

The Impact of Serial Killer Media: A Content Analysis

by

BryanJimenez

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Sponsor: Matthew Immergut

Second Reader: Dr. Lisa Jean-Moore

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Abstract

There is a certain obsession with serial killers in our culture. Films and shows such as *Zodiac* (2007), *My Friend Dahmer* (2017), and *Extremely Wicked; Shockingly Evil and Vile* (2019) all provide graphic details on these killers, their lives, and their victims. While the question of why, as a culture, we give these killers so much attention is worthy of consideration and will always be in the background of my project, my main question is how violence and sexuality intersect in the portrayal of serial killer films. I was particularly interested to see if and how earlier serial killer films such as “*Jeffrey Dahmer*” (2002) and more contemporary films such as “*My Friend Dahmer* (2017) have stayed the same or changed in terms of their portrayal of sexuality and violence. Four main themes emerged from my content analysis: an increase in implicit sexuality, the gruesome death of women, women as plot devices, and homosexuality as deviance. Based on this analysis I speculate how these films both reflect and might perpetuate violent, misogynistic, and homophobic views.

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Introduction

There is a certain obsession with serial killers in our culture. Films and shows such as *Zodiac* (2007), *My Friend Dahmer* (2017), and *Extremely Wicked; Shockingly Evil and Vile* (2019) all provide graphic details on these killers, their lives, and their victims. While the question of why, as a culture, we give these killers so much attention is worthy of consideration and will always be in the background of my project, my main question is how violence and sexuality intersect in the portrayal of serial killer films. I was particularly interested to see if and how earlier serial killer films such as “*Jeffrey Dahmer*” (2002) and more contemporary films such as “*My Friend Dahmer* (2017) have stayed the same or changed in terms of their portrayal of sexuality and violence. Four main themes emerged from my content analysis: an increase in implicit sexuality, the gruesome death of women, women as plot devices, and homosexuality as deviance.

Before unpacking these themes, I set the stage through a review of the scholarship on media violence, media portrayal of serial killers and what scholars say about serial killer fandoms. I then turn to the methods I used to analyze the data I collected. Finally, I will expand on the findings followed by a summary and a conclusion in which I reflect on how these common patterns reflect issues of sexuality, violence, and misogyny in the larger culture and how they may perpetuate these issues as well.

Literature Review

Our culture has a fascination in serial murderers. Why this fascination and what are the consequences? I examine this question by reviewing the scholarship on media violence and

youth, media portrayals of serial killers, and fandoms. I also look at the psychological disorder known as hybristophilia, in which an individual is sexually attracted to deviants and criminals. The former is a review of the cultural factors that contribute to our fascination with serial killers and the consequences of that fascination. The latter is a psychological approach, looking at how individual pathology may be contributing to this fascination.

The literature confirms that these shows reflect issues of sexuality, violence, and misogyny in the larger culture and how they perpetuate these issues as well.

Media Violence and Youth

Serial killer media exposes youth to violence, non-healthy relationship standards, and misogyny (Malamuth 1981, Burnay 2022, Bushman 2006, Martin 2019). Previous research has shown that media is impactful in this important developmental phase. In specific, researchers have discussed that media violence presented to youth increases aggression overall (Bushman 2006, Manganello 2008, Friedlander 2013, Martins 2019, Burnay 2022) Media does this by exposing youth to aggressive behaviors thoughts, feelings, arousal levels, and decreasing helping behavior (Bushman & Huesmann 2006).

Exposure to violent media may also influence teens by providing role models and examples of how to act in romantic situations. For example, a show that displays domestic violence becomes a model for how young people should act during conflicts. This modeling of domestic violence is also applicable to violence in general. In other words, modeled violence becomes the way to confront and solve difficult issues in young people's lives. In short, teens may view these forms of media and provide role models in ways to respond in a relationship when adversity occurs.

These media models perpetuate misogynistic views as well (Friedlander 2013, Lee 2010, Seabrook 2019, Burnay 2022, and Bushman 2006). For example, Burnay and Bushman argue that sexualized media content has negative effects on women, on what people think about them and how aggressively they treat them. Sexualized media provides a framework depicting how women should behave. If women do not follow this framework it contributes to internalized oppression (Bushman 2006, Burnay 2022, Friedlander 2013).

Even television shows that do not depict sexual violence are linked to attitudes and behaviors that are in support of violence against women. This can be seen in research done by Lee in which participants expressed less support for traditional gender stereotypes, higher scores of sexual objectifications of women, and exhibited higher scores on the rape myth scale (Lee 2010). According to Seabrook, the objectification of women is linked to media consumption. Research done by Seabrook depicts that there was a greater rape myth acceptance (Seabrook 2019). Altogether, media consumption whether it depicts sexual violence or not are related to attitudes and behaviors in support of violence against women.

