

Morbid Curiosity or Something Else?

A Quantitative Study Exploring Criminology Students'
Perceptions of Serial Killers.

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.10040638 | ISSN: 2977-1676



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www.journalcjd.org

British Library Registered ISSN: 2977-1676

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10040638>

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The Journal of
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Acknowledgements

It's weird to finally be in this position. Almost 10 years ago I dropped out of university after my dad passed away. I didn't think I was ever going to be able to say that I'd done it, I finally got a degree!

I would like to take the time to thank my guardian angel and accidental supervisor Angie. She continued to believe in me when I struggled to see the light at the end of the tunnel and kept me in check with reassuring but firm advice, always knowing what I needed! You truly are the best mentor, tutor and an inspiration.

Secondly, I'd like to thank my family, although sometimes they were the cause of the stress they got me here by dealing with a lot of crying and self-doubt! We have faced some tough times together and they have taught me how to face my fears with dignity and fearlessness! Mam, for always being there and believing in me. You'll always be my best friend, my inspiration, and my cheerleader. Dale for being a role model and making me realise I can do anything no matter how hard it seems and also being a pretty decent big brother. Josh for proofreading everything no matter how annoying it became and keeping me sane throughout these three years. Also for being there for me no matter what and enabling me to follow this dream.

Abstract

This research paper examines UK criminology students' perceived interest in serial killers and aims to provide an answer to the question: Morbid curiosity, or something more? The participants were all criminology students who were studying for a dual degree or a single degree at London Metropolitan University and were over the age of 18 at the time of the study.

The method used for this research project was a quantitative, survey-based approach with some qualitative questions. The sample for this research was small in scale as there were only a limited number of responses completed (12). The responses were majority female (83.3%) with a small sample of male participants (16.7%). The drawback to this was that there was not an equal sample of respondents.

The results confirm that criminology students studying at London Metropolitan University in the UK are indeed interested in serial killers. The data also concludes that 'morbid curiosity' does have a place in this to a degree. The data collected also found a correlation regarding gender and consumption of serial killer documentaries, which offers some interesting social justice insights regarding the unique interests of women and their subsequent motivations to study criminology. The data found that this is due to a need to understand serial killers' behaviour and cognitions, to educate and increase the chances of evasion.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The term Serial Killer has the power to both fascinate and repel. These individuals seem to operate outside society's moral universe, which can be exciting and intriguing but can also simultaneously cause alarm (Wilson et al., 2015). On Friday the 30th of December, a Ph.D. student of criminology was arrested and charged with the killings of four University of Idaho students in America, Pennsylvania (Bekiempis, 2022). Bryan Kohberger was reportedly conducting a study based on criminals, seeking to understand their most recent crimes, wanting emphasis on their thoughts and feelings during the execution of their offence. Kohberger was supposedly intrigued by criminals and their offences, wanting to gain an understanding of how it felt to commit said crimes through his research (Hurley & Flynn 2023). According to a study undertaken by Robinson & Zaitzow (1999) 'We criminologists are to a degree, what we study I.e. we commit acts of crime and deviance.' This led to the formation of this research question; Morbid curiosity, or something more? After researching the subject matter further, it was soon clear that the majority of research in this field was based on the general public and their intrigue with the notion of true crime, specifically serial killers. There was a gap in the research regarding criminology students/criminologists and their insights and dispositions into the true crime genre.

To understand this, it is important to understand various other factors that influence society's thoughts and feelings on serial killers and their crimes. Much of what the public knows about true crime is filtered through the mass media and then consumed by an inquisitive public. The reporting of crime in the media is intended to be informative, but in recent years true crime has become central to popular culture. There has been a barrage of true crime in the media from television shows, documentaries, and movies; the line between information and entertainment has become effectively blurred (Dowler et al, 2006, Cited in Jones & Mabe, 2021). According to Statista (2022), true crime is one of the most popular genres of shows watched in the UK with a 44.3% audience rating. This increased during the COVID-19 Pandemic as the Nation was placed under lockdown restrictions, and people began to turn to media outlets to entertain themselves (Rahman & Arif, 2021). Netflix was one of the streaming services that saw a lot of growth during this time to its subscription service. They began to release various true crime documentaries and series which proved popular (Ofcom, 2020). Netflix released a series based on Jeffery Dahmer in 2020, which quickly became one of the most-watched series on Netflix, with over a billion hours of viewing time in its first week (Cohen, 2020). This became noticeable in everyday life, friends were talking about Dahmer, even family members, and strangers in the street. Whilst in a waiting room for an interview, a gentleman asked me if I had watched the Dahmer series

yet. This gentleman was in his forties and didn't look like someone who usually enjoyed true crime. This is where the seeds of this research question were planted, as it seemed Dahmer had become a household name thanks to Netflix. This was intriguing, how an individual who had caused so much chaos and grief was now a household name. What better place to start to understand this desire for the morbid than with criminology students?

During the research, it became clear that the interest in serial killers seemed to be more defined within specific gender roles. Women are more likely to consume true crime than males. According to Horeck (2019), the true crime fandom is mostly made up of women, maybe assumedly due to their lack of autonomy in many true crime stories, and therefore they aim to regain some autonomy over culturally endemic narratives, in which young girls and women are brutalised by offenders (p.8). Statistics in an American survey shows that 18% of women said their favourite genre was true crime compared to 8% of males. Females also voted highly on watching true crime to understand the motivations of the criminals, making people more vigilant and safety-conscious (YouGov, 2022). This research therefore began to pertain to social justice within criminology, in the realms of how complex social systems within society affect the causation of criminal behaviour. In this instance, the gender roles shown which appeared in this research, pertaining to the consumption of true crime and the reasoning for that curiosity or fascination with the morbidity of true crime. Social justice is fairness within society regarding healthcare, employment etc. built on human rights, access, participation and equity. Human rights are respected and discrimination is not allowed to flourish. Gender inequality is considered by social justice activists to be one of the most important social justice issues (Soken-Huberty, 2020).

So, what allures people to these individuals and their crimes? Propagated by the mainstream media these individuals have become actors of their own lives, with their crimes playing out on screen, books, and podcasts creating an egregious 'celebrity' for public consumption (Weist, 2020). Has the recent increase in documentaries, dramas, and true crime fascinations affected how UK students regard these crimes and the perpetrators? Has true crime had any impact on students wanting to become involved in the study of criminology, as stated by Robinson & Zaitzow (1999). Could it be that serial killers fascinate us due to fictional characters, such as Clarice Starling and her interviews and profiling of Dr Hannibal Lecter in the novel *The Silence Of The Lambs*? (Harris, 1988). But more broadly what is it specifically which attracts criminologists to the gruesome crimes committed by serial killers, why exactly are they so intriguing? Is it morbid curiosity or something more? (Wilson et al., 2015).

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1 Curiosity killed the cat, you know?

For as long as it has been possible, scary stories have been entwined in all forms of media. From telling ghost stories at sleepovers in adolescence, with torch light under your chin, to watching horror movies about killers and documentaries on serial killers. According to Robinson et al (2014), Watching horror movies can cause nightmares for some of its viewers, whereas others seek the thrill and excitement the movie will bring. It was once thought that only delinquents and social deviants enjoyed the horror genre but recently it has evolved into somewhat of a popular escapade (P.41, cited in Box Office Mojo, 2013). Watching horror movies can induce sweaty palms, rapid heartbeats, and other physiological signs of fear, so why would we purposely seek out this kind of media?

The curiosity of what is going to occur creates enjoyment rather than negative emotions. Gaut (1993) argues that exposure to frightening stimuli can lead to desensitization as such used in exposure therapy. This can occur especially when horror is combined with humour, as it can ease the negativity of those emotions. Finally, the thrill of the fear can be seen as rewarding to some individuals and therefore they crave stimulation where their senses are alert, their heart is racing and their attention is highly focused. This increased arousal of horror-induced fear can be experienced as a reward, especially when one wants to break the emotional routine without risking one's life (Bantinaki, 2012. p390). This is called the paradox of horror (Vittrup, 2022 p.11). Individuals seeking out negative emotions, emotions which in real life they would strive to avoid, create the paradox of horror as people do not enjoy being scared or disgusted, but horror movies provoke these reactions (Yuüel, 2019). So is the genre of horror something that should cause alarm to society? Specifically regarding the individuals who consume it. Pascale (2016) argues that exercising the fascination with the macabre is beneficial to the development of character, and therefore within reason, such indulgences are morally acceptable (p.2).

