

The Psychology of True Crime Consumption: Deconstructing Parasocial Bonds, Morbid Curiosity, and Audience Engagement with Narratives of Crime

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Abstract:

The global proliferation of true crime media across several forms such as podcasts, docuseries, movies, literature, and social media has prompted academic interest in the behavioral, psychological, and sociological motivations of its consumers. This paper argues that such engagement is rooted in well-established psychological mechanisms rather than mere fascination or deviant tendencies, as a considerable amount of research frequently stigmatizes this behavior as a pathological condition. Integrating Parasocial Interaction Theory [1], Morbid Curiosity [2], Terror Management Theory [3], and Uses and Gratifications Theory [4], this theoretical analysis deconstructs how audiences cultivate quasi-intimate relationships with offenders, process existential dread, and eventually derive entertainment utility from true crime media. Ultimately, these findings demonstrate parasocial bonding that mirrors celebrity veneration and how it is mediated via narrative proximity, glorification of offenders, and media framing. The insights carry implications for media psychology, public health communication, and ethical responsibilities of entertainment production.

Keywords: parasocial interaction, true crime, morbid curiosity, terror management theory, uses and gratifications, serial killer, media psychology

I. INTRODUCTION

In 2024, true crime content accounted for 19% of all the global podcast streaming market by genre [5]. Highly popular titles such as *Crime Junkie*, *Rotten Mango*, *Casefile*, and *Morbid* routinely rack up hundreds of millions of streams. Documentary series and several adaptations based on infamous serial killers such as Jeffrey Dahmer have consistently ranked among the most viewed series of all-time within weeks of release. This is an important phenomenon that challenges our fundamental understanding of human nature: why do humans develop a sustained, emotionally charged investment with narratives of violence?

Several prevalent discourses attempt to explain this phenomenon with pre-existing ideas of morbid sensationalism or voyeurism. Journalists have also tried over the years to push a narrative that humans tend to exhibit such behavior due to an innate perverse attraction to violence. However, these concepts are scientifically unsubstantiated and often fail to explain deeper psychological architecture causing this phenomenon. A more nuanced picture is understood when looking further into research in media psychology, cognitive neuroscience, and personality psychology, in which consumption of true crime fulfills legitimate psychological functions like processing existential dread, satisfying adaptive curiosity, and fulfilling social and informational needs [6, 7].

Furthermore, audiences who engage in long-term episodic content such as web series and podcasts tend to show characteristics closely resembling parasocial bonds with the perpetrators that almost mirror the kind that audiences develop with celebrities or fictional characters. Particularly for these audiences, the criminal paradoxically becomes a quasi-protagonist figure who is familiar, discussed, analyzed, and sometimes even romanticized based on physical and psychological features. This paper does not seek to normalise this romanticization and idealization

of aforementioned “criminals”, but rather understand any sort of psychological substrate that makes these reactions plausible.

This subsequent analysis is organized into four theoretical components. Section II establishes the foundational theoretical architecture. Section III examines morbid curiosity as an adaptive psychological drive. Section IV analyses the mechanisms of parasocial bonding in true crime contexts. Section V applies Terror Management Theory to explain the appeal of mortality-salient narratives. Section VI synthesises these perspectives and discusses implications.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper draws on four established theoretical theories and ideas in psychology and communication studies that when put together, form a multi-level explanatory model addressing cognitive, emotional, social and existential facets of true crime consumption.

2.1 Parasocial Interaction Theory (1956)

Horton and Wohl [1] introduced a concept named “parasocial interaction” (PSI) to describe the **one-sided, illusionary sense of intimacy** that media users develop with celebrities, television hosts, or fictional characters. Unlike authentic social relationships, these parasocial bonds are unreciprocated, meaning, the audience member expresses feelings of familiarity, empathy, affection or even enmity towards these media figures. David Giles [8] later extended this theory by arguing that people can form parasocial relationships with **villains, antiheroes, and morally ambiguous characters**.

2.2 Sensation Seeking and Morbid Curiosity

Zuckerman’s Sensation-Seeking theory [2] identified humans’ need for novel, variant, and intense stimulation as a stable personality trait. Within this framework, morbid curiosity, which is defined as “an interest in witnessing or learning about events involving death, violence, or harm,” acts as a domain-specific expression of sensation seeking. Scrivner [9] further divided morbid curiosity into four distinct domains, in which the primary one was stated as fascination involving the minds of psychopaths, serial killers, or true crime.

