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| Obsessed with Murder: True Crime and Gender |
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**Abstract**

For much of history, true crime has been a popular genre that holds the attention of large parts of the population, even though it depicts gruesome accounts of real crime. Most recently, the genre has amassed a large following online. With the rise of more and more means of consuming true crime, its popularity has soared. Now, there is a group of people that are referred to as the “true crime community”, a group dedicated to eagerly discuss the crimes of the real world. What many may find surprising is the main demographic of true crime consumption: women. Female-identifying people are often regarded as the more sensitive of the genders, so what draws them to this violent genre? This study explores the women who are consuming true crime, joining the community, and why they do it.

Grisly murders, crime scene reports, and blood-splatter tests are surprisingly common topics in the true crime community. The rise of nonfiction-crime has been popular for decades; humans are drawn to the darker side of psychology. In recent years, media surrounding these crimes has only seemed to expand and grow in its popularity. It has never been more readily available. Whether picking up a novel on the catching of a killer, tuning in to a murder-based podcast, or binging Netflix’s latest docu-series, true crime is everywhere. While a large portion of the population consumes true crime, that large population may come as a surprise: women.

**Literature Review**

While there are studies that show who is most interested in true crime, many of them reflect an interest in nonfiction novels and the people that medium appeals to. These have supplemented some understanding of interest in true crime, but this study aims to find reasons why women, not people in general, are interested in true crime and expands the population to include people who partake in true crime content through a variety of media.

A key reading that offered insight into women’s interest in true crime is Megan Sweeney’s 2003 qualitative study “Living to Read True Crime: Theorizations from Prison.” In her study, Sweeney met with a group of incarcerated women and discussed why true crime novels were so frequently borrowed and read (2003). Conclusions were gathered from her interviews with the women, and several ideas on why these books are so popular were gathered: first, true crime helps incarcerated women understand themselves and their actions better; Second, incarcerated women can better empathize with other people and their actions through contextualization; True crime is helping women who have experienced and committed violence to come to terms with the actions perpetrated against them and those that they have committed through the lens of narrative (Sweeney, 2003). While these specific cases may seem niche, violence against women is not. In this, the idea was sparked that women may be more interested in true crime than men, as it may help women contextualize violence within our society.

Cathy Belben’s 2006 article “Creating a True Crime Collection” emphasizes several points on why this genre is useful as a narrative tool. For many, it can take complex ideas of psychology and hard to understand disorders and gives them a structured narrative that is more accessible for audiences (Belben, 2006). She also notes that they provide a timeline for scientific advancements and the evolution of crime investigation (Belben, 2006). As her writing focuses on the benefits of true crime novels for all, these ideas of knowledge and narrative-interest can be applied to women but lack the specificity of why this genre is so popular amongst them.

The idea that women are drawn to true crime as a survival guide was found in Vicary and Fraley’s research “Captured by True Crime: Why are Women Drawn to Tales of Rape, Murder, and Serial Killers,” where men and women’s reading preferences were compared (2010). In this study, it was found women were most likely to choose books with female victims—another example of empathy-building--and ones where escape was discussed (Vicary & Fraley, 2010). This genre also provided a sort-of manual on warning signs and red flags that attracted a largely female audience (Vicary & Fraley, 2010). This was another idea that contributed to women’s interest in true crime as a genre of media.

Deborah Jermyn’s “Making Sense of a Female Malady: Fear of Crime, Hysteria, and Women Watching CrimewatchUK” aids in understanding women’s experiences with violence and its relation to true crime television (2009). This piece explores women’s encounters with violence, how they perceive crime, and how they deal with it (Jermyn, 2009). In her writing, Jermyn proposes that women use the true crime genre as a tool that will allow them to release fear in a controlled environment with a straight-forward and often predictable narrative (2009).

Finally, the Center for Disease Control released a study over Intimate Partner Violence that, too, gives insight into women’s interest in true crime. In this study, they found women were more likely to face violence in their personal and intimate relationships than men (2018). As proposed by other authors, women have a higher fear of victimization, and the CDC study provides data that aligns with the very real threat of violence against women. Using the CDC’s research may aid in proving the link between fear of violence, empathy for victims, catharsis, and consumption of true crime.