Moving on from the genre of horror movies, which are usually constructed on fictitious characters; we proceed to the realities of society's crime and criminals. According to Lachmann & Lachmann (2007), Serial killers are the personification of 'evil' (p.17). The depiction of a 'serial killer' causes shock and disgust within society. According to Wilson, Yardley & Lynes (2015), these individuals and their crimes have the innate power to fascinate and attract. This unique beguiling effect they have comes from the want to know more about the individuals behind this label, as they operate outside of society's moral universe, which is both fascinating and terrifying (p.8). It is maybe understandable then, that serial

killers and their crimes have an infallible entanglement with the media. Wiest (2016), states that serial killers and their crimes are deeply embedded in Western cultures. They become the face of widespread news media coverage, therefore, becoming commodities of society (p.327).

A part of this attraction towards serial killers is associated with curiosity, the pragmatic desire to understand what society deems as unusual or obscure. Another part of this puzzle of attraction is the allure of 'safe violence'. This is the phenomenon that causes individuals to slow down when there is a traffic accident. It is also what makes the true crime genre so appealing to society (Dietrich & Hall, 2010). According to The Webster Dictionary cited in, Masinick & Teng (2004), This phenomenon is called 'rubbernecking'. The definition of this term is used in psychology to describe exaggerated curiosity within individuals who are presented with an incident, for example, a car crash. Some individuals are coined as 'disaster tourists', who seek out the scene of a disaster. Basic human disposition and curiosity are thought to be the cause of this. In more recent years with mobile phones and the instant access to cameras on those devices, 'disaster tourists' tend to photograph or film what they see. This according to Van-Hoving et al 2010, cited in Andersson & Sundin 2021, is the result of the media desensitizing society to tragedies and therefore wanting to experience something first-hand to obtain bragging rights. A case of this recently occurred in the media when 45-year-old Nicola Bulley went missing in Lancashire. The case became one which attracted the attention of the public, due to the media coverage it gained. People were travelling large distances to the site where Nicola went missing. They were seen taking videos and photos of the last known sighting of Nicola and the search efforts, going on to later post those videos on social media (Williams, 2023). This went as far as Nicola's body being filmed as it was pulled from the river Wyre, by police and then posted on social media by a member of the public. That individual went on to earn £900 in royalties for the video (Noyce, 2023). This shows the want for such information and content from the public, showing 'disaster tourism' at work. Individuals came to make their own conspiracies around Nicola's disappearance to the point that the public did not trust the police and their search efforts, which the media also reported. The effects that the media has on crime and the reporting of such violence will be discussed in more detail below.

2.2 I don't like Mondays (Tell me why)

The title of this section is based on a song by the Boomtown Rats. After reading about a mass shooting in Cleveland Elementary School in 1979 Bob Geldof wrote the song. A girl called Brenda Spencer had carried out a shooting killing two adults and injuring eight children, When asked why she committed this crime she responded simply; 'I don't like Mondays' (Trinity College London, 2018). The media representation of this incident which Geldof consumed, created a number #1 hit in 32 different

countries (Linazasoro, 2019). This powerfully showcases the effect of media reporting on a terrible incident. So do they have the power to make serial killers celebrities?

The representation of serial killers in the media is cast under two main categories according to Wiest (2016), *Monsters and Celebrities*. The way society represents these individuals within the media, links to broader cultural meanings. A study undertaken looking at the U.S. and the U.K. showed that both countries cast serial killers as monsters. On the one hand, the U.S. leans towards the ideology of fantastical monsters with exceptional abilities and exclusively focuses on the perpetrator. Whereas the U.K. present the perpetrators as savage animals and has a greater focus on the victims over the perpetrator.

The media has had a considerable impact on individuals who are coined Serial killers. They have gained notability and notoriety from all forms of media enhancing their self-image of grandiosity (Holmes & Redmond, 2006). Society has become fascinated as the entertainment industry produces books, movies, podcasts, and documentaries on these individuals' lives and crimes. Gregoriou & Burke (2011), argue that many serial killers use this desire for notoriety as one of their motivations for killing. Despite there being a copious amount of research into serial killers, there is little regarding the celebration of them in the media and the effects this has on society. Schmid (2005) cited in, Gregoriou & Burke (2011), believes that acknowledging this fame cursorily may lead to one's imbrication with and therefore the contribution to said fame (p.2).

In 2022 the streaming platform Netflix released its newest series *Dahmer- Monster: The Jeffery Dahmer Story*. This series became one of the most viewed on the platform, racking up over one billion hours of viewing time and making it into the global top 10 most-watched series. Due to its popularity, it has been renewed for two more series (Choen, 2022). The series follows notorious American serial killer Jeffery Dahmer, who killed 17 young boys and men between 1978 and 1991. Most of Dahmer's victims were black and gay (Bushby & Young, 2022). According to Choen (2022), the series was made to focus on Dahmer's victims and explore the institutional failings of systemic racism and pervasive homophobia. This has been debated within the public sphere as the victims' families did not respond well to the series. One family member described the series as 'harsh and careless' (Bushby & Young, 2022). The reviews on the series are dominated by people commenting on Evan Peter's performance as Dahmer, stating how they began to sympathise and humanize Dahmer, one reviewer stated; "Dark, twisted, and disturbing, Dahmer tries to tell the true story of Jeffery Dahmer. Unfortunately, the show may humanize Dahmer at times or disservice the victims who faced his horrific antics" (Rotten Tomatoes, 2022). These comments were made about an individual who engaged in rape, torture, and

cannibalism (Hafdahl and Florence, 2021). Showing the perception of the media has the power to rewrite stories and create a sympathetic bond with the individual who murdered so many young men.

Dahmer is not the only serial killer to have his life and crimes manufactured into the form of film or television. Ted Bundy was one of America's most prolific serial killers, and arguably the beginning of society's fascination with serial killers (Terranova, 2020). He killed over 30 young women and girls over a period of four years, this is an estimated number and some of his victims survived his attacks. Bundy's only interviews from death row are available to watch on Netflix; *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes* (Jones & Mabe, 2021). Bundy was one of the first individuals to have his trial televised and broadcast to various channels across the country, due to the sheer interest in his case. The media and the public seemed to succumb to Bundy's charm and natural charisma, the trial becoming more of a circus performance than a legal affair. Bundy became his own defence lawyer and even proposed to his girlfriend after asking her to take the stand, arguably showing his lack of empathy and concern for his crimes and victims [She said yes] (Terranova, 2020).

Hafdahl & Florence (2021) describes Bundy as educated, good-looking, and well-mannered with a reptilian smile. His charisma even charmed the sentencing judge as he went on to say of Bundy after his death sentence; "You're a bright young man. You'd have made a good lawyer and I would have loved to have you practice in front of me, but you went another way partner. I don't feel any animosity towards you. I want you to know that. Take care of yourself" (McCann, 2021. p.2). This now famous quote from the sentencing judge was re-enacted in the Netflix movie of Bundy's life and crimes in 2019. *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil, And Vile* (E.W.S.E &V) with Zac Efron starring as Bundy (Hafdahl and Florence, 2021). The portrayal of Bundy in this film results in ease and allegiance toward him, leading to the audience sympathizing with him (Milde, 2021. p7,68,69). Bundy's trial and the movie by Netflix had, what some may say, disturbing similarities regarding their impact on society. Specifically women. During Bundy's trial, he gained 'courthouse groupies' who waited outside the courtroom and frequently corresponded with Bundy, some wanting to marry him and others wanting to 'save' him (Jones, N.D). There was a distinguishable difference in the way in which the media reported Bundy's trial compared to other serial killers, for example Charles Manson's. This was due to the societal view of Bundy being charming and 'good looking', compared to Manson who faced a trial by the media due to his looks and lifestyle. (Hines, Bachman & Starr, 1973). Again this exacerbates the influence the media has over individual views and opinions, leading to one individual being referred to as 'Satan' and the other having as having 'Brains and charm' (See Appendix 1&2).

