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"You're In a Cult, Call Your Dad." An Investigation into the True Crime Podcast *My Favorite Murder* and Its Online Fan Communities

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"YOU'RE IN A CULT, CALL YOUR DAD." AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE
TRUE CRIME PODCAST *MY FAVORITE MURDER* AND
ITS ONLINE FAN COMMUNITIES

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
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In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Arts
Communication, Technology, and Society

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by
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ABSTRACT

The interest many women have in true crime has recently received widespread attention in popular media. For instance, a *Saturday Night Live* sketch that aired in late February of 2021 featured women singing about how their favorite way to unwind is to tune into the latest murder documentary or podcast. A leader in this true crime revolution, *My Favorite Murder (MFM)* is a true crime comedy podcast whose fan base—known as Murderinos—is massive in size and in passion. Despite the enormous popularity of true crime podcasts like *MFM* or *Serial*, research on true crime podcasts and their online fan communities is limited. This thesis seeks to add to the current popular dialogue on true crime podcasts and the many women who love them, as well as add to the growing body of literature dedicated to the exploration of true crime podcast fan communities.

This research uses focus groups to qualitatively explore how fans of *MFM,* who identify as women, connect to the genre of true crime, connect to the hosts of *MFM* Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark, and how they connect to other Murderinos virtually or otherwise. The original direction of this research pointed towards possible findings that would align with previous fan studies work on participatory culture (Jenkins, 2013) and fan behaviors like gift economy (Hellekson, 2009). Instead, the findings tell a story fundamentally centered on journeying from feeling alone to no longer feeling alone. The eighteen women, in conversation with each other during small focus groups, tell how they felt alone in their life-long love of true crime, and how their identities as women play a role in their liking of the genre. The findings also show that these women fans have developed a strong parasocial bond (Horton & Wohl, 1956) with

Karen and Georgia because of factors related to host responsiveness, the show's tone and message, and the hosts' openness and mental health advocacy. Finally, findings show that these women fans find support and an end to their feeling of being alone when they engage in a wide variety of *MFM* online fan communities.

Keywords: women, true crime, true crime podcast, fan studies, support, parasocial, qualitative, feminist.

DEDICATION

To all my incredible Murderino participants, and for Murderinos everywhere, this is for

you. SSDGM.

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This project quite literally would not have happened without the endless help and support of my incredible mom—you are my sunshine. Additionally, I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Erin Ash, for every time you pushed me, guided me, and got on the phone with me to talk me off a ledge. Your patience and support have been endlessly appreciated.

I would also like to thank my committee members: Dr. Guo Freeman, for seeing the potential in me and this project, and for giving me the life-altering opportunity to study with you in the future; Dr. Travers Scott, for pushing this project to its full potential by challenging me to interrogate what feminism and womanhood mean to me; and Dr. Kristen Okamoto, for guiding me through the unfamiliar (to me) world of qualitative methods. This thesis is a testament to all of your guidance.

Finally, there are many people whose unconditional support throughout the last two years has meant the world to me. To Lindsey Dixon, Mattias Miklancic, Coco Schulenberg, and Love Fest—I love and thank you all with my whole heart.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

When conjuring namesakes for popular fandoms, several recognizable names
come to mind: Trekkie (Star Trek), Potterhead (Harry Potter), and SuperWhoLock
(Supernatural/Doctor Who/Sherlock), to name a few. However, the name Murderino
would top the lists of the nearly 55,000 paying members of the *My Favorite Murder* Fan
Cult. With roughly 35 million downloads a month, the *My Favorite Murder* (*MFM*) true
crime comedy podcast and its fan base have become a force in the podcasting community
(Shapiro, 2020). Podcasts are categorized as digital files containing primarily audio
content that allow consumers to "timeshift and place-shift their listening and viewing
habits through the downloading of content onto a personal computer or a portable media
player for immediate or future viewing" (Haygood, 2007, p. 518). *MFM* brands itself as a
podcast that interweaves the grisly murder stories associated with the true crime genre
with lighthearted humor. True crime refers to accounts of actual homicides presented in a
more narrative, stylized format than traditional news (Durham et al., 1995). Hosts Karen
Kilgariff, a long-time television writer and comedian, and Georgia Hardstark, a former
Cooking Channel star, focus on two different true crime stories per episode, heavily
utilizing jokes and side commentary during the show with the intent of reducing the
feelings of unease created by the stories they share (Fitzpatrick, 2017). *MFM*'s massive
popularity since its premier in 2017 has catapulted Kilgariff and Hardstark into
podcasting fame, allowing them to co-author a memoir in 2019 (*Stay Sexy and Don't Get*

Murdered: The Definitive How-To Guide) and to jointly create the Exactly Right Media podcasting network (Shapiro, 2020).

Arguably initiated by the astronomical popularity of 2014's *Serial* (Spangler, 2018), true crime podcasts have become increasingly influential in the popular imagination. Though the rise of the true crime podcast has been fairly recent and requires more academic attention, public interest in tales of real-life murder and mayhem have been documented for centuries, although what is considered to be modern true crime made its earliest appearance in magazines in the 1940s (Murley, 2008). Despite the genre's hyper focus on sexually sadistic crimes against women, true crime's primary consumers and fans are, in fact, overwhelmingly women (Browder, 2006; Murley, 2008; Vicary & Fraley, 2010; Boling & Hull, 2018).

Before moving forward, it is imperative to articulate how gender and womanhood will be conceptualized within the framework of this project. First, note that I utilize a variety of sources that treat gender and sex differently. For the purposes of communicating all of these different types of sources with varying epistemologies and ontologies, I will be utilizing whatever language the individual piece uses to conceptualize gender. In general, there are a handful of ways that scholars from psychology, sociology, biological sciences, and other disciplines have defined and conceptualized gender. Some perspectives treat gender and sex as one in the same and as existing along a binary, following the traditions outlined in essentialism, where women and men are fundamentally psychologically and/or biologically different from one another (Rollins, 1996; Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982; Blenky et. al., 1986). Many

perspectives heavily used in social psychological research moved away from pure essentialism by recognizing that biological sex and gender are different, but that gender roles and attributions are still binary in nature along female/male, feminine/masculine scales. These gendered differences can be thought of as gender attributions (Kessler & McKenna, 1978) or sex categorizations (West & Zimmerman, 1978) that stem from others' perceptions of how an individual fits into the categories of male or female, or as characteristics of femininity or masculinity that an individual identifies within themselves (Bem, 1974; Bem, 1981). Criticizing the binary and normative approaches that such research takes, cultural theorists advocate from a social constructivist position (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Foucault, 1978; Laws & Schwartz, 1977; Bohan, 1993), where gender is completely decoupled from sex and is defined by interactions between people as realized through language and cultural discourse (DeLamater & Shibley Hyde, 1998). Stemming from de Beauvoir's (1972) famous line, "One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one," Butler (1990; 1993) conceptualizes gender as something habitually performed by and imposed upon an individual by society. Some scholars (e.g., van Anders, 2015; Jenkins, 2016; Mikkola, 2011) advocate for moving towards interrogating the intuitiveness or usefulness of the gender/sex divide. Mikkola (2019) argued that the divide feels unintuitive to the ordinary social agent in social structures where that divide is not clear in day-to-day life, especially when ordinary agents also may find positive value in the way their sex and gender comingle to form meaning. In sum, there is a wide variety of ways that previous research conceptualizes sex and gender, with the above analysis just scratching the surface of the conversation.

My own stance on gender and womanhood in this project is partially informed by the above perspectives, and partially informed by the concluding lines of a recent piece from Mazzuca et al. (2020, p. 30):

> To conclude, gender is a complex and multifaceted concept, whose intricacy is not exhausted by simplistic dichotomies between biological qualities of the human body and cultural or social aspects of sex expressions. These features interact at different levels and to different extents, depending also on specific experiences so as to form the representation of the concept of gender.

In their study, Mazzuca et al. (2020) found that, when asked in open-ended surveys, Italian individuals' conceptual knowledge of gender seems to incorporate both sexual and biological factors (e.g., *sex, female*) as well as aspects related to gender performativity (e.g., *femininity, masculinity, role*), arguably bridging what has previously been described as an unpassable gulf between essentialism and social constructivism (see: DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). Mazzuca et al. (2020) goes on to clarify that individuals who dominate Italian culture would categorize (admittedly problematically) as "non-normative" (i.e., non-binary or transgender) often mentioned words associated more with social constructs of gender and gender fluidity and justice, while "normative" individuals (i.e., cis-gendered) more often used the ideas of gender roles and biological binaries. Additionally, the authors also found that some "non-normative" individuals also used binary language in describing themselves. All of this is to say that, rather than seeing gender as something that can and should only be defined by one thing or another, gender is instead the result of a culmination of lived experiences within a culture that shapes gender identity and

expression in certain ways, sometimes biologically and sometimes socially (Mazzuca et al., 2020).

Ultimately, my perspective comes down to the idea that, as Harding (1998) states: "there is no 'woman' and no 'woman's experience'," (p. 7). Essentially, I believe in an experiential relativism, where what it means to be a woman is highly individualistically meaningful and can be based on any combination of sex and social construction, to any degree, and with any degree or non-degree of bigenderism. This is not to say that research on gender should be perpetuating gender binaries. Indeed, social psychological perspectives are becoming much more conscious of moving away from assumed gender binary in research (Hyde et. al, 2019; Lindqvist et al., 2020), and I believe that shift is a necessary step towards creating research that is reflective of a far wider range of lived experiences. This is just to say that this project does practice a bit of the basic idea of strategic essentialism (Spivak & Harasym, 2014) in that it makes room for previous research that does assume a binary, while still recognizing that the binary is formed from a social construction that embodies multiple complicated combinations of sex, attributes, race, class, and societal norms, and should not act as a default. Additionally, I do not believe that we should pick and choose when we decide what fits in with the definition of "woman," but rather to recognize and appreciate multiple, individually constructed views. For me, that means consistently using qualifying language throughout this piece (i.e., *some* women, *many* women) rather than language that universalizes the qualities and characteristics of the lived experience of being a woman.

Now that I have attempted to explain my positionality as a researcher, it is time to turn back to true crime and its relationship to its primary audience. (This is also not to say that those who identify as men do not like true crime, only that it is a genre historically associated with people who identify as women.) True crime's appeal to many women does not appear to be immediately obvious; after all, how could hearing in detail about crimes that could happen to you be enjoyable or beneficial? Exploring the facets of the true crime genre that appeal to some women will help illustrate the ways in which the seemingly primarily women audience of true crime podcasts is drawn to and becomes invested in these shows despite their fear-inducing content (Vicary & Fraley, 2010).

Investigating the behaviors that true crime podcast hosts display is also a vital component for understanding how many women fans become invested in these shows. Host behaviors could facilitate the development of parasocial relationships—i.e., a relationship in which a bond develops between a host and a listener through the illusion of having a face-to-face friendship (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Hartmann, 2008; Pavelko & Myrick, 2020). How these relationships are formed can vary but can often be attributed to the use of informal and personal language by the media persona (Pavelko & Myrick, 2020), which could potentially include the practice of gossip (Jones, 1980; Guendouzi, 2001) in the case of *MFM*. Additionally, there is the possibility that invitational/parasocial rhetoric used by the hosts could also encourage parasocial bonding (Foss & Griffin, 1995; Presswood, 2017). This form of rhetoric sees rhetors inviting audience members to participant in a narrative sharing experience and opens up hosts to feedback and change, possibly promoting bonds. Further investigation was warranted to

elucidate the nature of the connections between Kilgariff and Hardstark and their fans, and how those connections became meaningful to fans.

True crime's large women fan base also engages the historical feminist roots of fan studies as a field focused on fanish practice as a form of social and critical critique (Hannell, 2020), particularly when the fan text is as subversive as true crime (Murley, 2008). In regards to fan studies, Jenkins' (2006; 2013) concept of participatory culture in the modern media age drives much of the conversation surrounding the ways in which media industries and fan bases interact with and influence each other. In essence, Jenkins (2013) suggests,

> …focusing on participatory culture as a concept allows us to acknowledge the complex interactions between fans and producers, especially as media industries have had to embrace more participatory strategies in order to court and maintain relations with their fans at a time when a logic of 'engagement' shapes many of their policies and promotions. (p. xxii)

Jenkins describes three trends that are defining participatory culture: new technology that assists fan engagement, the rise of DIY fan media production, and economic trends favoring industries that utilize multiple channels to encourage active spectatorship (2006; 2013). The ways in which *MFM* utilizes different techniques and technologies to draw fans into the creation process warranted investigation given the show's enormous success by industry standards.

With the rise of ubiquitous computing in the developed world, virtual fan community interaction and engagement have become a major focus of fan studies

(Jenkins, 2013). Virtual fan communities are characterized by Ridings et al. (2002) as "groups of people with common interests and practices that communicate regularly and for some duration in an organized way over the Internet through a common location or mechanism" (p. 273). Armstrong and Hagel (2000) distinguish four different types of virtual communities: communities of transaction, interest, fantasy, or relationship. Within fan communities themselves there exist multiple layers of engagement, for example; the monetary and non-monetary benefits of the gift economy (Hellekson, 2009) and collective knowledge production and aggregation (Jenkins, 2013), to name but a few. Therefore, true crime podcast fanship can act as a site for creating and maintaining social relationships (Boling & Hull, 2018), and requires more formalized academic research to investigate further.

This research explored the experiences of fans who identify as women and are active in online fan communities of the true crime comedy podcast *My Favorite Murder* using a combination of a short introductory survey and focus groups. Given the true crime genre's history with women fans, this research focused on the lived experiences of women-identifying *MFM* fans by investigating (a) the ways in which *MFM* and its hosts Karen and Georgia facilitate connections with fans of the show, (b) the nature of *MFM*'s online fan-to-fan community interactions and practices, and (c) how women fans of *MFM* connect to true crime. These components were investigated and interrogated through the lens of the fans themselves via their disclosure of their experiences with the podcast, with the fan communities they are involved with online, and their personal histories with the true crime genre.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Podcasts have enjoyed an incredible boom in popularity in the United States in the last decade. As of 2020, 75% of the U.S. adult population has become aware of podcasting, 55% of Americans have listened to a podcast at least once in their lifetimes, and podcasts collectively boasted an estimated 88 to 90 million listeners in the U.S. (Watson, 2020; Edison Research, 2019). Podcast listener demographics reveal a majority white, 12-34 years old listenership (Watson, 2020). Men edge out slightly over women as active listeners: 39% of men in the United States having listened in the last month compared to 36% of women (Watson, 2020), and 54% of monthly podcast listeners are men (Edison Research, 2019). An estimated 62 million people are weekly listeners of podcasts, and weekly listeners averaged seven podcasts a week (Edison Research, 2019). The majority of listeners cited learning new things as the primary reason for listening to podcasts (74%), followed by being entertained (71%), staying up to date on topics (60%), to relax (51%), to feel inspired (47%), to escape (37%), and for companionship (24%) (Edison Research, 2019).

Previous research has explored the auditory appeal of podcasts. Nyre (2015) suggests that the self-selective nature of podcast listening creates an auditory experience that is highly engaging. Additionally, the act of putting in earphones and shutting out the outside world while plugging in to the podcast world also creates auditory intimacy (Bull, 2007; Berry, 2016; Nyre, 2015), and possibly even fosters a parasocial relationship with hosts (MacDougall, 2011). The auditory and general appeal of podcasts also partially

resides in the vast variety in subject matter and style of shows available for consumption. Previous research has pointed to independent podcasters' freedom to control the production process in a way that is not constrained to commercial radio prescriptions as one reason for the appeal of increasingly niche productions (Markman, 2012). For example, journalistic narrative storytelling in podcasts can build feelings of connection and empathy in the audience, contributing to auditory appeal (Lindgren, 2016). As of April 2020, there are over 1 million different podcasts with over 28 million episodes available for downloading and listening (2020 podcast statistics, demographics & habits (US, Canada & Australia), 2020). Podcasts focusing on music, news, entertainment, history, and sports occupy the top five most listened to types of podcasts, although true crime does come in at number nine with 28% of monthly listeners interested (Edison Research, 2019). Although traditional broadcasting companies—like NPR and iHeartRadio—rake in the highest number of unique listeners a month (Watson, 2020), podcast producers can be anyone who has the equipment and access to the internet and online platforms necessary to produce and distribute their work. This flexibility and accessibility mean that virtually any niche interest, experimental show style, and hosting personality can reach an audience (Haygood, 2007). Given the large number and types of podcasts available, the question of what makes true crime podcasts specifically so appealing and engaging to fans is an important point of exploration.

While the subject material of a podcast contributes to appeal, technological affordances of podcast listening also play an important role in their appeal to media consumers. According to Edison Research's Podcast Consumer 2019 report, "you can do

other things while listening" (87%), "they are portable" (80%), and "you can listen

wherever you are" (78%) are the top three reasons why people find podcasts enjoyable

(Edison Research, 2019). Additional reasons included "for particular hosts" (76%),

"being able to listen on a computer" (73%), and "feeling smarter" (59%), according to the

same report. Podcast listeners can choose when and where they listen to a show rather

than being tied to one particular device, time slot, or consumption location. Much of the

appeal of the podcast comes from the medium's time shifting functionality, which allows

listeners to free themselves from the "tyranny of the live" (Murray, 2009, p. 199), or the

necessity to attach consumption practices to the specific release time of a show. Although

podcasts had previously existed before 2005, Apple's move to include podcasts in its

iTunes downloadable content made the process of embedding a podcast episode on a

portable device significantly easier and faster (Haygood, 2007), allowing for a wider

range of listening location practices than traditional broadcast radio. Portable devices

constituted the majority of the devices used by monthly podcast consumers in 2019

(65%), followed by computer or laptop at 25% and smart speaker device at 10% (Edison

Research, 2019). Though the most popular listening location tends to be the home (90%),

monthly podcast listeners also frequently listened in the car (64%), while walking (49%),

at the gym or while working out (43%), at work (37%), and while using public

transportation (37%) (Watson, 2020; Edison Research, 2019).

Modern technological features like the ease of downloading also make the sharing

of podcasts between devices and people possible via text messaging, link sharing through

social media platforms, or emailing episodes. Searching the internet (73%), social media

posts (67%), and recommendations from friends and family (66%) top the list of ways people discover podcasts (Edison Report, 2019), and point to a trend of online presence and online community building as an avenue of spreading media to future fans. For example, McClung and Johnson (2010) found that people talking about the podcasts they download and listen to with friends and other program fans serves a predictor of podcast use, such that the anticipation of social exchange increases podcast listening. Additionally, an online survey of 100 listeners of the true crime podcast *Serial* found that early adopters of the podcast discover something new and share the experience with others as a way to entice loved ones to become fans of the show (Berry, 2015). The technological affordances associated with podcasts and their online presence will be revisited later in the discussion on online fan communities.

Host Behaviors

While there are, as previously mentioned, a plethora of reasons for listening and enjoying podcasts, the concept of host behaviors and the ways in which podcasts and their hosts engage listeners is of particular interest to this research. With 76% of respondents reporting that particular hosts make podcast listening enjoyable (Edison Research, 2019), it is important to look into some of the ways that hosts create an enjoyable and engaging experience for fans.