**Methods**

This survey consisted of several parts: an informed consent slide, questions separated by topic, and a thank you with acknowledgment to the Center for Disease Control. The informed consent slide informed participants on what the study’s purpose was, as well as age specifications (over eighteen and under sixty-five), and their right to withdraw the participation in the survey at any time. The survey questions were then split into sections, beginning with demographics. The survey was open to all willing participants (meeting age-requirements), although it was focused on women. Out of the 512 responses, 483 were female-identifying. This section also gathered information on race, education, relationship status, and age. These demographics were used to analyze which populations of women seemed most interested and why.

The following sections were geared towards true crime consumption, beginning with, “Do you consume (watch, read, or listen to) true crime content?” Participants were asked which medium they used to consume nonfiction crime content and for how long. They were also asked “Why do you consume these types of media?” with a multiple-choice list of responses and a blank space for them to type their responses. The methods of consuming true crime were broken down into viewing (mini-docs, television shows, or full-length documentaries), listening (podcasts), reading (books, magazines), and interacting with online communities. Respondents were then shown trailers for two true crime-based films, *My Friend Dahmer* and *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile,* and asked to rate on a Likert scale how likely they would be to view the films. The next question offered the titles of ten podcasts, randomly selected from the top 50 on the Podcast app (*My Favorite Murder, Phil in the Blanks, Serial Killers, This American Life, Crime Junkie, Conan O'Brien Needs Friends, Stuff You Should Know, Hidden Brain, Pod Save America, Pardon My Take*) and asked participants to select the podcasts they currently listened to or ones with which they would be interested. The final question over consumption choices was concerning books: “How likely are you to *read I'll Be Gone in the Dark,* a true crime novel about the investigation of the Golden State Killer?” This question asked participants to rate their interest in the book on a Likert-scale.

The survey was distributed across Facebook, Reddit, and Tumblr and spread through convenience sampling, making the results not truly generalizable. One Facebook connection shared the survey to her true crime Facebook groups, thus circulating through those who are interested in the subject, as a means of snowball-sampling. This led to a sampling population of 512 respondents.

This study aimed to find why women were so drawn to true crime, the mediums they use to interact with it, as well as how particular demographics may be more inclined to consume nonfiction stories of criminal activity. While this survey may not generalizable among the public at large, it is helpful to acknowledge (as depicted in Graph 1 below) that the study reached its target population: women interested in true crime.

**Results**

While the focus of the study was more centered on the female-perspective of interest in true crime, the survey remained open to male participants. The large majority of those who took part in the study ended up being females, though; a total of 483 female-identifying people responded. For the following results and analysis, only the results gathered from women are presented. The number of men and non-binary respondents was finalized at 27 and not covered in this research discussion, as the results are the most applicable female participants. Out of the 483 female participants, 431 identified as white/Caucasian. While these results may be representative of that particular true crime community, it cannot be generalized that the larger true crime fandom is predominantly white; the results may only be applied to the Facebook group and those who responded from it. The next highest population of respondents were those who identified as mixed-race (21), Hispanic/Latinx (8), Asian/Pacific Islander (8), Black/ African American (4), Native American (4), Jewish (2), and Middle Eastern (1). With a population that is skewed so heavily white, the results may be most applicable to that particular part of the true-crime community, as opposed to the community as a whole.

Most female participants reported spending only a couple hours per week engaged with the various forms of true crime consumption (Graph 3). The most popular reported times were between 1-2 hours and 3-4 hours, regardless of whether the method of consumption was listening, viewing, or reading. While the cumulative hours would equal a significant time spent with true crime per week, it is worth noting that some participants may under-report the amount of time they spend with nonfiction crime material, as they may be embarrassed or truly believe they spend little time with the genre. While most report spending 1-4 hours spread across the mediums, the highest rates of time spent consuming true-crime are through television and documentary viewing and podcast-listening.

The largest population of true crime viewing-women are single, with married women and those in a dating relationship following close behind (Graph 4). Responses from engaged or divorced individuals in the community were few. With how close the three leading responses were, the results suggest that there is not a large link between a women’s current relationship status and whether she views true crime or not. The female participants of the survey skewed younger, between the ages of 18-24 and 25-34, with the 25-34 age range reaching the highest portion of the population. The number of participants slowly declined as age increased through age 64. This tendency to lean toward a younger audience could be due to the survey’s method of distribution. Older audiences may not be as active on particular social media groups and may not have been exposed to the survey. Different means of distribution could better reach these groups.