Efron had a similar effect in the Netflix adaptation, one journalist wrote 'Zac Efron as Ted Bundy, is very, very hot. See y'all in hell, where I'll be pruning in Satan's jacuzzi' (Zaragoza, 2018). According to Wedemeyer (2019) after Efron's depiction of Bundy, there was a 'Ted Bundy is Hot' movement, which played out mainly on the social platform Twitter. Netflix even got involved due to the sheer overwhelming sexualization of Bundy (Appendix 4). After 'E.W.S.E &V', a plethora of memes came into the social sphere from the individuals who had watched the movie. One such meme as described by Fathallah (2022), presents an image of Efron morphing into Bundy (Appendix 3). The implication of the meme suggests that an ordinary man becomes negatively responsive to not being replied to by a female, thus a 'nice guy' turning into a serial killer (p.7).

So what does any of this have to do with Serial killers and the media's representation of them? Well according to Schmid (2008) the celebrity culture around serial killers, has developed as far as one's ability to purchase the nail clippings and hair of some serial killers, as if they were religious icons (p.3). Schmid (2008) goes on to talk about 'Jack the Ripper' and how his celebrity status has immortalised him as a mythical figure. Leading to him commonly appearing in literature, film, television, jokes, etc (p.4). This can be related to the similar treatment Bundy gained. According to David (1992) cited in, Holmes and Redmond (2012) Dietz a forensic psychiatrist, claims that the media helps disseminate the message that being a serial killer is good and there are rewards to such violent behaviour. These rewards include loyal fans, marriage proposals and splashy headlines within the media (p.32). Of which Bundy received when he was alive, and even in death. Another example of this is David Berkowitz (Son of Sam) who commented that during his crimes he convinced himself the public wanted him to do it [commit murder], as they were 'rooting' for him. This could be dismissed as the ramblings of a diseased mind, however, the media chronicled his every deed in a state of mounting excitement (Schmid, 2008 p.33).

All these examples given within this section, imply that the 'mass media' has the power to create 'celebrities' out of these individuals and their crimes. According to Haggerty (2009), cited in Wilson et al (2015), The rise of mass media has created a symbolic relationship between itself and serial killers. With the media and serial killers both on the quest for an audience, they have become entwined in the same enterprise. The media then became addicted to the portrayal of serial killers, resulting in them giving notoriety and 'celebrity' status to these individuals. As stated transgressors unquestionably think of themselves as asking for an audience, making their mark in the public arena becoming heroic outlaws and idols of destruction (Schmid, 2008 p.52).

2.3 Who runs the world (Girls)!

The true crime genre, which is based on non-fiction accounts of rape, murder, and the like has in recent years amassed an extensive audience. It could be suggested that due to the nature of this genre, the more aggressive sex (men) would be the ones who are most likely to find such accounts interesting. It may be a surprise for many when research collated on the topic has found consistently, that women are more likely to be seeking out this specific genre (Vicary & Fraley, 2010).

According to Boling & Hull (2018), their study found that 73% of females were predominantly within the true crime audience. Their motivations for consuming this genre were; Entertainment, convenience, and finally, boredom (p.92). Horeck (2019) would argue that women being avid consumers of the true crime genre, is due to women aiming to regain some autonomy over culturally endemic narratives, in which the female sex is brutalized by offenders (p.8). Browder (2006) agreed with this as she undertook interviews with a group of true crime fans. Many of them suggest that they consumed true crime to cope with the patriarchal violence they have encountered in the past, and therefore fear in the present (p.928).

Within many horror movies and books, women are very rarely the perpetrators, but mainly the victims. This role has been cast and created through years of old horror movies, presenting women as naive, powerless, sexual, and helpless victims who need to be protected and saved (Sa'eed & Jubran, 2019). Women are taking control of their autonomy within the true crime genre and it's serving them well. A female-fronted comedy true crime podcast called 'My favourite murder' has over 10 million downloads each month. The fans of the show refer to themselves as 'murderinos' and the audience is encouraged to share their 'hometown murders' where their stories are discussed, from female family members surviving horrific crimes to serial killers in their towns (Horeck, 2019). According to Boling & Hull (2018), this process of involvement is engaging to the listeners and therefore the majority of female listeners can participate in the investigation and binge on the complete season (p.106). This involvement can be brought back to the theory that women consume true crime to understand why an individual decides to kill women, they can in turn learn the warning signs and be prepared with survival tips and strategies becoming ambassadors of their own autonomy (Vicary & Fraley, 2010).

2.4 Better the Devil you know?

Research on criminologists and their apparent intrigue with serial killers is scarce. One study which was conducted by Robinson & Zaitzow (1999), presented evidence of criminologists being 'what they study'. Stating that crime and deviance is normal, even among criminologists. The data showed that

criminologists admitted to behaviour that is codified as serious and harmful within criminal law; 25% reported committing battery and 3% admitted to committing rape. 54% of this sample were male and 46% were female (p.4). It has been recently shown throughout the media due to investigations into police conduct within England and Wales; 68 officers and 25 staff members were found guilty of criminal offences, which included sexual offence and violence (Home Office, 2022).

In Idaho a PhD student in criminology and criminal justice murdered four university students. At the time the crimes were committed his studies were focused on criminality and the mind. He was reported to be a 'great student' (Flynn, 2023). With all this data it could be safe to conclude that criminologists and those who work within crime, in some cases commit offences even when they are involved educationally or professionally in criminology. But this is not reflective of all individuals who enter into the world of crime prevention or education.

According to Wilson et al (2015), Criminologists may see themselves as the fictional character, Clarice Starling interviewing the serial killer psychiatrist Dr Hannibal Lector, in the novel 'The Silence of the Lambs'. The fascination with serial killers might be situated within the intrinsic need to understand someone who repeatedly kills, as this behaviour is socially uncouth. There is also an innate human need to solve mysteries, by understanding these individuals' actions there is a sense that it can be predicted or controlled and therefore there may be a chance of the crime being prevented in the future (p.8).

Trebilcock & Griffith (2022) conducted a study, where they analysed criminology students and their reasoning for wanting to study the subject. Three main outcomes weaved through the interviews conducted building on existing interests, understanding the self, securing 'justice' and 'helping' others. Many of the students had experienced some kind of exposure to crime, which overall helped their motivation to study and engage in criminological studies (p.408). The study of criminology also supports the decrease in crime, as the study of crimes and their perpetrators results in social-economic changes, such as innovative policing strategies or rehabilitation strategies (Levitt, 2004). A report from the HMICFRS (2023) announced failings within the Met police in the case of the serial killer Stephen Port. It was found that due to inadequate crime analysis processes and poor training, the serial killer was able to continue killing victims. His Majesty's inspector of constabulary Matt Parr said "It is difficult to be reassured that the mistakes made in the Port case couldn't happen again" (p.3). Overall, it's arguable that the study of criminology is intrinsically acute when understanding civic society and the education and prevention of crime. The study of serial killers unearths an understanding of the individual which can support the future prediction of potential serial killers, preventing thousands of victims.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The research design for this particular study was a self-completion survey. This research design was chosen as it allowed for the investigation into, The perceived allure of serial killers for criminology students. The data collected was quantitative, this was to gather statistical data (Nassaji, 2015 p.129). This particular subject is a fairly under-researched topic when it comes to criminology students. However, there is plenty of research that has been conducted on the allure of serial killers within the general population. The research intends to focus on criminology students who are currently studying in the UK at London Metropolitan University.