Parasocial Relationships

First developed by Horton and Wohl (1956), parasocial interaction and relationships are well established concepts in mass communication studies. A parasocial relationship occurs when a media spectator develops a bond with a media

persona that feels as if the relationship is face-to-face. This relationship is perceived as and acts similarly to an interpersonal relationship with a peer, and for the socially isolated can even act as a substitute for social interaction. Although typically characterized as a one-sided relationship for the spectator, new media tools like social networking sites do allow media persona to interact with fans in a way that could increase the strength of the relationship (Hartmann, 2008; Perks & Turner, 2019; Pavelko & Myrick, 2020). Numerous factors contribute to the development of a parasocial relationship. Parasocial relationships can develop from a sense of identification with a persona, particularly for those who feel marginalized and can empathize with the persona's troubles (Boling et al., 2019; Hartmann, 2008). Other factors include length of interaction with media persona (Horton & Wohl, 1956), uncertainty reduction via persona attitude predictability (Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Perse & Rubin, 1989), perceived authenticity of persona (Hartmann, 2008), and persona use of an informal and personal style (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Giles, 2002).

The use of casual, personal language is of particular interest in studying podcasts because of podcasts' largely auditory nature. There is a possibility that the use of casual communication practices traditionally associated with women, like gossip (Jones, 1980; Guendouzi, 2001), by women podcast hosts could facilitate stronger connections to the host by mirroring how many women historically socially engage with each other in real life relationships. Jones (1980) characterized gossip as taking one of four forms: house-talk, or the exchange of information and resources for keeping house; scandal, or the sharing of stories typically for the purpose of judging others or living vicariously through

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others; bitching, or the "overt expression of anger at their restricted role and inferior status" (p. 197); and chatting, or an intimate form of gossip centered around mutual self-disclosure. Jones' (1980) perspective represents early attempts to investigate gossip at a time where academic and social institutions alike viewed gossip between women as "foolish, petty, backbiting talk about others' personal lives," (Adkins, 2002, p. 221). She contends that each type is deeply rooted in the patriarchal norms of women's historically limited social role in society as strictly staying within the home and attending to domestic affairs. More important than the content of the gossip for Jones (1980), though, is the social connection to other women it provides: "Gossip is essentially talk between women in our common role as women" (p. 195).

Later scholars would acknowledge that gossip is not a form of talk exclusive to those identifying as women, but rather as a one practice amongst many that comprises oral culture (Adkins, 2002). Guendouzi (2001), for example, later refined early conceptualizations like Jones' (1980) by seeing gossip as taking just one of two forms: bitching and peer-group news-giving. Bitching is characterized by the intimate exchange of a personal story highlighting the social injustices or violations done unto a person, regardless of gender identity (Guendouzi, 2001; Ribarsky & Hammonds, 2019). Peer group news-giving is a relaying of information about another individual to a different party and might eventually get back to the discussed individual (Ribarsky & Hammonds, 2019). Guendouzi's (2001) new conceptualizations brought gossip outside of the traditionalist home-making setting, and thus research on gossip began to open up to new possibilities, like studies about how it is used in the workplace as a social orienting tool

(Ribarsky & Hammonds, 2019) For the purposes of this study, gossip is particularly interesting in regards to parasocial relationships, because, as Adkins (2002) suggests, "trust is a necessary precursor to the existence and transmission of gossip—we have to have some recognition of commonality and community to enter the intimate activity of gossip" (p. 230). If women podcast hosts are using language that reflects or recreates modes of communication (problematically or otherwise) traditionally associated with women, it could provide a theoretical explanation for some women fan engagement and parasocial relationship development.

Parasocial relationships with podcast hosts has been given some attention in recent literature. Perks and Turner (2019) found that podcast listeners cited most often the:

> frequency or regularity of contact, opportunities to interact with hosts through social media or other avenues (thus creating the possibility for a two-way relationship), the conversational quality of the podcast, similarities between listener and host, and host sharing of personal information. (p. 109)

…as reasons for having developed a parasocial relationship with podcast hosts. Moreover, Vickery and Ventrano (2020) found that podcast listeners who showed a strong sense of parasocial interaction often listened relationally, or with the motivation to attend to the hosts' feelings and emotions. Both studies also point to the time-shifting ability and portability of podcasts that reduced the barrier between host and listener, and thus increased parasocial feelings towards hosts (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Perks & Turner, 2019; Vickery & Ventrano, 2020). Additionally, in an online survey of

541 *MFM* listeners, Pavelko and Myrick (2020) found that perceived help coping with mental health struggles was positively correlated to a parasocial relationship connection between *MFM* listeners and *MFM* host Georgia Hardstark. Hardstark's frequent discussions of her own journey with mental health treatment is thought to be a contributing factor to the parasocial bonding observed. These three studies provide a starting point for this research, which seeks to explore the concept

of parasocial relationships by linking observed host behaviors with self-reported fan community behaviors in a more specific context.

Invitational/Parasocial Rhetoric

Observed host behaviors in the context of podcasts likely occur most often in the form of rhetoric, for the simple fact that podcasts are almost exclusively auditory in nature (Haygood, 2007). Thus, it is important for the purposes of this research to examine rhetoric as an extension of host behavior. Given this research's focus on how podcast hosts facilitate fan connection and engagement, invitational rhetoric has the potential to explain how podcast hosts use rhetoric to engender a parasocial relationship. First conceptualized by Foss & Griffin (1995) and rooted in the feminist theoretical perspectives of equality, immanent value, and self-determination, invitational rhetoric refers to a rhetorical style that emphasizes a sharing of experiences and life perspectives between a speaker and their audience. While other forms of rhetoric rely on the assumption that people attempt to persuade others as a form of social dominance, invitational rhetoric puts emphasis on the safety, value, and freedom of audience members and their perspectives by not seeking to persuade the audience per se, but

simply seeking to understand others' perspectives on issues through a sharing of experiences (Bone, et al., 2008; Ryan & Natalie, 2001). Invitational rhetoric relies on the assumption that, by creating a safe space for an audience to share their perspective, the rhetor then makes space for their own viewpoint to change in a mutual give-and-take with the audience (Foss & Griffin, 1995). In essence, this style of rhetoric promotes the sharing of personal narratives with people of opposing views with the goal of (1) getting them to understand your point of view without discouraging them to stop listening to you for fear of being attacked and (2) creating goodwill with the audience by making yourself open to change.

This initial conception of invitational rhetoric has had its critics. Lozano-Reich and Cloud (2009) criticize the—as they put it—inherently sexist and racist implication that oppressed groups should heed the calls of civility, reciprocity, and understanding that is at the core of invitational rhetoric (Swiencicki, 2015). This implication, they argue, limits radical and passionate change-oriented speech like confrontational rhetoric, and ignores the power imbalance that will inevitably privilege the oppressor over the oppressed when both are given equal voice (Lozano-Reich & Cloud, 2009). Swiencicki (2015), however, contends in her work examining the ecology of invitational rhetoric and refusal that this criticism falsely equates invitation and confrontation as existing on two separate sides, while both can exist simultaneously. More importantly, though, is the idea that invitational rhetoric has been moving away from only concerning persuasion-related and inherently political events, and instead acting as a larger idea of inviting people in for discussion through narrative sharing generally (Ryan & Natalie, 2001; Swiencicki, 2015).

For example, Ryan & Natalie (2001) describe invitational rhetoric in the classroom as something that can be used to facilitate the sharing of different standpoints in an environment that could otherwise prioritize simple agreement with classmates and teacher for fear of retaliation.

In its latest iteration, invitational rhetoric has moved into the realm of media and digital dialogue. Presswood (2017) proposed the concept of parasocial rhetoric to address the blurring of boundaries between parasocial interactions and interpersonal relationships in digital networks, and as an extension of invitational rhetoric. They define parasocial rhetoric as a "series of rhetorical behaviors used by rhetors on digital platforms to encourage their audience to develop a parasocial relationship with them over time," (p. 182). While the concept has yet to be tested outside of Presswood's (2017) work on food bloggers, it is deserving of continued exploration for two reasons. First, it incorporates principles of invitational rhetoric in a digital media environment (i.e., blogs), rather than in the context of political discourse (Lozano-Reich & Cloud, 2009; Swiencicki, 2015) or communication pedagogy (Ryan & Natalie, 2001). Considering the focus of this project on podcasts and online fan communities, this makes parasocial rhetoric particularly appealing as a concept. Second, parasocial rhetoric addresses how the invitational nature of sharing experiences and inviting others to share their experiences can work to help engender a parasocial relationship, rather than as a tool of persuasion or in place of persuasion. The end goal, then, of parasocial rhetoric is not necessarily to see differing perspectives to work towards coming together on issues, but instead to encourage connection between media persona and audience.

Parasocial rhetoric details four rhetorical behaviors: "building rhetorical authenticity, granting response agency to an audience, maintaining asymmetry in the rhetor-audience relationship, and encouraging the audience to perceive itself as a peer community" (Presswood, 2017, p. 182—183). Building rhetorical authenticity echoes Hartmann's (2008) conception of trustworthiness of the media figure as a component of encouraging a parasocial bond, and granting response agency (e.g., by encouraging readers to comment on a blog post) addresses the creation of a safe space for audience response outlined in invitational rhetoric (Foss & Griffin, 1995). Instead of attempting to dispel the critique levied against invitational rhetoric by Lozano-Reich and Cloud (2009), parasocial rhetoric acknowledges the asymmetrical power of a digital producer and their audience. The rhetor (or blogger, or podcast host) simultaneously holds the position of expert while also being unable to engage individually with each audience member that engages with them, thus placing such interactions firmly in a parasocial realm rather than an interpersonal one. The last rhetorical behavior, audience perception of a peer community, describes the media producer (i.e., blogger) as relying on interactions readers have with each other to maintain her expert status without having to intervene herself. In the case of food blogs, this takes the shape of readers defending the blogger from a negative review via responses to the review that paint the blogger as "correct," without the blogger having to step in to defend herself and risk losing her relatability (Presswood, 2017). This is a particularly intriguing idea in the context of podcasts and online communities, since podcasts do not typically have just one centralized place to post reviews or replies, but can span across many platforms. Indeed, the use of invitational

rhetoric and parasocial rhetoric by podcast hosts as a form of connecting to and engaging with fans in a digital environment has not been explored in previous literature, and necessitates further exploration to see if/how it is used to facilitate podcast fanship and connections with hosts.

Participatory Culture

How podcast hosts and producers use participation and engagement—particularly in this digital age—to create and maintain fanship likely plays an important role in the characteristics of online fan communities. Jenkins' (2006, 2013) concept of participatory culture is of particular interest to this research because the concept has become ingrained in the market logic of new media in today's convergence culture (Scott, 2019). In essence, participatory culture refers to the way in which media producers and media consumers experience a give and take kind of relationship, where fans have some power over the meaning-making process through their resistant and/or affirmational readings while media producers simultaneously court and restrict participation from their fans. Historically speaking, fans have had very little ability to influence media producers in a meaningful way. Jenkins (2013) uses the 1987 show *Beauty and the Beast* and its fan base as an example: After the show killed off one of the two main love interests, many fans felt betrayed by the writers and ultimately left the fandom, having lost what they valued most from the viewing experience and knowing that there was nothing they could do about the change. This type of power imbalance—media producers exerting complete and discretionary power over consumers via the text—has shifted with the rise of ubiquitous internet access. As Jenkin's (2006) explains,

…participatory culture is taking shape at the intersection between three trends:

    a. New tools and technologies enable consumers to achieve, annotate, appropriate, and rearticulate media content;

    b. A range of subcultures promote DIY media production, a discourse that shapes how consumers have deployed those technologies; and

    c. Economic trends favoring the horizontally integrated media conglomerates encourage the flow of images, ideas, and narratives across multiple media channels and demand more active modes of spectatorship. (p. 135-136)

As consumers have gained a greater ability to engage in media production and meaning-making, producers began to recognize that the best way to maintain control over the material is to invite fans to contribute to the production process (Jenkins, 2006; 2013), be it through fan-creation competitions (Jenkins, 2013), fan auteurs becoming producers (Scott, 2019), or simply through having more content available across multiple platforms so fans have more material to work with (Jenkins, 2006). In these scenarios, the fans feel as though they are part of the experience of creation, while the media producer still retains control over canon, ensuring continued fanship and loyalty. One of the core recommendations given to new podcast hosts as a way to launch a successful podcast is to rely heavily on listener feedback and perspectives, and to acknowledge their perspectives and make changes accordingly (Podcast marketing: 50 podcasters share the tactics they used to grow their shows, 2020). Dowling and Miller (2019) argue that true crime podcasting (e.g., *Serial*) in particular represents a shift towards participatory culture in podcasting, with hosts inviting listeners to be a part of the production process

by giving them glimpses into the process of investigative journalism. Although such work points to participatory culture and its use in investigative type true crime podcasting, true crime shows like *MFM* that are not investigatory in nature need further elaboration in regards to how they use participatory culture to engage fans, and in particular female fans.

MFM and its massive fan base serve as vehicle for contextualizing the investigation of host behaviors and the impacts those behaviors, as well as the impacts of the technological features of the podcast, have on the engagement of fans. The discussion on the types of behaviors podcast hosts could potentially engage in leads to the first research question for this project:

RQ1: How is fan engagement and connection facilitated by the hosts of *My Favorite Murder*?

Online Communities

The building of fan communities in 'real-life' began with the original *Star Trek* series in the 1960s at a time when television fans were believed to be mindless media dupes, incapable of critical and active engagement with their text (Bury, 2017). The pioneering work of Bacon-Smith (1992) and Jenkins (1992) brought to light the ways in which primarily science-fiction television (e.g., *Star Trek, Blake 7, The Professionals*) fan communities gathered in various ways to connect with other fans and engage in fanish production with each other. Before the internet, these interactions took the shape of attending fan conventions, writing and mailing out fan zines, and meeting in small local chapters to discuss material (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Jenkins, 1992; Bury, 2017).

Bacon-Smith (1992) argued that fan communities could be divided between larger interest groups (i.e., the entire fan base) and smaller circles (i.e., those near you), the latter of which provided greater opportunities for social interaction (Bury, 2017). These acts and circles were confined to either geographic location and/or preexisting social networks, drastically limiting the scope of a person's fan community. If you did not have the money or time to travel to fan conventions, then your options for engagement were limited at best.

The internet has not only vastly increased fans' abilities to access and control media (e.g., streaming sites that facilitate asynchronous podcast listening), but the internet has also massively increased an individual's access to other fans outside of their circle (Baym, 2000; Bury, 2005; 2017). The nature of the fan communities that form over the internet often feels ambiguous, so a typology of internet communities is necessary for clarity's sake. Armstrong and Hagel (2000) in their seminal work on online community building as business strategy distinguish four different types of virtual communities: communities of transaction, interest, fantasy, and relationship. These classifications are useful in conceptualizing the purpose of the fan communities that a researcher encounters online, and thus helps in identifying why and how people interact with each other when operating in the communal virtual space. First, communities of transaction can take one of two forms online: (1) spaces like Etsy or RedBubble, where fan creations are commodified, sold, and bought for actual currency, or (2) gift economy exchanges, where fan works are freely distributed (Price & Robinson, 2016). For this type of community, the transaction or exchange itself typically serves as the primary form of interaction

amongst individuals. Hellekson (2009) posits that online gift economy, or gift culture, is a deeply symbolic practice amongst female fans in particular. It involves the exchanging of material (e.g., fan fiction, fan art, etc.) with other fans for comments and praise, and is considered by scholars like Jenkins (1992; 2013) and Hellekson (1992) to be best understood as a social act amongst women rather than a true economic act. Such scholars as Bacon-Smith (1992) and Scott (2019) argue that, historically, the transformative nature of female fan engagement with media creates legal (i.e., copyright infringement) and logistical issues for fan creators that prevent the selling of their work, thus often pushing female fan activity towards a gift economy approach rather than a monetary transaction approach as described by Hellekson (2009).

Second, communities of interest are ones in which individuals gather together in online spaces to discuss a specific topic of interest, and where interactions are almost exclusively centered on that interest (Armstrong & Hagel, 2000). Although discussing shared interests is a part of most types of fan communities, communities of interest are distinct in that members do not typically share personal information or discuss other matters outside the topic of interest (Armstrong &Hagel, 2000; Price & Robinson, 2016). Third, communities of fantasy consist of online spaces where fans come together to role-play or engage in acts of fantasy (Armstrong & Hagel, 2000). For instance, fans might take on the attitudes and appearance of a favorite fictional persona on Twitter and tweet as if they are the character (Price & Robinson, 2016), or sports fans might engage in creating fantasy football teams so they can act out the role of team manager (Armstrong & Hagel, 2000). Finally, Armstrong and Hagel (2000) identify communities

of relationship as the last type of online community. The initial intent of joining or creating any type of online community may not explicitly be to create deep and meaningful relationships that operate outside of the community context, but these relationships frequently occur regardless. Bury (2005; 2017) posits that friendship formation is integral to online fan communities and can even outlast the interest in the primary fan text. Although any fan community can foster relationships, communities of relationship are distinct in that the initial and primary purpose of the community is to share personal experiences with others, often for the benefit of emotional support and relationship building. It is important to note that all of these communities are not mutually exclusive, and indeed often either occur simultaneously or build off of each other significantly (Armstrong & Hagel, 2000).

No longer confined to the geographic and resource constraints of the physical world as they once were, fans today can interact with a diverse array of people through multiple virtual community outlets simultaneously to create meaningful relationships (Jenkins, 2013). The nature of those relationships can be observed and defined through Armstrong and Hagel's (2000) typology. For example, in her seminal ethnographic work on Swedish indie music online fandoms, Baym (2007) found that fans navigated a complex ecosystem of online sites that connected each individual to other individuals regardless of geographic proximity or demographic relation. These aforementioned members used their various platforms "to get one another excited about relatively obscure new music, to share news, to compare perspectives through reviews and discussion, to create public identities as members of this fandom, and to form personal

relationships with one another" (Baym, 2007, p. 12). Baym's (2007) findings echo the

descriptions of Armstrong and Hagel's (2000) communities of transaction (trading news),

interest (comparing perspectives on music), and relationship (forming personal

relationships). While this typology is useful and will be used throughout this research, it

is important to recognize that these communities do not work separately from one

another, but rather make up parts of a larger picture of media fandom online.