According to Graph 9 (consult appendix), listening to podcasts is the most common method for consuming true crime. This could be due to its passive nature of consumption; listeners can turn on a podcast and continue working, driving, or conducting other activities. The second most common method was viewing either documentaries, docu-series, or television shows. It may be suggested that this is also because of its passive nature; viewers have some level of conscious engagement, as they choose to pay attention or not, but do not have to interact. Participation was the third most used way of engaging with true crime. Participating in online true crime communities includes posting and interacting with fellow community members and reading what they write as well. This is a more active form of engagement. The lowest amount of time was spent reading true crime, especially with younger audiences. Those who read true crime regularly tended to be older (as depicted in Graph 7). The number of hours for Graph 9 was calculated by taking the lower number of each answer category of possible hours, which may have led to a conservative number of hours that each method of consumption was selected.

Most female respondents had completed a four-year Bachelor’s degree and only 4 of the 217 Bachelor’s degree holders do not consume true crime. 4 of the 114 participants who have completed some degree of college, or are currently enrolled, do not consume true crime either. Those who have earned associate degrees, doctorates, professional degrees, master’s degrees, or a high school diploma all identity as true crime watchers. With the large number of female respondents who completed some college or earned a bachelor’s degree, it would be reasonable for some of them to not watch, listen to, or read true crime, whereas fewer participants replied from the other categories of educational level completed.

Participants, later narrowed to female participants, were asked their reasons for interacting with true crime content and were given a series of responses, along with the option to give their response. Curiosity was the most popular response, followed by empathy to the victim, a desire to see justice served in a case, emotional catharsis, and to feel a sense of control, in that order. Individuals that chose to type their reasons included: forensic knowledge, interest in learning about the psychology of killers, survival tips/warning signs, narrative structure/genre interest, a fear of the unknown, and a background of working in the justice system.

**Discussion**

Why are women so drawn to true crime? A large part of their interest is purely out of curiosity. Humans are a curious species, constantly looking for answers, and this principle applies to even the most gruesome of human behaviors. Women have tapped into this natural sense of curiosity and applied it to a dark part of the brain. Of the 483 female participants, 430 responded that they consumed true crime out of curiosity (Graph 2). The conclusion can then be suggested that a desire to learn about this psychological underbelly of human behavior is just a part of who people are.

The second reason women are so drawn to true crime is empathy to the victim. While men are more likely to face violence from a random stranger, the media often report on the most sensational stories of wrong-doing. These crimes, often of murders and kidnappings, typically happen to female victims. This leads to women’s perceptions of crime to be heightened. It is also very true that women are more likely to be aggressed against in their own homes by people they know, according to the Intimate Partner Violence study, conducted by the CDC (2018). Between media portrayals of true crime and the very real crimes committed against women, it is easier for women to view, read, or hear stories about a female victim and relate to her. As seen in Megan Sweeney’s study of incarcerated women (2003), women in the criminal justice system often have long histories of past abuse and then go on to commit acts of violence, but reading true crime allows them to relate to fellow women, regardless of their race or age, and better understand the world and themselves. True crime is, in a way, a gateway for building empathy.

True crime stories most often have endings where the perpetrator of the crime must face their consequences, which is a leading reason women cited as for their consumption of true crime (Graph 2). While the world can be a terrifying place that makes women subjects of violence in everyday life, there can be a solace found in knowing that vile acts do not go unpunished. True crime can act as both comforts in a world where brutality seems to be everywhere and as retribution against those who commit it.

While women are often subjects of violence, it is societally unacceptable for women to be violent, whether physically or emotionally. While men have avenues to exert violent emotions through physical means such as fighting, women are not afforded such luxury in current society. They are often portrayed as nurturers, caregivers—not protectors or challengers. Women are expected to be placid, even in the face of tribulation or fear. This is where true crime can offer catharsis—a purging of intense emotions or feelings. The concept of emotional catharsis can go both in the way of the aggressor and the aggressed-against. For some consumers, seeing, hearing, or reading about a woman who disregards societal norms and acts violently may purge their anger or negative emotions. They may find a criminal with a similar situation and see how it resolves for that person, even if poorly. On the other hand, true crime purges fear. This may seem counter-intuitive, and in some ways, it is. Consuming more violent media may increase fear of violence in the world, but it helps women cope, a practice known as “adaptive coping”: using true crime as a tool to purge fear of everyday violence (Jermyn, 2009). The format of the genre is familiar. Women know they are safe when taking in this content, but it allows them to face the brutality of the world. True crime helps women to process the experiences faced by the people of their gender, which leads to an increased understanding of their feelings (Jermyn, 2009).

