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NETFLIX AND KILL: A FRAMING AND USES AND GRATIFICATIONS COMPARATIVE  
ANALYSIS OF SERIAL KILLER REPRESENTATIONS IN THE MEDIA

MALLORIE MARGARET LATORA

105 Pages

Serial murder is tightly woven into the foundation of American history, and as such, so has serial murder been a plotline in American media. Throughout time, there have been books, television shows, films, and podcasts that both entertain and inform media consumers about the heinous crimes committed by serial killers. Even when known for violently murdering multiple victims, serial killers have an allure that takes their status from death row inmate to a celebrity in their own right. The popularity of the serial killer genre of media calls for an analysis of the representation of serial killers in the media, along with an analysis of gratifications received from audience members after viewing. With an inductive, qualitative approach, this thesis used framing and uses and gratifications as a means for understanding serial killer frames and audience reactions to those frames, ultimately shedding light on audience interest in serial killer-themed media content. This thesis provides both theoretical and practical implications.

**KEYWORDS:** serial killer, violence, crime, framing theory, uses and gratifications, murder

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ANALYSIS OF SERIAL KILLER REPRESENTATIONS IN THE MEDIA

MALLORIE MARGARET LATORA

A Thesis Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

School of Communication

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

2020

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ANALYSIS OF SERIAL KILLER REPRESENTATIONS IN THE MEDIA

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M.M.L.

## CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	i
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION	1
Purpose of the Study	3
Preview	3
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE	5
Violence as a Spectacle	5
Social Construction of Crime	8
Social Norms	9
Deviance	11
Morbid Curiosity	13
Representations of Crime in Media	15
Crime News	15
Murder and Entertainment	17
True Crime	19
Infotainment	20
Serial Murder	22
Framing Theory	24
Uses and Gratifications	27
Television and Film	29
Streaming	30
Research Questions	31

Conclusion	31
CHAPTER III: METHOD	33
Data Collection	33
<i>Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile</i>	34
<i>Mindhunter</i>	34
<i>Rotten Tomatoes</i> Reviews	35
Justification for Methodology	37
Framing Analysis	38
Uses and Gratifications Analysis	39
The Comparison	39
CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS	41
Framing Analysis	41
Frames Present in <i>Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile</i>	42
Frames Present in <i>Mindhunter</i>	50
Framing Analysis Summary	59
Uses and Gratifications Analysis	60
Audience Reviews of <i>Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile</i>	60
Audience Reviews of <i>Mindhunter</i>	66
Summary of Thematic Analysis	70
A Comparison of Frames and Gratifications	70
Conclusion	71
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION	73
Summary of Findings	73



Framing Analysis	73
Thematic Analysis	75
Comparative Analysis	76
Theoretical Implications	77
Framing Theory	77
Uses and Gratifications	79
Practical Implications	81
Limitations	82
Future Research	83
Conclusion	84
REFERENCES	86

## INTRODUCTION

“The powerful visceral appeal of serial killers has led to a macabre love affair between them and the American public” (Bonn, 2014, p. 226). Serial murder is deeply rooted in the history of the United States, so much so that it has become an entire industry in American popular culture (Schmid, 2005). Killers like Jeffrey Dahmer, Ted Bundy, and John Wayne Gacy are infamous, American icons (Wiest, 2011) with countless films and television shows about their crimes that both haunt and entertain audiences. Serial killers are a popular topic for podcasts, books, and movies, both fictional and nonfictional (Boling & Hull, 2018; Durham, Elrod, & Kinkade, 1995; Roberts, 2014; Vicary & Fraley, 2010). “Society’s passion for serial killers is well documented by its insatiable appetite for Hollywood films on the subject, which number in the hundreds over the years” (Bonn, 2014, p. 226). With interest in serial murder at an all-time high, *Netflix* even created its own unique category on the streaming platform dedicated to this type of content. This interest goes far beyond its place in Hollywood with the sale of murder trading cards, T-shirts, and even nail clippings and hair from actual murderers (Schmid, 2005).

Historically, violence has been publicly enjoyed as early as the Roman times (Jewell, Moti, & Coates, 2011). Technology has advanced, but the cultural interest in violence has remained. Instead of gathering in a coliseum to watch gladiators fight to the death, audience members today seek entertainment that highlights another form of violence: serial murder.

Through a multi-step method, this thesis analyzed interest in serial murder through two specific media texts and their correlated reviews on a review aggregating website. With both framing and uses and gratifications analyses, I drew on the experiences of audience members to explain why they enjoyed, or did not enjoy, specific examples of serial killer media content.

Now, more than ever, media consumers have thousands of options at their fingertips. Video streaming has expanded over the last several years, providing audiences with different streaming services for every desire. The uses and gratifications approach to media research notes the competitive nature between media outlets and the active choice among audience members to consume media that gratify their needs (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973, 1974; Rubin, 2009; Rubin & Perse, 1987; Urista, Dong, & Day, 2009). This thesis, then, is an exploration of why media consumers choose specific serial killer content to gratify their needs.

Two recent examples of media texts in the serial killer genre are the film *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* (2019), and the series *Mindhunter* (2017). The film follows Ted Bundy through his journey meeting long-time girlfriend Liz Kendall all the way to his death sentence. *Mindhunter* is a historical fiction *Netflix* original series that follows two FBI agents as they interview convicted serial killers. Both texts are based in the 1970s-1980s and tell the tales of true American serial killers. However, there is a clear difference in the way the serial killers are represented throughout the texts. Told from Kendall's perspective, Bundy is questionably innocent until the near end of the film, while the serial killers in *Mindhunter* are in chains describing their crimes in graphic detail to the FBI agents.

The discrepancy between the depictions of these serial killers is even more interesting when looking at the audience reviews of the texts on the review aggregating website, *Rotten Tomatoes*. *Mindhunter* was highly favored over *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile*, with obvious comments from media consumers referencing the depictions of the killers (Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile Reviews, 2020; *Mindhunter*: Season One Reviews, 2020). These two texts allowed for many insights about what people enjoy within the serial killer genre.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this thesis was to explain what media consumers enjoy, or do not enjoy, about serial killer content. Even further, this thesis acts as an expansion to the ways in which serial killer media research is currently performed. Framing research about serial killers has focused on their representation in news coverage (Wiest, 2016), while I examined the historical fiction and fiction genre in television in film. Serial killers in the media have also been studied from the uses and gratifications perspective (Boling & Hull, 2018), but no studies have utilized data from an online forum. Even further, no research about serial killers has used a multiple-step analysis to make the connection between serial killer depictions in the media and audience perceptions. Using both a framing and uses and gratifications frameworks, I explored the connection between serial killer content and audience experience. The relationship that consumers have with the media is complicated, and this study's significance lies within its ability to further understand this complexity.

## **Preview**

The following chapter is a review of literature in which I establish the historical treatment of violence and the social construction of crime. I explain relevance of social norms and deviance within news coverage and define the different ways in which crime is represented in the media. I define true crime and establish its cultural relevance, as well as examine all previous research about serial murder. I provide a discussion for both framing theory and uses and gratifications to provide context for my methodology. My method chapter describes how I performed my analysis using a multi-step approach. I establish the relevance of the chosen texts, and the benefit to using both framing and uses and gratifications.

My results chapter details the serial killer frames established in both texts, as well as provides the findings of my thematic analysis of audience reviews. Additionally, I draw connections between the frames and audience reviews. After my results, my final chapter includes a discussion of the implications for my research. Along with a reflection of my findings, I provide recommendations for future research.

This thesis is a starting point for many other exciting research endeavors. In the pursuit for understanding why audiences enjoy serial killer content, this project exemplifies a way to understand why audiences are drawn to other types of content as well. This thesis also establishes the benefits to a multimodal approach to uses and gratifications studies.

## CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In this chapter, I provide an in-depth review of crime and its representation in media. Beginning with the historical background of the treatment of violence in society, I examine the way in which fascination with murder has evolved over time. With the many changes to news and entertainment media, I establish the relationship between them both and how they have come together as a new form of “infotainment.” Additionally, I provide a theoretical review of both framing theory and uses and gratifications to support the research questions and reasoning for the method I will follow in this thesis. This chapter elaborates on the research that has been performed regarding serial murder and the media in order to provide the necessary background for my thesis. My review of literature sets up the study by establishing potential reasons for interest in serial murder and the importance of understanding this fascination through the audience’s eyes.

### **Violence as a Spectacle**

Organized societies have always been entertained by violence, dating back to the times of ancient Rome (Jewell, Moti, & Coates, 2011). Large crowds would form in coliseums to witness the brutal battles of the gladiators and epic chariot races. Even today, with great advances in technology, people still gather around a ring to watch boxers fight each other, in some cases, even to death. Groups gathering to enjoy violence bring people together as a community (Jewell, Moti, & Coates, 2011). Aggression and violence add drama to the spectacle by intensifying entertainment value for the audience (Comisky, Bryant, & Zillman, 1977). Violence simply intrigues viewers. From joining together at the coliseum, to enjoying media content on the television at home, fans of violence have shared in violent public spectacles for centuries.

Though our ways of consuming violence as entertainment have changed, as a culture, we still enjoy violence and have encouraged the making of violence into a popular phenomenon.

Although violence in the sporting arena, even when it ends in death, is socially sanctioned and acceptable (Jewell, Moti, & Coates, 2011), violence as a result of criminal violence and murder are not. Yet, crime and murder still provide a high level of entertainment when consumed through the media. The same violence that has interested people for generations now has the added element of mystery, only amplifying the entertainment quality of the content (Knobloch-Westerwick & Keplinger, 2008). Interest in watching violent media can be linked, in some cases, to the personality of the viewers (Aluja-Fabregat & Torrubia-Beltri, 1998; Zuckerman & Litle, 1986). Those who experience high levels of enjoyment in consuming violent media content also have a desire to experience new and exciting things on a regular basis. Zuckerman and Litle (1986) referred to these individuals as high sensation seekers. The development of the media has encouraged the continued interest in violence and allowed for violence to grow into a true spectacle.

Debord (1967) has done extensive research regarding the media and its role in the creation of a social spectacle. The media construct an explanation of events that occur in our lives on a day-to-day basis. As media consumers, our understanding of events is based in the representations that are shown in the media. There, then, exists a social relationship between the lived experiences of the people and the mediated images represented (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017). Kellner (2009) expands on Debord's (1967) work in his book, *Media Spectacle*:

Media spectacles are those phenomena of media culture that embody contemporary society's basic values, serve to initiate individuals into its way of life, and dramatize its controversies and struggles, as well as its modes of conflict resolution. They include

media extravaganzas, sporting events, political happenings, and those attention-grabbing occurrences that we call news – a phenomenon that itself has been subjected to the logic of spectacle and tabloidization in the era of the media sensationalism, political scandal and contestation, seemingly unending cultural war, and the new phenomenon of Terror War (p. 2).

The media create a spectacle out of current events and perpetuate their stories by telling their own version of what happened. While the stories can be similar, they tend to only be a representation of the actual event (Debord, 1967; Kellner, 2009; Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017).

What is interesting about the magnitude of a media spectacle is that they can spread throughout society with or without the support of the mainstream sources (Kellner, 2009). Stories of violence can be spread through popular news media platforms but can also just as easily go viral in the world of Web 2.0. Web users can not only access information, but also contribute to the content and spread it to large groups of people (Murugesan, 2007). Violence almost always becomes a spectacle one way or another. From public executions, to lynching, to modern day murder, violence seeps into our everyday media platforms and creates public interest (Foucault, 1977; Reyes, 2016; Wasserman & Stack, 1994). Whereas people used to gather in the town square to witness public acts of violence, we can now witness such violence from the safety and privacy of our own homes on the television screen.

It is important to understand the magnitude of a public spectacle as it can influence the thoughts of those who observe it. Spectacles can be used to exhibit power and send political messages (Foucault, 1977). In his book, *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977) discusses how public torture and execution were used to create a public awareness and fear about committing similar crimes. Everyone was to know that if they were to break similar laws, they would face a



similar fate. In this way, violence was used ritually to bring order to the town. As a culture, we are still heavily invested in executions, even though they are not publicly attended as they once were. In fact, there is an entire website dedicated to information regarding the executions of individuals on death row (Death Penalty Information Center, n.d.). Upcoming executions, methods for executions, and even information regarding how to contact inmates is available, as well as the history of executions in the United States. Even though these executions are not publicly broadcasted the way they used to be, there is still an interest that surrounds this form of violence and an element of media that fuels this interest.

Violence throughout history has been celebrated by nearly all cultures in some form or another. Murderers have become celebrities, their deaths are public events, and television shows and movies about violence are produced at extremely high levels. There is an interesting interplay between condoned and condemned forms of killing, with both still receiving heavy press coverage. Whether on the news or in the form of entertainment, violence in society is a true spectacle.

### **Social Construction of Crime**

While violence against others tends to be frowned upon by cultures and civilizations around the world and throughout history, the degree to which certain acts of violence are accepted by a culture and others rejected depends on the individual culture and its norms of public and private behaviors. Many cultures, for example, distinguish between homicide as a crime and homicide as a justifiable act – perhaps in a moment of self-defense. The way societies construct the idea of crime is through their individual understandings of violence. What people find unacceptable, specifically when it comes to murder, is established based on the cultural norms that have existed throughout their lives.

## **Social Norms**

Norms are attitudes about the standards for approved behaviors in a society (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004; Sunstein, 1996). Social norms signify what should and should not be done by those who are a part of the society. They exist in nearly every aspect of human life and guide in understanding what is acceptable and what is not. They are some of the most powerful predictors for human behavior (Cialdini, Kallgren, & Ren, 1991; Newcomb, 1961):

There are norms about littering, dating, smoking, singing, when to stand, when to sit, when to show anger, when, how, and with whom to express affection, when to talk, when to listen, when to discuss personal matters, when to use contractions, when (and with respect to what) to purchase insurance (Sunstein, 1996, p. 914).

Norms create meaning within a society (Sunstein, 1996). Members of a group understand the importance of a phenomenon based on the norms set into place. Norms can both guide and constrain behavior and are learned through communication between members of the specific group through which the norms exist (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). Norms acting as a constraint have the power to eliminate a person's freedom to choose how they behave (Sunstein, 1996). Because of this, norms create conformity among group members (Fehr & Fishbacher, 2004). Group members tend to follow norms voluntarily if their goals align with the expected normative behaviors. Going against the publicly accepted norms lends the risk of getting ostracized by community members or a harsher punishment, depending on the norm that was broken (Fehr & Fishbacher, 2004; Göckeritz, Schmidt, & Tomasello, 2014). In fact, Bendor and Swistak (2001) noted that individuals make choices about their behavior based on their perception of receiving some form of punishment. Norms are far less meaningful if there is no fear of social sanction.

There is an important distinction in social norms literature between injunctive and descriptive norms (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990; Lapinski & Rimal, 2005; Strano, 2006). While providing different motivations, both types of norms influence behavior (Strano, 2006). Injunctive norms are those that pertain to people's understanding of what ought to be done (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990; Lapinski & Rimal, 2005). Conversely, descriptive norms refer to the perceptions about what is actually done by others in a community or group. Social sanctions are more likely to occur when people consider behavior on the basis of injunctive norms. Whether for approval or avoidance of punishment, choices about behavior are made based on what ought to be done (Strano, 2006). Those adhering to descriptive norms often do so in order to fit in with the crowd and typically do not involve a social sanction of any kind.

