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Dani Nicholson
Portland State University

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Does *My Favorite Murder* Inform Listeners’ Favorite Media?

Dani Nicholson

English Department, Portland State University
Portland, Oregon
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Research Question

How does episode content on the podcast *My Favorite Murder*, specifically episodes about unsolved murders like The Black Dahlia and JonBenét Ramsey, lead to the purchase of novels about those same unsolved murders? How does podcast content influence the consumption of other media?

Abstract

This paper discusses the media consumption of the *My Favorite Murder* listener community, a group that is engaged in true crime discourse via books, TV shows, and films related to true crime and recommended by the hosts of the true crime–comedy podcast. Drawing on scholarship of the psychology of podcast listening and cross-media practices, this paper poses the argument that many *My Favorite Murder* listeners have subconsciously created a similar media repertoire, and that all consumers of media subconsciously create a media repertoire that informs their daily lives. In addition to the scholarship referenced, this paper utilizes a case study approach and a survey on media consumption distributed to listeners in the *My Favorite Murder* community.

Introduction

The excitement surrounding the ever-popular true crime comedy podcast, *My Favorite Murder*, grows every day, and so does the public’s need to consume books and other media on true crime. Although the obsession with true crime existed long before the podcasts about it, the podcast medium allowed for a different kind of consumption. The days of sitting down to watch a true crime documentary were out, and the days of listening to accounts of murder and mayhem on
your work commute were in. Popular podcasts like *Serial* and *Criminal*, both released in 2014, paved the way for the explosion of fame and fandom that surrounds *My Favorite Murder* today. *My Favorite Murder* released their first episode in January 2016, with witty and no-holds-barred hosts, Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark, relating to listeners in a new, completely honest way.

The *My Favorite Murder* episodes on The Black Dahlia and JonBenét Ramsey were two of the earliest recorded and uploaded episodes. JonBenét was discussed in the first episode, and the story of The Black Dahlia was recounted in the seventh. I chose these episodes for my case study because of their prolific nature and unsolved status. Arguably, most fans of true crime have their fair share of knowledge about these cases, listener of the podcast or not; they’re simply too compelling and heartbreaking to forget. Elizabeth Short, known as The Black Dahlia posthumously, was found in January 1947 in a vacant lot in Southwest Los Angeles. She was severed in half and drained of blood. Her killer got away. JonBenét Ramsey was found dead in her Boulder, Colorado home on December 26, 1996 at the age of six. She died from asphyxiation by strangulation and a skull fracture. The crime scene was contaminated almost immediately, and no one has been charged with her murder. Elizabeth Short and JonBenét Ramsey are the subject matter of books, documentaries, and adaptations alike—everything from thought-provoking documentary *Casting JonBenét* to a fictional adaptation of Elizabeth Short’s murder in season one of TV show *American Horror Story.*

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The hosts of *My Favorite Murder*, Karen and Georgia, frequently recommend similar true crime books, TV shows, documentaries, and movies in their episodes. I wanted to find out how often listeners seek out what they recommend. How much stock do listeners take in a podcast host’s opinion? How far does listener curiosity extend? How do podcasts as a medium affect this curiosity? How does *My Favorite Murder* contribute to and influence an individual’s media repertoire? I was also intent on finding out how often listeners purposefully look for a book related to episode content after listening to an episode. Are listeners more inclined to buy books about cases that have already been solved? Is there a draw toward unsolved cases? I wanted to find out how podcasts as a medium translate and influence the consumption of other media as well—not only books.

In this paper, I’ll discuss my methodology, the process that led to the completion of my research, my survey results, a short case study on sales numbers for two book titles, and my critical analysis of various scholarly articles.

**Methodology**

I surveyed *My Favorite Murder*–related Facebook groups of which I’m a member. I asked group members a combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions, such as “Have you ever purposefully searched for and purchased a book about a particular murder after listening to a related *My Favorite Murder* episode?” and “Have you ever purchased anything Karen and Georgia have personally recommended (not including products from sponsored advertisements) after listening to the podcast?” I received over 200 responses from the survey, which greatly surpassed my goal.
I chose two specific episodes for a case study on book sales. I used NPD BookScan to determine the sales data for two titles, *Perfect Murder, Perfect Town* by Lawrence Schiller and *The Black Dahlia* by James Ellroy, which are two true crime titles about JonBenét Ramsey and The Black Dahlia, respectively. Specifically, I chose to look at sales data for the three weeks following the release date of each *My Favorite Murder* episode in which those cases were covered. I selected these titles randomly from a list of every book about The Black Dahlia and JonBenét Ramsey. I decided to supplement my research with sales data to see if there was any correlation between episode release dates and true crime book sales.

