

TRUE CRIME & LEISURE TIME

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF
HAWAI'I AT MĀNOA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE

DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

IN

COMMUNICATION

May 2020

By

Daniel Romero Jr.

Thesis Committee:

Kelly Bergstrom, Chairperson

Hanae Kramer

Gerald Kato

Abstract

This qualitative study rooted in deviant leisure theory looks into why people do or do not watch, read, view true crime content in their free time. Literature used to review this study found that fear and popular culture were driving factors as to why some people would choose to interact with true crime content. The study used semi-structured interviews to understand why fans and non-fans of true crime media would choose or not choose to engage with the content. The study found that for fans of true crime the reason why they would choose to engage with it was that they enjoyed the historical aspect of true crime and trying to get inside the minds of the criminals. For non-fans of true crime, the study found that the reasons why they would not choose to engage with true crime media were because of their lack of interest and fear and discomfort from the content. The study also found that both fans and non-fans of true crime media did not think that watching, viewing, or reading true crime content was considered a deviant leisure activity.

Keywords: true crime, deviant leisure, fear, popular culture, fans, non-fans

Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	4
<i>Theoretical Framework</i>	7
<i>Deviant Leisure</i>	7
<i>Homicide</i>	8
<i>Gambling</i>	9
<i>Gangs</i>	10
<i>Summary</i>	10
<i>Literature Review</i>	12
<i>Fear</i>	12
<i>Popular Culture</i>	17
<i>Summary</i>	21
<i>Methodology & Study Design</i>	23
<i>Recruitment Strategy</i>	23
<i>Interviews</i>	24
<i>Limitations & Scope</i>	25
<i>Data Analysis</i>	26
<i>Findings</i>	28
<i>Participants</i>	28
<i>Fans of True Crime</i>	29
<i>Historical aspects of true crime</i>	29
<i>Getting inside the mind of a criminal</i>	32
<i>Non-fans of true crime: Reasons for avoiding true crime media</i>	34
<i>Lack of interest</i>	34
<i>Fear and Discomfort</i>	36
<i>Deviancy</i>	38
<i>Summary</i>	40
<i>Conclusion</i>	41
<i>References</i>	44
<i>Appendix A: Interview Questions</i>	46
<i>Appendix B: Codes</i>	48
<i>Appendix C: Tables</i>	49

Introduction

The thesis was inspired by my lifelong interest in television and film. Ever since I was young, I have wanted to record things on a camcorder or digital camera. In addition to recording videos, I also enjoyed watching films and television. I also enjoy reading books about true crime like *Whoever Fights Monsters* by Robert K. Ressler and Tom Shachtman and also listening to podcasts on it from time to time. One of my most favorite television series is *Mindhunter*, which is based on true crime content. The true crime series *Mindhunter* debuted in October of 2017 on the streaming platform, Netflix. *Mindhunter* is an adaptation of a book by former FBI agent John Douglas and co-author Mark Olshaker called, *Mindhunter: Inside the FBI's Elite Serial Crime Unit*. The series follows two FBI agents who travel the United States in the early 1970s interviewing serial killers. Their goal is to understand the criminal mind so in the future they can be able to identify these criminals sooner and stop them (Chitwood, 2016). The serial killers the FBI agents interview go into great detail of how they killed their victims and it can create a gruesome image in the audience's mind of how the serial killers did it. The series is a major hit on Netflix, it has been described by journalist Paul Tassi (2019) as “perhaps one of the most atmospheric shows on the streaming service, and certainly, one of its best” (para. 1).

Growing up, my peers would ask me about what television or movies I liked, and I would tell them about my interest in true crime. Their reactions were less than positive; I was judged for watching shows about murder in my free time. As I got older, I noticed a shift and it now seems that a lot more people now share my interest in watching or listening to true crime media. I also noticed that it appears that more people are

comfortable sharing their enjoyment of true crime content, and its popularity is illustrated by the increased number of media products (television shows, movies, podcasts, etc.). I also observed that the internet allows for fans to meet and talk with each other.

This thesis research was motivated by my wanting to better understand why people like to watch or listen to true crime content in their free time. I was especially interested to understand this interest as some of the crimes depicted can be particularly dark and gruesome.

In this thesis, I explore the motivations of avid viewers and non-viewers of true crime media. 'True Crime' is defined as books and films about real crimes that involved real people (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019). True crime is a broad genre that can range from podcasts discussing true cases, to series like *Mindhunter* that are mostly true with some fictionalized elements. What will not be discussed in this thesis are crime dramas. While crime drama can be loosely inspired by real events, it differs from true crime because it is not retelling actual crimes but rather creating a fictional narrative to better tell a story. Therefore, crime drama series like *Law & Order* and *Criminal Minds* will not be discussed as they fall outside the scope of this thesis as they are series that are at times inspired or based on real-life crimes, but they are largely fictional.

In recent years true crime has become very popular as evidenced by production companies, streaming networks, and podcasts producing more series on true crime for people to watch or listen in their free time. The genre has become more widely available, but based on my personal experiences before this current surge in popularity if one was to say they were a fan of true crime then they might be looked down upon by people who do not watch the genre. In this

research, I seek to understand why some people view true crime content in their free time and why others do not. This research is guided by the following questions:

RQ1: What are the reason(s) that fans of the genre consume true crime media?

RQ2: What are the reason(s) that people who express a dislike or disgust for true crime have negative feelings about the genre?

The overarching goal of this research is to understand why some people view true crime content in their free time. Additionally, I sought to understand why others do not view, read or listen to this sort of content. The theory that will be used as a lens for this research is that of deviant leisure. Grounded in leisure studies, deviant leisure is a term generally applied throughout the social sciences to describe leisure behaviors that contravene socially accepted norms, values and ethical standards (Raymen & Smith, 2016). In this thesis, I use deviant leisure to a framework to see if the viewing, reading or listening to true crime genre on the part of my study participants can be considered a deviant form of leisure.

I begin with a review of the relevant literature to provide context as to why some audiences watch true crime in their free time. This literature review is focused on two areas: fear and popular culture. The literature dealing with fear argues that audiences of true crime will view it because they are fearful of becoming crime victims themselves. The second area of literature examines true crime and popular culture. This area of literature relates true crime's increasing popularity to an audience member's desire to keep up to date with the latest trends in media.

Theoretical Framework

Deviant leisure is used to guide this research. This provides a lens to examine peoples' engagement with forms of entertainment considered morally unsound by the larger population due to its taboo nature. This concept of deviant leisure is shown in various ways, like society's love for homicide (Arntfield & Williams, 2018), gambling (Raymen & Smith, 2017), and through gang members in metropolitan areas (Stodolska, Berdychevsky & Shinew, 2019). Such studies are relevant to this thesis as they provide examples of deviant leisure. They relate to the study of true crime by showing how fans of the genre form subcultures that may be considered unorthodox by non-viewers. The framework of deviant leisure is a way to explore audience engagement with true crime by attempting to understand why fans are drawn to this type of "dark" media, even though it does not conform with society's norms. Being that research in the field of deviant leisure is relatively limited, the works that are examined in this thesis are the most relevant in explaining audience engagement with true crime.

Deviant Leisure

"Deviant leisure is typically viewed as behavior that violates criminal and noncriminal moral norms" (Williams, 2009, para. 5). 'Deviant leisure' as an area of study in the academic examination of activities that some people may do in their free time that would be looked down upon by the rest of society like getting tattoos, doing graffiti art and being into vampire subculture (Raymen & Smith 2016). It crosses the line and becomes a form of deviant leisure is when it breaks the law, e.g. when trespassing on private property (Raymen & Smith, 2016). Some—but not all—of these activities are against the law, but they share a commonality that they have not typically considered them ethically or morally sound by most people in society. Fans of true crime might fall into this category of deviant leisure because some people might not consider it to be a societal norm or that it is in bad taste to enjoy watching such content.