Understanding injunctive and descriptive norms does not, alone, predict behavior, as different influences may change individual behavior in specific situations. In some cases, such as littering, it has been found that injunctive norms are more influential (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990). For example, while participants in one study had an underlying belief that most people littered, they still perceived littering to be a socially unacceptable behavior and abstained (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990). In this instance, injunctive norms were found to have the power to potentially promote prosocial behavior, more than descriptive norms. In other cases, descriptive norms may have a stronger influence. Rimal and Real (2003) analyzed the influence of social norms on college alcohol consumption and found that students were more likely to drink when they believed their peers were also drinking, despite the lack of social approval. Identifying themselves as different and straying away from behavior associated with the injunctive norms was a motivation to defy the norms agreed upon in society. This reasoning

helps in the overall understanding of deviant behavior and the break away from behaving in culturally accepted ways.

There are several reasons an individual may choose to behave outside of the norm, and when this happens, it is known as deviance (Sunstein, 1996). There is a sense of pleasure individuals feel when breaking away from the conventional nature of social norms. Acting outside of the norm is not necessarily bad, and in some cases, has promoted positive social change:

Humans do not act solely on the basis of the popularity of a behavior. Otherwise, the world would not have witnessed minority behaviors that have shaped history, ones that are described as acts of bravery and courage in fighting the powerful, and sometimes coercive, forces perpetrated by the majority. Nor would we have seen acts of defiance in everyday life, in which individuals take an unpopular stance despite group pressures (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005, p. 128).

Recognizing the influence of social norms and the consequences of deviance are an important aspect of this thesis. The way in which deviant behavior is reported in the media is largely the result of the norms set in the first place.

## **Deviance**

Deviance is a sociological term that refers to any attitude or behavior that violates an accepted norm in society (Abrams, 2016; Adler & Adler, 2011; Dodge, 1985). Many forms of deviance exist with varying levels of violations, each unique to the specific occurrence (Osgood, Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman, 1988). It is also possible that several deviant behaviors happen at one time. The specific behaviors that are considered deviant depend on the beliefs, attitudes, and accepted behaviors of the culture in which group members are living (Brauer & Checkron,

2005). Even further, deviance affirms those agreed beliefs, attitudes, and accepted behaviors (Herington & van de Fliert, 2018). It is apparent when someone goes against the norms in society, thus reminding all others what norms and values exist. This is especially true in regards to negative deviance, but not all deviance has to be negative.

For the purpose of this thesis, I will be focusing on criminal deviant behavior, specifically serial murder, and how it is represented in the media. Jessor and Jessor (1977) offer a definition that supports this analysis and its use of deviance as a behavior that has a negative effect on society. The authors describe deviance as “behavior that is socially defined as a problem, a source of concern, or as undesirable by the norms of conventional society and the institutions of adult authority, and its occurrence usually elicits some kind of social control response” (Jessor & Jessor, 1977, p. 33). This definition was created on the basis of deviant behavior among the youth but can be applied to serial murder as well. Brauer and Checkron (2005) found that the more deviant a behavior, the more likely a person viewing or learning about the deviance would react, and ultimately give attention to persons committing the deviant act. This is especially true in the consideration of serial murder.

The way in which crime is socially constructed and understood through the media has much to do with the behaviors, themselves, and if they are perceived as deviant. Whether the behavior is positive or negative, experiencing and learning about the deviance of others through the media is intriguing to consumers. As previously mentioned, the media perpetuates violence as a spectacle that provides the space for audience entertainment of deviant behavior. Journalists are motivated to cover stories about deviant acts just as the entertainment industry builds their narratives around characters deviating from the norms of society. Deviance is unexpected and

exciting and has an appeal to media consumers that nondeviant behavior simply cannot compete with.

### **Morbid Curiosity**

Media messages function in a complex way when it comes to social norms. In one sense, they reflect the preexisting norms within a culture; in another, they can generate new norms as a means of shifting what the public thinks about crime and violence. The understanding of crime in the United States is deeply influenced by the media representations of the crimes:

Media images or characterizations of crime and crime control in the United States are constituted within the core of the social, political, and psychological makeup of American Society. Mass news representations in the “information age” have become the most significant communication by which the average person comes to know the world outside his or her immediate experiences (Barak, 1994, p. 3).

The media constructs stories, influences consumers, and can create spectacles out of violence, in part, because of the innate morbid curiosity within humans. This morbid sense of curiosity means that people are interested in “highly intense negative information” (Oosterwijk, 2017, p. 1). This curiosity entails a combination of “compulsion, excitement, and fear” surrounding subjects including death and harm of others (Pinkerton & Zhou, 2007, p. 129; Zuckerman, 1984). Morbid curiosity is natural and occurs within all different personality types (Pinkerton & Zhou, 2007). Oosterwijk (2017) found that people seek out negative information and images in order to evoke specific sensations and experiences that are caused by the stimuli. The fear and excitement that come with consuming negative information and images is actually sought after. Morbid curiosity could also occur because of the opportunity it gives people to learn more about the world. People

want to learn more about things they do not understand, in this case, death and harm of others. This could be, then, a reason behind violence acting as a spectacle.

Interestingly, there exists a link between this sense of morbid curiosity and the media (Pinkerton & Zhou, 2007). People are drawn, and often choose to subject themselves to negative information and imagery, such as looking at pictures of a car accident (Oosterwijk, 2017). Over the last several decades, the media, specifically the news, has overwhelmed viewers with negative stories and images.

The concept, espoused by journalists and media critics alike, that bad news makes for good news is one that has long been analyzed by media researchers, and there is evidence this trend towards negativity in the news has increased in recent decades. Content analysis has shown that negativity in the media increased sharply during the 1970s, jumped again during the 1980s, and continues to rise (Patterson, 1996). This has occurred across the spectrum of news media, including print and radio, but the most dramatic example may be found in broadcast television news (Pinkerton & Zhou, 2007, p. 130). Negative stories have not only increased over time, but they are also consistently more appealing to consumers over positive stories. When given the choice, people preferred information and images involving death, violence, and harm (Oosterwijk, 2017). Media platforms can encourage higher viewership from consumers by keeping many of their stories on the morbid spectrum. “By increasing the negative content, viewers who respond favorably to such media could be gained without the threat of losing a substantial segment of the audience who might be shocked or repulsed by excessive negativity” (Pinkerton & Zhou, 2007, p. 140). The morbid curiosity within people is exploited by media creators to promote a followership of their specific program.

## **Representations of Crime in Media**

In order to build a stronger connection between morbid curiosity and the media, I have established how violence and negative information are actually represented. “Mass media representations of crime, deviance, and disorder have been a perennial cause of concern” (Reiner, 2002, p. 366). Media representations of crime are simply a version of the event that occurred. Because news and other media outlets are the main source of information to the public (Brownstein, 1991), this generates a concern for media consumers. With such an omnipresent media environment, media outlets are under serious pressure to create and disseminate content and stay relevant in comparison to their competitors (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017). Mihailidis and Viotty (2017) discussed the challenges in the media environment:

Pressures—economic, technological, political, and social—combined with the need to be constantly present, to report with equal speed and alacrity, and to gain followers in the process, has led to a landscape where “online news media are more part of the problem of online misinformation than they are the solution” (p. 447).

In all facets of media communication, both online and through television and film, there are problems with misrepresentation of events and people. While some things are overrepresented, others are not represented at all.

### **Crime News**

The way in which crimes are presented in the media is complicated, with no specific formula for how stories are covered from case to case. In fact, the interrelationship between media, society, and criminology “is essentially a complex and dynamic enterprise” (Barak, 1994, p. 5). Some of the previous research about the media construction of crime revolves around journalists and their selection bias (Barak, 1994; Lundman, 2003; Staab, 1990). Some crimes are



emphasized while others are ignored; some stories are sympathetic to the victims while others blame the victims (Barak, 1994). Journalists must make choices about what stories to include and exclude from the news, and those choices rely heavily on the level of deviance, which potentially turns into newsworthiness (Lundman, 2003; Pritchard & Hughes, 1997; Staab, 1990).

Scholars have dedicated time to understanding the choices that journalists make when selecting what stories to cover, and it often relates back to gender and race, as well as the crime itself (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000; Gruenwald, Pizarro, & Chermak, 2009; Lundman, 2003; Pritchard, 1985; Pritchard & Hughes, 1997; Sacco, 1995). The journalistic motto, “if it bleeds, it leads” is not necessarily true for all victims and all crimes. There is a distinction in news coverage depending on the race of the criminal as well as the victim. Stories involving Black and Latino victims receive less news coverage than those involving White victims (Petersen, 2016; Sacco, 1995). Petersen (2016) found that even the neighborhood in which the crime occurred impacted the coverage the crime received. Homicides that occurred in or around disadvantaged areas were less likely to receive news coverage at all. “Law enforcement agencies are less likely to seek or find evidence of serial murder activity where the victims are African-American” (Jenkins, 1994, p. 173). Since police agencies are often the main source of information for journalists, this is one way in which the media perpetuate an incorrect perception of crime.

Beyond race, the media construct their stories of crime based on the type of crime itself. Interestingly, a study comparing homicide coverage between England and Wales found that newspapers were more likely to cover homicides involving suffocation over those that involved poison (Peelo, Francis, Soothill, Pearson, & Ackerley, 2004). Sexual homicides and those that involved an obvious motive were covered more often than homicides involving children. The stories that media outlets choose to tell have substance, even a level of excitement. The intrigue

that surrounds violent news stories aligns closely with the concept of morbid curiosity (Oosterwijk, 2017; Pinkerton & Zhou, 2007; Zuckerman, 1984). The different narratives presented in the media help the news consumers make sense of crime in very specific contexts.

On a local and national level, murders are one of the most frequently reported stories. Beyond the television screen, murders also capture the attention of readers on the front page of newspapers (Pritchard, 1985). Because of the frequent coverage on all forms of media, serial murder is highly overrepresented, encouraging the belief that it occurs more often than it actually does (Wiest, 2011). This could be because the more violent the crime, the more likely it is to become a spectacle (Wasserman & Stack, 1994). Serial murder only accounts for less than one percent of deaths in the United States per year (Morton & Hiltz, 2008). Overrepresentation is also evident with crimes committed by individuals that are part of a racial minority: these crimes are reported at a much higher level than nonminority crimes. (Gruenewald, Pizarro, & Chermak, 2009; Lundman, 2003; Pritchard, 1985). Statistically, non-violent crime is more prevalent; however, the media coverage encourages viewers to believe that violent crimes occur more frequently. The construction of media content involving crime is a culmination of information from law enforcement and the frames placed on crime stories by journalists.

### **Murder and Entertainment**

More than just the news industry, murder and violence are a staple in the film and entertainment industry. The excitement of a thriller film and the intrigue of a serial killer that people can empathize with often make up the characters on our screens, both in film and television. Even when depictions of violence and death are particularly gruesome, it does not deter audiences away from viewing the content (Goldstein, 1999). What makes film and

television especially popular platforms for content involving violence is that they both can expand on storylines in a way news stories never could.

Violence has always been present in the media, even in its earliest forms (Murley, 2008; Schmid, 2005). In fact, one of the first recordings produced by Thomas Edison on his phonograph was a reading of H.H. Holmes' murder confessions (Schmid, 2005). The depiction of the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, was one of the first kinetoscopes. One of the first narrative films, *The Great Train Robbery*, depicted a victim thrown from a train as well as several robbers getting hit by a train (Schmid, 2005). Such early examples of violence in entertainment media speak to the impact it has had in society. "Film is unique among popular cultural media in its potential to shed light on the reasons why we have celebrity serial killers because it is a medium defined by the representations of acts of violence and by the presence of stars" (Schmid, 2005, p. 105). Films dive deeper into the narratives and give a more intimate look at death and violence, all while taking advantage of the star power that comes with celebrated actors and actresses.

Television, even more than film, can elaborate on a murder or serial killer narrative (Schmid, 2005). The time given over an entire television series allows viewers to explore the character and truly understand their point of view, even giving viewers the opportunity to grow empathy toward the killers. The small screen promotes a stronger level of intimacy with the content because it is as if the murders are being brought into their own homes (Murley, 2008). Audiences are both fearful and entertained while watching murder mysteries solved in front of their eyes. Consuming content of the murder genre on a television encourages viewers to see themselves as "pseudoexperts" (Murley, 2008, p. 110). In watching numerous shows about crime and murder, viewers believe that they have higher level of knowledge regarding the subjects.

They become detectives, only solving crime from the comfort of their couches without subjecting themselves to any real danger.

Giving viewers an entire television series to get to know characters allows them to empathize and understand murder from the killer's perspective. What was once a scary monster in the shadows has now become a relatable antihero that viewers grow to love over time. Specifically, Santaularia (2010) and Smith (2011) reviewed the television series *Dexter*, finding the ways in which his character touched the hearts of audiences, even through his many violent acts. Serial killer Dexter Morgan, a blood spatter expert for the Miami police department, cannot help but be loved by his fans as his murders only entail taking out the real bad guys who deserve it (Santaularia, 2010; Smith, 2011). The complexity of his character could only be understood through the format of television series. Even though he killed, he killed for the good of others, ultimately leaving him a hero in the eyes of the audiences (Santaularia, 2010; Smith, 2011). The ability for a television show to paint a serial killer as the hero speaks to the impact that television has on media consumers' understanding of violence.

### **True Crime**

Another subgenre of murder content in the media is one referred to as true crime. In some cases, true crime is mixed in with other forms of crime entertainment, but I argue that an important distinction should be made between the fictional narratives of murder, such as *Dexter*, and actual accounts of murder that occurred within our society, such as Ted Bundy or Jeffrey Dahmer. True crime is more closely associated with nonfiction and the retelling of criminal acts of real people (Franks, 2016). Murder, and specifically serial murder, is one of the most popular topics to cover in the true crime genre (Franks, 2016). Stories of actual crimes are enjoyed on

nearly every media platform, from books to documentaries, to television and, more recently, podcasts (Boling & Hull, 2018; Bruzzi, 2016; Franks, 2016; Murley, 2008, Schmid, 2005).

Women, more than men, are attracted to the true crime genre (Roberts, 2014; Vicary & Fraley, 2010). Vicary and Fraley (2010) explored why women are attracted to books with a true-crime plotline and found that women enjoy the genre because they like to read books with female lead characters. Women reading these novels often relate closely with the characters, even when they are the victim of the crimes. Because of this, women felt they were learning from the novels and in turn, more equipped for survival should something similar happen in their own lives.

In a similar study, Boling and Hull (2018) wanted to better understand the interest behind true-crime podcasts. They determined that women were motivated to listen to podcasts for entertainment, convenience, and the avoidance of boredom. Men had the same top three motivators, but at a lower rating than women. Women were also more motivated to listen to true-crime podcasts so they could eventually discuss them with their friends. The social aspect of these podcasts, and true crime in general, emphasizes even further that violence in the media brings people together.