Additionally, I analyzed articles on podcasts as a medium, the psychology behind podcasts, cross-media, and true crime, which informed my survey results and enriched my analysis.

**Process**

It is important to note that a portion of this research and data collection, and a majority of the writing, took place while the world was struggling with the effects of COVID-19. It is impossible to know exactly how the global pandemic affected those I surveyed, but I can only hope that it reminded them how much *My Favorite Murder* has positively changed the lives of listeners, and hopefully their own. I can, however, speak to how synthesizing this research, which is partially about heavy and emotional subject matter, has made an impact on my own mental health.

To be candid, it was difficult. I am a fan of true crime and an ecstatic supporter of *My Favorite Murder* but writing about crime and murder during a time of such uncertainty posed a challenge.
The world is doing their best to focus and maintain normalcy, but we all can only do so much. I was often comforted that artistic expression like *My Favorite Murder* and their recommended media exists and will continue.

**Survey Results**

**Figure 1**

Have you ever purposefully searched for and purchased a book about a particular murder after listening to a related *My Favorite Murder* episode?

- Yes: 67.9%
- No: 32.1%
Figure 2

Did you purchase any books about The Black Dahlia or JonBenét Ramsey after listening to episodes about those cases?

- Yes: 4.6%
- No: 95.4%

Figure 3

Have you ever consumed other media (TV shows, movies, other podcasts, etc.) based on Karen and Georgia's personal recommendations?

- Yes: 66.2%
- No: 13.8%
As shown in Figure 1, a majority of those surveyed have searched for media, specifically a book, beyond listening to an initial episode of *My Favorite Murder*. Karen and Georgia frequently—nearly every episode—recommend books they are currently reading, either to the audience or simply to each other, so I expected a similar result. It is important to note that the recommendations I am referring to are not sponsored. I did not expect to see that there was a two-thirds majority with listeners that sought out a book in order to learn more about the episode content. After asking respondents this question, I asked “If so, what books?” Of the 218 respondents, 70 individuals didn’t answer the question, while 41 respondents and 39 respondents included *I’ll Be Gone in the Dark* by Michelle McNamara and *The Stranger Beside Me* by Ann Rule, respectively. Of those respondents, 13 listeners listed both titles as books they have purchased after listening to the podcast. This did not surprise me; *I’ll Be Gone in the Dark* (published February 2018)\(^3\) is about the Golden State Killer, now known as Joseph DeAngelo, and the case was solved in April 2018\(^4\) after more than 50 years of speculation and detective work. The case’s recent resolution surely created plenty of buzz about the book. Karen and Georgia covered the case on the podcast prior to it being solved, and they discussed the case in length afterward. *The Stranger Beside Me* is an autobiography about the author’s experiences of knowing Ted Bundy before and after his arrests. Ted Bundy is arguably one of the most prolific serial killers in recent history, and there has been a multitude of media coverage about the case lately—in early 2019, the Netflix documentary *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes* and the Netflix movie *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* were both released and

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discussed on the podcast by Karen and Georgia. It could be argued that media about solved cases have a certain draw, perhaps even more in book form, because many readers want to know how they did it—how the murderer got away with it, how the detectives caught them, how the trial proceedings went, and more.

As shown in Figure 2, a staggering majority of those surveyed did not buy any books about JonBenét Ramsey or The Black Dahlia. However, the remaining 4.6% of those surveyed told me about what they did buy. Titles that were mentioned in the survey results included *The Black Dahlia* by James Ellroy, *Black Dahlia Avenger: The True Story* by Steve Hodel, *One Day She’ll Darken: The Mysterious Beginnings of Fauna Hodel* by Fauna Hodel, *The Cases That Haunt Us* by John E. Douglas and Mark Olshaker, *Severed: A History of Heads Lost and Heads Found* by Frances Larson, *Foreign Faction: Who Really Kidnapped JonBenét?* by A. James Kolar, and *Perfect Murder, Perfect Town* by Lawrence Schiller. Additionally, one respondent’s answer was “all of the Black Dahlia books.” Most of these titles were only mentioned by one survey respondent, with the exception of *The Black Dahlia* by James Ellroy and *Perfect Murder, Perfect Town* by Lawrence Schiller. I will explore these titles in depth in my case study below.

