “black comedy” or “gallows humour”, is credited to have originated from author Jonathan Swift in his satirical works, which is a type of humour used to lighten the atmosphere of topics that are taboo in nature, often rooted in cynicism and skepticism (Real, 2005). Dark humour has become a prevalent tradition in North American and British culture, defined by Bucaria (2008) as:

...the more or less explicit and sacrilegious representation of humour that has as its aim that of making fun of situations usually regarded as tragic, such as death, sickness, disability, and extreme violence, or of the people involved or subject to them. (pp. 218-219)

The usage of dark humour serves a distinct purpose to those who deal with death, as Palmer (1983) noted in their participant observation of medics, humour was identified as one of six overarching principal coping aids utilized to overcome the routine nature of death within their profession. Similarly, Young (1994) noted that in relation to police culture, it was found that black humour was utilized as a form of mental defence by constables surrounding “bad” or “messy” deaths, particularly when living relatives had to be informed of the outcome. It was



found that dark humour served young constables as a mediator in relation to their roles as police officers, allowing them to face the realities of death while carrying out their daily duties, ensuring they felt a sense of control over situations at all times.

The apparent trend of using humour to cope with an exposure to death is supported by much scholarly research, as Thorson (1985) detailed that death humour served three distinct functions: (1) it works as a defence mechanism, (2) it can be used as a form of social lubricant, and (3) it can help individuals gain a sense of control over the uncontrollable nature of death. The usage of dark humour was shown to be a common practice among those who experience death on a daily basis, with professions such as doctors, paramedics, and police officers. The differentiation between these professions and the serial murderer fandom is that of a willingness to expose themselves to the details and images of violence and death, an essential aspect of being a fan of serial murderers. As such, dark humour may be an integral strategy for managing fan identity within this community.

While the serial murderer fandom community and its members were not exposed to death to the same extent as professionals, when discussions revolved around particularly detailed accounts of a serial murderer and their crimes, it was often noticeable that a negative tone would overtake within the replies of community members, often expressed in how it made them personally feel or discussing how the victims or their families must have felt. For example, in one particular discussion, a link to the blog of a convicted serial murderer and pedophile was shared, which provided detailed accounts of what had occurred to child victims, resulting in an overwhelmingly negative emotional response by community members. As one fan shared how reading the blog made them feel:

Yeah I read a little of it awhile back. I stopped though as it made me feel dirty reading it. I felt like I might catch some of his sickness (evilness) if I continued to read it. I know that sounds weird though! Ha. I dunno if that makes any sense?! (p. 1101).

As an abundance of negative comments were shared, one user diverted the tone of conversation by the community using a satirical approach to mock the fact they held foreknowledge of what the blog would contain, “yeah who'd have guessed a serial killer's blog would be full of disturbing shit?” (p. 1102). The cynical nature of this response is informative of how members of the community were expected to handle the nature of death and violence in relation to serial murderers, utilizing a joke to point out the realities of their fandom and the autonomy they hold, where they willingly choose to expose themselves to the details of crimes, even if it may affect them on a personal level.

Another discussion thread began with a simple question, “What do you think serial killers smell like?”, to which community members overwhelmingly responded with jokes, such as one user commenting, “I bet Ted Bundy smelled sexy. Probably used old spice.” (p. 106). While in another serious discussion, an image of Ted Bundy’s Volkswagen Beetle was discussed, a vehicle which was predominately used in many of his murders, another user jokingly reviewed it, “Innocent and cute looking car. 9/10 for luring girls” (p. 153). In instances such as these, it appeared as if fans used dark humour to obfuscate the realities of the crimes of notorious offenders such as Ted Bundy had perpetrated, while also bonding through playing off of each other’s jokes.

However, when particularly graphic details were shared in a discussion, the rate of dark jokes also appeared to increase in frequency from community members. In one discussion thread surrounding a detailed account by Jeffrey Dahmer of how he cannibalized one of his victims,

