Beyond Entertainment:

Exploring the Intricacies of True Crime Fascination

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As I settle into the driver's seat, the hum of the engine accompanies the anticipation that arises from pressing play on yet another true crime podcast. Hours upon hours have been devoted to unraveling tales of murders, sects, abductions, and serial killers from around the globe. Each narrative becomes more than just a story; it's an exploration of human psychology and madness, a captivating journey into the depths of the darker side of humanity. With each chilling narrative, I ponder the peculiar allure that keeps me coming back for more. Is there a connection between this intrigue and any hidden criminal tendencies within me? The prevalence of true crime captivates millions, particularly drawing in a significant female audience, prompting me to dive deeper into this intriguing phenomenon.

This paper seeks to unravel the mysteries surrounding our collective fascination with true crime. From exploring the evolutionary adaptations that may underlie our obsession to understanding the personal and societal benefits, especially for women who seem disproportionately captivated by this form of entertainment. What common motives and characteristics do individuals within the true crime community share? How does this community serve as a support system, aiding in the processing of trauma and fostering connections among those with underrepresented voices? This journey will not only investigate existing research but also pose new questions, laying the groundwork for future studies. I seek to shed light on the complex web of motivations behind our fascination with the darker aspects of human nature,

ranging from the importance of social media in building community to the role of true crime stories within feminist discourse.

Unconscious motivations

People cannot always confidently articulate why they are interested in certain things; often, it is concealed within their unconscious motivations and biases. Uncovering the motivation behind true crime interest begins with the human negativity bias, which posits that individuals are more drawn to negative stimuli in the environment (Bebbington et al., 2017). Research indicates that people pay more attention to negative events, finding it challenging to disengage from threatening stimuli, and unpleasant stimuli activate neural brain functioning more strongly than positive (Crretié et al., 2009; Van Damme et al., 2008). Morbid curiosity, defined as a strong desire to learn about events connected with death and terror, presents another facet of the negativity bias (Zuckerman, 1984). Behavioral experiments have demonstrated that individuals deliberately expose themselves to images of death and violence when given a choice (Oosterwijk, 2017). But why are humans drawn to such gruesome content? Research suggests that this attraction may stem from an evolutionary adaptation geared towards vigilance against potential threats. However, while this theory aligns with our impulse for self-preservation, questions regarding its legitimacy arise when considering gender differences. Men tend to exhibit greater morbid curiosity than women, a trait often linked to the evolutionary responsibility of males to protect (Harrison & Frederick, 2022). Yet, intriguingly, this discrepancy fails to fully explain why women often display a heightened interest in topics like serial killers. It raises the possibility of a distinct female need for protective vigilance—an instinct aimed at survival, offspring protection, and avoidance of sexual violence, independently from a man (Harrison & Frederick, 2022).

Another bias possibly affecting people's obsession with true crime is presentation of stories as real-life events. Research showed that people are more drawn to non-fictional stories than fictional ones (Green et al., 2004). However, this is not universally true; gender differences show that women prefer non-fiction morbid stories, while men prefer fictional, which can potentially explain why women are more drawn to true crime (Harrison & Frederick, 2022). Additionally, evidence suggests that people are not well adapted to differentiate between fiction and non-fiction and prefer to read fiction stories presented as non-fiction stories (Kanazawa, 2002). Furthermore, humans trust non-fiction to such an extent that we rely on it to shape our worldview (Leavitt et al., 2014). Even how the story is told can impact our interests; an experimental study on mass murder coverage demonstrated that participants were more interested in school shooting stories when they focused on a hero – a bystander who stopped or slowed down the shooter – rather than on a victim or a shooter (Levin & Wiest, 2018). The same study indicated that the age of the participant played an integrative role, with individuals in their early 40s showing more interest in school shooting stories, possibly due to having children in schools. However, our unconscious can be an interesting place to start understanding the motivation of true crime fans, and it has the potential to uncover more about human psychology, in contrast to personal motivations, it is a great challenge to research.