### **Infotainment**

In making a distinction between violence in the news, fiction narratives, and true crime, it is important to recognize the blurred line that exists between all three smaller genres within the overarching crime genre in the media. Doyle (2006) acknowledged that in his own study, he used the terms “crime stories” and “crime in the media” to refer to both actual criminal events that occurred as well as fictional portrayals (p. 868). He noted that other scholars have often made the same choice in their research, making it even more difficult to differentiate the subgenres. Doyle (2006) goes on to encourage future scholars to better explain the “interplay between crime news

and crime fiction” (p. 877), noting the cultural impact that both have on media consumers. While not a central aspect of my thesis, I aim to close this gap by referring to this grey area as *infotainment*. The purpose of telling crime stories is to give factual information; however, there are also elements of dramatization involved (Graber, 1994). This dramatization lends itself to a more entertaining version of the story, one that can better capture and hold the attention of the audience.

When analyzing directors, Graber (1994) found that, in order for the content to appeal to larger audiences, there would often be entertaining elements within their stories in order to inform while also keeping them interested:

They believe that this requires attracting and then maintaining the audience’s attention through dramatic presentations, using visuals to convey the essence of human behavior. The directors opt in favor of telling a good story rather than conveying significant facts whenever the two objectives cannot be readily combined, because attracting attention is a precondition for transmitting information (Graber, 1994, p. 501).

Representing crime in the media is not only about providing the stories, themselves, but also telling the stories in a way that makes audiences want to listen. The dramatic framing of crime stories has been criticized because sometimes it lends itself to inaccurate perceptions of events (Graber, 1994). However, the dramatic ways in which stories are told also helps with the dissemination of the information.

While it is sometimes tricky to differentiate between crime news and entertainment, it is important, nonetheless, to understand the role it plays in the socialization of how people come to understand crime. The media, but particularly television, predisposes viewers to specific beliefs and cultivates an understanding of reality. When media viewers are shown repetitious messaging,

they tend to believe what they consume as the truth in their own lives. Although this is not a core point of my thesis, I argue that one of the harmful effects of inaccurate representations of serial killers in the media is the cultivation of fear throughout society. If the media represented crime with more accuracy and less dramatization, perhaps our society would be less fearful of crime.

### **Serial Murder**

One of the most popular representations of crime and violence in the media has been content about serial killers. Scholars have not always agreed on the definition of serial killer because there are multiple elements to consider (Haggerty, 2009; Wiest, 2016). The number of victims, time span of the crimes, and in some cases, the criminal's motivations impact the classification of the murder. Most definitions, though, have a few similarities. A serial killer is an individual who has killed more than three victims on separate occasions (Bonn 2014; Haggerty, 2009; Morton & Hiltz, 2008). While limited in its definition, the U.S. government attempted to formalize what serial killer means when the Protection of Children from Sexual Predators Act of 1998 was passed by Congress (Morton & Hiltz, 2008). The law was created specifically in order to assist local governments in their serial killing investigations. Included within the federal law was a definition for serial killing:

The term 'serial killings' means a series of three or more killings, not less than one of which was committed within the United States, having common characteristics such as to suggest the reasonable possibility that the crimes were committed by the same actor or actors (Protection of Children from Sexual Predator Act of 1998, p. 15).

Serial killers tend to be everyday people, seemingly just as normal as any other person (Bonn, 2014). However, what makes serial killers different is that, as psychologists have noted, many have an antisocial personality disorder (APD) (Bonn; 2014; Simons, 2001). Individuals with an

APD make choices and engage in reckless behavior without exhibiting feelings of remorse (Lahey, Loeber, Burke, & Applegate, 2005).

Serial killers in the media are often portrayed in very similar ways: male, White, charming, and intelligent (Branson, 2013). This, in part, is because of the effort made by the Behavioral Science Unit of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to secure funding to their department when they created the “myth of the white serial murderer” (Branson, 2013, p.11). When developing their own definition of serial murder, they created a profile based on a white man. Ever since, it seems, there is this underlying belief that nearly all serial killers are white men. Although not true, this idea has continued to be present throughout media representations of serial murder (Branson, 2013).

**Serial Murder as a Spectacle.** The creation of the media spectacle has encouraged an interest in serial killers dating all the way back to the 1880s (Bonn, 2014). People find themselves craving more information about the latest serial murder, and, because of this, journalists and other media platforms continue to create more content under this genre. The cycle of audiences wanting to know more about this type of violence and media creators giving them more media content to consume have generated an even greater spectacle.

Literature regarding serial killers often makes mention of Jack the Ripper and the historical beginning of serial killing (Bonn; 2014; Jenkins 2009; Schmid, 2005). When a sequence of five gruesome and unsolved murders took place in London, England, citizens were shocked and terrified (Bonn, 2014). An unknown individual who went by “Jack the Ripper” wrote letters that would be posted in the newspapers. This criminal’s relationship with law enforcement and the media gave him a stage and encouraged his infamous status. This cycle in which media outlets shine a light on violent criminals has allowed for the many serial killers to



follow in Jack the Ripper's footsteps and live in eternal infamy. The relationship that murderers have with the media perpetuates societal interest in these individuals, allowing them to reach their own celebrity status.

### **Framing Theory**

The frame that is placed around a specific crime or act of deviance influences the way audiences view and conceptualize crime. "Media framing is arguably one of the most influential techniques used to assign newsworthiness and construct the news" (Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014, p. 28). While framing theory most often refers to news, I argue that framing is also relevant in entertainment forms of media. Goffman (1974) first developed the concept of framing in order to explain how individuals make sense of the world around them. Framing is the process of presenting some elements of a story while omitting others, representing a story from a specific perspective (Entman, 1993). Media creators must select what they are going to show to audiences and make choices about what to emphasize and what to exclude. Framing helps the intended audience relate more closely to the material (Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014).

Media frames provide an organized idea that gives significance to a series of events. The media create the frames of reference for media consumers to understand and interpret the events happening around them (Scheufele, 1999). Frames can turn meaningless occurrences into dramatic news stories. Frames determine what information is understood and remembered. Similarly, how readers decide to act upon the news they read also is dependent on frames (Entman, 1993). According to Entman (1993), frames offer four primary functions: they define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgements, and suggest remedies. Frames that define problems explain the behavior along with determining its costs and benefits. Diagnosing causes includes defining who or what is creating the problem. By making moral judgements, frames

offer a specific stance on an issue and evaluate the behaviors and effects. At times, frames can even suggest solutions to behaviors when the cost is high (Entman, 1993).

Another perspective regarding the functions of frames was established when Hallahan (1999) applied the relevance of framing to public relations professionals. Hallahan found that frames can refer to the event or situation, attributes of the individuals, as well as choices and actions made by the individuals. Multiple functions of frames can be used at once, even within the same frame on screen. While Hallahan's frames were focused on the news and public relations content, these frames also make sense when considering how the news and entertainment media frame crime and violence.

Entman (1993) also notes that there are four locations in which framing can occur within the communication process: "the communicators, the text, the receiver, and the culture" (p. 52). The communicators, often in this case, journalists and media producers, are making decisions based on what frames to use. The choices about frames are made consciously and subconsciously, often pertaining to personally held beliefs. The text, itself, contains the frame as well. Words and phrases, as well as the images and sources that are used, help strengthen the frames created by communicators. Entman (1993) notes that the interpretation of the frame is left to the receiver. The interpretation of frames does not always align with the intended frame from the communicator. Additionally, the culture in which the frames are presented affects the interpretation of the frame. "The *culture* is the stock of commonly invoked frames; in fact, culture might be defined as the empirically demonstratable set of common frames exhibited in the discourse and thinking of most people in a social grouping" (Entman, 1993, p. 53). The culture of individuals will determine their understanding of the frames presented.

Within the general understanding of framing, there are two types of frames that exist across time and space: episodic and thematic frames (Gross, 2008; Iyengar, 1991). The differentiation between the two types of frames is useful for this thesis. Research involving these frames originated in political communication (Iyengar, 1991) but maintains relevance in the entertainment genre of media. Thematic frames focus on issues in a broader context and provide general evidence and statistics for support (Iyengar, 1991). Episodic frames are more specific and typically refer to one event or story.

Episodic frames present an issue by offering a specific example, case study, or event oriented report (e.g., covering unemployment by presenting a story on the plight of a particular unemployed person). Thematic frames, on the other hand, place issues into a broader context (e.g., covering unemployment by reporting on the latest unemployment figures and offering commentary by economists or public officials on the impact of the economy on unemployment) (Gross, 2008, p. 171).

Emotions evoked by episodic frames were found to be more influential than those from thematic frames (Aarøe, 2011; Gross, 2008; Iyengar, 1991). Episodic frames were also deemed more persuasive than thematic frames. To expand the current literature, this thesis focuses on the impact of thematic framing.

When considering the representation of serial killers, framing is especially useful because it allows for an exploration of the intended message from the sender, the actual text, and the interpretation from the receiver, as well as the culture within which the frames were presented. Many studies have explained the motivations behind killings and defined the characteristics of serial killers (Bonn; 2014; Holmes & DeBurger, 1985; Kocsis, 2008; Miller, 2014; Schmid, 2005). Weist (2016) even applied framing to serial killers in a comparison between news in the

United States and the United Kingdom. However, there is still a lack of scholarship regarding how serial killers are framed in the media in connection with how media consumers react to those portrayals (Wiest, 2016).

### **Uses and Gratifications**

Scholars have been interested in the media's ability to gratify the needs of consumers since mass media research began (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). To best understand how and why different forms of media satisfy the intrinsic needs of individuals, mass media researchers have utilized the uses and gratifications approach (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973, 1974; Rubin, 2009; Ruggiero, 2000). Within this approach, it is assumed that audience members are active and consume media based on specific motivations, goals, and objectives (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973; McQuail, Blumler, & Brown, 1972; Palmgreen, 1984; Rubin, 2009). The sociological and psychological needs of the media consumers play a role in their selection of media content, along with their personalities, availability of specific media, and influence from interpersonal relationships. This line of research is concerned with:

- (1) The social and psychological origins of (2) needs, which generate (3) expectations of (4) the mass media or other sources, which lead to (5) differential patterns of media exposure (or encouragement in other activities), resulting in (6) need gratifications and (7) other consequences, perhaps mostly unintended ones (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973, p. 510).

This approach to mass media research is especially interesting due to its versatility of results that can be yielded. Researchers have analyzed audience gratifications of media content, as well as the media platform on which the content is presented (Austin, 1986; De Schutter & Malliet, 2014; Flanagin, 2005; Henkel, James, & Croce, 2016; Katz, Blumler, Gurevitch, 1973; 1974;

Tian, 2006). The significance in this line of research lies in its ability to make sense of the individual needs that are gratified by media usage.

It is assumed, through uses and gratifications, that there is competition between media outlets and media content to gratify the needs of consumers (Katz, Blumler, Gurevitch, 1973; 1974; Rubin, 2009; Rubin & Perse, 1987; Urista, Dong, & Day, 2009). Because audience members are aware of their goals when consuming media, they make active choices about what to consume. The choice behind their media use is determined by “people’s needs and motives to communicate, the psychological and social environment, the mass media, functional alternatives to media use, communication behavior, and the consequences of such behavior” (Rubin, 1994, p. 419). Audience members seek different media based on the needs they want to fulfill. Perhaps a consumer would consume news media for their surveillance needs, while consuming entertainment media for enjoyment needs (So, 2012). For the purpose of this thesis, consumers may choose to consume true crime to gratify both needs at the same time through television shows and films.

A typology formulated by McQuail, Blumler, and Brown (1972) places gratifications into the following categories: diversion, personal relationships, personal identity, and surveillance. Diversion refers to the feeling of escapism, from constraints of one’s normal routine, the burdens of one’s problems, as well as emotional release. Individuals gratify their need for personal relationships by consuming media and developing pseudo-companionship with characters on the screen. Media consumers gratify their need to develop their personal identity by utilizing media as a personal reference, an exploration of reality, and a reinforcement of values. An additional gratification is that of surveillance, which allows media consumers to monitor what is happening

in the media and gain needed information about events and other individuals (McQuail, Blumler, & Brown, 1972).

### **Television and Film**

Television (TV) and film have adapted to the latest forms of media technology and thus, require new research to explain what draws in consumers (Duncan, 2010; Pena, 2015; Ruggiero, 2000; So, 2012). Both TV and film offer a wide variety of content, meeting the many different needs for the wide variety of consumers. For example, Nabi, Stitt, Halford, and Finnerty (2006) reported that a common gratification sought out when viewers consume reality television programs versus fiction programs was a curiosity for others. Xu and Guo (2018), while examining gratifications from Chinese singing competition television programs, found that consumers often sought out feelings of ambition and suspense, social interaction with their peers, and a high production quality. Escapism and relaxation were other motivators that led people to make the choice to consume TV (Rubin, 1983). Some individuals watch TV to pass the time while others use it to generate feelings of companionship with the characters on the screen. Television has been found to be a source of socialization: Harwood (1999) noted that often young people watched programs with characters around their age to build a sense of identity.

When exploring the gratifications of film, Austin (1986) and Tefertiller (2017) sought to understand what drew media consumers to film and the theater. Audiences are the most likely to see films in theater if they seem visually exciting (Tefertiller, 2017). Going to films in the theater was found to be enjoyable and relaxing, to offer a sense of escape, and to give viewers the opportunity to learn, both about the film plotline but also about themselves (Austin, 1986). The social aspect of viewers seeing films in theaters, as well as a strong urge to display their fandom, was a factor when choosing to see a film in theater. With today's technology, films are watched

in theaters but can be accessed through many other media platforms (Tefertiller, 2017). They can also be illegally downloaded and streamed in viewers' homes (Henkel, James, & Croce, 2016). Impatience and a lack of guilt could predict if media consumers would opt to illegally download content (Henkel, James, & Croce, 2016). Whether downloaded legally, or illegally, the ease of movies at home is ranked as a top gratification for streaming content versus going to the theater.

### **Streaming**

The act of viewing film and television at home has gotten easier as video streaming becomes more popular. Because of the significance of video in today's culture, the development of video streaming has sparked a new line of work exploring consumers' use of *Netflix*, *Hulu* and other streaming platforms (Duncan, 2010; Jenner, 2016; Logan, 2011; Pena, 2015; Pittman & Sheehan, 2015; Sjöblom, & Hamari, 2017; Steiner, & Xu, 2018; Vaterlaus, Spruance, Frantz, & Kruger, 2019). Streaming has entirely changed the television viewing experience: Audiences can now watch their favorite content at their convenience. Logan (2011) found that media consumers aged 18-34 are now video streaming much more often than they are viewing traditional television. Unique to video streaming is the gratification of control (Pittman & Sheehan, 2015). Playback of audiovisual content is always available at the discretion of the user (Krikke, 2004). Several studies regarding video streaming have focused on the gratifications received from bingeing, or the act of consuming many hours of the streaming service in one sitting (Henkel, James, & Croce, 2016; Jenner 2016; Steiner, & Xu, 2018; Vaterlaus, Spruance, Frantz, K., & Kruger, 2019). Other studies have explored the gratifications received from using a specific platform such as *Hulu* or *Netflix* as (Duncan, 2010; Jenner, 2016; Logan, 2011).

## Research Questions

This review of literature has established a connection between societal interest in violence and its connection to presence in the media. Through the television screen and other forms of media, criminal and violent behavior, such as serial killing, have become popular storyline elements for both informative and entertainment purposes. Using framing theory (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974) and uses and gratifications (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973; Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974; Rubin, 2009; Ruggiero, 2000) as my framework, I provide an explanation of their satisfaction, or lack thereof based on the representation of the killers in the media programs. While much of the research involving crime and the media focuses on its negative effects (Doyle, 2006), I argue that it is just as important to understand the reception of crime in the media from the perspective of consumers. Thus, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ1: How are serial killers framed in *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* and *Mindhunter*?