Figure 3 shows, once again, a staggering majority—86.2%—of listeners have consumed other media, like TV shows, movies, or other podcasts, based on Karen and Georgia’s personal recommendations. As explained above, Karen and Georgia frequently discuss and recommend many types of media on the podcast, and it is not limited to books. They often digress or interject during the podcast to mention a movie that comes to mind when discussing a particular case, and
they have featured a “podcast corner” in some episodes, wherein they gush about the new podcasts, true crime and otherwise, they are listening to. After asking this question, I asked respondents, “If so, what did you consume?” The majority of the answers featured podcasts and TV shows, particularly true crime docuseries and podcasts on the Exactly Right Network, which houses *My Favorite Murder*. Apart from these, it was difficult to determine a trend. This could mean that due to the large amount of media that Karen and Georgia recommend, the respondents may not have remembered everything they have consumed or whether something they have consumed was initially recommended by Karen and Georgia at all.

**Case Study**

As reflected in the survey question on Figure 2, I wanted to discern if *My Favorite Murder* listeners sought out books about JonBenét Ramsey or The Black Dahlia after listening to episodes about those cases. I chose these cases because of their infamy and unsolved status. I used NPD BookScan to discern if there was any correlation between episode release dates and sales for two titles: *Perfect Murder, Perfect Town* by Lawrence Schiller and *The Black Dahlia* by James Ellroy. The *My Favorite Murder* episode about JonBenét was released on January 14, 2016,⁶ and NPD reflected no influx in sales of the mass market paperback for *Perfect Murder, Perfect Town* for that week or the three following weeks. In fact, sales numbers decreased for that title after the first week of January.⁷ These numbers make some sense, however—there

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⁷NPD DecisionKey, “Perfect Murder, Perfect Town.”
could be a large increase in sales due to the holiday months, and perhaps an even larger increase at the end of December, as the anniversary of JonBenét’s death is on December 25.

As for The Black Dahlia, the corresponding episode of My Favorite Murder was released on March 11, 2016. The Black Dahlia sold 26 copies of the mass market paperback during the week of March 6-12, 2016, but that number dropped to 11 copies the following week, and 17 and 20 copies sold in the two subsequent weeks, respectively. Prior to the week of March 6-12, The Black Dahlia sold 20 copies, and sold 13 copies in the week of February 21-27. To summarize, there was a slight spike in sales for the week of March 6-12—the same week that the corresponding My Favorite Murder episode was released. It is certainly possible that a handful of My Favorite Murder listeners decided to buy The Black Dahlia after listening to the episode, but there isn’t a concrete way to determine this. I was surprised to see any sort of correlation at all based on my survey results.

Other factors could impact this case study, including the different ways individuals listen; according to my survey, many respondents (36%) started listening in 2017, which in itself renders this case study somewhat ineffective. Additionally, some listeners jump around to different episodes or listen out of order. Although approximately 23% of respondents began listening in 2016, my survey did not ask them which month they started listening, so it is difficult to ascertain how many of my respondents heard those episodes within three weeks after they released, let alone if they bought either title afterward. All in all, this was an intriguing exercise, and the case study revealed more than I expected.

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8 NPD DecisionKey, “The Black Dahlia.”
Critical Analysis

As seen in my survey results, podcast listening—in the case of this research, listening to "My Favorite Murder"—leads to the purchase and consumption of other types of media. This idea is also explored in Kelli S. Boling and Kevin Hull’s article, “Undisclosed Information—Serial Is My Favorite Murder: Examining Motivations in the True Crime Podcast Audience.” Boling and Hull’s study includes true crime podcast listeners’ responses to motivational statements such as “I listen to true crime podcasts because I love a good mystery,” or “Listening to true crime podcasts educates me about the criminal justice system,” with answers that corresponded to different motivation categories, like relaxation, entertainment, convenience, arousal, boredom, escape, and voyeurism. Boling and Hull found that entertainment and convenience were the highest rated motivations among their respondents. This finding, especially a highly marked convenience rating, relates to the discussion of podcast usage and the act of podcast listening, which will be explored further below. Their survey, which fills some of the gaps in my own, also asked respondents about podcast usage and the consumption of other media. Boling and Hull found that, when asked what other types of media they consume, the most popular forms of media consumed by respondents were books (88%), movies (80%), and TV shows (83%). This data corresponds to what was found in my survey; although my focus was partially on book purchases, some survey respondents still listed books when asked about other media, and when asked about other media, it seemed that their recall rate was lower when remembering TV shows and movies than when remembering the books they had purchased or consumed. This could be due to having the books in front of them or easily accessed, whereas it could be more difficult to

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access a list of TV shows or movies they had consumed. Boling and Hull also asked survey respondents if they had ever gone beyond listening to the podcast to participate in online discussions, communicate with hosts, or do research beyond what was presented in the episode.\textsuperscript{11} Although they presented data on participation in online discussions and on communicating with the hosts, they did not delve into the results behind respondents doing research beyond what was presented in the episode. However, I believe that my survey covers this area—searching for and reading true crime books about specific episode content is certainly considered research, and as shown above in my results, 67.9\% of respondents searched for and purchased a book about the content in a specific episode. Although Boling and Hull surveyed Reddit users and I surveyed Facebook users, I believe the overall demographic—true crime podcast listeners—is quite similar for the purposes of my study.