Gender and Fan Studies

Before concepts of fan studies and fan behavior can be explored further, it is

crucial to acknowledge that fan studies as a subfield owes its epistemological and

methodological foundation to the work done by feminist theory and feminist critical

scholars beginning in the 1980s (Hannell, 2020). I would argue that my project is one

which strives to be feminist in its epistemology and methodology. Although there is not a

stable or identifiable 'feminist methodology,' Harding (1987; 1989) explains that one

hallmark of good feminist research is the prioritization of women's experiences as worthy

of research own its own, not in addition to research on the experiences of men. Some of

the first works on audience analysis studies were conducted by feminist researchers

focusing on oft-ignored entertainment interest areas typically associated with women,

such as soap operas (Brunsdon, 1981; Hobson, 1982; Ang, 1985), "teenybopper"

magazines (McRobbie, 1990), and romance novels (Radaway, 1984). As Jenkins (2013)

states, these works "paved the way from generalized audiences… to gendered audiences

to fan communities" (p. xi). Additionally, Jenkins (1992; 2013) is often credited with

describing a concept later known as the aca-fan in the first print of his seminal work

T*extual Poachers* (1992). An aca-fan is a scholar that fully discloses their status as a member of the fan community that they are studying. This concept, centered as it is on researcher reflexivity, did not originate with *Poachers*, but instead came from the work of feminist scholars like McRobbie (1991), who called for researchers to reflect on their personal connections to their research interests and project with honesty in their writing. The feminist underpinnings of fan studies since *Poachers* has repeatedly been under explained in the literature under the apparent assumption that scholars already know the origins, with publications from the 1990s onwards often lacking explicit explanations or citations articulating the connection (Scott, 2019; Hannell, 2020), and should be explicated more in the future.

The early focus on many women fans and their interests has led to further research in regard to the way some women fans engage with the texts of their choice. Given the history of true crime as an entertainment genre whose audience is typically women (Murley, 2008), it will be useful to understand the various means of engagement many women use to act out their fanship and make connections with other fans. Scott (2019) argues that, broadly speaking, women fans generally tend to engage in behaviors that could be defined as "transformational" while men fans engage in "affirmational" participatory practices (obsession_inc, 2009). It is important to note that, while it is unclear where individuals who do not fall into the gender binary fit in to this typology, and that Scott (2019) does qualify that obviously women can and do engage affirmationally while men can and do engage transformationally, this dichotomous typology is currently being used in fan studies research appearing in journals like

Transformative Works and Culture (e.g., Zygutis, 2021) and can be useful for parsing out

how many women practice fanship, and thus warrants engagement here. Affirmational

fan practices are practices that do not stray from the original source material presented,

e.g., collecting memorabilia (Scott, 2019) and collective knowledge production and

aggregation on web forums (Jenkins, 2006, 2013). Transformational fan practices, on the

other hand, are ones in which the fan steps outside of the original source material in order

to supplement or alter the text to suit individual purposes (Scott, 2019), such as fanfiction

or fanart. Jenkins (2013) and Bacon-Smith (1992) both documented how slash fiction and

fanfiction were overwhelmingly produced by women since the late 1970s as a way for

some women to explore the emotional depth male characters displayed in such programs

like *Star Trek*.

Fanfiction has historically been the way that many women fans can have their

own wants and needs represented in the media they liked and, as (Bennett, 2014) argues,

has only become more prevalent since the advent of the internet age with sites like Live

Journal (Busse & Hellekson, 2006) and Archive of Our Own (Lothian, 2013). However,

fan fiction, Scott (2019) argues, has also often been denounced as a valid expression

of fanship because it threatens the authoritative power of media producers. Thus, fan

creations like fan fiction and fan art have been regulated to the status of subversive, in

turn making some women fan engagement subversive and unvalued according to scholars

like Scott (2019). There is some criticism to the idea that fan fiction writers engage in

'textual poaching' (Jenkins, 1992), or reading and creating in direct opposition to the

texts' and producers' intentions, Bennet (2014) argues that fan cultures are not

homogeneous even across virtual platforms and should not be studied as if they are always cohesive (see also: Busse & Hellekson, 2006). Still, Hellekson (2009) details how the exchanging of fanfiction and fan art acts as a powerful social act binding female fans together in a gift economy scenario, where the joys of creating and sharing come from the friendships formed by the act rather than any kind of profit. Gift economies are particularly interesting in that they can either operate as a free exchange for the purposes of socializing, or they can operate as monetary exchanges (Hellekson, 2009; de Kosnik, 2009), like in the case of Etsy groups.

Some limited research about true crime podcasts and their fan communities has been conducted (see: Boling & Hull, 2018). Buozis (2017) explored the deliberative digital democracy found in the *Serial* subReddit, where fans of the show gathered to share and discuss evidence from the case. Pavelko and Myrick (2020) investigated the effects of *MFM* and its social media community on the well-being of audiences with mental illness. Although they did not find a significant relationship between mere presence in social media communities and positive effects on mental illness, participants who identified as active users (i.e., posted frequently on sites) did experience higher levels of social bridging and bonding (Pavelko & Myrick, 2020). This work calls for further qualitative investigation into *MFM*'s online communities and their social bonding elements. As a whole, podcasting literature would greatly benefit from an exploration of true crime podcast communities, and necessitates a thoughtful, meaningful approach to fill this gap. In order to address this gap, the following research question was formulated:

RQ2: How and why do *My Favorite Murder* fans use online communities to connect with each other and the show?

True Crime and Women

In late February 2021, the popular late-night comedy sketch show *Saturday Night Live* aired a musical sketch called "Murder Show," which depicts a group of women alternatively shown in lounge wear and tight red latex outfits singing about how much they love watching and listening to true crime (Gariano, 2021). The sketch could be a topic of study in its own right—the main character hiding her interest from her partner (played by Nick Jonas), the sexualized imagery implying that liking true crime is somehow linked with sexual desire or power—but what it ultimately does is show that popular attention is being paid to the connections between many women and true crime. In an online survey consisting of 308 true crime podcast listeners conducted by Boling and Hull (2018), results revealed that 73% of the listeners were women. Some academic attention has been paid to why some women enjoy true crime, but certainly more research is needed. First, however, to aid in understanding the appeal of the true crime genre and the true crime podcast for many women, a review of the history of the genre itself is warranted.

Murley's (2008) work on the rise of true crime throughout the 20th century details a history of the genre dating back to the seventeenth century, with murder narratives distributed through pamphlets or sermons focusing their attention on the flawed but redeemable spiritual condition of the criminal. Although the concept of the murder narrative has spanned centuries, modern true crime as we know it today emerged with the

creation of *True Detective Magazine* and its popularity in the 1940s and 1950s. Formulaic in nature, true crime narratives follow the same general conventions across media:

> …one murder event, a narrative focus on the killer through exploring his or her history, motivations and unique psychological makeup, some degree of fictionalizing or speculating about events, and a great deal of tension between emotional identification with and distancing from the killer. (Murley, 2008, p. 5)

Murley (2008) offers several reasons for why true crime could be appealing to people generally: the promise of providing answers to serious deviant human behaviors, morbid human curiosity, or a simple cultural response to a fear in the rise in crime rates decade after decade, for example. For the purposes of this research, however, the question of why true crime might be appealing to people who identify as women specifically needs to be explored, as women seem to be the primary demographic of the type of show in question.

Interestingly, the true crime genre's trademark graphic and often disturbing retellings of grisly crimes against women in many senses delivers a therapeutic effect for many women listeners and readers:

> In a world in which women fear violence, but are culturally proscribed from showing an interest in violence, true crime books provide a secret map of the world, a how-to guide for personal survival—and a means for expressing the violent feelings that must be masked by femininity. (Browder, 2006, p. 929)

For many women consumers, true crime can act as a manual for how not to get murdered, raped, or assaulted. As Vicary and Fraley (2010) detail, in a world in which women are more fearful of being victims of crime then men, hearing about the psychology of a murderer might help a woman feel like she can spot the signs and save herself, for example. Consuming true crime elicits a feeling of control through knowledge acquisition, with consumers becoming self-identified pseudoexperts in criminology and forensic science (Murley, 2008). Engaging in true crime can, however, also make fans think that crime is more likely to happen to them than it actually is in reality (Vicary & Fraley, 2010; Murley, 2008). It seems that this process of anxiety reduction through exposure and knowledge acquisition can be a double-edged sword for some women, particularly when the victim of the storied crime is also a woman (Browder, 2006; Vicary & Fraley, 2010). Besides consuming for control, Boling and Hull (2018) also found that women listeners were significantly more likely than men listeners to listen to escape the monotony of their daily lives, to indulge in voyeurism, and for the purposes of social interaction.

While popular cultural indicators like the *SNL* skit indicates that true crime is something that people think is connected mostly to women, more academic research needs to be done to further illuminate the connection many women seem to have to true crime. Thus, the final research question for this project:

RQ3: How and why do women connect to the true crime genre?

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

Qualitative Phenomenological Research

In the field of communication, qualitative research serves to study the performances and practices of human communication by asking first a fundamental question: What is going on here? (Lindlof & Taylor, 2013). Performances are creative and local enactments of communication, while practice forms the routine aspects of everyday communication. Qualitative researchers tap into an innate human curiosity to understand what they see and experience, turning an eye to the going-on-here's of the world. With this idea in mind, this research seeks to understand what is "going on" with women-identifying active online fan community members of *My Favorite Murder* (*MFM*) by using phenomenological-inspired methods.

The phenomenological researcher, as stated by Bevan (2014), uses a qualitative methods approach that emphasizes the description of a person's experiences in their own words rather than from a theoretical standpoint or perspective. The phenomenological approach is one where the researcher seeks to see the world with fresh eyes, exploring the experience and subjectivity of the world as if the researcher is seeing it for the first time (Finlay, 2012). I will approach the fans of *MFM* with a fresh-eyes perspective, letting them speak without judgement or intervention on my part. Phenomenology, as compared to other types of perspectives like ethnography, strives to reduce the role of the researcher as much as possible (Bevan, 2014). The phenomenological reduction is about staying focused solely on the person or people you are interviewing, letting the ambiguity and

subjective interpretation of the phenomenon that the participant brings flow and stand without intervention.

The practice of phenomenological reduction becomes even more salient when the researcher is herself deeply emotionally invested in the phenomenon being studied. Another hallmark of good feminist research as established by Harding (1987; 1989) is research that comes from the lived experiences of the researcher herself. Although I am not active in any *MFM* online fan communities, I am myself an avid weekly listener of *MFM* and consider myself to be a fan of the show. This would classify me as an aca-fan as described by Jenkins (2013) and originating with scholars like McRobbie (1991). An aca-fan is a scholar who experiences a personal investment in and communal ties with the fan communities and practices they study, often to the benefit of the research. My emotional involvement with the podcast presents several advantages as a researcher. Researching an intimately familiar community leads to greater access, ease in building trust and rapport, and identifying gatekeepers quickly and easily (Wiederhold, 2015). My familiarity with the podcast allowed me to engage and encourage trust with my participants using shared language and histories, and ensured that fan-specific references will not be misinterpreted or lost on me. For example, the phrase "Fucking Hoorays" - a reference to a show segment where hosts Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark share good news sent in by listeners—was recognizable to me but could easily be misunderstood by an unfamiliar researcher. The aca-fan does, however, need to keep in mind that their personal feelings about protecting the fan community and its members from negative scrutiny may cloud judgement (Personal correspondence,

2020). Despite this concern, the shared interests between myself and the fans is precisely why a phenomenological philosophy bolstered this project: the experiences of these fans gained deeper reverence and meaning as they were taken in by a listener who cares about the community and about staying faithful to the fans' voices and stories. Phenomenological reduction helped me keep the necessary distance mentally to help ensure that my personal bias in favor of these fans did not cloud judgement while collecting and analyzing the data.

An additional component of phenomenological research that made it appealing to my research is that it allows for a flexibility of time and space, meaning that the participants were allowed to and encouraged to speak on how their perspectives have shifted over time (Finlay, 2012). A phenomenological research perspective allowed the experiences of *MFM* fans to not be confined temporally or situationally the way, for example, a case study approach or cross-sectional survey would. This flexibility and accommodating nature created a project that is temporally unrestricted and authentic to the experiences of these individual fans. In an effort to commit my work to a standard of high quality, it is important to disclose that the results of this research are extremely contextualized to the identities of the individual fans and are not meant to serve as a generalization of the experiences of all fans in the *MFM* community (Tracy, 2010).

Research Design

Recruitment and Participants

In this study, I utilized purposive sampling to recruit a total of 18 participants who identified both as an active member of an online *MFM* fan community and as a

woman. Both criteria were left purposefully vague in recruitment materials (see: Appendices A and B) to allow fans to interpret for themselves if they fit into those two categories, in line with qualitative research's epistemological stance on individual truth and experience. I chose to focus on fans who identify as women for two main reasons. First, given the true crime genre's extensive history with women-identifying consumers, I felt it would be theoretically interesting to explore how that history is playing out in the podcast realm. Second, I felt that focusing on women-identifying fans honors the legacy of such scholars like Radaway and McRobie, whose focus on the ways in which women interact with entertainment media paved the way for fan studies as a whole. The recruitment of these participants included two stages: targeted and untargeted. In the former, I identified accounts on Instagram and Etsy to contact directly, while the latter consisted of me putting a general call-out post on Instagram, Twitter, Reddit, Facebook, and the Fan Cult Forum. Recruitment began, after receiving IRB approval, on February 1, 2021 and ended February 3, 2021. The following sections provides greater detail.

Targeted: Targeted recruitment consisted of combing through Instagram and Etsy to identify accounts that fulfilled certain requirements that I created to identify active *MFM* fan accounts, followed by a direct message to these accounts explaining the study. On Instagram, I began the search for active *MFM* fan accounts by first making my own personal Instagram profile public. My personal profile consists of various pictures that show that I am, indeed, a graduate student at Clemson University. I figured making my profile public would ease the uncertainty and suspicion a direct message from a stranger tends to arouse in people, and would give my appeal

for thesis study participants more credibility. The second step of the search process was looking up the following terms in the Instagram Explore page's search bar: "My Favorite Murder", "Myfavorite", "Murderino", and "SSDGM".

While the first search term has clear connections to the show, now would be a good time to explain the other three terms. Over years of casual observation of the podcast, it has become clear that many fan accounts online use the tag line "My Favorite— ", followed by the particular interest the specific fan community subgroup is centered around. Karen and Georgia have made references several times over the years to fan groups that follow that pattern. "Murderino" is a term that fans of true crime generally frequently use to identify themselves to each other, although it is most closely associated with membership in the *MFM* community specifically. Karen identifies the origin of the term and its connections to the *MFM* community in the following way:

> The term "murderino" is from a Ned Flanders line in a Halloween episode
>
> of *The Simpsons*. A listener used it in a thread on our old Facebook page and
>
> everyone just ran with it. That's pretty much how the whole community
>
> developed. The live shows helped unify everyone, but our listeners are very
>
> proactive and passionate, so we haven't had to do much. It's definitely a DIY
>
> crowd. (Jarrad, 2019)

The term Murderino is so common as an identifier for a fan of *MFM* that I not only used it as a callout in my recruitment material (see: Appendices A and B), it was also the term that participants often used in the subject line of emails sent to me to indicate interest in the study. The term will henceforth not be included in quotations, and will be capitalized

to reflect the nature of the term and its strong link to *MFM* fan identity. Finally, "SSDGM" is an acronym for "Stay Sexy and Don't Get Murdered." This is the phrase that Karen and Georgia use to sign off from every podcast episode and to finish out their live shows, and is even the title of their joint autobiography. It is typically used in place of a farewell when fans of *MFM* are interacting with each other. For example, when participants contacted me via email and I reciprocated, each of us would sign off the email with "SSDGM, ___". Two out of the five focus groups even encouraged me to end the focus group session by saying the line as if I was hosting a live show. The phrase is meant to convey a joint warning, of keeping ever vigilant.

After entering in the various search terms on Instagram, accounts that felt like they could be *MFM* fan accounts (as determined by their Instagram name) were clicked on and explored further. Such examples of names that would indicate a fan account included MyFavoriteKarenKilgariff and MurderinoMemes. From there, eligible accounts had to have lasted posted in December 2020 at the latest. At the time of recruitment, it was late January 2021. This time frame indicated to me that the account holder was still engaging in the community regularly. Ultimately, six Instagram fan accounts were identified and directly messaged about participating in the study. One account, run by the participant whose pseudonym is Hannah, was the only account that contacted me back for participation purposes.

Targeted recruitment via Etsy followed much the same pattern as with Instagram. First, I searched the terms "My Favorite Murder," "MFM," "Murderino," and "SSDGM" into Etsy's search bar. The aim was to find merchandise that could then

connect me to the Etsy shops. There were two criteria that shops had to meet for me to

directly message them about participation in the study. First, shops had to have 1,000+

sales. This was used as a metric to determine how involved in Etsy the seller was, and

thus as an extension for how active in the community they were. Second, the majority of

their shop needed to be dedicated to *MFM* related products. For example, if the show was

selling 230 items total, and 88 of those items were dedicated to MFM while the rest of the

items were split into five other categories, then that would be a shop that would be

considered to have a majority *MFM* related products. This criterion was set to weed out

shops that only had a proportionally insignificant amount of *MFM* products. It stood to

reason that the more *MFM* products there were, the stronger the tie to the show and the

community would be. Seven shops were contacted in total, and one shop owner,

pseudonym Sage, contacted me back for participation. Interestingly, the participant

known as Sammi is the owner of a shop I contacted, but she seems to have come across

my study elsewhere and did not indicate that she was a shop owner until the focus

group.

The script sent to accounts on both Instagram and Etsy can be found in Appendix

B.

Untargeted: Untargeted recruitment occurred via Instagram, Twitter, Reddit,

Facebook, and the Fan Cult. Before posting on any sites, I created a jpg that I could

attach to posts that contained information regarding the purpose of my study, my

recruitment criteria, and contact information for my advisor and me. A copy of that image

can be found in Appendix A. For Instagram, I posted that picture with a caption stating

that I was in need of participants for my thesis project. I included the following hashtags in my caption: #ssdgm, #myfavoritemurder, #murderino, #murderinos, and #MFM. I again had my profile public in order to garner more attention from people outside of my social circle. Several of my friends and colleagues in the department shared my post on their Instagram stories as well.

Similarly, on Twitter I posted the recruitment picture along with a short sentence about how I was looking for thesis research participants. I did identify three fan Twitter accounts that I tagged in my Twitter post: My Favorite Murder Out of Context (@myfavmurderooc), Halifax Murderinos (@HaliMurderinos), and Karen Kilgargifs (@karenkilgarGIF). These fan accounts were identified as ones of interests using the same criteria as targeted Instagram accounts, but could not be directly messaged so I had to indirectly call their attention to my post via tagging. In addition to these accounts, I also tagged Karen, Georgia, Steven (their podcast production manager), the podcast's Twitter handle, and the Exactly Right Network's Twitter handle. Again, some graduate school friends and collogues shared my post, with the addition of Halifax Murderinos also retweeting my post.

For both Reddit and Facebook, I posted the recruitment picture with a short blurb asking for participants. I posted to the r/MyFavoriteMurder subReddit, and the Facebook group My Favorite My Favorite Murder group, respectively. It is interesting to note that, in the case of Facebook, my recruitment materials were apparently not confined to the single group that I posted in. The participants known as Alie and Kelley, for example, both encountered my post on Facebook groups for Murderinos in their local area. It is

unknown to me the final count of how many groups my post found its way to, but apparently at least a few! Finally, for the Fan Cult Forum, I posted the recruitment picture and a short blurb to two different Forum subgroups: Fucking Hooray and a general forum within the group. The Fan Cult Forum is an internet forum only accessible to paying members of *MFM*'s official fan club (i.e., Fan Cult) located on the podcast's official site (myfavoritemurder.com).