RQ2: What gratifications, if any, do *Rotten Tomatoes* users report gaining from watching *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* and *Mindhunter*?

RQ3: Do any differences in these reported gratifications reflect how serial killers are framed in the two texts?

## Conclusion

Consuming violence has been culturally accepted for centuries. Whether in a public gathering, through a television screen, or on a podcast, media audiences have enjoyed the storylines of vicious killers and their victims. Violence has taken over headlines in the news, been a major plotline for films, and covers social media platforms. With such a following from



media consumers, it is crucial to explain the exact media they are consuming. This thesis seeks to explain the frames used for serial killers in media and understand how audiences feel about such frames.

## CHAPTER III: METHOD

Scholars have used both qualitative and quantitative approaches to understand media phenomena (Berger, 2016, Priest, 2010). Based on the research questions I am seeking to answer in this project, a qualitative approach was most appropriate for this thesis as it allowed for a rich, detailed description of media texts (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) and the ability to understand and explain the complexities of serial killer frames and audience gratification. This chapter includes a description, and rationale, of the chosen texts selected for this project, as well as the method I used for analysis. I performed a two-part analysis: first a framing analysis of two media texts: *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile (EWSEAV)* (Berlinger, et al., 2019) and the first season of *Mindhunter* (Davidson & Winemaker, 2017), followed by a thematic analysis of audience reviews of those texts posted to *Rotten Tomatoes*, an online site that combines critic and audience reviews. I then compared the two data sets in order to find connections between media frames and audience gratifications.

### **Data Collection**

The chosen texts are both historical in nature, as they depict serial killers who lived, and killed, through several decades in the United States, mainly the 1970s and into the Eighties. Past research has explored serial killer frames in the news (Wiest, 2016) and media representations of fictional serial killers, like *Dexter* (Santaularia, 2010; Smith, 2011), but there have been few, if any, attempts at explaining serial killers depicted in the media from this historical fiction perspective. One a film, and the other, a television series, both texts are accessible through the streaming service *Netflix*. In a similar way, these media texts tell the stories of serial killers and their crimes, both entertaining and educating viewers of criminals' violent histories.

I watched the film and television series throughout the months of May and June 2020. While watching the content, I journaled all observations. To further justify the relevance of these texts, a description of the texts is provided.

### ***Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile***

*Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* is a 2019 film about Ted Bundy, based on the memoir, *The Phantom Prince: My Life with Ted Bundy* (Kendall, 2020). The story is told from the perspective of Liz Kendall, Bundy's long-term girlfriend. This, in turn, leaves much of Bundy's gruesome nature up to the imagination of the viewers. The film's timeline begins when he meets Liz in 1969 up through his trial in 1979, and ultimately ends with him on death row. The film debuted at Sundance Film Festival in January of 2019 and was purchased, and released, by *Netflix* in May of the same year.

The film takes place in variety of locations, as Bundy's crimes were committed in several states across the country. Much of the action occurs within jails and courtrooms, but Bundy is also seen with his girlfriend Liz at their home, out at bars, and on the run from law enforcement, both by car and on foot (Berlinger, et al., 2019). The plot centers around Bundy's relationship with Kendall, but also closely follows his experiences in and out of jail and his trials. Although Bundy and Kendall are the focus, Carole, Bundy's eventual wife is another main character that plays an important role in the storyline. The essence of Bundy as a man and criminal was captured through the juxtaposition of his charming character and the narration of his violent crimes.

### ***Mindhunter***

*Mindhunter*, a *Netflix* original series, was first released in October of 2017. Based on the true-crime novel *Mindhunter: Inside the FBI's Elite Serial Crime Unit* (Douglas & Olshaker, 1995), the plot follows two FBI agents, Holden Ford and Bill Tench, as they create and expand

the behavioral science unit that performs psychological profiling of violent murderers (Davidson & Winemaker, 2017). This series is somewhat less historically accurate as the names of the FBI agents were changed and intimate relationships of the agents were included for added drama. Still, the serial killers interviewed in the series were accurate, represented with their original names and criminal histories. Tench and Ford interview Edmund Kemper, Monte Rissell, Jerome “Jerry” Brudos, and Richard Speck to better understand the motives behind violent, serial murder with the intention of creating a typology that describes and predicts the behavior violent killers. Through this interview process, the audience is given insight into the psyche of the violent offenders.

The first season has several different story arcs, including the personal relationships with the main characters, as well a close look at current murder investigations the agents are assisting with at a local level. Another story arc follows an unidentified character acting out seemingly normal behavior but becomes much more suspicious by the end of the season.

Although there is a second season of *Mindhunter*, my analysis covers only the ten episodes that comprise the first season. Specifically looking at the first season allowed for me to analyze the text much more in-depth, rather than looking at both seasons at surface-level.

The first stage of my analysis was designed to help me answer the thesis’ first research question: RQ1: How are serial killers framed in *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* and *Mindhunter*? The frames found in both texts give context to second stage of the analysis.

### ***Rotten Tomatoes Reviews***

The second part of the analysis included audience reviews of *EWSEAV* and *Mindhunter* retrieved from a popular film and television review website: *Rotten Tomatoes*. *Rotten Tomatoes*, with its well-known Tomometer is one of the most popular and trusted television and film review websites (Rotten Tomatoes, 2020). While both audience and critic reviews are available

on the website, I only analyzed audience reviews. Although critic reviews could shed light on the ways serial killers were represented in the texts, critics are likely reviewing the content as part of their job. Their intentions would not necessarily be to highlight the specific gratifications they received; rather, they had to review the content as part of a job assignment. Reviews from critics could have been written with a bias that would be unhelpful for my analysis. It was my assumption in using audience reviews that they would represent a more honest perspective of gratifications viewers received from watching the texts.

In addition to their similarities in content that make for a worthy comparative analysis, the two texts were chosen based on their *Rotten Tomatoes* reviews. Television and film viewers can share their opinions of the media content by leaving reviews, along with a positive or negative rank, based on a five-star rating system (Rotten Tomatoes, 2020). The audience score presented on their website, then, is the percentage of users who have positively ranked the content. A minimum of sixty percent of viewers must give the content a 3.5-star rating, or higher, in order to receive the website's high honor of "Fresh" status. When less than sixty percent of the reviewers give the content a 3.5-star rating or higher, the films or television shows are considered "Rotten."

*EWSEAV* and *Mindhunter* were received quite differently, based on audience reviews. With 1,324 user ratings, *EWSEAV* received a "Rotten" score of 57 percent (Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile, 2020). Conversely, *Mindhunter* came in with a "Fresh" score of 97 percent, stemming from 3,871 user ratings (Mindhunter, 2020). The clear difference in the depiction of serial killers between the texts, in addition to the discrepancy in reviews makes this comparison worth exploration. It seems that, in part, the gratifications received from viewing the

content are a result of the serial killer frames throughout the texts. The aim of this thesis is to define the frames and explore the gratifications from those frames.

Audience reviews were analyzed until saturation was reached. After that, an additional set of reviews were analyzed to confirm findings. This second stage of analysis was performed in order to answer the thesis' second research question: RQ2: What gratifications, if any, do *Rotten Tomatoes* users report gaining from watching *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* and *Mindhunter*?

As I had previously consumed the content myself, I knew that there was a general difference in the way the killers were represented through the film and the series. The difference in frames, combined with the difference in rankings from audience members prompted further analysis to better explain and understand this discrepancy. With a “Rotten” film, and a “Fresh” television series, the purpose of this thesis was to find if audience gratifications were, in any way, related to the representations of the killers on screen. This third stage of analysis was performed to answer my third research question: RQ3: Do any differences in these reported gratifications reflect how serial killers are framed in the two texts?

### **Justification for Methodology**

Unique to this thesis is the two-step approach to researching serial killers in the media. The framing analysis gives context to the reactions from audience members, furthering the ability to understand user gratification. The application of framing has been linked most closely to news coverage (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009), making this thesis a strong and unique application of the theory . Similarly, while uses and gratifications research is most often performed through surveys, this thesis encourages an expansion to how scholars understand audience perception and gratifications. This expansion is important as survey participants often

avoid the truth, especially when answering questions about personal information (Berger, 2016). Fear of judgement often deters participants from sharing their truths. Instead, they will give the answers they believe researchers are looking for. Specifically, for this thesis, I wanted to find honest perceptions from audience members. Rather than maintaining complete anonymity, reviewers were identified by a username. In most cases the reviewer was identified by a first name and last initial. In this way, the platform gave audience members the opportunity to express their opinions without feeling the pressure to give a researcher the “correct” answer. As reviews are new ways of understanding media phenomena, the thick description that qualitative research provides is most suited for a qualitative method (Dominick & Wimmer, 2003). Both the framing analysis and thematic analysis were performed inductively, analyzing the material closely and forming my own frames and themes. As much of this analysis is a newer methodology, I did not want any previous research or bias to influence my findings.

### **Framing Analysis**

Since I specifically sought to find how the serial killers were represented in both the film and the series, I journaled my observations while they were on screen. Using both verbal and nonverbal frames, I sought to find patterns throughout the film and *Netflix* original series. From the dialogue to the setting of the scenes, I analyzed the ways in which the killers were presented over time throughout the texts. I kept track of the specific clothing choices, and even the cleanliness of the characters. Frames can influence how audiences understand an event and can affect their beliefs and attitudes (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009), so it was crucial to examine as many details as possible. I watched scenes that seemed particularly important several times to ensure I captured as much of their frames as possible. When the criminals, themselves, were not on the screen, I still kept notes of how they were being discussed by the other characters. This

allowed me to develop an even more vivid description of frames. Using my journal observations, I organized my findings into categories, ultimately putting them into a larger set of overall frames. I found frames for both media texts separately and combined them when fitting.

### **Uses and Gratifications Analysis**

Once audience reviews were collected from *Rotten Tomatoes*, they were put into a separate document and printed for coding purposes. When coding, I was specifically looking for evidence of gratifications received or not received through the consumption of media texts. This was inductive in nature as I wanted to remain as open as possible to any themes that may have arisen. A thematic analysis was best for understanding the audience reviews because it allowed me to find existing patterns within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke's (2006) methodology for a thematic analysis includes six steps. First, I had to familiarize myself with the data, which I did by initially reading through the reviews as I transferred them to the new document, followed by reading them again. After that, I created my initial codes and searched for potential themes. These themes were found through the recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness of ideas (Owen, 1984) of audience ideas. After coming up with the potential themes, I read through the data set as a whole in order to review the accuracy of the themes. I named and categorized the themes and followed up by writing my report.

### **The Comparison**

Finding the frames located in the text to answer RQ1, and generating themes of user gratifications to answer RQ2 were both completed in order to answer RQ3: Do any differences in these reported gratifications reflect how serial killers are framed in the two texts? RQ3 is ultimately what this thesis sought to explain. My findings will elaborate on audience gratifications of serial killer content and whether they are reflective of the ways serial killers



were framed in the texts. The following chapter will include the framing analysis of *EWSEAV* and *Mindhunter*, a thematic analysis of *Rotten Tomatoes* reviews for *EWSEAV* and *Mindhunter*, as well as the cross-comparison that explains the connections between frames and gratifications.

## CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS

In order to gain insight into the ways serial killers are framed in the media, I performed an inductive framing analysis of the film *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* (2019) and the television series *Mindhunter* (2017). I then completed an inductive thematic analysis of audience reviews from the review aggregating website *Rotten Tomatoes* for both texts to find potential gratifications that viewers filled while watching the texts. Afterward, I compared the two analyses to determine if gratifications were received from specific serial killer frames. The following is an in-depth explanation of my findings.

### **Framing Analysis**

This section of the analysis was designed to answer the thesis' first question: RQ1: How are serial killers framed in *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* and *Mindhunter*? The framing analysis revealed that the two texts, in fact, represent serial killers differently. I identified six frames through which Bundy is presented in the film, and only one of those frames emphasizes his violent nature (Berlinger, et al., 2019). Only one of these frames verbally and nonverbally depicted his violent behavior on screen. Conversely, the serial killers represented throughout the season of *Mindhunter* are framed in way that highlights their potential for violence and aggressive natures. (Penhall, Fincher, Douglas, Kapadia, & Lindholm, 2017). In this case, there is one frame that sheds light on the life behind the monster, giving audiences a look at the potential reason for the killers' behavior.

The plotline of *EWSEAV* follows Bundy from before his crimes began through his life in and [escaping] out of jail, and the entirety of his capital murder trial. This gives audiences the opportunity to question his innocence. It is not until the end of the film that it becomes clear to the viewer that Bundy is, in fact, guilty of committing these heinous crimes. *Mindhunter* has a

different approach in that the plotline follows two FBI agents as they question Ed Kemper, Monte Rissell, Jerome “Jerry” Brudos, and Richard Speck: convicted serial murderers serving out their sentences in prison. Whereas Bundy is often well-dressed and framed as potentially innocent, the serial killers in the *Mindhunter* series are much more likely to be wearing handcuffs and a jumpsuit, chained to a table, and eerily proud of their guilt.

### **Frames Present in *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile***

Any prior historical knowledge tells the audience that Bundy was a vicious murderer, despite his handsome appearance and charming personality. Even the title of the film gives the audience a clue into the type of man this film would be about. However, this movie takes a surprising approach to representing Ted Bundy. Nearly all the murderous behavior by Bundy was alluded to throughout the film, rather than visually seen on screen. Most of the time the audience sees the loving and charming version of Bundy with his girlfriend, Liz, while the soundbites of news stories reporting another dead woman play in the background. Since this film is based on true events, audiences could fill in the gaps and make the connections about Bundy and his cunningly secret, violent lifestyle, but it was never made obvious until the very end of the film. The lack of violence on screen could be attributed to the story being written from his girlfriend’s perspective. Admittedly, it was difficult for Liz to believe her beloved Ted could be so heinous towards women, so it makes sense that this film avoids outright imagery of Bundy committing murder. However, because of this, many of the frames and patterns throughout the film about Bundy have very little to do with his murderous nature.

Instead, we are presented with a man who has seemingly been victimized by wrongful accusations and someone who is hopeful for a future outside the confinements of a cell. He is kind and capable of true love. Even when things are taking a turn for the worst, he is intelligent

and always has a plan to improve his situation. He is mysterious in that all of his crimes are only assumed and never seen, which gives audiences the opportunity to wonder in the way that Liz once did—was Bundy guilty? As his situation worsens throughout the film, Bundy is framed as the loose cannon that he was in real-life. Ultimately, his true identity as vicious killer is only revealed within minutes of the end of the film. All questions were answered, suspicions confirmed, and audiences finally saw the man for who he was.

**The Man with a Heart.** Instead of being presented as the vicious killer he was in real life, Bundy in *EWSEAV* is framed in many scenes as a kind, compassionate human being – a man with a heart. After the opening credits and imagery of a prison, alluding to Bundy’s eventual fate, the storyline begins with a young Liz capturing the gaze of Ted across a bar. They smile at each other as they make small talk by the jukebox. They dance together, he takes her home, ultimately stays the night. Liz shows Bundy her daughter lying in her crib and jokingly asks if he wanted to run away. The look in Liz’s eyes tells the audience that she feels safe and happy he is with her. Bundy respectfully sleeps next to her without any attempt at sexual intimacy, only a hand around her for comfort. The morning comes and he’s seen making breakfast for Liz and her daughter. It was at this point, early in the film, that his charm and loving nature were established.