Insights from fans

When delving into the motivations of true crime enthusiasts, it's imperative to consult the fans themselves. This approach yields a diverse array of explanations, as there is no one-size-fits-all answer. Nonetheless, certain factors emerge as particularly prominent. In a comprehensive survey of true crime podcast enthusiasts—who represent the primary consumers of such content—both men and women identified entertainment, media convenience, and boredom as the

primary drivers behind their engagement with true crime podcasts (Boling & Hull, 2018). Media convenience is often attributed to the allure of podcasts as a form of entertainment; listeners can engage while performing chores or driving, without being tethered to a screen for long series or seasons (Chan-Olmsted & Wang, 2022). Moreover, the sense of agency that podcasts provide— allowing listeners to choose what, and when, to listen—further contributes to their appeal (McClung & Johnson, 2010). This agency is evident in listeners' inclination to speculate on individuals involved, interpret evidence, and understand perpetrator motives in an attempt to solve the case (Vitis & Ryan, 2023).

In another survey of true crime podcast consumers, a majority expressed their interest in true crime as rooted in a desire to understand how people become victims of crimes and "to know what situations to be wary of" (Vitis & Ryan, 2023). Some true crime fans mention consuming such content to "learn about what could happen to them" and how to avoid becoming victims (Boling & Hull, 2018). This supports the notion that true crime serves as an adaptive mechanism for vigilance and self-protection. While a smaller group views true crime as an educational tool, seeking to comprehend how the criminal justice system operates (Vitis & Ryan, 2023), a larger proportion of respondents indicated a preference for learning about crime-solving procedures over understanding the justice system itself (Boling, 2019). For certain individuals, true crime goes beyond mere entertainment; it serves as a pathway to self-understanding, a mechanism for coping with trauma, and a means of connecting with others who share similar experiences (Boling, 2023; Rodgers, 2023). However, clinical psychologist Dr. Thema Bryant views the obsession with true crime as potentially unhealthy. She suggests that if true crime stories bring relaxation, it may indicate that individuals find comfort and familiarity in trauma, possibly stemming from growing up in a traumatic and unhealthy environment (Robbins, 2023).

Although empirical data on this topic is currently lacking, the concept is undeniably intriguing and warrants further exploration.

Cultural disparities among true crime consumers significantly influence their motivations for engaging with the genre. A study comparing Singaporean (low crime rate) and Colombian (high crime rate) true crime fans shed light on this cultural effect (Soto-Sanfiel & Montoya-Bermúdez, 2023). Singaporeans tended to view true crime as a form of entertainment or a means to learn about past events, whereas Colombians utilized it as a source for survival skills and information about murderers. Additionally, Colombians approached this media with more caution, acknowledging inherent issues such as revictimization, victim-blaming, and self-victimization, including a fear of becoming a victim. Remarkably, motivations for consuming true crime intertwine with both personal and cultural contexts, often without our full awareness. It's conceivable that individuals, like myself residing in relatively safe environments, might perceive true crime differently from those in less stable areas with higher crime rates. This multifaceted nature of true crime fascination underscores the diverse motivations individuals bring to their engagement with the genre.

Gender disparities

As mentioned earlier, significant gender differences exist in true crime consumption, with women demonstrating higher involvement with true crime content. Despite men having an overall higher podcast consumption rate (57%), a striking 80% of true crime podcast audiences are women (Kilgariff & Hardstark, 2016; Boling & Hull, 2018). Intriguingly, women exhibit fascination with true crime content, despite having higher sensitivity and a lower disgust threshold than men, who often display more morbid curiosity and a preference for more gruesome media (Skolnick et al., 2013; Vicary & Fraley, 2010). While podcasts are equally

popular among individuals aged 18-55, the true crime podcast audience skews younger, with the majority falling into the 18-33 age group (Boling & Hull, 2018). This demographic alignment coincides with women in this age range facing the highest risk of sexual assault (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017). True crime narratives frequently revolve around male-perpetrated crimes against females, often with sexual motives. Despite women being less likely victims of crime than men, they experience higher levels of fear regarding victimization, especially fear of sexual assault, which often accompanies other crimes, referred to as the "shadow of sexual assault" (Ferrary, 1996). This fear is powerful due to the significant financial, emotional, and physical costs associated with sexual violence (Hagen & Symons, 2007; McKibbin et al., 2009). The prevalence of a female audience in the often-gruesome true crime genre can be understood through the concept of protective vigilance. Women's fear of rape operates as a precautionary threat management system, motivating vigilance and defensive behavior (McDonald et al., 2019). Despite sexual violence often being perpetrated by acquaintances, women express a greater fear of rape by strangers, a theme commonly explored in true crime (Stermac et al., 1995; Wilcox et al., 2006).