Participants: After recruitment materials were posted, the first 19 people who emailed me indicating interest were selected to participate in the study. One participant, known here as Vera, is a personal friend of mine and had already agreed to participate before recruitment materials had been sent out, and thus had secured her spot in the study first. At the time of recruitment, this put the number of participants at 20. Participants were then instructed to look out for an email within the week that would link them to a survey they needed to take before focus groups could begin. An additional 5-7 people who contacted me after the first 19 people were told that the study was full but they would be sent the link to the survey anyways just in case any other participants dropped out of the survey. Ultimately, 21 out of the around 26 participants contacted filled out the survey. One participant who filled out the survey indicated in her responses that she had no interaction with other fans whatsoever, and thus was removed from the study. Two participants who had filled out the survey and had indicated that they planned to attend the focus group session they were assigned did not show up for the session. Ultimately, there were 18 participants in total. Demographic information about the participants is included below.

Table 3.1: Summary of Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Location	Racial Identity	Self-Described Gender Identity	How long have you been listening to *MFM*?
Josephine	30	Colorado	White	Female	2 years
Morgan	25	North Carolina	White	Female	Over 3 years
Christine	27	North Carolina	White	Cis-Female	1.5 years
Marty	31	Illinois	White	Cis-Female	Since late May or early June of 2016
Miranda	26	Georgia	White	Cis-Female	3 years
Sage	57	Illinois	White	Old white lady	Since the beginning, I believe they just celebrated their 5th anniversary.
Kelley	32	Georgia	Hispanic	Female	Since the beginning, 2016
Shannon	52	Missouri	White	Female	Approximately 2 years
Hannah	25	Connecticut	White	Female	Since 2018
Bella	22	California	White	Cis-Female	3 years
Joy	58	Ohio	Asian/Pacific Islander	She/her	3 years
Vanessa	25	Ohio	White	Female/Girl/Femme	2 ½ years
Vera	26	Maryland	White	She/her	Since July 2017
Alie	22	North Carolina	White	Female	At least 2 years
Olivia	24	Utah	White	Female	2 years
Sammi	23	Michigan	White	Female	At least 3 years
Claire	21	Georgia	White	Female	About 2 years
Serena	22	New York	White	Female	About 4 years, started in 2017

Data Collection

The data collection process consisted of three sequential steps: preparation, an open-ended survey, and focus groups. First and foremost, material was prepared to be sent for Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval before recruitment and data collection began (Creswell, 2012). These materials included documents detailing the purposes of my study, an example of a semi-structured focus group interview guide, all consent forms, and procedures for the ethical collection and storage of data from participants (Alase, 2017). After IRB approval was received, participants were recruited as previously described and then sent a link to a Qualtrics survey. Upon completion of the survey, participants were assigned a date and time for the focus group they would be participating in based on their indicated availability. The survey and focus group steps of the data collection process are described in more detail in the following sections.

Survey. A link to a Qualtrics survey was sent to participants in early February 2021. Participants were told that they would need to complete the survey before they were to participate in focus groups. The surveys served three primary purposes in this research. First, the survey provided an outlet to gather information regarding participants' availability for Zoom focus groups in the last weeks of February 2021. Second, the survey allowed me to gather demographic information about my participants without having to either take up precious time during the focus groups or to make assumptions about their lives and identities. Finally, the survey asked questions about participants' relationship to the show and its online fan communities that served as useful information when forming the focus groups. The majority of the questions were open-response, which

allowed participants to answer questions in a way that left them free to interpret and communicate their lived experiences as they wished.

Upon clicking the Qualtrics link, participants were first greeted with a consent form asking them to read the information and agree to participation if they wished to continue. After consenting, the survey consisted of three main sections and took participants less than 10 minutes on average to complete. The first section asked participants various questions about their relationship to *MFM* and its online fan communities. Such open-response questions included "How long have you been listening to *My Favorite Murder*?" and "How did you first hear about *My Favorite Murder*?". Additionally, this section asked fans to indicate from a list of social media sites all the sites that they use most often to interact with the show/Karen and Georgia, and what sites they use most often to interact with other fans. Participants were also asked to indicate in an open-response question how often they spent on these sites. Finally, the first section included two items asking participants to select from a list of fan behaviors all behaviors they currently engaged in and all behaviors that they had previously engaged in before. Such fan behaviors included, for example, "Selling my fan art/fan creations online", "Engaging in online discussions about the show with other fans", and "Using online fan sites to coordinate in-person meetings with other fans".

The second section of the survey asked participants several demographic open-response questions. Participants were asked to give their real name (for tracking purposes) and a pseudonym if they wished to give one (if not, they were told they would be provided with one). Then, participants were asked to disclose their age and current

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location. Finally, participants were asked how they would describe their racial identity and how they would describe their gender identity. In following with feminist methodology, leaving these questions open-ended allowed participants to define and articulate their identities on their own terms, rather than having to choose from a prescribed list. The third section of the survey asked participants to indicate the times they would be available between 6:00 pm—8:00 pm EST Sunday—Saturday (excluding Tuesdays) for the weeks of February 14th—20th and February 21st—27th. Participants could also choose to mark "No availability" or "Other Time" on any of those days, and were asked to specify when they would be available if "Other Time" was indicated.

After the scheduling section was completed, a screen appeared thanking the participants for their time and letting them know that I would be in contact to schedule the Zoom groups imminently.

Focus Groups. The second phase of data collection consisted of five focus group sessions held over Zoom. Focus groups served two purposes in this study: to investigate the lived experiences of fans and to explore the ways in which these fans articulated their experiences to each other. The latter purpose articulates why focus groups were chosen over other qualitative data collection techniques like individual interviewing. Focus group methodology is unique in that it prioritizes the uncovering of interactions between my participants, and does not view group dialogue as simply just a collection of individual contributions (Myers & Macnaghten, 1999). In acting as a facilitator during focus groups, I sought to operate as an outside force observing how my participants

articulated their opinions to each other, negotiated between each other, built off of each other's experiences, and how they related to each other in the moment.

The following section details the three-step process I engaged in to conduct the focus groups: Planning of focus group interviewing guide; forming and scheduling sessions, and conducting the sessions.

Interview Guide. The semi-structured interview guide I used during the focus group sessions was created with qualitative interviewing methodologies in mind. There are certain interview techniques suggested by Benner (1994) that apply to many different qualitative approaches to interviewing, such as: using participants' vocabulary to ask questions; listening actively; and using clarifying questions. While Benner's (1994) general advice is valuable, I also incorporated dialogic interviewing techniques (Way et al., 2015) and phenomenological interviewing techniques (Bevan, 2014) to enhance the rigor of investigation. I chose to incorporate both dialogic and phenomenological interviewing techniques because I felt that having multiple types of interviewing questions would create for a deeper level of conversations. Questions asking participants to explain their lived experiences (e.g., "Tell me about a particular moment in your experience as a member of the fan community that made you feel connected to Karen and Georgia") represented phenomenological questions, while questions asking participants to dig deeper into their statements (e.g., "What made the moments you described memorable to you?") represent dialogic questions. The former allowed me as the interviewer to apprehend the phenomenon, while the later allowed the interviewees to be more reflexive and specific in their responses. Although such techniques are typically described in the context of one-on-one

interviews, the same principles successfully guided me in formulating lines of questioning in the focus group setting.

Much like phenomenological reduction, dialogic interviewing "allows space for questioning, change, and transformation by encouraging individuals to authentically engage with others and suspend their judgments and assumptions" (Way et al., 2015, p. 721). Dialogic interviewing incorporates the use of probing questions intended to prompt participants to reflect on, explain, and modify their initial statements, often requiring the researcher to suspend the urge to summarize the participant's words back to them. Mirroring the participants exact words back to them (rather than summarizing or transforming), or calling attention to a participant's incomplete or developing thoughts, are both effective probing techniques (Way et al., 2015). In an effort to be self-reflective, aiding in the goal of rich rigor (Tracy, 2010), I must admit that I had difficulty during the focus group process refraining from summarizing and/or transforming participants' words.

Phenomenological interviewing follows much of the same advice and techniques as dialogic interviewing, emphasizing the need to clarify and probe deeper to elicit full meaning. Bevan (2014) describes the phenomenological interviewing process as consisting of three main domains: "contextualization (natural attitude and life world), apprehending the phenomenon (modes of appearing, natural attitude), and clarifying the phenomenon (imaginative variation and meaning)" (p. 138). Phenomenological researchers' interest in the participant's specific experience requires an understanding of the context and history that provides meaning to the experience for the participant.

Categorized as contextualization, these questions would include ones that ask the participant to describe something from an earlier part of their life, or to describe the first experience they had with the phenomenon. Such questions for the purposes of my study sought to reveal the way the fans were first exposed to the podcast and to true crime generally (see Appendix C). I was also drawn to the idea of having participants reflect on the gendered nature of true crime, probing deeper to elucidate what draws female fans to such a show as *MFM*.

      Forming Focus Groups. Keeping in line with the recommended 4-5 participants per focus group (Markova, 2007), the 20 participants who filled out the survey were initially divided between 5 focus groups with 4 participants per group. Participants in Murderino Focus Group #2—Sage, Vera, Hannah, and Shannon—were purposefully grouped together, while every other group was created based solely on schedule availability. There were a few reasons why I chose to purposefully curate group #2. First, Sage and Hannah were the only two people who I had targeted for recruitment based on their Etsy and Instagram fan accounts, respectfully. I thought that having them converse could produce interesting and rich information. Second, my personal connection to Vera gave me insight into the type of participant she would be—extremely excited to engage in conversation with fellow Murderinos. I wanted a participant grouped with Sage and Hannah to be one who would be excited to engage, and thus facilitate more conversation and interaction, so I chose to put Vera in this group. Finally, Vera and Hannah are very close in age while Sage is in her late 50s. I wished to put someone who was closer in age to Sage to see how this balance in age could affect the dialogue, so I placed Shannon into

the group to round it out. As a side note, I likely would have put Sammi into this group if I had known prior to starting focus groups that she had an Etsy shop that sold *MFM* products. She did not, however, indicate in her survey responses that she engaged in fanship on Etsy, so she was placed randomly.

Every other participant was dispersed evenly throughout the rest of the four groups based on schedule availability because their responses in regards to the types of fan practices they engage in were relatively similar. Most people indicated that they mainly interacted by engaging in conversation about the show and about outside interests. Had there been a larger variety in responses (e.g., if people had indicated engagement in *MFM* fan art creation or sharing), then grouping them strategically might have been a more distinct possibility. It is important to note, however, that certain mix-ups and incidents left many of the groups with either more or less participants than originally planned. For example, Joy was scheduled for Focus Group #1 but got the days mixed up, so instead came for Focus Group #3. Murderino Study Focus Group #4 was originally scheduled for Saturday, February 20th, but was postponed due to several people needing to cancel last minute. Due to the postponement, Olivia was placed with group #5 while Josephine and Vanessa were rescheduled. Focus Group #5, with the addition of Olivia, would have had 5 participants, but one participant was a no show. Similarly, there was a no show to the rescheduled focus group # 4. The final groupings, dates, and recording length of the focus groups can be seen in the chart below.

Table 3.2: Focus Group Overview

Date	Group Number	Participants	Duration
February 17, 2021	Murderino Study Group #1	Claire, Serena, & Alie	1:15:28
February 18, 2021	Murderino Study Group #2	Vera, Sage, Shannon, & Hannah	1:13:40
February 19, 2021	Murderino Study Group #3	Marty, Joy, Bella, Kelley, & Sammi	1:09:22
February 21, 2021	Murderino Study Group #5	Morgan, Christine, Miranda, & Olivia	1:09:18
February 25, 2021	Murderino Study Group #4	Josephine & Vanessa	51:57

Conducting Focus Groups

Consent to be recorded and interviewed, a comfortable online conferencing platform (i.e., Zoom), and a secure means of communicating privately was established prior to the focus groups (Lindlof & Taylor, 2013). Before starting each focus group, I was sure to listen to the latest episode of *MFM* so that I could be sure that I would not miss any references a participant could make. An additional consent script was read aloud at the start of the planned interview section. I sent to each participant a link to their scheduled Zoom session ahead of time, and I chose to enter into the Zoom room 10 minutes before the official start time. This was in an attempt to feel prepared, but also so I could feel ready to provide a relaxed and friendly atmosphere for my participants. Setting up a relaxing environment (even if it is over Zoom) allows participants to be freer and more open with their speech (Markova, 2007). Typically, a participant would already be in the room when I got there, so we would make conversation until others arrived. Once I determined that it was time to start—usually

after waiting 10 minutes after our start time to allow time for any no-shows to arrive late—I read an additional consent script and began the focus group.

Upon meeting with participants, Lindlof and Taylor (2013) emphasize the importance of the initial negotiation between researcher and participants when first approaching the participants with interview questions. This negotiation is one in which the researcher remains open to restructuring of the interview questions in a way that will allow participants to express their felt realities more fully. Although I have included the semi-structured interview guide (See Appendix C), the initial negotiation between myself and my participants rendered the order and exact wording of each question situation. It was part of my role as the researcher to remain open and flexible to that negotiation in order to retain a commitment to quality (Lindlof & Taylor, 2013; Tracy, 2010). In my role as a facilitator, I commented on, prompted, probed, and stimulated each conversation as best as I could, using the interview guide to structure the time. After an hour, I told the participants that we were at the hour mark and they could choose to leave at any time, thus leading to the close of the focus groups.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for the phenomenological researcher, as Finlay (2012) puts it, "involves a focused act of discovering out of silence, sediments of meaning, nuance, and texture" (p.186). The vital first step of the analysis process was to transcribe the focus group sessions (Bird, 2005). Zoom is equipped with a recording and transcription service that was extremely helpful in that it accurately identified who was speaking when and transcribed everything as best it could, but the system is not perfect and required

intervention. I, along with an outside transcriber, watched and listened to each Zoom recording and edited the transcripts Zoom provided to match the recordings. I transcribed Murderino Study Focus Group #1 and #2, while my outside transcriber did Murderino Study Focus Group #3, #4, and #5. I worked through the first ten pages of Murderino Study Focus Group #1 to get a feel for how it would be best to convey tone, gestures, and facial expressions. Unfortunately, Zoom only showed a visual for whoever was speaking at the moment, making it nearly impossible to see others' reactions when someone was speaking. I was, however, able to recall from memory most reactions and could interpret emotions from sounds others made off-screen, e.g., "Mmmhmm" as agreement. These first ten pages acted as the personal guide Bird (2005) suggests developing before fully entering into the transcription process. I then gave a copy of the transcription personal guide (i.e., the first ten pages of Focus Group #1) along with the Zoom recording for #1 as a reference point, and gave the outside transcriber full access to ask me any questions about how I would transcribe something if need be.

Once the transcription process was complete, I used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) data analysis methods in my study. IPA is unique in that it encourages critical interpretation on the part of the researcher while analyzing data (Larkin et. al., 2006). This particular process allowed me the opportunity to engage in the lived experience of my participants by focusing my analytic attention on thick description while also engaging my own interpretations and theorizing in the analysis process (Tracy, 2010). The first step to undertaking the data analysis process was to read all of the transcripts in full three times to gain familiarity and clarity with the material (Alase,

2017). In addition to reading the transcripts, I also listened to the audio recordings for Murderino Study Focus Group #3, #4, and #5. Because I did not transcribe those groups myself, I felt that listening to the recordings would help me gain deeper insight. Although it was a laborious process—emotionally and mentally—it was necessary to gain insight into the material.

Then, at the recommendation of Alase (2017), I did three generic cycles for data coding. The first cycle consisted of breaking down the material into smaller, meaningful chunky statements or sentences. At this stage, I would read through a paper copy of the transcripts and highlight any phrase or block of quotes that I found intriguing. Each highlighted phrase or quote was accompanied by a brief handwritten note explaining why I found that piece of transcript interesting. For example, the following is an electronic interpretation of the way I highlighted and annotated a phrase from Murderino Study Focus Group #3:

Image 3.1: Data Analysis—1st Cycle
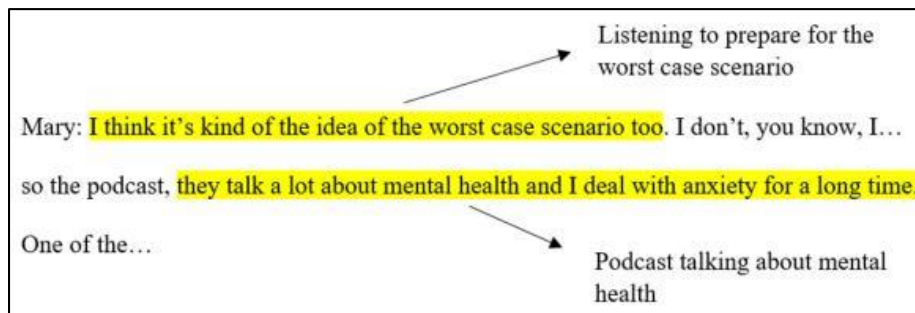
The second cycle was an additional condensation process, breaking those sentences down into even fewer words to move closer to the core essence of what the participants were trying to express. The second cycle was achieved through an ever-

evolving process that started out with me reading through the transcript for Focus Group #1, cutting out the previously highlighted portions, and then placing each slip of paper on a table under one of the three research questions, or under a miscellaneous category. Quotes that felt like they conveyed similar messages were grouped together. In following with IPA's encouragement of critical interpretation while analyzing (Larkin et. al., 2006), I was half way through the first transcript when I stopped to create labels that matched emerging themes and subthemes that I could already begin to see materialize. For example, having read and listened to the transcripts several times at that point, I already knew that mental health would emerge as a prominent theme when doing analysis. Thus, I created many different labels that I knew I would see again, like: mental health, true crime as taboo, male partners, informational support, etc. I repeated roughly the same process of cutting and creating new labels at least two more times, one time after I completed the full first transcription and another time after the fourth transcription. In the second two labeling processes, I created labels for quotes that were starting to pile together but did not have a home and would cut and/or consolidate labels where I could. For example, in one of the rounds, I collapsed the sub-themes of "mental health", "grief", and "experiences with addiction" into one "mental health" sub-theme. I would also expand themes if I needed to for clarity purposes. For example, at one point I had one theme of "I'm not alone" that I was going to break down further, but realized that breaking it down would create one big theme with a confusing tree of sub-themes branching off of it for the whole project. Instead, I put the label away while analyzing data and created new labels that would better organize the project while conveying a

similar message. Below is a visual of what the middle process of the data analysis looked like.