dark humour was used throughout by the community in its responses. Mocking a common YouTube cooking video sign-off, one member joked, “Remember to like or subscribe if you enjoyed my cannibalism cooking!” (p. 130) in response to how Dahmer described how he prepared his victims. However, despite the already taboo nature of cannibalism and the graphic details shared, one fan shared a crime scene image of the victim who was the topic of discussion, which in turn garnered responses such as, “Well you said extremely graphic, not sure why I clicked it.” (p. 132), deepening the already negative tone of the discussion. In response to this shift, it appeared as if dark humour became even more heavily relied upon, as users joked about Jeffrey Dahmer’s anatomical choices to consume, as one member stated, “biceps? they're too lean. you want something with marbling like glutes or upper thigh.” (p. 134), to which another user replied, “well, if he's gonna cook the biceps then he really needs to make a pan sauce to counteract the lean and dry biceps. some butter and flour roux with a bold red, like barolo. c'est si bon!” (p. 134). Examples such as these appeared to signify that fans attempted to counteract particularly dark tones of discussions with dark humour in order to bring the conversation back to a lighter tone. While at times it appeared as if these dark jokes crossed a line, they still succeeded in the purpose of keeping conversation lively and allowed users to bond with one another by responding to each other’s jokes.

However, detailed accounts of the crimes of serial murderers were not an essential criterion for the usage of dark humour, as in a discussion which provided the reasoning behind the motive of a serial murderer, in which they dreamed their father commanded them to swallow the saliva of fifty women, to which they murdered 44 women in pursuit of this goal, dark humour was utilized consistently throughout. As one user joked in reference to a viral motivational video featuring actor Shia LeBeouf, “Don't let your dreams be dreams.” (p. 1872), while another

simply made light of the murderer's flawed logic behind their crimes, "I have a similar dream. But I just go ahead and be flirty and respectful and get them to kiss me consensually." (p. 1873). These examples indicate that dark humour may play a substantial role in the subculture of the serial murderer fandom in general, not simply in occurrences of explicit detailed accounts. As dark humour required a collective experience by the community, it at times appeared to act as a form of interpersonal bonding.

Dark humour was a prevalent theme among the serial murderer fandom, referenced to approximately 244 times within the sampled documents. The usage of dark humour appeared to play a significant role in how fans coped with their willing exposure to death and violence, as it was most heavily relied upon in discussions that were morbid in tone or provided detailed accounts of crimes, similar to that of other professions exposed to death on a daily basis. However, it is difficult to decipher where dark humour in relation to emotion work by the community begins and where the culture of the Internet with making light of situations ends. As the one of the major communication mediums of the world, the Internet has fostered a culture where it has become increasingly acceptable to make jokes in relation to issues such as death and disasters, being shared on a massive scale (Blank, 2013). As one fan commented on product reviews left on Amazon, a website dedicated to the online sale of products, "Exactly. I would totally make dark jokes like these. Sure this person happened to be crazy but let's not let the standard be the lowest common denominator. I wanna tell dark murder jokes." (p. 234), indicating dark humour may not only play a significant role within this subculture, but as an intercultural manifestation with the Internet and the anonymity it grants users.

Consistently throughout discussions within this community, when a dark tone overtook discussion topics, members appeared to use dark humour as a form of coping in order to lighten

the mood of particularly morbid conversations or detailed accounts of crimes, allowing for conversation to continue and not become stagnant, or simply as a method of social bonding with the sharing of dark jokes. As a form of emotion management, dark humour appeared to play a significant role in regulating how fans dealt with being exposed to accounts or images of death and violence in association with serial murderers, often expressing how personally it affected them in a negative manner. As such, dark humour appeared to allow fans to indulge in these discussions and actively participate in discussing, enabling them to control or inhibit the emotive experiences typical of being exposed to death and violence. By doing so, the community can continue to learn or understand serial murderers and their crimes to the degree in which they desire in order to properly sate their interest.

Within the serial murderer fandom, community members had to cope with the realities of the crime of serial murder, specifically in relation to the details of murders, how victims had suffered, and images and videos related to crimes. As such, as community members willingly exposed themselves to the details of these crimes, it often elicited an emotional response, which many expressed took an emotional toll on them. As a result, it appeared as if members of this community utilized dark humour as a form of coping with these realities, instead lightening the mood of morbid discussions through the usage of dark jokes, which also served the purpose of social bonding, as members were able to play off each other's dark jokes. By doing so, it appears community members able to make being a fan of serial murderers more bearable, and thus actually engage with the community through discussion and the sharing of information.

## Chapter 8 - Conclusion

The serial murderer has become more than just a rare type of violent offender, due to specific parties, they have been socially constructed as apex predators that are social problems in need of societal response. With this fixation, the mass media has responded and afforded them vast amounts of attention, which has garnered them a significant amount of celebrity, and within the current western culture, this celebrity seeps into everyday life (Holmes, 2005). As with all celebrities, they have become products of consumption for the general public as represented by their adoption by popular culture in all forms of media, allowing for those who are interested to become fans, regardless of the notoriety of their acts.