Media Portrayal of Serial Killers

Serial Killers are portrayed in the media in one of three ways: either as sex icons, celebrities, or their acts are sensationalized, and they are portrayed as monsters. (Weist 2016, Strutz 2022, Iron 2021, and Pace 2019). Media represents serial killers as sex icons (Strutz 2022). This sexualization of serial killers brings them more notoriety specifically from women according to Strutz (2022). These famous actors who play serial killers have established fanbases, primarily women who find the actor sexually attractive. So, when these attractive

actors portray serial killers, they transfer their established sexiness to the killer. As a result, these women become attracted to the actual killer.

Becoming a sex symbol can also lead to serial killers becoming celebrities and pop culture icons. Hot topic and Spenser's merchandise surrounding serial killers contributes to their celebrity status. In addition, the media furthers this celebrity standing by providing many killers with a nickname, such as the "Son of Sam" or the ".44 Caliber Killer" (Irons, p.5). Altogether, the merchandise and nicknaming promote the killer's celebrity status.

Wiest argues that media sensationalizes serial killers. For example, many of the U.K. articles had sensationally worded headlines such as "Chilling Echo of Serial Killer Evil" and "If You See This Man, Run!" (Wiest, p.334). Also, when news articles talk about previous serial killers and compare them with the current killer, this continues the cycle of sensationalism. Nicknames such as ".44 Caliber Killer" also contribute to this sensationalization compared to when using their legal names. By focusing just on the serial killers' motives and method of killing and not the victims sensationalization continues.

Lastly, Wiest also argues the usage of monster imagery which is present in both U.S. and U.K. articles. Monster imagery also creates a sensation around the killer. For example, using terms such as deranged, sadistic, evil, psycho, or psychopathic, maniac, and predator (Wiest 2016). Using terms such as these further develops the sensation surrounding killers.

Serial Killer Fandoms

The true crime community (TCC) centers around notorious criminals, particularly serial killers, and mass murders. According to Spychaj (2017), many groups within the TCC have ethical standards that dictate what is permissible when it comes to violent crimes. For example,

the TCC will often focus on the psychology or upbringing of the killer to understand their motivation and mind (Spychaj 2017).

However, according to Barnes, Spychaj (2017) and Broll (2010) a subgroup within the TCC deviates from these ethical standards by idolizing, celebrating, fetishizing, and becoming obsessed with serial killers. An example of this can be seen with groupies. The phenomena of groupies can be found online and in person. An example of an online groupies that break away from online norms are individuals on reddit who purchase murderabilia, identifiable items related to murders, sharing their collection, even potentially selling them (Smith 2022). In person groupies are individuals who go against the norm by attending high profile trials, actively communicating with serial killers through mail and falling outside of what the community norm views as a healthy interest level.

All this activity deviates from TCC standards. In addition, this type of celebration of serial killers also harms the victims. As an example, the newest Dahmer film, the producers did not get the permission of the victims' families to include them in the film. With this many of the family members must relive their trauma. Rita Isbell, brother to Erroll Lindsey, a victim of Dahmer's, had to watch and relive her emotional speech that she gave during Dahmer's trial. She has stated that her family is angry that so many films are produced surrounding Dahmer and it traumatizes them repeatedly bringing up emotions they are trying to come to terms with.

Hybristophilia

Hybristophilia is the attraction to criminals or deviants. It is not an official mental disorder recognized by the DSM. However, some may argue that hybristophilia falls under paraphilic disorders, an abnormal sexual desire, typically involving extreme or dangerous

activities. The primary population that this disorder tends to effect is women. However, as argued by Pettigrew (2019), he states that this is a result of the lack of information and research done on the correlation of hybristophilia and men.

Hybristophilia is categorized into either passive or aggressive (Pettigrew 2019). With passive being the more common of the two, in which individuals would write fan mail to serial killers and men on death row with the intent of having intimate relationships (Pettigrew 2019). On the other hand, aggressive hybristophilia is described as individuals who help their partners perpetrate their crimes (Pettigrew 2019).