Image 3.2: Data Analysis—2nd Cycle

The final cycle, that of categorization, required me to take the core essences found and put them into meaningful categories. These categories could be described in many varied ways but needed to essentially be one word that encapsulated the core essence of that particular category of data (Alase, 2017). This involved not only rearranging and synthesizing categories down into their core essences, but also rearranging the order of the research questions to tell a cohesive story I additionally chose to organize sub-themes for each larger theme in the way that I wished to convey the themes in my findings. A visual of what the final version of data analysis looked like can be found below:

Image 3.3: Data Analysis—Final Cycle
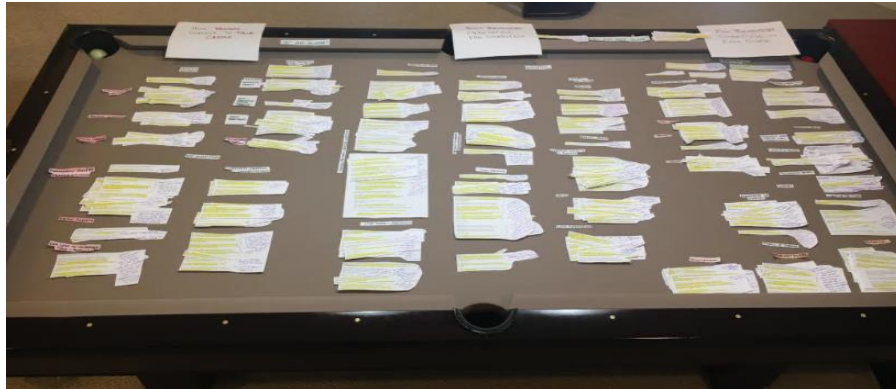
Each section of highlighted paper contains multiple slips of paper from each focus group transcript that goes toward supporting that theme, subtheme, or supporting point. This organization made it easy for me to (1) pick out quotes that I wanted to use as support for each part of my findings, and (2) kept me organized while trying to tell the larger, cohesive story of the findings. While writing, I continuously engaged with the data critically and interpretively as IPA would suggest (Larkin et. al., 2006) to make decisions on which quotes and interactions best told the story of the participants. I also did make minor changes in categorization of sub-themes. For example, the divide between defensive and critical feelings towards the hosts was originally categorized under "parasocial bond", but was moved to the more appropriate position of "responsiveness" during the writing process.

In an effort to be self-reflexive, I will admit that it is difficult to convey to others how I came to these conclusions, other than to say that my participants were so consistent in the way they told their stories to me and to each other that the final themes and organization of the story felt natural. The findings start at the beginning of their journey through true crime, flowing through to their experiences with the podcast, and ending

with their experiences in the fan community. Ultimately the data analysis process was one that was messy, creative, imaginative, complicated, time-consuming, and incredibly, deeply individualistic to me and how I saw these participants and their story.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The overarching theme of the project is the journey from "I'm alone" to "I'm not alone." Participants consistently expressed feeling that they were often alone in some way (e.g., in their true crime interest, mental health struggles, other interests, and/or literally physically isolated from company) and that the podcast and/or the community made them feel not alone anymore. This will serve as an overarching theme that will connect the rest of the themes together within the discussion and will be flagged when it appears in the findings. In regard to how these women connect to true crime, themes surrounding the origin of their interest, why they are interested as women, and true crime as taboo emerged. In regard to host behaviors facilitating fan connection, themes of parasocial bonding, cultivating authenticity, and the impact of live shows and Minisodes/hometowns emerged. Finally, in regard to fan behaviors facilitating connection, themes of recognition and connection, and support within online communities, emerged. I begin with an investigation of true crime origin, followed by host behaviors and fan behaviors, as I believe this organization tells a cohesive story in regard to the overarching theme of the project, of going from "I'm alone," to "I am not alone." Quotes from participants have been edited for clarity.

How These Women Connect to True Crime

The relationship these women have to true crime emerged as an important starting point to the questions of how they connect to *MFM* and other fans for several reasons. First, tracing the origins of their interest in true crime through their personal

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history reveals how deep their liking of the genre goes. True crime is not just a passing interest for these participants, but is instead a thread running throughout the course of their lives. Second, their speculations on why they as women enjoy true crime demonstrates introspective thought on their involvement, and how the consumption of true crime has made them feel in the context of their personal safety and empowerment. Third, their ruminations on their personal history with true crime reveals how isolating an interest in true crime can often feel, leading to that feeling of being alone. This feeling of isolation in their interest in true crime gives context for how important the podcast and the fan community has been socially and emotionally for these women.

Origin of Interest

The first theme to emerge under the question of interest in true crime is the origins of said interest. The women in this study overwhelmingly (i.e., 17 out of 18 participants) indicated that their interest in true crime has always been present in their lives. Christine was the notable exception, having only become interested in true crime in the last year and a half. The exact phrase, "I've always been interested in true crime," was uttered by nearly every participant, and some explicitly traced this interest back to a fairly young age. For example, Sage detailed how she became hooked on true crime after she found the book *Helter Skelter* hidden away under a stack of towels in her home when she was young, and Marty talked about how she tried to write a report on Jack the Ripper when she was in sixth grade. Serena's interest started young as well:

Okay, so I have always really been into true crime. My mother and I

watched *Dateline* together every single day since I was five years old. I've

literally seen probably every single episode... Every single time they're

[Karen and Georgia] like "I've seen every episode!", it's like, yeah, I get that.—

Serena

Every participant also had a material origin, which was either a piece of media

or a personal experience, that they could specifically trace as the initiating source. These

origins could be broken down into two types: consumption of fictionalized and non-

fictionalized crime, and personal experience with crime. The latter type of true crime

origin has additional implications for how these women relate to true crime that will be

explained further in following sections.

First, many participants stated that their interest originated with either active or

passive consumption of fictionalized and non-fictionalized crime media sources.

Fictionalized crime content included such shows as *Bones, NCIS, CSI,* and *Criminal*

Minds, and books like the *Nancy Drew* series. Non-fictionalized crime media sources

included shows found on the channels Oxygen or USA Today like *Forensic*

Files, *Dateline, Unsolved Mysteries, Cold Case Files,* and *Snapped*, or true crime

books and podcasts. Several participants indicated that their consumption of these types

of media material was something they had sought out on their own separate from other

influences. In other words, they were more active in their consumption. For

example, Vera detailed how she used to watch shows on Oxygen as a kid and how

surprised she was in retrospect that her parents let her watch it. Alie, whose parents did

not watch any crime-related shows with her as a child, recounted a childhood

story that demonstrates how deeply involved she was with the series *NCIS*:

> And I don't know why, but - I think I was maybe 12 or 11 or something – I
>
> dressed up as Abby [from *NCIS*] for Halloween. And nobody knew, of course,
>
> like when I went to these houses people had no idea what I was, but I think that's
>
> kind of where it started. [laughing] – Alie

Some participants, on the other hand, described how their interest came about through

passive exposure to crime media content, often through other women in their family or

social circle. Vanessa's grandmother, for example, watched a lot of *Judge Judy* type of

shows and Vanessa would watch it with her, and Hannah's childhood best friend's mom

watched Oxygen every day when Hannah came over to play. Morgan described how her

mom's viewing habits played a role in her interest:

> My mother growing up was a low key Murderino, even though she won't admit it
>
> now. I mean, every time you'd go in the living room, she's watching *CSI,*
>
> *Criminal Minds*, you know, all that stuff. And I became hooked, as children do,
>
> into what their parents are doing. So then I started watching it on my own.—
>
> Morgan

The second point of origin of interest in true crime was personal experience.

Three participants described crimes that had happened to people close to them, with

varying degrees of severity, as events that deepened or initiated interest. Olivia indicated

that she had always been interested in true crime but that the death of a friend in a car

accident while in college heightened the interest for her. Miranda described how a family

annihilation that happened around the time of her birth became a cautionary tale that she grew up with, and how her high school's would-be valedictorian was murdered on vacation. Her eventual work as an oral historian, combined with all of her personal experiences, made her hooked on true crime stories. Finally, Sammi's personal experience origin story was the most extraordinary:

> My birth mom was murdered when I was eight. I never had the chance to meet her and the only information I have is that her case is cold. We don't have any information on her. We don't, we don't know where she is. I don't really know much about her family because I'm adopted. So, to kind of cope with that at a young age, I started kind of researching true crime and what it all was about and every single aspect of it. So that I could understand why people commit crimes.—Sammi

Why They Are Interested as Women

Sammi's pursuit of true crime as a means for understanding criminal behavior transitions well into the second theme of why participants are interested in true crime as it relates to being a woman. Participants were asked to think about why women are drawn to true crime, prompting them to ponder over their own relationship to true crime as it relates to their gender identity. Two sub-themes of explanations for interest amongst women emerged: awareness and/as preparation; and fascination, understanding, and empathy.

Awareness and/as Preparation. By far the most commonly cited reason by participants for consuming true crime was the need to be aware of the possibilities of

what could happen to you and learning how to prepare for those possibilities. There is

often a fear of the unknown when it comes to crime, and true crime acts as a way to learn

about the violent crimes committed against women so that women can be knowledgeable

about how it happens, why it happens, and how to survive it. This was especially salient

for these participants because of they all identified as women. There was an

understanding amongst participants that, as women, they are vulnerable to violent crime.

This was demonstrated in an exchange between Miranda and Christine:

> Miranda: And I think that's why it's probably women, the most. Just because,
>
> like we're aware that society sees us as the weaker link. As the easier
>
> target, because we are more "fragile". [air quotes]
>
> Christine: Yeah, I would definitely agree with that. I am constantly telling my
>
> boyfriend all the things, you know, that women have to do [to be safe].
>
> Like when I would walk back from campus to my care, I'd always be on
>
> the phone with someone.

Many of the participants expressed this sentiment of the vulnerability that comes with

being a woman walking around in the world. For example, both Serena and Vera

described how walking through Baltimore as a young woman is often incredibly stressful

considering its high rate of crime. With that understanding of vulnerability comes a need

to be aware of what could possibly happen:

> And so, as women, knowing that we tend to be more vulnerable or tend to be the
>
> targets of these types of things [violent crime], I think it in general makes me feel
>
> better at least—and perhaps other people as well—to KNOW what the

possibilities are even though the possibilities are kind of horrible. And it might be

frightening to listen to it [but] it's better, it's less scary, to know what might

happen.—Olivia

The awareness of what could happen is the first step in a two-part system, with the

second step being the process of preparing for what could happen. Several participants

described true crime as a way to learn what to do in a crime situation, and as a way to

keep yourself hyper vigilant and safe:

If something happens to me, I am not getting in a car. They're going to have to

shoot me first… you're not getting me into a car, because nothing good ever

happens after that. And I don't go to a second location… So you have these little

things in the back of your head now. And it is power, to have an idea of what

you're going to do.—Sage

Feeling prepared for a situation that I never thought might happen to me… I guess

that, thanks to the show [*MFM*], I'm more alert of what's around me and I feel

safe because I know what I can do.—Kelley

There are two interesting things of note that emerged from the conversations

surrounding awareness and preparation. First, a few participants indicated that

their interest in true crime is connected to their anxiety. As Marty described:

Ways that I've learned to deal with my anxiety is to go to the worst-case scenario

and figure out like, okay, if this happens, what do you do? And so, I feel like

listening to true crime is almost the same in some ways. Where it's like, well,

what did they do? You know, especially the survivors' stories, marveling at their

strength…—Marty

True crime, then, acts somewhat as anxiety reduction. Second, several people also gave

indication that their consumption of true crime and/or listening to the show has

contributed to increased fear and paranoia surrounding crime. For

example, Serena described how she can tell how anxious she is by how stressed out she

gets when listening to *MFM*, and how she had to stop listening to the show while walking

home from her work in Baltimore because it was making her paranoid. A similar

situation happened to Vanessa:

When I was living in the woods, I started listening to a couple of episodes a day…

And I started having compulsions to check for serial killers under my bed. And I

was like, this is too much true crime [laughing]… So I had to limit myself a little

bit.—Vanessa

In this way, the awareness and preparation can seem to backfire in terms of anxiety

reduction.

Fascination, Understanding, and Empathy. Although awareness and

preparation were mostly commonly cited as reasons for interest, several other sub-themes

of interest emerged as well. First, a few participants mentioned that fascination played a

role in their interest in true crime. Claire, for example, demonstrated her fascination with

true crime in an exchange with Alie and Serena about hometown stories:

Claire: Do you all remember the one—this is so specific—the one live

show where the girl told the story about her best friend who, like, knew

she was gonna end up getting murdered?

Serena: Yes!

Claire: And then she did get murdered?

Serena: Mmmhmm. [nodding]

Claire: It's like, it's so sad but it's also like… Wow. Like, that's awful, I'm so

sorry for your friend, but like…

Claire: Dude! You knew you were gonna get murdered!! [excitedly]

Additionally, Vera mentioned that there is an element of morbid fascination,

while Olivia finds the criminal profiling element often featured in true crime to be

particularly interesting. Criminal profiling featured in true crime often provides

information about why those who commit crime do what they do from a psychological

perspective. This plays into the need to understand why crime happens, which was of

particular importance to Sammi after her mother's murder:

And it really helped me cope with the loss of her, especially at such a young age. I

was able to, I guess, "understand" [air quotes] why she was murdered. And so

now being 23, I now can talk about it and not completely freak out.—Sammi

For Josephine in particular, the interest surrounding criminal profiling comes from a

place of curiosity but ends in a place of empathy:

There's got to be a reason why. Maybe they were abused as a child or maybe they had like, you know, a rough encounter and you want to be empathetic to a person. I always lead with empathy.—Josephine

Empathy was most often mentioned as playing a role in interest in true crime in regards to the people that crime was perpetuated against. Considering women are the targets of a large portion of the violence depicted in true crime, there is the sense that, as Vanessa beautifully puts it, "Women probably identify more with what we would think of as the hero of the story." Additionally, Hannah and Morgan ruminated on interest being linked to what they considered to be women's natural empathy for others:

… women are also, I think, just naturally for some reason more intuitive about things and more curious sometimes… At least for me, it's from a social worker perspective… I think about, you know, the victim and how that affects everyone that they're connected to and that kind of thing, so I don't know if it's just kind of more like on an emotional level?—Hannah

Our [women's] empathy is just stronger, and we hear these stories, it's not just… some random lady, in this random town. It's our sister. It's our mom. It's our cousin. It's our best friend. It's, those people were people, and they meant someone to someone and it's important that we talked about them… you know, learn their names. Learn what they did. Who they were important to. They weren't just, you know, a random person.—Morgan

True Crime as Taboo

And I remember, I was like, if anybody ever knew that this was what I listened

to on the way to [place of work] they would definitely judge me.—Miranda

The final theme relating to how these women connect to true crime also is the

beginning of what was seen as the emerging theme of "I'm alone". Over and over,

participants kept saying, unprompted, that they felt like true crime has been a taboo thing

to be interested in for a very long time. For example, when describing her early interest in

true crime, Vanessa mentioned that she remembers being fascinated by *Dateline* but

feeling like she shouldn't be fascinated by it. This internalized taboo feeling has a basis in

reason. Vanessa later goes on to say that true crime and death, like disability, is probably

not something that we are taught to talk about in our society. Additionally,

as Josephine articulates:

A murder happened, right, or some sort of abuse happened in those stories. And it

feels like, hey, something bad happened to a person, so you shouldn't be into that.

– Josephine

Regardless, people are interested in true crime, and for those who are interested the taboo

nature of it has made it difficult in the past to connect with others over

that interest. As Marty points out, this is particularly frustrating because, "I was always

told that being interested in true crime was kind of weird, even though *CSI* has had 27

seasons. I mean, somebody's watching [it],". Some participants described attempting to

share their interest in true crime with others but then being rebuffed. For example,

I would get really excited about a new book or new documentary and everybody

would be like, "Why? That's weird." Like, "No, that's very strange [that] you're

excited about the new Ted Bundy movie. Like, that's weird."—Morgan

It's such a taboo topic, even though we know so many people like it, but it was

still like "You're talking about murder? We, you're weird. Like, you're gonna kill

me." [fake judgmental voice]—Claire

While some participants indicated that they had family members (mostly women) who

shared in their interest in true crime, there were other participants who indicated that their

families or friends didn't get the interest:

Nobody in my family really gets it. I'm the one that, you know, you're driving by

a river and I'm the one that's looking for floating bodies. [laughs] And I thought

everybody thought that way, but apparently not.—Joy

My family keeps joking about if they need to be wary of me, that I'm going to

kill someone because I'm interested in this stuff, and I'm like "No!"— Claire

And even to this day, my in-laws… [making strong "No" gesture]—Josephine

And then I got into college [and] no one else, none of my friends are really into

it…- Morgan

There is also an underlying theme to many of the comments participants were

recounting: the equation of interest in true crime to homicidal urges or desires as

presented in a joking manner. Claire's previously shown comments contain that

underlying theme, and Serena mentioned that her boyfriend jokingly asks if he is going to

be murdered by her. Many of the participants actually brought up their male partners. For example, the following exchange happened between Joy and Marty:

> Joy: I'm sort of interjecting here, but do you guys have any men in your life that think you're really crazy for listening to all of this stuff? Definitely my husband does. [laughing]
>
> Marty: My husband thinks I'm making plans for him. [smiling]

Overall, participants indicated that their male partners where either: disinterested and didn't understand the appeal; disinterested but supportive of partner's interest; or interested in true crime but not in *MFM* specifically. For some male partners, the disinterest stems from being averse to horror and gore, or just simply not finding it interesting. Olivia's husband was an interesting outlier in that she described him as being almost too empathetic to listen, because he gets too stressed out on behalf of the victims. There was some speculation amongst participants—namely Claire, Serena, and Christine—that male disinterest lies in the privileged position they hold in a society where men don't necessarily have to worry about being victims of random violent crime. In speaking about her boyfriend, Christine states:

> I think he kind of has that privileged aspect, where he's like, "I don't have to worry about this kind of stuff." Even though, obviously, he could be murdered too. But it's less something that's on his mind.—Christine

> Ultimately, the consequence of the societal taboo against enjoying true

crime has resulted in the past in participants often only getting to indulge their interests when alone, or even hiding their interests from others:

I think, in the beginning, it was more hush-hush. Like, why like true crime? It's

my guilty pleasure. I get home, I have wine and I watch true crime and I'm all by

myself in a dark room and nobody knows what I'm doing. —Sammi

Lacking friends, family, and/or partners to share in an interest that is a major part of your

life is something that likely feels quite isolating. Here is where participants began to

show how they felt alone, like they had no one to share this important part of themselves

with. However, it is important to note that participants almost exclusively framed this

isolation in the past tense, and for very good reason: involvement with the show and the

fan community is what has made them feel less alone.

Host Behaviors Facilitating Fan Connection

Understanding how participants viewed and articulated their connection

to *MFM* and its hosts, and how Karen and Georgia encourage (or do not encourage) fan

connection, is vital to understanding how participants began to move from feeling alone

in many ways to not alone. Parasocial bonding with the show's hosts—particularly in

times of physical isolation—was evident for the majority of participants. Perceptions of

the authenticity of a parasocial figure often plays an integral part in forming the

aforementioned bonds, and several sub-categories relating to host behavior cultivating

said authenticity materialized. In one of the sub-categories of cultivating authenticity,

responsiveness, there seems to be a bit of a rift between participants in regards

to defending versus criticizing Karen and Georgia. Finally, live shows

and Minisodes/hometown surfaced as unique aspects of the podcast that particularly

engaged the participants. Throughout each theme and sub-theme, moments of "I'm not alone!" arose.