While serial murderers with an active fan following is not a new advent, with admirers attending the trials of the most prolific serial murderers, actively communicating with them through mail correspondence, to even meeting them during their incarceration, with the emergence of the Internet and the world becoming increasingly mediated, those who hold an interest in serial murderers are able to network and form digital communities to an extent not before possible (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington, 2007; Leyton, 2005). While psychological explanations have been produced for this interest and attraction to serial murderers, such as *hybristophilia*, the attraction to dangerous individuals (Money, 1993), an interest in serial murderers may lie deeper in how humans seek to understand the realities of death and violence.

An interest in serial murder is understandable, as Penfold-Mounce (2009) states, "Crime is rarely routine or dull; there is something sensual and visceral about it... (p. 4). As far as crimes go, serial murder exemplifies this notion, allowing those within the fandom to vicariously experience something far outside of the boundaries of normal everyday life. The serial murderer ties a human fascination with death and violence into one, acting as symbolic encounters with

death that allow us to test our sense of morality and cope with the realities of death (Barton & Brown, 2012; Seaton, 1996). In addition, serial murderers can act as “idols of destruction”, becoming a representation of rebellion against the law and society in general, a notion that serves to pique a thrill and sense of freedom by proxy (Schmid, 2015).

By transgressing these lines, the serial murderer fandom is able to experience a form of vicarious experiences through serial murderers, as Ferrell (1998) describes, “adrenaline and excitement, terror and pleasure seem to flow not just through the experience of criminality... but through the many capillaries connecting crime, crime victimization and criminal justice.” (p. 38). As such, the serial murderer fandom may merely be a reflection of how a celebrity of an intrinsic human interest in violence and death, a culture which has raised serial murderers to a celebrity status through media exposure, and how popular culture has adopted the image of the serial murderer for its own agenda as a modern-day boogeyman (Haggerty, 2009).

However, unlike conventional fandoms which covet objects of interest that do not raise alarm from society at large, those who show a strong interest for serial murderers may experience courtesy stigma due to their fascination, as the serial murderer represents an act of universal deviance in their apparent willingness to take lives (Ben-Yehuda, 1985). As a result, the serial murderer fandom has several unique issues that only it faces.

Within the community, several moral boundaries were established, specifically around the topic of what was viewed as a permissible level of interest in serial murderers, and what was seen as drifting into the realm of celebration and idolization of serial murderers. However, these moral boundaries were permeable at best, dependent upon the context of discussion, where actions in behaviours in one instance are met with ramifications in order to correct their behaviour, while in others praised despite potentially crossing the line. As such, the community

is one of moral contradictions, indicating this community holds weakened collective conscious, as it appears even they are unsure of where they stand morally.

As a fan of serial murderers, this fandom faces the real risk of being viewed as deviant for their strong interest in serial murderers, or taking on a courtesy stigma by mere association with them. As a result, appeared to undertaken several strategies of identity management to address these risks. As this community exists in a cyber setting, community members are able to create alternate deviant identities, ensuring a sense of anonymity and insulating any risk of courtesy stigma from spoiling their primary, everyday identities, or those around them. In addition, fans separated themselves from “other” groups fans of through narrative resistance, having these other groups serve as deviance exemplars. By characterizing these other groups with negative stereotypes they viewed as unacceptable, namely idolizing serial murderers and not understanding their psychology, it allowed community members to uniformly reject them and see themselves as different despite belonging to the same deviant setting. However, the most intuitive form of identity management came in the form of socially distancing themselves from their objects of interest themselves, a behaviour that runs counter to that of normative fandoms. By creating distance through moral condemnation, expressions of contempt, and projections of violence, fans were able to create a social distance from serial murderers, constructing them as less than human, as well as emulate conventional behaviours, thus retaining some aspects of their normative identity.

Due to willingly exposing themselves to the crimes of serial murder, this community often immersed themselves in detailed accounts, images, and videos of violence and death. At times, this aspect of sating their interest appeared to take an emotional toll on fans, specifically in relation to victims and producing strong empathetic feelings. As such, it was necessary for fans



to undergo a process of emotion work, managing their emotions through the usage of dark humour. Dark humour as a coping strategy allowed the community to make light of particularly dark discussions, reverting a discussion from a morbid tone to that of a lighter one, ensuring conversation could continue, while alternatively acting as a form of social bonding, as fans could play of one another's jokes. As a collective experience, dark humour appeared to be a method that could be utilized to cope with the realities of death and violence, and thus enable the community to actually sate their interest in serial murderers and be fans. By exploring the serial murderer fandom and how it sets its moral boundaries and manages its collective fan identity, it provides insight into how what can be viewed as a deviant online subculture and community actually functions. In an increasingly mediated world, where individuals are able to network on a scale not before plausible, these digital communities will continue to be sources of sociological interest.