Similarly, to the categorization of hybristophilia, the understanding of occurrence can be separated into two forms: psychological and cultural. However, research that I have discovered deems it be less psychological but more cultural. In other words, the sexualization of serial killers is more nurture than nature. Strutz (2022) argues that the depiction of oversexualized serial killers' results with more hybristophiliacs. Especially on social media platforms such as TikTok and Reddit, where both Strutz (2022) and Smith (2022) argue that these platforms cultivate hybristophilia. TikTok has had trends in which users would pretend to get ready for a "date" with a known killer, only to later be killed off and dragged off screen (Strutz 2022). On reddit, specifically r/hybristophilia there are posts that list their serial killer "crushes," in one case a user mentions Ted Bundy, Richard Ramirez, and Jeffrey Dahmer due to liking the appearance of their hands (Smith 2022). Ultimately, these depictions and interactions between hybristophiliacs continue to sexualize serial killers which result with the decrease of validation and sensitivity the victims deserve.

Methods

To examine these sexual and violent tropes I watched and coded approximately thirteen films based off of serial killers; Jeffrey Dahmer 2002, My Friend Dahmer (2017), Ted Bundy (2002), Extremely Wicked Shockingly Evil and Vile (2019), Zodiac Killer (1971), Zodiac Killer (2007), Awakening The Zodiac (2017), Monster (2003), Aileen Wuornos: American Boogeywoman (2021), Boston Strangler (1968), Henry: Portrait of a Killer (1986), Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974 and 2022). The films were coded under seven categories: explicit sexual content, implicit sexual content, explicit violence, verbal aggression, mixture of violence and sexuality, gore, and misogyny. This was done so the data produced by the films can undergo a comparative analysis of the older films against newer ones.

Examples of what could be coded include but are not limited to; every time there is foreplay, every time when the killer is portrayed by an attractive actor, camera angles depicting the actors' body shirtless, women graphically being killed, camera shots of characters making out, sexual language: dirty talk, foreplay, and lastly women' bodies being covered in blood.

Findings

I found four predominant themes after coding and reviewing the films. Firstly, there was an increase of implicit sexual content, meaning that there were more instances where characters engaged in sexual language, flirting, sexual inuendo, and an overall implied sexualization of the shows. Another theme present was the deaths that women had were typically more gruesome than that of men. Continuing with the focus on women, many of them were used as plot devices, whether that be being used as a damsel in distress or showing how truly gruesome a serial killer

can be. Lastly, the films surrounding Aileen Wuornos and Jeffrey Dahmer painted homosexuality as something deviant.

Increase in Implicit Sexuality

When comparing earlier films to more recent ones, there is an increase of sexual content. In specific, much of the sexual content in the films is implicit rather than explicit. What I mean is there are many more instances of flirting, sexual language, euphemisms, and a variety of other implied sexual innuendos throughout these more contemporary films.

Let me provide some examples of the increase in implicit sexuality. In the case of Jeffrey Dahmer, the 2002 film “Jeffrey Dahmer” depicts three implicitly sexual scenes, him shirtless with an unconscious victim, him cuddling another victim in a different scene, and a naked mannequin in his closet that through conversation alludes to him pleasuring himself to. In contrast, the 2017 film “My Friend Dahmer” consists of six instances which include multiple instances of him admiring and stalking a male jogger with close ups of the man’s body, Dahmer being naked, work out scenes, getting a physical, and more.

We can see the same increase in implicit sexuality in earlier and later films about Ted Bundy. In the 2002 film, “Ted Bundy” we see only two instances of implicit sexual content where he flirts with women. While in the 2019 film, “Extremely Wicked Shockingly Evil” we have ten instances of implicit sexual content which include flirting with women, foreplay, Bundys naked body, flirting with his groupie, having a child with one of the women who was a part of his groupie.

In the Texas Chainsaw Massacre films based off Ed Gain, we also see an increase of implicit sexual content. The first film done in 1974, “Texas Chainsaw Massacre” contained no

instances of implicit sexual content. In contrast, the 2022 film “Texas Chainsaw Massacre,” there were five instances all insinuating a relationship between a barely legal teenager and a man older than thirty.

Even in the case of the Zodiac killer, where the killer is faceless there is a slight increase in implicit sexual content. While it may not be a drastic increase in comparison to the last films, it is still important to be noted. We see in both the 1971 film “Zodiac Killer,” and the 2007 film “Zodiac” that there were no instances of implicit sexual content. However, in the 2017 film “Awakening the Zodiac” there were three; many of which were flirtatious scenes.

In the case of Aileen Wuornos, it is important to note that she should be made an exception since she is a female serial killer. Similarly, to the Zodiac Killer, films surrounding Wuornos had a minor increase in implicit content. In the 2003 film, “Monster” we see it having two instances of implicit sexual content, which consists of her cleaning herself in a bathroom and cuddling with Selby. While in the 2021 film “Aileen Wuornos: American Boogeywoman,” has 4 implicit scenes, all focusing on her relationship between her and the old yacht club owner where she would flirt and make advances.

The Gruesome Death of Women

A consistent theme presents in both past and present films was that of women having deaths that were more violent in comparison to that of men. We see this theme present in films on the Zodiac Killer, Texas Chainsaw Massacre (Ed Gain), and Ted Bundy. In this section we will exclude Jeffrey Dahmer and Aileen Wuornos due to their victim demographic only being men.

In the 1971 film, “Zodiac Killer” we see female victims have more gruesome deaths such as smashing a car tire over an elderly woman head, telling a mother to throw her baby out of a window, smashing the hood of a car over a women’s head, jumping on it, and then proceeds to run it off the road with her body inside. In comparison, the men in these films were typically only shot. We see this trend continue in the 2007 film “Zodiac”, where even though men and women were victims of the same crime at the same time, only the men would survive. For example, at the 18-minute mark we see a couple enjoy a picnic and the zodiac confronts them and brutally stabs the woman over 20 times. While the male victim had less than 5 and survives. Even the recent 2017 film “Awakening the Zodiac” Zoe, we see one of the two main characters is captured, tortured, and threatened with electrocution by the Zodiac Killer while she waits for her husband to save her.

In the 1974 film “Texas Chainsaw Massacre” the male victims were not subjected to the same amount of violence and torture the female victims did. While the male victims only received a mallet to the head, female victims were chased, thrown, tortured, hung on a hook by their skin while being alive, and locked in a freezer. This theme continues in the 2022 film “Texas Chainsaw Massacre” where women are continuously fighting back while being slashed at, chased by a chainsaw, thrown, and even surviving a chainsaw to the stomach.

The theme of gruesome killings of women continues in the Ted Bundy Films. In the 2002 film “Ted Bundy” we see women being chased, stabbed, finding the corpses of other women, murdered in their sleep and raped. In the recent 2019 film “Extremely Wicked Shockingly Evil and Vile” we see what can assumed to be real crime scene photos, women being smacked over the head with a crowbar, cut up and displaying their decapitated corpse.

Women as a Plot Device

Present in many in of the films is the theme of using women as a plot device. There were two ways women characters were used as plot devices. The first is what I call the “damsel in distress” which means women were there simply to allow men to come in and save them. The second is women were used to show to show the perversity of the killers.

The first theme of men being saviors is particularly present in the Zodiac Killer films. In the 2007 film, “Zodiac” the plot revolves around Robert Grayson, who is a cartoonist at newspaper company. Throughout the film, we see the company receive many letters discussing murdering more women and children. As a result, we see Robert decipher the message saving the next victim. This theme continues in the 2017 film “Awakening the Zodiac” when Zoe, our female lead, is captured by the zodiac and she is ultimately rescued by her husband Mick. Even when Zoe grabs the sniper rifle shooting the Zodiac, the viewers believe she is the heroine. In a twist it is revealed he wasn’t dead and Mick, her husband, takes the final shot. Ultimately, being the “hero.”

Texas Chainsaw Massacre also shares the same theme of men playing savior. In the 2002 film, there are three instances where male characters try to play the role of a savior. After seeing one by one their female companions disappear, they go into the killers house trying to save them. In the 2022 film, Texas Chainsaw Massacre, the same applies. We see Richter trying to save Lila from the killer.

In films such as Henry: Portrait of a killer and the Boston Strangler we see women be used to emphasize how gruesome and perverse killers can be. In the 1986 film, Henry: Portrait of

a Killer focuses on two serial killers Otis and Henry. One scene depicts Otis raping his friend/roommate Becky, scenes where female sex workers are picked up, engage in sex, and then killed off, gruesome scenes of Henry chopping up bodies.

The 1968 Boston Strangler films continues the theme of using women to display how gruesome and pervasive killers can be by leaving a murder victim naked on the ground with a broom handle near her genitals, insinuating she was raped with it, the multiple bodies of both young and elderly women.

The Aileen Wuornos films, the plot is unique in the fact the films revolve around her relationships. In the 2003 film "Monster" it revolves around her relationship with Selby who at the time had just turned 18. The whole film is about her developing this lesbian relationship while murdering men and doing sex work to support them both. In the 2021 film, "Aileen Wuornos: American Boogeywoman" the focus is her relationship with old yacht club owner Lewis Fell. Throughout the film we see Wuornos trying to rid her elderly husband of all his money by trying to kill him, those who are in the will, and anyone in her way. Interestingly, both relationships paint Wuornos in either a pedophilic or in a gold digger light.