Parasocial Bond with Hosts

> Karen and Georgia became like my best friends/cool aunts/also maybe
> therapists sometimes. That's kind of- I've been on the train ever since and I love
> it.—Vera

The above statement was Vera's response to the question of how she first became interested in *MFM*, and perfectly encapsulates the first theme of parasocial bonds with Karen and Georgia. Despite not literally being friends with the show's hosts, many participants felt that they had meaningful bonds with the hosts that in many ways mimic real relationships. For example, Serena has been listening to the podcast since its inception in 2016, and had this to say about her relationship with Karen and Georgia:

> I think that my investment in the podcast [since 2016] has definitely
> increased because I feel like I have grown with them too. Like, even though
> they're significantly older and I'm at a different point [in my life], I feel like I'm
> kind of growing up with them.— Serena

In the same way that one grows up alongside a sibling or a friend, so too has Serena felt like she is experiencing the process of growth alongside Karen and Georgia. In fact, Serena is one of the few that directly referred to Karen and Georgia by name as if they were people she knew in her actual life. Additionally, I personally know Vera as a friend and the way she described her defensiveness when people criticize Karen or Georgia mirrors how she would defend a friend in real life:

And now it's [listening] this beautiful ritual that I have, and I feel like I really

love them. And I know it sounds dramatic but I'm very defensive of them

too. Sometimes on Reddit when people are getting really up in arms, I can get a

little like… [taking a quote from Georgia] "Goodbye, good luck, get laid, get

fucked,". And I was kind of like, "Yep, I'm saying that to the haters at this

point,".—Vera

Here, both Serena and Vera demonstrate how these relationships, although one sided, feel

as real and meaningful as other types of relationships.

The parasocial bond participants formed with the hosts was especially important

when participants felt socially isolated due to literal physical isolation. For example,

Vanessa explained that listening to *MFM* made her feel a lot less alone when she was

living in the woods with hardly any social contact for a year. During the COVID-19

pandemic, both Olivia and Morgan expressed how meaningful having the podcast

became when they were isolated from others:

I really needed that social aspect. I just needed to talk with my friends, you know.

I didn't have anybody physical with me, other than my husband, but we don't

always need to talk 24/7. And so, you know, it was just nice to have my

"girlfriends" [air quotes] with me. To keep me company on drives or keep me

company when I'm alone in the house.— Olivia

When the pandemic hit, I actually lived alone and I didn't see anyone for like

THREE MONTHS, so… [laughing]. I listened to a lot of *MFM* and a lot of other

podcasts because I needed—even the conversational bits [in *MFM*] I know a lot

of people skip over, that meant so much to me because it felt like I was talking to

someone, even though I wasn't. Like there was just that little piece of me that

was missing, and it helped a little bit.—Morgan

Olivia and Morgan's experiences reflect how parasocial bonding deepens and becomes a

vital lifeline to social interaction in times of isolation.

Cultivating Authenticity

The second theme that emerged while investigating connections with the hosts

was the ways in which Karen and Georgia cultivate authenticity. Perceiving

a parasocial media figure as authentic is often a prerequisite for bonding with them, and

thus this theme serves as a follow up to the previous theme by explaining why

participants formed parasocial bonds with Karen and Georgia. This section is broken

down into three sections: responsiveness, tone and message, and openness and mental

health. Each section explains the behavior the hosts demonstrate and how that behavior

makes/made participants feel.

Responsiveness. Participants identified several different ways that Karen and

Georgia demonstrate their responsiveness to their fans. Responsiveness in this context

refers to their willingness to accommodate their fans, receive feedback from their fans,

and put action behind their words in response to feedback.

The first form of responsiveness, that of willingness to accommodate their fans,

was articulated by Sage. Sage is an Etsy seller whose shop primarily sells merchandise

that is related to *MFM*, e.g., stickers featuring phrases heard on the show. Her shop has

had over 3,000 sales and maintains a 5-star rating. Her attachment to Karen and Georgia is strongly related to her position as an Etsy seller:

> I'm very attached to them [because] they don't say anything about makers using what they say on the show. They could have very easily trademarked that stuff and, you know, thrown a fit or, you know, legal stuff. But they want people to express it and I think that's one of the reasons they've taken off, too. They have developed a fan loyalty.—Sage

Karen and Georgia, as both the show's hosts and the producers, have never attempted to trademark any of their phrases, not even ones that are integral parts of the show (i.e., "Stay Sexy and Don't Get Murdered"). As Sage mentioned, this allows fans to create art and merchandise and to sell it without facing legal hurdles, which in turn also creates greater access to a wide variety of *MFM* related creations that are not available through the official merchandising. Sammi is also an Etsy seller who had just recently begun making *MFM* related apparel, and described the extra income—nearly $2,000 in one month—brought in by the enormous demand for *MFM* related things as life changing.

The second form of responsiveness described by participants was Karen and Georgia's willingness to receive feedback from their fans, and their willingness to put that feedback into action. One form of feedback is requests for stories to cover on the show. Vanessa described how she felt validated by the show's hosts when they finally covered the case of Emmett Till. She had made a request to hear more stories about black victims on the show and felt that the hosts took her voice and the voice of many other fans into consideration. Another form of feedback has been in the form of calling out

problematic behavior on the part of the hosts. There have been times throughout the podcast's history where listeners have sent in responses to Karen and Georgia criticizing them or correcting them on something they have said. For some participants, Karen and Georgia's willingness to hear that feedback and make changes when needed helps them connect to Karen and Georgia more. In a conversation about the fan backlash surrounding an official *MFM* shirt that used an image of a tepee a few years ago—which led to the shutdown of the original *MFM* Facebook group run by the podcast—Sage and Shannon had the following conversation:

> Sage: And, you know, they were growing and learning too. And people just went too far. And they had to shut it down, you can't monitor something that big.
>
> Shannon: That's actually- so that's one of the reasons why I love them.
>
> Shannon: Is because they grow and learn and they admit when they made a mistake.
>
> Hannah: Mmmhmm. [nodding]
>
> Shannon: And I think that's something I really relate to.
>
> Shannon: Because obviously, like, I make mistakes, and I mean I'm assuming everybody does, but like I love the way they just like respond to it with humor.

Several participants expressed a similar admiration for the hosts' willingness to own up to their mistakes, and to take action to correct said mistakes. The Corrections Corner is a part of the podcast the hosts sometimes incorporate, where they explain the mistake they

made, who called them out on it (e.g., a fan's Twitter handle), and then correct their

mistake. As Josephine states:

> You know, they make fun of their [own] Corrections Corner, but they do right by
>
> other people and just apologize and don't make excuses for that. So I think that's
>
> huge…— Josephine

There is an interesting point of tension, however, in the differences between

participants who felt very defensive of Karen and Georgia and participants who felt that

there were things to criticize. Vera, Hannah, Sage, and Shannon all agreed during their

focus group that they felt defensive over Karen and Georgia and felt that incidents like

the backlash against the tepee shirt went too far. Christine, on the other hand, explained

that she has become more realistic in her views of Karen and Georgia:

> I think it is easy to kind of put them on a pedestal almost… But, you know, I
>
> mean, they're not perfect. And they've said some potentially problematic things
>
> in the past. [But] I think it doesn't make me dislike them any. I mean, they're
>
> human just like us, but it does… kind of helps me connect to them better in a way.
>
> – Christine

Miranda was on the farthest end of this debate. She explained that several incidents that

she felt did not get a proper response—a podcast leaving the network without

acknowledgement, the hosts misgendering someone and giving a problematic apology—

led her to listen to the podcast with significantly less frequency than she had previously.

Similar to Christine, she described it as a veil being lifted, where Karen and Georgia were

no longer infallible. Unlike Christine, it did not appear to make them more relatable to

her. It does, however, demonstrate how inadequate responsiveness can hinder the formation of or damage an existing parasocial bond.

Tone and Message. In addition to responsiveness, participants also identified characteristics of the podcast and hosts' tone and message as points of connection. The following conversation perfectly summarizes how many participants felt about the tone of the podcast:

> Marty: I think because it's not as graphic as some other shows out there, it feels more like sitting around [with] older sisters or something.
>
> Joy: [nodding]
>
> Marty: And just gabbing and it feels familiar, it's nice.
>
> Joy: … I don't know, it's just something about their voices and their, the way they interact and just laugh about things that…
>
> Joy: Again, you just feel like you're sitting around with, with friends. [laughs and shrugs]

The hosts' avoidance of language considered graphic and their conversational tone appear to contribute to a sense of chatting with friends. Additionally, Josephine and Vanessa both stated that the sympathetic manner with which they discuss sensitive issues also sets a positive tone for them. Miranda again diverged from the rest of the group here, stating that she would not send her hometown story into the show, for example, as she felt that their humorous and light-hearted approach to sensitive topics could at times be insensitive to victims and their families.

As for the message of the podcast, Vera and Sage both describe a sense of empowerment that comes from the messages that Karen and Georgia send out via the show. Sage shared how listening to the show during her runs gave her the confidence to find her way back home:

It gave me the confidence [that] I could actually make it back home or make it back to my hotel. I had the confidence, "I can do this," you know, so I would venture out further and further... I thought I could do more. And I'm actually a pretty, you know, forceful person I think now.—Sage

In response, Vera further elaborated on this feeling by explaining how the show has helped her to feel more confident as she navigates living in Baltimore:

It's just, the idea of "Fuck Politeness" part of their platform has been so important to me in my life… You have to say fuck politeness all the time to people because you just, you never know… And then, as I move, I've gone to places that require more and more confidence and just being sure of yourself, and I feel like they have kind of given me that confidence to be able to access that part of me and not be scared of it or not be timid around it and to really embrace it.—Vera

Sage and Vera's focus group all agreed that the messaging of the show centered around a feminist, empowered, women-helping-women attitude that let them feel connected to the show and its hosts, and gave them more confidence in themselves.

Openness and Mental Health. The final sub-theme of openness and mental health is the only sub-theme cited by all participants as points of connection to Karen and Georgia. In fact, it is the *only* sub-theme out of *any* included in this study that every

79

participant mentioned without prompting. Openness in this context refers to how readily and frequently Karen and Georgia self-disclose through the podcast, on social media, and through their book. Participants overwhelmingly felt that openness contributed to a sense of connection. Even when sharing seemingly trivial personal details, participants still were able to make a connection with the hosts:

> One of my favorite things to do is buy [vintage] dresses. I've really loved whenever Georgia posts things about places that she finds dresses or sites or things like that. I mean, that's not really related to murder, but it kind of was like, "Oh, we have this similar interest."—Bella

> I'm a Karen because we're very close in age. I'm a little bit older than she is so a lot of her experiences have been mine, like I've never been in a ball pit [laughing], which is what they've been talking about for the last couple episodes. – Sage

A few participants provided explanations for why they think openness is an important and unique factor in their connection to Karen and Georgia. First, Sammi mused that *MFM* is somewhat unique in the podcast world in reference to host openness:

> It's just really sweet, because a lot of podcasts, they don't really talk about their personal life. They're just like, "Oh, here's a sponsor. Here's what we're talking about. The end, goodbye, and see you next week."—Sammi

Second, Marty explained that the more the hosts put their personal lives out there, the more it feels like you as the listener know them and that you can know the perspective that they are coming from. Understanding their perspectives, in turn, helps fans to feel

like they can share in experiences with the hosts. A poignant example of this is when Georgia's cat, Elvis, died in early 2021. Elvis was Georgia's Siamese cat who was featured in every episode. At the end of each episode, Georgia would ask, "Elvis, do you want a cookie?" to which Elvis would respond with a passionate meow. Sammi, Joy, Morgan, Josephine, and Alie all mentioned how Elvis' passing made them feel closer to Georgia because they could understand the grief that accompanies losing a pet. They were not only grieving for her, but *with* her:

> Yeah, when Elvis passed away, I bawled my eyes out because I'm a Siamese cat owner. I have three currently. I used to have four and my first one ever passed away and their podcast really got me through it. Because it's like, oh my gosh… my cat kind of lives on through Elvis.—Sammi

> How hard that is [losing a pet], and here's somebody [who] really talked about that. It was tough, but I got it.—Joy

This connection was a direct result of Georgia first incorporating Elvis into the podcast and then being open about the grief she was experiencing after his passing. Similarly, Miranda and Claire felt like they connected with Karen over the heavy and complicated grief that accompanies losing a parent or relative.

Karen and Georgia's openness about their struggles specifically with mental health and addiction had a profound impact on the participants. Many participants explicitly identified themselves as having a mental illness (i.e., anxiety, depression, and/or ADHD/ADD). Additionally, Olivia, Bella, and Hannah are all either mental health professionals or in training to work in mental health fields. Over and over, participant

after participant mentioned how Karen and Georgia's frequent and detailed divulgence of their mental health struggles made them feel more connected to the hosts, helped to normalize therapy, and made them feel less alone in their struggles. For example, Hannah described in detail how she has a family history with addiction, and hearing Karen and Georgia talk about their addiction recovery journey impacted her:

> I think it's really awesome how they're so vocal about it. How it's nothing really to be embarrassed or ashamed of. And that's just, you know, part of who they are, and what they went through and kind of normalizing it. I think it's really cool, especially for them with such a huge platform… so it kind of made me feel more comfortable coming to terms with our [my family's] own history with it… I think that… adds to the reasons as to why they [Karen and Georgia] can be so relatable sometimes.—Hannah

Joy and Vera both separately described the emotional connection they feel with Georgia after she posts a picture of her mental health medications on Instagram:

> I mean, this is TMI, but holy shit, you know. I'm on some of those [medications] too. And I cannot imagine sharing that with anybody. Because I'm just, I mean, even with my own family, I feel like it's… Well, I mean honestly, I feel like it's embarrassing how much stuff I'm on. But she OPENLY talks about that. I think that is absolutely remarkable. And just a huge help.—Joy

> For me it's My Favorite Meds [on Instagram], when Georgia does those pictures. She actually did one I think today… because she takes one of the same ones [medications] that I take so then I'm just like, it makes me- I would never do it

because I'm so embarrassed about it, and I have a chip on my shoulder so I'm not

going to post my meds on Instagram… But I really respect that she's able to do it

and because she's able to do it I feel less alone.—Vera

For Josephine, Georgia's vulnerable retelling of a sexual assault she survived created an

emotional connection similar to what Joy and Vera described:

Just kind of that rawness from her and talking about that experience. Because

most people, like she said, she's hid that for years and a lot of us that go through

similar experiences are embarrassed to share that. So I definitely felt connected to

her like, "Oh my gosh, even famous people go through this and it's not an

embarrassing thing,".— Josephine.

The fact that Joy, Vera, and Josephine even felt comfortable sharing something

they admit to being embarrassed about in a focus group with strangers speaks to how

Karen and Georgia normalize having mental health conversations and how that

normalization message permeates the fan community. For Olivia, this normalization has

served as a way for her and her husband to validate their careers in mental health fields in

the face of unsupportive and invalidating family:

We're really big into the mental health thing too, and the therapy thing. And our

families are generally the type of people who are like, "Mental illness isn't real,

therapy doesn't work, it's all just crap,". And so that's been really hard… it's

been kind of hard validating, over and over, that it [mental illness] is real when

we've constantly got our families saying that we're never going to get real jobs.

We're going to be poor our whole lives because we don't have anything to like,

we don't have a real education. But then, it's been nice knowing, hearing the validation over and over from Karen and Georgia and from people in the community that like, it is real, it does exist. And this is a real career that we can have that makes sense.—Olivia

Underlying every participant response is the notion of feeling like their struggles are embarrassing or are invalidated by others, and how Karen and Georgia's normalization and validation ultimately made them feel less alone. This directly mirrors the notion of interest in true crime being taboo and the isolation that comes from not being able to share your interests with others as described in the first section of the findings. Josephine was just one of many of the participants that pointed to the very existence of *MFM* and its increasing popularity as indicators to them that they were not alone in their interest in true crime anymore:

But when I was in school, it [true crime] was kind of a taboo thing to talk about. And then, as I got older, in college, I got a little bit more comfortable with it. I still kind of kept it [a] secret and I think it wasn't until more recently, probably in the past like five or six years when kind of *MFM* started taking off and some other true crime podcasts. So, it was like, "Hey, this is an accepted thing to talk about and kind of get into".—Josephine

Although that impact might feel small in comparison to mental health normalization, it does play a role in the fan community social bonding that will be discussed in the last section of the findings, and thus needs to be kept in mind going forward.

Live Shows and Minisodes/Hometowns

The final theme under host behaviors facilitating connection is the inclusion of live show events pre- COVID-19 pandemic and the weekly Minisode episodes as a routine feature of the podcast's experience. This theme is categorized under host behaviors for ease of organization, but is more reflective of Karen and Georgia's producing decisions rather than their performance behavior. Nevertheless, their decision to include both of these features of the podcast have had interesting impacts on fan connection.

Before the pandemic, Karen and Georgia would go on national and international tours, where they would perform their podcast show live in what could be described as a mix between a stand-up comedy and live reading performance. At the end of each live show, they would pick an audience member to come up on stage and share their hometown story. A hometown story refers to a true crime event that happened in a fan's hometown that the fan considers fascinating and worthy of sharing with Karen and Georgia and the show. Several participants (e.g., Shannon, Joy, and Claire) expressed good-natured jealousy that other participants had been to live shows, while Serena expressed distress over the pandemic ruining her plans to see a live show after her graduation. Sage, on the other hand, became a mini celebrity within her focus group when she detailed her experience being picked by Georgia to tell her hometown story at a live show! Underlying participants' musings about their live show experiences, or lack thereof, is a theme of connection that was articulated well by Vanessa's self-reflection:

> I kind of had an opportunity to go see a live show [in the past] and I passed up on it. And now that we're in Corona, that's not going to happen anytime soon. And

so, I feel like, if and when, I have that experience, I'll probably be more

connected [to the show], but for now I'm a little bit distant.—Vanessa

Live shows create an opportunity to see Karen and Georgia and feel connected to them

and the show in a way that is nearly impossible to replicate virtually, even when they post

recordings of previous live shows on their podcast feed. Going to a live show constitutes

an emotionally connecting experience, as expressed by the following exchange between

Sage, Vera, and Hannah:

> Sage: I don't know why I wanted to go to the live show so badly, but I did, but
>
> when we were sitting in that dark theater and I heard that [intro] music I
>
> almost started crying.
>
> Vera: [laughing and nodding]
>
> Hannah: I would absolutely cry. [laughing]

Minisodes are episodes released once per week on Mondays that feature Karen

and Georgia reading stories sent in by listeners. They usually last about half an hour and

are significantly shorter than normal episodes, hence the "Mini-designation". They

originally only featured hometown stories related to true crime but over the

years have evolved to include nearly any interesting story that Karen and Georgia

request, like stories about sinkholes or things found in walls or flour exploding when

putting out a kitchen fire (yes, really). The Minisodes are interesting when thinking about

fan connection because they serve as an opportunity for fans to be a part of the show,

something that isn't always common in true crime podcasts. As Serena explained:

I listened to tons of other true crime podcasts and I feel like they, if they

include something some wrote it's almost like, "We are telling this story, and this

person emailed us". Whereas a weekly episode dedicated to listener stories… It

shows that they're [Karen and Georgia] sort of involved too. Like it's not just the

community separated from them. It's like, they're also listening to us too, they

know what's going on. I think that's pretty special, and no other podcast does

[that].—Serena

Serena's analysis harkens back to the previous sub-theme of responsiveness cultivating

authenticity. When listeners feel like they are part of the process of production, they feel

like they are more connected to the hosts by feeling heard, seen, and validated. These

stories can also act as surprising moments of feeling that one is not alone in their

true crime interest. Miranda described hearing a story shared in a Minisode about a

fellow Murderino who found treasure in a wall at her job, and how that made her feel:

And I remember, I heard that, and I was like, that could by my job, that's

somebody like me. It was just kind of one of those, so there are people like me.