The research aims were as follows:

- A. To gather data on London Metropolitan University criminology students and their perceived interest in Serial killers.
- B. To analyse whether there is a correlation between gender and interest in true crime.
- C. To discover the most popular media sources used to view true crime and the frequency with which it is consumed by criminology students.
- D. To analyse if there is a link between viewing horror movies and true crime consumption.
- E. To analyse how familiar criminology students are with certain serial killers.

The survey mainly consists of closed questions. Some questions were open-ended to gain the most out of the data collected. The data was quantitative with some questions presenting as qualitative. This was the most appropriate approach, to gather a large set of responses and a broad set of opinions on the subject matter (Doyle et al, 2009). The quantitative method of the primary research was survey-based. It was conducted and created on the platform Survey Monkey originally. Due to restrictions only allowing ten responses to one survey, the format was moved over to Google Forms. This was done to allow unlimited response to the survey, without the extra cost of subscription which Survey Monkey

required. Google Forms is an online platform, which is freely accessible to all and is specifically available for the creation and distribution of surveys and data collection. The designing of the questions posed some difficulty, in terms of questionable validity regarding wording and functionality. There were some issues in ensuring that the questions and multiple-choice options were as operationally effective as possible. This resulted in trial and development, to ensure the survey was easily accessible and understandable to its participants and therefore effective for the intended research (Gray, 2022) (See Appendix 5). The goal of the survey was to collect at least 50 responses from criminology students who are currently studying criminology as a standalone degree or a dual degree. The survey was released for participation on 17/04/2023 and finally taken down for analysis of results on 01/05/2023. The survey is estimated to take the participants up to four minutes, but they can take the time they need to complete it as it is self-completion. The survey is fully anonymous for the participants and was distributed via WhatsApp groups, emails, and word of mouth. The use of Google Forms allowed for the results of the survey to be readily available at any stage of data collection. A variety of graphs and charts were available instantly, clearly displaying the data in an easily accessible way (See Appendix 5). The decision was made to opt out of using SPSS for data collation, as the research was under time constraints. Also due to the small scale of the research, there was no advantage in using SPSS, which is suited to larger sets of data analysis (Pallant, 2020).

During the research, some ethical issues were presented and therefore had to be considered. The survey-based approach allowed for anonymity for the participants to encourage them to answer as they saw fit, without judgment as many of the participants were peers on the same course as the research coordinator. Therefore, the survey was fully anonymous in line with confidentiality and all data collated was treated according to the Data Protection Act 2018. To ensure ethical consideration for participants, at the beginning of the survey, a warning was placed in bold to ensure that the participants were over the age of 18 before they proceeded. This was due to the nature of the survey and to prevent the respondents from any psychological harm in the process of the research, due to the sensitivity of the subject. It also consisted of a brief overview of the survey, and what the data would be collected and used for. Finally explaining the purpose of the research. There was also a disclaimer to inform the participants that they can withdraw from the study at any point during the process. The email address of the research coordinator was also added in bold lettering for the participants to get in contact, with any queries they had. This was to ensure that the survey met the ethical guidelines of the British Society of Criminology (BSC), minimizing risk to both the participants and the researcher, reflecting the principles, values, and interests of all those involved, and protecting the researcher from any form of misconduct (BSC, 2023). Throughout the process, a supervisor appointed by the University

also presided over the research, to ensure that ethics were being ensued and to also implement support for the researcher throughout the process.

There were advantages to using quantitative virtually submitted self-completion surveys. The surveys were quick to administer allowing larger quantities of participants and therefore responses. Face-to-Face interviews would have taken a long time to conduct and would have required more resources and a smaller sample of respondents. Surveys are reliable and consistent in their questioning whereas interviews can vary in the way the questions are presented, they are also more convenient in terms of completion for the researcher and participants (Bryman, 2021).

Despite these advantages, there were some disadvantages to using this quantitative survey-based research approach. The main disadvantage of this research was the non-response from the respondent's sample. Due to the research being aimed at Criminology students at London Metropolitan University, the respondent sample was already smaller than some other research projects. Being in the final year of the course also affected their motivation to participate, as the students had deadlines to meet and other commitments. Non-response could have been factored into the research plan, as Gomm (2008) states that incentives for participation could have been presented to students. This would however have impacted the researchers' lack of budget for this project and also may have affected students' answers and responses to the survey. With the increased desire for payment, the characteristics of the sample may be affected (Storms & Loosveldt, 2004). The survey consisted of ten questions overall, which were different in their style of response. Four questions were multiple-choice, and three were comment box answers where the participant could write an answer in their own words. Finally, three questions were originally slider scale responses, which allowed the participants to choose their level of interest from; interested, curious, intrigued. This was to allow the respondent control over their level of response to the question, but due to having to change the format to Google Forms, this option was not available which caused some issues in the layout of the question. Therefore, the questions had to be returned to multiple-choice taking away the participant's ability to score their responses on a scale and instead confined them to answer with the regimented responses provided. This may affect the data due to the inability to respond with a more extensive range of answers, resulting in the data collected being more restricted in its response over an exact amount of desirability which would have been present with the slider scale.

Chapter 4: Results & Analysis

The survey conducted for this research project was aimed at criminology students studying at London Metropolitan University. The survey was self-completion, which allowed students to participate online within their own time frames. Overall the survey totalled 12 completed responses, which is a small sample but one which suffices for this undergraduate research project. As a result of the small sample of respondents, the results aren't generalizable and therefore there is scope for a larger research sample to be gathered in the future for assessing the allure of serial killers for criminology students.

Within the data collected, there was a significant pattern observed regarding the participant's interest in serial killers and their reasoning for this. This data is important when answering the proposed research question for this project; Morbid curiosity, or something more?. Within the analysis of the data, the various layers which make up this allure to serial killers will be looked at and discussed concerning the literature and the data collected for this research project. The curiosity associated with the pragmatic desire to understand serial killers. The allure of safe violence, and the same compulsion which as mentioned earlier, makes people slow down when they see a traffic accident. So why are criminology students interested in these individuals? The next set of data to be analysed will reveal this.

Firstly it may be important for future reference to define the term, Morbid curiosity. According to Scrivner (2021), Morbid curiosity is the interest of an unpleasant thing, especially death. 'Morbid' suggests that death plays a central role in defining the object of curiosity. It may not be sensible for something as broad and abstract as death to be an object of curiosity, but rather the factors which lead to death. This is an aspect of cognition that has been shaped by years of evolution (p.2).

The research question itself focused on criminology students, studying at London Metropolitan University in the U.K. As expected all the participants were criminology students (100%). The chart can be seen here:

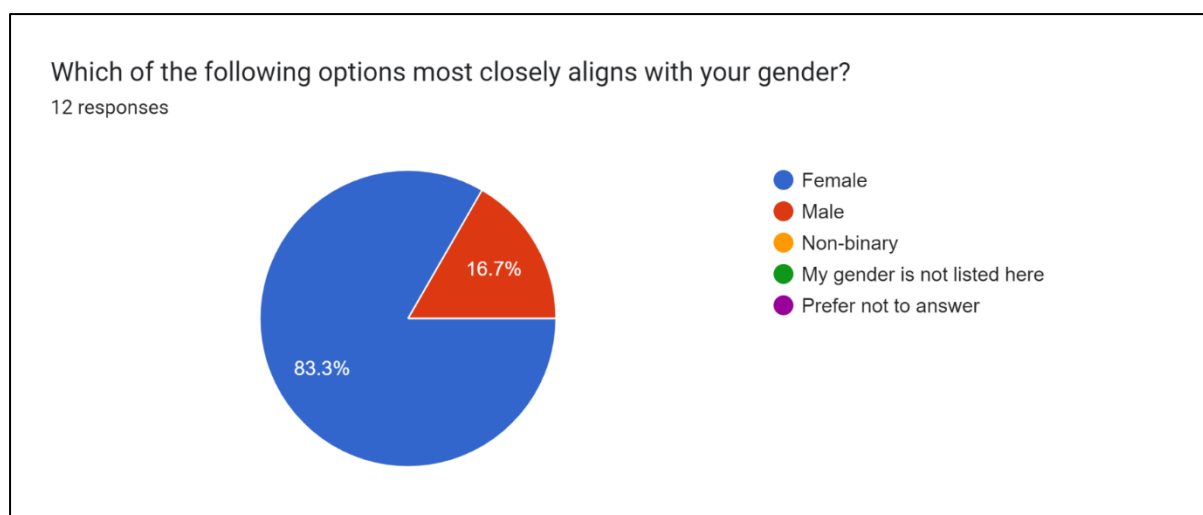


Figure 1. Graph to show the gender of participants involved in the study.