True crime content can be based upon real serial killers and some of their crimes are very brutal and gruesome. So why would people want to view this in their free time? The concept of deviant leisure helps to contextualize this subculture and guides my research questions seeking to understand why people view true crime content in their free time. Williams (2009) argues that body modification can at times cross over into being deviant leisure. Body modification examples that to some might be considered deviant include: tattooing, piercings, scarification branding, or flesh hook suspension. For those taking part in such activities, this can be a form of leisure to creatively express oneself or represent a personal experience they had. On the other hand, this might prevent them from some employment opportunities that might not allow even the most basic or simple piercings or tattoos to be visible. Furthermore, Williams (2009) argues this form of leisure also goes against the Judeo-Christian beliefs and psychiatric teachings about the body, adding to it being seen as 'deviant' by some parts of society. Overall, deviant leisure studies such as those conducted by Williams that examine activities that are not considered to be a part of dominant societal norms provide a framework that can help to understand my research seeking to examine whether or not fans of true crime engage in deviant activities by viewing, reading or listening to the genre.

Homicide

Deviant Leisure studies can help understand true crime genre and fans. Michael Arntfield and DJ Williams (2018), look at multiple murders as a cornerstone for a study on deviant leisure. Based on their study, the authors sought to examine criminals who have committed murders in recent years. In this article, the authors apply a leisure-based approach to the Las Vegas Massacre as a case study examining multiple murders as a deviant leisure. While extreme, their findings can be applied to other hobbies known as edgework which is "activities that are the threat to one's physical or psychological well-being or one's structured existence" (Arntfield & Williams, 2018,

p. 414). A leisure approach to comprehending multiple murder helps provide new important understanding. This relevant to my own study as many of the crimes depicted throughout the true crime genre are mass or multiple murderers. Two recent examples of this include *Making a Murderer* (2015) and *Confession Killer* (2019) which are Netflix series based on men who have been convicted of or confessed to multiple murders. This study analyzed offenders to see if they fall into the category of deviant leisure which in my study is very similar. We can see if being a fan or active listener, viewer or reader of true crime would put them in deviant leisure based on society's outlook on it.

Gambling

Thomas Raymen and Oliver Smith (2017) looked at another form of deviant leisure: gambling. Gambling (e.g. sports betting, online betting, etc.) has become a favorite pastime for some people. The most recent statistics from the Gambling Commission (2017) indicate that British gamblers incurred a record £13.8b (16.67b U.S. dollars) in losses in 2016, a number that has been consistently rising since 2011 (Raymen & Smith, 2017, p. 2). The article argues against gambling stating that it causes more harm than good for the pleasure of others in their free time. It examines, using a deviant leisure lens, what we see as with lifestyle gamblers emerging harms. (Raymen & Smith, 2017). The article also argues that while social gambling is backed by the industry, it can encourage more betting which in turn leads to further losses and impulsive gambling. The allure of gambling in a high consumer society—enabled by a high credit rate—brings in a reality of indebtedness to young adults that could lead to bad or poor self-behaviors like depression. This relates to my research in that while some in society view gambling as a bad form of leisure, others can view it as a good form of leisure, assessments that can apply to people who enjoy or do not enjoy true crime genre.

Gangs

Monika Stodolska, Liza Berdychevsky, & Kimberly J. Shinew, (2019) use social learning theory to look at the gangs presence and desire to be involved in deviant leisure activities. In their study, they interviewed thirty gang members in the Chicago area as well as other parts of Illinois. Their results showed that the gang members, as part of their leisure activities, would enjoy house parties which included sex, drugs, and alcohol. They also enjoyed hanging on the street corners, gang banging against other gang members or amongst themselves, and some forms of vandalism to mark their territories. The social learning theory, “maintains that criminal values are learned by association and outlines the mechanisms by which the learning occurs” (Stodolska, Berdychevsky, & Shinew, 2019, p. 280). As we can see the motives for gang members to be involved in deviant leisure activities has to do with the relationship with the flow states, social learning theory, and the thrill and pleasure for committing the crimes. They conclude the reason behind gang members being involved in deviant leisure practices has to do with the individual, but also surrounding social pressures. This relates in part to my research in that either individuals or social pressure from peers or friends influence people to view, listen or read true crime media or not.

Summary

Deviant leisure is a framework used to guide this research. The literature discussed in this chapter provides some examples of deviant leisure and also relate it to my research in a few helpful ways. The first study had to do with multiple murders and its relationship to deviant leisure. This relates to true crime media in that many productions discuss multiple murders, through the interviews I conducted one can see why people are interested in that. Next, I examined literature about gambling and its relationship to deviant leisure.

While some view it as harmless others look at the social and economic harms it can cause on others. This relates to my study on true crime media and my interviews because, I interviewed avid viewers and non-viewers, and some could see it as harmless while others could see it as social harm. The last study I examined in detail had to do with gangs and their involvement in deviant leisure. The authors applied social learning theory and also examined the involvement of individual factors and social pressures. In my own study, through interview questions, I sought to gather insights about the social influence on viewing or not viewing true crime media. I looked to see if the true crime genre fell into this deviant leisure based on the interviews I conducted and results from the two different perspectives of avid viewers and non-viewers.

In sum, deviant leisure is a framework that provides a means to understand fan involvement with and interest in true crime media. Viewing such content can be viewed as a leisure form of entertainment activity by fans, but non-viewers could see consuming this content as societal harm. Taken together, these studies provide examples and relate to the study of true crime in taking serious society's love for homicide. To reiterate the point earlier made in this section, being that research in the field of deviant leisure is relatively new, the works were limited in what I could find, so the articles—while scant—provide a basis on which I can build my own study.

Literature Review

In the introduction to this thesis, I provided some examples to illustrate the increasing popularity of media inspired by true crime events. There is a fan base that views true crime media even though it may be considered a deviant leisure activity. In this chapter, I review literature on fear as well as popular culture as possible motives for why people do or do not choose to engage in viewing true crime media. By grounding my study in this literature, it provides context for participant responses that fear and popular culture as factors for why they do or do not choose to view, read or listen to true crime media. Next, I discuss literature about fear being a motivating factor for interest in true crime, especially among women. Finally, I examine the relationship between true crime and popular culture as a means to show the rise of popularity of the true crime genre in recent years.

Fear

One factor that plays into why people are drawn to true crime media content is fear. Fear, in this context, refers to avid viewers being afraid of becoming a victim of the crimes they read, watch, or listen to. This fear is why they are drawn to true crime media. In a study by Amanda Vicary and Chris Fraley (2010), they discuss why women are drawn to books on true crime. The article does mention men's take on the genre of true crime but based on the authors' research in this article, men are usually drawn to content based on other types of violence, while their research showed that women are drawn to true crime content (Vicary & Fraley, 2010, p. 83). Women are more likely to be murdered or raped, and they are also more likely to read about these subjects (Vicary & Fraley, 2010, p. 85). Women readers tend to read true crime content in fear because they hope to not fall as a victim themselves. The authors explain,

A woman fears becoming the victim of a crime, so, consciously or unconsciously, she turns to true crime books in a possible effort to learn strategies and techniques to prevent becoming murdered. However, with each true crime book she reads, this woman learns about another murderer and his victims, thereby increasing her awareness. (Vicary & Fraley, 2010, p. 85)

As women view, read or listen to true crime-related media content they are finding out more information about suspects and then can subconsciously know the signs and avoid being victims of a crime. The authors argue that women are drawn to watching true crime because of their fear of becoming victims themselves, which drives them to become educated about the possible crime scenarios that are depicted in these series.

Catherine Traylor (2019) similarly looked at audience interests in true crime, which included three key elements for their engagement:

- 1) true crime audiences are detail-oriented and desire to connect with the story
- 2) platforms that offer mobility and convenience are overwhelmingly preferred;
- 3) audience engagement increases with the addition of visual components.

(Traylor, 2019, p. 30)

The first factor found in Traylor's study centers around the audience's desire to connect with the true crime story. She argues that since women can often sympathize with the victims in these true crime stories, they tend to like the genre. In Traylor's study, she states when women can see parts of themselves or their loved ones in, "they're more invested in the outcome by nature of feeling a 'this could be me' trigger" (Traylor, 2019, p. 28). Secondly, the author concludes that mobile platforms, such as smartphones and tablets, best engage the audience with the storytelling because of its accessibility and

convenience. Traylor's final discovery in her study reveals that audience engagement increases with visual components rather than reading true crime books or listening to podcasts. All three of these elements contribute to the mystery and fear components of true crime, which she argues are the main reasons why audiences are attracted to this genre.