Because, I didn't have anyone in my life I could talk to about it that wasn't like,

"What?".—Miranda

Fan Behaviors Facilitating Connection to Each Other

Miranda's words underscore the importance of simply knowing that other like-

minded individuals are out there, and transitions nicely into the final component of this

project and its corresponding themes. The recognition that the identity of

a Murderino brings, and the instantaneous and multifaceted connection that identity

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fosters, emerged as a strong theme. Within this theme, sub-themes detailing how participants expressed no longer feeling alone in their interests, moments of connection non-virtually, and further connections virtually materialized. The second sub-theme of support within online communities was particularly robust. Participants described different scenarios where they were either the giver or receive of support, or witnessed support taking place. The emotional, information, and tangible nature of support was further elucidated. In sum, fan communities serve as the final resting stop on a journey escaping the feeling of being alone.

Recognition and Connection

I'm Not Alone. In a particularly poignant statement, Morgan describes her thoughts on discovering *MFM* and its fan community:

> I guess justifying my, you know, just why I'm interested in it [true crime], didn't feel as isolating. It felt more, "Oh, there's literally thousands, hundreds of thousands of other people who have this exact same interest," and that felt good. I mean, for me that felt really good.—Morgan

Earlier in her focus group, Morgan described one of her most memorable experiences as a member of the *MFM* community. She had purchased a book called *The Sundown Motel*, and upon opening the book to the forward she saw the following dedication: "This is to all my fellow Murderinos. SSDGM." She admitted that this brought her to tears, and upon further reflection, had this to say about her emotional reaction:

> I guess you don't realize how big of a community we are… because… I heard about the book from… a different outlet, other than *My Favorite Murder*… and

then when I finally bought it and then opened it up, in the foreword, I felt like

they were calling to me because it said Murderino. It felt very, I guess special and

individual, even though we [are] a group, it felt, I don't know. It felt special.

[gesturing towards herself]—Morgan

Morgan's story demonstrates three important concepts. First, she articulated the relief of

feeling no longer isolated in her interest in true crime. It has been previously mentioned

throughout the findings that participants indicated that they no longer felt alone in their

interest in true crime. However, Morgan's perspective puts tangible emotional weight to

the burden that the feeling of being alone in your interests can create. Second, she

described how seeing the Murderino identifier in an unexpected and non-*MFM* related

space created a visceral emotional reaction of recognition and connection for

her. Serena, Alie, and Claire had a lengthy discussion in their focus group session about

how seeing *MFM* related stickers on cars or on laptops around town elicits a similar

emotional response, although they described it as excitement rather than being touched.

These tidbits of recognition create a feeling of connection, a reminder that there are more

people out there like you, and that they are closer than it might feel.

Murderino Connections Non-Virtually. Many participants had past experiences

where they either were approached by an unknown person identifying as a Murderino or

casually discovered someone they knew was a Murderino. In the case of the former, both

Shannon and Serena described wearing hats that had "SSDGM" stitched on the front and

being approached by other women out in public excitedly either asking about their hat or

just blurting out "Stay Sexy and Don't Get Murdered!!" Additionally, Serena has had

people come up to her in her school library and start talking about the show with her because of the *MFM* related stickers on her laptop. These types of encounters are particularly interesting because it implies a level of connection that overrides the typical impulse people have to keep their distance from strangers.

It was more common amongst the participants to have had an unexpected encounter with a person they already knew that led to the discovery of their shared identity as Murderinos. This person could be a relative, coworker, classmate, or friend. For example, Joy talked about how her niece-in-law was excited to find out that Joy was a Murderino, and how the niece-in-law thought she was the only one in the family but now they had something to bond over. Marty and Kelley described situations where they found out that some of their coworkers were also Murderinos. As Marty recounted:

> A new coworker and I were joking about not letting people be weird to you at work,   and she dropped, "Well, stay sexy and don't get murdered," and I was like [raises hand, mouth pops open in delighted shock]—Marty

Similarly, Sammi's classmate noticed an "SSDGM" sticker and identified herself to Sammi as a fellow Murderino. Claire recalled unexpectedly finding out that a sorority sister was a fellow Murderino:

> It was her birthday a few months ago, and her cake said, like "Stay Sexy and—
> "something else, and I called out, "Oh my god, and don't get murdered!!".—
> Claire

Claire even expressed a level of excited surprise that I am a Murderino, as she is someone who knows me through a former coworker. Additionally, Kelley explained that she was

not involved in many online communities, but that her unexpected connection with her coworkers has served as a way to engage in the fan community:

> I will say that I feel more comfortable talking about it [true crime] because, maybe I haven't been able to reach other fans, but at least I have been able to communicate with my coworkers and… Three years ago, they [*MFM*] had a live show in Atlanta and I didn't have to convince them [coworkers]. My coworkers were excited, and we drove and watched one the shows live.—Kelley

Murderino Connections Virtually. While the connections participants have made non-virtually are interesting and important in their own right, how and why Murderinos connect through online fan communities is of principle interest in this study. Participants articulated four main types of online fan communities: *My Favorite Murder* forums (i.e., Reddit and the Fan Cult Forum), location based *MFM* communities (e.g., Facebook groups like Atlanta Murderinos), interest based *MFM* communities (e.g., A group dedicated to Murderino Harry Potter fans), and the maker/seller communities (i.e., Etsy and *MFM*-related Etsy groups). Participants ranged in variety of online community involvement from only following Georgia on Instagram (Joy) to being a member of over 28 *MFM*-related Facebook groups alone (Claire).

There are two primary reasons why online fan communities emerged as particularly interesting. First, participants' experiences of isolation often meant that their only way to gain connection to others and share in their interests in true crime was through an online community. As previously mentioned, many participants felt like their loved ones were not interested in engaging with true crime, so the logical next step for

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fans would be to venture into an online community where social opportunities are wider. On the other hand, if participants felt like they had someone in their non-virtual life to share their true crime interest with, then they did not demonstrate as much involvement with online fan communities as others who were more socially isolated. For example, Serena speculated that she likely wasn't involved in communities outside of the *My Favorite Murder* subReddit at least in part because her close friends are all also interested in true crime, so she already has a social network to interact with. Josephine expressed similar sentiments, and exclusively only uses the Fan Cult Forum to engage in the online communities. Interestingly, these two participants indicated that they were not on social media sites, likely also contributing to their low involvement.

Second, participants who felt like they were lacking non-virtual relationships to share in experiences or interests outside of true crime were drawn to and benefited from the seemingly endless variety of online *MFM*-based communities available to fans. For participants who fell under this category, location based *MFM*-related communities and interest based *MFM*-related communities were especially prevalent. For example, Bella explained that she joins an *MFM* Facebook group in each city she lives in, as she moves around a lot and the groups serve as an easy way to get to know the area. Miranda also mentioned that she joined an Atlanta based *MFM* Facebook group in an effort to make friends after moving to a city far away from her and her husbands' families. Bella and Morgan both even met up with fellow Murderinos in their areas for local events, as facilitated by groups. Claire, who belongs to no less than 28 different *MFM*-related Facebook groups, perfectly articulated why a fan would turn to an

interest based *MFM*-related community through her explanation of why she joined

a Facebook group for Murderinos with ADHD/ADD:

> I recently joined one for people [who] have ADHD and I like it, because none
>
> of my really close friends have ADHD as bad as I do… So, it's nice to see people
>
> talking about [ADHD] because they do a lot of talking about
>
> the medications they're on and the different side effects of anxiety and insomnia,
>
> which I have both… So, it's really cool to get to talk to people who have the same
>
> issues that I do. But then, it's like, you don't just walk up to a person and be like,
>
> "Hey, do you have anxiety and insomnia thanks to ADD??". That's just not
>
> something you really break the ice with, and with that [*MFM* ADHD group] you
>
> already know you have stuff in common, because you have the podcast and true
>
> crime so it's like easier doing that.— Claire

There are a couple of things that Claire mentions here that contextualize why participants

chose to join interest-based *MFM* communities. First, there is the idea of not having

anyone in her life that she can talk to about her ADHD. Second, the identity

of Murderino gives her an in with a community, so she doesn't have to try to find people

to build those relationships with on her own.

To give a true sense of the enormous variety of interest based *MFM*-related

communities out there, here is a list of just the communities the participants in this

study mentioned: Long Dogerinos (a group for Murderinos with sighthounds); a vegan

group; Murderino book clubs; All Things Cleaning (Murderinos sharing cleaning

tips); Murderino *Animal Crossing* groups; Murderino in the Making (a group

for Murderinos trying to conceive); Crafterinos; My Favorite Marketplace; Etsy Murderinos; Anti-MLM group (Murderinos making fun of MLMs); *Jeopardy* group (people who are fans of the show and *MFM*); Appa You Want a Cookie? (*Last Airbender* and *MFM* fan group); Dear Maria, You're in a Cult (for pop punk and *MFM* fans); MurderEmos; That Being Saiderinos; Brooklyn 99erinos; You're in a Cult, Call Your Corgi; Slytherinos; Sew Sexy and Don't Get Murdered (a crafting group); Paint-erinos; Harry Potter and *MFM* group; Miniroinos (Murderinos who like mini things); Murderino Mom groups; Sticker Maker Group; Rainbow Murderinos (queer community); Scene of the Crime; Murderino Interiors; Sitting Crooked Crafters; and, finally, There's An MFM Group For That, a Facebook group where Murderinos can go to find all of the aforementioned groups and many, many more.

Many of these groups, although related to *MFM* in title, often never talk about the show itself. Christine describes this phenomenon well when thinking about her involvement in an *Animal Crossing* group:

> A lot of them having nothing to do- maybe the title has something to do with *My Favorite Murder*, but it's never even mentioned beyond like, in the intro question. In my "Nook" group, I sometimes forget it's a *My Favorite Murder* group because the connection is there and there's really good connections and relationships, but it's not at all related to the podcast. It's just, you know, we know we have something in common.—Christine

That commonality is, again, attached to the recognition and connection the Murderino identity brings.

Support within Online Communities

The last theme of the project, that of support within *MFM* online communities, comprises the vast majority of the richest information coming from the focus groups. Each participant was asked to recall a time in their experience as members of an *MFM* online fan community that made them feel connected to other fans, and the participants gave answers that painted a picture of a remarkably supportive and positive community. The atmosphere of support within the community and the types of support community members received or gave emerged as prominent sub-themes.

Atmosphere of Support. When describing the *MFM* online communities they are involved in, participants overwhelmingly painted a picture of a tolerant, supportive, positive community willing to engage in tough discussions with a no-nonsense attitude. Sage spoke about how Murderinos are "…just the nicest, most understanding people!" and how she has greatly enjoyed working with them as an Etsy seller. Kelley and Sammi, in recounting some of their experiences, described community members as caring and trying to make everybody comfortable in the group. A sensitivity to people's comfort within the community was also described by Miranda in regards to her *MFM* group dedicated to those trying to conceive. In that group, people rarely ask others to help identify if a pregnancy test is positive or negative, as it could be quite upsetting or triggering for members who were having troubles conceiving. When Claire first joined a few *MFM* Etsy groups to seek advice about her shop, she found that she never encountered a dismissive attitude from other members. When thinking about an

exchange she witnessed regarding a community members potential sexual assault, Bella marveled at how:

> It was all so positive and supportive and how rare that is to kind of see on the Internet.— Bella

Vera's thoughts on the relief of having a space on the Internet that feels safe underscores the rarity of such a space:

> It's nice to go somewhere where I feel like I can hang out with my friends. It's nice to go somewhere where, when politics are the way they are, where I feel like I can talk to the people and not be in a situation where I'm going to have to fight somebody for having, like, really insane, horrible, anti-person views.—Vera

The progressive and tolerant nature of *MFM* online communities was demonstrated by an experience Marty described having in her Harry Potter *MFM* group. After J.K. Rowling made several anti-trans statements, Marty appreciated that conversations surrounding separating the author from a beloved creation was taking place in the community. More importantly:

> It was, it was just really great to be able to have that conversation in a thoughtful way with other people coming from the same kind of [trans rights] point of view.
> – Marty

These views seem to help ground Miranda in the *MFM* fan community, despite her stepping back from the show's hosts. The following exchange illustrates her feelings:

> Kelsea: Yeah, and have you found that, has your feelings about the podcast impacted your feelings about the community?

Miranda: No. No, um, because I mean, like, I found that you know, like the

people in the community, they're very much like no B.S people. Even if

they're not outspoken. You know, they're still very like in line with kind

of you know, like what I think, what I believe.

While participants overwhelmingly painted online community atmosphere as

positive and supportive, Christine did acknowledge that, like any other space on the

Internet, drama between members does occur. One person will feel strongly about

something, leading to other responses, and Christine does her best to stay out of it.

Vera also expressed thoughts on the strong opinions that often circulate:

It's just, it's- even with all the opinions [on Reddit], it's never one where it's to

the point where I'm like "Oh, this is, like, bad." It's always like "Okay, you could

probably chill a little bit," but I'm never like, mad about it.—Vera

Types of Support. Participants described either giving, receiving, or witnessing

several different types of support within their respective *MFM* online communities. Often

times participants would communicate support experiences in a way that incorporated

multiple types of support, but in general the types can be broken down into emotional,

informational, and tangible.

Emotional. Emotional support within the online communities typically

involved the sharing of accomplishments or troubles and getting encouragement,

reassurance, or validation from other community members. For example, Serena

described hardly ever posting on Reddit herself but being quick to comment on other

peoples' posts with the words that she would want to hear if she were in their situation.

Vanessa recounted a time when she received emotional support and validation:

> In my job as a residence hall director, I have to put up bulletin boards every so
> often and I put up a bulletin board that highlights LGBT identities and also, like
> queer, notable queer couples in history. I was very proud of this board and I
> posted it to the [queer] Facebook group. And a couple of people commented and
> were like, "Hey, I was a hall director. I'm also in higher education and like, that's
> really cool,".—Vanessa

Josephine describes how emotional support for sexual assault survivors specifically in these spaces has been witnessed:

> [I] have witnessed it on the fan forums of like, "Hey, you know, I kind of went
> through a similar thing in college or had a similar family that, you know, blames
> the women if that happens to them." So, I think having those people that go
> through similar experiences is really helpful.—Josephine

Even just validating to one another that they are not alone in their experiences can feel like emotional support, like in Claire's case with her ADHD group:

> Like, this is gonna sound super weird, but someone posted like, "Does anybody
> else just unconsciously clench each butt cheek muscle like different beats in their
> head?" and I'm like, "Yes,"—Claire

>   ***Informational.*** Informational support looks like asking the community for information and getting responses in return. This information could be as trivial as asking about a local hairdresser in the Atlanta Murderino group for Miranda, or the best way to

get out a stain for Christine in her cleaning group. *MFM* Etsy groups in particular were

mentioned frequently in regards to informational support:

> I learned a lot about Instagram and the algorithm from the Sitting Crooked
>
> Crafters. I-I had no idea. I mean, there's a lot to learn on navigating those and
>
> getting your name out…"—Sage

> They're [Etsy community members] generally like looking at my shop and
>
> offering any advice or constructive criticism like how I can do better… how do I
>
> deal with this person who's being super rude about shipping and stuff.—Claire

Vera recounted a time when a fellow Lawyer-ion helped her in a significant way after she

posted a Fucking Hooray on Reddit:

> She just, for no reason other than the fact that we were both Murderinos and soon
>
> to be Lawyer-ino, just gave me all of this advice and all of this incredible material
>
> and resources to use and people to reach out to. And then, in part because of that,
>
> I was about to get information about the job that I know have lined up for the
>
> summer… and now I am going to work at Harvard this summer which is, like
>
> [laughing] so crazy.—Vera

Shannon additionally described how her involvement in an *MFM* independent podcaster

group has given her a place to get advice and encouragement. Other participants

illustrated how informational support was given in regards to more sensitive or serious

situations:

> I remember in the Atlanta group, someone posted about just a really
>
> disturbing experience she had had with a possible stalking situation and not really

knowing what to do. And I was just so amazed that like, the comments were all so supportive and genuinely like, this is what is the steps you take. And people are being like, "This is my friend, she's a lawyer." I remember that really stood out to me…—Bella

I posted on the Minneapolis group asking if anybody knew how to get information on cold cases. Obviously, it varies state to state, but I got a lot of information and nobody pressured me for my information. They didn't need any background on why I was asking for this information… they were telling me all this great stuff about how I can contact the police department and I can do all this stuff to try and find information, and there is a lot of people who offered to support me along the way, or even help, so that was, that was really nice.—Sammi

Tangible. Tangible support constituted community members providing real things, like money or contacts, to other community members with no expectation of reciprocation. Kelley detailed several remarkable stories from her Georgia based Murderino group. Although she could not recall specific details, she did describe how a woman could not leave a military base and asked the Georgia Murderinos for help, to which they responded by bringing her food and supporting her as best they could. Additionally:

Another member of the group had lost his house in a fire, so everybody was helping on the Go Fund Me for this person. I want to say that it was somebody in South Carolina, but I don't remember right now. But everybody was like, "Okay,

there goes 20, 50, 100 [dollars] and we just want you to be safe and have your

home back, have your happy place." [nodding and smiling]—Kelley

Here again Etsy served as a way to show fellow Murderinos material support. Sammi

described how non-sellers would ask in her *MFM* creative co-op group if anyone was

selling mittens because they wanted to get them from a Murderino instead of a big box

store. Hannah, who runs an Instagram account associated with *MFM* and her hobby, gave

a detailed explanation of how random Etsy sellers have begun to contact her and send her

free creations. She even showed her focus group on Etsy seller sent her that said

"SSDGM". She went on to explain that she was more than happy to give anyone who

needed one a shout out to promote their work and expressed amazement about how it all

came about.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

In thinking about this project and what I believe it has meant to me, to my fellow Murderinos, and to a larger understanding of the phenomena at hand, it is best to start from my own position as a fan of *My Favorite Murder*. I have been a weekly listener of the show since late 2017, and I have never missed an episode. I listen to the show and love the show because Karen and Georgia have grown to become my friends, and I feel like I am hanging out with my friends when I listen. In truth, they could stop talking about the murders all together and talk about pretty much anything else and I would still listen. I had little interest in true crime until shortly before starting to listen to the show, and I am still not the type of person to typically care much about talking about true crime with others or consuming it outside of podcasts. I would run out of the room when I was little when my mom watched *Law & Order: SVU* because it scared me. I do not participate in any *My Favorite Murder* online communities myself (and, if I am being candid, I muted the one I joined for this project after the data collection was complete).