As discussed above, I wanted to explore how podcast listening can inform other types of media consumption. The concept of searching for and consuming other types of media, as well as the relations between those types of media, is termed “cross-media” and is discussed in Uwe Hasebrink and Andreas Hepp’s article, “How to research cross-media practices? Investigating media repertoires and media ensembles.” Hasebrink and Hepp pose the idea of an individual’s “media repertoire,” or “the entirety of media that a person regularly uses.”\textsuperscript{12} The media that composes an individual’s media repertoire contains its own social domain—for example, the social domain of being a \textit{My Favorite Murder} listener, a true crime reader, or a true crime fan. The individual is then “engaged in different social domains that [Hasebrink and Hepp analyze] as

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid: 102.
communicative figurations,”¹³ in which the individual contributes, in some way—such as listening to new episodes of My Favorite Murder, posting in fan forums about episode content, or purchasing and reading a book recommended by Karen or Georgia. Each of these interactions contributes to the individual’s media repertoire, and by interacting with the medium, the individuals have inserted themselves into that social domain. For example, one of my survey respondents may have listed I’ll Be Gone in the Dark by Michelle McNamara as a book they purchased, the Netflix series Mindhunter as a TV show they’ve watched, and Serial as another true crime podcast they have listened to. This individual is part of a different social domain with each type of media, whether they actively “contribute”—via social media, fan forums, or Facebook groups—to the community or not. They are still interacting with the media, and that media will influence what they consume next. The media that we consume is interrelated, and this is certainly shown in the overlap of survey responses and similarity of answers within the My Favorite Murder community. Furthermore, the media consumption of My Favorite Murder listeners is more densely interrelated due to Karen and Georgia’s frequent recommendations. Although most listeners have other interests outside of true crime, and a majority of Karen and Georgia’s recommendations are true crime–related, it’s important to note the overarching interrelatedness, or even sameness, between the media that my survey respondents consume. In fact, it is rather effortless to envision a pool of vast similarity with only Karen and Georgia’s recommendations adding to it.

Hasebrink and Hepp also emphasize the analysis of how each type of media “make[s] sense to individuals and the practical meaning they have within their everyday lives.”¹⁴ This leads to my

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¹³ Ibid.
¹⁴ Ibid: 368.
exploration of media consumption, the act of podcast listening, and the psychology behind podcast listening. In January and February 2016, Edison Research conducted a national telephone survey of individuals aged 12 and older and covering a wide range of digital media topics. Of those surveyed, 40% listened to podcasts approximately one to three hours per week, with 19% listening to podcasts for three to five hours per week. Interestingly, 22% of respondents listened to three different podcasts per week, and 21% listened to four or five different podcasts per week. This is important to note because it contributes to an individual’s media repertoire—additional podcasts equate to another social domain, and may even equate to the consumption of other media if those podcast hosts recommend half as many as Karen and Georgia tend to do.

Lastly, I will explore the psychology behind and the act of listening to podcasts. The psychology of podcast listening is somewhat multifaceted. Although many enjoy podcasts while commuting, completing household chores, or exercising, Michael Grabowski, a professor of communication at Manhattan College in New York, spoke to Sirena Bergman at The Cut and argued that we could be overloading our brains with too much listening. “Consuming information is just the beginning—our minds need time to synthesize and absorb that information … That’s something we do in silence, by actively disengaging from digital technology…” Despite this, podcast listeners know how much one can learn from listening to them; it often feels more like brain food and a productive use of time than an overload. Bergman also cited a study that Jack Gallant, a