2.3 Terror Management theory

Developed by Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon [3], the Terror Management Theory (TMT) posits that humans use cultural worldviews and self-esteem as psychological buffers against the deep, existential terror caused by the awareness of inevitable death. Engaging in these mortality-salient narratives containing death as the central theme can paradoxically help humans by functioning as a controlled, wishful confrontation with death anxiety. This allows the audience to process fear from a safe space within the safety of “narrative distance.”

2.4 Uses and Gratifications Theory

Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch [4] proposed that media audiences actively seek constant psychological and social fulfillment. In the context of true crime, this framework identifies multiple gratifications such as learning information, building a sense of self, finding a way to escape reality by experiencing fear from a safe distance, and social currency (sharing topics for discussion). Boling [6] applied this framework specifically in people who indulge in true crime media, finding out that listeners valued cognitive engagement, problem solving, moral contemplation, emotional arousal, and community participation (often virtual in the modern world) as primary gratifications.

III. MORBID CURIOSITY AS AN ADAPTIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL DRIVE

The idea of pathologizing an interest in death or violence reflects an existing cultural and humanitarian bias rather than empirical or clinical evidence. From an evolutionary standpoint, curiosity about lethal threats, death, and

consequences of risky or violent behaviors constitutes an adaptive mechanism. Organisms that attended to information about predators, rivals, and dangerous members of the same species were more likely to survive than those that averted attention [9]. In this context, true crime activates an ancient threat-surveillance system through contemporary media that is usually made for entertainment.

Empirical support for this claim regarding adaptive framing comes from a 2010 study [7], which found that women, who are statistically more likely to be victims of homicide through a partner, consumed more true crime at a disproportionately higher rate when compared to men, although men were found to be more invested in violent media that involved wars or criminal violence. The authors interpreted this as a **threat-preparedness function**. This meant that details about how serial killers select, approach, and harm their victims may provide information to women relevant to personal safety. This is a particularly significant finding that directly challenges the notion that consumption of true crime is pathologic but maybe rather instrumentally rational.

Scrivner's experimental work [9] further demonstrates that individuals with high morbid curiosity showed no elevated psychopathology scores on standardized instruments. Rather, morbid curiosity correlated positively with openness to experience and the willingness to take the physical, emotional, and financial risks to supplement those experiences. This reframes the true crime audience not as an unhealthy subculture, but rather a segment of society that is characterised by cognitive openness and a tolerance for complex, disturbing material without losing moral orientation.

It is, however, important to note the limits of this study. Scrivner [9] acknowledged that at the end of the morbid curiosity spectrum, consumption patterns of this media may intersect with desensitization to violence, lack of empathy, or, in rare cases, subclinical antisocial traits.

However, the majority of true crime consumers occupy a neutral, normative range of this distribution, engaging in this genre in ways that are functionally equivalent to engaging with horror fiction, dramatic crime narratives, or tragedy fiction.

IV. PARASOCIAL BONDING MECHANISMS IN TRUE CRIME MEDIA

The parasocial bond between true crime audiences and the criminals presents itself as one of the most counterintuitive phenomena in contemporary media consumption. Looking at it from a logical or emotional standpoint, it shouldn't be possible for the audiences to develop feelings of familiarity, sympathy, or even admiration towards individuals who have committed acts of lethal violence. Yet, this still happens, and the reason can lie in a source beyond adaptive mechanisms, rather in media structure and the psychological mechanisms they instigate.

4.1 Narrative proximity and Intimacy

Horton and Wohl [1] noted in their study that repeated, intimate-seeming exposure to a media figure creates a subjective experience of a growing relationship. Long-form true crime formats, including multi-episode podcasts, documentary series, series of books, and fictional television series, create suitable conditions for this prolonged exposure structurally similar to conditions that generate parasocial relationships. This exposure is also intensified by the confessional nature of the content, giving access to the offender's childhood, psyche, relationships, turmoil, and inner world that exceeds the intimacy of most real-world acquaintances.

4.2 Role of Media Framing

In *Natural Born Celebrities*, Schmid argues that American culture has systematically applied an apparatus of celebrity to serial killers, in which they construct the perpetrator as a figure of fascination through similar mechanisms used to produce celebrities [10]. Techniques like profile features, stylized imagery, and narrative arcs that heavily focus on exceptionalism and individuality are stated to make the criminals stand out from the rest.

This is a framing meticulously developed by media outlets to engage the audience rather than the audience's psychology. Therefore, this parasocial engagement is also a construct of media.

4.3 Hybristophilia and its Limits

There is a subset of true crime media consumers that are identified by what clinical literature calls "**hybristophilia**," which is defined by sexual or romantic attraction to individuals who are criminals [11]. Although this phenomenon receives disproportionate media attention, it represents only a fraction of the true crime audience. Its existence should not be confounded with the broader population of consumers whose parasocial engagement might be mostly fuelled by curiosity and narrative investment rather than erotic attraction.

V. TERROR MANAGEMENT AND THE APPEAL OF MORTALITY SALIENT NARRATIVES

Terror Management Theory offers probably the most philosophically substantiated explanation that checks off all the boxes regarding true crime's appeal. In *The Denial of Death*, Becker [12] claims that humanity functions largely as a collective project that is trying to deny mortality. Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon formalized this concept into a testable theoretical framework, demonstrating empirically that reminders of mortality trigger worldview defense along with self-esteem and existentialism [3].

Inherently, true-crime narratives are mortality salient. They are centered around the idea of death, its perpetrators, consequences, and subsequent details. This fascination with true crime can be understood as a form of controlled confrontation with mortality, but from a safe frame of narrative rather than experience. The audience is reminded of their vulnerability (the victims happen to be ordinary people) but, at the same time, reassured of their safety (the killer being caught, justice being served, and the system functioning). This narrative structure, starting from the perpetrators' violent acts and ending with them being convicted, serves a purpose that is analogous when compared to tragedy in dramatism.

Pyszczynski et al. [13] extended TMT to media consumption in a modern world context, where audiences selectively engage with this content as a form of terror management when cultural buffers like religion, nationalism, or legacy sound less convincing. To a person who tends to have limited belief in concepts like religion or family legacy, media narratives can provide a confrontation with death that can ultimately benefit a person psychologically in processing existentialism without requiring any metaphysical commitments.

VI. DISCUSSION

The four theoretical frameworks discussed in this paper converge to form a consistent argument: true crime consumption is driven by an amalgamation of well-documented, normative psychological, adaptive, and sociological mechanisms rather than by deviance or any underlying pathology. Morbid curiosity serves adaptive threat-preparedness. Parasocial bonds are media constructs planned to keep audiences hooked to their products. Uses and Gratification theory suggests multiple simultaneous functions ranging from utility functions to community participation, and Terror Management frames true crime as a culturally important tactic to process existential dread.

A critical counter-argument that deserves to be addressed is the contention that normalizing this phenomenon can minimize the suffering of victims and their families or that this glamorization of offenders can lead to a cultural glorification of violence. This concern is ethical and empirically serious, but it is directed towards media outlets for their production practices and media ethics, rather than the psychology of the audience. The appropriate response is one where the consumer is not stigmatized but the responsibilities of media producers are analyzed, particularly regarding victim representation, consent, and framing offenders as threats to society rather than objects of celebration.

The findings of this paper also carry implications for public-health communication. If the audience is partly motivated by information-seeking and threat-preparedness, then public health campaigns addressing personal

safety, violence from family members, and criminal victimization might find an unusually receptive audience via true crime. This genre's established capacity to garner sustained, emotionally engaged attention shows its potential to be used as a vehicle to educate the public on evidence-based safety messaging and similar muses.

VII. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the psychology of true crime consumption is neither aberrant nor a sign of an underlying pathological condition. It is rather an expression of fundamental human tendencies operating through proliferating media. Parasocial Interaction Theory, Morbid Curiosity research, Terror Management Theory, and Uses and Gratifications Theory collectively synthesize a comprehensive explanation that places true crime audiences within the larger population of media consumers rather than its pathological margins.

Future research should address several gaps. Longitudinal studies examining whether long-term exposure to true crime consumption produces significant changes in anxiety tolerance, empathy, or safety behavior would substantially advance the empirical base. Cross-cultural comparative analysis would help in clarifying whether the psychological dynamics identified here are universal or culturally specific. And qualitative research centering the experiences of victims' families would provide a more balanced and holistic study to audience-centered analysis. As true crime continues its global expansion, the psychological study of its audiences becomes not merely academically interesting but socially and anthropologically crucial.

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