Kathryn Cassibry (2017) examines obsession with fear and adrenaline, arguing that audiences are drawn to stories of murder; in particular audiences are drawn to bizarre and hideous crimes. Examples of Ted Bundy and Son of Sam continue to draw our attention decades after their crime sprees ended. David Berkowitz, Son of Sam, terrorized the streets of New York during the 1970s by killing couples in their cars. Ted Bundy was a serial killer who murdered mostly college female students across the United States during the 1980s. People are interested in or attracted to them because their crimes captured the media's attention during the times of their killings. Bundy was executed in 1989, yet we see that he has still captured public attention in 2020. Indeed *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes (2019)*, *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile (2019)*, and *Ted Bundy (2002)* are all examples of media productions about Bundy's crimes that were released in the last 17 years to the recent year, 30 years after he was put to death for his crimes. Cassibry then questions why we are so intrigued by these heinous crimes.

Yet another reason we love true crime is that we get to explore the psychology behind the act of murder. No sane person wants to commit mass murder, but by the very nature of being human, our brains are wired at least somewhat similarly to these criminals. So, through watching, we are granted the opportunity to get

inside the mind of a murderer. We cannot quite grasp the motivation and conviction of people who commit these violent acts, but we feel compelled to.

(Cassibry, 2017, para. 5)

Research shows that when it comes to anything that is out of the norm for our day to day lives, people will be drawn to it, such as slowing down to get a better look at a car crash on the freeway (Cassibry, 2017, para. 3).

True crime is out of the ordinary for our day to day lives, but it also provides a means to receive an adrenaline rush. Rather than participating in thrill-seeking activities, it is far easier to listen or watch true crime content (Cassibry, 2017, para. 4). When it comes to true crime media, people can activate their sense of fear safely within their own homes. Another factor to be considered is psychological; we want to understand the reasoning behind the murders. Even if we can never truly comprehend a killer's actions, we as humans have the need to try to understand. According to Cassibry's research, women are more inclined to watch or listen to true crime content. The reason why is that women are most likely to be the victims of crimes (Cassibry, 2017, para. 7). Similar to the findings by Vicary and Fraley (2010), true crime podcasts or series can give women tips to prepare them in case of an attack. Cassibry argues that the factors of fear and adrenaline play roles in why audiences are drawn to true crime. In my own research, I kept this in mind and included questions in my interview guide to see if participants state that those are factors in why they are drawn to true crime media.

When I reviewed the relevant literature, I found that fear of being a victim is another common factor driving an interest in true crime media. In a study by Alexis M. Durham, H. Preston Elrod, and Patrick T. Kinkade (1995), the authors examine fear of

victimization of crimes from the perspective of true crime audience members. Their goal was to determine to what extent the true crime genre reflects real homicide cases in America. True crime has become a vital part of how viewers obtain their information about actual cases, but it is important to know how accurately they are portrayed in the media so that viewers do not get a distorted story. The authors obtained their analytical data from reports from the FBI to show actual crimes that have been committed in comparison to true crime portrayal in the media. The authors found that in regular crime reports, homicide is very rare in comparison to other crimes. Offenders that are represented in the true crime genre receive more punishment and attention compared to other criminals because of how harsh the crime is. Criminals that get the most media attention are usually depicted in true crime media outlets. The authors reinforced the theme of fear because viewers were still drawn to the true crime media even if the portrayals of actual crimes were not depicted properly or that it is not likely for the viewer to become a victim of a major crime like homicide.

Fear can be a driving factor in viewing true crime content. Some—but not all—women fear becoming a victim, so they watch true crime media in hopes to not become the next victim of a crime. By doing so, they are learning information about how to not become a victim, receive information about criminal profiles, and then in turn that information will allow them to know signs that they might be in danger. Fear also provides an adrenaline rush for true crime audience members by viewing, listening or reading about the crimes and criminals. I added questions to my own interview guide to see if any participants also feel the same adrenaline rush.

Popular Culture

According to Pamela Burger (2016), in 2015 the true crime genre began to rise in popularity. However, audiences have historically been drawn to the true crime genre. The interest in big murder cases has been going on for hundreds of years (Burger, 2016, para. 3). During the 1990s, the O.J. Simpson trial was a nationwide phenomenon that many television stations aired so that the viewers could watch. However, in 1892—long before the O.J. Simpson trial—a gruesome murder was committed by Lizzie Borden. Borden’s killing of her father and stepmother and subsequent trial was a public sensation:

The sheer breadth of literature and art produced in its wake speaks to an enduring fascination with a story that was, in its day, nothing short of a media phenomenon. Lizzie’s arrest and prosecution led to the original ‘trial of the century’ and garnered as much, if not more, press than O.J.’s proceedings a century later. (Burger, 2016, para. 14)

This shows that even before television and film, some people have always been drawn to true crime—especially murder. The public’s fascination with true crime can be drawn from media reports seen in newspapers and other forms of written or verbal reports. Based on Burger’s research, true crime has fascinated people for decades, becoming increasingly more popular throughout time because of different media and streaming outlets.

Kevin Hull and Kelli Boling (2018) apply uses and gratification theory to audiences of true crime podcasts. The uses and gratification model explores why people choose to view and interact with certain media, especially those that are mobile. In this study, the authors observed the audience’s engagement with the podcasts to further their studies on audience perspectives. Their findings indicated that most people would listen

to true crime podcasts because they were bored and could perform other activities simultaneously. One reason why women listen to true crime podcasts more than men is that they are often drawn to lead female roles and victims. Another finding is that women listen to true crime podcasts because of the “escape” aspect of it, meaning that they listen to it to figuratively “escape” their daily lives of work or school. Finally, the study concludes that women tend to listen to podcasts to prepare for social interactions, such as discussions about true crime stories.

Sara Sacks (2017) uses a feminist lens to examine why women are drawn to true crime and how they use the podcast *My Favorite Murder* as an outlet for personal trauma. *My Favorite Murder* is a weekly comedic true crime podcast hosted by two women entertainers, Georgia Hardstark and Karen Kilgariff. This podcast offers a more amusing and feminist perspective to the true crime genre. This is because they created a platform, “that publicizes and justifies women’s consumption of true crime, while critiquing a patriarchal society, which has made their consumption of its ‘taboo’” (Sacks, 2017, p. 1). Usually, true crime content appeals to viewers or listeners by instilling fear into them. However, while *My Favorite Murder* seeks to offer a better platform for people to laugh at trauma found in true crime; Sacks’ study of this podcast looks at the social phenomenon behind true crime. *My Favorite Murder* speaks to a second wave feminist audience which consists of young, white, middle to upper-middle class, cisnormative women (Sacks, 2017, p. 2). They use their comedy to offer a “positive space for the imagined audience of the podcast” (Sacks, 2017, p. 2). Furthermore, the hosts of the podcast seek to advocate social justice for women with disabilities and different ethnicities. *My Favorite Murder* also offers a safe place to build community with other

fans of the true crime genre. Fans of the podcast can network with each other to relieve anxieties and loneliness, creating a therapeutic place with other fellow fans of the genre. Overall, the podcasts use feminist values to bring people who share an interest in true crime so that they are not alienated from the larger society.

Another application that looks into the popularity of true crime is by Stella Bruzzi (2016). Bruzzi's study looked at audience interest in true crime documentaries. Writing in 2016, she argued that true crime content shown on television and Netflix should have its own category. Since then, Netflix has added true crime as a genre that can be searched and viewed. Bruzzi examined *The Staircase* (2004), a French mini television series about Michael Peterson's murder trial of his wife. Michael Peterson was an American novelist who was convicted of killing his second wife in 2003. This series was a great example of the, "following-the-subject documentary and a seminal true crime series cited by many" (Bruzzi, 2016, para. 2). She also examined *Making a Murderer* (2015), an American true crime television series on Netflix. This follows the story of Steven Avery and his wrongful conviction in which he served 18 years in prison for and then his other trial for murder which he was convicted of in 2007.