This frame was strengthened as the montage of Liz and Ted’s relationship plays. Bundy acts as a father figure to Liz’s daughter, Molly, helping her blow out her candles for her birthday. He plays with Molly in the front yard, opens presents with Liz and Molly by the Christmas tree, and teaches Molly how to ride a bike. Bundy also lovingly hugs Molly and refers to her as “Monkey.”

In one scene, Liz and Bundy shop for a dog and even discuss their future and marriage together. Liz promises Bundy that she will never leave him, giving the audience the impression

that he has a pure heart and can be trusted. Later in the evening, Bundy dances and drinks with Liz, flirting and kissing with love in his eyes and kindness in his voice. Liz calls him weird and makes fun of his musical selection. When accidentally breaking a wine glass, they end up making a game of it and breaking several more glasses. All of this leads to Bundy and Liz getting sexually intimate, smiling and giggling the whole time.

Even in certain moments during his trial, Bundy held onto the claim that he was innocent. With multiple calls to Liz, Bundy was detailing their future together, reminding her of his love. There is an excitement in his voice and a smile on his face whenever he has the opportunity to speak with the love of his life. During one of his trials, Bundy calls Liz and details the plot of a book he had been reading. It told a tale of hope and lovers that were eventually reunited, which he believed was a mirror of what would happen in their own relationship. It was clear that she wanted to believe him: She still visited him in jail and frequently spoke to him on the phone. Watching his trials on television, Liz grew tired of being hopeful of his innocence and eventual return. Bundy's vulnerability was at an all-time high when Liz ended their relationship in the middle of a jail's courtyard. His very evident heartbreak was a visual representation of the soul within a soulless man.

**An Innocent Prisoner.** With the lack of violence seen throughout the film, Bundy's claim to innocence is somewhat believable, that is, if an audience member was unfamiliar with infamous Ted Bundy in real-life. Even with multiple arrests, two escapes, and the evidence in the courtroom stacked against him, Bundy maintains his innocence throughout the entirety of the film.

It is clearly a mistake. He is being framed. The evidence is not nearly strong enough to prove his guilt. Near the beginning of the film, Ted is arrested and shown standing in a lineup, as

a young girl behind a window points him out, claiming he is the one that attacked her. Released on bail, Ted arrives back at home to Liz, telling her that it was all a big mix-up. He told Liz that, in fact, the girl who identified him was shown his picture twice before she picked him out of the lineup. This encouraged him that his innocence would soon be proven. Even further, someone had given his name to the police, so his arrest was not even his fault. This pattern continued as the film moved from Washington to Utah, from Colorado to Florida. Even though audiences were aware of his guilt, the way he was framed as an innocent victim of spiteful investigators out to get the wrong man could not be ignored.

His victimhood is emphasized when audiences are shown his uncomfortable cavity search when he enters the Utah State Prison. Bundy removes his clothing, and for a brief moment, feels vulnerable. Other prisoners are bumping into him, causing him to feel powerless and scared. He sat in his cell, hugging his knees, unsure if his claim of innocence would be believed.

After another escape, he is captured in Florida and put into custody. Immediately, he calls Liz to tell her that he did not do the things for which he was accused. The scene cuts to Bundy in his cell where he is harassed by one of the attorneys going after him. With the quick sound of a buzzer, officers rush into Bundy's cell and push him against his cell wall. While Bundy finds himself powerless to fight back, the officers shove a metal tool in his mouth that pulls his lips back far enough for his teeth to show. A photographer captures pictures of his teeth, which are to be used against him in his trial. The audience can sense the fear in Bundy's eyes as he groans and tries to get the strangers out of his space.

One of the last moments that we see Bundy's humanity is when he is sentenced to death by the judge in Florida. Even after his wife, Carole, and mother plead with the jury to spare his

life, the sentence ultimately sends him to the electric chair. Once again, he maintains his innocence and denies any involvement in the crimes. Unaccepting of his death sentence, Bundy sheds a tear in a full courtroom: “It is not a sentence of me. It is a sentence of someone else who is not standing here today” (Berlinger, et al., 2019). The audience members watch Bundy crack a sad smile as he cries and listen to the judge refer to him as a “total waste of humanity” (Berlinger, et al, 2019.).

**The Schemer.** The reality of Ted Bundy, equally present in his representation in the film, was that he had a manipulative personality and belief that he could outsmart everyone around him. While the actual crimes were not visually depicted in the film, his consistent plotting was ever-present. He maintained innocence throughout the film, and as a result, makes his escape plans and manipulations warranted.

For example, Bundy often took advantage of his status as a law student: he acted as co-counsel on his cases which gave him opportunities that a “normal” defendant would not have. In one scene, he calls Liz to tell her about all the benefits to acting as his own counsel, including his ability to speak to Liz on his own private phone. Even further, he uses his “lawyer” status as an aid in one of his escapes. While Bundy is in his jail cell, audiences see him jumping from his top bunk landing firmly on the floor. He was clearly up to something, which became clear when asking to use the phone during trial and ultimately jumped out of a window, escaping into the mountains.

Bundy quickly came up with a second escape plan as he realized he could cut a hole in the ceiling while other prisoners showered, hiding the sound of his homemade shiv cutting into the plaster. He was meticulous and acted only at the very right times. When able, he escaped through the hole in the ceiling and made his way to Florida. When caught once again, he spoke

kindly with Liz, noting that running away was a mistake but that he remained confident in his innocent plea regarding the slaying of several different women.

After Liz broke up with him, Bundy had a relationship with, and ended up marrying, a woman named Carole Boone. Firm in her belief that Bundy would never commit such horrifying acts, she was convinced by Bundy to speak to the media on his behalf. While under a gag order himself, he used his love interest to voice all he wanted to say but could not. He knew how to use Carole to his advantage, and he did as often as he could.

**The Unseen Criminal.** Even without depicting the violent acts, we know that Bundy committed all the crimes that are mentioned throughout the film. What makes this interesting is that frames are the inclusion and exclusion of specific information (Entman, 1993); thus, the unseen violence in the film is a frame all its own. The consistent mystery could be attributed to Liz's perspective; however, it was a deliberate and important choice made in production regarding how to depict Bundy.

As news stories are playing in the background of the action, describing the latest victim of the mystery killer, Bundy is seen playing with Liz and her daughter in the house, outside in the snow, and studying, downplaying his connection to the crimes. Most of the time, the mention of crimes were played over a montage of Bundy acting out normal behaviors. These scenes were filmed as if from a home video, giving the scene an even more wholesome feel as Bundy bakes cookies with Liz and Molly. This film technique was an important choice by production, as it shows Bundy to be a normal man while a violent killer was on the loose. It is never made obvious that Bundy is the person committing the crimes.

Even further, there are hardly any visual depictions of the murders. Footage from the actual crime scenes and news stories were intertwined with the newly filmed content for the



movie, but not much time was spent showing the crime scenes. While the murders of several women are mentioned throughout the film, even the alluded murders do not add up to the thirty that Bundy admitted to in real life before he was put to death by the electric chair (Rosewood & Lo, 2017). It is difficult to grasp the extent of Bundy's crimes with such a lack of visual representation throughout the film.

At one point, a detective brought Liz a photograph, emphasizing the danger that was Ted Bundy. Asking for help in finding him after one of his escapes, the detective stands at the door of Liz's home and hands her a photo in a yellow manila folder as a desperate attempt to encourage the cooperation of Bundy's love interest. Liz knew nothing, but the detective pleaded that if she found out any new information to let him know, before more women suffered a similar fate to the women in the picture he had given her. Even in this moment, it was difficult to pin Bundy as the killer because Liz never opened up the folder to view the photograph.

**A Loose Cannon.** Accurate with his personality in real life, Bundy was portrayed as unpredictable. He was paranoid, made rash decisions, and even proposed to his wife Carole in the courtroom while on trial for murder.

After his second escape, and a few weeks free in Florida, he was pulled over by the police. He got out of the car, clearly nervous and without many options, punched the officer and fled. At this point, it was known that Bundy was on America's Most Wanted list. He still maintained his innocence.

After his capture in Florida, the county sheriff publicly announced Bundy's indictment, sending Bundy into a frenzy. With a crowd of reporters around him, Bundy confidently and sarcastically voiced his "not guilty" plea and called out his unfair treatment while incarcerated.

Pacing back and forth, and flailing his hands, Bundy surely put on a show for all who were watching.

During his trial in Florida, Bundy was depicted repeatedly disregarding his lawyer's advice. At one point, his legal team begged him to plead guilty in order to spare his life should he be convicted and sentenced to death. While he promised his team that he would consider the plea, he publicly refused in the courtroom. Believing he knew better than anyone, he actively talked down to his counsel and fired the main lawyer working on his behalf.

**The Monster Unveiled.** It was not until the trial in Florida that photographic evidence and vivid descriptions of the crimes were revealed. The prosecutor describes in great detail the nature of the killings and the proof that Bundy was the culprit. The photographs of his teeth were compared to the bite marks on his victim, and even then, Bundy attempted to dismantle the credibility of the evidence but to no avail: This evidence was ultimately what convinced the jury to return a guilty verdict.

The frame of the monster was most evident in the way he affected the individuals around him. In the times of his trial, Liz began drinking heavily as she reflected on the killer she fell in love with. Those prosecuting Ted were filled with anger and dedication to ending the life of the man who ended that of so many others. The judge, who returned his guilty verdict and death sentence, was the person who uttered the famous statement and title of the film: "The court finds that both of these killings were indeed heinous, atrocious, and cruel, and that they were extremely wicked, shockingly evil, vile and the product of a design to inflict a high degree of pain and utter indifference to human life" (Berlinger, et al., 2019). It was with these words that the audience could finally feel the gravity of his violence that had been missing nearly the entire film. Even still, he maintains his innocence.

In one brief instance, the film finally answered all the questions it had been generating for its entirety. Near the date of his execution, Liz visits Ted and asks him one more time if he committed the crimes. Growing angry, he still claims he was innocent, until Liz pulls out the photo she had been given all those years ago. She holds the photo that allowed her and Ted to communicate through the safety glass and at once she put the photo of a headless woman in the woods up to the glass. “You need to release me, Ted” Liz pleaded. “What happened to her head?” (Berlinger, et al., 2019). For a moment, Ted still maintained that it was not him. But, all at once, he began to write a word in the fog on the glass between them. At the same time, a flashback to Bundy is shown, hitting a woman over the head with a crowbar and placing her in his Volkswagen Bug. The word he wrote on the window was revealed, “HACKSAW” (Berlinger, et al., 2019). The film had built up to this moment, where his monstrous behavior was revealed and he admitted his crime to Liz. The final, and most honest frame was that of Bundy as the monster he truly was.

While the frames in the film sometimes present Bundy in a contradictory way, his overall representation is as a man loved by Liz. (Berlinger, et al., 2019). With the historical nature of the film, it was known to the audience that Bundy was guilty, but throughout the film, his guilt was questionable. He was charming and intelligent, a boyfriend and a father-figure. Bits and pieces revealed his true character, but by and large, the emphasis was not on Bundy as a violent serial killer.

### **Frames Present in *Mindhunter***

*Mindhunter* established itself as different in many ways from *EWSEAV*, beginning with the fact that it was a television series rather than a film. Because of this, there were more plot

points than the film and the show also maintained several story arcs. While the other story arcs are mentioned briefly, they were not considered in the framing analysis of the serial killers. The established frames existed only when the serial killers were mentioned, on screen, and actively playing a role in the story line (Penhall, Fincher, Douglas, Kapadia, & Lindholm, 2017).

While the story takes place in many different locations, the agents are based at the Federal Bureau of Investigation in Quantico, Virginia. Special Agents Holden Ford, a teacher and crisis negotiator, and Bill Tench, a member of the Behavioral Science Unit, team up to educate local law enforcement about current FBI tactics. These sessions are known as “road school” and take place all over the country. Important to the overall plot, road school ultimately gives the agents access to the serial killers in prisons nearby. Law enforcement officers often ask personal questions about murder cases with which they are currently working. Using the FBI tactics, and their developing typology of murderers, Ford and Tench help solve several open murder cases. This plotline emphasizes the characteristics of the killers but does not establish them effectively enough to be considered a frame.

Tench is married with a troubled young son, and Ford has a girlfriend throughout the season. Sexual intimacy, family dinners, and even grocery shopping are seen by the audience but are not relevant for establishing the serial killer frames.

Tench and Ford interview “multiple murderers” or “sequence killers” as they are referred to in the early episodes in order to develop a profiling system that helps understand the psyche of those who commit violent crimes (Penhall, Fincher, Douglas, Kapadia, & Lindholm, 2017). With this purpose in mind, they recruit Dr. Wendy Carr, a psychologist to help code their interviews and make sense of their findings. Ed Kemper, known as the “Coed Killer” was their first interview, followed by Monte Rissell, Jerry Brudos, and Richard Speck.

These interviews are conducted in dingy rooms at prisons, locked and heavily guarded. Prisoners' feet and hands are chained with handcuffs strapped around their waist, strategically limiting their range of movement. All were in blue jump suits and escorted to the interview room by at least two guards, emphasizing their dangerous nature and reminding the audience that the characters should not be trusted. It is clear that the murderers are in need of validation for their behavior and acceptance from Tench and Ford. The purpose of the interviews is to find the reason for committing the crimes, ultimately finding that killers have broken and damaged upbringings. They reveal their true need for control and power over others through explanations of their crimes and power moves in the interview room. Even when seemingly cooperative and kind, the killers often take the opportunity to surprise Tench and Ford with behavior only killers are capable of.

**Monsters in a Cage.** The most apparent and recurring frame throughout the first season of *Mindhunter* was the killers presented as monsters in a cage. Quite literally, the serial killers were behind bars, only to be escorted by several guards, chained from their wrists to their ankles. Viewers were consistently reminded that these men were violent criminals that could not be left to their own devices.

This frame is first introduced in Episode 2 when Ford visits Ed Kemper for the first time (Penhall & Fincher, 2017). Ford enters the prison through a heavily guarded gate, only to walk through several more gated entrances. He is asked to sign a liability waiver, acknowledging the danger he is putting himself in by having this personal meeting with Kemper, a man who killed his grandparents, his mother, and seven other women. It was clear he was getting nervous for this meeting, but met with him, nevertheless.

As Ford enters the prison, he is met with prisoners arguing and shouting, from behind bars. He walks past other offenders, aware that his safety is based solely on the iron bars that separate him from them. Eventually, Kemper is escorted in wearing chains from his wrists, to his waist, to his ankles. Even when audiences cannot see the chains, they are heard clanging as a constant reminder that Kemper is locked up.

Audiences experience this frame repeatedly as Ford visits with Ed Kemper (Penhall & Fincher, 2017; Penhall, Haley, & Fincher, 2017b; Penhall, Spiegel, & Kapadia, 2017), Monte Rissell (Penhall, Orlando, & Kapadia, 2017), Jerry Brudos (Penhall, Haley, & Douglas, 2017a; Penhall, Haley, & Douglas, 2017b), and Richard Speck (Penhall, Haley, & Fincher, 2017). In their first visit with Brudos, Tench and Ford communicated with him from a table away, with Brudos' hands chained to a table (Penhall, Haley, & Douglas, 2017). Speck was interviewed in a very dark, scummy room, with prisoners shouting the entirety of the interview (Penhall, Haley, & Fincher, 2017). Each killer was very distinctly represented as a dangerous man behind bars, detained by chains, and heavily watched by multiple guards.

**Validation and Attention Seekers.** It was evident through the dialogue in the interviews that each of the killers needed to feel a sense of validation in order to speak more openly about their crimes (Penhall, Fincher, Douglas, Kapadia, & Lindholm, 2017). Ed Kemper was very open from the beginning (Penhall & Fincher, 2017), and gradually shared even more information as the interviews continued (Penhall, Spiegel, & Kapadia, 2017). To speak to his need for attention from the special agents, he wrote letters requesting their return for more discussions (Penhall, Haley, & Fincher, 2017b). As Ford and Tench voice their agreement with Kemper's beliefs towards women, they assure him his behaviors and thoughts were logical, so he continued to expand, using graphic language, the ways in which he committed his crimes. While Ford and

Tench did not actually agree with Kemper's illogical ideal of women, they used their agreement as a way to keep Kemper comfortable and open for discussion.

Rissell, Brudos, and Speck behaved similarly. Rissell was very closed off, angry even, when talking with agents Ford and Tench (Penhall, Orlando, & Kapadia, 2017). As he was encouraged to elaborate, he discussed his personal life and how he allowed one of his victims to leave before killing her. During the interview, Ford seemed personally interested in Rissell, which allowed the serial killer to feel comfortable enough to divulge details.

Brudos had little to say in his first visit, even denying his involvement in the crimes. He admitted that the women were beautiful, and that he masturbated to their photographs, but was not involved in the killings (Penhall, Haley, & Douglas, 2017). It was not until the agents' second meeting with Jerry that he began to open up when Ford permitted that during the meeting, he did not have to wear his handcuffs and even gave him a cigarette or two to make him feel comfortable. Ford encouraged him to discuss the details of the crimes and his feelings towards women, and so delicately asked about his relationship with his mother. Only with the sincere questioning from Ford did he finally reveal the darker details of the crimes, referring to them, though, in third person as if he was not involved (Penhall, Haley, & Douglas, 2017b).

This pattern continued when Ford and Tench interviewed Speck, as this killer was closed off until he could feel his actions were acceptable (Penhall, Haley, & Fincher, 2017). It was evident the first time Speck started to open up was when Agent Ford called attention to his tattoo, noting that he had to see it because everyone was talking about it. It was iconic and Speck was nearly famous for it. Speck cracked a small grin as Ford lifts his sleeve and reveals his trademark tattoo "BORN TO RAISE HELL." It was obvious in that moment that Speck feels appreciated for the powerful man he thought himself to be. Ford gives Speck even more

validation when he starts using misogynistic language to describe the women he killed, seeming to have similar beliefs. At this point, Speck describes how he raped and killed eight women in their townhome after breaking in to steal from them.

Throughout the season, all four of the killers exhibited evidence of validation seeking from agents Tench and Ford (Penhall, Fincher, Douglas, Kapadia, & Lindholm, 2017). They were violent, sadistic, and proud to reveal their secrets once they could feel Ford and Tench were interested. Giving them the sense of admiration was the agents' interview tactic and revealed the true need the killers had for feeling validated for who they were and their crimes.

**Damaged Souls.** Based on the interviews, it seems that their need for validation stemmed from another frame evident throughout the series: killers as damaged souls. Agents Tench and Ford, along with Dr. Wendy Carr were often shown having conversations about the reason behind the murder. They believe troubled childhoods were potentially a cause for their violent behavior. This frame gave insight into the psyche of the criminals, even allowing room for empathy in the characters. They committed horrible crimes, but it was a result of their abuse as a child.

Episode 2 was the first time Kemper mentioned his childhood and how his mother believed he would “do something hideous one day” (Penhall & Fincher, 2017). He claimed he was afraid of his mother and was forced to sleep on a dirty mattress, locked in the basement. He attributes his violence towards animals, and eventually his victims, to needing an escape from “the insanity of the world” (Penhall & Fincher, 2017). His father did not want him, and his grandparents felt Kemper was a freak. After killing his grandparents, he lived in a mental institution. Kemper tells the agents that his prime sexual years were taken away from him because of this, which heightened his interest in raping, humiliating, and killing his female



victims. Kemper told the agents he was emotionally immature because of the way his mother “conditioned” him (Penhall & Fincher, 2017).

Monte Rissell reveals a similar disdain toward his childhood. He describes getting in trouble at an early age and getting sent to a mental institution (Penhall, Orlando, & Kapadia, 2017). He reveals that his brother had cancer, ultimately giving Rissell some compassion as he let one of his victims go because her dad had cancer. Rissell believes he was a victim and his behavior was a result of his upbringing. He was separated from his father when his mother remarried, which was clearly a touchy subject for Rissell. When the agents mention his mother, he crushes a soda can in his hand. His stepfather beat him to a point that his eardrums were broken. Rissell says, “Nobody wanted me. Nobody ever fucking wanted me” (Penhall, Orlando, & Kapadia, 2017). He noted that, if only he could have been raised by his father, he would have been a lawyer instead of a killer.

Jerry Brudos tells Ford and Tench that he had not killed anyone; rather, he was drugged, beaten, and coerced into confessing crimes he did not commit. Eventually, Brudos opens up about his problematic relationship with his mother. She had always wanted a girl, which left Brudos in a complicated position (Penhall, Haley, & Douglas, 2017). He loved women’s shoes and was sexually aroused by high heels. Once during childhood, Brudos reveals that his mother took him in the backyard and burned his beloved stilettos. This memory was, quite literally, burned into his memory and seemed to fuel his interest in shoes even more.

In each of these instances, audiences had a glimpse inside the mind of the killer. The killers were damaged from childhood, recalling their troubled relationships and past embarrassments. It was this damage that led them down a path of violent killing and brought out their ultimate need for control over other human beings.

**Manipulative Megalomaniacs.** The control over others became increasingly evident throughout the season, creating the next frame: serial killers as manipulative megalomaniacs. Between the dialogue with Tench and Ford, as well as the killers' descriptions of their crimes, this need for control was exhibited by all four serial killers (Penhall, Fincher, Douglas, Kapadia, & Lindholm, 2017). Kemper, Rissell, Brudos, and Speck thrived on the sense of power and the feeling of control over their victims, but also over Special Agents Holden Ford and Bill Tench. Even while chained up, guarded, and locked in a room, they found ways to exert their control and display their power.

One way that Kemper's power was on display was when he offers the agents sandwiches at the beginning of one of their interviews. He notes that the guards were fond of him and he could get anything that he wanted. Seemingly small, this comment was Kemper's way of reminding Tench and Ford that, even though he was locked up, he still had an upper hand (Penhall & Fincher, 2017). The hospitality was extended again by Brudos when he assists in helping Ford fix his interview recorder (Penhall, Haley, & Douglas, 2017b). It was evident in both scenes that they wanted to exert whatever control they had into these situations.

Rissell describes one of his attacks in which he attempted to rape a woman, who, rather than fighting back, was enjoying herself. He grew angry because he wanted his victim to feel pain, which led him to kill her (Penhall, Orlando, & Kapadia, 2017). Kemper gave details about his mother shaming him, taking him to his breaking point where he violently decapitated her, among other things (Penhall, Spiegel, & Kapadia, 2017). It was his way of taking back the control she had over him.

Kemper and Brudos made it clear that they were more intelligent and skilled than those around them (Penhall & Douglas, 2017; Penhall, Haley, & Douglas, 2017). "It's not easy

butchering people. It's hard work," Kemper says (Penhall & Douglas, 2017). "It is not an easy thing to break a human being's jaw. Let me assure you, that takes practice," Brudos jokes as he enters the interview room with Ford and Tench (Penhall, Haley, & Douglas, 2017). Proud of their abilities and strength, the serial killers enjoy sharing the grimy details about their victims and their crimes.

At two different times, Kemper touches Agent Ford, almost as a reminder that those same hands killed many others. In one of their first meetings, Kemper describes how to slice someone's neck properly, running his fingers across Ford's neck as a visual aid (Penhall & Douglas, 2017). In the last episode of the season, Kemper finds himself in the hospital ward after a suicide attempt. This brings Ford in to visit, and while there, Kemper gets up from his hospital bed, puts his arms all the way around Ford's body and squeezes (Penhall, Haley, & Fincher, 2017b). Ford escapes and runs into the hallway as he begins having a panic attack. When given the opportunity, Kemper reminds Ford how powerful he is, even in chains.

**Unpredictable Perpetrators.** The killers continued to act in surprising ways throughout the entirety of the series: Audiences could never predict what they were going to do next. In the context of a series that was based in history, it is noteworthy that even still, the killers behaved in unexpected ways. They were complex, often explaining their thoughts and fantasies, describing their crimes with great pride. Conversely, they are damaged and clearly still trying to cope with their own personal traumas (Penhall, Fincher, Douglas, Kapadia, & Lindholm, 2017).

Two moments in the series were shocking and reiterated the unpredictable nature of a person who has violently killed multiple human beings. At one point, Ford brings out a pair of black heels for Brudos (Penhall, Haley, & Douglas, 2017). Ford was aware of the arousal Brudos experiences from shoes and gave him the shoes in an attempt to encourage honesty and open

dialogue. Towards the end of the interview, Brudos takes the shoes in a corner and masturbates with Tench and Ford still present. The agents leave the interview disturbed but intrigued by the killer's lack of control over his impulses in that moment.

Richard Speck surprises the agents as he is holding a small bird when he walks into his interview (Penhall, Haley, & Fincher, 2017). He claims he found the bird and nursed it back to health. At one point during the interview, Speck grows angry and throws the bird into a ceiling fan, killing it instantly in an explosion of feathers. It was difficult to decide what was more surprising, Speck nursing the bird back to health, or his killing it right in front of Ford and Tench. He, too, was a victim to his own impulses and lost control of his anger in that moment.

What stands out about the serial killer frames in *Mindhunter* is how graphic and specific they became. Because it was a series rather than a film, there was more time to develop the frames and continue to establish their relevance in the story line. Gruesome details of the murders and specific visual elements that alluded to the killers' dangerous nature both contributed to the serial killer frames. The significance of serial killer frames within the series lies in its representation of the criminals as violent and guilty, quite different than the way Bundy was represented in *EWSEAV*. There were fleeting moments in which audiences could feel empathy toward Kemper, Rissell, Brudos, and Speck, but were then quickly reminded of their dark, twisted minds and brutal murders.

### **Framing Analysis Summary**

What is interesting about the analyzed texts is the way both depicted true stories in American history. They were both set around the same time period and involved serial murderers. As audience members, we know the truth about the killers and their crimes, but one plotline followed a man denying his truth while the other left nothing to the imagination as the

killers proudly revealed their secrets. Whereas *EWSEAV* was centered around who Bundy was, as seen through Liz Kendall's eyes, *Mindhunter* was centered around why the killers committed their crimes, as seen through the eyes of Holden Ford and Bill Tench. Notably, the plotlines depicted actual characteristics of these individuals: Ted Bundy was charming and denied his accusations while Ed Kemper openly discussed his fetishes with the FBI agents. However, both men killed women just the same, and choices in editing and production were made to frame the killers in a specific light. The question becomes, was one frame preferred over the other by audiences? If so, why?

### **Uses and Gratifications Analysis**

This section of the analysis was designed to answer the thesis' second question: RQ2: What gratifications, if any, do *Rotten Tomatoes* users report gaining from watching *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* and *Mindhunter*? Along with the gratifications gained, I also reported when the users mentioned gratifications they were expecting but did not receive through consuming the media texts. Overall, reviewers found *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* entertaining and were pleased with the acting but dissatisfied with the lack of violence displayed by Bundy. Similarly, reviewers appreciated the high level of acting in *Mindhunter*, but were more favorable of this plotline and representation of the killers. While Bundy was framed as potentially innocent, there was no question that all four serial killers in *Mindhunter* were guilty. The specific themes of gratifications received and undelivered for both the film and *Netflix* series will now be discussed.

### **Audience Reviews of *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile***

*Rotten Tomatoes* reviewers were quick to mention the acting chops of those involved in the film, particularly Zac Efron (*Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* Reviews, 2020).

Noting the film had entertainment value, audience reviewers felt it lacked the gore that the film title alluded to. There was a general sense of intrigue, but disappointment in the glorification of Bundy. Without prior knowledge of the gruesome killer he was, many users noted it would have been hard to fill the holes in the plotline. The reviewers' comments were a bit contradictory as some encouraged true-crime fans to watch for themselves, but others were not impressed with the representation of Bundy.

**Great Acting with a Side of Intrigue.** The most evident theme throughout the reviews of *EWSEAV* was that of praise towards the actors involved in the film and the intriguing storytelling from Liz Kendall's perspective (Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile Reviews, 2020). Notably, this perspective was also condemned by reviewers, but there were still many who appreciated the story told from her eyes. Efron was the most highly praised, acknowledging his growth as an actor. Many *Rotten Tomatoes* users felt that this role established Efron as more than the teen heart throb; rather, a serious actor capable of different roles. Reviewers also acknowledged the performance of Lily Collins, appreciating her ability to tap into the role of Bundy's long-term girlfriend. "This show drew me in, the acting was incredible. The movie was compelling looking at the story of Ted Bundy from the point of view of his girlfriend and how it affected her life and the life of her daughter. Worth the watch" (Carol C, 2020, p. 1). Acknowledging the man Bundy was in real life, some reviewers appreciated Efron's ability to reenact Bundy's charming nature. "Bundy being played by Zac Efron was an excellent and chilling choice as in the film, Efron managed to capture the charming and friendly vibes Ted Bundy gave off which fooled everyone" (Step H, 2020, p. 3). Even though the film had a historical plotline, some reviewers still felt a sense of suspense as Bundy goes through his trial: "Honestly I was expecting this to be the typical serial killer movie and it was NOT!! I honestly

was so intrigued the entire time! I actually felt nervous when they read his verdict in the movie! This movie will have your emotions all over the board!” (Courtney F, 2019, p. 4). The interesting perspective combined with great acting from the cast left many reviewers satisfied, encouraging others to watch the film for themselves.

**A Lost Narrative.** Audience members articulated that their need for entertainment was met through the acting, but also noted their dissatisfaction with the lack of violence in the film. They felt that Bundy’s gruesome nature was lost in a narrative clouded by Liz Kendall’s perspective and was ignored through such frequent scenes in the courtroom. The excitement that surrounds Bundy’s story is somewhat hidden as most of his behaviors are alluded to, rather than shown on screen. Several reviewers commented on the courtroom proceedings, finding them boring and taking up time that could have been used to show Bundy’s true character. Even when commenting on the disappointing plotline, reviewers still mention Efron’s acting:

If you're expecting a lot of barbaric reenactments of Bundy's brutal slayings you will be sorely disappointed. The film's main focus is the legal proceedings and trials after Bundy's initial arrest, his inevitable indictment leading to his execution, and how his longtime girlfriend dealt with the morbid revealings of who the man she loved turned out to really be. A large portion of the film is a bare-bones procedural courtroom drama with a decidedly leisure pace; so this won't be a home-run for everyone who watches it.

Efron's unexpectedly captivating and believable performance as one of America's most notorious serial killers is enough to warrant a watch (Alex A, 2020, p. 1).

It was clear that *Rotten Tomatoes* reviewers were simply looking for more. A film about one of the most prolific serial killers in history would surely shed light on Bundy and his crimes; yet, this did not seem to be the case. Put more simply by another reviewer, Juan R, the movie had

“lack of narrative and exploration of the characters but with a very good performance” (2019, p. 8). With such an infamous story to base their expectations on, the reviewers felt the key elements were drowned out by production choices. “It's hard not to get caught up in the horrific story of Ted Bundy especially with Zac Efron's committed performance to the role, but overall the story is chopped together with a lot of crucial points missing or dramatized” (Ryan C, 2019, p. 12).

**Darkness Wanted.** A similar theme was repeated throughout the data sample as reviewers consistently commented on Bundy's dark nature that was ignored in the film. The previous theme touched more on missing pieces of Bundy's narrative, and this theme was differentiated by its focus on the lack of violence throughout the film. Some, like Luke R. were simply bored with the way the story was depicted: “Could not get past the first 45min. Such a fluff piece spending way too much time on Ted's relationship with Liz... Snore” (2019, p. 9). Others, like Dakota S., commented more specifically about the roundabout plotline avoiding some of the darker details: “An extraordinarily soft-handed approach to characters and a story that require more teeth. There's little to this film beyond Zac Efron's performance” (2019, p. 9). With a film about an American serial killer, reviewers were looking for somewhat of an educational experience. To the audience's dismay, this film avoided much of the darker sides to Bundy:

It's got some great moments and a fantastic performance from Efron but it's not the movie to see if you want to know about the Ted Bundy murders. The movie revolves around his relationship with girlfriend Elizabeth Kloepfer and his twisted mind and strange demeanor. Had it focused on the murders and trial it would've been more informative and interesting to watch (Farah R., 2019, p. 11).



Beyond an educational gratification, reviewers were clearly seeking an eerie sense of entertainment that was simply not delivered:

First up, I thought all the acting was pretty great, each of the cast members were convincing in their roles. I found that the story itself skirts around the darkest aspects of Ted Bundy's acts quite deliberately. I found this disappointing and that it dulled the impact of the true nature of this monstrous individual. It follows, in detail, those people around Bundy who are affected by his actions and try to remain loyal and supportive of him despite the damning and mounting evidence. There's some good stuff here, but all in all, I was underwhelmed by the story told” (Jordan P., 2019, p. 11).

It was evident through this theme that reviewers were seeking both educational and entertainment gratifications through a more graphic and realistic depiction of Bundy himself, rather than the individuals around him and his trials. There is much to learn about Bundy and his crimes but this film did not deliver many details outside of already well-known facts.

**Not-so-bad Bundy.** Even worse than the lack of violence was the resulting depiction of Bundy as a potentially innocent man, wrongly convicted by unfair law enforcement. Because the crimes were only alluded to, it was not always obvious that Bundy was the man behind the killings. In his real life, it was true that Bundy was charming and had many female supporters, despite his accusations. However, this element of the film was not appreciated by the reviewers. There is a tricky line between depicting Bundy as he was, highlighting the more positive element of his story, compared to minimizing the evil, violent aspects of his character. Notably all creative choices by production, these choices were not popular from the reviewers' standpoint:

Not at all what expected. While I think Zac Efron and Lily Collins excelled in their roles, the script was poor and the title is a complete misnomer. Was waiting for the extremely wicked, shockingly evil and vile moments to happen and they never appeared. The big reveal was supposed to be a decapitated body? That scratches the surface to what Bundy actually did. The most vile part of the movie were the groupies (Ben D., 2019, p. 4).

Acknowledging their prior knowledge, Max M. was still disappointed in the lack of clarity regarding Bundy and his guilt throughout the film:

The murders aren't shown but rather we see the film through his lover's perspective and how she begins to realize overtime [sic] that her boyfriend is a serial killer, which could be problematic to some. The real issue with this film is the portrayal of Ted Bundy and how the writers seem to romanticize him through his looks and charm; they made it seem as if he'd been cheated by the judicial system rather than being imprisoned for his heinous crimes. Of course we all know this isn't true but the film fails to prove exactly that (2020, p. 4)

Knowing the kind of man that Bundy was, reviewers were very disappointed in the positive attributes given to the serial killer throughout the film:

This film was a biased portrayal of Ted Bundy, and depicted him as a "cool" and "dreamy" guy when in reality he was a murderer and a rapist. The direction this film took was glamorizing Ted Bundy, as if he was an American rock star. I felt like I was watching a movie based on a man who was wrongly convicted, and was innocently accused (Matt F., 2019, p. 5).

It was evident through this theme that those tuning in to watch this film were aware of the individual Bundy was, and were expecting him to be depicted as such. While Bundy was

charming and continually denied his involvement in the murders of which he was accused, it seems that the audiences were far more interested in seeing Bundy as dark and twisted. A relatively positive representation of him, that nearly makes the audience question his guilt, is not what these reviewers wanted.

Overall, the reviewers of *EWSEAV* came to the consensus that the acting was excellent, and the actors accurately depicted the characters in a way that was entertaining and intriguing. Where the intrigue stopped and the dissatisfaction began was in the representation of Bundy as questionably innocent, without any crimes committed on screen until the very last moments of the film. Although reviewers still recommended that true crime fans indulge in the film, they warned of the empty plotline that left much for the audiences to assume based on previous knowledge of Bundy as a killer.

### **Audience Reviews of *Mindhunter***

As I analyzed the comments from *Mindhunter* reviewers, it was apparent that the audience members were looking for many of the same gratifications as those who watched and reviewed *EWSEAV*. However; in this case, the reviewers received many of the gratifications they were seeking (*Mindhunter: Season One Reviews, 2020*). *Rotten Tomatoes* reviewers frequently mentioned their appreciation for the acting, especially that of Cameron Britton, the actor who played serial killer Ed Kemper. Beyond the acting, reviewers heavily praised the writers for the script, something not mentioned by reviewers of *EWSEAV*. Reviewers were pleased to gain insight into the mind of serial killers, mentioning the thought-provoking dialogue that occurred between the killers and FBI agents. Equally satisfying was the suspense and graphic, detailed depictions of the murders. Still, some reviewers felt the storyline was boring and others were dissatisfied with the story arcs outside of the serial killer interviews.

**All-Around Well Done.** Reviewers of *Mindhunter* were very pleased with the overall presentation of the series. Not only did the series provide a great storyline, the directing was well done and the acting was very impressive. Vishnu T put it simply: “Its [sic] dark, thrilling, stylish and most importantly well written and amazingly directed. Awesome tv show” (2020, p. 1). The script was praised repeatedly, and reviewers appreciated the reenactments of real killers in history. Even with the fictional outer story arcs, reviewers were satisfied with what the show had to offer:

One of (if not the) best shows I have ever seen! The dialogue is extremely intelligent, the story lines seem to align with the reality of the crimes and killers, and the cinematography is perfect. And somehow, amid the true crime grit, it manages to be artsy and innovative! I usually hate "fictional" or "re-enacted" crime dramas, but this should not be classified in that genre. PLEASE KEEP THIS SHOW ON FOR A LONG TIME!!!! (Cynthia G, 2020, p. 1).

The acting was admired by many of the reviewers, as Cameron Britton gave a stunning performance as Coed Killer, Ed Kemper. Jonathon Groff and Holt McCallany were also appreciated for their work as FBI agents interviewing the killers and maintaining a great chemistry throughout the series:

I love so much about this show: the writing, the acting, the tone, and the cinematography, everything is on point. Jonathan Groff and Holt McCallany as Holden Ford and Bill Tench are amazing, and their interactions are hilarious. Cameron Britton as Edmund Kemper is terrifying and made me tense every time he was on screen. What really gets me is this shows detailed, cinematic shots, every scene is just beautifully captured (Anthony G., 2020, p. 5).

What was abundantly clear throughout the reviews of both *Mindhunter* and *EWSEAV* is the expectation of high quality in the true crime genre. Specifically, when retelling the stories of killers in history, it is important to maintain the integrity of the original story. Especially in *Mindhunter*, the reviewers praised the series for great acting, directing, and a script that moved the audiences to keep watching.

**Thought Provoking and Informative.** Reviewers appreciated the high-quality production of the series because it offered thought provoking dialogue among the characters that both informed the media consumers about the killers, and kept them on their toes with suspense. Because of the nature of the interviews between the FBI agents and the serial killers, audiences were given an inside look at the mind of the killers, educating them about the potential reasons for committing such violent crimes. “Ultrarealistic, education, and for some it's rather terrifying. The acting in this is phenomenal, especially by actors like Cameron Britton as Ed Kemper” (Night P., 2019, p. 6). The killers share their thoughts and feelings with the agents, allowing their character to shine through and the audiences the chance to understand them. Contrary to the representation of Bundy in *EWSEAV*, the killers in *Mindhunter* were depicted in such a way that did not promote feelings of empathy from the audience. Even with their troubled pasts, they were still always the dark and twisted killers the audiences knew them to be. “INCREDIBLY captivating and consumes all of your focus as you try and figure out the mind and thoughts behind some of the US' worst killers at the time” (Andrea S., 2018, p. 10).

Reviewers of *Mindhunter*, and assumed fans of the true crime genre, were gratified when they were given the opportunity to think deeply about what they were watching. The depth that the series provided allowed them to explore the minds of killers, while still remembering them

for their dark and evil behaviors. They appreciated the informational element, as the depictions of the killers rang true to who they were in real life.

**Suspenseful, Dark, and Very Detailed.** Novel to the *Mindhunter* series was its lack of censorship in reference to the crimes. The killers described their murders in great detail, and audiences saw even images related to the crimes throughout the interviews. In a series that depicted true events, audiences were gratified by an entertaining, and still suspenseful plotline. Raisul S referred to the series as “morbidly mesmerizing” (2020, p. 1). The stories retold through this series are dark, and in the midst of creation and production of the show, this darkness was not lost. The storytelling was referred to as meticulous by many of the reviewers, who appreciated the detail included in the interviews. “Deep, dark and beautiful. Once *Mindhunter* gets started it grabs hold of your soul and pulls you in tight” (Alex T, 2017, p. 13). Mystery combined with the accuracy of actual serial killers from history made for great enjoyment from the audience.

**Unwanted Story Arcs.** Disliked by most of the reviewers were the elements of *Mindhunter* unrelated to the serial killer interviews. While some claimed the overall series was boring and uneventful, more specifically the *Rotten Tomatoes* reviewers took issue with the other recurring story arcs. Special Agent Holden Ford starts a new relationship in the beginning of the season, which was not popular according to the reviews. They found this relationship distracting and felt there was an unnecessary amount of sex scenes between the two characters. What was obvious through this theme was the desire for more serial killer scenes and less outside of this storyline. Notably, due to the length of a series, there has to be more included in the plot to fill each episode; audiences were simply unimpressed by the outer elements of the show.

With the specific positive themes established from the reviews, paired with the dissatisfactory theme of unwanted story arcs, it is evident what audience reviewers were looking for in this true crime series. Based in history, audience members wanted action and information, with an exciting recreation of interviews with serial killers. Disinterested in other storylines, the reviewers were more interested in the deep, dark details behind the murders, rather than the interpersonal relationships between characters.

### **Summary of Thematic Analysis**

This section of the analysis was designed to answer RQ2: What gratifications, if any, do *Rotten Tomatoes* users report gaining from watching *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* and *Mindhunter*? Both texts received somewhat mixed reviews, but *Mindhunter* received an overall higher rating. Though reviewers' comments lead to different themes, they establish a general understanding of what audiences were looking for. Reviewers were disappointed in *EWSEAV* for the same reason *Mindhunter* was much more gratifying. True crime fans are looking for specific, detailed recounts of violence with a desire to learn more about the killers.

### **A Comparison of Frames and Gratifications**

The final section of this analysis was designed to answer RQ3: Do any differences in these reported gratifications reflect how serial killers are framed in the two texts? Through my analysis, it was evident that the specific representations of the serial killers within the text impacted the enjoyment of the viewers. The specific connection between serial killer frames and gratifications is discussed. Other interesting connections in the data will be reviewed in Chapter 5.

Ted Bundy was represented far differently than Ed Kemper, Jerry Brudos, Monte Rissell, and Richard Speck. Audience reviewers were quick to note their dissatisfaction with Bundy's

questionably innocent depiction throughout the film, while no comments of that nature were made in response to the killers in *Mindhunter*. For the same reason *Mindhunter* gratified the needs of those who watched and reviewed it, *EWSEAV* left consumers wanting more. This intersection between frames and gratifications is important because it highlights specifically what the audience was looking for and did or did not receive. When consuming true crime, particularly historical in nature, audience members wanted details about the crimes that they did not previously know. That audiences knew the outcome of the story ahead of time means that the plotline has to find ways to keep the audiences entertained. Viewers wanted a storyline with depth that could expand their knowledge about the murder, and the murderer. Even when the film and series was little scary, audience members preferred to be shown the details over simply hinting around them. Audiences turn to true crime content for entertainment and educational purposes. Without the violent details, audiences are left ungratified. No one wanted to watch girls cheering on Bundy, they wanted to see him vulnerable and suffering. The killers in chains, behind bars with a guard escort was the way audiences preferred to see the killers: guilty without question, creepy and honest about their violent behavior.

### **Conclusion**

This thesis sought to analyze what media consumers like about the true crime genre. To do this, I found specific ways serial killers were framed in two different texts. With both texts existing within the same time period, and the similarly violent killers as main characters, the analysis provided insight into ways serial killers were depicted. *EWSEAV* told Bundy's story from the perspective of his long-time girlfriend, leaving much to the imagination, even his innocence. *Mindhunter* framed the serial killers from an investigator's perspective, giving many specific and gruesome details about the ways they harmed their victims. *Rotten Tomatoes* users



were quick to comment on the different depictions of killers, highly favoring the creepier characters. This analysis highlights media consumer interest in true crime and what they are looking for in this genre of content.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this thesis was to describe the specific reasons why media consumers enjoy serial killer content. With such a popular genre like true crime, and many options to choose from, this study established potential reasons why audience members may choose some specific media content over others. Using a multi-step, qualitative approach, I established frames present in two different serial killer media texts: *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* (2019) and season one of *Mindhunter* (2017). Then, I inductively analyzed reviews of the two texts on the review aggregating platform, *Rotten Tomatoes*. After performing the two separate analyses, I compared the frames present versus the gratifications received from audience members. This chapter includes a summary of my findings, as well as the theoretical and practical implications, the limitations and recommendations for future research.

### **Summary of Findings**

The findings from my analysis that indicate media consumers, specifically those who left reviews on *Rotten Tomatoes*, have very specific needs they are seeking to gratify when consuming true crime content. A multi-step method allowed for an in-depth understanding of the reviewers' comments. With the framing analysis to add context, it was much easier to understand the perspective of the *Rotten Tomatoes* reviewers. In comparing both analyses, it was evident that one overarching need that audience members were looking to gratify when watching *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* and *Mindhunter*.

### **Framing Analysis**

Reflective of the various ways serial killers are represented in the media, *EWSEAV* and *Mindhunter* took vastly different approaches to framing American serial killers, historically known for their brutal attacks against their victims. While my findings are not generalizable to

the entire true crime genre, these two texts still provide interesting insight into the differences in frames of killers. Despite the similar time period and similar volatile criminal characters, the two texts approached the representation of killers very differently. Additionally, the historic nature of the two texts makes it easy to tell which information is shown and which information is withheld. Framing looks at both included and excluded information that create an image of an event or person (Entman, 1993), so it was interesting to compare killer representations where information outside the plotline is already known by audience members.

Bundy was framed more positively throughout the film, and even as potentially innocent in some scenes. While it was clear he was plotting ways to escape and manipulating those around him to get what he needed, his charming smile and denial of the accused crimes was very believable. The artistic choice to avoid much of his criminal behavior ultimately gave audiences mixed signals about Bundy and his murderous nature. *EWSEAV* was a film about the impact Bundy had on the lives around him, most specifically his girlfriend Liz. Additionally, it centered around who he was as a person, rather than delving into the how and why of his crimes.

Conversely, *Mindhunter* explored the how and why behind the killers' crimes more deeply, while still establishing a notion of who the killers were as people. *Mindhunter* had four serial killers in season one: Ed Kemper, Monte Rissell, Jerry Brudos, and Richard Speck. While the surrounding characters of the series were fictional, based on the lives of real FBI agents, the killers were all reenactments of real killers in the 1970s. The killers were handcuffed and wearing chains from their waists to their ankles, escorted by several guard. They discussed their crimes with great detail and darkness in their eyes. Without remorse for their actions, they shed light on the ways they attacked their victims, the difficult nature of taking others' lives with their

own hands, and the violent ways they treated the bodies after they killed their victims. Without question, these killers were guilty and the series did not shy away from any details.

### **Thematic Analysis**

The framing analysis was interesting in that it gave context to the reviews on *Rotten Tomatoes* for the thematic analysis. While it can be assumed the intention of the reviewers on the website was not specifically to call attention to their needs and gratifications, it was obvious they were active media consumers with goals in mind, supporting a uses and gratifications approach for this study (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973; McQuail, Blumler, & Brown, 1972; Palmgreen, 1984; Rubin, 2009). Several themes were found in the reviews for each text. Notably, not all themes were directly related to the framing of the serial killers, but still worth mentioning from a practical standpoint of the findings and future research.

Clear through the reviews of both the film and the series was the importance of quality content. Within the true crime genre, great acting, writing, and directing are crucial in the historical recreation of crime and reenactment of notorious serial killers. Audiences applauded the acting in both texts, but especially highlighted the writing and directing in *Mindhunter*. This revealed that the texts met their gratifications for entertainment and information seeking. Audiences already know the general idea behind the stories, so it is important for the texts to bring as much entertainment value to the table as possible in regard to production. Maybe the storyline does not come as a total surprise, but the acting made consuming the content far more satisfying. Reviewers of both the film and the series applauded the actors involved in the projects, with an appreciation for their close resemblance to the roles. The true crime genre, according to the reviewers on *Rotten Tomatoes*, requires a high quality of production to retell the stories already known to most who watch.

While the reviewers' comments reflected several other themes, they can be summed up in the generalizable idea that audiences are looking for violence and detail in the telling of true crime stories. Disappointed in the lack of violence in *EWSEAV*, audiences commented on Bundy's nearly innocent portrayal throughout the film. Known as one of the most prolific serial killers in history, Bundy confessed to over thirty murders before his execution (Rosewood & Lo, 2017). The film barely scratches the surface of his crimes, focusing on his relationship with Liz, his escapes, and his courtroom proceedings. Audience members tuning in to a film with the title "Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile" are likely looking to witness the evil man behind the charming smile.

The historic nature of true crime lends itself to not-so-surprising storylines. However, what audiences were looking for, according to the reviews, are thought-provoking representations of killers, with new information that could not be found anywhere else. Like car accidents and natural disasters, serial killers are terrifying, but enticing, and difficult to ignore (Bonn, 2014). Reviewers raved about the dark details included in the interviews with the serial killers, appreciating their opportunity to make sense of senseless acts.

Overall, it was clear that the reviewers from *Rotten Tomatoes* knew what they were looking for when tuning in to the true crime programs analyzed for this thesis. Some needs were gratified while others were not. The gratified needs were based in entertainment and need for information.

### **Comparative Analysis**

It was obvious through this analysis that there were connections between frames of serial killers and gratified needs of the reviewers. For instance, the need for information was satisfied by the guilty serial killer in *Mindhunter* explaining how he decapitated his own mother (Penhall,

Spiegel, & Kapadia, 2017). Conversely, audiences were not gratified when Bundy refuses to admit to the crimes with which he was accused, even after his sentencing (Berlinger, et al., 2019). Only during the last moments of the film were the needs of the audience finally met when Bundy admits to decapitating one of his victims with a hacksaw.

The frames in which serial killers are presented throughout the texts heavily influenced the reactions from the reviewers on *Rotten Tomatoes*. Reviewers were aware of what they were looking for in the true crime content, mostly a realistic depiction and retelling of violent criminals in history. Surrounding plotlines were unwanted and the graphic details about the murders were most appreciated.

### **Theoretical Implications**

The utilization of both framing theory (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1984; Scheufele, 1999) and uses and gratifications (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973; Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974; Rubin, 2009; Ruggiero, 2000) led to several theoretical implications in this thesis. The implications refer both to the expansion of studying the serial killer genre of media and to the methodological approaches of media research.

### **Framing Theory**

Framing was developed by Goffman (1984) as a means of explaining how individuals make sense of the world around them. While media framing has often been researched in relation to news (Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014), I argue this thesis exemplified its versatility to be utilized in entertainment media as well. Entman (1993) notes that the process of framing includes the presentation of some elements of a story but the omission of others. The findings in this thesis are supportive of this concept, as evident through the retelling of violent serial killers in American history. Specifically, because the texts analyzed were historical, it was obvious when

they left out specific details. Had the texts been fictional, omitted information would have been far more difficult to identify. In this way, this thesis supports the current concept in framing about the selection of material chosen for audience consumption.

Frames create significance out of even the smallest of details when highlighted by the media (Scheufele, 1999). This is exemplified in my thesis through the film analysis as Bundy's relationship with long-term girlfriend Liz Kendall is at the center of the plotline. Arguably, the story of Ted Bundy could be told without even acknowledging he had a significant other; however, this film takes a different approach and makes their relationship the sole focus. Frames are what help media consumers remember certain aspects of a story. This is evident in *Mindhunter*, which presents a violent and unpredictable serial killer frame. In one memorable scene, Richard Speck throws a small bird into a fan, creating a bird explosion in the small cell he was locked in with Special Agents Tench and Ford (Penhall, Haley, & Fincher, 2017). Solidifying the scary serial killer frame, this scene left audiences with something to remember about Speck.

Supportive of Hallahan's (1999) concept of framing, both the film and the series referred to specific historical events such as Bundy's trial and the interviews with the four serial killers. Attributes, such as Bundy's charming nature or Kemper's distaste for those who humiliated him, were emphasized in the texts. Further, the actions of the criminals were much more obvious in the *Mindhunter* series. Hallahan (1999) noted that frames refer to events, attributes of individuals, and choices made by individuals. This conceptualization of frames referred to public relations principles but this thesis has established their relevance in these historical and entertaining texts.

Iyengar (1991) notes two fundamental types of framing: episodic and thematic. This thesis utilized thematic framing to establish the overarching themes within the film and series. This expands on the original use of thematic framing in the political context. Episodic framing was notably more impactful and persuasive than thematic framing (Aarøe, 2011; Gross, 2008; Iyengar, 1991), however; I argue that thematic framing should be further explored through surveys and interviews.

Particularly noteworthy of this thesis' methodology is the multi-step method that gave context to the frames and the interpretation of those frames from the audience. There are four locations in which frames can occur: "the communicators, the text, the receiver, and the culture" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Through my analysis, I was able to elaborate on the text, itself, and describe the frames that I found. Even further, using the *Rotten Tomatoes* reviews, I was able to examine the receivers, or audience members, responses to the frames. With the ability to expand upon two different locations of the frames, I provided an in-depth explanation of the preferred frames from audience members.

### **Uses and Gratifications**

As technology changes and different media content is created, uses and gratifications remains a relevant form of media scholarship. This thesis supported the assumption that audiences are active in their choice of which media to consume based on their needs (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973; McQuail, Blumler, & Brown, 1972; Palmgreen, 1984; Rubin, 2009). Through the *Rotten Tomatoes* reviews, it was clear that the reviewers had expectations before consuming the content, and the reviews were used to express if their expectations were met. With uses and gratifications as my framework, I was able to establish that fans of true crime



that reported their satisfaction on Rotten Tomatoes were seeking to gratify needs of information and entertainment.

More specifically, this thesis supported the typology developed by McQuail, Blumler, and Brown (1972). The need for diversion was gratified through the aspect of entertainment. Interestingly though, the entertainment stemmed from the plotline itself, but also the quality of production. The development of personal relationships with characters was not mentioned by users, which was not expected as the characters analyzed were serial killers. However, interviews or other methods may reveal other findings about the feeling of companionship derived from consuming true crime content. The comments from Rotten Tomatoes reviewers revealed the audience's need to explore reality. An addition to the theory itself, this exploration was historical in nature. Other studies have not mentioned the exploration of reality from the standpoint of historical events. Further research might also find that in consuming the true crime genre, the reinforcement of values also exists. I would argue that the gratification of surveillance was also met, but in an unexpected way. This content was consumed, and reviewed, as a way of critically surveying how the stories were presented. Audiences, for the most part, had previous understanding of the storylines, so in watching the content, they were able to identify what was happening on screen versus what was missing. Further research would be necessary to better support this claim.

This thesis also emphasized the versatility in results from this line of research. I specifically used two different media texts on the streaming platform, *Netflix*, and strategically chose two texts within the true crime genre. Comparing and contrasting two different, but similar texts, is a great contribution to uses and gratifications as it allows for a more thorough

understanding of what gratified the needs of the audience in one case but did meet the needs of the audience in another.

This thesis acts an encouragement to other scholars to consider blending theories in order to make even more in-depth explanations of media phenomena. Without the context of the framing analysis, the *Rotten Tomatoes* thematic analysis would have seemed empty. Similarly, the *Rotten Tomatoes* reviews supplemented the framing analysis by providing audience perceptions of the frames presented in the texts.

Even further, this thesis encourages scholars to utilize other online platforms to gather data about uses and gratifications. The interactive nature of Web 2.0 warrants further research into user generated content (Murugesan, 2007). *Reddit* and *Twitter* are two other specific platforms that allow users to communicate their opinions and hold discussions with other users. These social media platforms would be a great place for findings honest experiences of media consumers.

### **Practical Implications**

As the true crime genre continues to grow in popularity, this thesis also leads to several practical implications about the representation of serial killers in media. Much of the research about serial killers has focused on their celebrity status and glorification in culture (Bonn; 2014; Schmid, 2005; Weist, 2016). Bonn (2014) noted that the representation of serial killers in the media is often sensational, rather than sensible. Based on the *Rotten Tomatoes* reviews, this thesis argues that audiences may not actually be fond of this glorification. Aware of the violent history of the serial killers from the texts, reviewers were dissatisfied when the plotlines that avoided acknowledging their violent behaviors.

The need to see and learn more about the gruesome crimes was evident in the reviews and supports the concept of morbid curiosity. People are interested in “highly intense negative information” (Oosterwijk, 2017, p. 1), and without a heavy presence in the *EWSEAV*, reviewers were very disappointed. The descriptions of the crimes from the serial killers in *Mindhunter* were highly praised.

The characters were far more developed in the series than in the film the film. As mentioned by Schmid (2005), a television show has the time, over many episodes, to build narratives and establish relationships between viewers and the characters. Supported by this thesis, I argue the more satisfying way to represent serial killers in the media is through a television series. The time allotted in a series is more appropriate to expand on the complicated mind of a serial killer.

Media coverage and cultural interest in serial murder has existed since the early beginnings of serial murder, itself. Jack the Ripper wrote letters describing his crimes, and people have been intrigued ever since (Bonn, 2014). The two texts analyzed are two modern examples of the sense-making involved in what seem like senseless acts. While the series was more appreciated than the film, they both are contemporary examples of serial killer content in the true crime genre.

### **Limitations**

The findings from this study cannot be interpreted without the acknowledgment of some limitations. First, as the study is qualitative in nature, with very specific data samples, the findings cannot be generalized to the overall true crime genre or the entirety of the media consumers. As these findings were only my interpretation, it is possible that another researcher would yield somewhat different results. Still, the findings provide a deep inspection of serial

killer frames in *EWSEAV* and *Mindhunter*, with the supplemental perceptions of the frames from *Rotten Tomatoes*.

The data sample of *Rotten Tomatoes* reviews represents only small population of individuals who watched the film and television series. Surely, there are other media consumers who watched the texts but were not included in the analysis. Additionally, this approach to uses and gratifications research relied on the comments of the reviewers to align with what I was searching for. This meant that many of the reviews discussed other things that are noteworthy, but not related to the specific research question. Utilizing typical uses and gratifications methodology of surveys would have negated this problem.

Because I attained comments from *Rotten Tomatoes* organically, rather than prompting participants with questions, it cannot be assumed that their needs were gratified at all. The comments were analyzed under an assumption, as there is no way of knowing if the reviewers' needs were actually met. Many of the comments were contradictory of one another. Follow up with participants would have allowed for further clarification of needs and gratifications.

It cannot go without mention that some of the frames presented in the film and series were true to the serial killers in life. It is difficult to critique the film for representing Bundy as a charming ladies' man, when in reality, he was charming and had many female followers throughout his trials. Historical representations of serial killers made for an interesting analysis but also makes it tricky determining what was important to represent the truth versus what was just entertaining.

### **Future Research**

Future research should specifically survey or interview media consumers about the two texts analyzed in this thesis to compare results and find similarities. If comparable, utilizing

online web platforms would become a more modern and practical way to retrieve data for uses and gratifications research. Even further, with the examination of similar content, this thesis' methodology should be repeated in order to see if it yields similar results. The multi-step, framing and thematic analysis provides much more information about the specific reasons why audiences are choosing specific forms of media over others.

The true crime genre is consistently expanding, as should the research about the genre. From books, to podcasts, to television and film, there simply is not enough media research performed about murder and the interpretation from audiences. Even further, the conceptualization of infotainment should be explored. Media consumers were gratified by the information the stories provided and entertained by the acting and violence, but the most satisfaction stemmed from a combination of the two. Media consumers are looking for a full experience when choosing media to consume, meeting as many needs as possible. Future research should more distinctly define this concept.

Most importantly, future scholarship should focus on the expansion of media theories and the ways they are studied. Media technologies are developing very quickly and the research dedicated to media needs to advance alongside the technology. Without the adaptations to new technologies, media research will ultimately become obsolete. This thesis was only one small step forward in the advancements of methodology.

### **Conclusion**

Serial murder is one of the most popular topics within the true crime genre of media and entertainment. The ways in which serial killers are represented in the media has a significant impact on the perception of the content from the audience. Based on this thesis, audience members preferred true crime content that shed light on the mystery behind brutal violence and

terrifying murders. Without the depth of character development, and visual and verbal evidence of their crimes, audiences were much more dissatisfied. This thesis was an examination of specific texts within the true crime genre, using a modern approach to data collection about uses and gratifications.

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