The processes of identity management strategies needed for community members sate their interest in serial murderers is extensive, as they appear to combat social norms around how serial murderers *should* be viewed, while simultaneously wishing to learn more about them to better understand them. As a result, fans within this community appear to struggle between their interest and their emotions, specifically emotional responses revolving around victims, which at times appeared to take a toll on them. While in some instances this fandom appears to function in a rather normative fashion, discussing their objects of interests, participating in fan labour and activities, due to the nature of serial murderers, all of these behaviours are tainted by deviance and stigma. However, as the serial murderer has been co-opted by popular culture for its own benefits, it is not surprising serial murderers would have fans who wish to better understand them, due to their intrinsic mystery, an aspect even the majority of society finds intriguing, this

community is simply a reflection of that. As such, while on the surface it may appear as if the fandom is deviant for its strong interest in serial murderers, they undergo several processes to retain some sense of normalcy around their interest.

This research project into a serial murderer fandom community has highlighted its significant differences from that of other normative fandoms. Unlike other conventional fandoms, there appears to be an ever-looming tension around serial murderers as their objects of interest, and this community's desire to not be perceived as glorifying them through their discussions. This problem around the glorification of objects of interest is a unique feature of this fandom, as other fandoms typically do not have to deal with the tension of deviance in order to undergo being a fan.

As a resultant effect, this fandom has erected boundaries within its community around behaviours seen as glorifying or admiring serial murderers, attempting to outline permissible behaviours for its members. While these boundaries attempt to enforce conduct consistent with societal norms, it causes a conflict in how fans pursue their interest in serial murderers, leading to permeable boundaries and contradictory behaviours, oftentimes relying upon the context of a specific discussion to rationalize them. Due to this, there appears to be a constant struggle between indulging in their interest in serial murderers as part of being a fan with that of conforming to social norms around how serial murderers should be perceived.

Despite an anonymity permitted by this community through the creation of anonymous deviant identities and the nature of the forum, societal norms appear to play a significant role in shaping how members of this community function despite a minimal risk of recourse. The deviance associated with serial murderers and their crimes in turn shapes how this online community conducts itself, fans undergo many processes of identity management in order to just

engage in fan behaviours, something that normative fandoms do not undergo. All of these identity management strategies and coping mechanisms undertaken by the serial murderer fandoms demonstrate the power that societal norms and the risk of being labelled as deviant can hold, even in an online community that is situated in an anonymous setting.

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## Appendix A

Category	Code Name	Operationalization
Informational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Murderer as a source of information</li> <li>ii. Family as a source of information</li> <li>iii. Investigation</li> <li>iv. Expert insight</li> <li>v. Identifying a serial murderer</li> </ul>	<p>Posts that provide information around a serial killer or their crimes, typically in the form of news articles.</p> <p>Information provided by the serial murderers themselves (e.g. interviews, books).</p> <p>Information provided by victims' families around crime or murderer(s).</p> <p>Information that is focused solely around the investigation of a serial murderer.</p> <p>Information from experts, ranging from psychologists, police, criminologists (e.g. academic articles).</p> <p>Articles or posts that revolve around attempting to uncover the identity of a serial murderer, be it active or from the past (e.g. Phoenix Serial Shooter, Zodiac Killer)</p>
User Curiosity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Seeking answers</li> <li>ii. Motives behind crimes</li> </ul>	<p>Posts or comments that seek to allow discussion around specific of a killer or violent crime to better understand them.</p> <p>Posts or comments that revolve around seeking out information around a specific murderer or their crimes.</p> <p>Post or comments that revolve understanding why serial murderers committed their crimes.</p>
Conditions of Serial Murder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Criteria for serial murder</li> <li>ii. Classification of serial murder</li> </ul>	<p>Discussions around the accepted definition of "serial murder" and who falls within it.</p> <p>The minimum criteria that is needed to be labelled a serial murderer and what separates them from other types of murderers (e.g. cooling down period)</p> <p>Discussions around the typologies of serial murderers and how others do not fall within it (e.g. groups)</p>
Personal Experiences with Murderer		Discussions around personal or second-hand information of personal experiences with serial