Bruzzi's study looked at a wide range of examples including television series, podcasts, and one-off documentaries demonstrate and how law and justice are represented or misrepresented in achieving justice and the truth. *Making A Murderer* shows different sides of the Steven Avery case, ranging from the justice and law enforcement side, to the prisoner's perspective. The filmmakers believe Avery is a victim of injustice from poor legal representation and circumstances. The series follows the Avery case where he was convicted of attempted murder and rape. He was exonerated

after 18 years in prison from DNA evidence, but was later arrested again for a different murder. *Making a Murderer* has archive footage and interviews give a first-hand perspective of the people involved in the cases. The filming style helps to match the case and bring it to the audience that the justice system needs to be fixed from so many people being wrongly convicted. The genre helps to raise issues about the representation of law in the digital era. The influence of true crime was so popular that it influenced filmmakers to create an extensive series on a single case and I want to see if that popularity influence will be a reason as to why participants of my study are drawn to true crime media.

While most of my examples thus far have focused on American media products, it is important to note that the true crime genre is a worldwide phenomenon. For example, evidence of its popularity can be seen throughout the countries where the language they speak is Dutch, such as the Netherlands. This can be seen in a study by Stijn Reijnders (2005), which examined the entertainment repertoire of true crime in the narrative structures, themes, and stereotypes, that can be employed in a popular representation of cruel acts. *Peter R. de Vries* is a Dutch true crime television program that is similar to *America's Most Wanted*. Both series were based on investigative journalism and would cover high profile criminal cases. Critics claim the series are a threat to the moral order and the model of an over-commercialized television culture (Reijnders, 2005). The author proposes a different argument. *Peter R. de Vries* followed an existing tradition of morals in the history of popular culture. Reijnders argues for the importance of the shows, saying that it is in favor of morality along the course of entertainment history and popular culture. He then looked at the television series to see how crime is portrayed and narrated

to then compare to other 19th-century true crime reports. The reports that were viewed saw that the reporting would be on similar crimes and portray them in the same stereotyping way for the killers and victims, which shows that the reporting is based on popular culture. The series and others alike, look for the dramatics of the suspect committing what he has done and telling the truth so justice can be served but in a very impressive way for viewers' attention. Vries mimicked a superhero in a way just like other protagonists in true crime shows because they go after killers and murders and get justice for the victim and save society from murderers. It copied many English detective shows that were aired before the show's time where he takes matters into his own hands, and this can also be seen in American television too. Reijnders found that we as a society seek the truth and justice and sometimes that cannot be found in the world but entertainment, but we can find principles and due process through television shows like *Peter R. de Vries* and *America's Most Wanted*.

Summary

In this review, I have examined two areas of the literature relating to true crime: fear and popular culture. In the previous section, I made the argument that deviant leisure studies provide examples of the framework guiding this study. This literature review has also provided clues about what sorts of topics to investigate when talking to my study participants.

True crime is becoming increasingly popular, but it has always been compelling. Pamela Burger (2016) stated in her work that true crime has become a unique genre and is increasing in popularity as evidenced by more content being released in the genre. This relates to my interviews with participants because it could be a reason why they view true

crime media. The true crime genre is a huge hit can be talked about a lot of viewers by many and so people would want to be kept up with the latest hits.

In having reviewed this research, it has given me insight into my questions for my semi-structured interviews, included in Appendix A. This literature has helped me develop interview questions based on the deviant leisure, fear and popular. The questions related to the literature in seeing if what was said by other authors about true crime media would apply to my participants. Examples can be to see if the participants thought that viewing true crime media as deviant leisure if fear plays a factor in why they are drawn to true crime content, as well as popular culture. The questions can be both applied to avid viewers of true crime content or non-viewers as well. These are a few examples of the questions reasoning and logic to see if the participants' answers relate to the literature and my research questions or if they do not.

Methodology & Study Design

In my study, I used qualitative methods in obtaining and analyzing my content and data. Qualitative methods are good for describing, interpreting, contextualizing and gaining insight into certain concepts or phenomena. The goal of this thesis is to investigate the phenomena of true crime in the media, seeking to better understand why people do or do not listen or watch true crime media content in their free time. True crime is now socially acceptable to talk about. Before it was not socially acceptable to talk about in that negative judgment would be put on a person or groups who talked about the genre and enjoyed it (Hull & Boling, 2018, p. 25). In the previous chapter, I presented my literature review where I covered how this topic has been covered in the academic literature to date. As a reminder, the common themes that I found in this literature were fear and popular culture.

Recruitment Strategy

When recruiting participants, I specifically targeted avid viewers, listeners, and/or readers of true crime content. My definition of an avid viewer of true crime is based on my judgment of how much and how often that avid viewers engage with true crime media. The fans of true crime media explained to me how much and often they engage with true crime content and also what specific content it is to make sure it was not crime drama. Then, based on that information I decided if they would be a part of my study or not. Another factor can be how much an avid viewer knows about particular criminal cases or how much they know about series, books or podcasts on true crime content. This decision was made to give me the best in-depth answers as to why they enjoy true crime and how they came to like it. I used the snowball method for recruiting participants in that I interviewed people, then I asked them if they would be willing to refer me to someone

that is also a true crime fan. I also asked people via social media about their interest or disinterest in true crime and see if they are willing to take part in the interview. When people saw my posts, they contacted or spoke to me face to face and asked questions about the study. I answered their questions and the participants would tell me if they were willing to be a part of my study.

In addition to interviewing avid true crime fans, to gain a more well-rounded perspective about true crime in a larger social context, I also sought out the perspectives of non-viewers of true crime content. These participants were recruited using the same methods mentioned above. I used my judgment to determine if they were to be a part of my study. The non-viewers told me why they did not view true crime media and if their responses were similar to some of the literature in the previous chapter, I decided they would be a participant in my study.

Interviews

To gather the experiences and perspectives of viewers and non-viewers of true crime media, I conducted semi-structured interviews. This method of data collection was selected because it allowed for the opportunity to obtain an elaborate response from each participant, providing a rich data set that I could then interpret via thematic coding. The participants consisted of both men and women aged 18-35 and also consisted of a diversity of ethnicities. I conducted 20 interviews, 10 interviews of participants who were avid viewers and 10 participants who were non-viewers of true crime content. The interviews ranged from 5-20 minutes, with the average interview being 12-15 minutes. The participants responses were recorded with handwritten notes and a voice recorder on my smartphone. For the non-viewers, there were 6 female and 4 male participants of different ages and different ethnic backgrounds. For the avid viewers, there were 6

female participants and 4 male participants of different ages and different ethnic backgrounds. I conducted interviews at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa in different locations on campus. Before conducting interviews, I gave the participants consent forms and verbally explained the contents of the form and provided an overview of my study; they all agreed and signed the forms. I did the interviews in private areas so I could do one on one interviews to obtain answers from individuals so they could be comfortable with me and tell me their likings or disliking with the true crime content. I used two separate interview guides: the first was focused on those who identify as being fans of true crime, the second was a series of questions to probe why a participant did *not* identify as being a fan of the genre. Both guides were based on the literature reviewed in the previous chapter, and both guides are included in their entirety in Appendix A. After the interviews were complete, I kept the audio recordings and consent in a safe and locked place on campus at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

Limitations & Scope

I made the decision that qualitative methods were best suited for answering the research questions laid out in this thesis regarding the phenomena of true crime media and leisure time. Quantitative methods would not be as ideal for this investigation because I was not interested in the frequency of viewing but instead, I was interested in the *experiences* of the viewing. Focus groups, big group interviews, and surveys were considered, but I decided interviews were the best way to achieve my goal of obtaining data for my findings. Surveys would not work because I wanted to talk to individuals to find out their thoughts on true crime, how they came to like true crime media, and why they choose or did not choose to engage with the genre. Also, focus or big group interviews were not the

best fit because participants may not be comfortable speaking in front of a group of strangers. This would then not provide me the responses I needed to gather my data.

Some of the limitations and weaknesses of this research would be that some people are more interested in true crime than others. Some participants went into great detail of their passion for true crime while others did not. It was not because they had little to say but were shy and timid during the beginning stages of the interviews but later opened up to me with more detail in their responses. Another limitation and weakness of the research are that some participants went off topic with their responses regarding the questions I asked. I did steer the interviews to get them back on track but few answers from the interviews did go off-topic and, in the transcriptions, it did not help to give me a code or theme for during my thematic coding process

Data Analysis

To interpret the data I collected from interviews, I used thematic coding of transcripts. Thematic coding involves recording or identifying passages of text or images that are linked by a common theme or idea (Mountain & Marshall, n.d.). Specifically, I approached thematic coding with an inductive and semantic approach. The inductive approach involves allowing the data to determine your themes (Inductive Approach, 2020). The semantic approach involves analyzing the explicit content of the data (Bueno & Krause, 2007). I went through the transcriptions and highlighted from the avid and non-viewers their responses that answered my research questions and created codes from the highlighted sections (see Appendix B). Then after looking at those highlighted responses, I put them into another document separating, avid viewers from non-viewers. I then started to highlight again what I felt were common themes relating to the codes, of the responses from the participants. Then in the same document, I highlighted in separate

colors other themes that I found to relate to the literature reviewed and anything I found interesting that participants said, but not about the research question. The final themes that I came up with for the avid viewer were historical aspects of true crime and getting inside the minds of criminals. The themes I found for the non-viewer were lack of interest and fear and discomfort. Lastly, both viewers and non-viewers thought that engaging with true crime media was not a deviant leisure activity.

Findings

This section presents the findings that arose from my analysis of the data I collected via semi-structured interviews. I begin by introducing my research participants. To give discretion to the interview participants and maintain their confidentiality, I gave them alternative names; no real or legal names appear in this document. Throughout this analysis, I draw connections back to some of the literature discussed in the previous section, which supports the existing literature as to why some people are drawn to true crime media. This chapter is divided into two sections: avid viewers and non-viewers. The last section of the data findings is a theme of both the avid viewers and the non-viewers based on the interview questions (which are included in full in Appendix A).

Participants

For this research, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 participants. I interviewed 10 avid viewers of true crime and 10 non-viewers of true crime. For my study, I chose to end data collection after 20 participants because I had reached thematic saturation. In both of these groupings, the gender breakdown was the same (4 men and 6 women). This was not intentional. I did not actively recruit the same demographics but due to the nature of snowball style sampling, it worked out this way. I created pseudonyms for each participant I interviewed to keep their identity and responses confidential. Please refer to Appendix C for table 1A for the information about the avid viewers that were interviewed and refer to table 1B for information about the non-viewers. These tables provide the demographics of the participants and also briefly summarize why they do not enjoy true crime media if they are a non-viewer. The table summarizing the viewers includes information about what media they like to consume. For the avid viewers, one can see how they first became fans of true crime and what media they enjoy consuming of the true crime genre. For the non-viewers, they do not enjoy true crime media and what activities or

genres they would prefer to engage with. In both tables, there were similarities between the participants. For fans of true crime, several of them enjoy engaging with the same media content or had similar backgrounds in how they first became fans of the true crime genre. Also, for the non-viewers of true crime content, many of them had similar reasons as to why they did not like true crime content and other activities and genres they would rather engage with.

Fans of True Crime

My first research question asked, what are the reason(s) that fans of the genre consume true crime media? To help answer this question, I interviewed 10 individuals who self-identified as avid viewers of true crime media. They spoke about their experiences engaging with true crime media and that is what they would consider a definition of being a fan of true crime content. In contrast to the literature reviewed earlier in this thesis, the fans I interviewed did not consume true crime media because of trends or it being popular. Instead, they consume it because they have a passion or interest in true crime media. Common themes running through each of the responses was that true crime is interesting to the participants because of the historical aspects of true crime, and a desire to ‘get inside the minds’ of criminals.

Historical aspects of true crime

One of the findings resulting from my analysis is that the avid viewers I interviewed reported that they like true crime media for historical reasons. Specifically, they mentioned wanting to hear and see first-hand what happened in the crimes that they are learning about. Ismael is an avid viewer that finds the historical aspect of true crime media interesting because “...*it was before our time but like you never know it could still happen today.*” Kim, like Ismael, enjoys learning about the history of true crime as well, “*I am very interested in that type of stuff, I like learning about the history.*” Kim is, “*a fan of Ted Bundy and Jefferey Dahmer,*” she grew hearing the stories about Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer because her father was from Wisconsin

where Dahmer committed most of his crimes. She had heard about Ted Bundy also through her father, but she would later watch more documentaries on him and gained her interest from watching and hearing about his stories. Like many other avid viewers, they are also fans of criminals whose crimes were committed before they were born so they turn to true crime media to learn more about the history of the crimes and the criminals.

Avid viewers reported that they enjoyed learning about the history of crimes and criminals. Ottoman was one participant who enjoys learning more about the criminals in true crime media, *"I like to look into the back story of that person and why they turned into a murderer and its interesting."* Mary had similar interests like Ottoman, seeking to learn about the crimes and criminals but also like to learn about the trials of the criminals too. Mary said this about her liking for the true crime and the cases: *"When the OJ Simpson documentary and When They See Us came out on Netflix and I watched those two, I was very interested in it."* Some avid viewers had their favorite criminals that they would like to follow their stories the most or even hearing their cases and stories is what got them into true crime. That was the case for Olive, *"Ted Bundy was like one of the main reasons that I got into true crime,"* because she was able to hear and see his stories firsthand from watching documentaries like *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes* on Netflix. Learning about the criminals and the cases is content that very much intrigues the avid viewers to want to keep being engaged with true crime media. The reason why the fans of true crime media find it so interesting is that they enjoy hearing and seeing the crimes and criminals. The fans of true crime media are interested in criminals who were alive and committing their crimes when most of the avid viewers interviewed were not alive so being able to learn about their history through media outlets is what they enjoy most about true crime content.

Lastly, avid viewers were fascinated with the history of unsolved cases in true crime media. One avid viewer Lucky, like other avid viewers, said he was compelled by unsolved crimes in particular. Specifically, he said,

The fact that they are unsolved and that they haven't found the person, or the person is still out there, it's probably the most interesting for that fact right there.

He goes on to explain why he likes unsolved cases for the mystery behind criminals not being caught and that they could commit their crimes and get away with it,

Somebody that has done something crazy and has not been caught until later only because like it's just crazy to think about that there are people that can do stuff like that or get away with stuff like that.

Misha was another avid viewer, like Lucky, who enjoys unsolved cases because the mystery keeps him invested and he wants to want to learn and see more. Specifically, he said: *"The fact that sometimes the story doesn't have an ending keeps you even more invested and then you kind of catch yourself watching more and more stuff."* Isabella was one of the few avid viewers that listened to podcasts and she enjoyed listening to cases that were unsolved as well. She said,

There are a couple of podcasts I listen to and there is one called *Unsolved Murders* that I listen to and that's a lot of cold cases but there are some about serial killers, so I think I like both.

A theme for avid viewers is the historical aspect of true crime media as well as the history of cold cases and looking into the backstories of the criminals. The reason why the followers of true crime media find it so interesting is that they enjoy hearing and seeing the crimes and criminals. The followers of true crime media are interested in criminals who were alive and committing their crimes when most of the avid viewers interviewed were not alive, so

being able to learn about their history through media outlets is what they enjoy most about true crime content. The reason why they are interested in true crime media content does not match the literature reviewed earlier in this thesis. The literature reviewed found that fear and popular culture are motives as to why people would be drawn to true crime content. Through interviews conducted in this study, the factors as to why fans of true crime content are drawn to it are because of the historical aspect of true crime and getting inside the minds of the criminals.