Criminology Students being the main target respondents for this survey may have affected the response rate overall. This is due to the majority of participants being in the last year of their degree, meaning they had numerous deadlines to meet for their final year. This predisposition would have caused issues for participants to find the time to complete this survey, therefore, resulting in a small sample of responses being collected. Overall 12 completed surveys were gathered, thus resulting in a small sample which was recognised by the researcher. In the Methodology, it was discussed that an incentive may have resulted in more responses, due to students being bombarded with various surveys in their last year of study. The majority of these surveys have various incentives such as Amazon vouchers (Gomm, 2008). Due to financial reasons, this was not possible but should be noted and taken into account for any future research along with the time of year the survey was distributed, as this also affected the data sample collected.

The survey was aiming to pinpoint the reasons criminology students were interested in serial killers, to gather data and analyse why they may have wanted to study criminology. Firstly the data looked into the level of interest, indeed if there was any, in serial killers. The responses for the level of interest were split into two categories; Highly interested (66.7) and Somewhat interested (33.3%). None of the respondents stated they had no interest at all in serial killers (0%). This can be said to come from the allure of serial killers, as they can attract and fascinate due to their behaviours being outside of society's moral universe (Wilson, Yardley & Lynes, 2015). There could be numerous reasons for the participant's interest in serial killers, one such interest could be the result of 'rubbernecking'. This phenomenon was discussed in detail during the research literature, as the psychological term for the exaggerated curiosity within individuals when presented with a tragedy, such as a car accident (Masinick & Teng,

2004). 'Rubbernecking' is a form of morbid curiosity, as individuals are intrigued to look at something which may cause them distress but there is an inability to look away (Byrne, 2018).

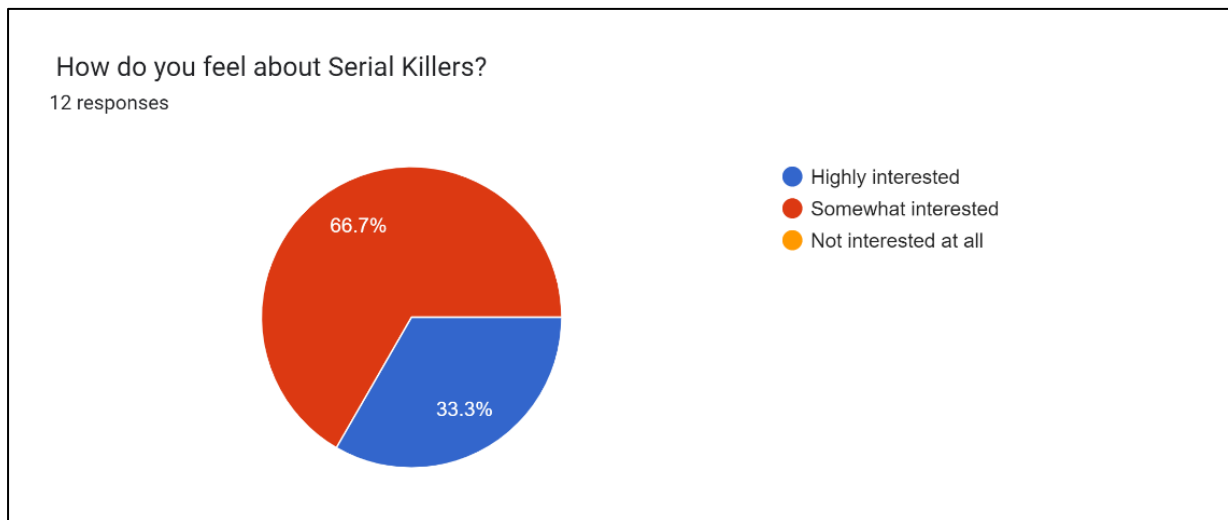


Figure 2. Graph to show how the participants report to feel about serial killers and their crimes.

Participants were asked to explain in their own words, What interests them in serial killers. The pattern that developed within the data, overwhelmingly showed that the participants were interested in why they committed their crimes rather than how;

‘The way their distorted mind works’ – Participant 3

‘The reason behind their acts, and if they feel any remorse’ – Participants 6 & 7

According to Wilson, Yardley & Lynes (2015), one of the many reasons individuals decide to become criminology students is to understand the psychology and cognitions of criminals. This can be seen in the data collected from the survey, as the participants overwhelmingly spoke of their want to understand serial killers and their crimes. When studying serial killers in academia there is a ‘protective frame’ between them (the perpetrators) and us (the criminologists), meaning the danger is non-existent. This can be related to watching horror movies, people enjoy them as they’re ‘not real’, as there is a barrier that exists between the viewer and the characters. This data collected for participants’ interest in serial killers refutes the thesis of morbid curiosity being a lone aspect of interest.

Moving back to the ‘protective frame’ explanation by Wilson, Yardley & Lynes (2015), the fear and enjoyment felt when watching horror movies simultaneously is called ‘The paradox of horror’. The

activation of two or more contradictory feelings at the same time, for example, terror and joy. The participants were asked about their consumption of horror movies as part of the survey (See graphs below). The majority of the responses were participants concluding that they do not watch horror moves at all (41.7%) but second was the response 'often' with 33.3% of respondents. Overall 58.3% admitted to watching horror movies. It could be assumed then, that as mentioned by Wilson, Yardley & Lynes (2015) the 'protective frame' may be a reason why individuals want to study criminology and there is a correlation between watching horror movies and interest in serial killers. Participants may see fictional characters depicted in movies and decide that they would like to become a member of society whose job it is to catch and prevent serial killers and their crimes. There is an innate human need to solve mysteries and understand individuals who commit crimes outside of the 'societal norm' (Wilson, Yardley & Lynes, 2015). The research found that exposure to these stimuli (horror movies etc) leads to desensitization, easing the negative emotions and causing the thrill of the fear to increase (Gaut, 1993). This beguiling effect can occur with serial killers who are not fictional or on a large screen as they have the power to both disgust and intrigue (Wilson, Yardley & Lynes, 2015).

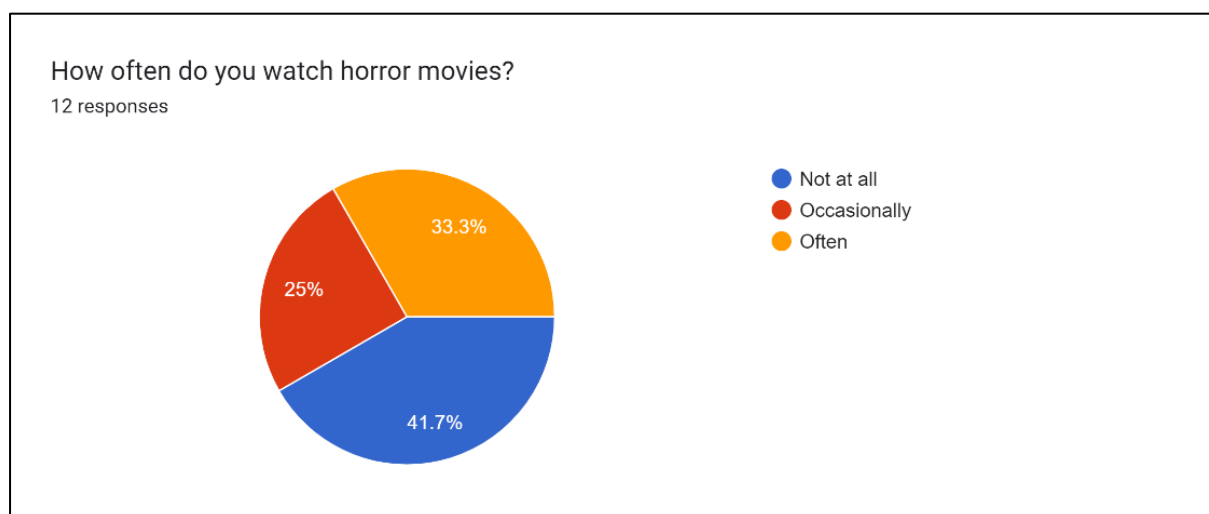


Figure 3. Graph to show how often participants report to watching horror moves.

The final layer of the understanding of whether participants' interest in serial killers is due to morbid curiosity or something different, is human nature's want to be free of societal rules. Serial killers present something that according to Dietrich & Fox-Hall (2010) we long for as human beings. Freedom, a life uninterrupted by rules. Serial killers do not follow the 'rules' of society, as mentioned previously in this analysis, they operate outside society's moral universe (Wilson, Yardley & Lynes, 2015). They may do so in a contorted way, but the desire to understand this is strong within us, due to the unconventional behaviour involved in their actions. The following research data concludes this interest in serial killers,

as 33.3% of participants agreed to be highly interested and 66.7% were somewhat interested which shows the clear effect serial killers have on criminology students. When looking at why criminology students were interested in serial killers, overall it came from a want to understand them, which has been correlated with the literature. Overall, there is not one simple reason for criminology students' interest in serial killers, as it follows various paths of intrigue and curiosity.

Finally, the participants were asked about the frequency to which they watched serial killer documentaries (in the last 12 months) and where they most watched said documentaries (Graphs below). Within the literature review, the influence of the media and their infallible entanglement with serial killers was discussed at length. The media creates news storms around serial killers and their crimes, leading them to become the faces of widespread news coverage (Wiest, 2016). The casual nexus leads to serial killers becoming 'celebrities', gaining notoriety, and even 'fans'. Certain serial killers become immortalised in literature, films, television, and even jokes (Schmid, 2008). This 'celebrity' status has transpired for some of the serial killers who were named in the question posed to participants below;

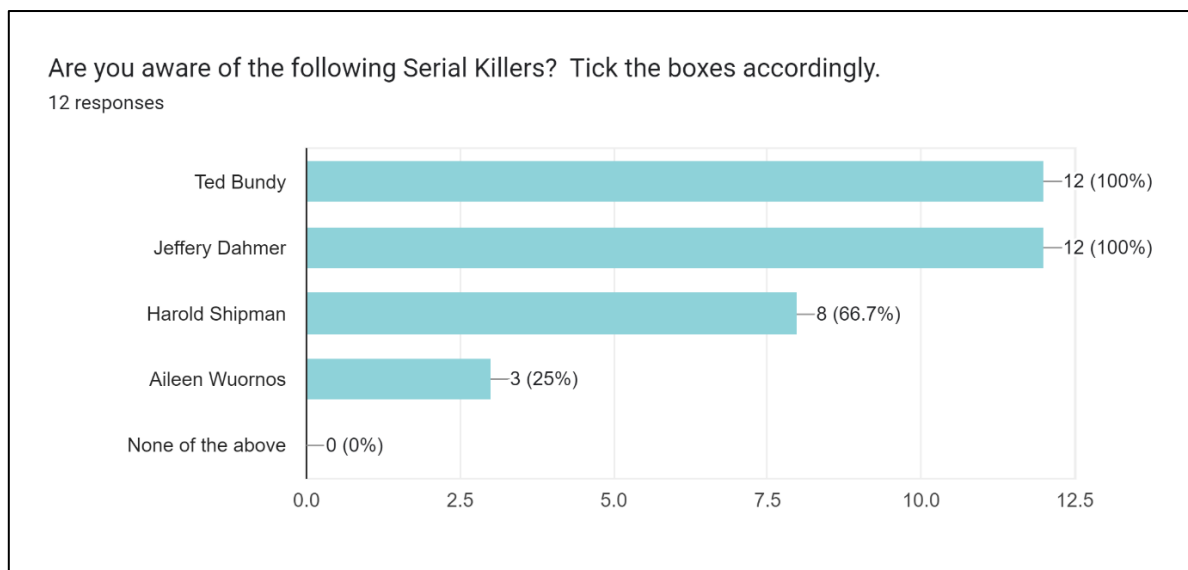


Figure 4. Graph to show if the participants have a general knowledge of 'famous' serial killers. The ones shown above vary in press appearance, age, gender and motive.

Interestingly from the data, it can be seen that the two most known serial killers were Ted Bundy and Jeffery Dahmer, with 100% of the participants being aware of them. Bundy and Dahmer have both had their lives and crimes re-enacted recently through Netflix series or films. Bundy was one of America's most prolific serial killers, he killed over 30 young women and girls. Bundy was a charming, good-

looking, well-mannered individual who gained mass media attention with his televised trial and numerous escape attempts (Hafdahl & Florence, 2011). Bundy was portrayed as such in the press, as Appendix 1 & 2 shows, the favourable headlines he received in comparison to Charles Manson. The movie about Bundy's life and crimes was called; *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* starring Zac Efron as Bundy. The movie gained a lot of traction but the film resulted in the audience sympathising and creating an allegiance with Bundy (Milde, 2021). This was also the case for Dahmer who killed 17 boys and men. Netflix released the series, *Dahmer- Monster: The Jeffery Dahmer Story*, which quickly became one of the global top 10 most-watched series on Netflix, within its first few weeks (Choen, 2022). The series was allegedly to focus on Dahmer's victims, along with systematic racism and homophobia in the police force at the time, but this was not to be the case (Bushby & Young, 2022). The show quickly became a commodity for people commemorating Evan Peters for his performance and his ability to humanize Dahmer, to which people sympathised with him (Rotten Tomatoes, 2022). Both of these individuals were convicted of committing serious crimes such as rape, torture, and cannibalism (Hafdahl & Florence, 2021), yet the public had become enamoured with them. This shows the power of the media and this can also be translated to the data collected, as the participants were most aware of the two serial killers who have become 'celebrities' due to Netflix. Netflix was also the most popular network participants watched serial killer documentaries on as seen in the graph below;

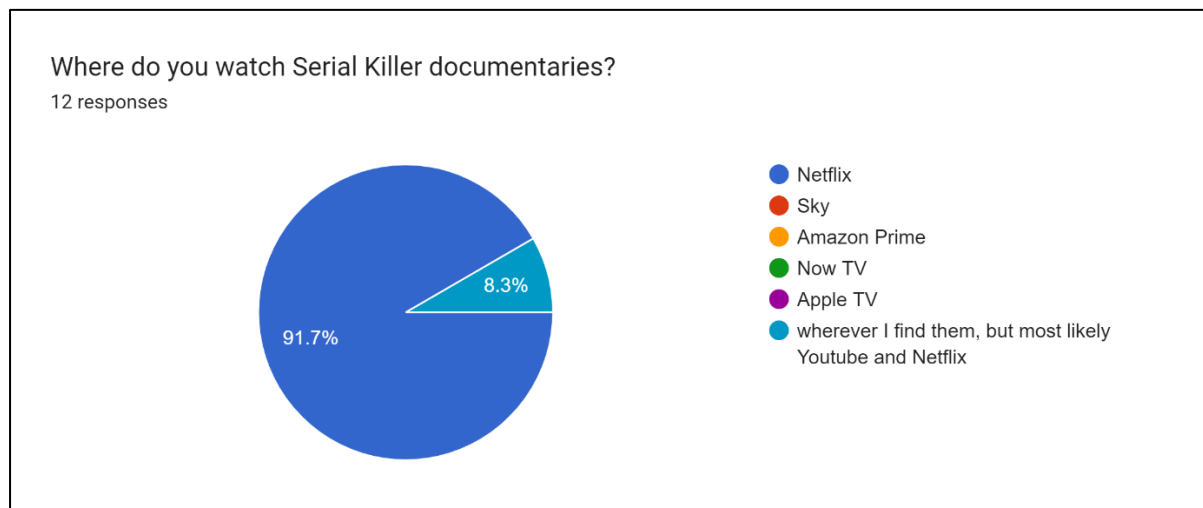


Figure 5. Graph to show if participants watch serial killer documentaries and where.

One participant stated 'Other' (See above), this participant also wrote the following;

'Wherever I find them, but most likely YouTube or Netflix' – Respondent 4

YouTube was not mentioned in the media outlets provided but again the participant mentions Netflix, it therefore can be assumed that Netflix is the most popular media outlet for watching serial killer documentaries. This supports the literature as Netflix seems to be the most popular media outlet to view true crime documentaries. This information is important to point out due to what was found and discussed during the research process. Mass media has an impact on how serial killers are portrayed by the general public.

Two other serial killers were mentioned in the previous question (Are you aware of the following serial killers), Harold Shipman (66.7%) and Aileen Wuornos (25%). Shipman is one of the most prolific serial killers in Britain, he was a GP who killed at least 215 possibly 260 of his elderly patients (Jackson & Smith, 2004). Aileen Wuornos was termed the first female American serial killer, she was convicted of killing seven men (Basilio, 2014). Interestingly, the respondents were less aware of these individuals, as they are deemed to be less attractive to the media or society. Harold Shipman was a GP and was convicted of his crimes at the age of 57, his victims were his elderly patients (Carter, 2000). Aileen Wuornos was a female serial killer who killed men, and although there have been Netflix series made about Wuornos and documentaries made about Shipman, they didn't gain the level of notoriety Bundy and Dahmer did. This may be an interesting research question to propose in future research, there may be unconscious bias due to the victims of these individuals or due to their gender or age. According to Vivary & Fraley (2010), women are more likely than men to select true crime literature with female victims, this is due to the survival information which is contained in the books. This correlates with the research and data collated on women being more interested in true crime and this line of research could be a valid and interesting addition to understanding why this may be in future research. Following on from this the gendered difference apparent in the true crime audience will be discussed next.

For this survey, the majority of respondents were female (83.3%) with a small percentage of male respondents (16.7%). It was made clear from the researched literature, that women are consistently more likely to consume true crime than men (Vicary & Fraley, 2010). The data from this research supports that thesis, as the respondents answered questions about how often they watched serial killer documentaries and also spoke about how interested they are in serial killers (See Graph below). However, the data may support the thesis that females are more engaged in true crime than males but It may be unreliable, due to the unequal measurements of male and female respondents. This is an important discrepancy in the data, as gaining an equal amount of female and male respondents would have more accurately supported or rejected the thesis as the data would have been more rounded and comparable. Nevertheless, it is key to point out that the data collated on females, did illustrate a

correlation with the literature. This correlation cannot be ignored but a larger sample would be more representative and therefore more reliable as mentioned.

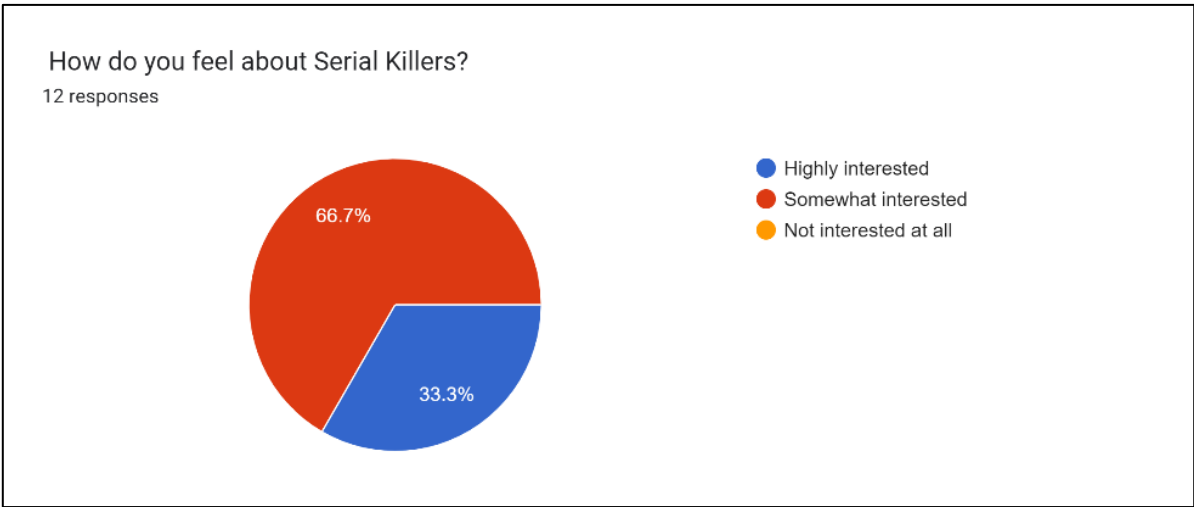


Figure 6. Graph to show how the participants involved feel about serial killers, rated on interest.

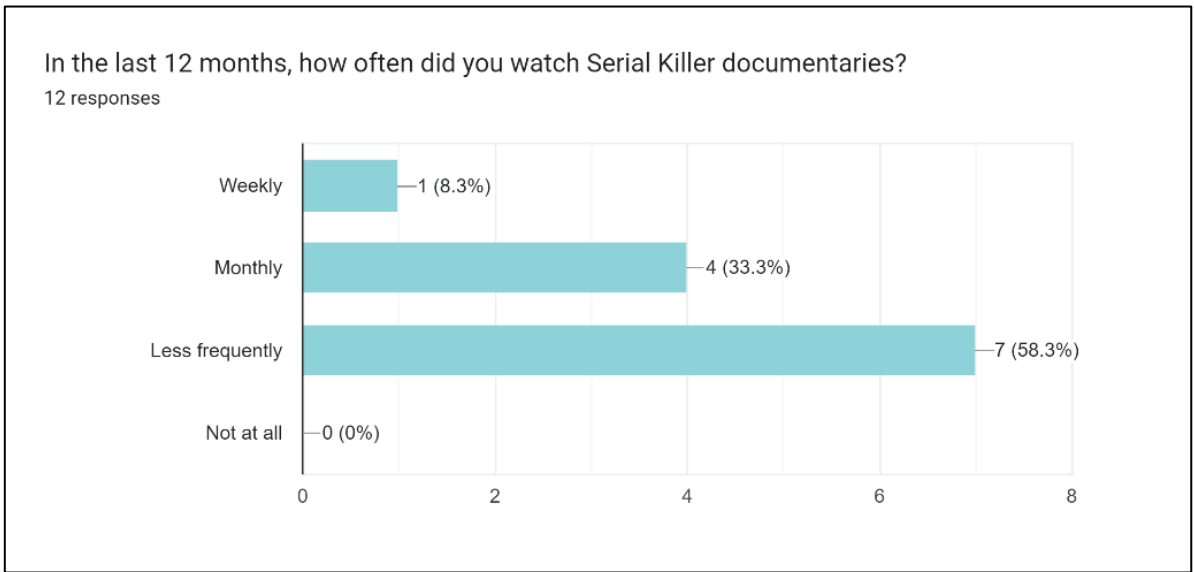


Figure 7. Graph to show in the last twelve months, how often the participants watch serial killer documentaries.

According to the literature, this gendered difference between men and women is due to women being consistently presented as the victims of true crime and fiction. It is also important to identify that violence against women and girls is a public concern and a social endemic. There are high rates of domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women and girls (ONS, 2021). 30% of women have

experienced intimate partner or non-partner violence or sexual violence, accumulating to 736 million women around the world (Gender Data Portal, 2022). The number of gender-related killings has increased between 2019 and 2020. Globally 81,000 women and girls were killed in 2020 alone, around 58% of them died at the hands of an intimate partner or family member. This averages one death every 11 minutes (Pycroft, 2022).