Beyond fear and avoidance, women engage with true crime for educational reasons. Studies indicate that women are more likely to prefer books containing useful tricks to avoid or escape victimization, as well as defense strategies against attackers (Vicary & Fraley, 2010). Moreover, women may turn to true crime as a way to understand the behavior of sexual perpetrators and explore the psychology and motives of killers, helping them identify warning signs in people and stay vigilant to avoid victimization. Additionally, women express a preference for books with female victims, which they find more relevant when learning to avoid victimization, while men exhibit no such gender preference (Vicary & Fraley, 2010). McDonald

et al. (2021) found that women who experienced greater fear of rape consumed more true crime, citing their motivation as learning strategies to avoid or escape such situations. Furthermore, women who have experienced sexual assault in the past tend to consume more true crime media and harbor a heightened fear of rape. However, it remains a possibility that true crime consumption could contribute to an increase in the fear of rape.

Other motivations more pronounced among women than men include the desire to escape and voyeurism (Boling & Hull, 2018). For women, escaping involves a temporary break from work or ordinary life, while voyeurism reflects an interest in delving into the lives of others and uncovering their secrets. Furthermore, women are more likely to view social interactions as a goal for consuming true crime, often desiring to discuss these narratives with friends and not to be left out. Overall, women are drawn to true crime for various reasons, like escaping reality, curiosity, and learning to protect themselves. It's not just about entertainment; it's about understanding fear, feeling empowered, and connecting with others.

"Stay Sexy and Don't Get Murdered"

The true crime genre transcends mere entertainment, evolving into a vast and dynamic community where individuals continually discuss, speculate, and explore both past and present cases. This community's discourse spans from aiding investigations, amplifying the voices of the accused, and even contributing to the resolution of cold cases, to the potential harm of falsely accusing individuals and complicating legal processes (Brown, 2018; Buozis, 2017). True crime podcasts, in particular, aim to seek justice for cold cases, advocate for the wrongfully convicted, and honor the memory of victims (Shratton, 2019). Some podcast creators express a desire to reform the justice system by educating the public and shedding light on existing problems (Boling, 2019).

While true crime offers both benefits and drawbacks for individual listeners and the community, its impact is profound. It serves as a powerful motivator, particularly for those who may feel isolated, providing opportunities to build relationships, connect with like-minded individuals. It also fosters parasocial relationships; true crime podcast hosts enjoy greater freedom of expression compared to hosts on formal TV shows or YouTube, resulting in a unique "hyper-intimacy" (Berry, 2016). This intimacy allows the audience to connect with the host on a personal level, fostering meaningful connections with individual listeners, making true crime podcasts more appealing than other forms of entertainment (McClung & Johnson, 2010; Piper, 2015).

Social media plays an integral role in the true crime community. Fans utilize platforms to amplify marginalized voices, produce counter-discourses, nurture solidarity, provide emotional support, and develop resistance strategies (Fraser, 1990). The "hyper-intimacy" associated with podcasts fosters an atmosphere that allows to express opinions, discuss niche topics, and amplify marginalized voices (Rodgers, 2023). These discussions enable people to share experiences and connect with diverse populations, promoting active communication rather than passive listening (Hoydis, 2020). Moreover, the true crime community has emerged as a powerful force within the feminist movement, creating popular mantras such as "F*ck Politeness" and "Stay Sexy and Don't Get Murdered" (Rodgers, 2023). The former is a quick reminder to women that they do not need to stay polite if they feel uncomfortable or unsafe and want to leave the situation without worrying about other people's feelings or being polite. The latter emphasizes that women should embrace their sexuality but know how to protect themselves and stay safe; the phrase also rejects blaming women for their victimization.