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16 Ibid.
computational and cognitive neuroscientist from UC Berkeley, was involved in and discussed on an episode of *Freakonomics*. In that study, participants were put in an MRI scanner and listened to episodes of *The Moth Radio Hour* podcast. Scientists found that the brain is much more active than initially expected while listening to audio content.\(^{18}\) This leads to states of enhanced concentration and absorption in the content, and yet, as Grabowski stated above, we need time to let that information sink in if we want to gain knowledge and wisdom from it. Although *My Favorite Murder* is not particularly informational, it is content-heavy, both in amount and in subject matter. For some, listening to accounts of murder, violence, and graphic content calls for a break every now and then. Along those lines, I also wanted to explore the psychological effects of listening to *My Favorite Murder* from the standpoint of mental and emotional health. As said above, listening to accounts of true crime is not for everyone, but there is something to be said about the community that *My Favorite Murder* has created. Both Karen and Georgia have opened up to their audience about alcoholism, drug use, depression, social anxiety, and about therapy, which has resonated with many listeners. Windy Maitreme, a listener from Louisiana who struggles with anxiety and depression, told *The Atlantic* about the roadblocks she has faced with going to therapy and committing to her appointments. When Maitreme had finally met with her therapist for the first time, she had already made and cancelled four appointments. She told *The Atlantic*, “It took everything I had to make me actually go in, but I could hear Karen and Georgia in the back of my head … It doesn’t matter what people think. You have to do what makes you feel better, and I did.”\(^{19}\) Maitreme represents many of the *My Favorite Murder* listeners who have felt aspects of their lives change after listening to the podcast. Karen and

\(^{18}\) Ibid.

Georgia explore two somewhat controversial topics in their twice-weekly episodes: true crime and mental health. Being exposed to both of those topics via a popular podcast with a growing fan community can allow a listener to feel like they are accepted and seen. Furthermore, exploring these topics with a touch of comedy adds a lightness and relatability to the experience. So, although Grabowski argues that consuming and listening too often might overload the brain, it must be considered that listening to *My Favorite Murder* often may also allow listeners to enter a safe, supportive, and welcoming space, and that could be worth a slight brain overload.

**Future Research**

Some limitations on this study leave room for future research. All of those surveyed were members of *My Favorite Murder* Facebook groups, so the results of the survey skew toward high online involvement. Although surveying those in Facebook groups corresponds to my discussion of social domains, I think it would be beneficial to include a larger portion of the *My Favorite Murder* audience. In the future, I would like to expand this audience for the possibility of a greater variety of responses. Additionally, it would be interesting to ask respondents about their personal motivations for listening to *My Favorite Murder*, as this would further inform the discussion on media repertoires and social domains.

**Conclusion**

Within the *My Favorite Murder* community, and the podcast community as a whole, exists a unique social domain that overlaps with many others based on host recommendation. Podcast listeners consume for many reasons, from entertainment to convenience to mental and emotional
support, and this consumption informs a whole other host of consumption—books, TV shows, and movies alike. With every medium a podcast listener consumes, they are exposed to a new social domain, and those social domains influence their personal media repertoire and therefore, their daily life. The social domains and communities that have been formed because of My Favorite Murder have fostered a supportive network of listeners that appreciate and consume the hosts’ recommendations with vigor, and many have been enriched because of them.

Acknowledgments

As a listener of My Favorite Murder and an individual who is engaged in true crime discourse, I wanted to find out how listening to the podcast influences the consumption of other media, and for that curiosity, I want to thank the hosts of My Favorite Murder, Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark, for creating such a supportive community, for being there with their loud and welcome honesty when life was too quiet, and for giving me something to write about in the first place. I would also like to thank those who took my survey, especially the Portland, Oregon Murderinos, who cheered me on from the beginning.

I am thankful for the support of many Portland State University faculty members, including Dr. Rachel Noorda and Dr. Kathi Inman Berens for their support of my interest in podcasts and cross-media practices. I would also like to thank Abbey Gaterud and Robyn Crummer-Olson for making my oral defense a truly enjoyable experience and for watching me cross the finish line.

Last but not least, I want to thank my family and friends near and far for their support, suggestions, and edits. I wouldn’t have made it here without you.
Works Cited


Survey Questions

1. When did you start listening to *My Favorite Murder*?
   a. 2016
   b. 2017
   c. 2018
   d. 2019
   e. 2020

2. Have you ever purposefully searched for and purchased a book about a particular murder after listening to a related *My Favorite Murder* episode?
   a. If so, which book(s)?

3. Did you purchase any books about The Black Dahlia or JonBenét Ramsey after listening to episodes about those cases?
   a. If so, which book(s)?

4. How soon, on average, do you listen to an episode after it is released?
   a. Within a day
   b. Within a week
   c. Within a month
   d. Other:

5. Have you ever purchased anything Karen and Georgia have personally recommended (*not* including products from sponsored advertisements) after listening to the podcast?
   a. If so, what did you purchase?

6. Have you ever consumed other media (TV shows, movies, other podcasts, etc.) based on Karen and Georgia’s personal recommendations?
   a. If so, what did you consume?

7. If you’d like to be entered to win a $15 eGift Card from Powell’s Books, click here.

Incentive Opt-In

1. Name:
2. Email address: