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Disney Channel Serial Killers

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Disney Channel Serial Killers

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Abstract

The appearance of actors Zac Efron and Ross Lynch, known for their roles as teenagers on popular Disney Channel productions, as serial killers Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer in the films *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil, and Vile* and *My Friend Dahmer* has raised questions about the effects of these portrayals on the Generation Z demographic. How does having these former Disney Channel actors portray these serial killers affect the way that Generation Z views Bundy and Dahmer? Through examining movie reviews by both professional critics and audience members, as well as social media posts on websites such as Twitter, Tumblr, and Tiktok, this thesis attempts to gain an insight into how and why these killers have become such a popular topic of conversation in society today, particularly among Generation Z. Furthermore, this thesis suggests that further research on these media portrayals of serial killers as well as inaccurate depictions of mental illness across many television series and movies is necessary to explain how the constant bombardment of serial killer media affects society as a whole.

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Chapter One: Introduction

In society today, it is a common guilty pleasure of many individuals to be interested in serial killers; people watch television shows and movies, read novels, and listen to podcasts about the topic, and they are eager to share the stories they hear with those who share their fascination. It seems as if every year there is another story being told about these killers, whom society should view as monsters because of the horrific deeds they committed against other human beings. Almost everyone will immediately recognize the names Jeffrey Dahmer, Ted Bundy, and John Wayne Gacy, whether they have researched them or have watched the movies that were made about these men that focused on their crimes. At first when these names are mentioned, the typical focus of the conversation is about their dangerous minds and horrendous acts. However, if a conversation about killers were to be dissected, it would be obvious to see that such serial killers are discussed almost as if they are celebrities. People know facts about them such as where they grew up, what their childhood was like, and maybe even exactly when and how they died. These facts are exchanged as if the people in question were Hollywood or Netflix stars, not brutal killers.

People also never seem to grow tired of listening to the tales of serial killers, especially if the killers were particularly brutal in the way that they killed their victims. Since 1993, there have been seven movies/documentaries made about Jeffrey Dahmer, and each of them breaks down a different aspect of his life. *My Friend Dahmer* (2017), which is based on a 2012 graphic novel by one of Dahmer's high school classmates, is exclusively about Dahmer's strange demeanor as a teenager in high school. According to the author, John "Derf" Backderf, Dahmer was an outcast who dissected roadkill and faked seizures for attention. Interestingly enough,

throughout this two-hour movie, Dahmer is not depicted killing a single person. The only mention of his murders in this movie is at the end, when the name of his first victim is spoken; however, that name will mean nothing to any viewer who does not know much about Dahmer, at least not until the disclaimer stating that Steven Hicks was never seen again. While watching the movie, the audience almost starts to feel bad for Dahmer due to the fact that people at school make fun of him and that his home life is difficult because his parents get divorced during the course of the movie. In fact, it is almost easy to forget that he was such a brutal killer during this movie and this particular portrayal of him.

In more modern depictions of serial killers, there has been a trend toward using actors that many people who are Generation Z (born between 1995 and 2015) grew up watching on television, specifically actors who were on Disney Channel. These actors are handsome men that played characters whom the audience is supposed to find likeable. For example, in *High School Musical*, Zac Efron's character Troy Bolton is a high school student who wants to be able to maintain his position on the basketball team while also pursuing musical theatre as another hobby. In the 2019 movie *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil, and Vile*, he plays serial killer Ted Bundy, whom the audience is supposed to despise because of his actions; however, those who are Gen Z may struggle to regard him as anything other than a hardworking, multi-talented high school student. Does having such an objectively handsome actor who is recognized and regarded as trustworthy and hardworking play these serial killers affect viewers' responses to their murders? Is it possible that, as a society, these preconceived notions about the actors who are playing these killers cause viewers to romanticize their horrendous actions? My research aims to

answer these questions, as well as discuss possible societal implications of romanticism of serial killers by the mainstream media.

Chapter Two: Definitions and Societal Implications

My research will depend heavily on the use of social media websites (Twitter, Tumblr, and Tiktok) to observe how users of these platforms discuss serial killers, as well as their response to Zac Efron and Ross Lynch depicting two of the world's most famous killers. A good portion of the content and posts on these websites is made by those who are members of Generation Z, or teens and young adults who are close to those ages, which makes social media one of the most accurate insights into their thoughts and feelings. Particular attention will be paid to the language used to describe and discuss both Bundy and Dahmer, and whether or not the users of these social media platforms appear to have placed them in a more positive or negative light since the release of Efron's and Lynch's films. Due to the heavy use of these social media platforms, it is important to define certain terms that may be used in social media posts as they are part of the social media "culture."

One of the most commonly used and therefore an extremely important term to understand is "stan." This word originates with a song that was released in 2000 by rapper Eminem on his album *The Marshall Mathers LP*, a song that was so highly praised it received a spot in *Rolling Stone's 500 Greatest Songs of All Time* (*Rolling Stone*, 2003). The song follows the storyline of a neurotic fan named Stan, who writes Eminem numerous letters in which he tells Eminem about what is going on in his life and asks the rapper about his own life. Stan becomes increasingly distraught every time he does not receive an answer from the artist, escalating to a level of anger

that leads him to kill both himself and his girlfriend by driving off a bridge. Eminem talked about the track in a 2000 interview, during which he revealed that he does receive letters from fans that sound very similar to the ones featured in the song, and he wrote this song to tell fans, “Not everything I say should be taken literally” (Bhatia, 2013).

It was after the release of this song that the term “stan” became popular, and its official definition is “an extremely or excessively enthusiastic and devoted fan” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). However, when it is used on social media today, it does not typically mean a fan to this level of extreme obsession; in fact, most individuals who use it are simply saying they are a big fan of someone and enjoy following his or her career. One of the most common uses of this term is when someone refers to the side of Twitter that focuses on celebrities as “Stan Twitter.” Users who are on Stan Twitter focus their Tweets around particular celebrities from bands, television shows, movies, and other forms of entertainment of their choosing; they discuss their work and what they like about these individuals, and many people even become very close friends with other users who are fans of the same celebrities and fly across the country to meet each other. Although the term “stan” has lost some of the weight it used to hold when the song first came out, Eminem certainly had a hand in normalizing this term for everyday use.

Another term that may come up in social media posts is “fangirling” or just “fangirl.” This term is similar to stan but has a less extreme definition. The phrase means a person, usually a girl or a woman, “who is an extremely or overly enthusiastic fan of someone or something” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In the past couple of years, the word “stan” has started to become more widespread than “fangirl,” a phenomenon that possibly stems from people on the Internet making a conscious effort to be more inclusive of all genders. The term “Fangirl” implies that only

people who identify as girls and women can be fans of celebrities to this extent, which is not the case; boys, men, and people who do not identify with either gender can be fans as well, and “stan” does not appear to single out any specific gender. The term also began to develop a negative connotation when it was used in the media, to the point where it appeared as if the term was being used to put down those who are fans of celebrities. It is less likely to come across this term than “stan,” but it is possible it may be used; therefore, an understanding of the term would be beneficial.

A paramount question people may have is, “Why does it matter how individuals discuss these movies on social media? What is the big deal?” The biggest cause of concern is that social media is a constant in the everyday life of Gen Z; they wake up and check their Twitter and Instagram instead of reading the morning newspaper like their parents might still do. Most of the information they receive is from these websites, and therefore what they consume is heavily dependent on the opinions of their peers. It is easy to believe everyone else thinks the same way as they do when most of the news they are reading appears to be tailored for them. This assumption has the power to bleed into society and the way we as a whole consume media surrounding serial killers. One of the most prevalent societal implications of romanticism of serial killers is the romanticism associated with certain mental illnesses. Both Bundy and Dahmer were diagnosed with a myriad of mental disorders, and their true psychopathology is something that researchers still discuss and write about to this day. In more recent years, the conversations around mental health have become more open than they were 20-30 years ago, with young adults and teenagers readily discussing depression and anxiety with their friends and peers, as well as with strangers on the Internet. The danger, however, lies in when these illnesses,

as well as more serious disorders such as Dissociative Identity Disorder (formally known as Multiple Personality Disorder) and Antisocial Personality Disorder (which is a disorder Bundy and Dahmer shared), start to become romanticized. This phenomenon is usually accomplished through mainstream media, movies and television shows that incorrectly depict people struggling with mental illnesses.

However, his romanticism of mental illness is not confined to serial killers. In a 2019 article published by the National Alliance on Mental Illness, author Jessie Yu discusses a television series called *13 Reasons Why*, which sparked significant debate and criticism when it originally debuted in 2017. Originally a novel published in 2007, the plotline follows a young girl named Hannah, who dies by suicide while in high school. Before she died, Hannah recorded thirteen cassette tapes that were intended to explain how she arrived at the decision to take her own life. However, these tapes can easily be viewed as a sort of “revenge” against those whom she felt had wronged her by talking badly about her. The biggest issue is the fact that Hannah does not seem to display any obvious symptoms of depression, and therefore her suicide can be viewed as an overly vindictive and selfish act solely focused on revenge. Depression symptoms can be very debilitating to some, and it can be discouraging and frustrating to those who suffer from depression to see a piece of media downplay what they are going through. This is a dangerous misrepresentation of depression and suicide that lends itself to the mainstream media’s romanticism of being depressed. Throughout the episodes, Hannah also attempts to reach out to teachers and faculty at her school about the bullying she is experiencing, but they ultimately prove to be disinterested in helping Hannah through this difficult time. Viewers who suffer from mental health issues may watch this and believe no one at their school would help them either. In

turn, this could stop them from getting the help that they need, which can be extremely damaging and lead to higher rates of suicide.

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) was actually able to observe this increase of suicide rates during a five-year study they were completing that coincided with the April 2017 release of *13 Reasons Why*. They discovered that following the show's debut, suicide rates in the U.S. among youth aged 10-17 increased 28.9%, especially for young males ("Release of," 2019), particularly due to the fact that producers were warned against including a graphic depiction of Hannah's suicide by mental health experts, but they decided to include one anyway. In their press release, they stated that the number of deaths by suicide in April 2017 was the greatest number they observed during their entire five-year study. Clinical scientist Lisa Horowitz, who was an author of the study, warns that, "All disciplines, including the media, need to take good care to be constructive and thoughtful about topics that intersect with public health crises" ("Release of," 2019). Furthermore, she said that she hopes this study can help raise awareness to the fact that, in particular, young people are vulnerable to what they see in the media.

Another example of an incorrect depiction of mental illness can be found in an episode of *Criminal Minds*, a crime drama television series that follows a team of agents that work in the Behavioral Analysis Unit of the FBI. The episode in question is part of the show's second season and aired on February 4th, 2007. During this episode, a member of the team has been kidnapped by what is believed to be a father and son team working together to kidnap and kill people for biblical reasons. However, it is revealed that after his father died, the son, Tobias, took on both his father's personality, including his voice, as well as the personality of the Archangel Raphael.

This is a harmful depiction of Dissociative Identity disorder for multiple reasons. First, having someone with DID using his or her personalities to become a serial killer paints the mental illness in an extremely negative light and could cause those who believe this is an accurate portrayal to fear those with DID. There is a willingness to believe that everything the media tells audiences is correct, so individuals with no knowledge about the field of Psychology might not feel the need to fact check this information, and therefore will never know any different. The second inaccuracy is the fact that Tobias took on the personality of someone he knew, in this case his father. The personalities of those with DID, often referred to as “alters,” are not usually people who already exist but rather are completely new personalities born from childhood experiences of trauma that live in the brain of an individual with DID. While some individuals with DID have expressed the fact that they have alters who are “fictives,” or personalities based on people or characters already known to them, these types of alters are not as common (Matulewicz, 2018). The alters of someone who has DID all have their own names, beliefs about what they look like (that sometimes contradict with the host body’s appearance), ages, and sometimes even languages and allergies; in other words, they are individuals who share the same physical body. This episode, along with movies such as *Split* and *Fight Club*, contributes to the media's tendency to romanticize inaccurate portrayals of mental illnesses.

Chapter Three: Literature Review

The existing scholarly literature that is closest to addressing my topic focuses mostly on how the media in general has depicted serial killers and psychopathy, and how this may have led to serial

killers being a common topic for both fiction and nonfiction storytelling. As Julie Wiest states in her article, “Casting Cultural Monsters: Representations of Serial Killers in U.S. and U.K. News Media,” serial murder is a concept that is deeply imbedded into Western cultures, and that some serial killers (Jeffrey Dahmer, Ted Bundy, John Wayne Gacy) have become almost as recognizable as monsters known from cultural myths.

In their article in the *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, “How Media Exposure Relates to Laypersons’ Understanding of Psychopathy,” Kessler and DeMatteo (2017) discuss how the public perception of psychology has changed, especially how popular film and television have affected the portrayal of psychopaths. They conducted a study that examined whether or not a relationship existed between exposure to fictional psychopaths and how the public conceptualizes psychopathy. Their findings show that higher exposure to psychopaths who were portrayed as protagonists led to a higher endorsement of traits associated with psychopathy, revealing a kind of romanticized psychopathy. They stated that their findings have legal, practical, and ethical implications, which could contribute to the potential for biased jurors. Their findings are a perfect introduction to what I predict I will find after conducting my own research.

In the first chapter of his book, *Why We Love Serial Killers: The Curious Appeal of the Worlds Most Savage Murderers*, Bonn (2014) opens by discussing the fact that a serial killer is often someone that would never be suspected of such horrific crimes, such as a next door neighbor or a coworker. This was the scenario with the notorious John Wayne Gacy, who was a successful building contractor, husband, and father. While keeping up with his favorable public persona, he tortured, raped, and strangled thirty-three young men from 1972 to 1979. Bonn then goes on to consider that news coverage of serial killers such as Jeffrey Dahmer and Ted Bundy

turn them into “ghoulish popular culture celebrities.” Boon notes that the fascination with serial killers dates back to the 1800s with the case of Jack the Ripper in 1888, and that his name has become synonymous with serial murder over the years. In the tenth chapter of his book, Boon tackles the public curiosity with serial killers and why the public finds their actions so fascinating. He explains that because the criminal offenses of these killers are so egregious, many people want to understand why they do what they do, which in turn leads to many news outlets focusing a tremendous amount of time on their stories. Boon focuses his writing on why people find serial killers so captivating and how media coverage contributes to this phenomenon.

Adding to the proven existing fascination with serial killers, Schmid (2006) opens his book, *Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American Culture*, by exploring the world of serial killer memorabilia. He discusses the fact that people purchase paintings and figures of killers such as Jeffrey Dahmer and John Wayne Gacy, even going so far as to purchase a brick from Dahmer’s house for \$300 and a lock of Charles Manson’s hair for \$995. These criminals are like celebrities, Schmid says, immediately recognizable by the American Public. Schmid discusses an interview with Andy Kahan, the Director of Victim Services and Advocacy for Crime Stoppers of Houston, who wonders what the widespread glorification of and attention given to such killers says about the society at large. The fact that society has mythicized these killers empowers and inspires men, so much so that some try to mimic their actions, thereby fostering a significant threat to public safety.

MacDonald (2013) discusses the fact that infamous serial killers have become fabled in popular culture, especially after the portrayal of Michael Myers in the 1978 movie *Halloween*. The positive reactions to this movie encouraged serial killing to be a recurrent narrative theme,

and around the same time that the movie premiered, the FBI coined the term “serial killer.”

MacDonald then transitions to focus on the media attention on Jeffrey Dahmer during the time of his trials in 1992 and that public interest in him was so significant that his trial was broadcast on cable television. MacDonald suggests this can be attributed to people coming to grips with their fear of him by enjoying watching the trial. MacDonald’s conclusion is an introduction to the fact that the media has played an enormous role in the normalization of attention on serial killers.

Chapter Four: Overview of Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer

In order to know why it would be so dangerous for those in society to romanticize killers such as Jeffrey Dahmer and Ted Bundy, it is important to have an overview of their crimes and what exactly they did to their victims to make their names immediately recognizable.

Jeffrey Dahmer

Notorious serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer was described as an energetic and happy child by his parents, Lionel and Joyce Dahmer, until the age of four, when a surgery to correct a double hernia seemed to change him (“Jeffrey Dahmer,” 2017). His family's frequent moves and the birth of his younger brother caused him to become more and more withdrawn. His disengaged and tense personality lent itself to his extreme difficulty making friends, as well as his fascination with death, bodies, flesh, and taxidermy (Salem Press, 2008). During his childhood, Dahmer’s interests escalated into a collection of roadkill and insects preserved in chemicals, as well as the heads of animals on stakes. He even mounted the bodies of these dead animals on trees behind his house (Salem Press, 2008). By high school, Dahmer had completely alienated himself from his peers, and would consistently seek attention with odd behavior, such as faking

seizures (Salem Press, 2008). By the time Dahmer was eighteen, his parents were in a custody battle over his younger brother, David, following their divorce. When his mother was granted custody, she picked up and moved herself and David to Wisconsin. Shortly after, Dahmer's father also moved out of the house, basically abandoning Jeffrey (Salem Press, 2008).

Dahmer's first murder took place on June 18, 1978, when he met an eighteen-year-old hitchhiker named Stephen Hicks. Dahmer brought Hicks back to the home that Dahmer now solely occupied. Dahmer and Hicks engaged in what was believed to be consensual sexual intercourse, and afterward, Dahmer struck Stephen in the head with a barbell when he attempted to leave the house. Dahmer then used a sledge-hammer to smash Hicks's body and buried the remains in the woods behind his house (Salem Press, 2008). Although this was his first in a long string of murders he would later be tried for, Dahmer did not kill again until 1987.

Between 1978 and 1981, Dahmer was in the army, from which he was discharged in 1981 because of his struggle with alcohol addiction. In 1982, after arriving home, Dahmer moved in with his grandmother near Milwaukee. Dahmer killed again in 1987, when he picked up a man named Steven Toumi from a gay bar. Dahmer took Toumi to a hotel, where the two men got drunk and lost consciousness. According to Dahmer, when he awoke, Toumi was dead, and Dahmer proceeded to take the body to his grandmother's house, where he engaged in necrophilia, dismembered the body, and threw the body parts in the trash (Salem Press, 2008). Dahmer continued this pattern of meeting men at gay bars and taking them back to his grandmother's house, where he drugged them, had sex with them (either alive, dead, or both) and then dismembered their bodies.

Dahmer relocated and moved into his own apartment in the fall of 1988. The day after he moved out of his grandmother's house, Dahmer brought a thirteen-year-old boy to his new apartment. Dahmer attempted to give the boy sleeping pills, but the boy escaped (Salem Press, 2008). The following day, Dahmer was arrested and pleaded guilty to sexual assault. His sentence was five years of probation. Nonetheless, Dahmer's killing continued. After picking up a twenty-four-year-old African American man in March of 1989, Dahmer brought him to his grandmother's house, engaged in intercourse with him, and then drugged and strangled him. Though Dahmer did dispose of the man's body, he decided to boil the man's head down to the skull. This pattern of collecting skulls and body parts to conduct chemical experiments of his dismembered victims continued, and Dahmer eventually turned to cannibalism (Salem Press, 2008). One of Dahmer's "experiments" was a lobotomy conducted by drilling into a live victim's skull and then injecting their brains with muriatic acid.

When selecting these victims, Dahmer tried to pick people whose disappearances would not be noticeable, such as borderline criminals on the fringes of society. However, Dahmer's series of murders came to an end after he picked up a man named Tracy Edwards on July 22, 1991. Edwards escaped the clutches of Dahmer's apartment and notified the police, who came to the location and noticed a rancid smell. The police discovered disturbing pictures in Dahmer's apartment of dismembered bodies as well as skulls and a full skeleton (Salem Press, 2008). Finally, Dahmer was arrested.

The trial of Jeffrey Dahmer started in January of 1992. Security during the trial was very tight, including an eight-foot-tall bulletproof glass barrier between Dahmer and the gallery. It is important to note the racial tensions during the trial, as a majority of Dahmer's victims were

African American (“Jeffrey Dahmer,” 2017). Dahmer did confess to killing people when he was interrogated by police, but he initially pleaded not guilty to his charges. In time, he changed his stance and pleaded guilty to the charges by reason of insanity. However, Dahmer was found sane by the jury on his seventeen murder counts. The state in which Dahmer was tried, Wisconsin, did not allow the death penalty, which led to his sentence being fifteen consecutive life sentences with an additional ten years on all counts.

Ted Bundy

Theodore Bundy was born in November 1946 in Burlington, Vermont and was described as a “charming, articulate, and intelligent young man” (“Ted Bundy”, 2020). He is quoted saying that he had an uneventful childhood, which friends and family have corroborated on occasion, but a closer look reveals Bundy as someone who was socially awkward and was known to cross lines of morality and legality (Kettler, 2019). He was extremely perceptive, even as a child, seeing through the ruse set up by his family in which they tried to pass off his mother as his sister because she had not been married when she became pregnant with Ted; in fact, according to one source, he always knew something was not right with his family dynamic. Bundy grew up with his grandparents, who had their own share of mental health problems. His grandmother suffered from both depression and agoraphobia, and his grandfather had a raging temper that was directed at everyone: cats, dogs, employees and even family members (Kettler, 2019). Despite Bundy’s insistence that the two had a good relationship, it is entirely possible that he experienced psychological and/or physical abuse at the hands of his grandfather.

Although he is notorious for being socially perceived as a well-adjusted member of society, there are instances from Bundy’s childhood that hint at a mental disturbance or

psychological disorder. For example, his aunt awoke one night to find that Bundy had placed knives all around her body while she was sleeping (Laytham, 2019). He also had been known to peep through windows on occasion, and during adolescence had a passion for pulp fiction, which was highly saturated with rape fantasies. In fact, he even used to wander the streets and try to find discarded pornography (“Ted Bundy,” 2020). By the time he was eighteen, Bundy had accumulated an extensive juvenile record for theft that was dismissed as soon as he became of age. Having this clean record is most likely why no one ever picked up on his lewd behavior.

Bundy showed a strong drive to do well in school, where he had been on track to start a career in either law or politics by the time he graduated from the University of Washington in 1972. All future career paths were put on hold by 1974, however, when Bundy killed Joni Lenz, his first known victim. In addition, several girls who went missing in the 1960s are assumed by some law enforcement officials and psychiatrists to be victims of Bundy as well, although he never confessed to those particular murders. It is possible Bundy simply did not have enough time to confess to every murder he committed due to the fact that he maintained his claim of innocence throughout his trial and for almost the entirety of his sentence while on death row. It was not until days before his execution in January 1989 that Bundy chose to confess on his own time to killing dozens of women because he enjoyed having complete control over situations. Furthermore, it is believed that he thought he could prolong his life if he held onto his innocence as long as he could. However, his confession failed to stall his inevitable execution, and he was executed on January 24th, 1989, at 42 years old.

Bundy’s victims were usually young, attractive college women whom he tricked into helping him carry books or unload his car by wearing either a fake sling on his arm or a full leg

cast and crutches. Another ruse Bundy used was pretending to be an authority figure, such as a police officer, in order to gain the trust of his female victims before he attacked them. Once he was able to convince them to help him, he would use a crowbar or a pipe to strike them over the head before restraining them with handcuffs and forcing them into his infamous 1968 tan Volkswagen Beetle. In addition to striking his victims, Bundy would often strangle them and mutilate their corpses. He often returned to where he dumped his victims' bodies or even took the bodies home to keep until the decay of the bodies forced him to get rid of them.

A contributing factor to Bundy's ability to go undetected for so long was the fact that he did not remain in a single state. When he was at school in Washington, he preyed on girls who went to his college, and then he moved three times to Utah, Colorado, and lastly Florida, where he was ultimately caught. Furthermore, the police did not take those who tried to report Bundy seriously due to his "seemingly upstanding character and clean-cut appearance" ("Ted Bundy," 2020). On August 16th, 1975, Bundy was arrested for the first time but ultimately released because while he did have masks, handcuffs, and rope in his car, these items were not enough to link him to the crimes. Nevertheless, the police kept him on constant surveillance and arrested him again for the kidnapping and assault of Carol DaRonch. Bundy then escaped custody twice; the first time was during his trial when he jumped out of the courthouse window, and the second time was when he climbed through a hole that he had made in the top of his cell, his absence going unnoticed by authorities for fifteen hours ("Ted Bundy," 2018). Bundy headed back to Florida, where on January 14th, 1978, he broke into a sorority house at Florida State University and attacked four of the girls living there, ultimately killing two of them. Then, on February 8th, Bundy kidnapped and murdered 12-year-old Kimberly Leach before he was caught by police

again on February 15th. Bundy was sentenced to death and was executed on January 24th, 1989, after confessing to thirty murders, but experts believe the real count of his murders is closer to one hundred.

Chapter Five: Methodology

This qualitative study will be completed in two parts. The first step at completing this research will be looking at online reviews of the movies *My Friend Dahmer* and *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil, and Vile*, as well as reviews of older serial killer movies such as *Scream* (1996) and *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) that starred actors who were not as well known for their children's movies as Efron and Lynch. An analysis will be conducted of the reviews written on the popular film critic website *Rotten Tomatoes*, a platform that includes professional critics from well-known publications (ex: *USA Today*, *The Washington Post*) as well as lay critics. Special attention will be paid to the ways in which these movies are discussed, and whether or not the focus of the review is on the movie itself or the actors and their own personal characteristics.

Secondly, I will be utilizing the social media platforms Twitter, Tumblr, and TikTok to search the terms: Ted Bundy; Jeffrey Dahmer; My Friend Dahmer; Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile; Scream; and Silence of the Lambs. This is to discover how children and teens discuss these movies with their peers in an environment in which they feel as if those around them share the same or at least similar opinions. Here, it will be easy to determine whether or not having Efron and Lynch in these movies had a significant impact on how the audience received these films.

Chapter Six: Movie Review Findings

On *Rotten Tomatoes*, movie reviews are split into categories based on whether or not the reviewer is a professional critic or simply an audience member who watched the movie. Below is a table of the comments made by the first fifteen of the movie critics who were listed, and how often those remarks appeared (the numbers reflect critics who made multiple remarks within a single review). The wording of the comments has been paraphrased in order for them to fit within a smaller number of categories.

Comments on *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil, and Vile*- Critics

Comment/Criticism	Number of appearances
Fascination with Bundy's life before his arrest	1
Efron's resemblance to Bundy (physically and personality-wise)	2
Understatement of Bundy's crimes	9
Positive remarks for Efron's performance	4
Allusions to Efron being a "teen idol"	1

Figure 1

Next is a table of paraphrased comments made by the first fifteen audience members, also accounting for multiple remarks made within a single review.

Comments on *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil, and Vile*- Audience Members

Comment/Criticism	Number of appearances
Positive remarks for Efron's performance	8
Extreme focus on Bundy and his girlfriend	1
Generic/forgettable storytelling	2

Efron's resemblance to Bundy (physical appearance and personality)	2
Understatement of Bundy's crimes	3
Misguided sympathy for Bundy	2
Confusing pacing of movie scenes	1
Truthful portrayal of Bundy's crimes	1
Shifted perspective on serial killers (in empathy for serial killers)	1

Figure 2

As reflected in the tables, it was more common for critics to focus on the content of the movie and how it detailed Bundy's crimes, while audience members tended to comment more often on Efron's performance and whether or not they believed he accurately portrayed the notion of how they believed Bundy behaved during his lifetime. This difference in opinion could stem from the fact that critics and an audience members are looking at movies from two very different angles; the critics are constantly searching for something to comment on so they can write about it, while the audience members are more relaxed and watching more for enjoyment. The comments also depend heavily on how much the viewers know about Bundy and his crimes; not knowing their knowledge level beforehand is a limitation of this study.

Next, this process will be repeated for *My Friend Dahmer*, starring Ross Lynch, who was also previously a Disney Channel actor. From 2011-2016, Lynch played Austin Moon on *Austin and Ally*, a comedy series that followed these unlikely friends and their musical partnership. The table below mentions John "Derf" Backderf, who went to high school with Dahmer and is the author of the graphic novel on which *My Friend Dahmer* is based.

Comments on *My Friend Dahmer*- Critics

Comment/Criticism	Number of appearances
Humanization of Dahmer to some degree	6
Insight into what led Dahmer to be a serial killer	1
Questioning of the morals of Backderf as well as the morals of other classmates	2
Praise for Lynch's performance	2
Heightened mystery/lack of explanation for Dahmer's actions	2
"Hypnotic" or "chilling" effect of the film	2

Figure 3

Comments on *My Friend Dahmer*- Audience Members

Comments/Criticism	Number of appearances
Uneventful/boring/slow plot	3
Praise for Lynch's performance	5
Motivation for watching being Lynch's popularity on Disney Channel	1
Effective portrayal of the making of a killer	1
Humanization of Dahmer to make him "likeable"	2
Disappointing focus on Dahmer's high school life	1
Lack of focus on the actual murders	4

Figure 4

In the reviews for *My Friend Dahmer*, it is evident to both groups that this movie barely scratched the surface of who Dahmer really was and how he came to be known as one of the

most prolific serial killers in American history. While the purpose of the movie may not have been to show the murders committed by Dahmer and instead an attempt to highlight the events that led him to becoming a serial killer, there is a certain expectation that comes with making a movie about someone as ruthless and barbaric as Dahmer. A number of the audience members even commented that they felt the movie was boring or too slow, a critique that almost certainly stems from the expectations they held for the violence level of this movie solely based on the fact that it was about Dahmer. This brings up a separate but equally important point about society and whether or not people find some sort of enjoyment in watching media that includes the act of murder.

In order to compare the response of these two films to other serial killer movies, this process will be repeated below for the movies *Scream* and *Silence of the Lambs*. The actors portraying the killers in these two films, Skeet Ulrich and Matthew Lillard as partners in *Scream*, and Anthony Hopkins in *Silence of the Lambs*, were not well known for children's movies before these roles like Efron and Lynch were. The question is whether or not this difference will be obvious based on the audience and critic reviews of the movies. Again, the wording of the comments has been paraphrased in order for them to fit within a smaller number of categories.

Comments on *Scream*- Critics

Comment/Criticism	Number of appearances
Unintentionally too funny or ironic for a horror movie	3
Positive review of the movie overall (“scary”, “entertaining”, “enjoyable”, etc.)	4
Renovated/put fun back in the horror genre	4
Focus on “bromance” between Billy and Stu	1

Innocence of women in the story	1
Surprisingly smart and funny dialogue	1
Plot was twisted too many times	1

Figure 5

Comments on *Scream*- Audience

Comment/Criticism	Number of appearances
Positive review of the movie overall (“clever”, “intriguing”, “spooky”, etc.)	12
Stands out from other movies in the genre	1
Had loose ends that needed tightening	1
An original within the genre	3
Not a favorite of die-hard horror fans	1
Praise for Sidney Prescott’s performance	1

Figure 6

Right away, there is an incredibly obvious difference in the reviews for *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil, and Vile* and *My Friend Dahmer* versus the reviews for *Scream*; not a single review for *Scream*, from either the critics or the audience, even mentioned the main male actors. Instead, the reviews focused on the content of the film and how it fit within the horror genre. Only one review out of the thirty that were reviewed mentioned an actor that was in the film, and it was Sidney Prescott, who played the main female character. In fact, someone who is planning to watch this movie might not even know who the actors are simply by reading the reviews; this is a stark difference from the *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil, and Vile* and *My*

Friend Dahmer reviews. Below, the process is repeated one last time for the film *Silence of the Lambs*.

Comments on *Silence of the Lambs*- Critics

Comment/Criticism	Number of appearances
Filmed like an “artsy” horror	1
Outlines police proceedings thoroughly	2
Positive remark for the film overall (“perfection, “one of the greatest thrillers,” “deliciously twisted,” etc.)	6
Praise for Foster and Hopkins’ scenes together	2
Triumph of filming technique	1
Far ahead of its time	1
A good mix of suspense and thriller	2
Chilling performance from Hopkins	1

Figure 7

Comments on *Silence of the Lambs*- Audience

Comment/Criticism	Number of appearances
Exceptional movie overall	2
Praise for Foster’s and Hopkins’ chemistry	3
An “all time great” or a “classic”	4
Praise for Lector as the greatest antagonist of all time	1
Praise for Hopkins’ performance	5
Effective progression	1
Marvelously shot	1

Praise of Foster's performance	2
--------------------------------	---

Figure 8

For *Silence of the Lambs*, there were both critics and audience members who mentioned the main male lead in this film, Anthony Hopkins, and praised his performance. However, the number of comments about Hopkins is almost incomparable to the more recently debuted films; only one critic and five audience members specifically praised Hopkins for his performance, while four critics and eight audience members did the same for Efron, and two critics and five audience members for Lynch. Furthermore, there were comments about the filming technique and the way *Silence of the Lambs* was shot, while comments like these are absent from the reviews of either *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil, and Vile* or *My Friend Dahmer*. These aspects do not seem to be the focus of those who watch the more modern films, and instead the focus is extremely centered on Efron and Lynch; a possible explanation for this difference being the viewers perceived connections with these actors and a desire to follow along with an actor of whom they are a “stan.” One limitation of using *Rotten Tomatoes* as a website for movie reviews is that the ages of the critics and audience members leaving the comments are unknown. This makes it more difficult to determine the differences between the ways in which certain age groups consume media about serial killers, which is the reason social media is the next step in observing the Internet's response to all four of these films.

Chapter Seven: Social Media

When a new movie or television show is released, it is common to see many aspects of the project discussed on social media: from the actors in the production, to the quality of how it was directed, and even to what the audience believes could have been done better overall. It was

not a surprise, then, when *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* and *My Friend Dahmer* created a lot of buzz around the internet for a variety of reasons.

The response to these movies was very mixed; there were fans of Efron and Lynch who were excited to see their favorite actors in such pivotal roles, those who thought having these actors play Bundy and Dahmer romanticized the serial killers, and even those who thought the actor picks were accurate for a variety of reasons. Using the search phrase “Zac Efron Romanticizing Ted Bundy” revealed some of these varied responses. For example, in a tweet on January 27th, 2019, Twitter user @goobstanishxo stated, “Zac Efron playing the role of Ted Bundy isn’t ‘romanticizing’ a horrific serial killer. It’s the perfect portrayal of how Ted Bundy literally used wit, charm & good looks to commit the things that he did & the way he manipulated his victims & everyone else around him.” Many users agreed with this sentiment, pointing out that casting Efron was a more accurate way to portray Bundy’s ability to get away with committing so many crimes, rather than casting someone who was less conventionally attractive or charismatic. Desiree (@love_desiree_) even put pictures of Bundy and Efron next to each other to show how similar the two actually looked, further highlighting the fact that Efron was a good casting choice. This collage is shown below.



There were those who did not agree with this viewpoint, however, such as @RosarioErin, who tweeted, “does anyone else think it was a bad idea to cast zac efron as ted bundy bc now we have a whole younger generation of kids romanticizing Ted even more than he already was ?? or is that just me,” adding in a comment “...i kind of wish they used a lesser known/loved actor so that people could think “wow this guy was crazy” instead of “omg !! zac efron!”” However, this does seem to be the unpopular opinion on Twitter, with more users seeming to agree with @goobstanishxo and @love_desiree_ that Efron was a good choice for the film.

On the other hand, searching “Ross Lynch Romanticizing Jeffrey Dahmer” yielded only three tweets, while using the same search phrase for Efron and Bundy resulted in pages of tweets. This discrepancy could be due to Efron’s popularity in the media, or perhaps due to the different perspectives provided in the two movies. Twitter user @sophiamustdiee shared their hope that people would not start romanticizing Jeffrey Dahmer after the release of this film, stating “i stg if people start romanticizing jeffrey dahmer after seeing My Friend Dahmer just bc ross lynch plays him smhhh” (stg being an abbreviation for “swear to god” and smh for “shaking my head”), However, @nataliebisharat directly pointed out the differing responses to the two films, asserting, “it genuinely angers me that people are mad at Zac Efron playing Ted Bundy. but when Ross Lynch is Jeffrey Dahmer, its fine. lmao oK. please dont say they're ‘romanticizing’ Ted Bundy just bc Zac Efron it's bigger and more built. they're just tryna tell a story.” She appears to believe that the body types of Efron and Lynch have a direct influence on the way the public responded to these movies, and the fact that Efron was more “built” or muscular was what caused some romanticizing. However, a direct influence on this could be the

fact that Dahmer was a gay man, which is why he only killed men and boys, and this fact may affect the level to which women romanticize Dahmer.

In order to find tweets that are more related to this thesis, and to not only see tweets of people recommending the movies, “stan” and “fangirl” were added to the searches “*Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile*” and “*My Friend Dahmer*.” One user, @Thomansfield, felt very strongly about the subject and stated, “Whoever chose Zac Efron to play Bundy in *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* is absolutely the worst. Started Ted Bundy stan culture. Not to mention that movie is not good and paints him in a good light by leaving details out.” In short, this Twitter user blames this movie for creating the actual Bundy fans rather than accurately portraying the man Bundy truly was. Many of the tweets found while searching these terms were similar to this one by @justalikiss, who says, “Ross is getting so much recognition for his role in *My Friend Dahmer*; I’m a proud stan,” or one like @waitonittn’s comment: “now watching *extremely wicked, shockingly evil and vile. stan zac efron;*” clearly, there are similarities between these tweets in terms of the ways in which fans are showing their appreciation for how well the actors did in these films.

The next two Twitter searches, “Ted Bundy stan” and “Jeffrey Dahmer stan,” led to some shocking results. There are Twitter stan accounts fully dedicated to Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer; these accounts do not focus on the movie versions of these men depicted by Efron or Lynch, but rather the actual serial killers. One account that is a fan of Ted Bundy is user @bedbundy, and this person tweets statuses such as, “Bruh I legit love ted because he’s just so iconic. Like bishhh he jumped out a fucking window. A WINDOW, like that’s a mood right there.” and “Wish I could give Ted Bundy a lil kiss rn.” Another Ted Bundy account that gives a

little bit of insight into a possible reason why the phenomenon of serial killer fan accounts exist is @BundyHot. In response to a tweet that no longer exists, @BundyHot writes, “I was criticized today over fangirling over him. I was told there are tons of men out there looking like him who aren't killers. And I am like, ok, show me where they are and I am moving right now.” Twitter user @2dpidor responded to this, saying “omg yea show me someone hot and handsome like ted cmon im waiting,” and @BundyHot agreed, tweeting back “ikr? I haven't met someone as hot as Ted in years.” The individuals behind these accounts seem to have an infatuation with the charming and handsome man that Bundy was, while they seem to ignore the fact that he was a killer who is responsible for over thirty murders. The phenomenon of women being captivated by Bundy is nothing new, as during his time in jail he received hundreds of letters from female fans. There was even an instance where a woman was so obsessed with Bundy, her attention began to make him uncomfortable to the point that he asked his wife, another woman who had fallen in love with him while he was in prison, to stop sitting near her during the trial because he did not want to have to look at her (Oliver, 2018).

While there are discussions on Twitter about people who are Jeffrey Dahmer stans, there seem to be far fewer of these accounts compared to Ted Bundy stan accounts. This may have to do with how traditionally handsome and charming Bundy was, compared to Dahmer, who was exceptionally socially awkward and may not be viewed as traditionally attractive. However, it is definitely still possible to find tweets from people who claim to be fans of the notorious serial killer. One from @sknnylitlewitch, in a response to tweets that are not available because they originate from a private account, states, “...or stan Jeffery Dahmer, he's a gay icon [emojis],” and one from @satansloveclub, who said, “Me watching people fight over Charles Manson and Ted

Bundy.. Anyways stan jeffery dahmer [gif of Jeffrey Dahmer].” Despite failing to attract the same attention from women as Bundy did while he was in jail, Dahmer still received letters and even money from people who were interested in him. In an article dated March 6th, 1994, AP news reported that Dahmer had been sent at least \$12,000 dollars from those who were writing him letters, including a nun who sent him \$10 for mailing her two art books (“Serial Killer Dahmer Collects \$12,000 from Pen Pals,” 1994).

To determine the difference in the generational response to movies that star Disney Channel actors and those that do not, the next search terms were “Silence of the Lambs” and “Scream 1996.” The year the movie was released was added to the search for *Scream* in order to avoid any unrelated tweets that just included the word “scream.” There is an immediate, noticeable difference when searching for tweets about *Silence of the Lambs* in that a majority of the tweets do not mention the actors in the film, and many people are simply recommending the movie to others or offering their opinion after having watched the movie. There are no discussions related to this movie romanticizing mental illness or serial killers. In one tweet, @sofritaaas reveals, “the silence of the lambs tattoo design im a lil in love with” followed by a picture that includes the moth that has come to be associated with the film surrounded by the quote, “I’m not sure you get wiser as you get older, Starling- but you do learn to dodge a certain amount of hell.” This tweet lends credence to the idea that there are those who still romanticize this serial killer film, even though their focus might not be on the actors who played both Buffalo Bill and Doctor Hannibal Lecter.

Twitter is not the only social media website that participates in the discussion of serial killers; other websites even protect the identity of their users, which leads to more free-flowing

discussions without the fear of judgement from those who know them in their everyday lives. Tumblr.com, for example, is an unmoderated social media platform where users feel safe discussing taboo subjects through the anonymity the site provides. The search function on the website works in a very similar manner to Twitter's search, so it was easy to use the same search terms and observe the difference between the posts from the two websites. Searching "Zac Efron Romanticizing Ted Bundy" did not produce any results, and the same happened when searching "Ross Lynch Romanticizing Jeffrey Dahmer." Furthermore, while searching the film titles did yield results that included pictures and gifs from both of the movies, adding "stan" or "fangirl" to the searches again failed to yield any results, except one post under "My Friend Dahmer stan," but the use of the word "stan" here was directed at the actor who played John Backderf.

"Ted Bundy stan" was a search that did provide results, the first of which was a post that included screenshots of tweets that users had found and wanted to comment on, such as the post from user @pinkgoodra, who posted a conversation between three twitter users. Although the Twitter handle of the first user is cut off, "Samantha Bundy" tweeted, "The e word is an awful word and anyone who uses it needs to be arrested for hate speach [emoji] #tedbundyisinnocent," to which @sinnohshiba responded, "electric chair," and @bundyzbaby chimed in with, "stop throwing the e word around like its a joke. it's a very harmful and derogatory slur and shouldn't be treated like it's nothing." The Tumblr user also added the tags on this post, which are hashtags that users include on their posts either as commentary (as they are used here) to categorize their posts to be easily found by others. The tags said, "the true crime fandom is a DISEASE," which serves as a shocking reminder that there are those who follow the lives of many serial killers, not just Bundy and Dahmer, because they are truly interested in their lives and the acts they

committed. The tweets described above prove that fans of these killers can become so blinded by their attraction that they start to say and believe outlandish ideas that others cannot begin to understand, and that terminology can sometimes be used incorrectly on the internet when users are left to post their thoughts without restrictions. The other posts under this tag were posted by those questioning how people could say they were stans of an actual murderer.

In Tumblr's case, removing the word "stan" and simply searching "Ted Bundy" and "Jeffrey Dahmer" provided the most results and revealed the greatest variety of discussions, even including discussions about other killers. Some posts were "memes" or jokes that involved the killers, others were intended to be informational and included facts about the men, and lastly there were gifs and pictures from both *My Friend Dahmer* and *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil, and Vile*. One of the popular "memes" or jokes that appear under both the Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer tags are posts about watching true crime documentaries, hinting again to the enjoyment that society gets from hearing and learning about murder. The two images below are screenshots from the website that are examples of jokes involving watching true crime documentaries.

rothsteinarnold [Follow](#)



**

tatooine-princess [Follow](#)

...



These two images are both trying to convey the fact that these users find it enjoyable to consume these topics in the media, and even that they cannot get enough of them to the point that they stay up until 3am to watch them. These are both very popular posts on the website, the first one having 23,519 notes or interactions and the second 8,765 notes (as of April 9th, 2021), proving that many share this enjoyment of consuming this particular type of media. The following is another example of a joke that users post about serial killers, and it makes light of the fact that Dahmer was a cannibal who consumed parts of his victims.



This is an example of a Tweet that was posted to Tumblr, which is a common occurrence on the site, and the user is saying that no matter how good looking people are perceived to be by society, they will always look good to Dahmer because the killer would want to eat them. It is

possible that jokes like this are a way to deal with the stress and anxiety surrounding the scary reality that men like Dahmer exist. However, it is also possible that users post these simply because they genuinely find them amusing, which points to a level of desensitization on the topic.

Due to the fact that enjoying such documentaries is not limited to only Dahmer and Bundy, there is an entire fanbase dedicated to following the lives of serial killers and murderers. User @tomino-chan comments on the growing popularity of this true crime fandom, making a post that this user refers to as an “informational guide,” which reads almost as a set of guidelines for enjoying serial killer/mass murderer media. The section of the post that draws the most attention is the first one, which discusses the “inside jokes” of the True Crime Community (TCC) and where they originate; a screenshot of this section is included below.

With every other community/fandom, there always has to be some inside jokes within them. The most prominent ones are mostly from the home videos Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold from the Columbine case such as, “What the hell are you doing to my sister’s bike?!” or “No, you goddamn piece of punk ass shit! Do not touch that friggin’ kid!” or even, “Fucker should be shot,” (which is the only example not from the home videos). It’s important to know the source of these for any newcomers. If you’re an anti, then it won’t be as important, but if you want to binge the tapes, then go ahead. Another inside joke is Dave Cullen who wrote one of the most inaccurate books on Columbine. You’ll start to notice how much of an influence Columbine has had on the TCC as it’s one of the most documented cases in the tags.

@Tamino-chan’s language when referring to Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who are the duo that killed thirteen people at Columbine High School in April 1999, is a perfect example of talking about mass murders as if they are celebrities. This user knows direct quotes from them, and admits to not only watching the home videos that Harris and Klebold made as potential dress rehearsals for the Columbine shooting, but seemingly encourages others to watch them as well for enjoyment purposes. This user also uses the word “anti” in this post, which in this context would refer to someone who either shames or criticizes the TCC for being fans of or following

the lives of these killers and others like them; someone who is an anti would specifically be worried about the repercussions of the level of attention these perpetrators are getting because of the impact it has on the victims, their families, and the glorification of these mental illnesses. Furthermore, this post points to the desensitization the TCC has in response to murder and death, and because @Tomino-chan claims to be sixteen years old, this user does fall into the category of Generation Z, which could point to this diminished response to murder being a generational marker.

However, there seems to be some disagreement among the TCC regarding who is worthy of having fans, and some in the community think others are taking their interests too far. User @dylanklebaddie, whose username itself is referring to Dylan Klebold, voices feelings about this in a post that has 1,918 notes (as of April 12th, 2021) and talks specifically about twenty-two year old Nikolas Cruz, who shot and killed seventeen people at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in February 2018. A screenshot of a section of the post is included below.

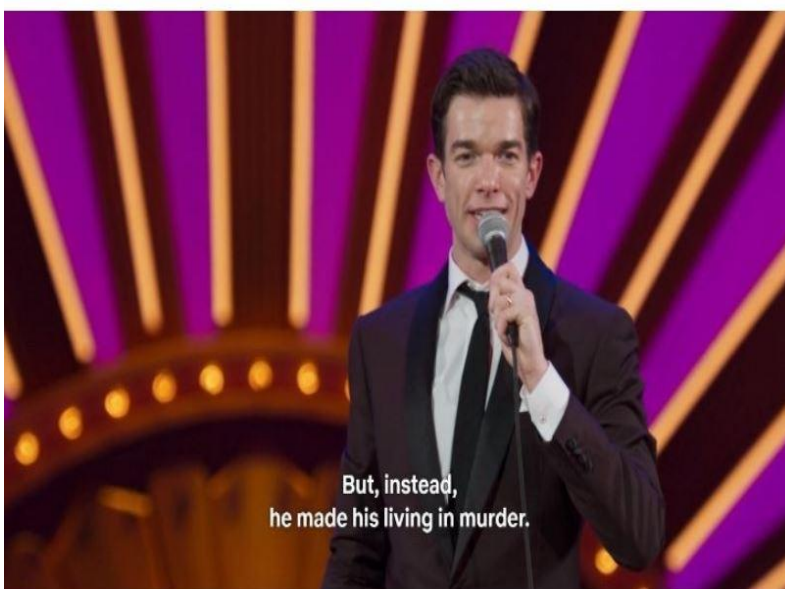
The whole Nikolas Cruz section of the TCC is giving the rest of the community a horrible rep. They're incredibly insensitive, I've seen numerous posts where they're talking about the fact that they support what Nikolas did. They seem to have no respect for any of the victims. That whole Nikolas part of the community seemingly celebrates a new school shooting, talking about how excited they are that there's a new shooter who might be "cute". Just start your own community, don't put your utter disrespect for the victims of these tragedies on the rest of the TCC. That's not what the TCC is about, stop associating yourselves with the TCC, I can only speak for myself, but I don't want any of you in this community. I don't support, nor do I want to be associated with anyone who condones the actions of murders. I refuse to associate myself with anyone so disrespectful and utterly insensitive. Find your own community, the TCC isn't for you.

@Dylanklebaddie is upset with those who outwardly confess that they think Cruz is attractive, and even says that some in the TCC use the word “excited” when referring to him or his crimes. This user is clearly disturbed by the mindset of some to regard serial killers and mass shooters as celebrities and does not believe the TCC should be a space in which "fans" talk about Cruz as if he were a cute new actor or singer. This user, instead, believes those in the TCC should respect the victims of these killers and refrain from romanticizing these murderers. However, it is hard to ignore the fact that, as mentioned previously, the username @dylanklebaddie is a reference to one of the Columbine shooters, and this user’s profile picture is also a picture of Klebold that his mother had provided for an article nineteen years after the shooting (CBS News, 2018). This use of his name and photo is something that others might find as disrespectful and insensitive to the thirteen Columbine victims as those who talk about Cruz in the way @dylanklebaddie is saying they do. This can also be an example of desensitization regarding the topic; it is difficult to ignore the irony in the fact that this user blogs and talks about Klebold and the Columbine Shooting, yet is offended by those who find Cruz attractive. On the other hand, someone else may find even being affiliated with the TCC strange and upsetting and may fail to understand the tendency of some people to constantly read about these topics and to know so much about killers throughout history. This hints to a blurring of lines between a causal interest and an unhealthy idolization or infatuation; this was also evident in many of the Tweets about users who found Ted Bundy attractive.

Similar to the situation on Twitter where the discussions around *Silence of the Lambs* and *Scream* mostly revolved around those who enjoyed the films and wanted to recommend them, there is no discussion about the TCC or finding real life serial killers/mass murderers attractive

under the *Scream* or *Silence of the Lambs* tags on Tumblr. Many of the posts under *Silence of the Lambs* are either gifs or videos from the film, discussions that include the 2013 television series *Hannibal* that was also based off of the book series written by Thomas Harris and how the projects differ from each other, and also posts about Anthony Hopkins. Furthermore, many users made jokes or “memes” similar to the ones previously included about Tumblr users who enjoyed watching true crime documentaries. The following screenshots are two examples of jokes found under the *Silence of the Lambs* tag.

remembering hannibal lecter is an intelligent and highly capable
medical professional



This first screenshot, posted by user @capismycopilot, features popular stand-up comedian John Mulaney during his 2018 show at Radio City Music Hall saying the line, “But, instead, he made his living in murder.” This user, and the 1,106 people (as of April 21st, 2021) who shared and liked this post are joking about the fact that Lecter had the potential to be a highly successful and well respected surgeon, but instead he became a serial killer and a cannibal.

it's a damn good thing hannibal lecter never worked in retail

#what with his eat the rude philosophy #hannibal

#hannibal lecter #silence of the lambs #cannibalism

This second post comments on the fact that Hannibal Lecter is famously quoted for saying he only ate people he found to be rude. User @darknessandterrorandkittens is saying it is good that Lecter did not work in retail because it is very common to meet customers who are rude while working in retail. Searching “*Scream* 1996” provided mostly posts where users were focusing on the actors themselves who were in the film, such as this picture of Drew Barrymore behind the scenes and a photo of Lillard, Ulrich, and Campbell at the movie’s premier.



Lastly, TikTok is a social media application that gained a lot of popularity during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. Users on the app post short-form videos that can be up to sixty seconds long, and they can talk about virtually any topic of their choosing. Similar to the concept

of “stan Twitter,” TikTok users find themselves on different “sides” of the app based on the videos they interact with daily; the “For You Page” shows users videos that the app thinks they would be interested in, but the “Following” page will only display videos from accounts the user follows. As with other social media websites, there is a search function that will bring up videos related to a specific topic or person. Searching Ted Bundy’s name immediately results in thousands of videos from an abundance of users on the app. One of the first results is a video from the account @caughtpodcast, who made a video about quotes from Bundy, thereby instantly creating that celebrity atmosphere around him. Quotes she reads include, “I don’t feel guilty for anything. I feel sorry for people who feel guilt,” and, “We serial killers are your sons, we are your husbands, we are everywhere. And there will be more of your children dead tomorrow.” The comments under this post are reminiscent of the Twitter discussions of people finding him attractive and charming, with user @stansangwoohoes saying, “I found it hot-,” and @danyae_m admitting, “tbh he was so freaking smart I lowkey admire it [emoji].” The desensitization of these users to his crimes runs so deep that they are able to look past Bundy acknowledging he feels no guilt over the dozens of women he killed and still viewing him as someone who deserves attention or praise for being intelligent.

Further perpetuating the obsession with Bundy is the fact that many museums carry some of his former possessions, as previously mentioned in Chapter Three by Schmid, who opened his book by discussing serial killer memorabilia. User @sydsmoore caters directly to this point by posting a video detailing the inside of his infamous Volkswagen Beetle, even showing items that were found in his car when he was arrested. @Katiebug.the.ladybug almost completely encapsulated the hypothesis of this thesis with her comment under this post, “what i’m getting

from this comment section is that gen z would not mind dying for this man & i can't say i disagree." @ssa.emmajean also seemingly commented directly on part of the hypothesis of this paper by saying, "is it bad that i'm unphased by all of these???" Both of these comments point to the fact that people who are Gen Z, or of an age close to that generation, are possibly aware that the fixation and romanticism surrounding Bundy is not something that is "normal," but due to the media they are surrounded by every day, they cannot help but find Bundy and his life interesting.

There are many videos that are similar to the ones from users @_itsfrancesca and @betty.x.boop, who reveal that they felt attracted to Efron while he was playing the part of Ted Bundy; @betty.x.boop posting clips from *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil, and Vile* with an audio clip from Britney Spears' song *Criminal* when she says the words "Mama I'm in love with a criminal," and @_itsfrancesca also posting clips from the movie at times during which she felt Efron looked attractive. These two videos are examples of people who found Efron attractive in his role as Bundy, while not finding Bundy himself to be handsome. In other words, these users were still able to find Efron attractive despite the fact that he was playing the role of a serial killer whom they do not find attractive because of his crimes.

Under the Jeffrey Dahmer tag, Kayleenataliah speaks directly about the specific humor that Gen Z has in relation to serial killers and how it is not for everyone in a video she posted about being questioned by a cashier at Target regarding her decision to get a tattoo. When the woman asked her why she marked her skin because she would probably regret it when she is older, Kaylee responded, "Well, you know, Jeffrey Dahmer says that cannibals don't like tattoos so at least I'll never regret being eaten alive," which she thought was a funny joke, but the

woman did not share the same type of Gen Z humor, so she seemed very confused. In fact, mentioning this quote from Dahmer and implying that they are now safe from cannibals since their tattoos make their skin taste worse is a joke that is commonly posted on the internet by those with tattoos. Another example is the tweet from @50_ShadesOf_Tre pictured below.