I say all of this to explain where my mind was when I approached this project initially. I was interested in the show, knew it had a massive following with a community whose interests were diverse, and thought that studying *MFM* and its online fan communities would make for an interesting project that could keep me intellectually engaged. The core emotional connections my participants expressed—to true crime, to online *MFM* fan communities, to other Murderinos—was not there for me, and so I almost missed their potential. Instead, I initially approached this project from the

perspective of a researcher who was, yes, a fan, or an aca-fan (Jenkins, 1992; McRobbie, 1990), but in truth I was privileging my role as a researcher first. This made me focus on theoretical concepts of fan engagement, like participatory culture (Jenkins; 1992), or technological affordances of podcasts, like time shifting and portability (Haygood, 2007), instead of the potential ways that fans would feel about their community and each other. Initially, I approached the project like the researcher I was rather than the fan I am or hope to be. This project ultimately became so much more than what I thought it would be. These 18 women, in conversation together, crafted a humbling (for me at least) story of journeying through the feeling of being alone towards no longer feeling alone through their connections with the podcast, its hosts Karen and Georgia, and each other.

The goal of this discussion session is to synthesize the findings and relate them to theoretical concepts and previous research. The findings section of this thesis is heavily laced with discussions concerning the more nuanced subthemes and sub-subthemes. In an effort to reduce the risk of repeating myself, the following discussion will focus on how the larger themes inform past and future theoretical concepts and research into the 'study of womens' (Harding, 1989) and true crime, true crime podcasts, and online fan communities.

The journey from alone to not alone began with how these women felt like they connect to true crime. Several of the findings for this question supported previous research done on true crime. When asked about their thoughts on women being the primary consumers of true crime, most participants echoed and further validated the findings of Browder (2006), Vicary and Fraley (2010), and Murley (2008): true crime

acts as a way to make oneself aware of what could happen to you, and to learn how to

prepare for such a situation. These women often expressed that need to prepare as

resulting from both the socially constructed ways women are written as the more

vulnerable target in comparison to men (e.g., women being the 'weaker' sex, less able to

fight back), and the lived realities of walking around in the world looking like a woman

(e.g., Serena and Vera walking around in Baltimore). Thinking through how these women

conceptualized gender, there are echoes throughout their responses to RQ3 that represent

different epistemological stances on gender. For example, I see the previous statements as

reflecting such paradigms as gender attribution (Kessler & McKenna, 1978) and sex

categorizations (West & Zimmerman, 1978), where characteristics of womanhood are

written on the body by others in a way that is based on cultural understandings of gender

as a binary. Interestingly, two participants—Hannah and Morgan—described curiosity

(similar to Boling and Hull's [2018] dimension of voyeurism) and empathy as reasons

why many women might be interested in true crime. This appears to lean towards more

essentialist arguments that posit that men and women are psychologically different from

one another, with women having unique characteristics that make them more nurturing or

empathetic (Rollins, 1996; Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982; Blenky et. al., 1986). They

do later qualify that, perhaps, women are instead socialized to be more empathetic, a la

gender performativity and social constructivism (Butler, 1990;1993), but still rooted their

stances is binary language. These results point to Mikkola's (2019) argument that, for

better or worse, the ordinary social agent in predominantly bigendered societies might not

resonate with the idea that gender and sex are completely socially constructed and separate.

Additionally, these women described the social isolation that for so long accompanied an interest in true crime given the genre's taboo nature while they were growing up. Given that true crime as a genre is simultaneously considered socially subversive (Murley, 2008) and conceptualized as a genre for mostly women (i.e., the SNL skit [Gariano, 2021]), the parallels to the pioneering work of feminist scholars investigating many women's investments in culturally delegitimized media like soap operas cannot be missed (Brunsdon, 1981; Hobson, 1982; Ang, 1985).

Before continuing on to the discussion on host behaviors, it is important to pause and recognize an additional important dimension of the true crime genre that went unexplored in this research: the genre's striking whiteness, and almost exclusive appeal to white women (Venanzio, 2020; Milan, 2021). True crime producers and editors disproportionally center the content of their productions (i.e., podcasts, books, etc.) around white perpetrators victimizing white women (Browder, 2010), despite white women being far less likely to be victims of crime in comparison to non-white individuals (Green, 2020). Scholars and non-scholars alike have argued repeatedly that this emphasis on white, predominantly middle-class women victims perpetuates harmful narratives about who is worthy of sympathy when victimized (see: Yardley et al., 2019), which could have damaging implications on peoples' perceptions of victim-blaming and who is prioritized in the justice system (Green, 2020). The implications of racially disparate representation in true crime becomes even more problematic when coupled with

the way in which true crime often upholds the criminal justice system as distributing righteous justice to murders and rapists, thus often propping up cops and detectives as heroes (DenHoed, 2019; Yardley et al., 2019). *MFM* specifically has come under fire in the past for being insensitive in the rhetoric they use on the show, which often generalizes whole communities of marginalized individuals – especially Black and Latinx individuals – and sometimes praises a justice system that disproportionately harms Black individuals (Duchemin, 2017). Future academic research on race and representation in the true crime genre is necessary for understanding the harmful impacts such media can have on perceptions of race, crime, and the justice system.

The isolation previously mentioned caused by a lack of people to share in true crime interest arguably set participants up well to form parasocial relationships with the show's hosts, Karen and Georgia, addressing RQ2's concern with how host behaviors facilitate fan connection to the hosts. Hartmann (2008) explains that in times of social or physical isolation—e.g., COVID-19 quarantining for Olivia and Morgan—the importance and strength of a one-sided relationship with a media persona increases (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Not only did nearly all participants indicate a parasocial bond with Karen and Georgia, but they were also able to describe different things Karen and Georgia do that make these women feel so connected. These collections of behaviors echo previous research on how and why people form parasocial bonds. The behaviors were collected under the larger theme of cultivating authenticity, which is characterized by perceptions of the media persona's relatability and willingness to show their human and flawed side

(Hartmann, 2008). Such behaviors included demonstrated responsiveness to their fan community's needs and desires (Presswood, 2017), utilizing a casual and conversational tone (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Giles, 2002) and women empowerment messaging, and openness to sharing about themselves and their mental health increasing empathy and identification with them (Boling et al., 2019; Hartmann, 2008). While gossip (Jones, 1980) did not materialize as a component of parasocial bonding, invitational/parasocial rhetoric (Foss & Griffin, 1995; Presswood, 2017) was seen in the dimension of responsiveness and openness. Participants described ways in which Karen and Georgia create an atmosphere (e.g., through the Corrections Corner) where listeners feel safe to share their suggestions or concerns, and where Karen and Georgia take those suggestions and corrections seriously, often following up with action. Often such exchanges with Karen and Georgia take place digitally, further collapsing the distance between media persona and fan, bringing the two closer to a two-sided relationship than other forms of media like television (Hartmann, 2008; Perks & Turner, 2019; Pavelko & Myrick, 2020). Additionally, participants' descriptions of the Minisodes as a space to participate in the production process falls under the purview of participatory culture in a digital age (Jenkins, 2013), further engaging fans.

Again, reiterating the overarching theme of the journey from alone to not alone, participants overwhelmingly mentioned Karen and Georgia's openness to talking about their mental health as a connecting factor. This finding adds qualitative support to Pavelko and Myrick's (2020) robust online survey of *MFM* fans, wherein fans who felt helped by the show indicated a strong parasocial relationship with Georgia due to her

openness with her mental health, and strong identification with Karen and her past experiences with addiction. My participants—especially Vera, Joy, and Hannah—all expressed how the hosts sharing their experiences in an invitational and open manner made them feel less alone in their own experiences with mental health and addiction.

The final stop on the journey from feeling alone to not alone, RQ2's focus on fan behaviors that connect fans to each other is where the most radical departure from my original conception of this project happened. I expected maybe to find elements of Hellekson's (2009) conceptualization of the gift economy on Instagram accounts, or maybe differences in affirmational and transformational acts of fan creation amongst the Etsy artists (Scott, 2019). The closest conceptualization of the gift economy (Hellekson, 2009) or any other fan studies theorizing was perhaps when Hannah described her experience unexpectedly receiving free gifts from Etsy shops in exchange for unprompted promotions on her fan Instagram account. However, it was not the fan-related nature of the act that made it of note, but rather the supportive nature of the act that made it interesting. Supportive communication describes behaviors that are intended to provide comfort and help, and are separated into five types: emotional, esteem, informational, network, and tangible (Burleson, 1994; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; LeFebvre et al. 2020). Each and every participant had an incredible story related to support within and outside of their fan communities, and every type of community (Etsy, Reddit, Instagram, Facebook, & the Fan Cult) ultimately became communities of relationships (Armstrong & Hagal, 2000) no matter their original intent. This follows Bury's (2005; 2017) findings that friendship formation is integral to online fan communities and can

even outlast the interest in the primary fan text, as was the case with Miranda. Emotional

support, classified as expressions of care and comfort and encouragement (LeFebvre et

al., 2020), occurred in every type of space, even Etsy. Informational support provides

advice, facts, or recommendations, and encompassed an incredible range of behaviors

and results, from helping to find cold-case information for Sammi's murdered mother to

just simple housecleaning tips for Christine. Finally, tangible support provides literal

material goods, like food or money, to others (LeFebvre et al., 2020), and every instance

a participant described did not involve an expectation of return support. In every instance

of support, my participants described the experience with wonder, happiness, and the

feeling, ultimately, of not being alone. They described the feeling of being understood, or

seen, or listened to, or cared for, or at least not made to feel weird for enjoying true

crime. That was the essence of their experience: finding the podcast, and then finding the

podcast community, made them feel less alone mentally, emotionally, and socially.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are several limitations to this research that are worth noting. First, there are

a few methodological limitations that accompany focus group-based research. One such

limitation, as Smithson (2000) details, is the issue of one or several group member(s)

dominating the conversation so that only one viewpoint is clearly articulated. For

example, in Murderino Study Focus Group #2, Vera's passionate declarations of defense

against criticism of Karen and Georgia and the show may have steered the conversation

towards a place where other participants may have felt like they too had to declare

feelings of defensiveness. As recommended by Smithson (2000), I did my best in the

analysis process to interrogate the interaction as a 'collective voice' that produces or does not produce consensus, rather than just one individual's view being enforced upon others (Smithson & Diaz, 1996). Additionally, Sammi's often intense and detailed answers in Murderino Study Focus Group #3 led to a situation where her voice became the most prominent upon review of the transcripts, and I realized that I had even skipped over directly asking Kelley a question or two, for example. However, Kelley's and others' silences in the discussion should not be viewed as something inherently problematic for thorough research, but rather as reflective of silence as a feature of human group interaction (Smithson, 2000).

Another limitation of focus group methodology is the difference between an individual's 'public' versus their 'private' (Goffman, 1981)—in other words, what an individual participant would be willing to share in front of others versus in a one-on-one interview versus how they might actually feel all have the potential to differ greatly. Here again, Smithson (2000) advocates for a recognition that focus groups constitute a specific communication situation, and that there is no such thing as 'accurate or inaccurate' when it comes to expressions, but rather that whatever one chooses to express is a part of the context of the communication situation. I will say, though, that I had moments where I wished I was one-on-one with a participant so I could have probed deeper. For example, in describing her waning listening practices in the last several months, Vanessa mentioned a recent depressive episode as one reason for the decline. Had I been alone with her, I may have had the confidence the ask her to go further, but I hesitated because I did not want to potentially make her uncomfortable in front of Josephine. Similarly,

Sage appeared to become emotional when describing how *MFM* made her feel more confident in her ability to run and find her way back home. Again, I was caught between wanting to ask more questions to clarify but also not wanting to make her feel uncomfortable. Luckily, Shannon stepped in for me to ask Sage to explain that feeling more, an act which this admittedly nervous novice focus group moderator was appreciative.

Finally, while qualitative work by its nature does not presume to make claims of generalizability (Lindlof & Taylor, 2013), it is still important to recognize and articulate the limitations of my sample to maintain sincerity and rigor (Tracy, 2010). The fact that *MFM* boasts over 35 million downloads per month (Shapiro, 2020) and the sheer number of fan communities mentioned by participants in this study alone (30) both indicate that the entirety of the *MFM* fan community is likely vast in numbers. It is also likely more diverse than what was represented within my participants. For example, only two of the eighteen women described their self-defined racial identity as anything other than white. This is especially troubling given the previous analysis on the true crime genre's relationship with race. Although a question about sexuality and identity was regrettably not included in the survey and thus cannot be fully explicated, eleven out of the eighteen participants did make references at some point in their discussions to having boyfriends or husbands at the time of data collection. Note that I will not be making any assumptions about the presence or lack of presence of transgender individuals in this study. While four participants explicitly described their gender identity as cis-gendered, I will not presume to know implicitly how the other participants conceptualize the term 'female' or 'she/her'

in relation to their own identities. I believe this aligns best with my previously stated stance on gender and its individualistic and experiential nature. Lastly, participants skewed below 33 years old with an interesting leap from 32 to 52-58, representing a narrow age range, and at least six participants were currently perusing graduate-level degrees, indicating a high level of education. In sum, the findings and any discussion or implications of said findings is highly specific to these participants and should not be used to generalize to the entirety of *MFM* fans and their experiences.

There are several different directions future research should explore. First, future research should explicitly investigate how *MFM* fans of many different identities relate to true crime podcasts and other fans, including gay men, queer individuals, transgender and gender fluid individuals, and BIPOC women. While my research only required participants to identify as women and did not preclude other identifying features, for a fan base as large as *MFM*'s it would be beneficial to see more targeted recruiting practices in future research to give voice to marginalized individuals in the community. Future research should also reproduce this project in the context of other true crime podcasts and their communities, e.g., *Crime Junkie, Wine & Crime*, and *And That's Why We Drink (ATTWD)*. These shows follow similar patterns as *MFM* of women hosts (or, in the case of *ATTWD*, a woman and a non-binary person) using conversational tones and occasionally humor while recounting stories of true crime and/or the paranormal. Perhaps through examination of multiple true crime podcast communities, researchers can better understand and appreciate the vast experiences of true crime fans in a digitally focused age. Additionally, future research should also further interrogate how a parasocial

breakup with a media persona (Cohen, 2003; 2004; Eyal & Cohen, 2006) that is
voluntary and initiated by the media consumer—as Miranda described to some degree
with her distancing relationship to Karen and Georgia—impacts involvement in a fan
community, particularly when the media persona is the main media source.

Lastly, I believe this project could have interesting implications for online
community design and necessitates further comparative research. My participants' hyper
focus on mental health as a primary factor in connecting with the show's hosts and other
fan's via online networks suggests that online communities should be designed to
facilitate open dialogue about sensitive and personal topics, i.e., enhanced privacy
settings and communicative systems that encourage supportive dialogue. Online safety is
especially important in communities predominantly comprised of women who are – as
my participants aptly continually reiterated – especially fearful toward and attentive to
crime and harassment. Future research should study online communities dominated by
men (e.g., Esports communities, fantasy sports communities, etc.) to see how
communities dominated by particular genders compare in their needs for safety,
connection, and mental health support.

Conclusion

> It's become more than just a podcast to me. It's become friendships and like,
> lifelong friendships. And it's become my livelihood. So, it's… it's more than just
> a podcast.—Sammi

My Favorite Murder and its online fan communities are, as Sammi simply yet
powerfully describe, much more than just podcast and virtual social space, respectively.

For the women in this study, who grew up with true crime and often hid their passion away from a rejecting society, *MFM* has given them the opportunity to step out into a world where they can be free to share in their joys with others. In a world where it can often feel terrifying to be a woman, true crime offers a space to feel prepared and capable. Hosts Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark give to these fans a friend to metaphorically sit and chat with and someone to admire and grow alongside. Karen and Georgia give to their fans the gift of openness, and in doing so empower these women fans to feel alone no longer in their struggles. Finally, *MFM* fans give to each other love and support through online communities, where support can be as small as an encouraging word to as huge as the financial help to begin your life anew. This project began as an investigation into the characteristics of fan and host behavior classified by academics and theorists but ended in a place of warmth and meaningful connection, a connection born around an instantaneously recognizable and unifying identity: that of the Murderino. And in true Murderino fashion, I will close this chapter with a farewell:

Stay sexy, and don't get murdered.

APPENDICES

Recruitment Post

Recruitment Letter

Hello! ☺

My name is Kelsea Schulenberg and I am a graduate student from Clemson University's Department of Communication Master's program. For my thesis project I am conducting research about true crime podcast online fan communities and I am interested in your experiences as an active member of [insert online community platform]'s *My Favorite Murder* online community. As a Murderino myself, I hope to investigate how my fellow female fans experience using online communities to connect with each other and the show itself.

Should you choose to participate, your participation will involve one informal focus group hosted on Zoom with other *My Favorite Murder* fans that will last between thirty minutes and an hour. This would be completely voluntary and would not include any financial compensation. You must be 18 years old or older to participate. You must also identify as a woman to participate in this study.

Please contact me via email at kelseas@g.clemson.edu, or Dr. Erin Ash at ash3@clemson.edu, if you would like to participate and/or if you have any questions about the study. Thank you for your time, and I hope to hear from you soon!

SSDGM,

Kelsea

Time of interview: _____

Date: _____

Location: _____

Contextualization

Tell me about how you first became interested in true crime podcasts generally.

Research tells us that women are actually the primary consumers of true crime. Why do you think that is?

Tell me about how you were introduced to *My Favorite Murder*.

Tell me about the online fan communities for *My Favorite Murder* you are involved with, particularly other female fans. How long do you spend on these sites a week? How do you interact with other fans? Why this particular fan site and not others?

Apprehending the Phenomenon

Tell me about how you first became involved in [X] online fan community for *My Favorite Murder*.

- Potential structural questions:
    - What do you mean by (insert fan-related term)?

        o   Can you describe how that feels/what that looks like/what that means?

        o   What kinds of activities do you do on this particular fan site? Post comments? Share/sell art?

Tell me about a particular moment in your experience as a member of the fan community that made you feel connected to Karen and Georgia.

Tell me about a particular moment in your experience as a member of the fan community that made you feel connected to other fans of *My Favorite Murder*. Particularly other female fans.

Clarifying the Phenomenon

- What are the characteristics of the online fan community you are most active in today?

- How would you describe your relationship with Karen and Georgia?

- What purpose does this fan community serve for you? What purpose does the podcast serve for you?

- What made the moments you described memorable for you?

- In what ways would this moment or day have been different if you were a male fan?

How has your emotional investment in the fan community and the podcast changed during your time in the community? How has it stayed the same? Describe to me the ways in which your views have evolved over time.

Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences with *My Favorite Murder* and its online fan communities?

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