Recognizing everyday fear and violence in women's lives, restructuring gender norms, and denouncing victim-blaming are among the main goals of the true crime community (Rodgers, 2023). Historically, women have lacked a safe space to express their fears, emotions, and worries regarding violence and harassment. Intimate podcasts encourage female listeners to share their personal experiences and perceptions within an understanding community, providing a safe space to express fears, emotions, and worries regarding violence and harassment (Hoydis, 2020). Listening to others' stories makes them feel justified in their fears, reinforcing the notion that it is not their fault (Rodgers, 2023). Online platforms also facilitate the sharing of information about dangerous individuals, distributing safety tips, and issuing warnings. Additionally, the true crime community serves as a refuge for survivors of domestic violence, challenging media portrayals of victims and exposing weaknesses in the criminal justice system (Boling, 2023). They share their experiences to educate the public and provide a safe space for processing trauma and escaping abusive relationships. This therapeutic experience represents a novel way for people to connect and support each other.

Despite its inclusive and intimate nature, the true crime community maintains its own rigid rules and norms. Fathallah's (2022) study on Reddit's true crime community revealed how fans regularly police boundaries to protect themselves from "Bad Fans" or individuals who obsessively idolize criminals. The community attempts to separate itself from such fans, preserving the space for those who are more "rationally" invested in true crime. However, Fathallah (2022) suggests that moderators' gatekeeping practices may be connected to preserving gendered norms and morality, necessitating further investigation into the characteristics and motivations of those involved in these communities.

What's next?

Despite the widespread popularity of true crime media, it remains largely unexplored territory in the scientific field. Investigating the motivational aspects of true crime stories requires experimental work to determine whether the non-fiction element is the most attractive component of the media. Additionally, research is needed to ascertain if consumers would find fictional stories with similar crime components as useful and educational if presented as non-fiction. Furthermore, it is essential to examine whether listeners are interested in stories where the victim is less relatable or similar to the typical audience, such as older individuals. Moreover, there has been little exploration into why women exhibit more interest in serial killer topics. Hypotheses suggest a potential female need for protective vigilance to survive independently from men (Harrison & Frederick, 2022). However, contrasting hypotheses propose that true crime consumption serves as a reminder of the possibility of danger in our relatively safe lives compared to our evolutionary ancestry (Murley, 2008). Future research could investigate whether true crime enhances fear of crime, particularly in women regarding sexual assault. Additionally, understanding why women express a preference for stories with less common perpetrators, such as strangers like serial killers, could shed light on adaptation strategies to prevent considering everyone as a potential danger. Examining this gap through the lens of uncertainty tolerance, defined as adaptiveness to change and tolerance of not knowing what is next, may provide insights into the female prevalence in true crime consumption beyond previous examinations (Hillen et al., 2017).

Anecdotal evidence suggests benefits of true crime for victims of crime and marginalized communities. However, it remains unknown if true crime consumption is actually beneficial in detecting perpetrators or avoiding victimization. Despite its popularity among victims of crime, little research has closely examined psychological trauma and true crime media use. While some

argue that true crime can be a powerful therapeutic method by desensitizing individuals from trauma, others view it as revictimization when used to relive traumatic experiences. Furthermore, there has been no examination of this topic using psychophysiological methods, which could provide meaningful insight into the neural processes of such media and its relevance for trauma care. Future studies should explore these areas to provide scientific evidence for the clinical relevance of true crime.

The dynamics of the true crime community have been understudied, providing fertile ground for social psychology and sociology research. Despite its perceived benefits and inclusivity, the community has strong gatekeeping practices that may prevent certain voices from being heard. Additionally, it is unclear whether the true crime community provides educational resources to avoid or cope with crime, or if its popularity is solely due to the surrounding community and the sense of belonging it offers. Moreover, it is unknown whether the true crime community is unique or if other media or topics that include hyper-intimacy share the same audience or functions. Exploring the importance of parasocial relationships in this phenomenon remains an intriguing area awaiting exploration.

Conclusion

In essence, our fascination with true crime delves beyond entertainment, driven by unconscious motives and evolutionary instincts. Gender disparities underscore women as primary consumers, motivated by fear, vigilance, education, and empowerment. The true crime community not only fosters connection but also challenges societal norms. However, this search did not give definitive answers on so many questions aroused by true crime. Significant gaps persist in our understanding, highlighting the need for further scientific exploration into this compelling phenomenon.

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