Getting inside the mind of a criminal

In addition to learning about the historical aspects of certain crimes, participants in this study are drawn to true crime media because they enjoy trying to get into the mind of the criminals, seeking to comprehend why they commit their crimes. Ismael said, *“I just want to know what is going on in people’s minds you know?”* Here, when he mentions “people’s minds”, he was referring to the criminals who are featured in true crime media he watches. Brianna has been a fan of true crime for a long time and she finds it interesting because she can try to understand the mind of the criminal like many other fans. She said, *“It’s interesting to know-how like a mind of a serial killer works and do the things that they do.”* Kim is also is a fan who tries to understand why criminals could commit the various acts and crimes that they do, *“I want to know why someone would want to murder someone, just why would some take someone’s life, I like to figure out what they were thinking.”* Betty, who enjoys the genre now, was previously not a fan. Her interest changed as she got older and began to engage with more true crime content and she tries to understand the mind of the criminal as well. Betty said this about her change of heart with true crime, *“I was creeped out by it but then my interest changed and it’s interesting to me to learn how people think and how they like are capable of going through with murder.”* Misha enjoys investigating with the detectives on the true crime content that he watches because, *“when I watch, and I feel like I can catch something they won’t catch.”* This is something that

keeps him invested in the content and also trying to understand the minds of the criminals as well just like criminal investigators would too,

It's like just that interest and curiosity that keeps me watching it, serial killers kind of creep me out and once you find their motive and pattern and there is no mystery left to grab onto.

Trying to dive into the minds of the criminals was a big factor in why these fans are drawn to true crime content. They find this interesting because the viewers of true crime content do not understand how the criminals could commit their crimes, especially as one of murder. So, in hearing and viewing their stories and backgrounds through media outlets they can achieve a better understanding as to why they committed their crimes.

The avid viewers are allured by the stories of the criminals in true crime media. Betty enjoys how true crime content covers—in detail—the stories of the criminals. What she likes most, similar to other avid viewers, is that people can engage with true crime content on the go. So, avid viewers can learn about the stories of criminals and be involved with other activities. Betty said this about true crime content,

They really just get into it and they go through everything and I can hear it and I don't have to watch it and I can just listen to it and go about my business and they do a very good job.

Isabella also enjoys hearing the stories about criminals and also enjoys how true crime media is on mobile platforms so she can do other activities while being engaged with true crime stories.

Isabella said this about the mobile aspect of true media,

I would like to listen to podcasts, it would be on my phone because I could listen while I am walking somewhere and just like the mobile aspect of it.

Olive enjoys learning about the cases of Ted Bundy because, *“it went into such detail that happened and everything that he went through,”* and that is why she is a big fan of true crime media and the Ted Bundy cases because she was able to, *“hear his stories and hear his interviews,”* first hand. Kim was also very intrigued by Ted Bundy’s behaviors and she wanted to understand, *“how he messed with people’s minds,”* and this applied to many avid viewers trying to comprehend how criminals could engage with everyday people to deceive them in committing their acts of crimes. These behaviors and acts are what brought avid viewers to enjoy true crime content. Being able to get an insight into what criminals were thinking when they committed their crimes and being able to hear their stories firsthand are themes as to why avid viewers engage with true crime media. They need to hear the stories firsthand because the fans of true crime want to try and comprehend as to why the criminals would commit the crimes that they would, and true crime media offers them outlets for the supporters to hear their stories.

Non-fans of true crime: Reasons for avoiding true crime media

My second research question asked, what are the reason(s) that people who express a dislike or disgust for true crime have negative feelings about the genre? In contrast to the themes for watching true crime as discussed in the previous section, my non-viewer participants had two reasons as to why they don’t enjoy this particular genre. They are generally not interested in the genre of true crime. Also, consuming true crime media makes them feel uncomfortable and/or scared. Overall, the two main themes as to why the participants do not like to consume true crime content are that they have a lack of interest and fear and discomfort.

Lack of interest

Non-viewers of true crime media found the content not engaging and some of their reasons were as simple as, *“I get bored watching... I’m not willing to sit down for three hours to watch”* (Ashley). Like Ashley, Crystal does not like true crime media because she finds it, *“boring and*

it's just not thrilling to watch." Many of the non-viewers were not drawn to true crime because it is not engaging to them, for example, Christopher said, *"It's something that doesn't grab my attention."* Overall most of the non-viewers did not have an interest in the true crime genre, *"it is just not something that interests me"* (Sarah). True crime media does not grab the attention of the non-fan participants quite simply because they do not find it to be interesting.

The non-viewers described other genres they would rather watch or other activities they would rather be doing like for example Willis stated, *"I'd rather be either doing something productive with my work or surfing."* Willis has decided that he would rather focus on working more or doing something physical. Sarah prefers other genres, explaining *"I just would rather choose to watch something else a little more comedy or just like what isn't real life."* Like Sarah, Mark would rather view content on the lighter side instead of real-life content, *"I just prefer other genres like rom coms or just comedy in general just true crime isn't my thing."* Maureen was not interested in true crime because she feels that the true crime genre sheds a positive light on the criminals and she would rather, *"see movies or TV shows based on real people helping lend a hand to a community."* These factors in lack of interest apply to many of the non-viewers who have other genres as their preference instead of true crime, *"I could watch other things that I already enjoy viewing or watching"* (Christopher). For the non-fans of true crime, the genre is not worth their time and this counter the fans of true crime because they enjoy spending their leisure time engaging with true crime media.

Some non-viewers found true crime media to be too real for them and they found it scary or they felt like the crimes could happen to themselves or someone close to them. Crystal was one of the non-viewers who found the content distasteful because, *"it can be gory and I don't like gory, blood and all that,"* and this is why she chooses not to consume true crime media. Like Crystal,

Ashley had a similar response in regards to the blood and gore aspect of true crime and wanting to skip that to the ending of the cases in true crime media, *“I don’t like the gory part of it and I don’t want to know what happened to tell me the end picture.”* Since true crime is based on real criminal cases non-viewers did not like to engage with the genre because, *“I know it’s real and it’s scary and to know things like that can happen in the world”* (Norma). The non-viewers I interviewed lack interest in true crime media because they do not find it engaging; they would rather watch other genres or do other activities in their free time.

Fear and Discomfort

Non-viewers stated that true crime media made them feel discomfort. A handful of non-viewers, for example, Norma and Esmeralda, stated they do not like to consume true crime media because they think that it is too real, and it scares them as to how real it is. Norma elaborated, *“I get nightmares and it scares me knowing that people are out there like that in seeing dark memories it can happen anytime anywhere.”* Esmeralda had this to say about true crime media on why she thinks the content is too real for her to consume,

It’s scary and just to think that humans can be so desensitized and not have morals and values and the way they treat each other or even how they come up with some the harshest things and be ok with that.

Esmeralda and other participants felt like they could become too paranoid about the world from watching true crime media because they feel like anyone could commit the crimes they hear or see from the true crime genre. Thomas shared a similar view, *“Like if you watch so much of it, it’s on your daily mind so every time you go to a certain place you think something bad will happen instead of thinking something good will happen.”* This is an interesting finding as for some people fear draws them to true crime, but in this case, it pushes them away. In the literature reviewed earlier in this study, fear was a factor as to why people would be drawn to true crime media. In

this case of the non-fans of true crime media, it drives them away from the genre and they wish to not engage in it because it makes them feel uncomfortable because of the fear.

A few non-viewers had some thoughts on why they did not enjoy true crime media in that they find discomfort from watching it. Maureen and Christopher were two examples of the non-viewers that said they found discomfort in true crime content, specifically they did not like how such media glorifies criminals. Christopher feels that overall true crime is not a positive genre for people and,

The way true crime is now I feel like it's trying to be glorified or put it in a positive light to where it's like the popular thing nowadays and I feel like it definitely shouldn't be a positive thing because it's not positive.

Maureen said she finds it uncomfortable when seeing a documentary on Ted Bundy because "*I don't want to watch a documentary about him killing 30 people it doesn't help me see the good in the world.*" Instead, Maureen enjoys *Coach Carter* and other similar media. *Coach Carter* is a movie based on a real story of a basketball coach who helps kids who would otherwise not make it out of their community go to college for basketball and academics. He also turns their high school basketball program into a winning one.