_____ Another popular joke on the internet involving Dahmer originated because of the frustration many members of Gen Z feel towards the Americans who are among the richest in the country but do not pay enough in taxes. In a video with over fifty-thousand likes, @welldcmnjackie says, “Where is Jeffrey Dahmer when we need him most, eat the rich!,” followed by a photo of Dahmer from when he was in prison. Comments under this post include one from @emmacliinton who said, “i couldn’t agree more [emoji],” one from @abbymh67 saying, “wait actually yeah,” and many more users who said they also agreed. While everyone is clearly joking, they all feel comfortable enough making jokes about a man who killed seventeen people to solve current problems because they know others in Gen Z will understand this brand of humor.

Similar to the interest @sydsmoore showed for Bundy’s car, @wendy.manjarrez posted a video that includes multiple photographs of the inside of Dahmer’s apartment when he was arrested, even captioning the video, “There’s actually so many pictures of his apartment I could make a part 2 [emoji].” The pictures are extremely graphic, including tools such as saws that

Dahmer used to dismember his victims, pools of blood in areas such as his bedroom, and the inside of his refrigerator, where he stored pieces of his victims. Even when directly shown the horror of what Dahmer did to his victims, some users post jokes; for example, user @reddaboss comments, “Not gonna lie his apartment is looking better than mine,” or even saying how he is their favorite serial killer, which is what @lala52505 commented. This is also not the only video on the app that shows pictures from Dahmer’s apartment; @may_x_mey made a similar video that included pictures @wendy.manjarrez did not have in her video. The first few photographs only showed off some decor that Dahmer had in the apartment, including a fish tank, which was a topic of a lot of the comments. @3nema said, “it’s so weird seeing the fish tank bc it makes him seem more human, he fed and took care of a fish like everyone else, but killed and ate people,” and @sunfleezy commented, “At least he had fishies [emoji].” Even though the pictures that followed were much more shocking and showed a blood-soaked mattress and a barrel likely filled with the acid he injected into his victims, these users were able to focus on a minor detail that humanized Dahmer and make a joke out of it.

Something unique to Tiktok that was not immediately observable on the other social media platforms as it was with Efron and Lynch is users posting that they do find the actors who played Billy Loomis and Stu Macher attractive. @thedevilsguardian posted a video of Skeet Ulrich and Matthew Lillard in their roles, particularly in instances when they felt the actors looked the most attractive, which included clips when Ulrich has been covered in (fake) blood from the murders. Many of the commenters seem to agree, voicing their own attraction; @quackityisahotassdaddy said, “they are so hot literally in the movie I had to keep replaying scenes of them,” and @nimrodgrrrl admitting, “I can’t stop watching this help.” There was even

a comment from user @vhs.blakely, whose attraction was to the character himself and not Ulrich, saying, “Billy Loomis has my heart.” @madeleinesmith_98 posted a video making a similar point, using a song from the band *Counting Crows* that includes the lyrics, “What's the problem, I don't know, well maybe I'm in love,” while showing a picture of Ulrich as Billy to explain why she watches *Scream* over and over again. Although these characters are fictional and are not responsible for real life murders, these Tiktoks demonstrate the fact that the romanticism and borderline acceptance of finding serial killers and murderers attractive is a very common occurrence, with these videos having sixty-three thousand and seventy-nine thousand likes, respectively.

The most interesting videos under the *Scream* and *Silence of the Lambs* tags involved users integrating their love of these movies into other hobbies and their everyday lives. @Journalwithpay showed the process of making a page in a scrapbooking journal dedicated to *Scream*, using screenshots from the movie and other art supplies to make a collage of the characters, and finishing it off by claiming *Scream* to be the best classic horror movie and Billy to be attractive. Another account called @technicolor_toast mixed a love of cooking with an appreciation for *Silence of the Lambs* by making a meal inspired by the movie that included liver, fava beans, and chianti. A more permanent reminder of *Silence of the Lambs* was posted by @wrenmarie_tattoos, who showed off a tattoo cover-up done for a client who replaced an old tattoo with the infamous moth that is an immediately recognizable image from the movie to others who see it. These accounts highlight the fact that people who are fans of these serial killer movies continuously involve these movies in their everyday lives, and their appreciation for these films does not stop at watching them or even at engaging in discussions online.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

While my original hypothesis was that Disney Channel actors such as Efron and Lynch were indirectly causing an increase in the romanticism of killers, it quickly became apparent that the issue runs far deeper than these two actors and the movies in which they starred. Their handsome and charming demeanors may have drawn fans in originally, and the movie reviews proved that not only did both the critics and audience members who watched *My Friend Dahmer* and *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil, and Vile* focus more on Efron and Lynch's performances during these films, but for *Scream* and *Silence of the Lambs*, the focus was shifted to how these films fit into the horror genre. However, the media's mishandling and misrepresentation of mental illness, along with an altered perspective on who these men actually were due to watered-down film versions of their crimes, lends itself to an overall warped societal view of serial killers. Generation Z comes across as glorifying these killers due to the volume of jokes they make revolving around Bundy and Dahmer, although it quickly became apparent that the generation is constantly being influenced by the media they consume to assume that the mistreatment and misrepresentation of those with mental illness is a "norm" and therefore something they have "permission" to idealize in their everyday lives. Killers are starting to be viewed almost as "celebrities" because of how the mainstream media dissects their lives; even school shooters who are given an exorbitant amount of attention after the crimes they commit instead of the focus being on the victims get their moment of "fame." This celebrity/killer mindset has clearly caused this generation to become desensitized, and at some point their murders become almost a story to them rather than reality.

As chapter seven demonstrated, there are definitely those who take the interest of serial killers and mass murderers too far: praising shooters like Nikolas Cruz or calling him cute, having profile pictures or user names that refer to a Columbine shooter, or even having an infatuation with Bundy himself. However, because of the media's glorification of these men and the trend towards making killers seem as if they deserve some levels of sympathy, the jokes that those in Generation Z make are coming from a warped version of reality where Dahmer and Bundy do not seem as brutal or violent as they actually were. This begs the question regarding whether or not producers and CEOs of major media companies are aware of the influence they are having on U.S. youth with their depictions of these men and their use of objectively handsome actors. Even as this is being written in April of 2021, there is already a new Jeffrey Dahmer series in the works that will star Evan Peters, another actor who appeared on Disney Channel from 2004-2005 in *Phil of the Future*. Is this trend continuing because the media believes having good-looking actors helps market these productions to Generation Z, especially those who want to see their favorite actors star in more pieces of media? If this is the goal, Netflix seems to be a big proponent of this trend, having created both *Extremely Wicked*, *Shockingly Evil*, and *Vile*, as well as the new Dahmer series with Peters. This may simply be the result of watching the statistics of what movies or series are most popular among Generation Z, but it is possible that some Netflix employees may be aware of the cultivation theory and they are using it to their advantage. Furthermore, media companies may be aware of the phenomenon of Hybristophilia, which is a sexual interest in and attraction to those who commit crimes (*APA Dictionary of Psychology*, 2020). To better understand this phenomenon, a follow-up study to this research could focus on streaming services such as Netflix, and how U.S. youth having

access to serial killer movies at such a young age may be causing a rise in Hybristophilia. Such research could analyze the data about the viewing of serial killer media using the cultivation theory framework, which states that those who watch a lot of television are more likely to believe the real world should function as it does on television shows or movies (Stacks et al., 2015). This could help to determine whether or not a correlation between increased viewing of serial killer media and Hybristophilia exists, and if media companies are taking advantage of this process for profit.

Lastly, in order to reduce the harmful effects that the incorrect depictions of mental illnesses are having on Generation Z, and society as a whole, it is important that producers and directors start listening to the advice given by psychological professionals. The devastating results found by the NIMH following the release of *13 Reasons Why* proves how susceptible young viewers are to images and ideas portrayed in the media; moreover, these results were completely avoidable. This desensitization must not be passed on to future generations, regardless of the entertainment factor of serial killer media.

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