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Close calls</li> <li>ii. Wishing to contact</li> </ul>	<p>murderers, or those who wish to have a personal experience.</p> <p>Posts revolving around how personal or someone close was almost the victim of a serial murderer.</p> <p>Users who seek information on how to contact serial murderers while imprisoned, or how it has gone for others.</p>
Celebrity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Fame</li> <li>ii. Infamy</li> <li>iii. Thanatourism</li> </ul>	<p>Revolving around how well known an individual is, be it positively or negatively.</p> <p>Relating to how serial murderers have become famous due to their crimes (e.g. news coverage) or lack thereof.</p> <p>Posts or comments revolving around how notorious or prolific a serial murderer is.</p> <p>Sites of dark tourism, typically made famous due to the crimes that occurred there, or the individuals who owned them (e.g. Killer hometowns).</p>
	Paraphilia	Posts relating to paraphiliac disorders that may apply to murderers (e.g. necrophilia).
Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Pop culture</li> </ul>	<p>Various forms of communication mediums that are utilized (sharing, requesting) on the sub-reddit (e.g. images, news articles, videos, etc.)</p> <p>Discussions around serial murderers specifically in relation to television, film, and books and how they impact the popular culture.</p>
Serial Murderers' Childhood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Early identification</li> </ul>	<p>Posts that discuss serial murderers as children.</p> <p>References to what can be learned from serial murderers as children that may have predicted their behaviours (warning signs).</p>
Fandom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Imitation</li> <li>ii. Murderabilia</li> </ul>	<p>Being a fan of someone or something, coming together collectively as a community to share ideas and thoughts.</p> <p>Emulating serial murderers or their victims through behaviours, dress, or actions.</p> <p>Items associated with serial murderers and other violent criminals or crimes.</p>

	Victims	Dialog around individuals or family members that were harmed by serial murderers or other violent crimes.
Dark Humour	i. Meme	<p>Posts or comments that are meant to be comedic revolving around a serial murderer or their crimes, making light of a serial murderer.</p> <p>Images that are intended to be humorous that feature a serial murderer, often containing a morbid/dark element of joke.</p>
Legal Proceedings	<p>i. Trial</p> <p>ii. Imprisonment of murderer</p> <p>iii. Death penalty</p>	<p>Discussion around a serial murderer or crime at various stages of interaction with a criminal justice system.</p> <p>Information and images that revolve around a serial murderer or violent offender during the trial process.</p> <p>Posts that revolve around the condition of a serial murderer while imprisoned in addition to potential parole hearing.</p> <p>Posts that focus solely on a criminal who is facing, or has been sentenced to the death penalty (United States).</p>
Community/User Responses	<p>i. Sympathizing with murderer</p> <p>ii. Contempt</p> <p>iii. Attraction/Fascination</p> <p>iv. Providing/Correcting</p>	<p>Relating to the various emotions users convey over text through word usage in their posts to serial murderer(s), their crimes, or other users' comments.</p> <p>Comments or posts that relate to showing empathy for a serial murderer (e.g. Despite their crimes they had a good side).</p> <p>Comments or posts that show a particular dislike for a serial murderer(s) or their crimes and/or another user of the subreddit.</p> <p>Comments or posts that appear to have an underlying fascination or apparent attraction to a serial murderer(s) or their crimes.</p> <p>Noting the information another user is incorrect, and correcting them with their own information.</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>v. Fantasizing</li> <li>vi. Neutralization</li> <li>vii. Behaviour management</li> <li>viii. Assuming facts</li> </ul>	<p>Creating imaginary or metaphorical situations, however improbable, revolving around serial murderers and how they may have occurred (e.g. Serial killer death battles).</p> <p>Neutralizing the severity of a serial murderer(s) and their crimes.</p> <p>Someone within the community addressing the behaviour of another user in a positive or negative manner (e.g. insults).</p> <p>User comments that assume the behaviour or actions of a serial murderer based on what they believe is correct.</p>
Rivalry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Competition between murderers</li> <li>ii. Comparison to other murderers</li> </ul>	<p>Posts that directly discuss what serial murderers thought of one another, or to vie one against another (e.g. Original Night Stalker vs. The Zodiac Killer).</p> <p>Comparing the crimes, traits, or modus operandi of one murderer or murderers to another.</p>
	Does not fit board criteria	Posts that technically based on the board rules do not belong, but have been allowed.
	Evil	References to a serial murderer(s) or their crimes being immoral and malevolent in nature.
	Mental health	Discussion or posts revolving around the mental state of a serial murderer and/or their victims in relation to crimes.