The fifth most common reason for the consumption of true crime is cited as a sense of control (Graph 2). Just as female-identifying people use it to process their emotions, they can also use it as a tool to gain a feeling of control over their emotions and their fate. Life can become stressful and overwhelming but compared to the intense turn of events that take place in these nonfiction narratives, one’s life seems tame. Women can compare the events of true crime and feel that their life holds a certain level of societal normalcy. The lack of restraint presented in the books, podcasts, and shows of true crime can help women to feel their circumstances are manageable; it gives them a sense of control over their lives.

Women also reported using true crime as a means for gaining knowledge, which confirms Belben’s 2006 research on the subject. Belben found the genre offered valuable insight on psychology and forensics (2006). Several women, 12, confirmed that this was part of the reason why they partake in true crime (Graph 2). True crime media contain details of crimes, from terminology to psychological-profiling. When using a visual medium, such as books or television shows and documentaries, crime scene photos may even be shown. These details and pictures can give an insight into what goes into solving these crimes. This could lead to an interest in becoming part of the criminal justice or law enforcement careers, another finding represented in Graph 2, and confirmed in the case of one policewoman from Jermyn’s 2009 study.

Ten women specifically mentioned consuming true crime due to its analysis of the criminal’s psychology (Graph 2). This is another form of knowledge that people can gain from reading, listening to, and viewing these violent tales. It is not the physical science, such as forensic science, that these women are interested in, rather what hides behind the physical. Certain shows, novels, and podcasts tend to dig deep into the root cause of a killer’s psychosis. Examples include podcasts like *Serial Killers* or *Cults* where one host will study the criminal’s history and give insight into how their upbringing may have impacted their futures. Women who partake in these more psychology-driven forms of true crime may gain insight on warning signs in the future.

These warning signs are what draw many women to true crime; if they can spot red flags, they believe they will be prepared and can avoid the tragic fate of the story’s victim. Three women filled out their responses with survival tips being one of their reasons to consume true crime. This aligns with the findings of Fraley and Vicary in their 2010 study, *Captured by True Crime: Why Are Women Drawn to tales of Rape, Murder, and Serial Killers?*. Women use the paths to violence in this content to try and predict ways they can keep themselves safe, whether from strangers or those that they know (Fraley & Vicary, 2010). Women also seek out content that offers physical tips that will aid them in escaping the fate of a victim (Fraley & Vicary, 2010). Reading one women’s tale of escape, or even lack-of-escape may offer women valuable lessons on personal safety.

As previously mentioned, there are several faults in the findings of this study. The number of responses, 512, is not reflective of the true-crime audience as a whole. Rather it is representative of a particular population of the true-crime audience—white women, mainly between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four. This survey used convenience- and snowball-sampling, so the responses are coming from people linked by their sphere-of-influence which may lead to homogenization of their thinking and opinions. Further studies on women’s interest in true crime would be well-versed to gather responses from more diverse populations and through both digital and physical mediums--such as paper surveys, phone surveys, and online surveys—to get a better representation of the wide array of audience members that consume true crime.

**Conclusion**

The violence portrayed in true crime is not pretty, is not idealistic, but it is real. The sometimes-sensational acts are works of nonfiction; they are the reality for both the perpetrator and the victim. What is not sensational is the everyday fear felt by women in a society that can often objectify them then subject them to violence: emotional, psychological, and physical. This fear of violence is what leads many women to true crime, often in hopes that they will be able to safeguard themselves and prevent themselves from being victimized. Regardless of violence, women also turn to true crime for knowledge and to satisfy their natural curiosity. Even though it may hard for outsiders to understand, true crime builds empathy and a strong bond between the women who consume it.

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**Appendix**

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