Homosexuality, Murder and Deviance

The Jeffrey Dahmer and Aileen Wuornos films stand out in all of these films because the main character is homosexual. What was clear in the films was the linking of homosexuality and deviance. The Jeffrey Dahmer films display homosexuality as being something perverted, connected to sexual deviance and murder. Aileen continues this deviant narrative with the premise of the film surrounding Aileen, a 46-year-old woman, manipulating a newly 18-year-old high schooler, Selby. In some cases, Aileen would be referred to as a groomer, an individual who

builds a relationship, trust and an emotional connection with a child or someone significantly younger than them so they can manipulate, exploit, and abuse them.

In the 2017 film “My Friend Dahmer” we see homosexuality presented as something perverted. There are many instances of Dahmer stalking, admiring, and ultimately planning on abducting a male jogger in his 2017 film. In the same film, the same jogger is also a physician who Dahmer goes to for a physical. Afterwards Dahmer masturbates at his home recounting how the doctor was touching his genitals. All this points to Dahmer’s homosexuality and linking it to his sexual perversion and, ultimately, his desire to kill.

We see the same linking of homosexuality with deviance in the 2002 film “Jeffrey Dahmer” While perversion was the focus of the 2017 film, murder and violence is the focus of the 2017 film. Throughout the film we see Dahmer drill holes into his victim heads, roofie them, cutting up victims, and more. These portrayals push the narrative that homosexuals are violent, perverted, and sexual assaulters.

In the case of Aileen Wuornos, in specific the 2003 film “Monster” focuses on her relationship with freshly 18-year-old Selby (character portrayal of Tyria). Furthering the linkage of homosexuals being groomers. Throughout the film we see Selby and Aileen engage in a relationship while Selby is in her last year of high school. Aileen takes innocent dates and interactions and shifts them to more sexual topics. As an example, when Selby and Aileen are on a date in the roller rink, Aileen points out Selby’s classmates and theorizing the young boys’ sexual fantasies, according to her words “basing it off her experience with men,” Following this an Innocent roller-skating date turns into Aileen and Selby making out and engaging into foreplay in the back alley. We are even able to see the reaction of Selby’s classmate being disgusted with her.

Conclusion

Returning to my main research question about the interplay of violence and sexuality in serial killer films we can see four predominant themes. The first was a historical trend in which we can see an increase in implicit sexuality throughout these films. Second was a constant feature of most serial killer films in which women were killed in gruesome and gratuitous ways compared to the “clean” killing of men. The third was also a common theme which was the usage of women as merely a plot device for the sake of the heroic man or a display of the killers’ perversity. Lastly was the linking of homosexuality with deviance in the films depicting non-straight killers.

So how might these themes perpetuate as well as reflect larger social issues such as misogyny, sexuality and violence? The increase of implicit sexuality found in these films reflect the ongoing issue of the pornification of our culture. Pornification is the normalization of sexual themes and imagery in mainstream culture. Previous research (Goldfarb 2015) has stated that we can see this pornification process in advertisements, video games, commercials, and other cultural products. With this a glaring issue, many of these products sexualize groups who should not be sexualized in the first place such as children and young people. With the pornification comes the consequence of trivializing violence against these groups.

This process of pornification also trivializes violence against women. In particular, for younger audiences who consume more of these cultural products – such as films about serial killers. As mentioned in the literature review, teens create models based off the media they consume. They look to media models for a framework for how to behave in the face of adversity. So too, they look to the media for relational models on how to interact more generally. In this sense it’s not that films about serial killers are “causing” violence toward

women, but in the larger context of pornification, these films become one more model for how young people perceive and navigate their personal relationships, which includes violence against women.

Pornification is of course connected to patriarchy. Viewing these films, the fandoms around these films, and the success of these films reflects and contributes to the ongoing dynamic patriarchy – namely, of men dominating women and other men. In each of these films, women are overtly subservient, sexualized, and passive victims to the violence of men. And while we look on in horror and fascination at the spectacle of gore and violence, this spectacle comes directly from and reinforces patriarchal domination in the larger culture.

According to Andrea Dworkins (1981) book, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, sets the standard that scenes depicting men engaging in force and intimidation is what marks a scene as pornographic, setting the stage of sexualized gender inequality. With many of the films depicting scenes such as the bodies of sex workers, covered in blood and having their breasts shown on screen. It can result with male viewers seeing these films and believing that violence against women is okay and that women are only useful for sexual gratification. The same can be said for women, providing a framework in which they need to abide by.

There were some limitations with this study. Firstly, the term docudrama is a broad genre, further research could possibly define a specific genre. Another limitation is the lack of diversity, many of the killers are white men, with only one two out of the thirteen films being a woman.

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