Lastly, some of the non-viewers' discomfort with true crime media was that it would put negative thoughts in their head about being fearful of people in the world. Thomas was one of the non-viewers who did not want to engage with true crime media because he would become uncomfortable and think bad thoughts about people. He said,

I don't want to think about that stuff I want to be relaxing and settling down because when you watch it sometimes like for me you become tense and paranoid.

Non-viewers' fear and discomfort stems from them thinking the content is too real and it causes them to become fearful of the world and they find discomfort in how the media glorifies the criminals and how it creates negative thoughts for them on other people.

The findings from the non-viewers were that they lack interest and are afraid or find discomfort when viewing or listening to true crime media. They find the genre of true crime boring and they would rather view other genres more in line with their personal interests. The non-fans would also rather do other activities and find that the genre is not worth their time, in contrast to fans of true crime would spend their time viewing or listening to true crime media. The non-viewers also think that true crime media is too real for them and some are afraid to view it. This counters the literature reviewed where fear was a driving factor in why people would be drawn to true crime media but through these interviews of the non-fans, they have been pushed away because of fear.

Deviancy

Deviant leisure, the guiding theoretical framework laid out earlier in this thesis, provides a framework to help understand the relationship between 'deviancy' and this form of leisure as well as non-viewers' thoughts on deviance. In this section, I return to the literature to illustrate both fans and non-fans of true crime did not find that true crime media is a deviant form of leisure. The reason why deviant leisure was used was that it involves doing an activity for leisure that would be deemed as negative according to society's views (Williams, 2009). So, in using this as a framework, deviant leisure was supposed to help interpret why society views true crime as a negative leisure activity through the participants' responses. Through my analysis of participant responses (both the avid viewers and non-viewers of true crime media), I argue that neither grouping indicated they considered consuming this media as a deviant leisure activity. Thomas, a non-fan, thought that true crime media was not considered deviant leisure because,

“It’s more accessible and it’s more like if you’re curious it doesn’t mean it’s something dark and it’s more like you want to be more knowledgeable.” As a reminder from what was discussed above, Thomas does not like the genre because it puts negative thoughts in his mind. Other participants felt that being a fan of true crime was more socially acceptable now than it has been in the past. Ottoman said,

I think it might be more acceptable now, I’m not sure just thinking in my head maybe back then if you were caught watching that stuff, they would probably think that you were down the path becoming a murderer.

Ottoman has been a fan of true crime media since he was younger, and he enjoys watching shows like *Making a Murderer*. Most of my participants had similar things to say about true crime media being more socially acceptable. They pointed towards how there is so much content now through so many platforms; it is more accessible and is therefore more acceptable. Also, most participants thought that they would not be judged negatively for being a fan of true crime, Brianna said, *“I don’t feel like I’m being judged negatively, it’s a topic that a lot of people watch, and it informs on like what goes on in the world”*. Brianna has been a fan of true crime for many years and enjoys viewing many different types of true crime content. Fans and non-fans of true crime do not think watching, listening or reading true crime media would be considered deviant leisure. After all, some of the crimes would be gruesome and this activity of engaging with the genre would not fall into the mainstream of society. From what the participants of both fans and non-fans of the genre stated was that they did not feel that it would be considered deviant leisure to view, listen or read true crime media because they feel that most people have access to the media and that many people in society do want to engage with true crime media.

Summary

Through this analysis, both of the research questions were answered through the participants' responses in the semi-structured interviews. Avid viewers of true crime media stated that the reasons for why they like to view true crime content was because of the historical aspect of true crime and also going into the minds of the criminals. Non-viewers stated the reasons for why they do not like it is because of their lack of interest in the genre and their fear and discomfort stemming from watching true crime media. It turned out that from both the avid viewers and non-viewers of true crime media felt that it was socially acceptable and was not considered a deviant leisure activity.

The key takeaways are that fans of true crime will view, listen or read the content because they are interested in the historical aspect of true crime and they want to get inside the minds of the criminals. This did not relate to the literature reviewed earlier in this thesis which argued that fans of true crime are drawn to true crime because of fear and popular culture. Instead fear was a factor that would drive people away because the non-fans of true crime do not want to engage with true crime media because they lack interest in the genre, and it causes them to be afraid and have discomfort. Both fans and non-fans of true crime media did not think it was deviant leisure to watch, listen or read true crime when the literature reviewed stated that it would be.

Conclusion

I began this brief study by asking why people do or do not view, listen, and/or read true crime content in their free time. I used the theoretical framework of deviant leisure to help understand why fans would engage with a leisure activity that could be viewed as something socially unacceptable. I then reviewed the relevant literature, which argued that fear and popular culture would be factors as to why fans would choose to partake in true crime media as part of their leisure. I conducted semi-structured interviews and used thematic coding to analyze the data, drawing connections back to the literature where appropriate.

What I discovered from my findings in this study was that fear, popular culture and deviancy were not factors in why my participants choose or do not choose to consume true crime content in their free time. From the literature I examined, fear and popular culture were driving factors as to why fans would choose to engage with true crime media. In my findings, the themes I discovered as to why fans choose to interact with the true crime genre is an interest in the historical aspect of true crime and getting inside the mind of the criminals. Fear and popular culture did not come up as a theme as to why fans of true crime media choose to watch, listen or read it. Fear and discomfort did play a role as to why non-fans of true crime media did not like the genre. The other theme for non-fans of the content was the lack of interest in true crime media. The last discovery from the interviews in correlation with the theoretical framework is that both fans and non-fans of true crime media did consider consuming true crime media was a deviant activity. Based on my findings from my interviews reasons as to why people would choose to watch, listen or read true crime media in their free time did not match what I had read in the literature and about the theoretical framework. The themes that I did come across in the

findings for fans were, the historical aspect of true crime and getting inside the mind of criminals and for non-fans, it was lack of interest and fear and discomfort of the true crime genre.

Future Work

This exploratory study provides the groundwork for continued research on true crime media and deviant leisure. Deviant leisure was a framework used to help understand the fans of true crime media in examining whether they fell into the category of deviancy or not. As a future study, one might look to examine true crime media and their fans through the lens of uses of gratification theory to analyze why fans choose to engage with true crime media and what personal gratifications they achieve from doing so.

Deviant leisure studies could be further evaluated by examining other forms of media genres besides true crime to observe if they fall into deviancy. This study explored the avenues of true crime media but in another study, one might consider looking at the genre, crime drama, to investigate if their fans and non-fans to see if the participants think that crime drama is considered a deviant leisure activity. In such a study, one could examine and compare fans and non-fans of true crime and crime drama, in particular examining the viewers' thoughts on deviant leisure and their themes from the interviews conducted. This research showed why fans and non-fans engage or do not engage with true crime media, and this study could help further develop other fandom studies of different forms of media in the future.

References

- Arntfield, M., & Williams, D. J. (2018). An Unlikely Retirement: The 2017 Las Vegas Massacre as an Exercise in Project-Based Deviant Leisure. *Homicide Studies*, 22(4), 410–421.
- Boling, K. S., & Hull, K. (2018). Undisclosed Information—Serial Is My Favorite Murder: Examining Motivations in the True Crime Podcast Audience. *Journal of Radio & Audio Media*, 25(1), 92–108.
- Bruzzi, S. (2016). Making A Genre: The Case Of The Contemporary True Crime Documentary. *Law and Humanities*, 10(2), 249–280.
- Bueno, O., & Krause, D. (2007). Scientific Theories, Models, and the Semantic Approach. *Principia*, 11(2), 187–201. <https://doi.org/10.5007/16488>
- Burger, P. (2018, May 16). The Bloody History of the True Crime Genre. Retrieved October 31, 2019, from https://daily.jstor.org/bloody-history-of-true-crime-genre/?utm_source=internalhouse&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=jstordaily_08252016&cid=eml_j_jstordaily_dailylist_08252016
- Cassibry, K., (2020, January 24). What's the Deal with the True Crime Obsession? Retrieved February 24, 2020, from <http://inpathybulletin.com/whats-deal-true-crime-obsession/>
- Chitwood, A. (2019, September 24). David Fincher Sets Anna Torv, Holt McCallany to Lead Netflix Series 'Mindhunter'. Retrieved November 13, 2019, from <https://collider.com/anna-torv-holt-mccallany-david-fincher-netflix-mindhunter/>
- Durham, A. M., Elrod, P. H., & Kinkade, P. T. (1995). Images of crime and justice: Murder and the "true crime" genre. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 23(2), 143–152.

- Inductive Approach (Inductive Reasoning) - Research-Methodology. (n.d.). Retrieved January 5, 2020, from <https://research-methodology.net/research-methodology/research-approach/inductive-approach-2/>
- Lee, D. (2019, July 12). Netflix's Mindhunter will return for a second season in August. Retrieved November 21, 2019, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20190712180501/https://www.theverge.com/2019/7/12/20691954/netflix-mindhunter-season-2-premiere-august-david-fincher-return>
- Mountain, A., & Marshall, H. (n.d.). Thematic Coding. Retrieved January 7, 2020, from <https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/evaluation-options/thematiccoding>.
- Placido, D. D. (2017, October 18). Netflix's 'Mindhunter' Is So Good, It Makes Me Feel Physically Sick. Retrieved November 13, 2019, from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/danidiplacido/2017/10/18/netflixs-mindhunter-is-so-good-it-makes-me-feel-physically-sick/#754d35703b36>
- Raymen, T., & Smith, O. (2017). Lifestyle gambling, indebtedness and anxiety: A deviant leisure perspective. *Journal of Consumer Culture*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540517736559>
- Reijnders, S. (2005). The People's Detective: True Crime in Dutch Folklore and Popular Television. *Media, Culture & Society*, 27(5), 635–651.
- Sacks, S., Chavez, C., Mundy, D., & Shafer, A. (2017). "Let's Get Cozy and Comfy and Cuddle Up and Talk About Murder:" *My Favorite Murder and the New True Crime* (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing). Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1948895388/>
- Smith, O., & Raymen, T. (2016). Deviant leisure: A criminological perspective.

- Stodolska, M., Berdychevsky, L., & Shinew, K. (2019). Gangs and Deviant Leisure. *Leisure Sciences, 41*(4), 278–293.
- Tassi, P. (2019, August 19). 'Mindhunter' Season 2 Cements It As A Top Five Netflix Show. Retrieved November 20, 2019, from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/paultassi/2019/08/19/mindhunter-season-2-cements-it-as-a-top-five-netflix-show/#251623b54c1b>
- Traylor, C. M. (2019). “*Serialized Killing: Usability and User Experience in the True Crime Genre*”. Retrieved from http://cardinalscholar.bsu.edu/bitstream/handle/123456789/201830/TraylorC_2019-3_BODY.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
- TRUE CRIME: definition in the Cambridge English Dictionary. (n.d.). Retrieved November 21, 2019, from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/true-crime>.
- Vicary, A. M., & Fraley, C. R. (2010). Captured by True Crime: Why Are Women Drawn to Tales of Rape, Murder, and Serial Killers? *Social Psychological and Personality Science, 1*(1), 81–86.
- Williams, D. J. (2009). Deviant Leisure: Rethinking ‘The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly. *Leisure Sciences, 31*(2), 207–213.

Appendix A: Interview Questions

Avid Viewers Questions

1. When you hear “true crime media”, what does that make you think of?
2. When and how were you first introduced to true crime media?
3. What is your favorite or some of your favorite examples of true crime media? Why is it your favorite?
4. Have you ever introduced anyone else to true crime media? Why or why not?
 - a. When introducing other people to true crime, is there a particular piece of media you tend to introduce them to first? What is it and why?
5. Do you think that being a fan of true crime media is more socially acceptable now than it has been in the past?
6. If you tell people that you enjoy viewing true crime content in your free time do you feel like you are being judged negatively for viewing it? Why or why not?
7. Do you like to do other activities while viewing true crime content? (homework, chores, etc.)
8. What platform do you like to best view it on? (mobile device, television, laptop, etc.)
9. What form of true crime do you like best? (serial killers, cold cases, etc.)
10. Do you like to view crime content to keep up with trends of its popularity? Why or why not?
11. Do you feel like true crime content is on the rise of popularity? Why or not?
12. Do you feel like true crime is something that would be considered dark leisure activity? If yes or no, why?
13. Why do you think historically people have always been drawn to true crime?

14. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your interest in true crime?

Non-Viewers Questions

1. How do you personally define true crime?
2. Why do you not like to view true crime content?
3. When you hear “true crime media”, what does that make you think of?
4. When I first talked to you about my research study, you didn’t have positive things to say about “true crime”. Why was that?
5. Have you ever had a positive or enjoyable experience involving true crime media?
6. Do you think that being a fan of true crime media is more socially acceptable now than it has been in the past?
7. Can something be changed or altered that would make you want to view true crime content? If so why or why not?
8. Do you feel like true crime is something that would be considered dark leisure activity?
If yes or no, why?
9. Do you think historically people have always been drawn to true crime? Why or why not?
10. What are the factors in why you do not like to view true crime content?
11. Would you view true crime content if you had influence from your friends, peers or others that would make you want to view it? If so why or why not?
12. Are there any motives as to why you do not view true crime content? If so, what are those motives and if not, why do you not have any motives?
13. Can you understand why other people want to view true crime content in their free time?
If you can or cannot explain, please say why?

Appendix B: Codes

Avid Viewers

Codes	Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learning about the history • before our time • back story • unsolved cases 	The historical aspect of true crime
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • messed with people's minds • I want to know why someone would want to murder someone • I like to figure out what they were thinking • being able to hear his stories and hear his interviews • I just to know what is going on in people's minds 	Getting inside the minds of criminals

Non-Viewers

Codes	Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boring • not as thrilling • I didn't find it interesting • it was not engaging • I just never really liked watching • I do not enjoy watching it 	Lack of Interest
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I don't like gore • Blood • it bugs me out • I just don't like the depressing side to it • it bothers me 	Fear & Discomfort

Appendix C: Tables

Avid Viewers

<i>Name</i>	<i>Man/Woman</i>	<i>Age Range</i>	<i>How they came to be a fan of true crime</i>	<i>Favorite true crime media</i>
Ismael	M	18-35	Since he was in undergrad and it was shown to him in a class	History Channel
Ottoman	M	18-35	Since 2015	Making a Murderer
Lucky	M	18-35	Since he was younger, and his cousin introduced him to true crime media	Unsolved Mysteries
Misha	M	18-35	Since he was younger, flipping through channels and discovered true crime media	Unsolved Mysteries
Kim	W	18-35	When she was younger, and her father introduced her to true crime media	Any media involving Ted Bundy or Jeffrey Dahmer
Mary	W	18-35	Has been an avid viewer for a few years	When They See Us & cold cases
Olive	W	18-35	Since she was younger	Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes
Isabella	W	18-35	Since she was younger, and her sisters introduced her to true crime media.	Mindhunter and Serial
Betty	W	18-35	Since she was in high school.	YouTube Videos
Brianna	W	18-35	Since she was younger.	The news

Table 1A

This is a table of avid viewers of true crime media stating their name, gender, age-range, how they became a fan of true crime and their favorite true crime media.

Non-Viewers

<i>Name</i>	<i>Man/Woman</i>	<i>Age Range</i>	<i>Why they do not like true crime media</i>	<i>Other activities they would rather do or other genres they would rather view</i>
Willis	M	18-35	It is not realistic for him	Surf
Mark	M	18-35	Scares him because of past experiences	Watch romantic comedies
Christopher	M	18-35	It does not interest him	Watch other genres
Thomas	M	18-35	It puts negative thoughts in his head about people in the world	Watch other genres
Crystal	W	18-35	Boring and gory	Watch other genres
Maureen	W	18-35	Her family values	Spend time with family
Ashley	W	18-35	Boring and gory	Watch thrillers and dramas
Norma	W	18-35	Lack of interest	Watch other genres
Esmeralda	W	18-35	Hates true crime media	Watch other genres
Sarah	W	18-35	Lack of interest	Watch comedies

Table 1B

This is a table of non-viewers of true crime media stating their name, gender, age-range, why they do not like true crime media and other genres or activities they prefer over true crime.