Women are attempting to take back their autonomy within the true crime genre, to protect and educate themselves against perpetrators (Sa'eed & Jubran, 2019). Browder (2006) states, women are avid true crime consumers to cope with patriarchal violence from their pasts and their future. By understanding why an individual decides to kill, the warning signs may be spotted and by learning survival strategies women may use this potential life-saving knowledge to protect themselves (Vicary & Fraley, 2010). The data collated from the survey shows that the majority of participants were somewhat interested in serial killers (66.7%) and the remaining 33.3% were highly interested in serial killers. The overwhelming response for the reasoning behind this interest for the female participants was due to their psychology and the cognitions behind committing their crimes;

‘What makes them tick. Are they different to everyone else mentally or physically.
What makes people murder’ – Participant 11 (Female)

‘I am interested in their upbringings, their social interactions, their traumas, as
those all contribute to their offending behaviour. I am interested in the 'why'?
rather than in the 'how'?, if that makes sense’ – Participant 4 (Female)

‘I am interested in serial killers because of their thinking. I want to know how they
think’ – Participant 8 (Female)

The quotes above were taken from the survey data collected and as stated were the responses of female participants. These responses show that the overwhelming reason females are interested in serial killers and by proxy, the true crime genre is to understand why serial killers commit these crimes, how their minds work, whether are they different to their own and finally what drove them to that point of committing murder. From the data collected from the survey responses and the literature reviewed for this research project, it is arguable that women are more interested in true crime than men. The two male respondents answered the question of interest in serial killers with, Somewhat interested meaning that the respondents who answered highly interested were all females thus reaffirming the thesis that females are more interested in serial killers than males.

Also clear from the data collected are the reasons women are interested in serial killers. The overwhelming response to the question can be correlated with the thesis that women want to gain an understanding of serial killers' psychology, cognition, and the questions pointing to 'why' they commit these crimes rather than 'how'. It can therefore be theorised, women being aware of the mindset of serial killers and murderers, makes the consumption of true crime a 'tool' in helping them become more aware of these individuals and their behaviours. Thus helping them spot and potentially prevent themselves from becoming a 'powerless', 'helpless' victim and taking charge of their own autonomy (Sa'eed & Jubran, 2019). The data collected from this part of the survey responses collates with that of the research and therefore helps create a better understanding of why women are more interested in serial killers than men. Therefore this research can be linked to social justice theories. Gender is an important factor in social research as the importance of equality within this field is well-versed and the inequality faced by women who are victims of crime is unsurmountable. The types of victimisation women face as victims of crime include domestic violence, sexual abuse, and exploitation (prostitution and trafficking). These factors are due primarily to gender inequality within society (United Nations, 1985). According to Krantz & Garcia-Moreno (2005), violence against women is a well-recognised public health problem and human rights violation of worldwide significance (P.818). The results of this research project show that women are more interested in the consumption of true crime and the reasoning behind this was due to their innate need to understand the individuals who commit these crimes on a psychological level. Further to this the evidence shows this was due to women trying to protect themselves from becoming victims of crime like so many of the other women have suffered.

Overall the link between gender and true crime consumption was made, also supporting the literature. The data has been able to show that women are more interested in serial killers and by proxy, true crime and that the reasoning for this is due to the desire to understand the perpetrators and learn their behaviour patterns to educate and protect themselves, taking charge of their own autonomy. The research question; Morbid curiosity, or something more? is answered within the data collected, it is clear that the criminology students of London Metropolitan University are interested in serial killers because their crimes stand apart from societal norms. Students are eager to learn what makes these individuals 'tick', why they commit these crimes, and the psychology and cognitions that lead to their acts and behaviours. Although there are many layers comprising all interest in serial killers the data gathered for this survey has found that overwhelmingly students are interested in the 'why' rather than the 'how'. Morbid curiosity has some part to play in criminology students' interest in serial killers, but it is only one piece of a larger puzzle and contributing factors.

The survey could have gone further in asking the participants why they feel the need to understand the crimes and behaviours of serial killers. What they feel the pros and cons of understanding this information would present to the field of criminology or themselves as individuals. This could be a good follow-up for this research or added in any recreations of this research to create a further understanding of the participant's line of thinking.

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Appendix 1: Steinback, 1980.

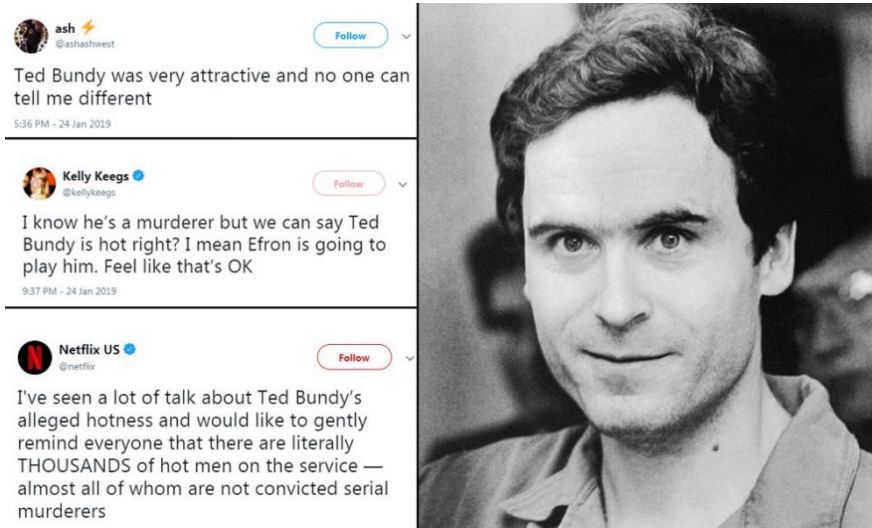


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Appendix 3: Fathallah, 2002.




Appendix 4: Simpson & Stern, 2019.



Appendix 5: Survey.

Questions Responses **12** Settings



The allure of Serial killers: Criminology students perspective

Hello & Welcome!

You must be over the age of 18 to take part in this survey.

This survey is compiled of 11 questions and is aimed at criminology students. The surveys questions will enquire about your interest in criminology and/or serial killers. The survey was created via Google forms for the purpose of an undergrad research project entitled: Morbid curiosity or something more? No identifying details are collected or shared during the course of this research. Only your gender is considered as part of the analysis. You are able to withdraw from this survey or the study at any time during the process.

Please email: SAR1190@my.londonmet.ac.uk with any queries or concerns regarding participation and/or the survey.

Thank you for taking part!

Which of the following options most closely aligns with your gender? *

☐ Female

☐ Male

☐ Non-binary

☐ My gender is not listed here

☐ Prefer not to answer

Are you a criminology student? *

☐ Yes

☐ No

What topic did you most enjoy during the Criminology course? *

Long answer text

.....

Can you explain, in your own words; What interests you about Serial Killers? *

Long answer text

Are you aware of the following Serial Killers? *

Tick the boxes accordingly.

- ☐ Ted Bundy
- ☐ Jeffery Dahmer
- ☐ Harold Shipman
- ☐ Aileen Wuornos
- ☐ None of the above

Please **list** any Serial killers which you're aware of, that were not mentioned in the previous * question.

Long answer text

How often do you watch horror movies? *

1. Not at all
2. Occasionally
3. Often

In the last 12 months, how often did you watch Serial Killer documentaries? *

- ☐ Weekly
- ☐ Monthly
- ☐ Less frequently
- ☐ Not at all

Where do you watch Serial Killer documentaries? *

- ☐ Netflix
- ☐ Sky
- ☐ Amazon Prime
- ☐ Now TV
- ☐ Apple TV
- ☐ Other...

How do you feel about Serial Killers? *

- ☐ Highly interested
- ☐ Somewhat interested
- ☐ Not interested at all